



# AVIVA ITALIA

Architect Flavio Lombardo fell in love with Dublin and a girl from Donegal, says **Mary O’Sullivan**, but despite a passion for soccer, both his career and home were built beside Irish rugby’s new stadium. Photography by **Tony Gavin**

Think the looks of footballer Francesco Totti and the delicious accent of Gianluca Vialli and you get a flavour of their compatriot, Dublin-based architect Flavio Lombardo. Like all Italians, he’s a fan of soccer, yet he actually ended up as a project architect on that great new icon of rugby — the Aviva Stadium. He’s even ended up living on Bath Avenue, Dublin 4, a stone’s throw from the stadium, with superb views of the bedpan-shaped building from the house’s upper storey. Flavio doesn’t just work on big jobs; in fact he’s recently gone out on his own and is currently working on five projects of different sizes and budgets. So he is an ideal architect to consult on the weekend of May 7-8 at the fantastic Simon Open Door initiative, which has taken place every year since 2005.

As anyone who has participated in the Simon event will know, you just sign up and, in return for a €50 donation, you’ll receive an hour-long consultation with a certified RIAI architect on a range of issues relating to the home. The nice thing is that architects such as Flavio give their time and expertise completely free, and every single cent collected goes to the Simon Communities.

Flavio has also recently completely renovated the artisan dwelling he and his wife, Carol McNelis, from Glenties,

Donegal, bought in 2009. He has brought to it the same extraordinary attention to detail he brings to all his projects, but then he’s been watching a master craftsman at work ever since he was a child in northern Italy in the beautiful town of Costigliole Saluzzo, which he says has two castles, a hill, a river and 1,000 people. “My dad was a window maker, a joiner, he worked with timber,” he recalls, adding: “I used to go to the building site during the summer, so I was always linked to the construction sector.”

The seed to study architecture was sown at an early age, and he has his dad to thank for that too. “I used to hear my dad complain about architects,” Flavio says with a laugh. “Well, not complain,” he explains, “he was always talking about them as if they were big persons. I suppose, psychologically, subconsciously, it made me think about becoming one.”

The summer work convinced him that he’d enjoy the profession and after finishing school he studied in Turin, then worked in a practice in northern Italy and also taught architecture there. It was a combination of his love of travel and his desire to learn English that brought him to Ireland. “I’m a very good traveller. I love to travel and I felt it was a handicap not being able to speak English. I didn’t want to regret it later in life, so in 2001 I came here to learn English for six months. Now it’s 11 years



**‘Dublin is a really easy city to live in. You have the sea, the mountains, parks, the rain. What more could you want?’**

that I’m here,” he says with a laugh, adding: “Dublin is a really easy city to live in. It’s big but there’s still a feeling of living in a small place. It’s not like a big metropolis where everyone is alone. You have the sea, the mountains, parks, the rain. What more could you want?”

After three months he got a job in architecture firm Patrick Rooney Associates. Then, in 2003, he moved to Scott Tallon Walker, where he worked for seven years. During that time he continued his studies and did the Aviva work. He also met Carol. “We were flatmates in Portobello,” he says, rolling the ‘r’ to make Portobello sound like a place for romantic trysts rather than the more prosaic Dublin-city neighbourhood it actually is. Carol is more forthcoming about the details, “Don’t say we met on the internet,” she says with a laugh. “That’s our joke. It was Daft.ie. Flavio

was renting a two-bedroom apartment and sub-letting a room. On the ad, he claimed he was looking for someone who enjoyed socialising around dinner. I went to see the apartment but I was in a hurry — I was going to see an Italian movie and he said he’d contact me the next day. I bumped into him with his bike the next day along the canal, so we felt that was fate. Shortly after I moved in, and four girls helped me, and he made a typical Italian dinner with loads of wine for us, and he still does,” Carol says fondly, adding that another omen was the fact that her first holiday abroad was a school ski trip to a place 40 miles from Flavio’s home town of Costigliole Saluzzo. The couple got married there, and they go back regularly to eat delicious meals under Flavio’s family’s magnolia tree.

Delicious meals are a key component of their marriage. “Flavio can open an empty cupboard and yet make a three-course dinner [of the contents],” says Carol. So, as one would expect, the kitchen is an important part of their home and it was the first thing Flavio designed when they bought it.

The house dates from the early 20th Century and had a bad extension comprising a kitchen with a bathroom

**Left** The exterior of the extension with its sun-trap patio. The pink and white ripple chairs are from Minima² in Hanover Quay, D2

**Above** Architect Flavio Lombardo in the kitchen area of the open-plan extension of his terraced house in Dublin 4. The Smeg fridge adds a burst of colour, as do his three-year-old’s drawings. The glass doors lead to a courtyard

**Top right** The living area with the dining area and courtyard beyond. White walls are

**teamed with grey porcelain tiles, while colour is added in the form of accessories. The painting of the gramophone was bought during Flavio’s days in Italy**

**Middle right** The lime wall adds a splash of colour to the bathroom. Flavio imported the sanitary ware by Catalano from Italy

**Bottom right** The Diesel/ Foscarini floor lamp and the Moroso chair, both from Minima², and a part of the bookshelves which run the length of the living room

directly off it. “It was damp, the ceilings were low, there was no light and no connection to the garden,” Flavio notes. He quickly demolished the old extension and designed and built a new, two-storey extension. Everything is bespoke and everything is meticulously detailed. Flavio points out how everything lines up and balances out, even things the naked eye would never notice. “That way you get harmony — everything is lined up, nothing is casual. If it wasn’t, you wouldn’t see it, but you’d know something was wrong,” he explains.

The design principle was to maximise the daylight inside and out, to create a multifunctional space with separate dining, living and cooking areas. Flavio made features of the courtyard — accessed through double doors from the kitchen area — and the patio and garden, which are off the living area. The courtyard creates a well of light in the middle of the house, brightening not only the new area but also the downstairs back room, which is a guest bedroom. The front room is currently Flavio’s office, while upstairs comprises a new bathroom, the bedroom of their three-year-old, Isabella, and the master bedroom. The hall and landing are full of light, enhanced by a



porthole-style window on the landing.

Flavio painted all the walls white and put new, extra-wide, extra-long, smoked oak boards throughout the older part of the house, while the extension is floored in dark-grey porcelain tiles. The glass is all triple-glazed and the house is so well insulated that in winter they only use the central heating for one hour a day.

Despite the predominance of white, it’s not a bland space. To echo the grey of the floor, Flavio added features such as grey-painted niches for the TV and work station. But he loves splashes of bright colour too: the bathroom, furnished with white sanitary ware by Catalano, has one wall painted lime, while the lime Smeg fridge is a feature of the kitchen. Books, paintings and furniture from Minima² add liveliness to the colour scheme.

It’s all very chic, very contemporary, very Italian, but there is one area that Flavio has no control over: Isabella’s room is pink, like that of girls’ rooms the world over. But that’s OK with Flavio; what’s important is that it’s right for the family. “I love Italy but this is home,” he says simply, adding: “Sometimes we forget how lucky we are.” ■

See [www.simonopendoor.ie](http://www.simonopendoor.ie) and [www.flaviolombardo.com](http://www.flaviolombardo.com)