

# Be a grand designer

Just €50 will buy you an hour of a top architect's time next month – and you'll also be helping the homeless, writes **Siobhán Maguire**

**F**ive years ago, Sheila Doyle and her husband, Mel O' Cinneide, entered uncharted territory when they decided to build their own home. Choosing an elevated site in Tara Hill, a historic Co Wexford location near the coast, the couple set about realising their grand designs.

There were some hiccups along the way: a difference of opinion with an architect forced the two to go it alone, while part of the house had to be built into the landscape, so that the property would blend in with its environment and not hamper views from the nearby beach. Doing this also kept the local planners on side.

But the biggest – and most welcome – distraction was the arrival of their two children, Eimear and Iarla.

“At the moment, we are happy with about 80% of the house, with the other 20% ripe for some adjustments,” says Doyle, a part-time software support specialist. “We had no experience of build-

ing a home before this, so it was a huge undertaking.

“On paper, the design looked wonderful and in many ways it is, but now that we are in the house with the kids, there are some aspects we would like to change, so that it is better suited to us as a family.”

To make those changes, Doyle and O' Cinneide, a university lecturer, have turned to a charity for some architectural advice. The pair have signed up for the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland's (RIAI) annual Simon Open Door event, which raises money for Simon Communities of Ireland, the countrywide charity for the homeless.

The event, which is in its sixth year, takes place on April 24 and 25 and allows homeowners to have a one-hour consultation with an architect, taking their pick of the talent on offer, in return for a €50 donation to the charity.

“I think a lot of people are very scared of working with architects because it is the big unknown,” says Dermot Bannion, RTE's celebrity architect.

“Most people wouldn't consider hiring an architect unless they were building a hospital or small school, because they wouldn't feel there was a need for

one. But the value that an architect can bring even with a small budget is huge, and meeting one for an hour for €50 is a great opportunity.”

Kevin Prendergast, an optician, knows just how useful the process can be. He was unhappy with the plans drawn up by his own architect for his then new home in Artane, in north Dublin, in 2006, so he made a Simon Open Door appointment. He spent an hour with Burke-Kennedy Doyle Architects, a practice in Harcourt Terrace, Dublin 2, and came away with drawings for a contemporary extension that doubled the size of his home.

“We walked in with ideas for our home that other architects told us couldn't be done,” says Prendergast. “Sandra Campbell and Paul Quinn started sketching straight away. They wanted to know about our ideas, our



lifestyle, what we wanted for our home. We left with drawings of our extension.”

Prendergast, who with his wife, Clara, and children, Gavin and Eimear, has invested much time and energy into achieving the family’s ultimate design-

sign. He estimates that it cost €200,000 for the 1,000-sq-ft extension, which is single-storey to the rear of the house, two storeys tall to the side and includes a new kitchen.

“Four years on and we have the perfect house,” he says. “Obviously, all of this work was done at the peak of the market, but it means we have the house we want. The most important thing for us was having two architects really listen to us on the day. We walked away with what we wanted.”

Since its inception, the Simon Open Door event has raised nearly €200,000 for the charity, and more than 2,500 consultations have been held. All the architects involved give their time free.

With the economic downturn, however, interest in the consultations has waned. Last year, only 491 consultations were booked; in 2008, there were 737. But Bannon and his colleagues say the current climate should encourage more people to book consultations, as in a recession, homeowners favour renovations over buying, selling or trading up.

“In the boom years, if the sitting room wasn’t big enough, you moved. People can now see that the stamp duty you would pay on the average home — about €50,000 — could get you a great extension, instead,” he says.

There are 190 practices taking part this year, including such well-known firms as O’Mahony Pike in Cork and Anthony Reddy Associates in Dublin 6. So far, among the most heavily booked are Amanda Bone, of Bone O’Donnell Architects in Dundrum, Robin Mandal, of Robin Mandal Architects in Blackrock, and Arthur Duff, of Duff Tisdall Architects on Dublin’s North Circular Road.

In the two weeks since the launch, 75 consultations have been booked, leaving 1,300 more up for grabs. People are advised to take as much information about their properties to the practices as they can on the day — from Ordnance Survey or site location maps to photos of house elevations. They should know their budget limitations and have an idea of what they want to do to their home.

“I hope this year’s figures will be up

on last year,” says Mandal. “We try to encourage people who come to see us on

the day to send in as much stuff as they can before the event, such as photos, so we can prepare. For us, it’s a great opportunity, because you have that hour to be as creative as you like, which is quite a pleasure for us. In fact, last year my wife went to two other architects with plans of our house.”

Doyle intends to make good use of her hour with an expert. She has already booked time with Cathal O’Leary, of OLS Architects in Enniscorthy, Co Wexford.

“The house is really lovely,” she says. “It’s built on four levels, like two half-houses, and we built into the ground to comply with planning regulations, which limited the elevation of the house. We have a lot of space, 3,000 sq ft, which includes a huge living room upstairs and a round kitchen, which is aesthetically pleasing from the outside but not the most practical. We would like to have more storage space in the kitchen.”

Another couple who hope to benefit from their consultation are Dermot and Lorraine Russell, who own a three-bedroom terraced house in Terenure, Dublin, and have booked a local firm, ODKM

Architects, for the open day. They hope to work on plans for a rear extension that will include a dining area and additional living space.

While the Russells like modern architecture, they want the extension to blend in with the red brick used in the rest of the house.

“We first heard about this last year and we thought about getting involved,” says Dermot, who works in IT. “This is our first foray into a consultation process. We do have space and have been thinking about an extension. It’s a new house with a large, south-facing rear garden. We think we could do something that would make use of the natural light and would ideally like large sliding doors for easy garden access.”

The theme of this year’s fundraising event is low-cost interventions, or “future-proofing”, to help families create a home that helps them cope with their changing needs as well as their bills. A list of top tips on saving energy and reducing bills is available on the Simon Open Door website, [simonopendoor.ie](http://simonopendoor.ie).

The tips include ensuring that your roof space is well-insulated, upgrading

boilers, using energy-efficient light bulbs, Sustainable Energy Ireland grants for heating controls and extra lagging jackets on hot-water cylinders.

“I will certainly be asking my architect about solar panels,” says Doyle. “We have a timber-frame house, so it heats up quickly.”

There is other advice on the website for homeowners unsure about what to do in a stagnant market. Now, say architects, is the time to apply for planning permission. “It lasts for five years and means that you will not get lost in the glut of applications that will swamp the planning system when the upturn takes place,” the website advises.

“I think this will be the best €50 people will spend if they are thinking of doing anything with their home,” says Mandal. “It will be like a breath of fresh air because you will have somebody looking over a problem or idea from a completely new point of view.”

To book a place with the Simon Open Door initiative, visit [simonopendoor.ie](http://simonopendoor.ie)





**“WE WALKED IN WITH IDEAS THAT OTHERS SAID COULDN’T BE DONE AND LEFT WITH DRAWINGS OF OUR EXTENSION”**



**Dubliners Dermot and Lorraine Russell; inset, happy clients Clara and Kevin Prendergast**





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