



Eva Byrne is one of many architects taking part in the Simon Open Door day, which provides advice for homeowners, while raising funds for the Simon Community. **Gemma Tipton** gets some ideas

OPEN UP NEW POSSIBILITIES

HOW MANY PEOPLE get to live in a house they fell in love with? For a great many, even pre-boom, the house you live in is the house you can (just about) afford, at least with a first home. And with cheery phrases such as credit crunch and negative equity redefining the idea of a “property ladder”, the number of us stuck in homes that don’t suit us terribly well is considerable.

There’s another statistic to consider, though, and that is the number of people with no homes at all. They are the ones that organisations such as the Simon Community seek to help. Now in its sixth year, the annual RIAI Simon Open Door initiative aims to raise money for those who are homeless, or facing homelessness, while giving those of us who do have somewhere to live advice and inspiration to make our places better.

It’s a clever idea – for a €50 donation to the Simon Community, you get an hour’s consultation with an architect, who can advise you on anything, from building from scratch,

conservation issues, extending, to making the most of what you have. Since the project began, hundreds of architects and thousands of members of the public have taken part, with €200,000 being raised in the process.

All the architects give their time for free, and come from a range of backgrounds and expertise, across Ireland. A theme this year is how architects can help you to see the possibilities of your existing spaces, by imagining solutions that may never have occurred to you before.

One of this year’s participating architects is Eva Byrne who, although she trained as an architect and for a number of years had her own practice, now offers a different sort of service. She gives advice on how to have a “new” house, without moving house at all. Specialising in no-cost to low-cost solutions, Byrne can give advice on small interventions but can also think bigger and will recommend everything from architects, to plumbers and electricians, to where to shop.

IDEAL HOME Architect and house consultant Eva Byrne with her children Vita and Oscar, and dog Bisto, in the Dublin house she designed with husband Gerard Carty

Talking to Byrne, I realise it’s amazing what we put up with at home – I once spent nearly a year tripping over a chair every time I went from front door to kitchen, and yet a small rearrangement changed everything.

In the same fit of home improvement, putting up a bedside shelf meant glasses of water were no longer knocked over by pillows chucked out in the night. Byrne agrees, and tells the story of one client, a woman who wanted advice on building a sun room. “I went into her south-facing sunny living room and said ‘but you already have one’, so we rearranged the furniture, and I advised her to buy an awning. She phoned me that summer to tell me she was sitting under her canopy, and that she was so happy.”

Byrne’s own home is a stunning example of what good architecture can achieve. She and her husband, Gerard Carty, who works with the award-winning Grafton Architects, designed it themselves. They have opened it to the public in the past at the Irish Architecture Foundation’s

Open House event, where people get to go round snooping into intriguing buildings, both public and domestic (Open House 2010 runs from October 7th-10th).

Even here, the needs of a family as children grow up (the couple have two children, Oscar, 11, and Vita, 10) meant changes had to be made – and moving the long dining table into the kitchen area altered the whole sense of how the family lived, worked and played.

“It was very simple but very profound,” says Byrne. The kitchen table was custom made. “That was a revelation, and commissioning a piece can be less expensive, if you know exactly what you want.”

Brimming with ideas (she has suggestions for how I should replace the bamboo-patterned frosted glass I have learned to live with in my front door), Byrne has recently created a website (houseology.ie) where you can be inspired to see the potential in your own space.

“It’s a way of sharing,” she says. “Architects do share information, that’s how people get ideas.”

She goes on to explain how she works, by sitting down with people, talking to them. “For me it’s the story – the people, the lives – that’s what I work off. You need to find out what people’s issues are. What we’re looking for is the optimal solution, that’s the one that suits people’s circumstances.”

What, I wonder, will architecture be like when we start building again in this country? Will we get better buildings? “I think the standards will be higher. People’s expectations are higher, and they’re more open to new ideas.

“People have less money now but they still have needs. What’s stopping people living in the houses they want?”

If it’s a question of design, Byrne, or one of the other Open Door Day architects, may be able to help. If it’s a more serious social issue, then the Simon Community is the one to turn to, and that’s why this is a project that really deserves support.

● A two-hour consultation with Eva Byrne, outside the RIAI Simon Open Door Day, costs €300. Contact her on 087-2940805 and at houseology.ie, which also has interiors tips.

● Simon Open Door 2010 is on next Saturday and Sunday, April 24th-25th. See simonopendoor.ie to book your time slot with the architect of your choice. There is also advice about what to think about in advance, and what to bring with you.



‘People have less money but they still have needs. What’s stopping people living in the houses they want?’

Eva Byrne’s interiors advice

- Assess your furniture layouts. Rearranging/re-allocating furniture can have a profound effect on how you experience and use each room.
- Keep furniture away from windows, or place smaller pieces at windows, to enhance the flow of space and of light.
- Address your storage needs. Reduced visible clutter will enhance your enjoyment of the space available.
- Painting window frames white will increase reflected light. Keep window dressings light in both colour and texture.
- Where a larger space is required, explore how adjacent spaces might be joined by removing a wall or by making a large opening between them.
- Assess where it might be possible to provide roof-lighting: light from above is powerful and transforming.
- Small children naturally gravitate towards adults, so try and have some toy storage and play space in or near the kitchen.

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