



Cover story

PAUL BEST

Outside the box

Curves are challenging and costly but, for many, they're well worth the effort.

It wasn't just your regular, ho-hum Victorian government planning approval. This was the striking Zaha Hadid-designed 54-storey tower proposed for the western end of Collins Street being given the green light three weeks ago. The work of the celebrated British architect, who died in March, the four vase-like volumes stacked atop the other were trademark Hadid: dramatic, eye-catching and – typical of the Iraqi-born “starchitect” – full of sinuous surfaces.

While challenging, with professional warnings to “handle with care”, curves nonetheless are lovingly embraced by designers and home owners alike.

“Usually, we build in a rectilinear form, which is very rigid and structured,” says architect Martin Friedrich, who tries incorporating curvilinear geometry in most of his projects since introducing a spiral staircase to a pair of Brighton townhouses (see cover property).

“Curves bring a certain softness ... [and] sensuality,” he says.

Friedrich singles out a design, still on the drawing board, proposed for Viewbank, in Melbourne's north-east. Not only are the curves designed to soften the house's presence in the landscape, – which is why they are employed so liberally in rural and mountain settings as well as near bodies of water – but they are used to direct lines of sight; in this instance, views overlooking Plenty River.

Design director of architecture outfit dKO Jesse Linardi says curves appeal to us because they reflect the fluidity of the human form and so

much of the beauty and efficiency of design in nature.

“Curves are more sculptural, more human,” he says.

It's what architect Tony Owen calls “liquid architecture”, in which design, like nature, alters every millimetre rather than every metre, which results in a more boxy style.

It also explains why we instinctively gravitate towards consumer goods with curves, such as iPhones and sports cars.

But, while swirling ribbon and wave-like structures suggest a wild and unfettered spirit, like Frank Gehry's Guggenheim museums, Zaha Hadid's Heydar Aliyev Centre, in Azerbaijan, or even McBride Charles Ryan's Cloud House, in Fitzroy North, there is often a specific design response, sometimes governed by site restrictions or building codes.

With one of dKO's apartment projects, the curved facade traces an

easement line, while its barrel-vaulted entrance references a nearby railway overpass.

For its 36-storey Sky One tower in Box Hill, the development's rounded edges are designed to appeal to an international market.

“International buyers don't like sharp edges,” says Linardi.

Curves can be applied internally to generate flow from one space to another, reveal and frame, play off an external contour or, like Friedrich's Brighton staircase, introduce something sculptural and art-like.

Collingwood architect Matt Gibson has detailed them in joinery and junctions. “For my parents' place, I designed a kitchen bench with a truncated curved end like New York's Flatiron Building,” he says.

Buxton agent John Clarkson says curves can at times be challenging to sell, especially if it's “over-the-top” haute design. “It can polarise buyers,” he says, citing one property that resembled a battleship. “Half will love it, half hate it.”

At the same time, though, curves – when done well and appropriately – can create excitement and encourage buyers. “Sometimes, it's all positive feedback,” he says.

New technology is making it easier and more cost-effective to consider curvature, although they add a premium.

Friedrich budgets \$18,000 for his two-storey spiral staircase and \$40,000 for three levels.

It also doesn't remove the fear of adopting curves. As one architect remarked: “It is a most dangerous form, if not handled well.”



1 Laburnum Court Brighton About \$3.2 million+

« From the street, the townhouse's floating louvred facade is all strong lines and angles. The matching townhouse next door reinforces the impression. But to maximise the courtyard areas for both townhouses, award-winning architect Martin Friedrich designed a shared central driveway, featuring curves, leading to an underground four-car garage with turntable. Taking this as his lead, Friedrich saw an opportunity to incorporate a spectacular three-level spiral staircase through the front half of the house. Drawing his inspiration from the Guggenheim in New York, and staircases from the 1930s, the St Kilda architect envisioned the stairs playing various roles. At a practical level, it guides residents up from floor to floor. It also occupies a smaller footprint than other staircases. This allows it to stand as a piece of sculpture. The property also features a private study/office. Auction 12.30pm, August 5 Agent Buxton, John Clarkson 0408 153 045

■ See more at domain.com.au/2012923509

