

ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE PROFILE

SINCE 2005, DUBLIN-BASED STERRIN O'SHEA ARCHITECTS – SOSA – HAS ESTABLISHED A REPUTATION FOR INNOVATIVE AND HIGHLY CONSIDERED CONTEMPORARY BUILDINGS. THE AIM OF THE PRACTICE IS TO PRODUCE BESPOKE DESIGNS RESPONDING TO EACH SITE AND THE PARTICULAR NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF THE END USER.

WORDS Caroline Allen
PHOTOGRAPHY Marie-Louise Halpenny



STERRIN O'Shea | ARCHITECTS

Q What prompted your interest in architecture?

A. I had an uncle who was an architect, he lived in London and when he used to visit he brought exotic books and gifts. He was the only person I knew who had been to Japan. He fascinated me. I suppose it was always in me from an early age. I loved art and spent my entire transition year sculpting and making card models. I found my Leaving Cert biology book when clearing out my parents' attic this summer and was amused by the number and variation of apartment layouts scribbled all over it. I studied architecture at DIT Bolton Street and also Ecole d'Architecture de la Villette in Paris and qualified in 1996. I was very privileged to work with excellent design offices both in Dublin and in Sydney over the next ten years.

Q When did you set up on your own and why?

A. I set up SOSA in 2005 as I had just finished working on Colaiste Eoin & Iosagain and also an apartment building in Dalkey along with Grafton Architects. I felt I had gained a huge amount of invaluable site experience. Perhaps it was naivety but I thought I can do this on my own if I keep the scale small. I was very fortunate as Grafton Architects referred my first three clients.

Q Is your work focused mainly on residential or commercial projects?

A. At the moment it is focused on residential. There was a huge demand in this area when I set up in 2005 so I have been kept extremely busy. It is a scale which I enjoy as I get to detail every aspect of the building right down to even specifying the kitchen tap. I try to only take on a few commissions each year so that I can spend the necessary time at the early design and

tender stages resolving issues which might otherwise impact on the budget or program later when on site. I wouldn't like my work to be typecast, but I suppose I am fascinated by how people live, and how they adapt to spaces. It still amazes me to see how a building, in terms of light and design can impact on quality of life. Every project brings a new challenge so really it doesn't matter what the building type is once you have a trusting client with an open mind and an exciting site.

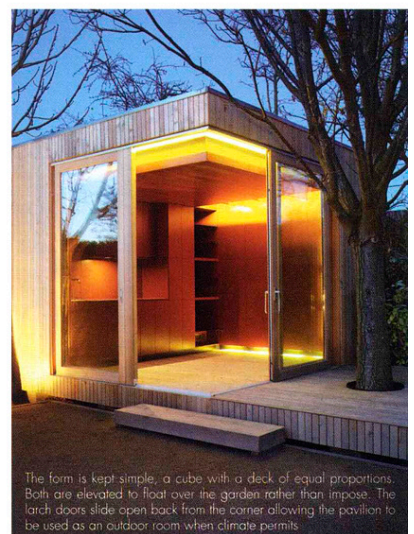
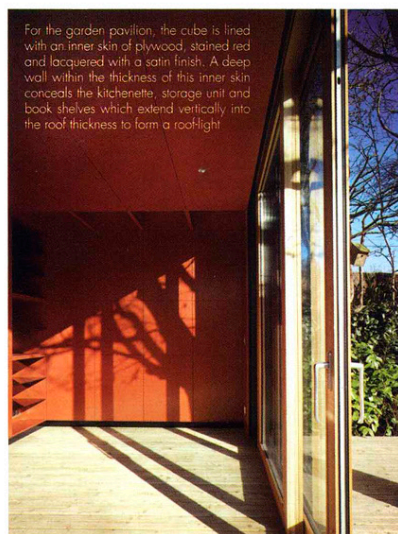
Q What are your favorite materials and why?

A. I don't have a favorite material although I seem to have worked a lot with timber lately. I would like to

think of my work as experimental and progressive; constantly researching new materials and exploring new technologies. At present I am detailing a house clad entirely in slate. It is important not to get fixated on aesthetics as every site is different, every client has different requirements – the 'one-fits-all' approach just doesn't work in this business.

Q Your first project was highly commended in the OPUS 2007 awards. What was that project and how important was it having it acknowledged in the awards?

A. My first solo built project was very small; a



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garden pavilion for clients who wanted to enjoy their garden and avail of the evening light as their main house faced east. Although it was a very small commission it was a way to explore ideas about light - both natural and artificial - and layering. It was commended in the RIAI 2007 awards and OPUS 2007, the latter was as much for the workmanship as for the design. An extension in Rathgar which included remodeling

an Edwardian house was selected for exhibition in this year's RIAI awards. The exposure through these awards has without doubt led to other commissions. It definitely generates awareness of your work which is critical in the current climate.

Q. What are your thoughts on the building process?
A. Building is an extremely laborious process

and it requires a lot of patience. You don't just design a building and visit it a year later when it is complete. You nurture that building, so it is hard sometimes when you are so close to appreciate all the effort that has gone in to it. I often resent the fact that it takes such a long time from that first site visit to the day when you hand the keys over to the client. Other designers have the advantage of having quicker turn around.



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Churchtown extension: side and rear extensions to existing house including attic conversion to allow for master bedroom suite



Q Your work seems to consider interiors as much as the main building fabric? Was that a conscious decision?

A. The interior or 'fit-out' is as much a part of the overall architecture as the 'shell' itself. I think it is crucial that the entire building, both inside and out, is fully considered at early design stage. I like to design kitchens and furniture specifically for the individual but also to keep the theme consistent. As people are currently interested in the idea of using large expanses of glass to allow maximum daylight and views, it is important to consider small things like how a blind or curtain might fit to make that space work in the evening. I try to design slots in the ceiling to conceal blinds and curtain rails and ensure they are considered early on and don't become an afterthought. The same applies to landscaping, after all your client is looking out on to these external spaces.

Although this is usually outside the main contract, I advise clients to get an expert on board early so that the landscape design evolves with the design of the overall building and the concept is kept uniform. A building only becomes a home when your client occupies it so it is important to identify with your client, their family including their belongings and to try and understand how they will use their building long after you are gone.

Q As an architect owner of a Georgian house, what are your thoughts on that whole area? Is there enough support from the authorities? What do you think of their general treatment when it comes renovations/extensions?

A. I must admit I was quite surprised at how open the planners were to the idea of a contemporary extension when in discussions regarding a recent application for a protected structure. They seem to

favour modern additions to contrast the existing rather than pastiche replicas, which is reassuring. Refurbishment can be difficult with protected structures because on one hand you are conscious to retain and preserve as much of the original fabric as possible whilst on the other hand you are trying desperately to bring the building up to modern day building regulation standards.

Q As a city dweller, what do you think of current developments in architecture in the capital?

A. I see the move towards higher densities and tall buildings such as Elm Park and the Docklands as positive. By increasing height in specific areas we can create more open space and these spaces can then connect essentially stitching communities together. Quality though is paramount, particularly in relation to how these buildings connect with the ground. We still have a very major problem with

Churchtown hallway Double height hallway with stepped bookcase forming balustrade to main stairs



Westfacing terrace kept flush with finished floor in kitchen/dining zone.



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Slate clad house in Co. Sligo with large picture windows offering views of Ben Bulbin and the Atlantic coast.



infrastructure. I know this is being addressed at present but it still amazes me that Dublin does not have an underground system.

Q What is your view on sustainable dwellings?

A. Sustainability has to be the key focus in all projects; as architects we have a duty to push this. We must be cognisant of this both when designing and specifying how our buildings are to be built and used. I recently completed two town houses in Monkstown with Catriona Cantwell. These were designed to retain heat thus minimize energy requirements using passive house standards. Both houses were built using carbon neutral materials and have heat exchange systems allowing for a healthier environment.

Q Who are your design heroes and why?

A. I am interested in the work of many architects, mostly European, particularly I would say those from Switzerland, Spain and Portugal. Design 'heroes' would have to be 'the masters' whose work we first studied in college - Le Corbusier, Aalto and Mies van der Rohe. I recently stayed in the Unite d'Habitation in Marseilles designed by Le Corbusier in 1945. This collective dwelling project represents a synthesis of all his previous housing studies, which were very forward thinking for the time. It incorporates a double height communal shopping street with a hotel in the middle together with a gym, running track, auditorium and crèche on the roof terrace. The fact that it is still occupied today also testifies to the validity of the original concept. He designed every element of the

building, right down to the letterboxes. Even my husband who is not an architect was intrigued by the folding timber door detail to our bedroom terrace installed 60 years and still operating gracefully.

Q Do you think the economic downturn will affect the quality of architecture in this country?

A. It is inevitable that it will affect the extent of building. Already we see social housing schemes on hold - quality less so perhaps. If anything it might have a positive affect in that by slowing down architects will have more time to explore ideas and investigate building techniques and materials, resulting in better buildings more robust and better able to stand the test of time. In a way things had to slow down we needed to take stock of what was happening in Ireland and to re-evaluate. We have lived in a developer-led culture for so long now and so much has been built both good and bad, particularly in the last ten years.

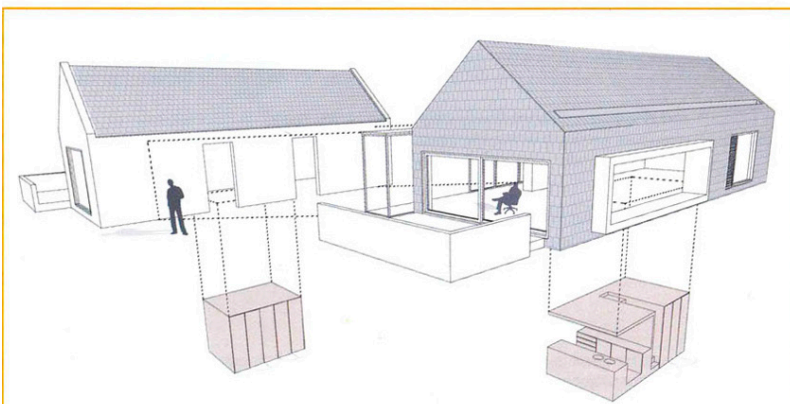
Q What's next for SOSA?

A. Building in the countryside, all going well. We have a house starting on site in Rosslare, Wexford and also houses in Sligo and Cork. In Dublin, we are working on tender documents for a large extension to a house in Monkstown and also a courtyard house in Foxrock, which was recently granted permission. Architecture is a collaborative process and I am very conscious that the success of the first three years has been a result of the combined efforts of my design team, consultants and builders. I have been lucky enough to work with people who care as much about building as I do. There's no kicking back in this industry; you constantly have to prove yourself. After all, you are only as good as your last job.

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Sligo house – two forms, one existing, one new, matching the exact profile of existing but slipped in plan to create sheltered courts.

Internally timber boxes house services such as bathrooms and kitchen.

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