

The clever louver system helps protect privacy without compromising view or light.

Who Lives Here

Home Owners Aoife & Ronan Walsh, along with their two children, Áine & Cliona

Property 1930s, 3-bed, semi-detached house in Clontarf, Co. Dublin

Project Extension to rear and remodelling of interior, adding 80sqm of space.

Budget €250k, but spent €240k!

Value €1.2m



The sliding doors in the kitchen are positioned in line with the bay window at the front of the house in the front lounge. This visually opens up the entire ground floor and allows natural light to flow uninterrupted.

ReaderProfile

“Our Architect’s Vision Went Beyond the Blueprint”

Creating your dream home is easier when you’ve found the right location and an inspirational architect. With the help of MacGabhann Architects, Aoife and Ronan Walsh opened up their tired 1930s house to embrace views, natural light and contemporary design...

“We bought the house in 2003/4 when baby number one was on the way. We wanted a good base to settle down and Clontarf ticked all the right boxes. The house also had loads of potential – a large garden and a garage which could be converted if we needed to.”

Aoife and Ronan carried out their home improvements in two phases. Phase one was rolled out shortly after purchase and included rewiring, upgrading windows, installing central heating and semi-converting the

garage to create a utility area and small WC. The separate toilet and bathroom on the first floor, a typical layout seen in properties of this period, were also merged together to create a new family bathroom. “These alterations were practical rather than creative so we restricted the architect’s involvement and decided to source labour direct and manage the project ourselves - something we would not recommend or ever do again! You have to remember it was still boom time in Dublin →

Opposite: The fold from wall (vertical) to patio (horizontal) accentuates the monolithic nature of the rear extension with its large blocks of white and cut-out holes for windows.

Location Location Location... Clontarf is a coastal suburb on the north side of Dublin, most famous for the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 during which Brian Boru, High King of Ireland defeated the Viking invaders. It adjoins a number of commercial villages and includes easy access to Dollymount beach and the second largest municipal park in Dublin, St Anne’s. However, it is perhaps most desirable for working families because it’s served by the DART line, numerous Dublin Bus routes and is a mere two miles from Dublin city centre. There’s no denying the value placed on a good location, and Clontarf is certainly a highly regarded area in Co. Dublin.

and everyone was cashing in. It was extremely stressful and we got very badly burned with poor quality work and people not turning up when they were supposed to. It's definitely not recommended when you're pregnant. The worst example was the initial rewiring work not being up to the required standards. It all had to be ripped out and redone at second fix stage which delayed our project considerably. Luckily we had only part-paid the electricians involved and didn't lose everything!"

The couple decided to carry out phase two of their home improvements in 2007/8 with a very different approach; this time with full architect involvement. "Our family was expanding and we simply needed more space. We didn't want any stress or hassle like we experienced previously," recalls Aoife, "so we contacted the architect who worked with us on phase one. Antoin and Tarla from MacGabhann Architects designed the new living space and managed the project in its entirety, which left us free to carry out our normal daily routine. In fact we weren't too far away because we were lucky enough to rent the house next door for the duration of the project."

A good architect should spend at least two hours with you on the first briefing. The Practice knew the family well and had already grasped their likes and dislikes. However, Tarla and Antoin used the session to gain a deeper insight into how the family lived (now there were two children) and what they hoped to achieve by carrying out further renovation to the house. The session raised a number of important issues – the couple felt the ground floor was dark and gloomy, the kitchen was small and there weren't enough bedrooms to accommodate their growing



family and stay-over guests. Aoife was also adamant she didn't want a redundant middle room, sometimes left behind after an extension is added. "You might see them used as offices or playrooms," she explained. "We wanted a ground floor that was fully open with accessible zones, and where the garden could be seen and easily used." The brief was now much clearer – create an open plan living space on the ground floor with plenty of natural light and a much bigger kitchen with direct access to the garden; incorporate an extra bedroom on the first floor so family guests from Donegal and Waterford could stay.

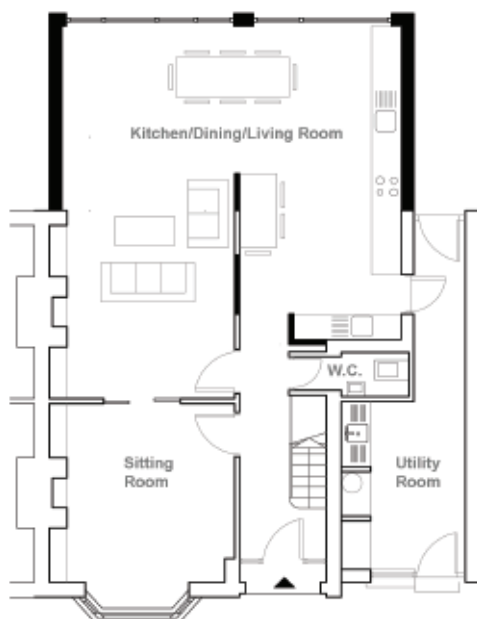
Above: Glazing was an integral part of this design concept so all windows have a specific function – providing a view, contributing to natural light or enhancing the feeling of space. This is the new dressing room.

THE BRIEF

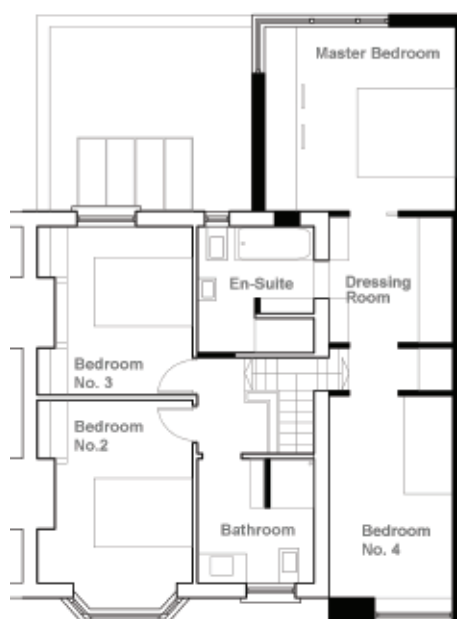
- ✓ More natural light
- ✓ Bigger living space
- ✓ A guest bedroom
- ✓ Larger kitchen
- ✓ Access to the garden
- ✗ No stress
- ✗ No 'dark' middle room on the ground floor

The architects' proposed plans didn't diminish the size of the existing house or garden, but simply remodelled them to provide a more functional and practical layout that met the family's current and future needs. This meant full conversion of the garage and adding a small extension to the rear of the house. All elements in the project adhered to the principles of design efficiency and referenced everything from space planning and energy performance to materials and colour tones. As you can see from the plans, the old bathroom was turned into an en suite, while the old box room was transformed into the new family bathroom. That meant a spacious new bedroom and dressing room could be created on the first floor and a generous open-plan living space incorporated on the ground floor with direct access to the garden.

Aoife and Ronan wanted plenty of natural light so the architect strategically positioned windows to maximise solar gain or take full advantage of a particular view. The corner window in the new master bedroom, for example, offers distant panoramic views towards the sea when standing up, while the narrow, rectangular window directly below this provides a private view of the garden when lying in →



Ground Floor Plan



First Floor Plan



bed. As there are no permanent blinds, a metal privacy screen with tilting louvers was erected to prevent overlooking the neighbour's garden or someone from the kitchen looking up into the bedroom through the recessed ceiling window.

Four glazing elements were introduced on the new ground floor living space, each providing a specific design function. Firstly, a slit window is flush with the ceiling and throws natural light deep into the kitchen/dining area to compensate for the lower than average ceiling height. Secondly, the large window beside the kitchen units frames a 'picture' of the garden and incorporates a ledge (in polished concrete) which doubles up as internal seating for children or additional worktop space. Thirdly, to visually connect the front of the house to the rear and channel more natural light through the house, the architect mirrored the position of the sliding patio doors with the

Above: The red Arne Jacobsen chairs make a striking feature in the kitchen against the blanket of white.

Above right: The polished concrete surface folds down to create a window seat or extends up to provide a seamless worktop.

bay window in the sitting room. The sliding doors also provide direct access to the rear garden, which was an important part of the original brief, particularly now the family had two children. Finally, the recessed ceiling window is positioned between the new flat roof and the wall of the original house to

To ensure the new living space was light and airy rather than dark and cluttered, the architect restricted the design palette to four elements inside and out:

1. **WHITE:** Kitchen units, walls, tiles, internal joinery and patio.
2. **GREY:** Worktop/window seat and external window frames.
3. **CONCRETE:** Worktop/window seat and patio.
4. **WOOD:** Flooring, doors and internal window frames.

provide a two-fold function - penetrate natural light deep into the centre of the new living space and give the illusion of higher ceilings.

Concrete has a reputation for being rough and cold. However, when the material is highly polished, it can feel almost warm to touch, thus making it suitable for indoor use. The architects' initial idea was to lay it throughout the ground floor living space, but unfortunately it was unsuitable for the existing part of the house, which had a timber board substrate. Instead, they chose second best - 75mm wide x 22mm deep, tongue and groove, oak flooring, which is luxurious and hard-wearing. To keep the interior consistent, they fitted flush-panel, solid oak internal doors and painted them white to provide a seamless boundary around the room. Still wanting to incorporate polished concrete somewhere, Tarla suggested applying it to the worktop, which Aoife and Ronan loved. However, as always, Tarla's vision went a step further and from this emerged the worktop-window seat, which forms a special feature in the room; contrasting against the white walls and kitchen units. Concrete was also carried through to the exterior and formed the patio which visually extends from the walls when painted white.

As with any new build project, energy performance and efficiency are paramount to conserve heat, reduce energy bills and create a more sustainable home. To help Aoife and Ronan achieve this, the architects incorporated a number of features into the design - a high-efficiency condensing gas boiler, low-E argon-gas filled window units, high density insulation and dry-lined internal walls. The window frames are particularly impressive because they are 'alu-clad', with timber frames specified inside and aluminium frames outside.

Aluminium is a hard wearing and durable material, while the painted timber inside provides warmth and design continuity. Orientation is also important - the rear garden is south facing, so positioning a lot of glazing at this end of the house maximises solar gain – which means plenty of natural light and heat from the sun!

Throughout the project, Antoin and Tarla communicated with the couple via email. “It was a completely different experience,” explains Aoife. “Minutes were sent to us after every on-site meeting and if we needed to make a decision about something, Antoin or Tarla would explain the choices, give us a deadline and we would email back with a response. It was stress-free and hassle-free.” This process of communication was critical to the success of the project. “Although there were no major issues,” explains Antoin, “it was important the clients knew exactly what was going on – because we were on a fixed price, fixed time project and any delays would ultimately have impacted on us meeting the terms of the contract. For instance, we discovered the garage had no foundations so we needed to decide whether we would relay them, which would increase the cost of the project or add steel beams to reinforce the first floor. One option was going to cost more money yet either one would have resolved the issue. In the end we decided to use steel beams but I couldn’t have decided that without the client’s input.”

Being a project manager carries a lot of responsibility, not only for scheduling and budgeting, but for ensuring every aspect of the brief and design is fully communicated during construction. This was why Aoife and Ronan wanted ‘full architect involvement’ from the Practice. Their attention to detail would stay true to the original concept and help them achieve the home of their dreams. This was evident in the ground floor area where the architects devised special holding units for the spot lights. “The ceiling is low and we didn’t want to interfere with the insulation panels or waste any of the heat that these light fittings radiate,” explains Tarla. “The holding units direct heat down into the room rather than up into the ceiling; as well as becoming a design feature in their own right!”

The kitchen is the heart of the home and in this house it fulfils many functions – the white, handleless Poggenpohl units in their simple form are integral to the overall design concept and contribute to the feeling of light and space in the kitchen zone; good quality appliances from Siemens, Blanco and Neff were chosen to enhance the cooking experience; and bespoke larder-style cupboards were designed to store children’s toys, thus helping the transition between family time and entertaining guests, without affecting the overall look and layout of the

kitchen. Special pieces of furniture were also introduced - Arne Jacobsen Butterfly chairs in red, were matched with a Jacobsen Super Circular dining table, and Eileen Gray Bibendum Chairs. These pieces help unify design with function as well as initiating conversation from visitors! “Generally the new living space fulfils all criteria set out in the original brief,” says Aoife. “There are no awkward spaces and every part is usable. We particularly love the worktop with the incorporated window seat! That helps the garden become an extension of the new living space.”

The project commenced in April 2008 and was expected to take six months. However, unavoidable delays pushed the completion date to December. “These things can and do happen through nobody’s fault,” recalls Tarla. “Luckily in this case it wasn’t a major issue because a ‘Liquidated Damages’ clause was built into the contract with the builder. This meant the injured party, ie. Aoife and Ronan, would be compensated for any losses they incurred as a result of the delay. Under these terms, both parties agreed that the builder would pay the additional cost of renting the house next door.”

Aoife and Ronan are converts to ‘full architect involvement’. “We paid a fixed price with no extras, were kept informed of all stages and experienced no hassle or stress throughout the project,” says Aoife. “In fact I think we actually received loads of extras! The builders were professional and delivered the highest standard of quality, while the architect managed each stage efficiently so all parties delivered exactly what was specified on time. If something wasn’t right, the architect had it rectified immediately.”

The whole space feels bright, airy and most of all integrated - you can walk between



Above: The garden is framed like a picture, thanks to the carefully positioned glazing.

kitchen, dining and living areas very easily, while the sliding doors positioned directly opposite the window at the front of the house, connect front and rear, as well as penetrating natural light throughout the ground floor. As a direct result of the couple’s alterations, Tarla expects the property to receive an energy rating around B1/B2, which is a dramatic improvement from the standard E-F it would have registered in 2003. Not only is the property more energy efficient now, but its new layout and design truly reflects how this family wanted to live in the location they chose to settle. ■

SourceBook

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Concrete Worktop

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Windows & Doors

(Phase 1) Rationel, 1800 292929, www.rationel.ie and
(Phase 2) Bonner Windows, (0)74 93 82023
www.bonnerwindows.com

Designer Furniture

Arne Jacobsen Butterfly chairs in red & Fritz Hansen
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from Instore Furniture, Stillorgan Business Park,
Co. Dublin (0)1 2958872

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