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In Dublin, an Ambassador's Mansion Gets a Makeover

By LIZA FOREMAN

DUBLIN

When the next United States ambassador to Ireland takes office, he or she also will take up residence in one of Dublin's most spectacular houses — and have the former ambassador, Thomas C. Foley of Connecticut, to thank for its recent restoration.

The Georgian mansion, which is featured in tourist guides and even marked on city maps, is one of only two residential properties in the city's sprawling Phoenix Park — the other is the home of the Irish president.

Built in 1776 by Colonel John Blaquiere, the British government's chief secretary, the mansion, which is rented from the Irish government for a \$1 a year, has been the ambassador's residence since 1949. Since then, the property, which totals 2,638 square meters (28,395 square feet) and stands on 62 acres, has been redecorated several times.

"A lot of residents have devoted themselves to decorating," said Mr. Foley, who resigned from office Jan. 20 and is now at home in Greenwich, Conn. "I was interested in the restoration and preservation of the house, which is a great asset to the U.S. government for conducting diplomacy."

Mr. Foley, who lived in the house alone, worked with local specialists to complete the first major work on the house since its last overhaul in 1952. "I took it on because it was so needy," said Mr. Foley, who estimates that he personally paid \$400,000 to \$500,000 for the work. But, he added, "This would be expected of a political appointee."

The ground floor of the two-story home, includes a vast ballroom where President Reagan once held a lunch for 130 people; a dining room; two reception rooms, often used for public functions; a library; office; kitchen and pantry; powder room, and staff rooms.

In the private quarters upstairs, which are rarely seen, there are six suites, including the ambassador's suite and one called the presidential suite, which has accommodated Presidents Kennedy, Clinton and George H. W. Bush, as well as celebrities like Bing Crosby and Princess Grace of Monaco

Mr. Foley had several rooms repainted using oil-based paints in a traditional Georgian color palette to give the interior walls a more authentic look. The "unfortunate lavender color" was removed from the dining room and replaced with silk gold-patterned wallpaper. The downstairs office went from a shade of lime to a pale Georgian green. He also had the entry hall walls redone, using a faux-brick pattern, replicating what would have been typical in a Georgian entrance hall.

Throughout the house, which has a homey but formal feel, chandeliers were restored to look as if they were still lit by candles, and large mirrors were added over the fireplaces.

Mr. Foley even had radiators revamped or removed to accommodate one of his passions — art. “Many of the changes were dictated by the needs of the art,” he said.

Through the State Department’s Art in Embassies Program, Mr. Foley arranged for a number of major American artworks from leading museums and galleries to display in the residence, including pieces by Mark Rothko, Edward Hopper and Helen Frankenthaler.

But perhaps the most striking piece is by the late New York artist, Sol Le Witt. Covering an entire wall in a prominent hall, the work’s white squiggles and black squares contrast sharply with the house’s historic flavor. “Maybe three people in Ireland knew Le Witt before we put it there,” Mr. Foley said. “Now there are maybe 20,000 people who would have seen it.”

On the exterior, Mr. Foley replaced the downward-focused illumination with “up” lighting, giving both the entrance gate and the white house itself a bolder, brighter look in keeping with the lighting traditions of the White House.

No detail was too small for Mr. Foley, who had the security camera towers moved out of sight, the fences repainted and a huge patch of rhododendrons removed. “The patch was so big that you would drive in through the gate and see nothing until the last minute, when the house would jump out at you,” he said.

Mr. Foley also involved the Irish government, securing a grant to repaint the outside of the historically registered building. “I like to have things working right,” he said. “To have things architecturally and aesthetically consistent with the period in which they were built.”

Correction: March 12, 2009

A photo caption in this article misspelled the name of the American artist Sol LeWitt.

Images used in the article:



The U.S. ambassador's residence in Dublin, built in 1776, is one of two estates in Phoenix Park -- the other is the home of the Irish president. Thomas C. Foley of Greenwich, Connecticut, who was ambassador until late January, spent much of his term refurbishing the mansion. Photo: Derek Speirs for The New York Times



The grand staircase at the entrance of the 28,395-square-foot, two-story residence. The painting, on the left, is by the American artist Sol LeWitt. Mr. Foley's passion is art so he arranged for several pieces, including the De Witt, to be loaned to the residence through a State Department program. Photo: Derek Speirs for The New York Times



One of the two reception rooms on the house's main floor. In addition to being the ambassador's home, the residence also is used for meetings and social gatherings.

Photo: Derek Speirs for The New York Times



The residence's ballroom. President Reagan once held a lunch for 130 people in this room.
Photo: Derek Speirs for The New York Times



Among the changes that Mr. Foley made in this house was removing what he called the

"unfortunate lavender color" of the dining room and replacing it with this silk gold-patterned wallpaper, which is more in keeping with traditional Georgian style.

Photo: Derek Speirs for The New York Times