

Mark Leslie Helyar



SPLIT BET
The quirky bookends will add a touch of luxury to any room P12

Well-rounded idea

Serpentine lines in a spectacular glass extension in the heart of Rathmines pay homage to a vase created by Alvar Aalto, one of Finland's greatest designers, writes **Dara Flynn**

Some of the world's best-known architecture has either been inspired by an everyday object or given a nickname in honour of one. In this decade alone, the urban landscape of London has seen the sprouting of a Gherkin, a Razor and even a

Cheesegrater. While the architects behind these buildings may or may not have been inspired by these prosaic items, closer to home in Rathmines, Dublin 6, a project on a far more private scale – the design for rear extension by the architectural firm Lawrence and Long – was based on a flower vase.

While there isn't a bloom in sight, from a certain angle the glass addition to the rear of this protected Victorian home is a dead ringer for Finnish designer Alvar Aalto's celebrated Savoy vase.

The rear of the period semi-detached home was originally destined to sport the classic glass box that characterises the majority of extensions, but the clients were anything but square.

"Initially, we presented an orthogonal [right-angled] design, but the client's wife strongly disagreed and asked that we make it more 'serpentine' and fluid – she didn't like the straight angles."

"We took it on board," says Joe Lawrence, who designed the project with his practice partner, Pierre Long, and their team. However, you don't just do curves for the sake of curves.

"Rather than a couple of willy-nilly curves, we applied a geometry. You must commit to it," says Lawrence.

Commit they did. The main rear wall of

the new addition is made from bespoke floor-to-ceiling glass panels, produced in a curved design, for a form loosely based on a pair of adjoining circles. As a result, it appears fluid and animated, like an organic form spilling outwards from the confines of a formal Victorian house. It's entirely unlike the vast majority of domestic extensions being drawn in Irish and international architectural firms.

Making waves
The fluid design of the extension softens the corners of the traditional Victorian house; below, Alvar Aalto's Savoy vase



When designing the Rathmines project, a familiar shape began to emerge from the blueprints. Soon, the architects had affectionately dubbed the project "Savoy", a reference to its striking similarity to Aalto's classic glass vase, which was designed in 1937 for the luxury Savoy restaurant in Helsinki. The resemblance is most obvious from the exterior terrace: viewing it from a certain angle is like peering through a gigantic example of that iconic piece of Finnish glassware.

I am influenced quite a bit by Scandinavian design, and Aalto in particular. There's a nod to the Savoy here, without question," says Lawrence.

All of this was achieved with no small effort. Although a curvy form is pleasingly simple in appearance, it's difficult to execute. It calls for

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→ more precision than a glazed box and, as a result, it's a lot more expensive. It looks simple but it's highly complex. In fact, it's easier to do straight lines. It has been constructed to appear as though the glass is supporting the roof, which of course it most certainly isn't," he says.

The curved glass panels were custom-made in Britain, and no two are alike. The roof is supported by a steel orthogonal structure, with a second steel frame installed in front of this, which has a curved finish.

It isn't just the shape of the so-called Savoy extension that created a challenge for its architects. The home in question, which is in the heart of an area teeming with examples of fine architectural heritage, is also a protected structure.

The client's wife had some medical issues that meant it was important for her to be able to get around easily, with an uninterrupted layout

Although this poses challenges for an architect, Lawrence was happy to comply. "I'm very much a supporter of the recent legislation that promotes the proper provision of protected structures on record. They're being treated more carefully and that's good, since we have to protect our heritage. So many of our buildings in the past weren't treated so respectfully," says Lawrence.

A protected structure is one that the planning authority considers to be of special interest from an architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical point of view.

It is noted in the Record of Protected Structures and it may be a building or part of a building. If you own a protected

structure, it's your responsibility to make sure it's not endangered by accidental damage, neglect, the elements or decay. If an owner doesn't do this, the local authority has the right to buy it from under your feet.

When it comes to updating a protected structure, it's important to consult a conservation officer, and it is helpful to ask for a Section 57 declaration, which tells you the type of works that will not be seen to affect the building's character and which you can do without permission. As a rule, structural changes

such as those undertaken at the Savoy project need permission. Here, a flat-roofed single-storey addition was removed in order to make room for the new extension, which has a slightly larger footed base than the original.

"The existing single-storey extension didn't relate to the house or to the garden," says Lawrence. "Any improvement on that was always going to be a positive. We retained an internal chimney wall in the rear room created by the extension, rather than do the easier thing and just remove it. We made two openings either side of the chimney, which was allowable."

Inside, a new kitchen by Arena was fitted towards the centre of the plan and a reading room was created at the client's request. All the floors are on the same level and there's a play on scale – door openings are taller and wider than average. "The client's wife had some medical issues that meant it was important for her to be able to get around easily, with an uninterrupted layout and wider openings," he says.

The reading room to the side is lined in oak, with a bespoke bench tailored to correspond to the dimensions of a rooflight above it, so that its slitter is illuminated by a perfectly rectangular pool of natural daylight. "The old extension had made this southwest-facing room feel dark, so the combination of rooflights and glass curves do the opposite. This is not a huge space – only two people live here – but it feels bright and open."

The flooring is a beautiful American oak herringbone parquet and its pattern changes at the border where the house's

Simple yet stylish
Beautiful parquet flooring takes pride of place in the bright extension, below left, clever uplighters are concealed in the columns

original back wall once stood. "We think of that as a little memory, where the old ends and the new begins," says Lawrence. Another "memory" of the house's heritage is a rescued rear sash window. "Rather than throw it in a skip, we repositioned it to the front of the house at the entrance hallway," he says.

The roof is made of zinc towards the garden and sedum, a living carpet of fleshy plants and grass, closer to the house, while the exterior of the reading

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room is brick with some lime render. The heating system is as unusual as the extension itself. Lawrence and his team opted for subtle trench heaters, small curved radiators that follow the shape of the glass panels at the perimeter, sunk in the floor.

Rather than top the heaters with a metal grille, the architects fashioned oak grilles to match the floors. There is no visible ceiling lighting: the main space is lit by lamps, and clever uplighters were concealed in the structural columns.

"We wanted it to be as abstract as possible. If you load lights into a ceiling, you're immediately giving away the



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scale," Lawrence says. Part of the beauty of glass is that it allows a house to connect with the garden with ease. "We've blurred the inside and out. Both by day and at night, the garden feels a part of the house and the new rooms," says Lawrence.

To reflect the materials used by the house's 19th-century builders – classic red brick with granite on the boundary wall – the terrace is lined in Irish granite with intermittent lines of red bricks.

Open spaces
Ceiling-to-floor glass walls offer wonderful views of the garden

Curved glass has a unique relationship with light, too. "It distorts it somewhat and it feels fluid. This isn't a room with sharp corners or heavy masonry. An old lady walked by one day and stopped and just stood there. I thought she was about to say, 'That's disgusting', but she didn't. She used the phrase 'absolutely beautiful'. It was such a nice thing to hear. Human beings really respond well to curves."

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