

Home & Design

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Who bought Bowie's art?

Mystery Irish buyer succeeds at Sotheby's Page 4



Bewitched by a boathouse

The owners of this converted boathouse in south Galway have views over an extensive walled garden, as well as across Galway Bay, but the special features of the house draw the eye in as well as out



Arminta Wallace

The glories of Galway Bay have been celebrated in story and song for as long as anyone can remember. Those huge skies, those spectacular sunsets. Who wouldn't want to live in a place where the full moon casts, as Steve Earle puts it, "silver light over green and blue"?

So when one particular family found its dream house on the bay's south-eastern shores – and not just any house but an 18th-century boathouse in a dreamy location at the edge of a peaceful inlet – you might think, well, there's a happy ending right there.

In fact, it was just the beginning of a complex restoration and refurbishment project that took 14 months. "The whole idea," says Galway architect Laura Brennan as we drive west along a maze of tiny roads, "was to minimise the impact of the building. To have something distinctive, but not showy. I didn't want to do a big sail roof or something like that. We used the same pitch, the same proportions as the original. The outside, which was converted to a dwelling in the 1970s, is pretty much as we found it."

Every building site, no matter how dreamy, has its challenges and as we step out of the car, the major challenge on this one is impossible to miss. Built to service an 18th-century landed estate, the boathouse was tacked on to the 5m-high stone wall surrounding a four-acre kitchen garden. The wall is a protected structure so the question was how to marry the wall's dramatic, curving immensity with the modest, yet characterful, nature of the house.

Brennan's solution was to make the wall the star of the show, using it both as a structural "spine" running through the new building and as a shelter to create a roomy, yet almost cloistered garden with its own microclimate. "You have two very different sides to the house," she says. "There is a constant interplay between old and new – between wild sea views on the west side and sheltered garden views on the east."

Which is all fine and dandy, except that you can't see the sea from your kitchen window: surely the aspiration of everyone with a house by the water? "At one stage the client was very keen to break an opening through," Brennan says. "I don't think we would have got permission, anyhow. But I said, 'There's so much power knowing the sea is on the other side of that wall, instead of being able to see it from everywhere in the house'. And actually they came around to thinking they loved that."

The owners of the property, who kindly gave us unfettered access, requested that their privacy be respected – suffice to say that they are part of a wealthy Galway family which owns a nationwide retail fran-



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chise. But though money was no object and all materials used in the project are of the highest quality, their demands for the house were strikingly modest. "They loved the location, the setting and the historical background. They wanted four bedrooms, a big kitchen and a living room."

You'd think that any house with a stonking great wall around it would feel somehow dwarfed and dark. But as we step through the glass-ceilinged atrium – one side of which is composed of the chunky exposed stones of that garden wall – and into the main living space, there's a sense of being surrounded by light.

A central tenet of Brennan's design was to create surprise sightlines that are both aesthetically pleasing and supremely practical. It's no accident that the low winter sun streams through to stunning effect; Brennan's plan ensured that from the kitchen island you can track its movement from dawn to dusk. From the kitchen sink there's a clear view of indoor and outdoor children's play areas; and the use of passive-house principles including hi-spec insulation and heat-recovery ventilation

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■ The boathouse seen from the water; the living room overlooks the garden; the glass-clad hallway; a window recess. PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID RUFFLES



Bewitched by a boathouse



■ The boathouse extension; the house is on four acres.
PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID RUFFLES

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system ticks the sustainability boxes.

The play between old and new, inside and out, is at its most striking in the treatment of two contrasting windows. Off the main hall there's a separate sitting room where the boathouse's original opening, which consisted of three panels, has been glazed with a single mammoth sheet of glass. "It was quite complicated, building that in," Brennan recalls. "The glass itself is about 50mm thick and is certified as structural."

So, with the help of 21st-century glazing technology, the old becomes new. Upstairs, in the dressing room off the master bedroom, a new oriel window has a traditional appearance from the outside but, from inside offers unfettered sea views and comfortable cushioned seats from which to enjoy them.

The original boathouse being rather small by modern standards, Brennan added an extension that contains a playroom, a wet-room where the owners – who are keen sailors – can shower and dry off after a day on the waves, and a generous guest suite.

"Getting the levels right was tricky," she recalls, as we admire the view of the garden from the guest bathroom. "There's a considerable slope up from the seashore to here; about two metres. To minimise excavation and also to get it all to sit into the landscape, I decided to go with the land, so there are steps within the building."

Because of that decision to follow the contours, and the use of accoya timber cladding, the exterior of the house has a sleek, almost seal-like appearance. Once inside, though, clever angles create a series of hidey-holes and restful corners. Window-seats are just begging for you to plonk yourself down with a book. Some of the window-frames have curves which echo the form of, and draw your eye back out to, that mammoth out-

side wall. Brennan, who trained as a painter, also designed the uncluttered interiors, using a carefully-contained palette of colours and materials to complement the shades of the landscape outside.

This seamless blend of old, new, inside and outside creates a house which feels welcoming but not overpowering. A building which – if this doesn't sound too weird – gives you a hug. Looking back on the project, how would Brennan sum it up? "You research," she says. "You absorb a whole series of questions. You're working with the existing building to try to restore it and make it work – and you're listening to the client saying, 'We want a big kitchen'. You know they have small children. You're thinking of maybe 100 parameters."

A project such as this is, she stresses, very much a team effort.

"First comes the client. It takes a fair bit of courage on the part of the client to hand the design over to you, and to trust you."

The work of conservation architect Garrett O'Neill

“It comes back to the conviction that a house is a home: a space for living in, not a page from a catalogue

was pivotal, as was that of structural engineer John Britton. "Good builders are the unsung heroes, and there are good builders - I can't praise Michael Burns and his team enough." Bespoke furniture was designed in collaboration with the Galway furniture maker Ben Gabriel.

But in the end, she says, after all the research, all the discussions, all the hammering out of details, it all comes back to simple human emotions. To playfulness and lightness, and to the conviction that a house is a home: a space for living in, not a page from a glossy catalogue. Now that sounds like a happy ending to me.



■ A customised vanity unit. PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID RUFFLES