



# IT'S SHOW AND TELL

Karen O'Rourke fell in love with her house because it was a blank canvas, says **Mary O'Sullivan**, and she used all of her design talents to transform it. Photography by **Tony Gavin**

**Y**ou've heard of a tennis coach, a drama coach, a life coach, even a radical forgiveness coach — now meet the renovation coach: Karen O'Rourke. And why not? One interesting side-effect of the current economic climate is that people are devising all sorts of new ways of doing business, and this is Karen's idea. "People can't afford to move, so instead they're doing up their existing homes. Many can't afford the full interior-design service, yet they don't have the know-how themselves. That's what I, as a renovation coach, will do — help people to do it for themselves," she explains with some glee, implicit in which is the knowledge that she has come up with a great idea.

Karen is certainly amply qualified for the role. The dynamic Dubliner taught for 10 years, and she has been in the interiors business even longer. She has many other skills which make her perfect for the task, not least the fact that she herself has been making things — doing it for herself, if you will — all her life. "When I was a child, some kids read books — I made things. I even had a studio. My father was a joiner, and his workshop was my studio," she says, laughing. "I made clothes for dolls, and clothes for myself. I did the Grafton Academy course when I was 14."

In those days in Ireland — the early Eighties — interior design was a fledgling business and not for the masses

as it is now. Only a few made a living from it. Instead, fashion design was a popular choice for a creative student embarking on a career, so Karen followed that path, starting with an apprenticeship with Ib Jorgensen. Now an art gallery owner, in those days he was a leading light of the Irish fashion industry.

"I trained as a cutter with Ib. I love him, he was amazing," Karen says. "I was with him three years — I cut all of the garments and some of the patterns. When I think back, I remember going over to the studios of designers Sybil Connolly and Pat Crowley — we'd swop fabrics for linings, that kind of thing. It was lovely to be part of that world."

Karen loved the business, so she decided to study fashion at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD). After getting her degree, she worked in several areas, including sportswear design with O'Neills and childrenswear design for Ladybird. She then joined a company designing and making ranges for Sasha and Alwear, and she worked with menswear designer Pat McCarthy. With such wide experience in the fashion business, it's not surprising she was offered a teaching post at NCAD. She combined the two jobs. But, always a doer, she found herself gradually getting into the interiors business, too. "There's a crossover from fashion to interiors — both are three dimensional, both deal with fabric and structure. Opportunities came my way, and as they did, I took



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them," she says. "I was selling houses part-time on Saturdays for Ross McParland auctioneers, and they gave me an introduction to developers who asked me to do a showhouse." Karen was in the right place at the right time.

For the following 10 years she was on a roll, as she explains: "It started with one two-bedroomed house, then it was six-bedroomed houses, and detached houses. That led to apartment fit-outs. We were dealing with huge developers."

Obviously the showhouse side of things has dried up for the foreseeable future, but there are other avenues of work which have followed. "Many who saw our work asked us to do private commissions," Karen explains. "Nowadays, there's an awful lot of work in the area where apartments are now 10 years old and tired, with kitchens out of date and needing to be refreshed so

they can be let. We do a lot of them."

Despite the "we", Karen operates as a one-man business. "I always use the royal 'we', but it's just me," she explains with a laugh. "I have a great team of plumbers, carpenters, painters, specialist painters, and joiners. We keep up to date on all the new developments in insulation and so on, and we can offer expertise in all areas."

It's hard to imagine how, but throughout her working life Karen has also found the time and space in her head to buy and renovate houses for her own use. She is currently living in her fourth, which she bought seven years ago — it's the longest she has spent in any house, and she shares it with her partner, Philip Armstrong, and her adored dogs, Poppy and Prue, photos of which line the hallway and stairs.

Dating from 1922, the property is a red-brick, four-bedroomed terraced house on one of Dublin 6's many leafy roads. What attracted her to the house was the fact that it only ever had one owner, and all the Edwardian features were intact. "I looked at other houses, but there was always something wrong — they were extended in the wrong way or the features were removed," she says. "Here, while the original fireplaces were



**Left**  
Interior designer Karen O'Rourke in her kitchen, which has solid units topped with Silestone. She uses beams and copper pots to give it a rustic feel

**Above**  
The dining room has the features which made her fall in love with the house: gracious proportions, original cornicing, mantelpiece and flooring. She has furnished it in solid mahogany period pieces and her collection of old china

**Top right**  
The drawing room, like the

dining room, is painted in Dulux's Fine Ecru, and she has added wooden mouldings to the walls to suggest panelling. She made the curtains herself.

**Middle right**  
Karen opted for a period feel in the bedrooms. She picked up the furniture at auctions in Ireland and France, and even from skips: 'I'm inclined to stop at the side of the road if I see something glinting at me'

**Right**  
Karen got the coronet over the bed in the guest bedroom from an old house in Slane

boarded up, they were still intact, and no cornicing was taken down. It was like a blank canvas. Houses like these are so gracious, you can do so much."

Karen had to undertake extensive structural work, including the installation of insulation and a whole new central-heating system and she also extended the existing kitchen, but she opted to keep the period feel of the house, and emphasised it with her choice of furnishings and fabrics. Karen loves skips and auctions and has a lovely collection of mahogany period pieces. These combine well with the pitch-pine floors — they are the original floors, which she had stained. Where possible, Karen has preserved anything worth saving. She had to remove the tiles from the kitchen floor, but she kept them for years knowing she would find a use for them. Finally, last summer, she found just the place for them when she had them laid in the passageway outside the kitchen, which is also accessed through the double doors in the dining room. "It's not a patio, it's a piazza," she says, mock grandly. "I plan to put in a glass roof, making it an extra space without darkening any area inside."

As can be seen from the decor, Karen loves colour, but she opts to keep most

walls fairly muted by using Dulux Simply Colour neutrals on most walls — for example, Fine Ecru by Simply Colour is the shade on the living and the dining room walls. Instead, she introduces colour via cushions, sofas, armchairs, wall hangings and especially curtains.

The curtains are a special feature of the drawing room. "These windows were particularly difficult as the two windows are quite close together. So I got the idea of lining them and turning them back with the same colour," she explains. The fabric is embroidered silk and the lining is dupion silk. "I made them myself," Karen says. "There's nothing I can't make." She is constantly changing the decor, and between the day of my visit and that of the photographer, she put panels on the walls of the living room and she added beams to the ceiling of the kitchen. "So now we have Versailles in the front, and Bunratty in the kitchen," Karen reports happily.

Whatever your own particular house fantasy, the renovation coach can help you achieve it. ■

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