

Czechoslovakian Crystal

in Pavlova Paradise: Vladimír Čačala, 1926-2007

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Characterizing New Zealand as the half-gallon, quarter-acre, pavlova paradise in 1972, British writer Austin Mitchell distilled the essence of national aspiration (Mitchell, 1972). During the Holyoake years, a detached house on a separate parcel of land had somehow become identified with what it meant to be a true New Zealander. Low-interest State Advances loans after the Second World War meant that this ideal suburban existence was an achievable goal even for those on low incomes. But as a writer in *Design Review* cautioned in 1953, over 40 percent of the population of cities were people “for whom a detached house standing in its own grounds is not necessarily the most practical proposition. Its maintenance is too costly in terms of time, money or ability” (Your New House, 1953: 88). The writer advocated building flats as an alternative:

Multi-unit housing development in the cities is as important to the economy of the country as a single-unit development in the suburban areas; such development has sometimes been carried out successfully in the past but it carries the stigma of the overcrowded slum with it. The need for well-designed flats is more pressing than ever before and the people who need them most are least in a position to finance their erection. This must be a task for local or national government, or for the larger private investment agencies. (Your New House, 1953: 88)

High-density housing was considered foreign, associated with Europe and hard to assimilate, although the Labour Government had undertaken experiments with large-scale rental developments in cities in the 1940s. Austrian architect Ernst Plischke later reported that the New Zealand suspicion about apartment blocks was that only prostitutes or intellectuals wanted to live in **them**.¹ Housing these particular groups within the larger society was not a priority for post-war planners.

With the change of government to National in 1949, opportunities arose for private investors to develop urban blocks to accommodate flats that would be affordable for low-to-middle income groups. In Auckland, émigré Czechoslovakian architect Vladimír Čačala (1926-2007) (Fig. 1),² who arrived in the city at the end of 1952, spearheaded this development. Well-recognized for his glamorous avant-garde designs for homes such as the Blumenthal House (1958), Čačala is less well-known for his pioneering of the new materials and methods of modernism to produce a higher density of housing for private clients. In this article, Čačala’s biography is sketched and his most significant designs for houses, factories, shops and churches are assayed against the proposition that the extent of his involvement in multi-unit design had implications for his modernism.

Appropriately enough – since apartment blocks were considered fit only for bohemians in New Zealand – Čačala was an immigrant from the country previously known as Bohemia. Vladimír Oldřich Čačala was born in Prague in 1926, only

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¹ In his self-published memoir, Plischke recalls the words of a visiting housing official: “In Auckland leben nur Prostituierte und Intellektuelle in flats” (Plischke, 1989: 283). This is corroborated by Cedric Firth who wrote in 1949: “To the ordinary citizen, the term ‘flat’ is indelibly associated with a tall barracks-like structure with poor accommodation and poor appearance and with little to commend it.... A title, then, is required to cover flats planned to meet the modern requirements of the family – a title devoid of so many unattractive associations. It is hoped that the term ‘multi-unit’ will suffice” (Firth, 1949: 37).

² Born 23 March 1926, married 9 May 1957, died 27 May 2007.



Fig. 1: Vladimír Oldřich Čácala. Čácala Family Collection.

3 The furniture of Bohemian cabinet-maker and marqueterian Anton Seuffert (1815-87), who arrived in Auckland in 1859, exemplifies this fine woodworking tradition.

eight years after the Austro-Hungarian Empire had ended with the defeat of Germany in 1918. The new union of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia created one of Europe's most industrialized countries, and by the 1930s, Czechoslovakia was at the forefront of new thinking about architecture, design and the application of modern technologies. Wooden furniture, and in particular marquetry, had a long tradition in the region, but was beginning to be superseded by a demand for chrome-plated steel and lacquer promoted by the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925.³

As well as changing the face of Czechoslovakian furniture, prosperity facilitated controversial architecture. In Prague, building was controlled by a central planning authority which favoured proposals for projects that could express the prestige of the city through dramatic design. As the middle child born to furniture manufacturer Vladimír T. Čácala, the young V. O. Čácala had a privileged insight into contemporary design in the capital city. He visited many of the newly built and most remarkable examples of architecture with his father, including Adolf Loos' Villa Mueller (1930) and the Dutch architect Mart Stam's Palicka House (1932), which was part of the Baba Housing Estate (1928-40), the Czech equivalent of the Weissenhofsiedlung. A three-hour bus ride away was Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat House (1930) in Brno. Built with a steel and concrete skeleton frame, with screens of translucent onyx and marquetry in exotic woods on the interior, the most impressive feature of the Tugendhat House for the young boy was that the glazing at the front had been designed to retract into the floor to turn the whole living space into an elevated porch.

These informal lessons in modernism were interrupted, along with Čácala's formal education, in the late 1930s when the universities in his country closed and remained closed for six years during the Second World War. Invaded, annexed and generally appropriated by Nazi Germany, Czechoslovakia was not liberated by the Red Army until 1944. Čácala enrolled at the Czech Technical University in Prague when teaching resumed on 4 June 1945, under Professor Emil Králík (1880-1946). Karel Prager (1923-2001) and Karel Hubáček (born 1924), who would

later be acclaimed for their use of new materials and structural elements, were also students at the time. Interviewed in 2004, Čácala described his architectural training in post-war Prague as being heavily influenced by the Bauhaus:

When the Bauhaus was closed by Hitler in 1933, all the students and the professors spread away from Germany. A lot went to Prague and that's where I was lucky. I had those teachers to learn the clean lines and the simplicity from. The architecture school in Prague was more or less run by the guys who were Bauhaus. (Binsley, 2004: 72)

For many Europeans of Čácala's generation, the Bauhaus⁴ introduced the concept of the design studio as a kind of industrial laboratory, where ideas for mass production could be trialled. Marcel Breuer's cantilevered armchairs, which were made of tubular steel and leather and were light, transparent and easily moved, with the base of the frame acting as a skid, epitomized the Bauhaus aesthetic.

Neither Fascism nor Marxism proved conducive to modernist architectural design. Czechoslovakia became a satellite state of the Soviet Union in February 1948. The economy was committed to centralized planning, and private architectural practice was banned. Čácala's father was denounced as an enemy of the people, his factory was closed and he disappeared. Seven months later, in September 1949, his son escaped across the border to American-occupied Bavaria. From there he travelled to Hamburg and in 1950, with the assistance of the United Nations International Refugee Organization, he gained passage to Melbourne from Naples on board the Sitmar liner *Fairsea*.⁵ He travelled under the Displaced Persons Programme which brought 170,000 immigrants to Australia between 1947 and 1953. In Sydney, Čácala worked as an architectural draughtsman before discovering that his father, who had left Czechoslovakia six months before, had already settled in New Zealand. On Christmas Day 1952, they were reunited in Auckland, a city around a third the size of Prague with a population of about 300,000 people.

As an industrial designer with skills in plywood furniture manufacture from his years working in his father's factory, Čácala had no difficulty finding employment. He joined the architectural partnership of Brenner Associates⁶ which had been formed in 1949. Des Mullen, Stephen Jelicich and Milan Mrkusich (the latter two of Dalmatian-Croatian descent) had been joined by Ron Grant in 1950, and worked mostly on interior fit-outs, with their showroom at 79 Hobson Street. Čácala found Brenners the ideal vehicle for his ideas about modern architecture and he became a design partner in 1954. He soon found his first independent clients as well. Austrians Ernst Gelb and his wife Ilse, a seamstress, had arrived in New Zealand as refugees from Hitler in 1939 and prospered. They bought a north-facing section in Mt Albert Road, opposite historic Alberton, and sought to build a sophisticated house which reflected their European origins. Perched atop a solid masonry basement, the wooden house is clad with vertical cedar boards and has a flat roof. A timber deck cantilevers out over the garden along the length of the house at the back, opening up the living room and master bedroom to the distant views and sunlight through French doors (Reid, 1992: 75-83).

Two years later, in 1958, Čácala was commissioned by fellow Czechoslovakian émigré Ernest Blumenthal and his Canadian speech therapist wife Rachel Raye Blumenthal (née Ginsberg) to design a contemporary house for modern living (Figs. 2, 3 and 4).⁶ On a private St Heliers section with panoramic views, Čácala

4 At the Bauhaus in Dessau in 1927, an architectural department had been set up by Hannes Meyer (1889-1954), a champion of functionalism in architecture, but his Marxism led to his being replaced as director in 1930 by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1967).

5 The passport issued to Vladimír Oldřich Čácala is dated 2 January 1950.

6 Named for the mountain pass through the Alps between Italy and Austria, where Mussolini and Hitler met to celebrate symbolically their Pact of Steel in 1940.

7 Another Czech Architect, Heinrich Kulka (1900-71), had been the best man at Ernest Blumenthal's wedding, yet it was Čácala, who was chosen to design the house.



Fig. 7: Koningham House, 1960. Čačala Family Collection.

9 Rents are documented as £7.10s for a one-bedroomed and £8.5s for a two-bedroomed flat in 1967.

10 Jointly developed by Čačala with the Blumenthals as investors, this scheme comprised six two-bedroomed and three one-bedroomed flats with sundecks and living rooms facing over the city and Waitemata Harbour.

The distinguished designs for individual houses from the 1950s have somewhat eclipsed Čačala's reputation for multi-units later in his career. He had a long-term interest in rental housing, and even his most glamorous homes often included self-contained flats which could be rented out to provide owners with income. Providing his fellow investors with good returns,⁹ Čačala's approach was bold and innovative. In his multi-units, it is possible to see an antipodean parallel to Mies van der Rohe's low-rise townhouses and Pavilion Apartment designs in Illinois, where the introduction of externally projecting mullions at the module reference points makes the elements of the building's structure visible. As early as 1954, Čačala built his first block of four two-bedroomed apartments at 100 St Stephen's Avenue in Parnell. Using first brick, then concrete and finally reinforced concrete block in combination with large areas of glass, Čačala moved towards a Miesian fusion of structure with transparency over the next twenty years.

Unlike Mies, his uppermost concern was always affordability. With his first multi-units, he took care to comply with the conditions for a State Advances loan by keeping the cost of each to £1000 so that they could be individually purchased. His next development of eighteen one-bedroomed flats at 16-18 St Stephen's Avenue complied with the Town Planning Department's restriction on the number of occupants zoned for that area of land but was also a commercial proposition for a small number of investors. The trend here was capitalizing on valuable land by increasing the density of development, often beginning by buying a section with a single house, removing it and building multi-units in its stead. This approach is epitomized by the reinforced brick Paritai Drive development of 1965 (Fig. 8). Similarly, the 'Seabreeze' flats at Birdwood Crescent¹⁰ represented a kind of system-built housing, based on European models. Constructed in reinforced concrete block with Winstone Vibradec floors and long-run roofing, these flats were quickly and economically erected, and were the prototype for the larger-scale apartment buildings. Čačala's confidence in the potential of his materials

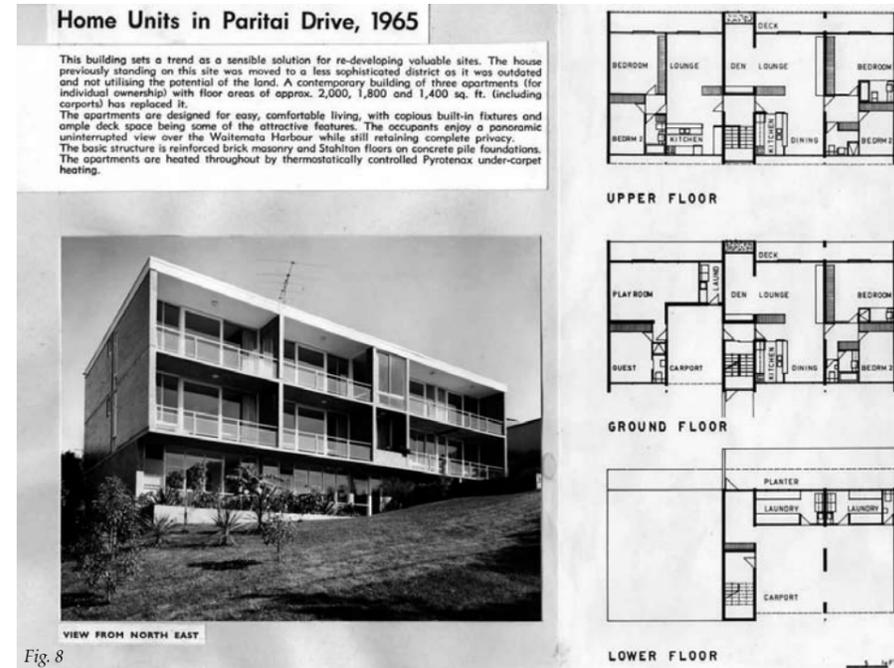


Fig. 8

to extend to high-rise developments continued to grow. A 27-unit block of flats at 49 St Stephens Avenue was completed in 1969-70. Next, for E. Lichtenstein & Co Ltd., an Onehunga Wool scouring company, he designed the six-storey block of 60 one-bedroomed flats in Gladstone Road, Parnell (now the Barrycourt Motel), which was one of the tallest buildings in Auckland to use concrete block structurally. By 1978, also for the Lichtensteins, the Northcrest Apartment block of nineteen flats at the corner of Kepa Road and Kupe Street in Orakei was finished, proving the reliability of the material and even (controversially) slightly exceeding the height restriction for the area.

A cursory tally of the developments listed in Čačala's job book for the two prosperous decades from 1954 until 1978 shows that the inner-eastern suburbs of Auckland were populated with over twenty Čačala-designed apartment blocks, with others appearing on the North Shore and in Herne Bay.¹¹ Generously proportioned, with floor areas typically of 1400, 1600 and 2000 square feet (or 131, 150 and 185 square metres), these were distinctive and luxurious flats, which Peter Shaw describes as presenting a "convincingly 'modern' look to their inhabitants. Much use was made of textured wall finishes, including hessian, exposed aggregate and a variety of sprayed-on surface finishes, which could be highly effective if used sparingly." Shaw concludes, "Čačala, employing a minimal analogy, advocated a certain amount of repetition of motifs in order to produce a unified effect in matters of form, texture and colour" (1991: 125).

This tendency towards standardization shows that as a European modernist working in New Zealand in the post-war period, Čačala endeavoured to overcome distance by reiterating the Bauhaus aesthetic which had nurtured him. His interpretations of this abstraction in the local context were circumscribed by the limited tastes and resources of his period, but amongst his fellow émigrés, he found a sympathetic clientele. His multi-units introduced the principles of functionalist architecture to the private housing development context. The re-

Fig. 8: Home units in Paritai Drive, 1965. Čačala Family Collection.

- 11 The job book includes the following:
- 1954 Four two-bedroomed apartments, 100 St Stephen's Avenue, Parnell
 - 1958 Eighteen one-bedroomed apartments, 16-18 St Stephen's Avenue, Parnell
 - 1960 Fifteen one-bedroomed apartments, 13-15 Freemont Street, Parnell
 - 1962 Seafield Flats, nine apartments, 3 Birdwood Crescent, Parnell
 - 1962 Two apartments, Titai Street, Orakei
 - 1962 Fifteen apartments, Milford Road
 - 1963 Four apartments, Glendowie
 - 1963 Rodnal flats and house
 - 1963 Eight apartments, Gillies Avenue, Epsom
 - 1963 Apartments, Hamilton Road, Herne Bay
 - 1964 Six apartments with shops, Coates Avenue, Orakei
 - 1964 Three apartments, 5 Hempton Drive, Orakei
 - 1964 27 apartments (eight studio, eleven one-bedroomed, seven two-bedroomed and a penthouse), 49 St Stephen's Avenue, Parnell
 - 1965 Apartments, 11 Mt Eden Road, Epsom
 - 1966 Thirty apartments, View Road, Mt Eden
 - 1967 Twelve apartments for Wiseman, Edenvale Road, Mt Eden
 - 1968 Thirty apartments, 49 Esplanade

- Road, Mt Eden
- 1970 Eighteen two-bedroomed apartments, 9a Esplanade Road, Mt Eden
- 1970 Fifty apartments, 33a Edenvale Crescent, Mt Eden
- 1970 Sixty-one apartments, 18 Gladstone Road, Parnell (now Barrycourt Motel)
- 1973 Two flats and a house for Mr Bennett, 69 Ngapuhi Road, Remuera
- 1973 Five apartments, 33 Arthur Street, Ellerslie
- 1973 Four apartments, 12 Coleridge Street, Grey Lynn
- 1974 Northcrest Apartments, 160 Kepa Road, Orakei

sulting architecture responded to the reality of commercial imperatives without compromising the way in which the visual logic of the architecture derived from the qualities of materials and the nature of construction processes. By maintaining the aspirations of modernism in this way, Čačala demonstrates his lasting commitment to the International Style, creating a crystalline architecture which endures in its pavlova paradise setting.

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