



# A HOME FOR GENERATIONS

Architect David Leyden and his wife, Aileen, who met in Thailand and fell in love in Australia, now live in a renovated Georgian house that has been in David's family for 60 years. Edited by **Mary O'Sullivan**. Photography by **Tony Gavin**

**T**he Mexican architect, Luis Barragan, said: "My house is my refuge, an emotional piece of architecture, not a cold piece of convenience."

Fortunately, it's a sentiment that architects are taking on board more and more when they design houses.

A good architect will try to get inside the mind of the client, and to create something that will satisfy him/her, and yet not compromise the architect's own aesthetic. Sometimes, of course, circumstances will give rise to stress between the architect and client, and this was often the case with David Leyden's recent project in Dublin 6.

"Near the end, I was getting pressure from the client. She was pregnant and I couldn't get away from her — I had to get into bed with her every night," David explains.

He is joking, of course. The client in question is his gorgeous wife, Aileen Cahalane, and the project was their own home — but maybe he's only half-joking.

He does go on to explain that it was an eye-opener to see at first hand the emotional roller coaster that clients experience when they are doing major work on their homes.

The couple, who already had one child, had moved out of their home in Limerick and were living in Aileen's parents' house in Dublin. The pressure was on to get into their Ranelagh home before the second baby arrived. It's fair to say the affable architect also

had a lot of personal emotion invested in the project — obviously he, too, wanted a comfortable home for the family, but there was more. The house had been his grandmother's, his father had grown up in it, and David had spent fond times there during his childhood and college years while he was studying in UCD; it has been in the family for over 60 years.

He loves the house for other reasons, too. There's the history. "Three signatories of the Proclamation lived on the road; there was a lot of political activity here," David says. And, of course, there are its Georgian origins and features — the proportions, the mouldings and the mantelpieces — which, as an architect, he loves.

David's dad, Patrick, was an architect before him — and so, growing up, David always had an interest in the area.

"My subjects at school in Glenstal were sciences and art. I was always very artistic, although I was told I was a bit too flamboyant for the strict rigours of the Leaving Cert," he says with a laugh, adding, "Anyway, with my father an architect, it made sense to go into architecture."

During his college years, like most other students, he took time out to work in prestigious architectural firms abroad, and he spent a year in San Francisco, as well as a further 12 months in Aarhus in Denmark. When he qualified in 2000, he got a job in Henry J Lyons, but, after 9/11, things slowed down and he decided to travel and concentrate on his other



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great love — the sea, and all the activities associated with it. He's a passionate diver and surfer. His travels included a year in Thailand, where he first met Aileen, who was travelling with friends.

"I was working in a bar in Ko Phi Phi and Aileen came along. We hung out for a while — just friends. It was just a week, but there was a definite connection," he says.

Soon after, David moved on to Sydney, and real work as an architect. His work also took him to Noosa Heads in Queensland, the playground of the rich, so he managed to include surfing and diving. Meanwhile, Aileen, who's a trained theatre nurse, hit Perth.

They didn't keep in touch, but, after three years over there, they randomly bumped into each other. "It was winter in Australia when we met; in Thailand he'd had a tan. I was, like, 'It sounds like Dave, is it Dave?'" Aileen says with

a laugh. Once they got together, they stayed on in Australia for two further years, and both got phenomenal experience in their different professions.

"We always had an eye on moving back and, in 2006, my dad said, 'If you want to come back, now is the time,' and we were ready," David says.

So back they came. Aileen got a job with a medical distribution company and David joined his father's practice, Leyden Hassett & Associates.

They got married in 2008 and, in 2010, their delightful daughter, Moana Lei, arrived. Her name is Samoan — they had travelled to Samoa on their way back — and means Ocean Flower, which they felt was apt given their love of the sea.

At the time of their return, Ireland was, as David describes it, "blingtastic"; but it changed almost instantly. "Just as we got off the plane, things started to tighten up," he says, wryly adding, "because I never experienced the boom as an architect, I kept my sunny disposition. My approach was to hold fast and, if I'm doing good design, that will stand to me; I will get good clients."

And so it has proved. The company has offices in both Limerick and Dublin, and they take on all sorts of work — commercial, retail and office fit-outs, conservation, education, etc. Last year,



**Left** Architect David Leyden and his wife, Aileen, in the living room with their daughters, Moana Lei and Lily-Anne. The sofa is from BoConcept, the chair is by Marcel Breuer and the table lamp is by Klickity, from the Kilkenny shop. The paintings are by artists, John Boyd and Cara Thorpe, who are represented by Cross art gallery

**Above** David and Aileen in the kitchen of the period house he renovated. The floor is polished concrete and the walls are brilliant white. A graphic touch is added

**with the yellow splashback and the blue RSJ.**

**Top right** The dining area of the kitchen — the couple love to entertain. The picture was a wedding present

**Middle right** Moana Lei's brightly decorated bedroom. Moana Lei's name is Samoan and means Ocean Flower, chosen by her sea-loving parents

**Bottom right** The hall is furnished with pieces that David and Aileen picked up on their travels. The print is by an architect friend

they completed the new headquarters for the Munster Council of the GAA in Limerick, which was quite a prestigious project. "Usually, we like to have at least one 'anchor' project, and we fill in the gaps with smaller projects, like domestic work," David explains.

His grandmother's house — now his own family's home — is one such domestic project. David's grandmother passed away in 2008, but she had been in a home before that and the house was derelict for eight years. His father and his aunt, who co-own it, didn't want to sell, so, when David and Aileen offered to renovate it and move in — become caretakers, in a way — everyone was delighted.

"Dad and I designed it together," David says, "though, in fact, there's very little architecture in this project. It's a protected structure, so we couldn't change much. It was really a rescue job. The building had moved — you could see out gaps." Where it was falling down, they fixed it up. He patched up leaks and put in some new windows, new electrics, new plumbing and central heating.

The house — it has four bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs, while downstairs, there are interconnecting reception rooms and a kitchen/dining room — is completely transformed. David's design

aesthetic is stamped on every room.

"The smallest intervention can make a massive difference," David says. "I play with what's in front of me. I respond to the site and the character of what's there. I do have a style — Scandinavian design would be my influence.

"After my years in Australia, I just love the light," David says. "I paint everything white and, just by dropping in a few different things, you can change a mood. I like warm, playful minimalism rather than the austere kind." Take the RSJ [a support beam] in the kitchen — it's very architectural to expose it, but, being playful, they painted it blue. "From living in the tropics, I like a lot of colour," he says.

Although he had contractors doing the big jobs, David did a lot of the donkey work himself, with the help of a friend. He had run out of money and the client was beginning to freak, though she does give credit where it's due.

"If you'd seen the floors and the walls — there were holes in them. Fair play to Dave, he did it all," Aileen says.

Baby Lily-Anne arrived 19 weeks ago and it's a real family home now. So, satisfied client and architect both. **■**

*For further information on Leyden Hassett & Associates, see [www.lha.ie](http://www.lha.ie)*