

Flavio Lombardo fell in love with this 1930s house long before buying it, then spent a year reviving it, writes Siobhán Maguire

Extended wait was worth it

Flavio Lombardo had never set foot inside No 39 Bath Avenue, a three-bedroom terraced house in Dublin 4, when he started to sketch an alternative layout. The Italian-born architect was fascinated by the period home when it came on the market in late 2007. But there was a problem. At €1.1m, the Sandymount property was far too expensive. Even a reduction the following September to €860,000 was way over his budget. Nevertheless, he continued with his drawings.

"There was something about the house and its location so close to those iconic chimneys in Ringsend and the coast," says Lombardo, who moved to Ireland from Turin 10 years ago.

"As soon as I saw the house advertised on the internet, I watched it for a year and even put in an offer much less than the asking price, but it was refused. From the moment I saw the brochure online, I started sketching. It wasn't even about if we would get it or not, it was about how I could realise changes for the house without taking from its period charms."

In April last year, however, the price of No 39 dropped to €575,000. For Lombardo and Carol McNelis, his Co Donegal-born wife, it was an opportunity to negotiate once more. They made an offer of €490,000 in May 2009. To their surprise, the bid was accepted and, one week before their wedding in Italy, they secured the keys.

"After studying the market for so long and watching this house sit with the most ridiculous asking prices, I never allowed myself to get into the mentality of 'I'll buy that one day'. In the end, waiting turned out to be an advantage and we secured the house for half its original asking price," he says.

But the honeymoon period was short-lived. After their wedding, Lombardo and McNelis realised the house was not ready to be a home for them and their two-year-old daughter, Isabella. There was no alternative but to stay in their rented accommodation in Portobello while Lombardo got to grips with the project ahead — what would turn out to be a contemporary and light-filled extension with an inner courtyard, landscaped garden and new bathroom.

Already working as a senior project architect on the Aviva stadium at Lansdowne Road, Lombardo found himself devoting early mornings and lunch hours to fixing up his new home.

"I wanted to do as much of the Bath Avenue project as I could," says Lombardo. "I would leave my rented apartment at the crack of dawn with my hard hat and boots and cycle to the house, where I would discuss the day's work with the builders. Then I would set off to the stadium, which is behind the house, and get working on its plans. I would be over and back between the two projects during the week and spend my weekends in the house demolishing rooms and digging out the garden. It was



Lombardo and McNelis bought the Dublin 4 house for €490,000; inset right, before the extension

always great to see the progress of each building from the vista of the other."

It took Lombardo, who is now setting up his own practice, 11 months to complete the extension and to refurbish the original house. Construction started on the extension last November and it was completed in March. Remarkably, the finished product stayed true to some

of the sketches he made long before he viewed the house. The rear of the original 1930s house — an old extension with a dining room, kitchen and bathroom — was demolished to make way for an open-plan room where the family could cook, eat and relax. Lombardo hated the original extension because the small WC was right beside the kitchen area.



"I WAS LUCKY — AS AN ARCHITECT, I DID NOT NEED TO HIRE ONE — BUT THERE ARE WAYS TO SAVE MONEY ON THESE PROJECTS"

His design moves the bathroom to above the kitchen. The living room, which was upstairs, was converted back into a bedroom. The project cost about €84,600 in total. Not bad for an extra 505sq ft of living space. The house as a whole measures 1,442 sq ft.

He says: "The design principle was to maximise the daylight, to use standard construction methods to minimise cost, to use a contemporary design distinguishing the old from the new, and to create a multifunctional family room where we could all stay together. Each of us could still be doing different things: cooking, eating, reading, using the computer and playing. This also extended outside with flooring into the patio."

"For the outside of the extension a white Monocouche [render] was applied

and white full-width timber-glazed window/doors were chosen. Brown granite stones for the patio area created a clean bright monochrome look."

Given that the extension is about 10m long, it was important to bring some light into the open-plan space. Lombardo did this by creating an inner courtyard, which separates the extension from the back wall of the main house and allows natural light to flood into the new room from both ends.

"Most extensions protrude from the main fabric of the building. In this case the inner courtyard is an optimal solution, creating a well of light that allows you to have doors and windows to its sides," he says.

Given the amount they paid for the house, Lombardo and McNelis were determined to keep the project on budget. To do this, they undertook much of the work themselves, tearing old timber joints off walls and pulling up old floors. Original features including fireplaces and cornicing were restored.



Isabella in the 10m long extension; left, the new bathroom



Lombardo's day job was as senior architect on the Aviva stadium

Flavio's tips for homeowners

- Do as much as you can yourself, from stripping wallpaper to painting, sanding floors, gardening and filling skips
- Save money by subcontracting jobs rather than hiring someone to delegate tasks
- You should wait to buy the house at the right time
- There is no need to have everything straightaway, especially when it comes to furnishings. You can do it bit by bit at a later stage, or when you can afford the right piece

"We were filling skips with carpets and wallpapers that had been in the house for over 30 years. The house had been used for rental accommodation for a long time, so we had to deal with issues that had been allowed to linger, like damp around the old, small windows and on walls and the bathroom. There was no way we could move a small child into a house in that state."

Lombardo admits that building an extension can be a fairly hectic and time-consuming job. But for the thousands of homeowners who cannot trade up or sell in the current market, revising or rebuilding an existing space can transform your home.

"I was lucky because, being an architect, I did not need to hire one. Also, I was able to project-manage as well as do all sorts of manual jobs," he says.

The family moved into their newly renovated home at Easter, but the couple are not rushing the furnishing. "We decided to use a neutral colour

scheme for the extension, painting all the walls in white with the exception of some grey in the bookshelf, which holds the TV and a computer workstation. The colour in the room comes from the books, the paintings, the green Smeg fridge, the orange carpet and an antique brown armchair."

Everything in the room is bespoke; the bookshelf and all the windows and doors are meticulously detailed. The kitchen was made in Tullamore, Co Offaly. Underfloor heating was chosen to rule out the need for radiators and Italian Catalano sanitaryware and Gessi taps were fitted in the bathroom.

"The layout I had in mind in those first drawings was not to complicate things. It's a family centre which brings us together rather than have everyone in different rooms."

The project was "a long year's journey" but Lombardo says: "I hope this will encourage people that, even in a recession, you can work hard with a small budget and make a wonderful home."

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