

leading BY DESIGN

In a male-led profession, it takes real grit for a woman to build a successful empire. JENNIFER O'LEARY meets six female architects who have done just that. Photographs by AGATA STOINSKA.

Sterrin O'Shea Having worked for a number of practices in Australia, Sterrin O'Shea is quick to point out that in comparison, female architects are very much to the fore of the profession in this country: "If you are passionate about what you do and work hard, you'll get to where you want regardless of gender."

Sterrin opened her own practice, Sterrin O'Shea Architects, in 2005. "I worked with Grafton Architects for several years – in fact, Shelley McNamara and Yvonne Farrell still inspire me – but the building industry was so buoyant that it was time to give it a go on my own."

Sterrin says that the transition from bigger-scale projects to smaller-scale work, such as extensions and one-off houses, proved a challenge in itself: "In a way, I was a little naïve – I assumed it would be easier, but smaller projects take as much passion, time and labour. That said, it does get easier with experience." Her first solo project, remodelling an extension to a 1930s Dublin house, was her most thrilling.

Contrary to assumptions, much of an architect's day-to-day work is not spent sketching. "My role is to liaise with the client; be team leader for the design team; work with the builders, engineers, sub-contractors; essentially, it's making sure everyone is doing their job, hence I enjoy the time I get in the evenings and weekends researching and sketching designs, going to visit buildings and art exhibitions ... It's a hobby but still technically work."

Architecture is clearly something she's passionate about. "The stages of any project are still a thrill. When the main structure is up on site, it's possible to get a sense of the space for the first time and, in the next phase, you get a sense of the light. It's just a fantastic feeling to have an idea and for it to be built – I just wish it would happen faster!"

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