

MOVE

Expert eye on a prime site

The property journalist owner of this Blackrock house tweaked the plans to make it perfect, says *Linda Daly*

There were cows still grazing on the wooded site of Clonfadda Woods, on Mount Merrion Avenue in south Dublin, when Clodhna O'Donoghue, who was property editor of the Irish Independent at the time, started to eye up the land in 1991. She was on maternity leave, lived nearby, loved the location and had ambitions to upsize. In a flight of fancy – she hadn't the means to, nor the intention of, buying the site – she drew up a development plan of what she would love to see there.

When developer Gem Construction finally bought the land at auction in 1994, the company had planned to build only apartments on the plot, but O'Donoghue knew better, so she rang them up and asked them to meet her.

"I lived locally, I knew the area and knew there was a huge appetite for houses. Everyone I knew in Merrion Park who wanted to trade up or down wanted to stay local."

The developers sought planning permission for 40 apartments and 25 houses. They would eventually build 27 houses after acquiring more land. "By the time planning permission was granted, all the houses were booked with deposits [prices started at IRE220,000 (€279,000)]. It took much longer for the apartments to sell."

O'Donoghue would go on to spend 18 years as property editor with the *Irish Independent* and would break big news stories. She also hosted property shows on television, including RTE's *House Hunters* – so she knew a fair bit about the sector and what to look for in a house.

"Location was the most important decision in buying at Clonfadda Wood. This is a great spot in Blackrock and close to so many good schools," she says. "When I bought my first house in Merrion Park, I chose it based on its proximity to Gleeson's Pub, which is a great restaurant and pub, and the Dart. When we bought this house we could have walked around from Merrion Park with the fridge."

Selecting her plot at Clonfadda Wood was the next priority. She went for No 3, with its south-facing back garden, arguably the best site in the quiet, electrified development where more than 24 years later, large detached houses lie behind manicured front gardens and powerful cars sit on the wide driveways.

In a quiet cul de sac, No 3 stands on its own on a bend in the road – it is the only house in the scheme that has no next-door neighbour.

O'Donoghue says the main benefit of buying new was being able to create a home that suited her own requirements. From early on in the construction phase, she visited the site regularly and had the builders make tweaks to the configuration and finish in the house. It made her home more individual.

She had them take down a wall below the stairs to open up the hall and designed a stained-glass window into what was then the playroom, to allow light to filter through. "The most important thing for me in a house is a big hall. You spend a lot of time greeting and saying goodbye to guests here," she says.

She also asked the builders to take space from the utility room to create a cloakroom – long before sufficient storage space was a requirement in new builds. The utility room, which sits off the kitchen and has a side door to the garden,



As No 3 sits on a bend in the road, there are no neighbours overlooking the secluded south-facing garden, left; O'Donoghue's favourite room is the spacious hall, below; Velux windows help to illuminate the open-plan kitchen, right



is still a decent size.

"Adding outside taps, connections for electrical outlets and garden lights, together with a large patio, were all possible because we did it at the construction stage. You can never have too many sockets or too much lighting inside," says O'Donoghue.

Other changes downstairs included putting in interconnecting folding walnut doors between the sitting room and what was then the playroom. So, today, what you have is a house that opens into a large entrance hall with stairs rising to the first floor on the left and a large double-aspect sitting room to the right.

To the left of the hallway and overlooking the front garden is a study. An open-plan kitchen and living space sits to the back of the house.

In 2006, O'Donoghue and her husband, Ciaran Shanley, knocked through the wall between the kitchen and the playroom and added four Velux windows in the kitchen. They painted the wooden kitchen units a brighter cream colour and re-sanded and re-varnished the wooden floors throughout.

Upstairs, there are four bedrooms, a large master bedroom with an en suite shower room, and a bright double bedroom to the back of the house, which also has an en suite shower room. New owners are likely to want to update the bathrooms. There is plenty of wardrobe space in the master bedroom, but you could turn the small bedroom into a

dressroom.

The couple converted the attic into a television room but years earlier ensured they got the most space by asking the builders at construction stage to provide a cut roof, as opposed to trussed roof. "A trussed roof is more difficult to convert. I used to argue with builders who would always put trussed roofs in first-time buyers' homes, which would deprive them of the option of converting and force them to move on."

Today's first-time buyers may have O'Donoghue to thank for their large attic spaces – many developers now provide cut roofs to allow buyers to grow into their homes.

While O'Donoghue used her knowledge of the property market to design her house just the way she wanted it, she also used her know-how to pick a south-facing back garden. She even bought an extra strip of land to the back of the property to extend it. Sitting in her kitchen is a picture of the garden in the 1990s when it had just a lawn.

Over the years O'Donoghue and Shanley have planted the space, creating their own "private haven". It is surrounded by mature trees and shrubs, has its own pergola and an angled sandstone patio. The shed is decorated with knick-knacks that the couple picked up on their travels over the years.

"Long before we bought house furniture, we invested in trees and shrubs. As the patio was being laid we

decided on its shape and size. Every time I was annoyed at work, I'd get out there and weed for an hour. It was a good stress reliever," says O'Donoghue.

On summer days, family gatherings always migrate to the garden, and the couple have hosted many celebrations over the years, including the joint 85th birthday party of O'Donoghue's late parents three years ago, a 30th birthday party last year and plan to host a big bash

for a 21st next month.

"But my most enjoyable time is just sitting in the sunshine listening to the birds and pottering around the plants. Nobody can see into this garden. It's very secluded. You can't hear anything except birdsong. It's as though you're in the middle of the country."

So why leave? The couple have put the property on the market for €1.35m with North's Property. No 1, around the corner,

went on the market last month at the same price and has already gone sale agreed, so expect No 3 to go quickly.

O'Donoghue says with the family flying the coop, the couple is in search of a smaller home. She hasn't decided if she will buy new or second hand just yet, but she says her priorities will be the same as with No 3 Clonfadda Wood: a good location and aspect will be vital. "A view would be nice this time," she adds.

THE LOWDOWN

What it is: A red-brick, four-bedroom detached home in the secure Clonfadda Wood development

Where it is: On Mount Merrion Avenue in Blackrock, in south Co Dublin

How much: €1.35m

Agent: norths.ie

What they say: Well located with a magnificent garden

What we say: We'd buy it for the back garden.

MOVING ON

ENGLISHMAN IN NEW YORK

Sting and Trudie Styler have just rented a luxe pad in 520 West 28th Street, the New York building designed by the

late architect Zaha Hadid. The musician, 66, and his actress-producer wife, 64, are holed up in a large terraced apartment on one of the top floors of the 11-storey building, which features a private Imax cinema, a 75ft skylit lap pool and a robotic car-parking service.

MAY'S DISPUTE BITES THE DUST

Unless you're a lawyer, you're unlikely to have heard about Brian May's claim for damages for the nuisance caused by his neighbour's basement dig, which has finally been settled after almost four years of legal wrangles. In 2014, the Queen guitarist and his wife, the actress Anita Dobson, brought a claim against the "excessive noise" caused by the developer digging out a super-basement next to their multimillion-pound home in Holland Park, west London. The couple agreed to accept £25,000 (€28,600) for the noise and vibration



caused by the works, but then attempted to recover costs of more than £200,000. In 2016, a judge said their costs

would be limited to £35,000 but in January this year, the amount was increased on appeal to £75,000.



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