



Love and other drugs

Richard Fagan didn't love the apartment he bought, so he rented it out. However, life took some difficult turns, which forced him to look at it afresh and make the most of what he had. His design expertise proved invaluable

Edited by **Mary O'Sullivan** | Photography by **Enda Kavanagh**

Entrepreneur Richard Fagan spends his days coming up with kitchen concepts for his design-conscious clients.

The majority live in either edgy, contemporary homes or in beautifully restored period houses, and their kitchen requirements are usually exacting, comprehensive and state of the art. Richard helps them to achieve their dream kitchens with his top German brand, bulthaup. "Fifty per cent of our clients live abroad, in Sweden, Manhattan, and South Africa. They are Irish, working abroad, but living here. They are very discerning people, usually with stunning art collections, and their homes are incredible," he says.

Richard himself, on the other hand, lives in a compact one-bedroomed apartment and is utterly content with that.

There are several reasons. For one thing, he has done a fantastic job with the apartment, making it the perfect bachelor pad, combining functionality with a pared-back aesthetic. He changed the orientation of the living spaces, making sure they all get as much light and sun as possible. He's furnished it with pieces by designers he admires — his Carl Hansen

chairs are a typical example — and on the walls are pieces by his favourite Irish artists, including Maser. And, of course, he gave himself a bulthaup kitchen.

A second reason he's content is because Richard is also a glass-half-full kind of guy. He makes the best of every situation. Life has taught him to be like that.

Originally from Skerries, North Co Dublin, Richard is one of four siblings. His dad was in construction and Richard himself studied engineering at Bolton Street. On graduation, he had no idea what he'd like to do, but found himself working with a friend of the family. This led to a job in the furniture business, and he quickly realised he loved it. Pretty soon, he had a little black book stuffed full of important contacts.

However, he began to feel keenly the fact that he had gone straight to work after college and had never done the gap-year thing so, in 2012, after 10 years in furniture retail, he decided to take a break and go travelling.

Tragically, fate dealt his close-knit family a terrible blow when his beautiful sister got sick. "When my sister Caroline was a child, at aged nine, she had a rare form of thyroid cancer, which fortunately



"I became her medical advocate," Richard explains haltingly. "If the shoe was on the other foot, she'd have done the same for me"

remained in remission. She grew up, got married to her childhood sweetheart and had two beautiful babies, Clare and Katie. Then, in 2012, when Caroline was 30, Mum and I started to notice a change in Caroline. Her cancer had come back, but in a more aggressive form, so any ideas of travel I had, I put on hold. I literally downed tools, and focused just on Caroline. I became her medical advocate," Richard explains haltingly. "If the shoe was on the other foot, she'd have done the same for me."

According to Richard, they were lucky enough to have an amazing medical team in Ireland, but the cancer was so rare they decided to investigate the American scene,

and that's when it got particularly tricky. "It was all hands on deck finding new treatments, new drugs," he says. "We were reading all these medical papers online, trying to put that information to practical use. There was nothing happening here in Europe, but we found out there were clinical trials in two hospitals in America, and after many months, we were able to get Caroline into those hospitals. Also, with her consultant in Ireland, we were able to get him to bring treatments into Ireland that weren't already available. So she was starting on drugs that were the first of their kind here."

Richard is clearly devoted to his parents and siblings — he also has two brothers



TOP LEFT: The newly decorated bathroom in Richard Fagan's apartment. Richard opted for a sleek black decor. He took out the bath and put in a generous shower unit, and he also added a laundry room — vital for rugby-playing Richard, who plays for the Emerald Warriors

ABOVE: Richard in his kitchen/dining/living room. The HDF kitchen units edged in aluminium are by bulthaup, while the dining chairs are by Danish designer Carl Hansen

TOP RIGHT: Richard befriended Irish DJ Annie Mac in 2005, and he has framed the posters of her many raves which he attended. The #Rave Safe sign, made in Germany, is a homage to her

RIGHT: Richard has made the most of the balcony by lining it with artificial grass, adding potted plants and painting the walls a Provencal shade of terracotta

— and he says they pulled out all the stops for Caroline, as did their huge support network, whom he can't praise enough for their dedication. "We knew no regular drugs were going to work, so that's why we focused on clinical trials. We set up a Caring For Caroline Medical Trust, and all our family, friends and our local town, Skerries, got on board. We were able to buy this new drug for Caroline," Richard says, adding sadly, "We were just buying time for her."

Richard devoted two years to being Caroline's medical advocate — a crazy, emotional, roller coaster of a time, with Caroline often travelling to the States, sometimes even with her two little girls, making sure herself that she got as much quality time with them as possible. Then in 2014, when she was still alive, Richard's parents persuaded him that he needed to go back to work for his own sake.

As it happened, a company he'd been



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working with before contacted him and asked him to work with them in Ireland. "That's how bulthaup arrived to me, and how I opened my business, Realm in Grand Canal Dock," Richard says. "It was important that, before she passed, Caroline saw I was getting my life back. We opened in April 2014, and she passed in September. She organised the opening; it was great she got to see that."

Richard is thrilled that his sister got to see the business up and running, yet he still wonders how he got through those early days. But again, his support network rallied round. "That really helped in a very dark time, trying to get the business up and running, trying to make sure the family, though grieving, were OK, and we were all very cognisant of how her young girls were going to get through," he says.

At the same time, Richard and his colleague — 'work wife', as he calls her — Michelle Dunne did extensive training



MY FAVOURITE ROOM

GET THE LOOK

Clean Living

This understated style makes the most of the space available, adding a touch of luxury with opulent furnishings



Dining table
€1,210, Inreda



Carl Hansen chair,
€625, Realm



Prandina lamp
€455, Realm



Jug
€75, arranstreeteast.ie



Alessi kettle
€140, Brown Thomas



with bulthaup to understand their thought processes. Richard is now in year three of his business, and it's going well.

"It's not for everyone; only a certain type of customer gets bulthaup. Bulthaup products are not Celtic Tiger products," he says. "They are one of the top five luxury kitchen brands, but they're not brash, they're very understated. Bulthaup units are very highly engineered, very highly designed; functionality is very important to bulthaup. The design makes the space work harder. And you have to buy into it completely. People often try to buy one item like a tap, but you can't. The units become collectors' items. It's been proven that a bulthaup kitchen adds value to a house," Richard says persuasively.

He's worked so well with bulthaup that another high-end company with a similar ethos, Italian bathroom company Agape, approached Richard to represent them. He's also added lighting and a walk-in-wardrobe brand to his portfolio.

Richard's experience with these high-end companies was obviously a great help to him when he decided to redesign his apartment.

He'd bought the apartment in 2005 and lived in it briefly. At the time of buying, he thought it was ideal, but when living in it, he found it fell short of expectations. "The orientation was completely wrong, the placement of the kitchen was wrong, we had all these poky storerooms, and

"I had my back to guests while cooking. I couldn't open the fridge and the dishwasher at the same time, so I moved walls"

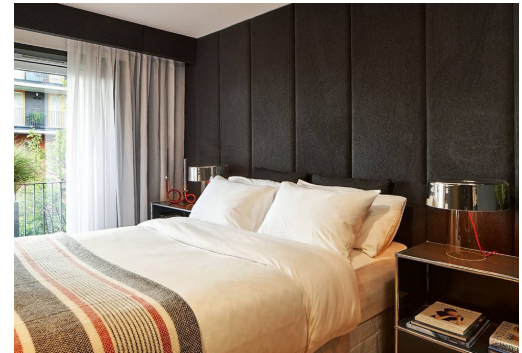
it was very cramped," he says.

He rented it out for a few years, but when he decided to move back in, he wanted to get it right before doing so. "I love to entertain and it just wasn't comfortable," he says. "I had my back to guests while cooking, and I couldn't open the fridge and the dishwasher at the same time, so I moved a lot of walls, changed the kitchen. Getting the apartment to work for me was paramount."

Michelle helped Richard with the design and, while creating a good working space was important, the overall feel is attractive and striking, with strong colours and interesting paintings, such as those of Lola Donoghue. It's a fun, hard-working space, yet luxurious, almost like a hotel suite. Richard also likes to promote Irish craft and particularly likes the work of the makers in Arran Street East.

And, of course, there are lots of photos of Caroline. ■

See realm.ie
See bulthaup-hanoverquay.ie



MAIN: Richard on his sofa, which was originally black leather, but he had it reupholstered. The painting above the sofa is by Lola Donoghue, and the flooring is engineered oak

ABOVE: The bedroom is furnished in restful tones of grey. Richard struggles with sleep, so he had the ingenious idea of commissioning a headboard in padded fabric, which covers a whole wall and creates a peaceful ambience. "The person who made it also does acoustic rooms for sound studios," Richard notes