

HOME



ANIMAL CHARM

These quirky ornaments will cheer up any room
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An addition of just 9 sq m, a rejig and some hidden tricks prove rear extensions don't have to gobble up the garden, finds **Dara Flynn**

Not all extensions are designed to create huge amounts of extra space. In the case of the Ranelagh home of Dr Angela O'Brien and Stephen Stewart, an addition of just nine square metres, and some magic tricks concealed in the walls, made all the difference.

For a family with three young children — Thomas, 10, Harry, 9, and Anna, 7 — outdoor space was important, and while their existing layout wasn't working, there was no way they were going to allow the house to gobble up the garden.

"They wanted to keep as much of the rear garden and play area as possible," says David Leyden of Leyden Hassett Associates, the architects behind the project. "Beyond that the broader brief was to produce a classic schedule of accommodation — kitchen, dining, living room and an additional sitting room: the expectations you'd have of any modern home."

"We didn't want a big extension encroaching on what is already a small garden," says O'Brien. "But we did need two living spaces as well as a utility."

The extension, Leyden knew, did not need to be large to be transformative and give the couple the use of space they craved. The tiny 9 sq m (97 sq ft) add-on was positioned in such a way as to "unlock" the ground floor plan, giving the couple the flexibility to reposition key spaces in accordance with their aspect.

"It's so small it doesn't compromise the external spaces, as it is pushing out only slightly on to the garden, but it meant we could play around with the ground floor, running the 'working' →

We are family

O'Brien lives with her husband, Stephen, and their three children, Thomas, 10, Harry, 9, and Anna, 7





Little wonder
The extension, right, is small enough to not compromise the external spaces; above, the kitchen features handleless doors and a hob built into the island; below right, Anna, 7, has her own "magic wall"



→ zones such as the kitchen, hall and utility towards the northern boundary wall," says Leyden. "Meanwhile the commonly used areas, such as living spaces, could be positioned in the southern side."

Modifying the existing layout meant Leyden could also create a series of interconnecting functional spaces instead of a singular open-plan room. "We enhanced the function of each space but also articulated them correctly," he says. "Often, I feel open-plan living can have a parish hall effect: building one huge space and throwing all of your functions into it. "I am the son of an architect and grew

up in an architect-designed home with open-plan layout. I wouldn't say I'm scarred by it, but now I am definitely more into articulated spaces. Often, a space can feel larger when its uses are 'zoned', despite being inter-connected."

The design certainly creates the illusion of a lot of space. There is a clear view from the front of the house to the rear, giving an uninterrupted passage for the eye towards the garden through the utility and kitchen. The sleek, matt grey kitchen, built by Shannonside Kitchens in Limerick, features handleless doors, a hob built into the island and ceiling extractor. "The kitchen was a



collaboration between ourselves and Angela and Stephen, who had strong ideas about their interior," says Leyden. "We worked well together; I don't think either design sensibility was compromised."

A large sky light inserted at the first floor return brightens up the previously light-deprived stairway. The project also involved heavy investment in insulation. The existing floorboards in the original part of the house were lifted, a membrane laid and a layer of spray foam insulation added. The floors were then relaid, sanded and treated with a lime dye to match the new limed oak flooring in the kitchen and extension, supplied by the Hardwood Flooring Company, creating a sense of continuity.

The extension also carved up the rear garden just enough to define two spaces: a landscaped area and an inner courtyard. Access to the garden is via a large bifold glazed door. "It's quite an impressive door," says Leyden. "There was a touch of trickery in creating it as we took the corner out of the existing return and had a cantilever on the other side, so it's a double-cantilever. That meant quite intensive engineering, which is buried in the ceiling."

There are several other invisible but effective tricks in the house, including three innovations by Gyproc, the gypsum plaster manufacturer, for



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which the couple's home acted as a guinea pig. The first is "lifestyle wall" — a plasterboard surface that is stronger, more durable and more sound resistant than conventional dry-lining. It allows paintings, mirrors, curtain rails, and even heavy items such as televisions,



See the light
The commonly used areas, such as the living spaces, above, are south-facing

radiators and storage units to be attached directly to a wall, with only the need for a screwdriver.

"Traditional plasterboard is not as strong; it requires fixing plates to be installed during the build, which means you have to make decisions in advance

about exactly where your TV or radiator or other heavy objects will go," says Leyden.

"The gypsum in the lifestyle wall contains 'binders' that make its core extra strong. You can hang a 42-inch television set on it using a single screw



and you don't even need a drill — you can screw directly into the wall."

An equally user-friendly technology is incorporated in some of the walls: magnetic plaster. Achieved by means of a plaster mix containing magnetite, an iron oxide, the walls can attract magnets, even if painted or wallpapered over, turning them into giant notice boards.

"It's really handy in the kitchen, for recipes and lists, and in the utility we can stick up calendars, the kids school notices and other bits and pieces, using little magnets," says O'Brien. It has also proven a hit with the children, particularly Anna, who refers to it as her "magic wall". "She loves having the

Often, a space can feel larger when its uses are 'zoned', despite being inter-connected

magnetic space behind her bed and has made a little collage of pom poms and decorations that she can change whenever she likes," O'Brien adds.

The "silent floor" completes the hat trick of clever solutions. Fixed to the ceiling, it is essentially a slab that kills the decibels of sound travelling up through floors — a common problem in period homes with wooden floors. O'Brien opted to place a sound barrier between the frequently noisy kitchen and dining space and the au pair's bedroom and bathroom directly above.

O'Brien admits she was initially doubtful that such a small extension would be sufficiently transformative. "She didn't really believe me until she saw it in the flesh," says Leyden.

O'Brien says: "We were concerned about the connection to the garden, and it was hard to visualise how it would all work. We trusted David, but it's difficult to retain your vision of the perfect home when you're standing on a building site.

"But it turned out great, and we have some really nice views of our garden: the spaces are distinct, yet linked."

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