

The €50 makeover

For a small outlay you can get fresh ideas for your house and help the homeless at the same time, writes Siobhán Maguire



This Rathmines townhouse extension shows how a home can be transformed with the help of a good architect

For 10 years, Michael and Niamh Ryan mulled over a way to brighten up their north-facing kitchen. It wasn't a question of freeing up space — their five-bedroom detached home in Cork's posh Montenotte neighbourhood had more than 2,100 sq ft of accommodation — but it was about making the most of the family home they had no intention of leaving.

"We were thinking about doing some work for such a long time and we had proposals from three or four architects, but we just couldn't decide," says Michael, an engineer and father of three. "The biggest challenge was to bring light into the house and make the kitchen a more functional room, but it was all about finding the right way to do this. We had a polycarbonate sun room that was really non-functional because

it had a plastic ceiling that froze in the winter and was too hot in the summer."

Then the couple signed up for the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland's (RIAI) annual Simon Open Door event, a weekend initiative that allows homeowners to have a one-hour consultation with their pick of local architects, in return for a €50 donation to the Simon Communities of Ireland, the countrywide charity for the homeless.

"We trotted off to the Simon event on



a Sunday morning and met up with Andrew O'Brien, an architect in Cork city, who spent an hour and 20 minutes with us on our ideas," says Michael. "I must say, he was one of the few architects that I thought had a bit of common sense. He listened carefully to us, took

on board what we were trying to articulate and sketched a new extension in front of us."

That was last April. By September, O'Brien was on board as architect to design, plan and supervise the construction of a 322-sq-ft mono-pitch extension that widened the kitchen, added a utility room, porch and en-suite bathroom, and rejigged the home's heating system. The work also extended to paving and doing up the driveway. It was an ambitious plan, but as far as the Ryans were concerned, it was a job well done.

"After 10 years of thinking about it, we were finally close to what we were trying to achieve," he says. "Within 12 weeks, all the work we had long discussed was completed and we had the kitchen we wanted. I think it's the best bit of advice you'll get for €50 for one

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hour. Architects are a bit more pragmatic these days, in both their sketches and understanding of clients."

For O'Brien, this feedback is key in an economy where nearly half of the country's architects are either out of a job or underemployed. That it came about on foot of a charitable contribution makes it all the more sweet.

"You don't go into an initiative such as the Simon Open Door looking for work," says O'Brien, who has volunteered his architectural know-how to

the charity since 2008. "It is nice to give something back, but it's also about making it a positive experience for homeowners who come to meet you.

"In the past, some people may have found architects difficult to approach. There was a barrier there from the profession, but events like this help break

that down and make us more approachable. That's a huge positive."

The theme of this year's campaign is sustainability, with the focus on low-cost ways to help households reduce energy bills and run their homes in smarter, greener ways. This can be achieved by: upgrading insulation, boilers, windows and lighting; replacing appliances with AAA rated, more energy-efficient units; draught-proofing doors and windows; and shutting down heating during summer months.

Now in its seventh year, the Simon Open Door event has raised nearly €250,000 for the charity. More than 920 architect practices have participated and 3,600 consultations have taken place. This year, about 120 architects have agreed to volunteer their expertise and some are almost booked up, including Robert Mandal Architects in Blackrock, Co Dublin, and ArcDox, a specialist architects in Sandyford, Dublin 18.

Other names in this year's hat include John Ryan, of Camilleri-Preziosi Ryan Architects, in Monkstown, Co Dublin, whose previous work includes an open-plan extension to a Rathmines townhouse, and Patrick Lloyd, of Peter Legge Associates in Blackrock, Co Dublin, who has recently completed a new home in Connemara, Co Galway. The property was constructed from two derelict cottages that were rebuilt using the existing stone and were enhanced with glass.

"An important part of the consultation is to be able to give people an idea of previous work," says Lloyd, who at 30 is one of the younger architects on board. "Connemara is a good example of the collaborative process between architect

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and client, where you can come up with an approach to rebuilding two ruined cottages. It's about a combination of ideas and experience of both the architect and client."

Last year's initiative drew 955 homeowners to the event, a big increase on 2009, when just 491 consultations were booked. In 2008, there were 737. Launched on March 1, the event has so far attracted a total of 60 homeowners, who have signed up for consultations. A further 1,350 places are available.

"Given the changes we have seen in the property market, many people are looking at improving, not moving," says Kathryn Meghan, RIAI's assistant director. "That's one of the reasons we think the success of the Simon Open Door has really grown over the past two years. Last year, people used the Open Door Weekend to visit an architect to talk about everything from open-plan kitchens to increasing storage and becoming more energy efficient. We are hoping to surpass that record this year and would encourage anybody thinking about making changes, big or small, to their house to visit simonopendoor.ie to make an appointment."

O'Brien is expecting renewed interest because the Irish homeowner has different needs and priorities, compared with the boom years, when building houses from scratch and trading up were not uncommon. Now, the property owner is far more cautious. In a stagnant market where trading up is not a realistic option, families are resigned to staying put and making the most of their existing spaces.

"The jobs have changed to extensions and refurbishment work. There are few clients who will look for a new site or one-off housing," says O'Brien, who has since set up his own practice after being made redundant last year.

"The majority of clients are people who probably have savings of €50,000 to €80,000 and are looking to stay in their homes and upgrade with a new room.

"The profession has also changed.



There is a lot more emphasis on conservation, on working with smaller spaces and maximising on usable room within a smaller area. It is a difficult profession at the moment because it is so competitive and there's more of us out there looking for the same work. Every practice has been affected in some way."

✦ *Simon Open Door 2011 takes place on Saturday and Sunday, May 7 and 8. To book a place with the architect of your choice, visit simonopendoor.ie*



O'Brien, left, with the Ryansat their Cork home; below left, the Ryans' new open-plan kitchen





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The airy interior of the Rathmines extension, designed by Camilleri-Preziosi Ryan Architects





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