

How to bring light to the darkest of spaces

ARCHITECT'S CLINIC

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Q We would like to have a bigger living space that connects with our back garden but the rear of our house faces north. Does that rule out an extension?

THE first thing to note is that north-facing aspects have developed a bad reputation that they don't necessarily deserve.

From late spring until early autumn the sun rises in the north-east early in the morning and sets in the north-west late in the evening. This affords carefully designed north-facing extensions ample opportunity to avail of morning and, in particular, afternoon sun. Remember, we tend to use the social spaces of our houses (inside and out) more in the latter part of the day, so well-considered north-facing extensions can maximise this afternoon and evening sunlight.

The existing house and the spaces within should be carefully assessed before thoughts turn to an extension. Extensions sometimes merely replace existing indoor spaces, which can become redundant and disused once the extension is complete — the abandoned “good room” at the front of the house.

Given the front of your house is south-facing, the spaces here should be given full consideration at the outset to maximise the natural light they receive and to bring this light through to the rear north-facing areas of the house where possible.

In a north-facing extension, east (morning) light should be brought into the space however possible. Psychologically, we tend to enjoy arriving into the kitchen in the morning if there is natural light flowing in from an east-facing window. In many cases this can be successfully achieved by angling or folding the roof of the extension to create a high-level window, which can run the full length of the extension, right from the back wall of the original house.

As mentioned previously, given the southern orientation of the front of the house, daylight from here should be brought through the house as much as possible. Replacing the spine wall between the original sitting and dining rooms with a full-height, sliding, folding door, for example, will allow south light to flood into the northern areas of the house (and the extension), uniting front and rear spaces

when required, while also allowing the spaces to be fully separated when that is desired. The line of sight (and light) from the hall through to the kitchen should ideally be unobstructed with the view extending right out to the back wall of the garden beyond.

Capturing western sunlight is often the primary goal of house design and north-facing extensions can in many cases successfully achieve this. If the extension can be set away from the western boundary, this elevation can be substantially glazed to flood the new extension (and the existing spaces beyond) with daylight and sunlight. Maximising the height of this glazing (for example, by stepping the ceiling up adjacent to this facade) will help bring in western light, even when the sun is at its lowest.

Any extension should be seen as a link piece, connecting the original house to its garden, and unifying all spaces, internal and external, in a coherent sequence. The design of the garden (and the boundary walls or fences) is critical, as it will form the termination of sight lines from within the house. The level of the garden should relate to — if not continue, in part at least — the floor level of the house.

Consideration should be given to using materials as a unifying motif. Brick, for example, could start in the original house, continue through to the extension, and run beyond to form planters and benches in the garden.

Finally, though, don't be afraid of a little carefully controlled shadow. As the Hawaiians, who know a thing or two about sun, tell us: “Without the rain, there is no rainbow.”

If you are considering changes to your home, work with a registered architect. You can find a registered architect on rca.ie, the registration body for architects in Ireland.

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In this project, one challenge was to introduce light to the north-facing rear and architects Brennan Furlong came up with clever solutions. Left, a large picture window with a lower than usual sill, gave room for a window seat and frames the view. Right, horizontal window behind the kitchen units on the west-facing side of the extension bathes the working section of the kitchen in additional light.

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