

Interior design is a religion for Orla Collins, and she's sacrificed enough snakes to prove it. She tells Niall Toner of the first Irish home she has transformed

Should you hire Orla Collins to reinvent your home, be careful what you ask for. Recently, a client of her company, Purple Design, simply requested "a house that rocks". They got it. One of the rooms in their classic Arts and Crafts mansion in the English countryside now has a snakeskin floor, while the kitchen features a bronze eelskin banquet.

"It's great," says Collins, who comes from Rathgar but is based in London. "It is looking like something from Alice in Wonderland."

The budget is €4m (£4.9m) and the owners are pretty rock'n'roll, so that is the kind of house they wanted and that is the brief they gave us. Their business is a successful online gambling site and they are letting us have free rein.

"I am not interested in working for people who show me a book or a magazine and say, 'I want that.' My answer to them is, 'If that is what you want, then you don't need me. You can do it yourself.'"

Erskin and snakeskin are just some of the exotic materials the designer is fond of using. Semi-precious stones, such as turquoise and pyrite, are a favourite, too.

Collins doesn't do easy "television-style" makeovers, either. She is known for her disdain of such programmes as *Changing Rooms* and has even said that the reverts they should be banned because they give the impression that there are quick fixes.

She is of the opinion that, rather than spending a few quid on fabric, time and money should be spent on "defining the space", after which everything else will fall into place. Nor does she do cheap, but she does do exclusive.

"When I'm doing a job, I eat it, sleep it and breathe it 24 hours a day and I won't rest until it is done properly," she says.

But surely upmarket clients with buckets of money are hard to come by in the present climate. Collins, though, says she has yet to feel the clammy hand of the recession.

"The thing is, we don't do that high volume of jobs, partially because the ones we do tend to take a long time. We have lost one regular client because of the economic situation, but we know he will be back when things improve," she says.

She likes to get involved only in projects that are almost rebuilding. Digging down to increase ceiling height is something she has done in the past.

Bespoke furniture is an important part of the process and her trademark look, which she says is "in your face in a sophisticated way".

Her fondness for using animal skins and semi-precious stones wouldn't be everybody's cup of tea, which is just as well, given that most of us couldn't afford her services.

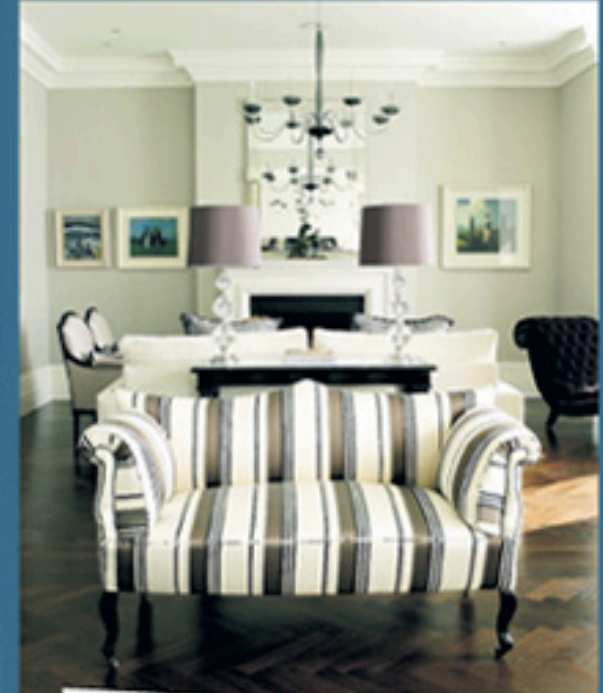
"It is the detail and attention to it that is of most concern to me," she says. "I am really interested in the 'fitty bits



Snake and eelskin are favourites for Collins, pictured in her flat in southwest London



A bedroom at the Irish house Collins revamped; right, the chocolate and cream living room



Traditional and modern mix in the dining room; right, a purple Chesterfield with a sea view



High priestess of taste

and I will spend a lot of time on them." Although her company tends to work only with clients in Britain, Collins has completed one project in Ireland, a Georgian-style house in Co Cork, which seems a world away from the stylish surrounds of Chelsea, in southwest London, or Arts and Crafts homes in the English countryside. But the period revamp illustrates the flamboyantly creative approach of the former fashion model.

"We originally perceived the project as a serious refurbishment," says Collins. "But after the initial sit-out, the state of the house was fully uncovered and the project turned into a

complete rebuild, apart from the external walls and roof."

The design concept was to regain the "prestige and elegance of the house", she says, and to create a more refined and stronger interpretation of the original interior.

The house was built in the 1840s and had not been touched since, so it was in terrible condition, according to the designer, who says that her aim was to bring the grandeur of the outside of the house to its interior.

"We wanted to provide richness with a high level and standard of detailing, and bold proportions to such elements as cornices, skirtings, architraves,

plinth blocks and panelling," she says. "Decoration was designed to complement the grandeur of the fabric of the building, as well as adding to the feeling of opulence and glamour."

Collins had most of the furnishings custom-made. These included silk hydrangeas cast in Perspex on a purple bedside table-desk, and a handmade four-poster bed in the master bedroom.

"I have a door fetish, so I designed the doors and had them made," she says. A grand piano in the living room was stripped and refinished in matt zinc, while its base pedals and hinges were removed and replated with nickel.

Collins moved to London in the early

1990s, where she worked with the renowned designer John Sothcott and various architects before setting out on her own in 2003.

In her first year in business, she won a Design and Decoration Award for Best New Designer in Practice for her renovation and contemporary styling of a listed apartment in Kensington, west London.

The practice is planning to launch its own range of furniture, called Diva, at Deconex, the interior trade show which takes place in September at the Royal Hospital, in Chelsea.

"It will be a range of sophisticated furniture and lighting using a lot of

exotic animal skins and semi-precious stones," she says. Prices will start from about £5,000.

"It is something I thought I would always do, though it is quite a big investment and a bit scary."

At the Cork house, meanwhile, Collins says she attempted to adapt the space for modern living by incorporating the latest technology, such as touch-panel lighting with individually programmed mood settings, as well as a music system wired to all the rooms, electrically controlled blinds and curtains and underfloor heating in all the rooms.

It's a three-storey house but the

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ground floor at the front is the first floor at the back. The ground floor has two linked reception rooms and a study, while the lower ground floor has a family room, kitchen, dining, living, utility room and a guest bedroom.

On the first floor there are three bedrooms. The three floors are linked by a custom-built staircase with a pewter finish. Bevelled mirrored panels extend from the first floor down to the lower ground floor, where three small rooms were combined to make the large family room and the floor was lowered to increase the ceiling height.

All the internal walls were replaced and all the floor and ceiling levels were

adjusted, as was the roof structure, so that the raking ceilings in the bedrooms could be removed.

At the lower-ground-floor level, a floating ceiling was built over the kitchen area to create a sense of separation and, elsewhere in the house, door heights were increased to add "further drama and elegance to the rooms", according to Collins.

The doors were veneered and lacquered and fitted with polished nickel-deco handles.

The look for the family room was a blend of the old and the new. Paneling, coricing, a fireplace and stone floors were used to "create a sense of enclosure

and more traditional space around the more modern kitchen area". Contemporary furniture provided the contrast.

Collins says that she would be keen to work in Ireland again if the right project came up, although she says the hours are exhausting.

"It would mean coming over once a week in the early stages and then more or less living there by the end. If I am coming to Ireland for a job, the day would start at 4am and end at about 2am, so I would have to factor that into the price."