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LANEWAY, WALL, GARDEN, HOUSE

DONAGHY + DIMOND ARCHITECTS

The project was to provide new kitchen, living room and bedroom to this 19th-century split-level terraced Dublin house. This was achieved by stripping away extraneous extensions, recasting the boundary retaining wall to the rear laneway, and reinstating familiar domestic forms of lean-to and covered-yard accommodation arranged around a courtyard garden. The walls provide direct support for two roof elements which define the courtyard. Their lower edges rest on and are connected by a timber box-beam doubling as valley gutter that collects all rainwater from the rear of the house and diverts it to a cast concrete cistern. Bricks from the enlarged opening in the back wall are used to pave the two connected yards.

The design aims to draw on the ‘borrowed landscape’ of domestic backlands with its network of returns, backyards, outhouses, garden walls and rights of way. The scale of garden wall and lean-to roof is used to connect and mediate between private house, urban courtyard garden and common back lane, using unadorned construction and a palette of carefully chosen materials. The boundary wall of cast-in-situ boardmarked concrete encloses and defines the garden and backyard, as well as presenting a new elevation to the semi-private world of narrow rear and side lanes. This presents an unadorned material to this ambiguous urban territory that is self-finished and robust, and at close contact traces a detailed memory of the sawn Douglas Fir boards used as formwork in its casting. This same grain is mirrored in roof structure, ceiling boards, kitchen cabinets, window seat and external joinery which are all in Douglas Fir. The richness of the untreated wood will eventually mute to become more like the light-coloured concrete and the zinc roof covering, the palette becoming more even with weathering. The concrete walls and the timber structure will not need painting (and are therefore maintenance-free), but will take on the life of the lane and garden, allowing lichens and moss to inhabit their textured surface.

Internally, the boundary wall is lined with insulation and an internal masonry wall where it encompasses the kitchen and garden bedroom/study. An insulated, heated concrete screed is polished to create a reflective yet warm floor surface adjacent to the courtyard, stepping up to create a plinth on which kitchen cabinets sit. GrGGBS replaces 50% of cement in concrete throughout. The span of the box beam with alternating roof planes draws together garden, house and lane with a new enclosing wall.

address – Portobello, Dublin 8
client – private
photography – Ros Kavanagh
design to completion – 2006-2011
site area – 140m² / floor area – 122m²
budget – private

opposite – View of project, with bedroom block on left and kitchen on right
LANEWAY, WALL, GARDEN, HOUSE

View from kitchen towards courtyard and bedroom block
Sliding screen to kitchen
opposite

Evening view of kitchen from courtyard
Entrance from laneway
ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

WILLIAMS – It’s another one of these slightly retro interiors! Are we getting a kind of new retro thing? Post-retro style, or something.

McGARRY – I like the concrete, I like the rainwater business. I like where you come in at the corner of the site, where it's open, and then you sidle on down to the courtyard. The bit that surprised me is the floor of the courtyard. But I like the idea that you'd make something in concrete – with two pitched roofs – and shuffle them. It's enough.

WILLIAMS – It's a slightly academic point, but would you actually appreciate or see the neat junction of the two pitched roofs and this sort of really neat gutter? Yes, I suppose you would, and you would see it from the upper windows of the existing house.

McGARRY – The whole project is about making spaces, whether it's open, part open, or enclosed. And then there's the rainwater, concrete and timber, and it's all over.

WILLIAMS – And the way the two pieces just slip apart - I think it is really rich, really nicely handled.

BRADY – I find it very attractive. I think that move is very clever. The temptation is usually to put something all the way across the back of the house, or an extension down the side of the site. Instead, having those two spaces is such a relief; it relieves that particular issue and allows for that secondary entrance. Likewise, I love the way in which the rainwater has been handled – two roofs very simply come together. It's also modest.

WILLIAMS – It’s clever stuff.

Ó CUFV – I would reiterate what the others have said. It's very clever and pleasing.

BRADY – This is very disciplined and shows a strong sense of design understanding, especially when you look at the composition; the beam line, and the gutter line is also the lintel line for the sliding door. It's all handled very well.

McGARRY – It’s the rainwater that does it. I mean, the cleverness of bringing the beam over the sliding door to frame the gutter on the way down...

RYKWERT – I'm not as enamoured of it as a project, but I can see it has real merit. And I do agree with the points you make about the clever way it’s handled.

BRADY – I think this deserves an award.

McGARRY – So do I.