

The Abbey Leix estate, an ancestral 18th-century Georgian in County Laois designed by James Wyatt



Belles of Ireland

Touring the grand architectural gems of the Midlands and southern coast, classicist **Steven Gambrel** reveals the quiet strengths of the country's powerful design legacy.



LEFT: Interior designer Steven Gambrel. **BELOW:** A theatrical 18th-century hall at Gloster House in County Offaly

I SEE IT BEFORE HE DOES. We're on a slim road an hour outside of Dublin, winding our way through the rolling hills of County Laois, and at the base of a grassy slope, just past the ruins of an old abbey, is a gray block of a house. It isn't one of the homes on our tour, more like a demure cousin who's spent centuries ducking the aristocracy.

There's a ruddiness to the stout two-story structure, like a winter's day. But beneath a hipped roof, low twin chimneys, and a modest triangular cornice is a radiant red door that sets the beautiful old Georgian ablaze.

Steven Gambrel is seated next to me on our tour bus, talking with an architect across the aisle. I'm betting his conversation won't survive this house. It's a silent wager, and it's a good one. When he spots it, he goes quiet, and stretches up and around in

his seat to watch the gracious, windswept structure fade into the distance.

What it lacked in nobility, it made up for in sheer fortitude, a virtue of Irish architecture that has long captivated the New York-based designer. We are here with the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art (ICAA) on a week-long study of the design traditions of the rural Midlands and County Waterford. It's a mix of mostly American architects and interior designers, led in parts by the charming decorative arts author Robert O'Byrne and lured by exclusive entry into some of the country's finest ancestral estates, from the famed **Emo Court** and homes of the Blackwater Valley to the impeccably rebuilt **Ballyfin**, where our group is staying (see page 48).

For Gambrel, it's a return to the familiar—and that's what interests me. His richly



ABBEY LEIX, JAMES FENNELL; PORTRAIT, JAMES ANDERSON; HALLWAY, PETER LYDEN



LEFT: The pedimented porch at County Waterford's Cappoquin House, a Georgian rebuilt in the early 20th century after burning in Ireland's Civil War

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“The staircase felt almost *modern in its strangeness*. It was symmetrical and cold and strong and rigid. *There was a magic to it.*”

—INTERIOR DESIGNER
STEVEN GAMBREL



ABOVE AND RIGHT: The mid-18th-century Russborough estate in County Wicklow; its formidable facade is the longest in Ireland, stretching 700 feet across.



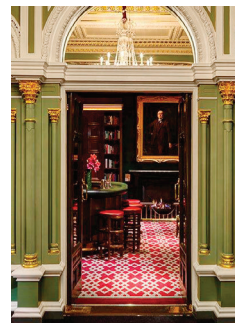
acclaimed work has long carried the quiet influence of the Irish, from his sinewy gray palettes to the aged grandeur of his kitchens. “There’s a humility of materials and a muscular scale to the Georgian architecture here that I’ve always found very compelling,” says Gambrel. “It isn’t that it’s less refined than the English traditions, but rather, the details here are often so unexpected, yet oddly familiar. A grand English marble hall is beautiful, but I’m more drawn to elements I can bring back and interpret.”

On the first evening we are there, seated in Ballyfin’s dining room, he tells me of one of his first entrées into the vernacular: a visit to **Russborough**, an estate in County Wicklow. In the entry, he recalls, is a formal staircase with wide, shallow stone steps that ascend gradually beneath a carnival of plasterwork. “It felt almost

modern in its strangeness,” he says. “It was symmetrical and cold and strong and rigid. There was a magic to it.”

Beneath the notable girth in Ireland’s building traditions is an undercurrent of restraint. At **Abbey Leix**, a 1770s Georgian down a long drive lined by a forest of ferns and soft bluebells, a stone entry with classical swag moldings and fluted columns soars behind a modest blue entrance. “The doors aren’t broad or heavily ornamented,” Gambrel notes, pointing to their glossy finish and simple brass hardware. “There’s elegance in these proportions.”

It’s perhaps a byproduct of pragmatism, which feels like a local material in itself. Hefty peat barrels for serving fireplaces flank an entry table the way Louis XVI chairs might greet us in a French loft. Bedrooms are dressed in



→ After landing in Dublin, rest up at **The Shelbourne**, the meticulously chic early-1800s hotel where Ireland’s first constitution was drafted. It’s in the heart of the city’s Georgian neighborhood, and its 2019 renovation by Guy Oliver is a lesson in the range of modern classical design. Rates start at \$360; theshelbourne.com.



→ An hour and a half west of Dublin, find **Ballyfin**, the five-star 1820s estate in County Laois that stands as a grand example of Ireland’s classical architecture. And today, it’s the most luxurious: The 614-acre estate offers just 21 guest rooms, leaving plenty of space for exquisite studies in Regency design. Rates start at \$690; ballyfin.com.



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heirlooms and an honesty of purpose. Kitchen counters curve with traffic patterns. “You look at it and think the contour is beautiful, but they didn’t soften it because it was pretty, but because it was the right thing to do to keep people from bumping into a hard corner,” notes Gambrel.

Indeed, he seems most intrigued by signs of the living, the sculleries and kitchens and mud halls that betray how these homes are (or were) inhabited. As our group lingers in gilded dining rooms or wanders parterre gardens, I find Gambrel marveling at a hidden passage disguised as a breakfront or talking with a house manager about

The drawing room, main staircase, and entry hall at Ballyfin. Wallpaper in drawing room, Colefax and Fowler. **FAR LEFT:** Gambrel studies the vertical scoring detail on the back stairs at Abbey Leix.

how long it takes to light all the hearths. “It feels warm and happy here,” he tells her.

This distinct sense of balance and harmony is as apparent in the humble, highly symmetrical Georgians we see set into the hills as it is behind their deep corridors. There’s a cordial realism living among the ornate neoclassical and Celtic artistry. Some years ago, Desmond Guinness, the architectural author and conservationist who founded the Dublin-based Irish Georgian Society, introduced Gambrel to Seaforde, the ancestral home of the Forde family in the north. “We walked the grand hall and these immaculate rooms with Lady Anthea, the lovely woman who lives there,” he recalls. “But then she led us down a few steps to her kitchen near the rear of the home. There were three dogs asleep on a stone floor in front of an AGA stove. It was so warmly vibrant. I could see this is where she really lives.”

And it’s where we all live, Gambrel contends. “There’s an amazing degree of intuitiveness and practicality we can learn from here,” he says. “It’s how the Irish design houses. Their respect for the weather-worn stones, peculiarity of form, the warmth of a kitchen...It’s masterful.” ♦