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A lack of running water didn't deter the owners of this crumbling cottage – they harnessed its special energy to create a harmonious home, says *Grainne Rothery*

Transforming Shaolin Cottage from near dereliction into a charming home with a curved, zinc-clad extension and a beautiful, rambling garden has been a labour of love for Nigel O'Brien and Sarah Codd for the past 24 years – and their work is not over yet.

The pair, who are both artists, were living in a quiet cul-de-sac backing onto Dun Laoghaire golf course when they started looking for their house in the country in the late 1990s. O'Brien grew up in Cabra in Dublin but Codd is from Enniscorthy in Co Wexford and missed countryside living. "I grew up on the banks of the River Slaney and I just

wanted to come back to the peace and quiet," she says.

O'Brien, who was working for Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown county council's parks department in Cabinteely, had visited a medium, Paddy McMahon, a few years earlier. "I was thinking of giving up my job because I'd got so tired of it. He told me to stay but to paint and that I'd been an artist in a past life in France. He also said our souls would develop better in the country."

After looking at a couple of properties in Wexford, they were brought to see a two-storey cottage near New Ross that they thought was "the most beautiful place on the planet".

Nigel O'Brien and Sarah Codd fell in love with their country home in the 1990s and split their time between Wexford and Dublin until 2017

"Even with the house derelict and the grounds overgrown and cattle everywhere, it was amazing," O'Brien says. "It had been untouched for years so we felt the presence of nature spirits," Codd adds. "There was a very special energy and it was so beautiful and we fell in love with it instantly."

After buying the property, which was down a quiet lane, very private and included three quarters of an acre of land, they started wondering what to do with what was essentially a shell of a house. "I took the ivy off the wall and the chimney fell down a week later," O'Brien says. "The plan

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Move



Above: the renovated downstairs open-plan room in the original cottage. Left: the cottage's first bathroom is part of the extension, which was finished in 2020. Below right: Codd's collection of Aura-Soma products sits on display shelves designed by architect Isabel Barros

→ Continued from page 15 at that stage was to seal it up and put a roof on it."

The pair continued to work in Dublin – O'Brien with the council and Codd as an energy healing therapist – and split their time between Dun Laoghaire during the week and Wexford at the weekends. The cottage was still uninhabitable, so this involved staying in a caravan on the property or at O'Brien's father's holiday home in nearby Ramsgrange for several years. As they were still paying a mortgage on the Dublin house, the renovation was a long and slow process.

O'Brien, who had started painting, held an exhibition and made a number of sales. "We got some money to be able to do things to the house, which was very helpful. We bought a gate and ladders and tools for scraping off the plaster. And a friend of mine came down and fixed up the windows."

A bank loan in about 2003 enabled them to take on a local builder to seal everything up and break down a wall between the house and an adjoining piggery to make a kitchen. They also raised the ceiling upstairs and added a new roof and ended up with one open-plan room downstairs and one upstairs.

Wherever possible, they re-used and recycled. "I think we've always been into the environment and salvaging and looking after the planet and not always consuming," says Codd. The cottage stairs

came from her sister's pub in Ferns. O'Brien used Douglas fir he sourced from the council to make a beam over the fireplace. The granite window sills and heads – and more recently, the step for the new porch – were originally in a convent in Waterford.

These initial renovations were completed in about 2005 and they were finally able to move inside although they still had no running water. "We had a well outside," O'Brien says. "And we built a dry toilet in the shed. It wasn't great going outside in the middle of the night when storms were raging!"

They also bought a two-acre field next to the property, which is now woodland. The garden is an ongoing project and passion for O'Brien. He's added a grass area to the original plot of land and a polytunnel and has a quarter of an acre still to plant. "We're hopefully going to be self-sufficient," Codd says.

Their long-term plan had always been to sell the house in Dublin after O'Brien retired in 2014 and to move full time to Wexford and build an extension. That idea made even more sense to them when the golf course next to their house was sold in 2004 for redevelopment. "It went from being a really quiet cul-de-sac to a really noisy one," Codd says. "We figured it was time to move."

They put that house on the market in 2017, moved to Wexford by June of that



“We spend every evening in the old place in front of the fire and it's beautiful

Left: the cottage's garden is an ongoing project for O'Brien and the couple hope to become self-sufficient. Below left: the bespoke kitchen in the extension was designed by local firm Oakman Joinery. Below right: the striking zinc-clad exterior contrasts with the traditional stone building

year and subsequently engaged the Wexford-based architect Isabel Barros to create their extension.

In terms of rooms, they wanted a new kitchen, a bathroom and some extra living accommodation. But they also wanted it to be designed in keeping with feng shui principles. Barros says her design aimed from the very start to keep the chi energy flowing gently through the house. This, she says, influenced the layout, the location of the windows and the orientation of the rooms.

One of the challenges was to ensure that the new structure – which would add 44 sq m on one level to the existing 52 sq m over two floors – wouldn't dominate what was already there. Barros says the simplicity of the extension and its contrasting volume helps to achieve the right balance and retain the old house as the focal point. And she says the connection between two completely opposite shapes is a very visible manifestation of feng shui principles. "The end result is that it gives them that harmony and balance."

O'Brien says they originally wanted quite a traditional style – two-up, two-down and the extension to be finished in stone. "But Isabel changed our minds on that. When we saw the concept plan we thought it looked amazing. And the plan is exactly the way it has been finished."

They weren't initially sure about the zinc cladding. "But we love it now," Codd says. "Isabel's idea was that the extension should hug the cottage."

The build began in March 2019 and was completed – apart from the snag list – in early 2020. The curved extension comprises the kitchen, the couple's bedroom and – finally – an indoor bathroom. A hallway divides the kitchen from the bedroom and bathroom and runs from the old part of the house to the back door and a sheltered porch.

"We particularly love sitting out in the porch in the evenings," Codd says.

Some of her own vibrant and abstract paintings on silk are displayed on the

walls of the hallway, as are her Aura-Soma products on display shelves designed by Barros.

The bespoke kitchen was made by Oakman Joinery of nearby Wellingtonbridge. Fittingly, it has an old Aga that was given to them by Codd's sister-in-law's father and has since been reconditioned and converted from solid fuel to electricity. They've also recently installed a retro fridge. "The kitchen is wonderful because it's south-facing so we have sun all day long," Codd says.

The extension is A-rated, with an air-to-water heat pump and underfloor heating. The cottage has also been made cosier with the installation of five radiators. Improving the insulation on that side of the house is on the to-do list, as are putting in an upstairs lavatory and basin and adding a window that was previously in the pigsty extension. They're also about to install solar panels on the extension and a new set of gates they've been told were originally in Paddington station in London.

They love both parts of the house. "When people call they come into the old part and think it's absolutely amazing," says O'Brien. "And then they go into the new part and can't believe it's even more amazing. And there's such a contrast between the two."

"Our builder said, 'You'll close the door behind you and you won't bother going into the old place.' But we spend every evening in the old place in front of the fire and it's beautiful."

The finished house is very different to how they originally imagined it would be. "We were thinking of continuing on with stone and maybe having a two-storey rectangular building," Codd says. "But now I just love the round shape and the energy flowing beautifully."

"Isabel got the feng shui just right," O'Brien says. "And we wouldn't change anything. When Sarah's niece Muireann came in the first time she said, 'She really got you, didn't she?'"

“We've always been into salvaging and looking after the planet





A brighter outlook

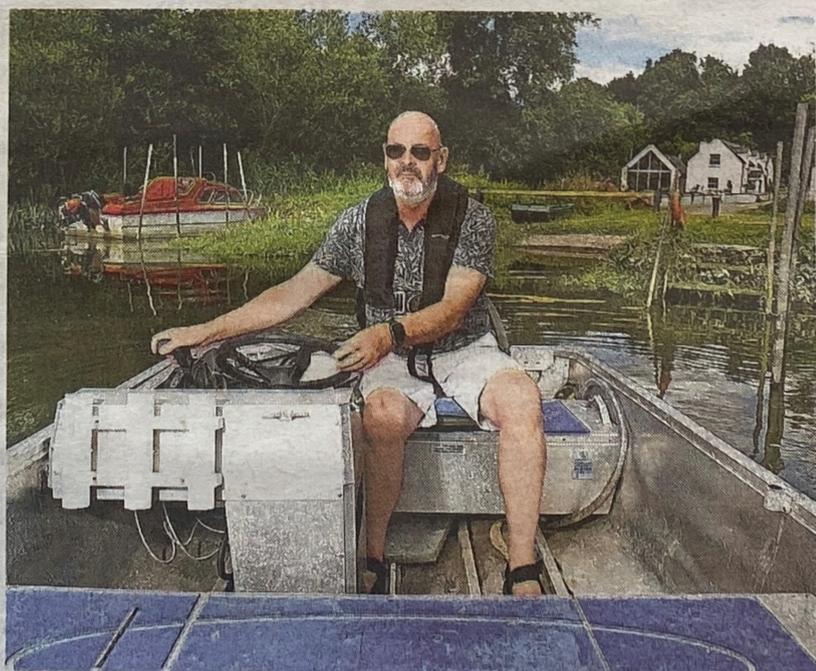
With no views of the water from their old cottage, Imelda and Myles Thorn angled their new extension just right to capture the stunning landscape, writes *Grainne Rothery*

Seven years ago, when Imelda and Myles Thorn were the successful bidders at auction on a quaint two-storey cottage next to the banks of the River Nore in Co Kilkenny, they knew they had a job on their hands. “The house needed to be rewired and replumbed, and it was damp,” Imelda says. “It had a kitchen and bathroom extension that was very cold and had a flat roof that leaked. And the garden was completely overgrown – a large part of it you couldn’t get into.”

“So we kind of knew what we were buying. But we’d fallen in love with it. In one way it was the cuteness of the house but it was also the situation – it’s close to the river and just such a lovely location.”

Partly dating from the late 1800s, the house is about 50m from an old quay on the river and surrounded by trees. “But there was no view from inside the original cottage,” Myles says.

At that stage the accommodation included two reception rooms, along with the kitchen and bathroom, and three



Main: the building designed by Isabel Barros has a full-length glass gable end. **Above:** Myles Thorn casts off from his riverside home

small bedrooms upstairs. The couple cleaned the place up, painted the walls and put a new tarpaulin onto the extension roof. “We had it like that for a couple of years while we decided what we would do,” Imelda says.

When it came to renovating and extending they knew they wanted something that would be sympathetic to the old house, which they still loved – despite the damp and the cold and the lack of views. It also needed to work for the extended family, including their two grown-up children and three grandchildren, aged between 11 and 13.

“We didn’t want a glass box,” Myles says. “We wanted to build something functional that would give us the view but would also fit in with and conserve what we already had.”

With that in mind they consulted with the Wexford-based architect Isabel Barros, focusing on the views they could achieve and how they liked to operate as a family and entertain friends. “And we think Isabel came up with a fantastic design,” Imelda says.

Central to that design is a new structure that almost mirrors the original cottage in shape and size. These two main elements – or legs – are connected by a corridor.

There’s a twist. “What’s really lovely about Isabel’s design is that one of the legs tilts towards the other and gives a direct

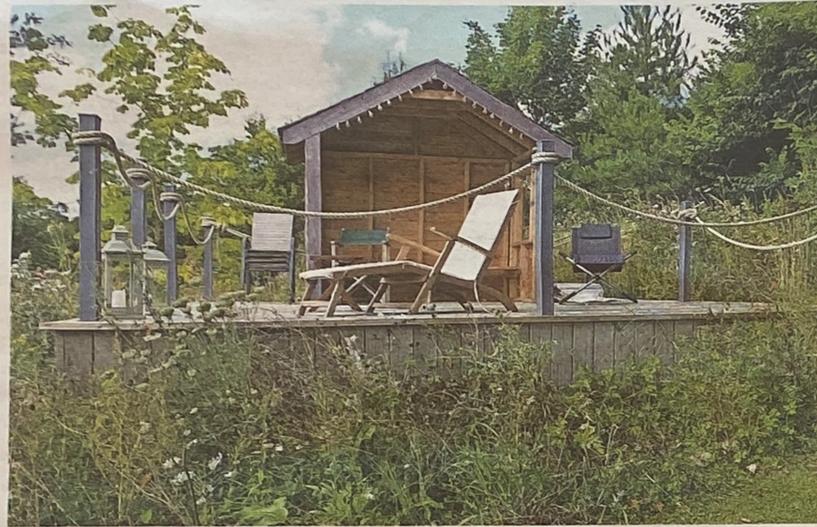
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Move



Above: the garden is a passion for the Thorns who have spent years working on the once overgrown space to create wildflower areas and a sunny deck. Left: triangular bay windows allow views of the river from many parts of the house



“The house is built for purpose rather than to be flashy. The kids can run amok

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 view of the river,” Myles says. “It was an interesting solution to the problem and as soon as we saw that particular iteration – and I think it was probably the fifth or sixth attempt – we knew that was it.”
 It’s not just the orientation that’s different. This part of the extension is a single space: a huge kitchen/living/dining room with extra volume thanks to the vaulted ceiling. At the river-facing gable end there’s an entire wall of glazing. “From any part of that room you can see the river,” Myles says. “Even on a dull day it is beautiful.”

Two separate single-storey blocks – with matching rendered walls and natural stone slate roofs – sit next to these larger elements. “So it’s not one enormous house. It’s like a little cluster of small houses.”

The main entrance opens into one of these smaller blocks or pods. This boot room leads to steps down to a corridor

through the old house. First up on the left is a small bedroom with built-in cupboards that, among other things, house the washing machine. Next to it is a shower room.

The corridor opens into a cosy sitting room, which has the staircase and is where the original porch and front door opened into. The new porch has pretty half-doors and, like the rest of the older part of the house, timber sliding sash windows. Upstairs are two more bedrooms, both with en suite shower rooms.

Just before the sitting room and to the right is the link walkway between old and new – a floor-to-ceiling picture window at the end of it gives a lovely view of the garden. Glazing on the left of this link looks out on a triangular space and offers a small glimpse of the river. On the other side another bedroom and a full bathroom are in the second of the two smaller blocks.

The open-plan room has two sets of sliding doors to patio areas, one in the huge glazed wall and another facing on to the garden. The latter is part of a triangular bay window, or wedge, that’s repeated on the opposite side of the room with a couple of smaller windows. The window angles match the building lines of the old part of the house. “It’s almost as if Isabel moved the building but kept the original orientation,” Myles says. “We get two different views.”

The renovation and building work began towards the end of 2017 and took almost a year to complete. Being next to a special area of conservation and on different levels, the build was always expected to be challenging. The couple were also aware from a survey that the foundations were poor or non-existent. Things got more complicated, however, when they found out during the build that the cottage had been poorly constructed and its fabric had been damaged over the years by water coming in from an underground stream. Their surveyor’s recommendation was to completely rebuild the existing structure.

“We were really disappointed,” Myles says. “We fell in love with the old cottage and one of the reasons we went to Isabel was because she’s a conservation architect. But in hindsight it was probably the best thing that happened. We now have a very highly insulated house that looks exactly the same, although it’s of



“From any part of that room you can see the river. Even on a dull day it is beautiful

Clockwise from right: the refurbished original and new extension about 50m from an old quay; the open-plan kitchen/living/dining room with vaulted ceiling; Myles Thorn in an office nook; and the glazed wall with its views down to the River Nore

modern construction. We feel we have the best of both worlds.”

They also feel they were blessed by having both Barros’s design and their builder Tom Morrissey’s construction ability. “He was great,” Imelda says. “We’re in a valley and it’s a very steep hill, even in the garden. When you come into the house you have to go down some steps. All of that was very tricky.”
 “And when we did have issues where we had to take down walls and do this, that and the other, it went smoothly,” Myles adds. “We were extraordinarily lucky and we’re really happy with what we ended up with.”

The focus in the house is on function rather than luxury, they say. “We wanted somewhere for our children and grandchildren to spend a lot of time with us,” Myles says. “The old house was very simple and we continued that theme throughout because we wanted all the surfaces to be hard wearing. The house is built for purpose rather than to be flashy. It’s very simple and that’s the way we like it. The kids can run amok.”

The garden has been something of a passion, particularly for Imelda, who

has spent the past two and a half years transforming the space. As well as putting in grass and flowerbeds she’s planted a number of mature trees, a wildflower garden and a hedgerow. After the pandemic began they added a deck at the top part of the garden, which gets the sun in the late evening.

“It’s an ongoing thing and will change over time but it’s really lovely now,” Imelda says. “The house is sitting more into its surroundings now the garden is there and the trees have come up. That was always the aim – to make the house sit more into the landscape.”
 The couple now split their time between their base in Dublin, where they work, and their riverside home. “It’s just under two hours to get here,” Imelda says. “Being in striking distance is a huge advantage. We have fabulous neighbours here and it’s a very welcoming community. And there’s plenty to do.”

They describe the house and the setting as their sanctuary. “When you drive down the road, you can feel your heart skipping a beat,” Myles says. “And you slow down and you just forget everything else.”

