



The solid oak herringbone floor by The Hardwood Flooring Company runs throughout the ground level and creates a seamless flow. The dining room table and chairs are by O'Driscoll Furniture. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Architect Niall Henry and his children, from top, Evan, Ruby and Isobel. **FAR RIGHT** A carefully chosen selection of pieces take pride of place in the home's entrance. The Le Corbusier LC1 chair is from Cassina and the Eddie Cahill painting, *Walking From A Broken House*, was a gift.

# SPLENDID ISOLATION

Designing a family residence is part of the day job, but for architect Niall Henry, building his own home was a chance to push the boundaries.

PHOTOGRAPHY PHILIP LAUTERBACH

WORDS TARA CORRISTINE

STYLING MARLENE WESSELS



A

n optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty, according to Winston Churchill. It's a sentiment that Niall Henry of Dublin Design Studio must be very familiar with, as his award-winning home is truly an exercise in overcoming obstacles.

It started with a site, just 70 metres long by 10 metres wide, which belonged to Niall's father-in-law and was originally granted permission for three single-storey houses. Over time, the site was passed on to Niall's wife and her siblings, who decided to use it to build their family homes.

"We were delighted with the location because it is so close to the centre of Clontarf, its amenities and schools. The site came with certain constraints, but it was a huge opportunity to design something for myself and my family."

Three families combined to form one client, presenting a new set of requirements, and revised permission was sought for three two-storey dwellings instead. Sitting at the intersection of over 20 back gardens, privacy was at a premium. The path to an



**WHO LIVES HERE** Architect Niall Henry and his family.

**THE HOUSE** An open-plan new build in leafy Clontarf.

**WHY WE LOVE IT** The wealth of clever details that not only presented solutions but became features of interest.



approved design meant considerable thought and constant communication.

“We had a very understanding planning officer but there were some objections. Building on the boundary of a number of houses, we had to be very careful,” Niall explains. “We worked closely with our neighbours and once we explained that the proposal wouldn’t impact on their gardens or houses negatively, they were on board, but that was a lengthy process.”

Overlooking adjacent properties was just one of the constraints facing the build – shape, size and access to the site also played a part. Building in a very residential space will always present challenges. “The design, planning and construction process all come with compromises, but they also add to the architectural interest of the house.”

By ‘stepping’ the first floor and pushing it a metre-and-a-half back off the ground floor level, there is an overhang above the side garden. The result is that it feels completely sheltered – entirely unexpected in the middle of suburban Dublin.



**OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT** The Porter & Jones kitchen is free of any handles or hardware, keeping the simple, seamless feel. High-gloss grey units bounce light back into the space.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT** A built-in seating area provides a space for children to sit and chat while meals are prepared. Drawers below hide away bulky kitchen tools. **ABOVE** Electrical sockets are recessed into the countertop. The miniature Eames Eiffel table and chairs in the children’s playroom were sourced online and the sliding doors can be closed over to conceal toys and clutter.





The couple bought the hide rug while on honeymoon in Franschoek, South Africa. The glass table, from Habitat, allows light to flow through the space. The curtains hang on a recessed track and can be positioned to move with the sun. Electrical sockets are set into the floor to allow walls to be given over to windows. The Grossman Gräshoppa lamp is by Gubi at Minima. The cloudy grey couch from Natuzzi at Arnotts keeps the palette light.



This secluded setting allows the family to take advantage of the south-westerly aspect and so, large windows were fitted throughout the ground floor of their open-plan living area. “We wanted to maximise the amount of glass because we could. It’s quite private. Sitting downstairs, even though you are surrounded by houses, all you can see are trees.”

Recessing the window frames into the floor and ceiling meant the view through the windows is unobscured. The smokey-hued glass is echoed in the glass top added to their O’Driscoll dining table. “Simon [O’Driscoll] is a good friend who has worked with us over a number of years, and with three small children, the glass tabletop is for damage limitation!”

In the kitchen and living area, a muted palette is used to bounce light back into the space. On a cloudy grey Natuzzi couch, velvet cushions and an Avoca wool throw add warmth. The high-gloss kitchen from Porter & Jones is an utterly sleek affair, devoid of handles or knobs, while the seamless feeling continues with electrical



**ABOVE LEFT** Many of the stunning pieces of art were gifted to the couple. *Moonlight (Bolus)* by Eva McCauley sits at the bottom of the oak stairway. **ABOVE RIGHT** The 16-metre corridor that leads to the couple’s master bedroom is lined with built-in storage. The veneered oak windowsills offer seating for the children to look out over the courtyard.

sockets set into a covered spot on the counter.

It seems unthinkable now, but the stunning solid oak herringbone floor, which leads into the light-filled hallway, wasn't Niall's first choice. "I had wanted a polished concrete floor, but my wife felt it would be too cold and clinical, so the compromise was the parquet floor, and I am very happy with it."

While many hallways are little more than a thoroughfare, the entrance to this mews is both beautiful and functional, and is also Niall's favourite space. "We decided to make the stairway the main feature when you come into the house. With the roof light above, it makes a real statement when you come in the front door."

Flooded with light, the oak staircase appears as though it is hovering, with the children often playing in the space beneath. "We were extremely tight with the width of the stairs, so we recessed the handrail into the wall and lit it. It's creating a feature in what could have been a dark, unusable space. That's why I like it – it's the area we had to work hardest on."



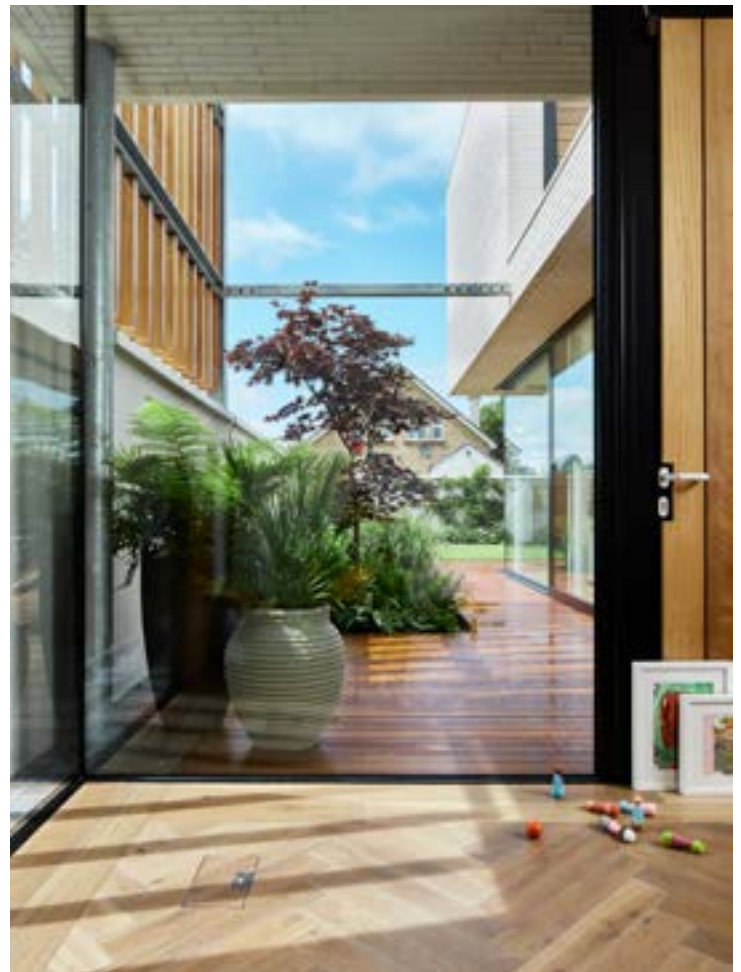
**ABOVE LEFT** The Sobell Stereogram sideboard with a record player and radio belonged to Niall's aunt Dorothy and was bound for the bin before he rescued it. The framed magazine cover showed the winning design for the U2 Tower, which Niall was a part of. **ABOVE** A Jenny McCarthy painting over the bed in the master bedroom was a christening gift from a friend. The Artemide Melampo lamps from Bob Bushell are wall-mounted so as not to impede the floor-space. A sliding door leads to the en suite.



In keeping with the rest of the house, every available area doubles as storage. “The base to the stairs has in-built storage units. Inside the front door, we doubled the depth of the standard closet where we keep everything from buggies to suitcases,” says Niall. “We tried to focus on difficult areas of design and looked at ways to maximise them.”

Treasured pieces of art lead you up the stairs, past the hidden laundry chute – a deal breaker for Niall’s wife – towards the master bedroom, which sits at the end of a corridor. Unsurprisingly, the 16-metre corridor wall hides floor-to-ceiling storage. “There is no dead space – every square inch is either open-plan living or storage.”

Opposite it, windows overlook the sedum roof garden with deep oak-veneered seats where the children like to play. “Anywhere we have used glass, it’s fixed and anywhere we open the section, it’s a solid piece. One of the key elements was ensuring the windows were right throughout the house. They weren’t the easiest option, but the house wouldn’t have been the same without going the extra mile.”



**ABOVE LEFT** The three houses were built on a site that was the intersection of the back gardens of some 20 houses, and measures just 70 metres long and 10 metres wide. **ABOVE** The iroko louvred screens break up the direct view of the adjoining gardens, offering privacy for both the family and neighbours.

Upstairs, calm tones continue in the master bedroom, where a painting by Jenny McCarthy hangs above the bed. “The art throughout the house was a mixture of pieces we have bought over the years, and presents. My favourite piece is the Kingerlee over the fireplace. My wife’s favourite piece is the *Tree* by her friend Helen Cody, as it is a very personal painting for both of them.”

Functioning as a sideboard is a beautifully maintained Sobell Stereogram music centre, which once belonged to Niall’s aunt Dorothy. The master en suite, like the family bathroom, is a bright space with a large ceiling window which, thanks to a heat recovery system, keeps the house warm throughout the year.

It will come as no surprise that this mews house won the 2016 Best Housing award at the RIAI Awards. “What the judges most liked, I think, was that it showed what you can do with difficult sites in urban locations,” Niall muses. “An award from your peers is very nice, and the fact that it’s the house that I live in makes it a bit more special.” [dublindesignstudio.com](http://dublindesignstudio.com)



**ABOVE LEFT** The garden design by Allium Landscapes mirrors many of the home’s details including the iroko teak decking and built-in storage in the garden seat. **ABOVE RIGHT** The south-facing roof garden is planted with low-maintenance flowering sedum, which helps to slow rain fall off.