

# Devotion to design

Architect Robert Bourke is passionate about creativity, sustainability and interesting design, and in his terraced house on the northside of Dublin he has used all three to make a home he loves

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**A**rchitect Dermot Bannon of *Room to Improve* gets a fair amount of flak but in fairness he has taken a lot of the mystique out of house design. And at the same time, he's shown how important it is to get an architect involved in a building project; the good ones will get the most out of your space and will come up with clever design features.

The Simon Open Door campaign run by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland is another way of becoming conversant with housebuilding and renovations, and finding an architect to suit your project. Through this initiative, which takes place this year from April 8–15, homeowners who are thinking of doing some work, can, for a fee of €120, which goes to the Simon Community, meet with an architect to discuss ideas and get realistic advice about budgets, design ideas and the all important energy saving.

Robert Bourke is one of the architects taking part this year and you couldn't hope to meet a more grounded professional. Anyone who points out the design experiments in his terraced home



in Dublin 7 that went slightly wrong, as Robert does, is definitely someone who has a pragmatic outlook on life.

When explaining an epiphany he had about his future while touring abroad, he doesn't claim that it took place in any of the iconic Le Corbusier buildings that he had visited, but rather in a Burger King in Cordoba – showing that he's someone who doesn't

take himself too seriously. He does, of course, take his work seriously and is passionate about sustainable design, and the many awards he and his practice have won are evidence of that.

Robert took a rather roundabout route to architecture and set up his practice just as the crash came in 2008 and those factors possibly contributed to his phlegmatic view of things too.



Architect Robert Bourke in the kitchen of his red-bricked terraced house on Dublin's northside. Sustainability is very important to Robert, who opts for glass and timber where possible rather than concrete and steel. He chose a mix of open shelving and units. His units are birch ply and were blue. "This is an experiment that went wrong, the colour faded," he laughs. The open shelving is planks of solid pine glued together. The worktop is stone. The drawings are by his niece and nephews



*The site was a former graveyard. We had to excavate and exhume the bodies. There were hundreds of skeletons*

The eldest of four, he grew up in Dalkey and always had a leaning towards architecture. "My mother was an art teacher and was very interested in interior design. She had all these Habitat catalogues and I thought [Habitat founder] Terence Conran was amazing.

"I remember painting my bedroom a deep red. I don't suppose that's typical stuff for a teenage boy," Robert recalls with a

laugh, adding that initially he was put off architecture by well-meaning advisers.

"I did the Leaving Cert in 1994. The economy wasn't in a good state. You're filling out the CAO forms, listening to doom and gloom stories. I went to a career guide who said I would be equally good at architecture, engineering or science. There were no architects in my family and every

one said if you do architecture you'll have to emigrate and end up in Berlin, which they were rebuilding at the time. When I think back, that would have been great but I took the safe option, engineering."

He studied engineering at Trinity and realised very quickly that it wasn't for him. "Engineers have to think in terms of numbers, architects work with space," he »

## My favourite room

» says. He thought of giving it up but he was persuaded not to by his professor. He stayed in Trinity for the four years and found the bits he enjoyed most were courses like history of architecture.

**After graduation he did an** internship for a summer in an engineering firm in Bath and this cemented his desire to change to architecture; he got a place in DIT, starting the autumn after graduation. "To get into DIT, I had to do an interview and aptitude test and strangely enough they offered me a place in third year, which meant skipping first and second year – they were very impressed that I had an engineering degree. I said 'Are you sure that's a good idea?' I ended up haggling with them. Eventually we agreed on second year."

Architecture was everything he had hoped it would be and confirming the college's faith in him, within months of starting his architecture course, he won a prestigious design competition, run by the Architecture Association of Ireland, for second year students from all the Irish architecture schools. "The competition was to design a car park along the river in Drogheda. Everyone else built things. My approach was to do nothing except to have these sail-like masts coming up out of the water with lights on them and make the car park into a public space. I was blown over because I'd only been doing architecture for a few weeks, I knew I'd found the right thing."

He did an internship that following summer in Amsterdam and found it very exciting. "Coming back to Dublin from Amsterdam I found Dublin a bit staid and boring, so after third year I went to Berlin for my year out and got an internship there. I finally got to go to Berlin."

After that he decided he'd like to finish his studies abroad and was accepted by the University of East London. "The way architecture was taught was very different to Ireland, it was very creative, much more into craft and social engagement. If we were designing a building we wouldn't just look at



**Above:** Robert in the front room which had to be replastered. All new windows were added, as well as insulation and solid oak flooring. He didn't put in underfloor heating for budget reasons but is glad he didn't. "There's always a risk you'll upset the balance," he says. The fireplace is original

**Right top:** Robert had the brick fireplace rebuilt and added a wood-burning stove

**Right:** He added 'a micro-extension' by pushing out a metre into the courtyard and creating a wall of glass and cedarwood. "It warms up like a greenhouse, even in winter." Outside the cedarwood weathers to a silvery colour. Robert is a believer in recycling and the white chairs, on the right, were ones being thrown out by a client



it on a map, we'd go there and talk to people living there."

After graduation, Robert got into a good small practice in London and within a short while of joining the firm, he was made lead architect on the design of an arts/sports block for a school. This project had some unusual aspects. "The site was a former graveyard where famous people had been buried, including the painter George Stubbs and Charles Wesley, a leader of the Methodist church. We had to excavate the site and exhume the bodies, there were hundreds of skeletons. If any were buried in lead-lined coffins, and had died of small pox, it would still be in the coffins so all the contractors had to be vaccinated against small pox."

It was, Robert says, a dream project for a newly qualified architect and took four years.

On finishing it, he decided to do some travelling and did a tour of all the Le Corbusier-designed buildings in France. He went to Morocco for a few weeks and then on to Cordoba in Spain and visited some spectacular buildings, including the famous Mosque-Cathedral there. "I joke that I had my epiphany in that building but it was actually across the road in Burger King. I went there because after travelling in France, Spain and Morocco, I was sick of adventurous food.

"While in Burger King, I decided I'd move back to Ireland. I was so excited I couldn't sleep that night and I wrote down all my plans about moving back. I was going to reconnect with the ocean. I was going to windsurf, to do rock climbing and I was going to start my own practice."

However, first he felt he needed experience in an Irish firm and got a contract for eight months. Then the crash happened and there was no more work – architectural firms all over Ireland were shrinking. He had to hustle for work. "The recession took five or six years. The first year, I bought a Vespa and scooted around the city looking for work. There was a group called Onlinetradesmen.ie who would advertise for clients and I registered for it. It was mostly a

waste of time, but I got one job out of that year which worked out really well. The clients were really open-minded. They had a house in Ballybrack that was not working for them and they were really open as to how it could be improved. The solution was to reconfigure the layout of the house by reshaping and adding bits where space was needed.

**"We added three small brick extensions and we did all the joinery in oak. The clients were really on board, which was lovely as at the time, I was an architect with no track record in houses. It worked out well and we got an award for the design. When clients get involved it often leads to better results."**

The work situation got better after that, though it was a struggle for a number of years. So much so that when on one of his scooting expeditions, Robert spotted a small red-bricked house on a gorgeous secluded square on the northside, not far from his office on North Great Georges Street and it was going for a song, there was no question of buying it. "It was a ridiculously low amount but I couldn't buy it. No one would give a mortgage to anyone in construction."

However, things improved and he's really busy now, combining his practice with lecturing in UCD. He kept an eye on that square for houses for sale and one finally came up in 2016, which he was able to afford and which to his delight is a better house with a southwest-facing orientation.

Dating from 1890, the terraced three-bedroomed house had been lived in by the same family from the time it was built and still had its 19th century features but it did require a lot of structural work, including replastering, new floors, new windows, reconfiguring some of the rooms and the addition of an upstairs bathroom and a downstairs loo.

"I did an energy upgrade while retaining the original features." He also did what he calls a micro-extension and extended the back reception room by a metre. As an expert on sustainability – he did a



**The house is near town and Robert and his housemate cycle to work. It opens onto a square which is used by residents for play and for events like open-air movies at Halloween. "I'm in charge of sound," Robert says**



*The house I saw was going for a ridiculously low amount but no bank would give a mortgage to anyone in construction*

master's last year in Switzerland – where possible he opts for timber and glass over steel and concrete. He took out the brick wall and added enormous light by creating a wall of glass and cedarwood. "It warms up like a greenhouse, even in winter," Robert notes.

He did the same thing in the kitchen leading off the back room, and both look onto a charming courtyard paved in red brick salvaged from the walls.

The kitchen is a mix of units and open shelving and Robert points out the difference between the insides and outsides of the units – both had been a blue colour but the outsides were completely faded by the sun. "An experiment that went wrong," he laughs.

Fortunately he does his own experiments in his own home rather than in the houses of his many satisfied clients. ●

*For more details on Robert Bourke, see rba.ie. For details on Simon Open Door and to book a session with an architect, see riaisimonopendoor.ie*