

First, go get your bearings

Architect and recent First Time Buyer **David Sheridan** offers his hard-won tips for home hunters in 2016

After a year of sifting through paperwork, becoming “besties” with estate agents and solicitors, drafting construction drawings, agonising over paint colours that to the naked eye are identical, the house which we went ‘Sale Agreed’ on this time last year is finally liveable (see the four, grouped ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures on right.)

We won’t be moving in any time soon though because we’re not married, and ‘living in sin’ may see a vengeful God send a plague of locusts to the house to wreak havoc on the new blinds. Especially considering how long it took us to settle on those particular blinds!

Assuming you are happily single, married or suitably committed, and are ready to buy a house, here’s some advice I would offer you to help find your perfect home, first time round.

No.1. Location, location, location.

Without stating the obvious, location is a hugely important factor for consideration when buying a new home. If you see a house that ticks every box on your list but is in a terrible location for you, then don’t buy it. There are a lot of changes you can make to a house after you’ve bought it but location is not one of them. The important factors to consider here are what amenities are close by (shops, parks, schools etc.)? Is the local infrastructure good (roads, public transport routes etc.)?

What are the future plans for that area? (Check the local Development Plan). Finally, is it a sought-after area? If you do decide to sell again in five years time, is there likely to be much demand for houses in that area?

This is where a bit of local knowledge is invaluable. I, being only a blow-in, took a back seat on this one and my girlfriend, who is as Cork as a can of Tanora wrapped in spiced beef outside Hillbilly’s on a Saturday night, took the reins. She would whittle down the potential houses based on location and then I would come back in with my black polo neck and cast a pretentious eye over her

choices.

My first question was always the same. What’s the aspect?

No.2. Aspect, aspect, aspect!
For me, this is as important as location and it should be right up there at the top of your checklist. If it’s not, move it there! Ask any second-time buyer what they want in their new home and, without fail, they will all say that a good aspect is a must. This is something that is often overlooked by first-time buyers or, at least, not given the consideration it warrants. This is not helped by the confusion

around what “south-facing” really means. It is not uncommon to see two different properties, on opposite sides of the same street, both advertised as south-facing. In one case the front will be facing south and in the other the back. You want the latter!

Houses in Ireland are generally designed with the living space at the back of the house for greater privacy and access to the back garden. This is where you want the most light and a south-facing rear elevation will mean you have lovely sun all day. West-facing will

provide evening sun and east facing will provide morning sun. As a rule of thumb; south means Sun, north means none! This made the filtering process much easier for us.

Houses with south-facing back gardens went to the top of the pile, west-facing was next in line, east facing after that, and we ruled out any houses with north-facing back gardens. There was a caveat to this however. Some consideration was given to houses that had a north-facing back garden but a living space that was primarily to the front, provided the front garden was sufficiently private that you would feel comfortable sitting out in it...in a Meath jersey! Lucky enough, we got a south-facing back garden so I didn’t have to worry about that.

No.3. The BER necessities.

When buying a second-hand home, ‘A’ and ‘B’ BER ratings are very scarce, and therefore a ‘C’ rating is usually the best you can hope for. While it is always advantageous to have a high BER, don’t disregard a house with a lower BER if it ticks all your other boxes. It is always possible to improve the BER by re-insulating. However, when considering houses with a lower BER, the wall build-up becomes more important. The cheapest method, by a distance, of improving your wall insulation is to have them pumped. This can only be done in cavity walls (not cavity blocks. There’s a difference!).

If the house does not have cavity walls, you will have to use either internal insulation (dry-lining) or external insulation. These methods are significantly more expensive. The cost to pump the walls on a standard three-bed semi-d would be about €1,000, significantly cheaper than internal insulation (€8-10K.) or external insulation €10-12K. The cost of upgrading the windows and boiler can also be significant and should be taken into consideration before buying.

Due to the fact that my girlfriend is an Irish female, her greatest fear in this world is the fear of being cold. If my first question was, “What’s the aspect?,” her first

question was always, “Will it be warm?” This meant the house needed to either have a high BER from the outset or else have the potential to upgrade it, at minimal cost, to a high BER. In the end we went with the latter.

(It should be noted, that although significantly more expensive, it is possible to achieve greater results when externally insulating, as you don’t generally have the same depth restrictions as you do in cavity or internal insulation. Another thing to note here is that if you are planning on doing significant renovation/remodelling work to the house then the cost of dry-lining can be swallowed up, to a large extent, in the overall construction costs, making it a more attractive option in some cases.)

No.4. Fixer-Uppers.
Don’t judge the book by its

manky cover! Seeking out fixer-uppers can be a great way for first-time buyers to bag a bargain. This is not for everyone though. If you are the type of person who gets stressed out if someone puts teabags in the coffee jar, then this is probably not for you. However, if you have the time, the patience and a reasonable knowledge of what’s involved, then a fixer-upper can afford you the opportunity to create a home that is the perfect fit for you and at a reasonable price too. Before putting pen to paper on a fixer-upper though, you should always; 1) get an engineer to carry out a detailed conditions survey of the property, 2) consult with an architect on the potential for renovating, remodelling or extending, and 3) know roughly how much the proposed works are likely to cost.

As a broad rule of thumb you should allow between €500-€1,000 per m2 for remodelling/renovation works and €2,500-€3,000 per m2 for extensions. The age of the house is a big factor here, however. A house built in 1900 will cost significantly more per m2 to renovate than a house built in 1990. The costs will increase further again if the house is a protected structure.

Another factor to consider is whether the internal walls are block or stud walls. Remodelling a house with all stud walls internally is generally cheaper and less problematic.

Obviously, given my profession, I wouldn’t shy away from the challenge of a fixer-upper and would recommend anyone doing the same. However, it’s important you don’t bite off more than you can chew.

Given our own time and budgetary constraints we wanted a house that we could easily put our own stamp on, without the need to go for planning, and that didn’t require significant structural work or large amounts of new construction. The house we settled on was sufficiently sized that there was no immediate need for an extension and all that was required was internal remodelling.

The fact that the house was a bungalow with stud walls throughout meant that internal remodelling was much less problematic. We re-orientated the house so that the open-plan living space ran the full width of the rear of the house (South-facing), the bedrooms occupied the side and front of the house (East & North facing respectively) and the services, i.e. bathroom, HP, utility etc. were all

moved to the centre of the house.*
*While it is nice to have a bathroom with a window to the outside, it’s not essential. We used some high level glazing to borrow light from the bright living space.
No.5. Room to expand.
Although the house might seem perfect for your current needs, it may not be perfect for your needs in five years’ time and what was spacious may start to seem cramped. This is why it’s important that your new property can accommodate expansion, if and when required. Often, the most cost effective way to get the extra space you require is to convert your attic. However, not all houses can take attic conversions.

Bungalows are much better suited to attic conversions than two-storey houses, for example, due to the fact that the attic space

is generally wider and taller. If an attic conversion isn’t an option than it’s important to ensure you have sufficient garden space to the rear or side to accommodate a decent sized extension without compromising the amenity of your garden.

Our own garden isn’t large enough to take a significant extension without having an impact. However, the fact that it’s a bungalow, with a generous attic space, means that the option is always there to expand without disturbing the geraniums!

(No.6: If you’re buying as a couple, try not to break up in the process. It won’t be nice living in a house with your ex... even if it is south-facing!)

David Sheridan has opened the Cork office of OC Architects and Design, see www.ocarchitects.ie



Main pics top, and left: Dublin home extensions by OC Architects, images Assert Photography. Below, ‘before’ and ‘work in progress’ at Cork’s Broadale by OCA’s David Sheridan