

Planning is key for the perfect extension

DESIGNING and building an extension, compared to a new house, is like doing open-heart surgery on a living patient rather than building a new robot. So says John-Barry Lowe of Eden Architects in Dublin, a practice experienced in extensions.

Much of what happens in architecture is driven by fashion, he says, but that's not necessarily right for an addition to a residential property.

"A lot of extensions have acres of glass, but people do not especially like sitting by glass as it can be uncomfortable. You do wonder how pleasant those rooms actually are to live in?" he says.

Tim Darmody of Darmody Architects agrees, saying the art of the extension is a practical one.

"The client wants to know 'Where is my kitchen table going to be? Will I have good light in the morning and in the evening? Where will I store my golf clubs? What will the energy rating be?'"

Extensions are increasingly popular again, given the downturn and the challenge of selling a house and moving on. The first step is to think about why an extension is needed.

"Talk about it first and write down what you want," says Lowe.

"Don't just jump into it. You're going to have to live in it for 10 to 15 years, so it's worthwhile thinking about it and talking about it first. Paper is cheap at the start of a job. It's very easy to look at different structures that might suit and tease things out before committing to it. It's

Function is more important than size when it comes to adding an extra room. **Kathy Foley** reports

better to do things slowly and carefully."

Most house owners request a combined dining/ kitchen area, with some additional living space, but Lowe advises them not to focus too much on labels.

"Putting names on rooms can restrict you. Instead of saying, 'I want a dining-room', look for a room that can have two or three functions. A dining area can also be a study area or a play area. I usually spend a lot of time working storage into an extension plan. People want a 'good room', but every space can be a 'good' space as long as you can put things away," he says.

An extension can be turned to almost any use, although kitchens have plumbing requirements. Dining spaces can be as little as 2.7 metres wide, but living areas

really need to be at least 3.3 to 3.5 metres in diameter.

House owners seeking extensions tend to be keen on open-plan spaces, but Lowe says such rooms can fall victim to "big shed syndrome", being too noisy and cluttered. He likes to use lots of double doors and sliding doors to give flexibility to extensions.

In addition to adding a modest extension to a house in Booterstown, Co Dublin, Lowe opened up the existing house, maximising light and storage. Previously, the reception rooms were not connected and the house had a poky kitchen, a converted garage used for dining and a lean-to conservatory where the children played.

Lowe deliberately limited the width of the extension. "There is a tendency to extend to the full

width of the plot, but with a normal house, that means you have a depth of 60 metres with no air movement and poor contrast of light."

The extension stretches just 1.8 metres into the garden.

"If you go out further, say to six metres, with a flat roof extension, it begins to feel unattractive, like a container was dropped there," says Lowe. He also raised the height of the glassed-in area to 2.9 metres, higher than the 2.6 metres in the rest of the space. "Height is as important in giving a sense of space as depth or width."

Lowe and Darmody insist an architect should save a client on the cost of an extension. "You can even end up talking them out of building an extension," says Lowe.

"Architects will ask about the budget and make damn sure they don't go over it without consulting the client. If they can find a way to build for half the budget, they will do it."

"We have not been very good at getting the message across of the value of architects doing extensions," says Darmody, adding that a good, architect-designed extension is customised to the users.

"Clients might come in with an image from a glossy magazine and say 'I want that in my back garden', but it has to work in the context of the existing house and garden, layered on top by how the family will choose to live in it.

"In the end, the client should have an architectural property that is absolutely unique to their circumstances."



This extension by John-Barry Lowe of Eden Architects opens up the house to natural sunlight and leaves no dead or unused spaces. The new room avoids the tendency of filling the full width of the plot, and, as a result, fits in well with the existing house.



Added value in design

As this selection shows, contemporary Irish home extensions can be dramatically different.



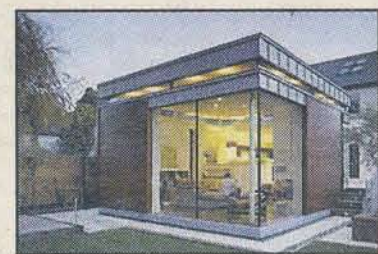
Nun's Lane, Killester (Donal Hickey Architects)



Landscape Room, Co Sligo (LID Architecture)



Ballinlough, Cork (Carr Cotter Naessens)



Vernon Grove, Rathgar (Darmody Architects)