

Rose Martin looks at a house in Douglas, Cork, with cool colours and Nordic minimalism at its heart

"NO shoes please — we're Swedish" — it's the kind of sign to bring an Irish person up short — the evolution from pigs in the parlour to socks in the foyer isn't fully complete, perhaps? We still baulk at rules, don't we, but in this case, the slight revolt that passes through the central nervous system is quickly over-run by a "we're all Europeans now anyway" and off go the winter-worn boots.

Ah the joy of underfloor heating — why wouldn't you take off your shoes with such comfort afoot? And why would you spend your days hoovering and mopping when the Swedish approach, (born out of 6 foot high snow drifts and melting boots), means a less labour-intensive routine at home.

And along with the sign, there's the other brilliant solution to the no-shoe problem — a range of proper wooden clogs to slip on and off, (they're ubiquitous in Sweden and can be picked up in the local supermarket for the same price as rip-off Crocs here), when running outdoors to take in the washing, for instance. And for the visitor who comes a viewing too.

So how does the Swedish approach to everything happen in a mid-century house in Douglas, Cork?

Well, the call of the wild really. One half of this ex-pat family is from a neighbouring parish and having spent years abroad, it was time to take a family of strapping, handsome boys home while giving a garden back to their mother. And did they find a garden — the tucked away semi in the heart of denser Douglas is a little oasis — a huge, enviable site of nearly a third of an acre tagged onto a solid, but sagging family home. That's the way it was when they came to view and the site and the orientation sold them immediately. South-west facing, with only a bungalow at the far, far end, this is a gem of find — and it's a walk to schools, shops and Douglas village, while town, in true northern European style, is a bike-ride away.

Techie, educated and home-working, this couple is a prototype for the modern Irish family — and their house had to work with them, which is why they went for a full makeover.

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ABOVE: This white kitchen by Kube is the perfect, 'defensible space' with its own direct access outside. The peninsula allows a breakfast bar and was the owner's preferred option — she feels an island breaks the space.



The silver birch cut lengths provide an earthy decorative element to the simple furnishings of this carefully extended home. They also remind the Swedish owners of home. The peninsula kitchen is to the left and the double doors lead through to a sheltered, barbecue area. The same wide plank, limed, engineered flooring is used throughout the house.

All pictures: Miki Barlok



ABOVE: The open tread staircase, built in oak by Cloghroe Joinery, Ballincollig, allows light to flow from top to bottom and back to front in this house. The air to water system is hidden under the stairs.

BELOW: A view through the extension from the kitchen. The soft blue/ grey sofa is from Habitat.



LEFT: The wedge-shaped design of the extension allows light for most of the day in this living room. Chairs are Ikea Poang, with grey sheepskin covers, (in demand online), and the folksy milk stool and table are from studiodelleal-pi.com. The white standard light is from fraumaier.com — worth a look for some really tasty designs and available here through Dublin-based, Britalux lighting, britalux.ie



This they did by Skype and Viber while still living abroad, and by placing a huge amount of trust in their contractor, Kieran McCarthy, who also represents the modern Ireland, offering an integrated development service from design, to hand-me-the-keys.

They met him at an exhibition, liked the cut of his jib, did their research and a number of sit-downs later, came up with a working plan. The house had been purchased and while the planning process was in train, the couple and the contractor organised a gutting and re-fitting of the solid but snug semi. The short story is that they created a wrap-around extension to the south-western side, but that doesn't do justice to the significant re-arrangement of the old property.

From outside, there are the telltale signs of a tasty makeover, but it's not screamingly obvious — there's more than a touch of Swedish modesty here too. No flash, just top quality, highly engineered fittings and fixtures that are hinted at from the outside. There's the front door, which, along with the solid oak stairs inside was handmade by Cloghroe joinery and the windows are triple-glazed by Munster joinery. Inside, (after the sock-baring) the evolution of light into what would have been a darkish hallway is profound — created by bright colours and openness. The stairs to the right are floodlit from the roof and indicate the quality of what's to come, while to the immediate right, there's a huge utility room area, accessed via a funky foyer which leads through to a spacious ground floor bathroom and on to what can only be described as a library of family life.

Everything is slotted in here — from the aforementioned clogs, stacked in Ikea shelving, to sports kit, hardware, software, freezers — the lot. It's a compendium of storage and is in your face ordinary, but it allows the rest of the house to work. The junk stops here by keeping the outdoors out and the indoors in. Who wouldn't love a utility like this? (It also has access to the side path, which is turn leads through to the back garden without disrupting the kitchen.) Back out and where formerly, there was a small galley area full-stopping the short entrance hall, now it's a lead-in to a breadth of space right and left.

"We were interested in getting more space and we knew the house would need work to the exterior and we needed an extra bedroom. The gardens are big and south and west facing and we were satisfied that Kieran and the architect, Stephen Doyle, would work with that brief." Initially, the couple looked at creating two rooms in the extension, but the configuration demanded a rethink — did they really

need two sitting rooms? In the heel of the hunt, they decided on one, large, open plan room with a vague, L-shaped profile when viewed from the kitchen/dining/ living room, but which, on a flat plan, turns out to be a huge wrap-around development over two stories, with an attic conversion to boot.

And yet, this doesn't feel like a big, in your face job — it's more human in scale and there's a great flow here — the ergonomics are good. The woman of the house was also adamant she wouldn't have a central island — she says she'd keep crashing into it, so instead, there's a peninsular projection in the all-white kitchen made by Kube. It fits into the outline of the old back kitchen, but opens into a circulation space with access through double doors to the garden and then around to a dedicated dining area, with clerestory windows sucking in westerly light, without compromising neighbour's privacy.

The room then turns west straight out to the garden with full length windows to the south and west giving access to a southerly patio, (there was a rain-proof, wide canopy designed for here, but it was the one element reduced in scale by the planners), a smaller version still provides shelter for the barbecue area, however.

The reach out to the garden is wonderful and you can see why the couple bought this house — in a lovely touch of serendipity, there's a copse of shiny Jacquemontii birch planted there, a sight that conjures up Sweden for the family, who spend a lot of time flying back and forth. In fact, lengths of raw birch are used as design props in the living room.

Narrow plank flooring, limed oak stairs, white walls and simple, quality designs are the key to this comfortable, but curated look. The house has been lifted into the A-grade in terms of Ber rating and over three floors there are four bedrooms and a purpose-built, fully connected office. The collection of years of continental living gives a certain flair to the interior styling and fabrics in curtains and cushions are Marimekko — the Finnish fabric designer.

From purchase to moving in — this has been a tribute to technology — from the upgrade to the methods employed in its renovation, the full remake of this old house took from March to September and perhaps the only recognisable element is the sitting room, which, while upgraded and insulated, retains the familiar, three-bed semi shape and is a haven from the open spaces elsewhere.

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ABOVE: This statement chair was purchased in Denmark and punches style in lime.

BELOW: An evening view of the house; the complex and stacked extension is easily read from the rear.
Pic: Jan O'Connell





A study was ingeniously tucked into a niche on the southern side of the house and it's comprehensive fitting and high-tech connectivity allows working from home with ease. The stairs leads up to the redeveloped attic floor.



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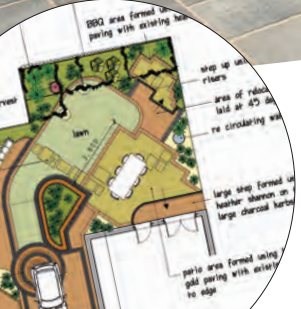


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LEFT: A false wall was created in the master bedroom to hide banks of open storage built behind — the minimal Scandinavian style of the house is facilitated by well-planned areas like this. The piano stool was purchased over ten years ago and the design blends nicely with the mid-century piano.



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