

perfectly staged

A red brick, mid terrace house in Arnott Street close to Dublin's South Circular Road has been developed in contemporary fashion with the young professional in mind.

'Neutralisation' is not a property term we're too familiar with in Ireland. Essentially, it's the skill that 'home stagers' / 'home doctors' / 'property stylists' (as they are variously known) use to promote the sale of a property, whether an existing home, renovation or new build. According to Home Presentation, an Australian property styling company: "to help your home sell you must aim to 'neutralise' it". However, this does not mean painting everything cream and stripping the house of its personality. "No one will get excited over a bland house. You need to create harmony and balance", they insist. Property styling should not be confused with interior designing, however, as the objectives of interior design are very much to help you personalise your home, whatever your taste may be, whereas property styling aims to maximise its appeal to the broadest range of tastes, and hence neutral schemes work best.





The concept of home staging is just taking off in Ireland, though it's been going in the US since the 1970s, is big business in Australia and increasingly so in the UK. We have been familiar with show houses for some time, but are likely to become more familiar with home staging in private houses as the market slows and competition increases in property sales. Sinead Considine runs Upstage, a Dublin-based interior design and home staging company and is one of very few designers in Ireland who have experience of home staging in the mature markets overseas. After leaving school she went travelling in Australia and fell in love with the country and the lifestyle. She returned to Ireland to study interior design but then got the urge to go back to Oz and went to live in Melbourne, working in a home staging company for four years. Eventually, living on the other side of the world, Sinead missed family and friends too much, and returned two years ago to set up her company in Dublin, offering home staging, furniture hire and interior design for private and developer clients.

I asked her how Ireland and Australia compare in her business: "Completely different. The homes are so different. Australian homes are often very contemporary, lots of cutting-edge design and then of course, you've got the weather factor. They can afford to have huge open-plan spaces, because, for one thing, they don't have to heat them. Above a certain price-bracket, no-one in Australia would sell their home without staging. It just makes sense. If you think about selling a car, for instance, you would make sure it was serviced, everything fixed and neat and tidy before you put it up for sale to get the most money you could. It's the same with houses. In Australia they claim that the average rate of return is \$3 to every \$1 spent on styling."



Number 12 Arnott Street is the third house Sinead has worked on for developer Emmet Long, whose company Hillrock looks to maximise profits through quick sales of the properties they develop and is therefore very keen to ensure a high level of presentation. Auctioneers for the property, Douglas Newman Good, recognise the value of property styling, particularly for empty properties: "People find it very hard to visualise living in a house when it's presented without furniture," says Lesley Ann Devins from Douglas Newman Good. "As auctioneers we find that staged properties photograph really well and this gets the property off to the all-important good start by encouraging potential buyers to investigate further."





Emmet involved Sinead from the time he purchased Arnott Street and they set about defining the look they wanted to create for the house from the outset. Built around 1880, the house was in pretty poor condition when Emmet took it on: "There was subsidence at the back and no-one would touch it. All we could retain were the front wall and the roof – the rest had to be demolished." Dramatic as this sounds, the demolition gave Emmet the opportunity to rewrite the wrongs that occurred over a century ago. "Just because a house was built in the "good old days" doesn't mean to say that it was well built," he says. "There were good builders and bad builders, no different from today, plus they had problems such as acute materials shortages to contend with."



Although the house was in poor condition, the things it had in its favour were its location and the character that comes with an older property. Arnott Street is in a quiet residential area close to the city centre, a stroll away from Harcourt Street and at the moment has many older residents who've lived there all their lives. It can only be a matter of time, however; before the demographics change – it's easy to envisage the street in a few years, re-energised and full of young professionals and couples with small children.





Originally, the property was single storey to the front with two bedrooms on the upper level over the kitchen to the rear. Emmet felt it was important to be able to offer the possibility of three bedrooms given that he was aiming at young couples who would have friends staying over or may be starting a family. Unable to build more than a single storey extension at the rear due to planning restrictions, they had to reconfigure the available space within the original footprint. To this end, the single storey living room at the front of the house was split vertically to form a living room downstairs and a third bedroom/study/mezzanine living space upstairs. The two remaining bedrooms were adjusted to provide a master bedroom with ensuite shower-room and slightly smaller guest room.

Downstairs, the dividing wall between living room and kitchen was knocked down and a single storey extension built to create an open plan space incorporating living, dining and kitchen. The brick fireplace where a cast iron stove had once stood was retained as a period feature and painted a tranquil blue/grey in Farrow & Ball's No. 22, but otherwise the space has a contemporary feel. A great bonus is the wall adjacent to the patio garden which comprises bi-fold glass doors opening out to create a seamless indoor/outdoor entertainment space, cleverly linked decoratively by the garden end wall being painted in the same Farrow shade as the fireplace in the kitchen. Light through the glass doors is supplemented from above by a glass-sided skylight projecting through the kitchen roof.

Solid ash floors stained a dark brown run throughout and decoratively Sinead has kept things nice and simple with white furnishings and neutral walls. The lacquered white high gloss kitchen units with stained iroko work surfaces were built and installed by Emmet's team and there is supplementary storage at the rear in the sizeable utility room.





Sinead designed most of the furniture in the house which was then made to her specifications. Dining and occasional tables are in wenge with retro “Series 7 butterfly” dining chairs and Philippe Starcke’s perspex “ghost” chairs lending an up-to-the-minute feel. In the living area, a luxurious white leather “Fendi” style sofa and footstool sit under the raised window, side-lit by perspex and chrome lamps with silver thread shades.

The bathroom downstairs is neatly tucked away at the end of the hall, kitted out with contemporary Shires fittings and flooring in coated cork tiles – Naturo Cork Flooring - imported from Germany, which have the appearance of porcelain tiles but are soft and warm to the foot and may be used in any situation.



Upstairs, the ash floors continue throughout the three bedrooms. The main bedroom is styled with wenge headboard and side tables and continues the acqua theme from downstairs with blue/green bed linen and blue poppy painting leaning on the mantelpiece over the original cast iron fireplace. This bedroom has an ensuite shower-room, again with a cork tiled floor. Bedrooms two and three each have a different look with milk chocolate contrasts to the bed linen in one and a strong black and white theme complete with large "Breakfast at Tiffany's" Audrey Hepburn print in the third bedroom situated at the top of the stairs. Here again are more bi-fold doors which close for privacy but open out to make the space equally usable as a study or living area.





The house may be styled with the young professional in mind but the property market is notoriously unpredictable: young couple, gay couple, successful single, country-based executive looking for handy pad in town – the possibilities are manifold. The point is 'though, that the stylish furnishing, fixtures and fittings will allow them all to imagine living there. ■

Sinead Considine: t: 01 634 8118 m: 087 278 9898 e: info@upstage.ie w: www.upstage.ie ; Douglas

Newman Good t: 01 679 4088 www.dng.ie; Naturo Cork Flooring supplied by ZN-Design Gibbs:

086 819 4856; Shires Bathrooms 01 404 7600 www.shires-bathrooms.com