

A Site to Behold

When Cliff and Deirdre relocated due to work commitments, they searched for a site, or property that they could make their own, bespoke creation. They eventually found a 1970s bungalow in Letterkenny on a remarkable site with incredible views. The next step was to transform it from the 70s into a well thought out, functional family home for them and their children Tiegan, Rowan and Euan.



‘We moved to Dublin in the late 90s and I was working for British Airways and then Aer Lingus,’ says Cliff. ‘It was a very exciting time in Dublin and we have many friends there. We stayed for a few years and then I got a job in Derry and a year later we bought this. It was a 1970s bungalow and bizarrely the estate agents didn’t show a picture of the view across the river at all. The house was quite overgrown with shrubbery and ivy. It had been on the market for quite a while but we came out to see it and were instantly keen so put an offer in right away and bought it. We lived in it for a while to get a feel for the place before deciding how we would adapt it to suit how we lived.’ The couple had previously worked with MacGabhann Architects on a business premises and the relationship had been very successful. They knew they were the right practice to bring on board to work with them on transforming the bungalow. ‘Our previous house in Dublin was very run down so we were very open to another renovation. When we moved in it was such a joy to have so much space compared to Dublin. We spoke to MacGabhann’s and they came out, had a look round and said there were some fantastic things we could do. So we got back in touch and started the process.’

MacGabhann Architects came on board and began their

process with the client and as they explain, they treated it like any other scale of project the practice work on; producing scale models and developing the family’s thought process. ‘As is often the case is Donegal, the best sites often have bungalow on them. They lived in it for a while and then came to us so we said ‘lets assume we’re starting on a greenfield site, let us prepare a brief for what you would want from new, forgetting the existing. People often try to resolve the problems they have and tailor the brief accordingly. But we see if we can meet the aspirations, working within the existing home and within budget. We set about designing models from their feedback. You always have a certain amount of wishes, we can always meet a certain percentage of them. They were delighted with it as we had shown them the model. It had more to do with the interior and their relationship between the interior, the garden and the views. It’s like performing an operation, take away a bit of wall, widen doors, widen corridors etc and it transformed. We used the split level to our advantage with the kitchen and dining below with the surrounding living and play areas. The process is all about dialogue, we try to put a skin on their idea. We listen very carefully to clients. Any projects success depends on the relationship with the client, they had a good understanding of us and we had a good understanding of them.’



Both parties exchanged ideas over the course of a year or so and as Cliff says, many of the changes would seem subtle compared to other renovation or extension projects. But the sum of all the parts has made a dramatic change to the property. The 70s were well and truly banished. The garden to the rear was extremely overgrown which previously made the house very dark so the entire surrounding site was cleared, one of the main benefits to living in the house for a while to get a feel the likes of light and space. 'The ideas were more about rejigging which then moved on to a small extension the whole way along the rear of the house,

utilising the use of glass. Our builder was Barney Gallagher and he was fantastic. He did Deirdre's sisters house in Donegal town and they had a great relationship with him. He was very reasonable and worked very differently which we liked. He was very open minded and nothing was ever a problem. We never had to chase him for anything like other builders. He was here every single day for us. We gave MacGabhann's a fairly short brief in terms of what we wanted. We didn't want to clutter the process and we really loved how they worked. It's a modest extension, but they put so much thought into the detail. For instance the

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steps down into the kitchen area some might see as a waste of space but the kids play on them, people sit on them and it becomes part of the space. There were so many good solutions they came up with. The open-plan aspect has drawbacks for some people because of noise but for me personally, a lot of properties stick to a Victorian format with dining room, lounge etc. I prefer the informality of open-plan. We still have the option to close off the top room if we need to. For instance if the kids have friends over they can play away in there. Practically, it works very well for us. I find it a very comfortable home and the location is wonderful.'

The flooring in the kitchen area of the open-plan space is a great choice. Subtle enough not to overpower the room and practical for young children to run about relatively safely, the linoleum finish has worked brilliantly. 'The floor I love. We wanted the same flooring throughout apart from the living room and bedroom for a warmer, softer area as opposed to changing from tiles to wood to carpet. You have to accept if you're going to use it, it's going to take a lot of traffic and it will mark. It looks pristine when it first goes down but to keep it like that would be torture! The marking is part of its character. The kitchen is by

Northbrook Designs in Buncrana. They are a lovely, small family firm who were really good to us. We wanted a Corian worktop, with a chunkier profile, and we wanted as few handles as possible. Anything we wanted in the design at all, they were very accommodating. They did all the bookshelves for us too in the office and they did the partition in our bedroom too. They were fantastic to work with and nothing was ever any trouble for them.'

There are a number of furniture pieces and accessories that the family have kept with them. One of the new centrepieces however

is the kitchen table. They spotted a similar one that was unfortunately over their budget, so they took the idea to a local joiner who made it for them for a fraction of the price. 'It's quite difficult to get a long, simple table,' says Cliff. 'You get much more creative when you're running out of budget!' Up in the living room, the open-plan nature of the home is dealt with perfectly. It has an altogether different feel from the kitchen but retains the connection. It has become a favourite spot for Deirdre, as she explains, 'We were limited where we could locate the stove as there's a stud running into the main wall. I love it up here.



It's very cosy. It's not huge, but it's perfect for us. The study works well for us too as we're able to work away yet peek over and keep an eye on the kids. We wanted carpet in here for a nice change and a softer feel. I'm glad we did it. It adds to the cosiness. I thought we'd maybe live to regret it with the kids running about but it's been more adult mishaps with coffee and wine spillages!

In the master bedroom, having the partition with storage is an ideal solution, meaning no need for a space taking wardrobe which in this room means they have the added bonus of being able to harness the view once more with a small sitting and living area. 'Deirdre uses it for working from home, she's much more disciplined than me!' says Cliff. 'As the children get older, we will use it much more than too. It makes it more than a bedroom. We love it. We knew we could take a risk in here with it and it worked out well. The extra space is such a transformation. When we have visitors, people can come down and have their own space. It's nice to have a music and reading space and it's another option from the open-plan space. Our spare room we thought would make a great study eventually but for now it's ideal for visitors.'

Cliff and Deirdre admit the process was tough at times as it always is when you have to leave your home for renovations, especially with young children. 'It was tough going,' says Deirdre, 'and we had to move out into an old house nearby and then we had to move in with the folks for a while so it was stressful at the time. But Cliff loved the whole process. With just 400sq ft added to the original property, on paper it wasn't a big change, but most importantly it did enable us to make numerous changes throughout and rework the layout. We just wanted a better use of space and that's exactly what we got. For the small change it was, we got so much out of it.' 🏠