MOVE

The architects guide to designing your new build home

Three architects talk to Grainne Rothery about how to plan a home that will work for how your family lives — now and in the future

The timber-clad Lakeland House, designed by Marshall McCann Architects, integrates with the surrounding landscape

Grainne Rothery

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Finding the perfect site and getting the funds in place may seem like the hard part if you're planning to build your dream home, but coming up with a design that will stand the test of time — aesthetically and functionally — is no mean feat either.

You may be weighing up the merits of zinc over burnt-larch cladding or picture windows versus bifolding doors, but the most important step is ensuring the house works for how you live, says Roisin McCann, an architect with Marshall McCann in Co Antrim.

"I like to come at it from the flow and light and usage of space rather than what it looks like," she says. "Then, when you start thinking about the aesthetic, it's about picking what you love now. And if you love it now, chances are you will continue to love it and it can be adapted as you move through your life."

Matsu House is set into a slope overlooking Belfast

THE ARTISAN PHOTOGRAPHER

James Crowley, of Foley + Crowley Architects in Dublin 4, advises thinking about how your home will function for you in the future as well as the present — and not just in terms of the family growing but also down the line when children have moved out.

"You might have however many kids at home now and it's a bit chaotic, but fast forward ten years and things will have changed and it could just be two of you rattling around in it," he says. "So think a bit longer in your brief and the task you set yourself, especially with the cost of construction at the moment. The size of the house makes a big difference to the cost, and longer term you have to maintain it and heat it and everything else that goes with that."

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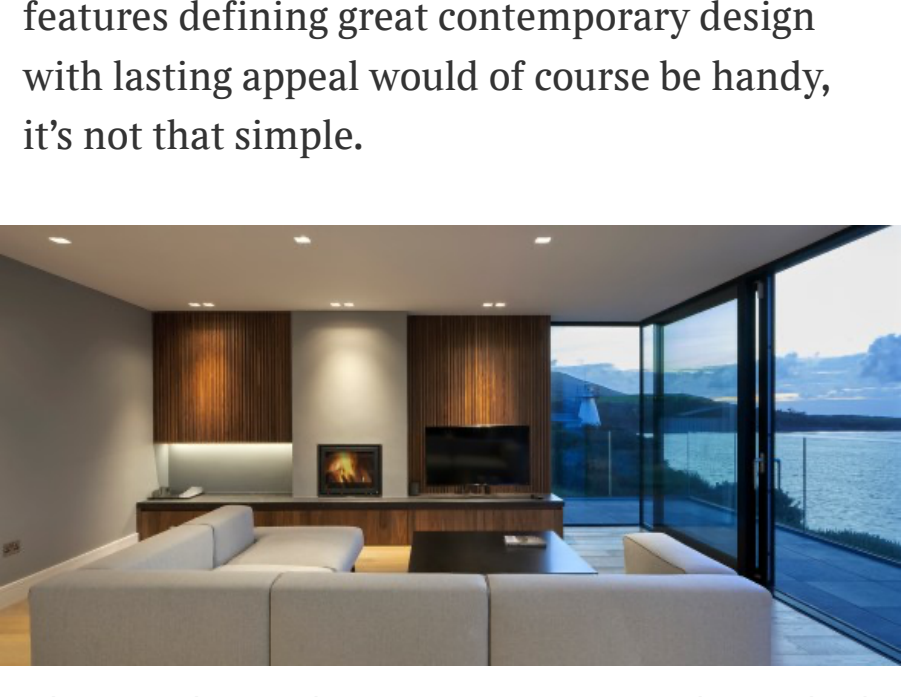
There are plenty of ways of reducing the footprint, including by being a bit more practical about the size of children's bedrooms. "Your kids don't necessarily need a double bed, a desk for doing their homework and a play area at the same time. The rooms can be a lot more compact if you think about them in the stages they'll be used," Crowley says.

Once the practicalities are sorted, you can focus on the aesthetic elements. While a list of features defining great contemporary design with lasting appeal would of course be handy, it's not that simple.



Floor-to-ceiling windows at Beacon View on Valentia Island in Co Kerry, showcase its panoramic views of Dingle Bay

GARETH BYRNE

McCann says a well-designed house should respond to its surrounds and integrate, but not necessarily blend, with its context. "Ideally it should be iconic and unique but not prominent," she says. "It should be innovative, especially when it comes to the environment and sustainability issues. It should highlight the important aspects of the site; internally, play with light, creating light and shadows, connect the occupants to the biodiversity of the site, taking advantage of the beautiful country that we live in.

"But, most important for me, is that it should be elegant and refined, with attention to detail and beautiful proportions."

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Examples of Marshall McCann projects that embody these principles include Matsu House in Hillsborough, Co Down, a 425 sq m super-contemporary and very high-spec home that's set into a slope and designed to be unobtrusive from the road. Clad in black charred larch and single storey at the front, it opens into a double-height entertaining space and spectacular views over Belfast. Silver Bark House, also in Hillsborough, is bedded into the landscape with its muted timber cladding. Built to Passivhaus standards, it won the prize for innovation in sustainable architecture in this year's Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland awards. The institute described it as encapsulating "the essence of sustainability, innovation and timeless design".

For Crowley, being mindful of the local environment is vital when choosing materials for the exterior. "You can do that by looking at the colours and the types of materials around the building. In rural Ireland you often see beautiful stone walls because they're using stone from the ground. Things look right when they're made from materials that are local to the area. If you can use materials that are sourced locally or even if the colours in them are close to the materials found in the landscape it can make the building settle in a lot better with the context."

House on the Hill in Cork features simple white rendering and lots of glazing

JED NIEZGODA

Crowley has recently designed a home for his own family that will be clad with burnt larch. "That's because the backdrop is a forest. A timber-clad building in the forest will always look better than if you put a brick building there."

While it may not quite work in the forest, Fred Wilson of Wilson Hill Architects in Dublin is a fan of brick for creating timeless exteriors. "It comes in and out of fashion a little bit but it does stand the test of time," he says. "You can use it in quite a modern way with a lighter mortar. We tend to use it for texture as well. If we're working on a building that's mostly render we add a bit of brick. It might be a white brick to match the white render and it gives a bit more of a three-dimensional aspect."

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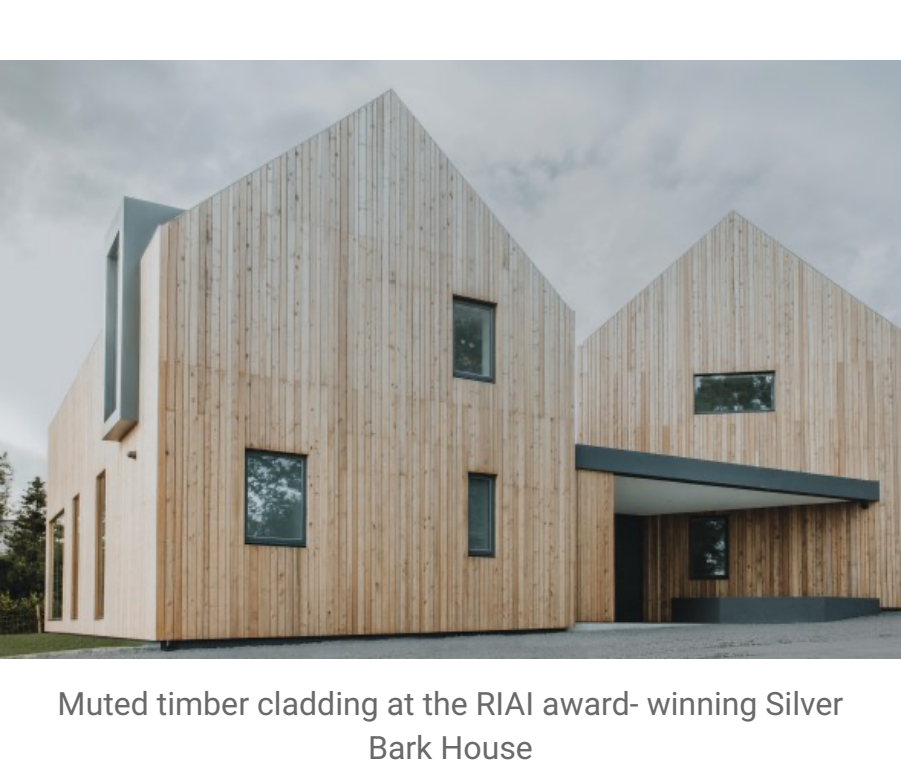
Simple render and lots of glazing also works very well in very contemporary architecture such as Wilson Hill's Beacon View on Valentia Island in Co Kerry, with its panoramic views of Dingle Bay, and Foley + Crowley's House on the Hill, which has sweeping views of Cork city on one side and the countryside on the other.

Crowley's design for his own home incorporates large windows to take in the surrounding views — and to get free energy from the sun. "You can use the sun to heat your house during the day and then you cool it down a lot easier in the summer if you can open the windows."



Muted timber cladding at the RIAI award- winning Silver Bark House

KERI-LEIGH KEARNEY

Huge floor-to-ceiling windows may be top of your wish list too, but take care to avoid creating situations where spaces will get too hot. "You need to think of the orientation and the way big windows face," Crowley says. "If they're facing south you'll need overhangs or canopies that block direct sun coming in and making the place overheat."

Window colours are also an important consideration. "We try to push for a black window frame," Wilson says. "Particularly if you want a thin window frame, go for a dark colour that will blend in better."

Wilson also recommends looking at window colour, brick, mortar and slate together rather than as completely separate elements. "They're all tied together," he says. "Mortar colour is about 15 to 20 per cent of a façade with brick. People don't realise how much of a difference that makes."

You may want to go a bit mad on the inside but Crowley recommends a more neutral palette for fixed interior elements that are hard to change — the flooring, the bathrooms and the kitchen, for example. "Sometimes people go for big statements in the finishes and these can date very quickly," he says. "We use the Scandinavian style quite a lot and that lends itself to a more minimalist base that you can then build on.

This Foley + Crowley project on Seafield Avenue, Clontarf, has a bespoke neutral kitchen that would be easy to respray in future

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"It's much easier to change your soft furnishings or pieces in the room than making big statement pieces within the architecture itself."

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Wilson agrees that neutral fixtures are a better long-term bet. He suggests, if funds allow, going for a bespoke rather than a factory-made kitchen. "Then in ten years' time when you're sick of the colour you can get it resprayed and change the handles. Go for a nice, neutral worktop such as a white marble or a white quartz. You can have colour in your furnishings.

"Don't go into the showroom and go for the new 'in' thing like bright, multicoloured terrazzo — in a few years that might be out. A traditional-style terrazzo or concrete floor is timeless."

Finally, if you really do want to build a home that combines functionality and beauty, engage the services of an architect.

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