

TIPS FROM RIAI ARCHITECTS

NOTE – This Document was produced for Simon Open Door 2010.

The following RIAI Architects and Practices, who all participated in Simon Open Door 2010) provided the tips:

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1. Look to **rearrange your entire ground floor**- if you extend, you might just end up with dark, unusable rooms in the centre of your home.
2. **Do not assume that first floor rooms can only function as bedrooms.** Using a bright upstairs room in winter might be just the thing to help you through dark days.
3. **Get extra high kitchen wall cabinets, wardrobes and shelves** that extend up to your ceiling. You gain additional shelving, it looks impressive and you reduce visible clutter.
4. **Insulate your attic**- This can reduce bills and make your home more comfortable to live in. It pays for itself within two years.
5. **Fit another lagging jacket over your hot water cylinder** to half the heat loss for minimal expense.
6. **Be selective in your use of colour**- lighter, unified colour schemes maximise the sense of space as well as light. The floor and furnishings can be a good source of colour.
7. **Now is a good time to get 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.
8. **Use up-lighters and floor lights** in preference to traditional down-lighters, and reduce wattage to create a more pleasant ambience.
9. **Reduce the noise in your house** by fitting insulation in stud partitions and between floor boards. Soft finishes such as large rugs, throws and cushions will also help.
10. **There has never been a better time to build from a cost perspective.** From builders to decorators to materials, there is great value out there.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH AN ARCHITECT

- Take your time: Don't rush the design process: challenge your architect and investigate different possibilities. The time taken at this design stage (which incidentally should be enjoyed) will pay dividends later. Designs need time to germinate and good work, design and detailing take time.
- Getting an Architect's advice on improving the layout of your living spaces can be invaluable. The simplest moves such as the rearrangement, removal or even just the relocation of a door or wall can increase the light into, change the way you move through, use or furnish a space. The smallest of changes when carried out correctly can make a huge difference.
- The public perception of "Architecture" is very often to do with big public works and grand statements or where houses are concerned it is about vast extensions. However, Architects can play a role in revisiting people's homes with a view to making more of what they have, evaluating the way space is used in relation to their lives and needs and considering simple interventions that could make a difference.
- Simple issues such as storage, lighting and heating, when dealt with effectively, can dramatically alter the use and enjoyment of a house. Now is the time to get the basics in order to make the most of what people have. The Simon Open Door event is the perfect opportunity for people to have a brief audit of how their home may or may not match their lifestyle and needs.

- Employ a professional RIAI Qualified Architect to help spend your money wisely (spending less at the start can cost more in the end)
 - Ensure your Architect is suitably qualified – you can check this with the RIAI
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ENERGY SAVING / REDUCING BILLS

- Make your house energy efficient. This reduces bills and makes your house more comfortable to live in. At the same time it gives independence from rising fuel costs.
- Check that your roof space is well insulated. It is easy to upgrade your insulation here. There should be at least a 200mm layer of insulation between joists. To further improve insulation lay a second layer over the top of the joists to prevent cold bridging. Rock wool insulation is more environmentally and user friendly than standard fibre glass insulation.
- The greatest investment anyone can make is insulation. Pays for itself within 2 years.
- The best tips for clients on a tight budget are;-
 - 1) Basic Level (No building works considered)
 - Increase insulation levels in attic roofspace if accessible
 - Upgrade boiler to 90% efficiency
 - Upgrade heating controls
 - 2) Mid Range level (If minor building works are being considered)
 - Upgrade wall insulation either internally or externally
 - Add draft lobbies to external door entrances
 - Replacement windows to low 'e ' double glazed.
- Install a stove with a back boiler to heat your hot water.
- Change your light bulbs to energy efficient one.
- Install mixer taps in bathrooms.
- Consider Replacing all standard wall vents and window vents with humidity sensitive automatic vents which open only when the room needs to be ventilated. Heat loss through permanent vents is a major waste of energy and contributes to excessive CO2 emissions.
- Don't sign up for additional insulation without having an independent assessment made of the likelihood of condensation within the construction increasing as a result.
- Don't fit insulated dry lining to brick walls or hollow block walls as this will prevent the natural drying out of the wall and may lead to a buildup of moisture trapped in the wall over time. Get advice from a qualified professional.
- Avail of the SEI grant for heating controls. Controls are quick to fit by a heating engineer and have immediate payback on investment. They are also almost foolproof.
- Make sure to get a RIAI registered architect's independent assessment of the HALO improvements suggested by the ESB surveyor before agreeing to implement them. .
- Remember the worry of whether your uninsulated attic tank was going to freeze in the recent cold weather? Now is a good time to finally get it insulated. And make sure to insulate all the pipes that connect to it through the attic.
- If you already have a lagging jacket on your hot water cylinder, fit another one over the top of the existing one and half the heat loss from the cylinder for a minimal expense. Don't forget to insulate all the pipework in the hot press as well as these can lose as much heat as the cylinder itself. You don't need any particular expertise to fit this, just a little patience. Pipe lagging can be purchased from a local plumbing suppliers and nominal cost. For a professional finish wrap the pipes in foil tape over the lagging to keep everything securely in place and hide any poorly executed joints.

- Chimneys are a major source of heat loss and draughts. In rooms where the fireplace is no longer in use, fit a chimney balloon up the flue above the fireplace to block the draught and save on heat loss. It is a good idea to remove it in the summertime to allow any dampness in the flue to dry out. Alternatively, have a competent tradesman fit a rain shedding cowl to the chimney pot to keep the flue dry.
 - If you have single glazing, we would recommend investing in an upgrade to double glazing. However, if you already have double glazing (but with old-style air-filled gap), upgrading to argon-filled or 'coated' systems is NOT worth the expense in terms of energy savings. With a proper assessment, money could be better spent upgrading the building fabric of your dwelling via insulation or air-tightness improvements.
 - Fit Rockwool insulation in stud partitions and between intermediate floor joists to improve sound insulation between rooms. This will also help to keep the heat within individual rooms.
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THINKING ABOUT BUILDING OR EXTENDING?

- Re Planning Permission: Architects now have the time available to take on smaller work than before and the planners are also less busy. There is nothing to be gained from delaying and finding yourself part of the glut of applications that will swamp the planning system once the promised upturn has taken hold.
 - If you have a planning permission which you can't afford to implement right now, get your architect to make an application for an extension of time on the existing permission, or to make a fresh application for the same work under the current development plan, so that it doesn't expire.
 - Now is a good time to get a competent and referenced tradesman to do those small domestic repairs that they were too busy to undertake during the boom. Replace broken window cills, rebuild frost damaged garden walls, refix detached gutters, replace cracked sanitary ware, repoint brick chimneys, reslate or re-felt roofs. These items may even be covered by household insurances so read the fine print of your policy and avail of the current record low prices of building materials and labour to sort out those "must do" jobs around the house.
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OPTIMISE YOUR EXISTING SPACE...MINIMAL OR NO OUTLAY.

- Assess your furniture layouts. Re-arranging/re-allocating furniture can have a profound effect on how you experience and use each room.
 - Assess your colour schemes. Lighter, unified colour strategies will maximise the sense of space as well as light.
 - Assess and address your storage needs. Reduced visible clutter will enhance your enjoyment of the space available.
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WAYS TO MAXIMISE NATURAL LIGHT....

- Assess your furniture layouts. Keeping furniture away from windows, or placing smaller pieces at windows, will enhance the flow of both space and of light.
- Assess your windows and window dressing. Painting window frames a light colour internally will increase the amount of reflected light. Keep window dressings light in both colour and feel.
- Assess your colour scheme including all furniture and all finishes and all accessories, not just walls.
- Assess where it might be possible to provide rooflighting. If located correctly, a rooflight can transform a dark room still further by allowing direct sunlight in also.
- However, windows are better than roof lights in terms of view, weathering and thermal efficiency. Roof lights are most effective for internal spaces which do not benefit directly from windows. Adding a roof light to an internal hallway/ stairway/ landing can make it a more impressive space and avoid having to artificially light it during the day.
- Fitting a glass door from a bright living room to a dark hall can bring light into the hall way and highlight the entrance to the main room.
- Balance the flow of light in the house as a whole, where space and other considerations allow, by opening up between the front and rear rooms. This will allow, for example, a north facing rear room benefit from the daytime sun in the front room.
- Explore whether some day time uses might be facilitated at first floor level. Spaces at an upper level will be naturally brighter all year round. This can be especially welcome in Winter when daylight levels are low.

- Generally South facing facades should have large windows and openings to maximise solar gain. It is advantageous to have larger living areas to the south. North facing facades should have smaller windows to minimise heat loss. It is advantageous to have service areas such as bathrooms and kitchens and storage to the north.
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STORAGE TIPS...

- Identify what is to be stored and provide appropriate, conveniently located storage in each case. Your home will still get messy from time to time but at least each item will have a "home".
 - Adjustable shelving will maximise the usefulness of any shelved area.
 - 30cm is a good all-round shelving depth.
 - Provide full height access to Hot Press, cupboards and storage areas where possible – a normal door means a lot of the area at high level is effectively inaccessible.
 - Hot Press/linen storage shelves work well with shelves 30cm apart in height. Laundry topples over more easily where shelves are farther apart. You will fit in more shelves and more items.
 - Coats and jackets are more usefully stored on hanging rails, not hooks, where overload occurs easily. A rail needs to be placed in a space 60cm deep.
 - Identify any recesses or dead space in your rooms. By using these spaces to build in bespoke storage units it negates the need for additional storage furniture. This frees up floorspace and creates a better feeling of spaciousness. Your architect can help you identify these spaces and may design the storage furniture for you.
 - Unused attic spaces have strong potential for additional storage. An attic hatch and ladder, timber decking, and a light switch can be added to create a large new storage space for belongings that you don't require regular access to.
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GENERAL DESIGN TIPS

- If your house is already cluttered, but not in a charming way, then don't add anything new without removing something else first.
 - Get some house plants and look after them.
 - Less usually is more.
 - "Good design improves your life".
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USE OF COLOUR

- If in doubt about colour, use white – preferably off / warm white - and never magnolia.. Use natural materials in preference to un-natural materials, but use un-natural materials in preference to fake naturals. Always avoid the 'beach effect'.
 - Be selective in your use of colour as too much can darken and make a room appear smaller. In general, white should be used to maximise brightness. The floor can be a good source of colour in a room and contrast with the white walls. Furnishings, curtains and cushions are also a good source of colour without darkening a room.
 - In terms of use of colour, if spaces are small, a monochrome palette using very light shades can make a small space seem bigger, a contrasting coloured accent to one wall can be used as a focal point.
 - Use bright colours in north facing rooms.
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