

## MY FAVOURITE ROOM



# THE PILLOW WHISPERER

Interior designer Noelle O'Donoghue indulged in a bit of night-time chat, says **Mary O'Sullivan**, when she wanted to persuade her other half to move house. And her husband Eoghan is very glad she did. Photography by **Tony Gavin**

**Y**ou've heard of horse whispering — now meet Noelle O'Donoghue who indulges in a bit of pillow whispering. Marriage is a complex affair and we all have different methods of getting our way within the relationship. When Noelle, who now lives in the countryside between Edenderry and Tullamore, wanted a new house, she says she spent many nights pillow whispering her husband to get him to agree to sell their home and build another.

"We lived in a lovely, unusual house, but we built it on a budget when we got married in the mid-Nineties and it was lacking many features. In 2002, when the boom started, I was working in Dublin in a basement. When I went in in the mornings it was dark, and when I got home it was dark — I became obsessed with sunlight and having it in my home at the right times in the right rooms," she says.

Her husband did give in to her softly voiced entreaties and they now live in the home Noelle wanted. It wasn't that he was a pushover; rather, he knew he was in safe hands.

After all, Noelle had designed and decorated the first house and he knew

that she would also create a second lovely home. Interior design is something she's been doing professionally for years and before that it was fashion design — she can turn her hand to anything; creativity is in her genes.

"My mother was always great at decorating. I suppose I got it from her. I grew up wanting to be an architect. Then I realised I needed a zillion points and decided it would be easier to get into art college," she recalls.

After a foundation year in art college in Waterford, it dawned on Noelle, whose family have a dairy farm in Clonbullogue, that it would be hard to make a living from art and so she switched to fashion and opted to go to the Grafton Academy.

"In those days you could go through the course as quickly as you could pass the exams. Our cows went down with brucellosis and we had no income, so I had to finish it quick. I did a course in 18 months that normally took students three years," Noelle recalls. She wasn't just quick, she was good too — she represented Ireland at the prestigious *Fil d'Or* awards in Monte Carlo and was overall winner of The Irish Linen Guild's Best Designs in the late Eighties.

She spent the next 15 years in a variety

**Noelle once designed bridal gowns: 'I can be just as creative with windows, but they never change their minds or lose weight'**

of fashion businesses, but she gave up fashion when she married Eoghan. They met in the local rugby club. "He had been in Canada and then came home. One day, my brother remarked that there was a new lad in the club. I couldn't wait till Sunday to get out to see him," she explains with a laugh.

Eoghan has a stud farm and the couple have two children, James, seven and Molly, three.

When Noelle first got married, she worked in her mother's bakery, but the old creative juices couldn't be stopped and she opted to do an interior design course in 1999. It's not a million miles away from fashion but, according to Noelle, there are crucial differences. "I can be as creative on windows as I could on dresses and windows never change their minds or lose weight," she notes.

It's a statement made out of bitter

experience. Noelle made wedding dresses throughout her fashion career and on one occasion, a girl put on mountains of weight between the early fittings and the final ones — "there weren't enough seams to let out, I had to remake the dress" — and on another, a bride lost so much weight that her heavily beaded dress had to be taken in drastically and Noelle didn't have a needle small enough for the beads. "Of course, I got them looking lovely but it was hard work," she says.

She has spent the last 12 years in her interiors business, Noelle Interiors, specialising in curtains — designing them, providing the fabrics and getting her team to make them up. She also advises on interiors.

Almost by accident, her home had the perfect work area for the business — the basement. "The site is on an esker and because of some very solid rock and a sloping site, we had a choice of building the house in a hole under the road or building it up and creating a basement," Noelle explains.

From the time Noelle and the family moved in, until the boom years, she ran the business exclusively from the house and that worked out well.

There was a steady demand for whole







**Above**  
Interior designer Noelle O'Donoghue in her kitchen, which is floored in travertine and designed by Noelle in such a way that light streams in from different angles throughout the day

**Top left**  
The bathroom is decorated in a restful mix of neutrals. The rolltop bath was from Noelle's family home and she matched it with antique-style sanitary ware

**Top right**  
The guest bedroom is decorated in purple and

silver-grey. The lamps are from Noelle's shop in Tullamore and the stool is an antique. 'I've been going to auctions and antique fairs with my mother since I was a child,' she says

**Middle right**  
Noelle's daughter Molly in her bedroom, which is decorated in cream, red and green. The fabrics in the blinds, which feature stars, and in the horse-strewn curtains are both in a fabric known as Voyage

**Bottom right**  
A detail of the hall, which features an antique coatstand

houses to be kitted out in the Kildare area and it was always word of mouth. However, the market has changed a bit and, to survive, Noelle decided to explore the Tullamore side of the country. She opened an interiors shop on the main street selling gift items and interiors accessories — lamps, mirrors, picture frames, candles.

She also has fabrics in the shop and if people bring in rough measurements of their windows, she will give a quote. Once they order, she goes to their homes, takes accurate measurements and has the curtains made up. "If people are ordering curtains, I give the interiors advice for free," she says.

Noelle's own home is a fantastic showcase for the kind of curtains she makes. The house, which is detached, Georgian-style and sideways to the road has a middle floor with a kitchen/living room and a drawing room, both of which run the full length of the house and have windows to the front and back and are full of light.

"Orientation is so important when laying out a house," Noelle maintains. "The main kitchen/living area is to the left, which is south-facing. There's a large kitchen window to the east and a bay window to the south, and in the living



area two windows to the south and French doors to the west. So as you move through the house during the day you follow the sunlight. There are no windows to the north as this is a full, grey light — it does nothing for a room."

There are four bedrooms upstairs, one of which is ensuite and which comes complete with a dressing room.

Even though the house is large — 3,500sq ft with high ceilings — it's warm and cosy thanks to geothermal heating. "I grew up in a beautiful Georgian house but one summer my mother painted my bedroom window and left it open to dry. It never closed again for years. It was freezing, so I was determined to have a warm house," she says.

It's nearly there, according to Noelle, but not perfect. However, Eoghan has already declared he's not moving. "They say you need three houses, but my husband says not unless he does and divorces him. I hope I won't have to go to that extreme," she laughs.

It took as if she'll have to find herself a more persuasive technique than pillow whispering. ■

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