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TV presenter Una McQuillan has learnt the secrets of self-building the hard way, she tells **Niall Toner**

Although architecture is in the news, as plaudits are heaped on Irish practitioners on the international stage and the annual domestic prizes are handed out for building design, there is not a lot going on on the ground, thanks to the virtual collapse of the construction industry.

With huge job losses in the sector, many of those lucky enough to be still practising have had to go back to the drawing board metaphorically speaking, changing the way they operate and bill for their services, as well as diversifying into other areas.

Una McQuillan, who runs her own all-female practice in Dublin, diversified before the downturn, getting into interiors as well as building design, and later television. She co-presents RTE's long-running *About the House*, with Ireland's high-energy grand-uncle of eco-friendly architecture, Duncan Stewart.

In the next series in the autumn, McQuillan will be showing us around her pick of new residential architecture in Ireland, be it new-builds, extensions, renovations or conservation projects.

For her, the finished interior of a building is as important as the structure and its outward appearance, something she feels clients often forget.

"The classic mistake people make is not to have a really well-prepared brief when they go to see an architect in the first place," she says. "Often people will come to me with drawings they have had done already, but I would rather



McQuillan says the slump is making builders offer better value for money

hear from the client themselves and find out what they really want. Clients are often fearful of saying what they really want because they are afraid of the cost or that what they are saying is going to sound really silly to the architect's ears.

"Often, people will go ahead and build without thinking about where the light switches and plugs are going to go, or sometimes they realise after finishing the job that a really important piece of furniture is not going to fit in."

Despite the downturn, McQuillan says her own practice is busy at the moment with upmarket refurbishment projects, including one in Leeson Park, Ranelagh, and another in Ailesbury Road, Ballsbridge.

She got her training at Kingston University in London and LA Paul & Associates in San Francisco. But unlike a lot of architects, she gained a huge amount of on-the-job experience working for the most picky of clients: herself.

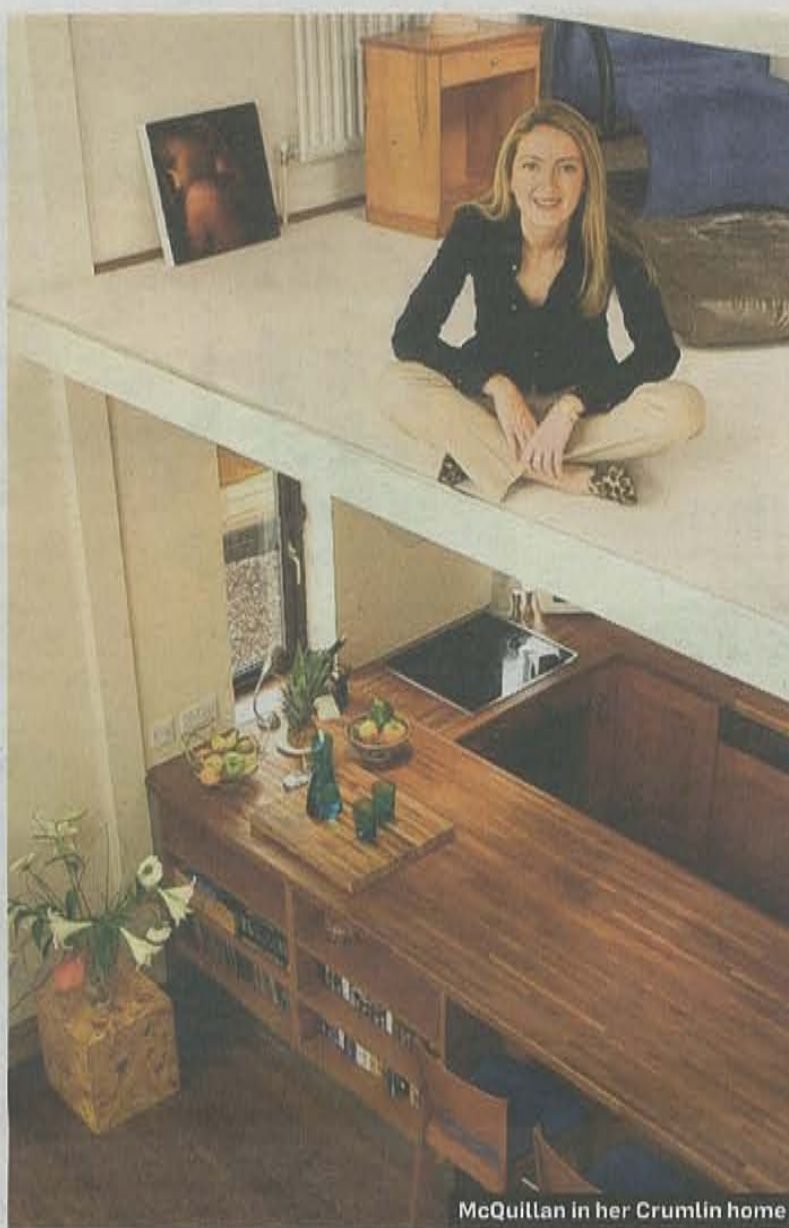
McQuillan has carried out several projects requiring her to live among the results, which she says has helped teach her the importance of getting so many aspects of a job right, including how to manage a budget. Back at the turn of the millennium, she built herself a home from scratch, having tired of living in a sub-500-sq-ft apartment.

As the property market was beginning to take off, she cashed in and bought a site in Crumlin, building the five-bed home for just under €200,000.

Then in 2004 she worked on a modern refurbishment of husband Con Carroll's mews house in Rathgar, taking out all the walls and turning it into a light-filled "bachelor pad". This was on a more substantial budget of about €1m.

She says these projects taught her that project management is crucial.

"This process is phenomenally important, because, among other things, it involves paying the builders. A client will develop a certain relationship with the builder, who will naturally try to get paid as much as possible as quickly as possible, and the temptation is to think: 'Well, they've put in a really good week's work, so I'll pay them,' and then you wonder why they don't turn up next week.



McQuillan in her Crumlin home

"I THINK THE PUBLIC HAS COME TO BE A LOT BETTER EDUCATED ABOUT THE WHOLE PROCESS OF BUILDING"

"I remember one instance on that job in Rathgar where a critical beam had been left outside, despite assurances it hadn't been, which could have done irreparable damage to it. Going the direct-labour route is something I really wouldn't advise either, unless you really know what you are doing.

"And, of course, there is the other end of it, where a builder will have a good personal relationship with a client and doesn't know how to say no, in which case the builder can often paint himself into a corner where he may lose money. This is another good reason to have an architect in between."

McQuillan reckons the property boom didn't exactly help the standards of building out there and the value for money available, an area where she thinks change is already well under way.

"The lack of professionalism in the building trade is phenomenal," she says. "There are so many of them out there that set themselves up as builders and they are really demolition men, or they might have been foremen on a building site. Anyone can call themselves a builder. There is no regulation or qualification required. They have got away with so much in the boom years, as much for the way they have talked to us as anything else.

"A lot of the problem is that so many builders begin with the end in mind, and their minds are not really on the job itself but getting it finished so they can get paid. That is why reputable firms, such as the Sisks and the Cramptons, stick around for years, as do much smaller versions of these, ones which you won't necessarily have heard of."

She is currently renovating a garden-level apartment in Pembroke Road, Ballsbridge, which she intends to move into herself. Her practice has just set up offices overhead in a house that was once home to the poet Patrick Kavanagh.

Of course, it won't be any ordinary basement flat, but something more in line with some of the "sexy architecture" she shows off on the programme. She hopes it will also serve as a showcase for her own talents.

Part of the look will be a specially

imported, mature olive tree from Italy that will be lit on the inside with LED lights and will mark the entrance, its greyish leaves matching the granite.

"We have taken on the job of refurbishing the whole building, so our landlord is also our client," she says. "The apartment will be finished next month and I will be moving in. The garden levels of these buildings are quite dark, so it was quite a challenge to bring light into the place."

At the rear, McQuillan has added a sort of conservatory, with the aim of letting in as much light as possible, and she has excavated at the return to give more ceiling height.

She says: "The glass roof in the back section was inspired by Andie McDowell's apartment in the film *Green Card*. It is intended to have a sort of 'orangery' effect. We have also put in underfloor heating for warmth."

Though her new home is unfinished, looking like a site that might itself feature on *About the House*, McQuillan hopes to have it completed before shooting starts on the next series.

Now in its 15th series, filming for the latest will begin this summer. This year has proved challenging for the independent producers of the series, because the economic recession has made it trickier to tie down sponsors and finance.

The downturn has helped shape the show's content, too.

McQuillan says: "Now on the show you see projects where people are cutting their budgets while they build. But a lot of it is focused on how to get good value for money in the current climate.

"I think over the course of the 15 years of the show, the public has become much more educated about the whole process of building, not just because of *About the House* but *Grand Designs* and all the other ones, too.

"I think we will be able to show that good design need not cost the earth, which is important in these times. People don't just want to see presenters running around saying everything is great any more."

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The study at Rockfort House, Dalkey, renovated by McQuillan; right, the kitchen at the Rathgar 'bachelor pad'

