

## MOVE

# There's a ring of Kerry about the place

An upbringing in the Kingdom has informed the work of architect Achim Gottstein, who is taking part in the latest Simon Open Door event, writes Barbara Egan

**H**iring an architect to transform your home will increase its value and may not be as expensive as you think. That's the belief of Achim Gottstein, of Gottstein Architects, and the idea that is being promoted by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland at this year's RIAI Simon Open Door event, which takes place from Saturday until Friday, May 19 (see panel, right).

"There is a perception that getting an architect makes the process more expensive, which isn't necessarily the case," says Gottstein. "It will offset the life-cycle cost, there's value added on resale and it will help to appreciate an asset."

He adds that in Ireland there is a "lack of awareness" of what an architect can do for you, particularly in areas outside Dublin. "Nationally, it never ceases to amaze me how many people are going at it alone without an architect."

"Many don't understand the service on offer, and the fact that the architect doesn't just develop a design and planning application drawings. The service is

far more encompassing than that, and includes brief writing, site appraisal, brief development, design through to construction, through to project managing and interior design."

Gottstein's own design process and finished buildings are shaped by the unearthly beauty of his native Co Kerry – he was born and raised in Killarney – along with his German ancestry, not to mention his training at Dublin Institute of Technology, Bolton Street, and Aachen University in Germany, where he learnt the importance of the three-dimensional approach.

These influences are apparent in one of his Dublin-based firm's latest residential projects, designing an extension for a Victorian home in Rathgar. "The clients consulted us on the purchase of their new home, and we looked specifically at orientation, aspect, garden and borrowed landscape," says Gottstein.

"We felt the orientation of this house had some challenges, but the garden and landscape were big selling points for the clients. The brief was to restore the period quality of the house and design a new family space which was not just a

large open-plan area." The clients wanted designated zones for family activities, which were "separate but comfortably co-existing".

Gottstein also had to address the house's orientation: the back faced northeast and was partially overshadowed by the main house. "To conserve the character of the rear reception room and bring light into the new extension, we decided to create an external room, a courtyard which brought sun and daylight into the building," he says.

"This allowed the front study and the rear kitchen/dining area to be linked visually, and the children can play there while in sight of both those areas."

Gottstein also added a large roof light in the dining area, which brings a wash of brightness down a warm, textured brick wall. He also wanted to preserve the integrity of the protected structure: "The addition is defined as a ribbon of grey limestone, running from front to back, so that is very clear what is original and what is new."

The extension is also roofed with limestone flags, while the boundary wall is defined in contrasting warm heritage

brick on a limestone plinth. All the structural elements are clearly expressed in the building, including the deep concrete beams that carry the flat roof.

Internally, some clever design elements have been added. The limestone plinth runs through the glazed wall to the courtyard, becoming a bench with toy storage beneath, and runs upwards to define the back wall of brick.

The limestone is echoed in the kitchen splashback, which is a bank of shallow storage for herbs and spices with limestone doors. The narrower space joining the hall to the family area has flat grey panels to one side that open to reveal a television unit. On the opposite side is a window seat to the courtyard with storage under, finished in warm teak – a perfect spot for children to watch television while the parents are in the kitchen.

"I think that the courtyard is the most successful element in the project," says Gottstein. "It's my favourite space. I like the way it engages both the original Victorian building and the contemporary additions."

He developed an early interest in construction thanks to his German

building contractor father. He left the Kingdom at the age of 17 to study architecture at Bolton Street, spending an interim year in his parents' home country of Germany. "I was fascinated from an early age by the progression of shaping and making buildings from drawn ideas to actuality," says Gottstein.

"I particularly enjoyed working with timber, cabinetry and joinery and kept that interest as a hobby, although that was BC [before children]."

He has two daughters: Lotte, aged 5, and Lucia, 3.

Studying at Bolton Street gave Gottstein an excellent grounding in design, "but the greater rigour in design process that I experienced in Aachen University has had a lasting influence on my work, too," he says.

The approach at the German university was three-dimensional and craft-based, he says. As a result he uses 3D models in his practice. "We find clients relate more easily to them than drawing or digital representation," he says.

After graduating in the late 1990s, Gottstein spent five years with the Dublin practice Donnelly Turpin. In 2003, an unexpected opportunity came knocking. "Having grown up in a family business, it was always in the back of my mind to have my own practice, and when I was offered a project developing a dockland site in Limerick, I made the decision to go for it," he says.

Although the development was never built, it prompted him to set up Gottstein Architects. In 2005, the firm beat stiff competition to win the contract for the €70m redevelopment of the Europe Hotel and Resort in Killarney. "The brief was the development of a 4,000 sq m spa building adjacent to the existing structure, in a landscape with sweeping views of Lough Leane and the McGillycuddy Reeks," says Gottstein.

"We decided to carve the structure out of the landscape and use grass-roofed rough-hewn black limestone forms with frameless glazing, to relate the building to the environs, blurring the boundaries between built form and landscape."

The project put the practice on the map and Gottstein Architects now

## OPEN DOOR POLICY

Gottstein Architects is taking part in next week's annual RIAI Simon Open Door campaign, which will see architects across the country offer one-hour consultations for a donation of €90. Proceeds go to Simon Communities of Ireland, which provides care, accommodation and support for homeless people. Since the campaign started in 2004, more than €600,000 has been raised.

Gottstein has participated in the event since 2010. "It is mutually beneficial, in terms of making the public aware of the profession and what we do, and raising funds for a worthy cause."

Typically, people attend their first consultation with mixed levels of preparedness, says Gottstein. "Some will have photos of the house or, if they've recently purchased a property, they will have the estate agent's brochure. We tend to do a bit of preparation before they arrive."

Online registration forms give people the opportunity to describe their project. "The more people fill in when they register, the more helpful it is, and the more people bring with them, the more they get from it," adds Gottstein.

"This event points people in the right direction, it lays out options for them and provokes thought."

RIA Simon Open Door takes place from Saturday until Friday, May 19. [simonopendoor.ie](http://simonopendoor.ie)

employs seven architects, in what Gottstein describes as a design collaborative that has a mixed work profile of residential, hospitality, commercial and industrial.

[gottsteinarchitects.com](http://gottsteinarchitects.com)



The redbrick front of the Victorian house in Rathgar, far left, and the rear extension in limestone, left and above, designed by Gottstein

## HOME FRONT A STING IN THE TAIL

Emergency housing in B&Bs and hotels may not always be of good quality and there are implications for the mental health of the families involved

LORCAN SIRR

**O**ne evening last week, at my mother's house in rural Tipperary, a large rat sat up on the living room windowsill and looked at us through the window. There are always rats in the road ditches nearby, but rarely do they approach the house, and they never sit up on the windowsill.

Thankfully, this one was not quick on its feet – it had probably already eaten some rat poison – and it was dispatched with a shotgun, after it had hopped down from the windowsill, of course.

Rats are not animals you want in or around your home, so it was with horror later that evening that I watched a video posted on Twitter by the Inner City Helping Homeless group showing rats in emergency accommodation in Dublin. I do not know anyone at this homeless charity, nor do I have any reason to doubt its video and the

photographs of mould and damp that were sent in anonymously by families being housed by the state. If they are genuine, then we have a problem.

During the week of March 20–26 there were 4,909 adults classified as homeless in Ireland, up 24% from the same period last year. Two-thirds of these people were in Dublin.

There were also 1,256 homeless families, comprising 1,682 adults with 2,563 children. This compares with 955 homeless families in March last year (1,285 adults and 1,994 children).

Of the 1,256 homeless families, 830 were single-parent ones – up 25% since the same period last year.

What damage is the government doing to the long-term mental health of these families, and in particular the children, by housing them in B&Bs and hotels, especially if they are in poor condition?



Parents' mental health problems can affect their children

According to Shelter, the UK homeless charity, poor housing conditions have the biggest impact on mental health, followed by unaffordable and unstable accommodation. One in six adults in their survey says housing stress affects their physical health, causing hair loss, nausea, exhaustion and headaches, according to Shelter.

Not only is housing a cause of mental health issues, it also exacerbates existing ones. Anxiety and depression are the most likely manifestations in adults, with knock-on effects in children who aren't immune to the upset.

It is easy for people to feel overwhelmed by housing problems, especially when their options are limited. People living in emergency accommodation have few choices, existing at the mercy of stretched services trying to house them in a market with little supply

and where landlords are often reluctant to accept them as tenants.

The four Dublin local authorities have put up posters looking for landlords to accept tenants by offering to pay two months' rent in advance, plus the deposit. This immediately puts them at an advantage against non-local authority applicants, who cannot afford to make such offers. More stress. Private-sector tenants are

also under increasing pressure.

It seems that responsibility for enforcing the government's 4% rent cap in "rent pressure zones" will not fall to local authorities or the Residential Tenancies Board, as might have reasonably been expected, but to tenants themselves.

Now we have the incredible scenario where tenants – some of whom are already living in insecure circumstances and are afraid to ask for even basic repairs – are expected to report their landlord for trying to raise rents by more than 4%.

While my head is often "wrecked" by housing issues – arguing over numbers, dealing with officials, and so on – at least I can go home at the end of the day.

We should spare a thought for those for whom serious mental stress over housing is all too real.

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