

Sunday Independent

ARCHITECT'S CLINIC

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To extend or not to extend?

**Q** WE live in a three-bed semi in Lucan, Dublin, with our three kids. Ideally we would like a family room and a separate space for ourselves. Do we need an extension?

**A** IT'S a question we are often asked by our clients. To answer, follow the steps:

■ **Orientation** Suburban housing suffers from a common problem: the same layout is repeated throughout an estate regardless of a site's orientation. But check where the sun rises and sets. How much natural light could be captured? Is there a view? Are there structural issues to address if opening up walls to bring in more light? The more light that enters a room, the brighter and bigger the space will feel.

■ **Reduce circulation** One key step in gaining space is to reduce circulation areas. The typical semi-detached house often has a collection of separate rooms that don't really connect. In such homes, the kitchen is nearly always in the annex, blocking any connection to the garden, while the middle room of the house is used to reach those to the rear, turning it into an extension of the hall; a space my father-in-law endearingly used to call, "a feck of a room".

■ **Useful space** A well-designed home is not just about the floor area available, but about how that space is used. The location of functions can be key. For example, it may be worth considering moving the kitchen to a more central position, as well as reorienting your dining/sitting areas beside the garden; improving both access to the outside and allowing more natural light and ventilation to the interior. Don't be afraid to think about moving furniture either. In domestic projects in particular, detail matters.

An exterior wall is normally about 300mm thick. A new opening to the garden can gain an extra 150-200mm of space by pushing the doors/windows towards the external edge of the existing wall thickness; it might just be enough to make a layout work. Also, be aware of your house's natural advantages so you avoid placing rooms in the wrong location — why put the utility room on the sunny south side, for example?

■ **New connections** Consider opening up the

wall between your front and rear rooms, as a way of providing a freer connection between the two — in terms of movement, views and light. A simple set of doors on parliament hinges (which allow the doors to fold back 180 degrees) allows privacy when required. Sliding doors can change this connection too.

■ **Storage** Consider thin, tall storage on appropriate walls or fully utilising the space under the stairs. Avoid the glory hole storage room in which you can find nothing. Efficient storage is your saviour.

■ **The brief** With all this in mind, develop a solid brief. Architects are trained as problem solvers and it's our job to use our skills and expertise to find the best way of establishing a clear plan/outline for the proposed project. It's always a good idea to begin with an ideal wish list. You need to produce a brief which fulfils the optimum needs and aspirations of a project, should money be no object. This can be distilled to the essentials as the design progresses and budgets are finalised. For more, see pages 4 and 5.

■ **Budget** As with any project, the wish list has one limiting factor: the budget. This is where the skill of an architect really comes to the fore. Moving things by as little as 50mm can determine whether a room succeeds or fails. Architects are trained to maximise space. Making changes to your home requires a significant investment and it's far more prudent (and less expensive) to explore the possibilities on paper rather than jump in and construct another disconnected room.

Having considered the above, it may emerge that an extension is the answer for you. But by investigating the possibilities, you'll have made an informed decision for your situation.

If you are considering changes to your home, work with a registered architect, check [ria.ie](http://ria.ie), the registration body for architects in Ireland. Gary Mongey is a director of Box Architecture, [box.ie](http://box.ie)

Do you have a architectural dilemma we can help you with? You can email your problem to [designclinic@independent.ie](mailto:designclinic@independent.ie). Advice provided is for guidance only and readers are advised to seek professional assistance for any proposed project.