

# Light relief

Edwardian cosiness came with dark cramped spaces in this Dublin home — until a clever extension brought the sunlight in, writes **Mark Keenan**

Fergal Phillips / Mary Louise Halpeny



Mahogany decking and panelling blends the extension with the garden



The living area looks out over the garden where there is a play area



McCabe's new kitchen features a solid-oak work surface

**"THE LIGHT FLOODS IN AND THE VIEW DOWN THE GARDEN IS REALLY GREAT, AS WELL AS PRACTICAL BECAUSE YOU CAN ALWAYS SEE WHERE THE CHILDREN ARE"**



The glass roof draws in light that is carried through the ground floor

Irish architectural awards have so many rear extensions on their shortlists these days that they might as well add a dedicated "Rear of the Year" category next time they're handing out gongs. And among the behinds likely to be at the forefront next year is Sterrin O'Shea's addition to a period terraced home in Dublin 6.

"Yes, we want the usual: more space and light. That's a given. But what we'd also like is lots of clever-clogs hidden storage," said Karl and Geraldine McCabe in their brief when they called in the architect to extend their 1905 home in Rathmines, last year.

They had lived in the property since 2001 and after a decade realised that

while their elegant Edwardian home was cosy and comfortable, it was also dark and warren-like. After seeing a magazine feature about a contemporary project by O'Shea, the couple reckoned she was the designer for them.

"We just felt that, as well as being talented, Sperrin knew what we wanted and that she was efficient and on our wavelength," says Geraldine McCabe, who has two children, Ellie, four, and James, two.

"We'd bought the house from somebody who had converted it from flats back into a private residence, so most of the heavy and expensive work had already been done. But the dimensions were quite cramped, especially the old kitchen area, and there wasn't a lot of

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light getting through at that level.

"With the arrival of our children, the bits and pieces were already starting to spread all around the place. We needed those extra kitchen, dining and living spaces, as well as insulation for the rest of the house, so we thought we might as well get everything done

at once. We also needed lots of clever places in which to put all that fletsam and jetsam away," says McCabe, a former marketing manager with a software company.

And in these cash-strapped days, the domestic architectural work that makes the most practical and financial

sense is not the building of new one-off houses but the revitalising of older ones. With construction prices and architects' fees low, there has never been a better time for those with plenty of equity in a home to commission such work. But it can be tricky.

To add 400 sq ft and break open a further 600 sq ft, the downstairs rear of the McCabes' listed house had to be knocked out, then supported on pillars while the work was carried out.

The project took six months, a surprisingly short time for a complicated project such as this and the architect and her clients are delighted with the quality of the finish. "It was down to three factors," says O'Shea. "First, careful specification, next making sure the details were done right on the suite and last, but not least, having a really good builder to carry out the work. The original kitchen — in the ground floor of the return — was dark and had little or no relationship with the garden because of the outside utility room/WC lean-to structure built right in front of it.

"The McCabes wanted a new kitchen to connect with both the garden and the main house, from which it was very detached. To solve this we remodelled the return and extended to the side and rear."

Meanwhile, heaps of hidden panel

O'Shea decided to deploy a brilliant-white concrete compound for the flooring. This was poured, polished and then sealed, leaving a clean bright surface to help bounce the light into the depths of the open-plan kitchen/dining space. The architect didn't want the extension to dominate the existing house, so many aspects were toned down to reduce its impact and to make it as "invisible" as possible.

The roof was coated in a dark anthracite zinc, the inside walls in a sobering dark charcoal. The white floor, large glazed panels and glazed roof would help to solve the light problem, but O'Shea faced another challenge.

"The McCabes were keen on a long island counter, which we'd decided to construct in white silestone [a composite stone material]. The trouble then was that almost everything in there was now almost too stark and sterile, with all the grey and white. We needed something to warm it all up."

O'Shea ordered a bespoke solid-oak extension to the silestone counter from a local company. "It took five men to carry the oak slab into place," she says. The result is a warm centrepiece that blends easily with the white silestone.

storage was built into the kitchen walls to accommodate utilities, a cloakroom, children's toys and the usual bric-a-brac. "It's just so fantastic to be able to put all this stuff away out of sight," says Geraldine. "And just wait until you see our garden 'shed'."

Within what appears to be a line of timber fencing panels is a secret door. Behind it is storage for bikes, garden equipment and hardware.

Work was also carried out on the existing house. Insulation was upgraded and sheep's wool insulation was installed in the attic, which was also panelled and floored to create more storage space, which is reached by a folding staircase.

The old floorboards were also sanded and cleaned. Finally, the team installed solar panels on the roof to help heat the water.

As with almost any renovation scheme, budgets had to be trimmed and the limits agreed. The height of the glazed areas in the extension had to be reduced and contemporary upright radiators were used in the new kitchen/dining area instead of the underfloor heating they had wanted.

However, the savings meant that garden could be landscaped. "There's no point in having a thoroughly

contemporary extension with a builder's site to the rear," said McCabe. "So we managed to cobble together some funds and called in a landscaper."

The 95ft garden blends with the extension via a mahogany deck that has matching sides. Contrasting with this are areas of Indian sandstone, gravel and low-level concrete raised beds, which enclose a rubber-floored play area for the children at the centre. In the old part of the house a roof light was mounted to illuminate the stairwell and the Victorian-style front door was painted a striking lime green.

"We moved back in in November just when the worst snow in decades hit," says McCabe. "It was quite dramatic to hear big heaps of it falling off the main roof and thudding onto the glass roof of the extension. So it got well tested early on.

"It's beautiful in summer because the light floods in and the view down the garden is really great, as well as practical — from the extension you can always see where the children are at all times.

What the McCabes have ended up with is a living area that is used more than the rest of the house. But that suits them.

"If you want to just get some peace

and quiet, you can sit in the original front reception room and relax," says McCabe. This room, as with the rest of the house, has all the expected trimmings of an elegant Dublin Edwardian home: high windows, a marble fireplace, crystal chandelier, stucco ceiling work and now thick polished floorboards.

Between the living room and the extension is the original dining room, now a place of transition that takes the family from their "old" restored period house into their thoroughly modern extension. The light that penetrates from the new open area pierces through the house right to the front door.

"I'm very pleased with the end result," says O'Shea. "Most of all, if you stand at the back you'll see that this big old house is still the dominant presence and that the finished extension is somehow quite ephemeral and hasn't overshadowed it all.

"After all, there's this new space to talk about, but we can't forget that this commission also involved the careful restoration of a very old house."

"We've got the house we want to stay in from here on in. Isn't that everybody's dream?" says O'Shea.

†† Sherrin O'Shea Architects, sosa.ie