

CREATIVE space

A photograph of a modern dining room. In the foreground, a white table with dark wood legs is partially visible. On the table, there is a large, clear glass vase filled with vibrant pink lilies and green leaves. Behind the table, four dark green leather chairs with wooden legs are arranged. In the background, a white wall features a mounted television and two pendant lights with white shades and dark metal fixtures. A framed abstract painting is visible on the left wall.

Hiring a specialist project manager to manage your renovation is not about walking away and coming back six months later, but it will give you the space and time to be creative about the design of your new home, says RTÉ producer and presenter Olan McGowan.

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While Olan's high degree of involvement in the project ensured that he got the desired result, he would never even contemplate fully managing a project on his own. "I just don't believe the average homeowner has the knowledge to manage such a specialised area. How much research can you possibly do, especially if you have a day job?"

Bottom right: Olan had a very distinct vision of the result he was after, and though this entailed a large amount of work on his part, his efforts weren't in vain as the end certainly justified the means

INSIDER INFO

The owner: Olan McGowan.

The location: Churchtown, Dublin 14.

Type of house: 1970s bungalow.

Purchase price: Undisclosed.

The architect: Carl Kennedy Project Management.

The brief: To create a contemporary bungalow that is one hundred percent wheelchair accessible and to the highest standards of energy efficiency.

Build route: Architect, project manager and building contractor.

Budget: Undisclosed.

Final cost: Significant overruns due to changes in specification.

Planned time for job: Six months from commencement of build.

Time it actually took: Seven and a half months.

Value renovation has added to the home: The home has potentially doubled in value.

Planning issues: Planning permission for a new kitchen/dining room and ensuite was granted on first application.

Biggest challenge: Installing the various energy conservation systems.

Problems encountered: The energy systems were new to both builder and client.

Best bargain: The walnut kitchen from Tierney kitchens, which beat the next nearest quote by over 50 percent.

Verdict: The high-end finish on the house reflects the fact that no effort or expense was spared in this renovation.



the project

It was the location that sold Olan McGowan this very dated seventies bungalow in Churchtown, Dublin. "It's so peaceful and secluded here, yet by cutting through the adjoining laneway I can be in Churchtown village in two minutes." The original house itself had little appeal with its uninviting exterior, pine tongue and grooved ceilings and brass and stone-effect chimney. From the outset, Olan's plans were radical. As a wheelchair user, complete accessibility to all areas of the house would be essential, yet Olan didn't want "a house that looked as if it had been designed around functional requirements." He also wanted to incorporate the latest energy efficient heating systems.

getting a professional project manager

Although this was Olan's first renovation, he had built his previous home, a four-bedroom detached house in Ballinteer. "I learnt a lot from that build. Both the architect and I became too focused on making the building wheelchair accessible and didn't give enough energy to the aesthetics. As a result, I was never happy with the look of the house." This time around, Olan was determined to redress the balance of functionality and aesthetics. He began by appointing an architect to re-design the house, get planning approval and draw up an initial tender document. He then appointed a new architect, Carl Kennedy, who specialised in project management, to oversee the build. Carl came highly recommended by two friends whose homes had undergone large scale renovations. "Unless you have a first-hand recommendation, don't assume that your architect will make a good project manager," says Olan.

selecting the builder

Four building contractors quoted for this high end renovation. After consultation with Olan, a North Dublin-based company, Atfar Construction Ltd, was selected. The main reason for Olan's choice was the strong recommendations from previous clients. Also, project manager Carl Kennedy had worked with Atfar before and made it clear the company was



With hindsight, Olan wonders whether renovation was the right option: "Would it really have cost much more to demolish and re-build? I'm 95 percent happy with the end product, but I can't help thinking I should have costed both options at the outset"

Bottom left: Olan undertook the task of interior decoration and design himself, something that consumed endless weekends, hunting around fabric shops, selecting colour schemes and comparing prices on fittings. Handpainted Italian silk Fortuny lamp, available from Minima





OLAN ON... RENOVATION VERSUS RE-BUILDING

1 Don't make the assumption that a high end renovation will be cheaper than re-building.

2 According to the RIAI, on a per square metre basis, standard renovation and extension costs €2,700 to €3,300. Building a 'one off' house costs €2,500 to €2,900 per square metre.

3 If your property is detached and does not have significant period character, it may be worth considering the benefits of a blank canvas.

4 Put your mind at rest by pricing both options!



his preferred choice. "A good relationship between the main contractor and the architect is helpful," says Olan.

dividing up responsibilities

At the start of the job, the architect and builder came up with a written schedule for the renovation, outlining the sequence of the build and the schedule of payments. As sections of work were completed, the architect would inspect and certify the works before writing to Olan to advise him that he was happy for a stage payment to be released on receipt of the builder's invoice.

Olan admits it did get confusing at times when it came to who was doing what. "My role as client wasn't discussed in detail at the start and I did end up getting quite hands-on, particularly when it came to the conservation issues. Modern energy efficiency systems are relatively new to this country and most builders and architects will admit that they are unfamiliar with them." Olan decided to get further external expertise from energy consultant Gerard Berney, who drew up a plan for an energy efficient heating system, an integrated solar heating system and a heat exchange air extraction system.

every renovator project manages

Olan believes that active involvement in the project is simply unavoidable if you care about the end product. "With any renovation, you will end up doing some element of project management, the choice is how much? I had such a strong vision of what I wanted that I found I had to be on site a lot of the time. You cannot simply download the contents of your brain to your builder or project manager, but you can get them to take responsibility for many functional areas."

creative energy

Delegating the responsibility for the day-to-day management of the build enabled Olan to keep his focus on the end product. "Visualisation is key. If you project manage all areas of your own build, how can you have enough time, space and energy to visualise and be creative?"

In Olan's case, he took responsibility for the interior decoration and kitchen design. "If I was doing another project, I would consider consulting an interior designer or internal architect. I think I'm pretty good at that stuff, but the right creative person

can be very helpful when it comes to deciding on layout and sourcing the right products.”

shopping around

Olan’s creative input was vital when it came to the design of the kitchen. “I love cooking and entertaining so this was really the centrepiece of the house. At the same time, I require special features such as height adjustable work surfaces. Basically, I wanted an adapted kitchen that didn’t look like one.” Olan sought a range of quotes for his kitchen design, a process that revealed an incredible price variance in the marketplace. “I asked each kitchen company to quote for the same design, with MDF carcasses and solid walnut doors. The highest quote came in at €32,000 and the lowest at €10,000 from Tierney Kitchens. All quotes were for nearly identical kitchens and excluded the worktop costs. I’m one hundred percent satisfied with the kitchen Tierneys installed and I’m not easy to please!”

changes cost money

Olan’s thirst for perfection led to many changes along the way which he admits were costly. “For example, originally I specified huge vertical radiators so that I could avoid hanging my art collection over radiators. But when I saw them in situ, they were too overwhelming and I had to re-think. I went back to using horizontal radiators, but placed shelves above them to deflect heat from the paintings.”

Olan also made the mistake of overlooking the landscaping of the site until the end of the build. “When I decided at the very end that I wanted decking rather than paving, it was extremely costly to excavate and clear the hardcore from the sealed site. This cost could have been avoided. My advice to others would be to plan your landscaping properly from the outset.”

These changes, for which Olan accepts personal responsibility, pushed this renovation far beyond budget.

O’Reilly man

According to Olan, a well-managed renovation is all about balance. While he can’t understand how somebody could walk away from their project and come back six months later, he is adamant he would never consider fully managing a project on his own.

“Life is too short, the whole process is too stressful and time consuming. Even experienced tradesmen argue over details. You need to have an informed professional to make key decisions. You might save money in the short term, but you’ll never have the peace of mind of knowing every detail is up to speed.”

Olan believes knowing your limitations is essential. “At the very least,” he pleads “get a structural engineer because structural problems are hard to correct. Remember O’Reilly man in Fawlty Towers? Surely Basil Fawlty has to be the original and best example of a renovator who thought he could be his own project manager? And let’s face it, we have plenty of O’Reilly builders in this country!”

Despite being willing to hand over the management of aspects of his renovation, it is clear that Olan’s home is still very much a product of his vision. “When we got to end of the project, the builder turned to me and said: ‘Now I understand, this was what you wanted.’”

Olan McGowan produces and presents ‘Outside the Box’ on Tuesdays at 8.30 pm on RTE Radio 1.

OLAN’S RULES

- > Don’t let anyone tell you that not being your own project manager means you are not having creative input into your home. The opposite can be true – by not doing everything you give yourself the space to be creative.
- > Don’t assume that appointing a project manager will cost you money – it may even save you money in the long term.
- > Don’t judge something by its price. Paying a high end price does not guarantee a high end product or service.
- > Plan your landscaping when you plan your renovation. The heavy landscaping tasks will cost less when incorporated into a build rather than left for a specialist landscaping company.
- > When you have your heart set on a decorative element, go for it. Don’t compromise on the finishing touches.



The once dated seventies bungalow attracted Olan because of the excellent location – a peaceful and secluded area that is still a mere stone’s throw from Churchtown village

USEFUL CONTACTS

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