The clients had been living next door in a Victorian villa – a house of many rooms. They wanted a convivial living space which more loosely accommodated contemporary family life. The idea for the new house started from an introductory conversation held on the site. Looking out to sea, with the sun on our backs, we discussed with the client our shared preference for facing north, watching the effect of the light on the landscape without the glare of the sun in your eyes – the quiet of standing in the shadow and looking at the light. Halfway up the Hill of Howth, overlooking the harbour, the site lies sandwiched between houses, blinkered by its boundaries and mesmerised by the outline of the island of Ireland's Eye.

A three-part plan and sectional organisation grew out of the site conditions. The house was designed from the inside out, or from the sense of being within the site looking out, and each development in the form was designed from first principles. A long wall is aligned between two trees which fix diagonally opposite corners of the plot. The body of the house turns to focus on the island; the walls bend to cup the space that flows between them. The house is extended like a telescope. It is designed as a device for directing light through from the south and views out to the north, but its scale is determined by everyday domestic routines. Dimensions are set out from the fixed points of fireplace and kitchen, with the dining table as the centre of gravity around which the plan revolves.

The long walls are load-bearing; there are no columns or cross walls; the space flows on. Transparency is maintained along the length of the house, and the structure takes its lateral stability from concrete floor slabs. Concrete ceilings are boardmarked in correspondence with the floorboard pattern of the rooms. Timber floors turn up at their edges to make partitions and balustrades, avoiding any secondary detail of railings or skirtings. Spiralled inside their wooden boxes, the sky-lit shower rooms are tiled all over in glass mosaics. External brickwork is smeared over in grey-pigmented limewash, and internal wall surfaces are selectively painted to emphasise the effect of light and dark on the character of the house. Earth-based colours saturate one face of each longitudinal wall, with crosscuts providing contrasting highlights in the linear structure.

Area – 280m². Stage – completed March 2003.
Long walls bend to cup the space

Lower-ground-floor plan

Ground-floor plan
The house looks towards the island.

1st floor plan

Longitudinal section
ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

O'NEILL – The walls show the way the architects were thinking about what's going on on this site. The walls cup the view, and follow the path of the sun.
FINUCANE – I have to say I really like it. I could live in it. The finish on the concrete, and the detailing of the timber, is so beautifully done, isn't it?
CONROY – It's a beautiful house. It's beautifully made as well.
BETSKY – I'm not sure I'm that convinced when you have to literally translate angles and points of view for geometric abstractions into physical form, and it gives you these kind of tortured shapes, and I wonder whether all of them are quite as wonderful as the photography makes them look. It also makes you create these massive parallel walls that kind of drown the house.
O'NEILL – I think that particular photograph might be exaggerating that effect in the middle of the house.
ROBBRECHT – It’s well situated on its small site, although still very near other houses. But I would not live in a house with so little space in it. It’s also a bit overactive in its geometry for my liking. But it’s a nice house, I have to say.

O’NEILL – I take what you say about the geometry, but I think it is a really satisfying design. They are not wilful decisions; they are very much considered. And the materials and finishes throughout are beautiful.

ROBBRECHT – I particularly like the quality of light inside.

CONROY – The aesthetic of it inside is to do with these shapes pressing on each other, and the concrete and the timber. I think that’s why that release through the hole in the slab is so powerful, because the rest of it is about compression, which I think gives it its character. The rooms are, when it gets down to it, pretty small. But I think it’s a beautiful house.

BETSKY – We could have an endless debate about the geometry of the house. But I really don’t buy the notion that you make a line, and say the view is there, and so that
means that you have to get that geometry as a physical wall. Why do the opposite walls of the living room have to do the same thing? But there are wonderful spaces in there as well. And the handling of materials is impressive.

CONROY – The combination of those spaces and materials – that’s what’s good about it. The detailing throughout is really compelling.

O’DONNELL + TUOMEY – founded in 1988 by Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuomey. The practice has developed an international reputation for cultural and educational buildings. (See p116 for full biography.)

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