



FRUIT OF AN ORCHARD

Department stores just don't do it for interior designer Louise Higgins; she preferred to furnish her house from the local shops of Co Kildare. And closer still to home, the plot on which it stands was once part of her father's fruit farm, writes **Mary O'Sullivan**. Photography by **Tony Gavin**

Clare-based interior designer Louise Higgins believes in shopping locally. When it came to furnishing her spacious detached home, the contents of the department stores of the big city were not for her. Instead, she sourced interesting pieces in shops around her home county of Kildare. Among the many pieces she bought in *Asíndel*, a Naas furniture shop, is her extendable dining room table.

Even when it came to buying antiques, which she loves, she found all she needed — including her spectacular Victorian bookcase — in *O'Reilly's of Prosperous*, just minutes from her home.

She shopped locally when it came to a partner too: her husband, Adrian, is almost the boy next door, hailing from *Abernwood*, a townland in the nearby *Bag of Allen*. And their home is only seconds from Louise's original family home. In fact, Louise, her parents and three sisters have a set-up reminiscent of great families, real and fictional. Like the Kennedys and the *Evings*. OK, it's not quite *Hyacinth Blue* or *Southfork* — there is no high wall surrounding their houses, for one thing — but they do all live next door to each other.

All their houses are on land that was once her father's fruit farm and, unlike some listings we could mention, the four

Higgins girls earned their sites through their labours.

"The fruit farm was extra to Dad's job in internal audit in the Department of Justice," says Louise. "He used to grow everything: strawberries, raspberries and blackberries, and we all had to do our share of picking. I never minded. I thought it was great fun," she recalls, adding that: "We knew from when we were children that we'd each have a site. We were blessed really, because sites around here are very expensive."

When it came to building her house, Louise had several other advantages. Adrian, whom she married in 2004, is a quantity surveyor specialising in energy ratings, and has myriad contacts in the building business. His expertise in energy also meant he knew the best kind of underfloor heating to install and the most energy-efficient ways to insulate the house. And, by the time they had finished building, Louise had qualified as an interior designer.

Her career up to then had been with the *HSE*, a career she had opted for after study in several different fields.

"I'm a devil really. I've done lots of courses and I've a good few qualifications," she laughs. She first completed an arts degree in *DCU*, then a post grad in computer science and, after that, a teacher's diploma in information



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technology. Computers became her speciality and she moved around the field, working as a technician and a call centre manager before moving into human resources.

However, she was always very creative at school and very good at art, and she decided to do some interior design courses in her spare time. The courses helped her through a particularly sad time in her life.

"Adrian and I had a baby girl, Laoibhse, and she only lived a short while," Louise recalls. "I was very upset, and it was really difficult being on maternity leave with no baby to look after. I threw myself into studying for my interior design qualification. It helped keep me sane, losing myself in something I'm so passionate about. I got Laoibhse's name going me along this career path."

Since then, Louise and Adrian have

had their darling baby, *Jarrie*, now 15 months, and Louise recently decided to take a career break to look after him. She is now a member of *The Interiors Association* and is also doing some interior design projects under her new company name, *Aspire Design*. Projects to date include some houses she and Adrian have bought and restored. "I'm also doing a renovation in *Kildare* and, at the other extreme, I'm doing a very minimalist house," she says.

And, of course, she did their own home, which they built two years ago. It's a detached house on nearly half an acre, with six bedrooms, four of them en suite. At 4,300sq ft, it's spacious, elegant and full of interesting elements. Local architect *Royal Fitzpatrick* designed the house with input from Louise. Features include the enormous fireplace, built from bricks salvaged from an old path in *Kiltealy*. It works on two sides, both in the kitchen/dining room and behind, in the double-height TV room, which is reached by steps down from the kitchen.

"Years ago, as a child, I used to watch the houses being built around here, and I remember seeing a big, open fireplace and thinking I'd like to have one like it," Louise recalls.

Another feature of the house is the secret bedroom. "I stayed in a castle in

Top left Louise is the dining end of her kitchen and sitting room. Not only does it contain the extendable dining table and chairs from *Asíndel* in nearby Naas, but also a snazzy, complete with another table and built-in benches

Above The spectacular TV room, with its open fireplace stretching right up to the rafters. The fireplace is made of brick salvaged from a path in *Kiltealy*. The gallery and all the other woodwork in the house was done by carpenter *Carrollan Honey*. The book-lined

gallery contains a secret door leading to the master bedroom

Top right The painted kitchen by Italian company *Alfieri* is traditional in style. The granite worktop has a twinkling-star quality to its finish

Middle right All of the six bedrooms are decorated in different colours

Right Louise had a false back wall built in her bedrooms, behind which she has created shelving for her 100-plus pairs of shoes

Scotland once and there was a beautiful library with a hidden door. You just pressed a panel and it opened into another room. We've created a similar panel in the bookshelves in the gallery above the TV room, and it opens into our bedroom," Louise explains.

Within the master bedroom itself is another interesting feature. Behind a false wall, Louise has had a shelving system built which is devoted entirely to her collection of more than 100 pairs of shoes.

But it's not just a house of tricks — certain elements are very traditional, such as the *Miraz* kitchen from Italy. This is made up of cream-painted wood-veneer with decorative carvings and a polished granite work surface. Called *Gakoy*, the granite has a natural sparkle. The floor is tiled in polished Italian marble. Features include a built-in coffee maker, a device on the island which enables sockets to be stowed out of sight when not in use, and an Aga.

As well as a dining table and chairs, the kitchen/dining room has a built-in, padded seat, which has seating upholstered in a soft lime green. Kitchen accessories, including the kettle and toaster, are the same colour — a sharp contrast to the cream creams. Green is a favourite colour of Louise's,



in fact, she's a fan of colour in general, and it's refreshing to see a house with so much. The living and reception rooms (as well as the kitchen/dining room and the TV room, there's a formal sitting room, a study and the gallery over the TV room) are decorated in classic shades of cream and chocolate brown. In the six bedrooms, Louise has given her love of colour full expression and has decorated each one in a different shade, including pink, red and gold and purple. The colours are echoed in the bedcovers and window treatments, which are all crossed with luxurious fibres — no mean feat, considering there are 38 windows in the house. The window fibres are all from *Prestigios Textiles*, and they can be ordered through Louise herself. Everything is beautifully finished, and Louise pays tribute to the curtain makers, *H&A Curtains*, and the excellent work *H&A* are in *Derrinstown*, in the *Bag of Allen*, while *Richard Finlay* is from *Blackwood*, Co Kildare. Louise's mum might as well be: "There's no place like home and no people like home people."

TEL: (085) 288-9026, or see www.aspiredesign.ie, or email Louise at aspiredesign@02.ie