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Imric Porsolt: The “Messenger of Modernism” in Exile

Hungarian Imric Porsolt (1909–2005), a graduate in architecture from the Czech Technical University in Prague, arrived in Auckland as a 30 year old in June 1939. He practised as an architect for over a decade and then taught full-time at the Auckland School of Architecture, in both architectural history and design studio, from 1950 until his retirement in 1974. Speaking with a pronounced middle European accent, he brought a dramatic presentational style and breadth of learning to his lectures.

Porsolt was employed in the School of Architecture only a short time after it had experienced a period of revolt against poor studio teaching. After World War II, staffing of the School was meagre: Professor Cyril Knight as Head of School was joined by English academic Charles Light, who was appointed to a professorial Chair in Design in 1947; Edmund Ferriday, Sammy Crookes, and Arthur Marshall taught construction; muralist James Turkington taught art, with Vernon Brown and Richard Toy in studio. Recent graduates and current students worked as part-time tutors. In 1946, the Architectural Group produced a magazine, *Planning*, with a content critical of the limited scope of the School’s curriculum. In 1948, they and others offered a new vision for the Bachelor of Architecture and their complaints were escalated to the University’s Professorial Board (Gatley 2017: 44–50). The students had requested changes to the history and theory courses in particular, and although Knight defended the focus on “the evolution of European civilisation” (Gatley 2017: 50), it is evident that Porsolt’s encyclopedic approach to teaching the history of buildings—which included African, Persian, Chinese, and Japanese construction—was an attempt to redress the imbalance of his predecessors. Porsolt took challenges to his content and ideas in good spirit, later remembering that in those early years, “I met a very restive generation of young architects” (Porsolt 1984b: 3). Five years after he retired, the School of Architecture invited him to publish 12 of his architectural history lectures as study papers, inaugurating the School of Architecture series: *Italian Architecture* (1980); *Axial Symmetry in Classical Greece* (1980); *Romantic and Nineteenth Century Architecture* (1980); *The History of Building: An Outline History of Structural Thought* (1980); *A Brief Outline of World History* (1981); *A History of the Dwelling and of Places of Meeting Considered Together* (1981); *The History of City Forms as Artifacts in the Landscape* (1981); *The History and Design of Vertical*

Communication (1981); *Italianate Architecture in Europe* (1981); *Preliminary Notes to Twentieth Century Architecture* (1981); *Outline History of the Architectural Profession* (1981); and a single essay on architectural conservation, *Architecture in the Landscape and the Revolution of Bath* (ca. 1983 [1981]). These constitute the major documentation of the focus of his architectural history teaching. He also published articles on furniture and, as Julia Gatley notes, was a valuable counterpoint to Cyril Knight, whose own history/theory teaching, with its focus on “the evolution of European civilisation”, was conservative and traditional:

Porsolt was an important addition in overcoming concerns about the teaching of history and theory in the School. He invigorated this subject area with interests that extended to modernism and also the applied arts. From 1955, a revised history/theory curriculum included a course on architecture from the eighteenth century to the post-war period, with a New Zealand component (Gatley 2017: 50–51).

Roger Walker was one former student who found Porsolt’s knowledge and understanding of history impressive. In a 2016 interview with John Walsh, on the occasion of his New Zealand Institute of Architects Gold Medal, Walker remembers,

Imi really embedded a sense of history and what was happening in Europe, and put New Zealand in context. He didn’t put New Zealand down but clearly established the pecking order of architectural history and that was very important to me (Walker in Walsh 2016: 1).

Porsolt kept a minor private architectural practice going while teaching, although he admitted, “I think I was lacking in the necessary business acumen” (Porsolt 2005: 34). Nevertheless, his work has attracted acclaim from historians of modernism. The Pollard House in Titirangi makes it into Bill McKay and Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins’ list of the top 50 New Zealand houses of the twentieth century (Lloyd-Jenkins & McKay 2000: 75). McKay and Gatley consider the Pollard House evidentiary of the existence of connections between the international and the regional in New Zealand modernism (McKay & Gatley 2010: 206–07). Gatley also observes that:

Porsolt differed from many of New Zealand’s émigré architects, who tended to favour the flat roofs and clean white surfaces of international modernism, as his houses were soon gabled and woody, as demonstrated by the Pollard House in Titirangi (1962) (2017: 60).

If his architectural projects seem limited in scope for a 50-year career in New Zealand, it might be due to the energy and time he expended on his teaching and on writing about art and design for the *Herald*, *Home & Building*, and *Landfall*. He approached writing for the popular and literary press with a kind of missionary zeal, driven by a desire to educate his audience. His art criticism evinces a trans-cultural approach typical of the Viennese school and analogous to the writing of his Australian contemporary, the Austrian-born art critic Gertrud Langer (1908–1984) in Brisbane. He frequently compares local painters to their European and American peers and discusses local manifestations of art styles and movements in an international context.

Porsolt was a keen advocate for the conservation of heritage buildings, in particular Old St Mary’s in Parnell, but ironically, given that the generation of architects

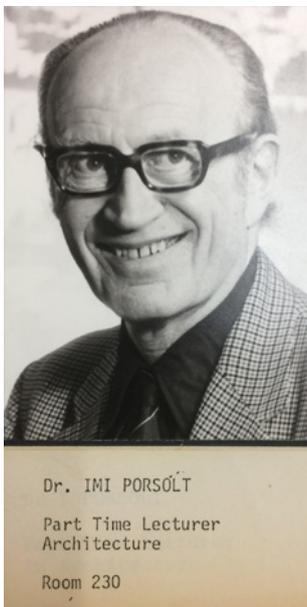


Fig. 1 University of Auckland staff photograph of Imric Porsolt, ca. 1975. [APPFA Staff Photographs Collection, Architecture Archive, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services]

he taught included several important postmodernists, he was vehemently opposed to the preservation of façades of old buildings to preserve streetscapes. He saw postmodernism, which he referred to as “neo-pre-modernism” or “neo-prene modernism”, as meretricious and appealing only to the nouveau riche and share-market speculators, writing in 1984:

It is old-fashioned: its philosophical idol is Pierce, and its semiological hero, de Saussure. And, as I tried to demonstrate, even these obsolescent theories are unapplicable. Their practice is a sort of “anything-goesism”: eclectic stylism, arbitrary axialism, wilful mannerisms of all kinds, and not really surprisingly, a steady “revival” in a playful way of mechanistic, pseudo-structural formal elements that have come down from Functionalism. Amusing and clever. An amusement of the jaded rich. Of whom else?
(Porsolt 1984b: 3)

He knew both Vladimir Cacala (1926–2007) and Viennese-trained Heinrich Kulka (1900–1971), who were fellow Czech émigré architects in Auckland, and was the sponsor for the family of Czech architect Robert Fantl (1923–2016), who stayed with Porsolt on his arrival in New Zealand in October 1940 at the age of 17 (Fantl 2005: 32). Fantl remembers:

I watched Imi at work at night, we talked about architecture, and I read some of his books on the subject. Even to a fairly raw and under-educated youngster, it became clear that Imi was highly intelligent, well-educated, cultured, very knowledgeable, original both in his thought and his design, and a lateral thinker with a great sense of humour. He was highly influential in my decision to take up architecture after my discharge from the air force (Fantl 2005: 32).

After graduation, Fantl joined the Housing Department where he met Viennese émigré architect Ernst Plischke (1903–1992). In 1960, he joined Plischke in private practice in Wellington.

This article argues that there are three distinct aspects to Porsolt’s contribution and that these assume equal importance when calculating his legacy, and also informed his teaching. These are the buildings he designed, the articles he wrote on design, and, finally, his significance as an art critic. In his writing on abstraction, in particular the paintings from the 1950s and 1960s by Milan Mrkusich and Colin McCahon, he shows a depth of understanding of the international context for abstraction that led McCahon to remark, “before the advent of Mr. Porsolt there was no criticism in New Zealand” (Bell 2017: 144). Porsolt’s depth of understanding of abstraction distinguished his writing from other critics such as A. R. D. Fairburn, who famously dismissed McCahon’s paintings in a *Landfall* article in 1948, snidely suggesting that they “might pass as graffiti on the walls of some celestial lavatory” (Fairburn 1948: 49–50). Parochialism of this sort was anathema to the cosmopolitan Imric Voytich Porsolt.

Background and Training

Born in Pozony in Hungary in 1909 (now Bratislava in Slovakia), Porsolt grew up speaking both Hungarian and German as a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The classical revivals were still dominant when he began studying at the Technical University in Prague, where he graduated with a Diploma in

Architecture in 1935, and his writing and teaching were influenced by the materialism of Gottfried Semper (1803–1879), the most influential and prolific German architectural theorist of the nineteenth century. Porsolt never shook off the classical influence, choosing to write his doctoral thesis on axuality in Greek antiquity some 40 years later. In keeping with the materialism of Semper, he situated his discussion of the origins of architecture in anthropology and archaeology (Porsolt 1973b: 1). Fellow students at the Technical University were Oldrich Tyl, Jan Visek, Ludvik Kysela, and Josef K. Riha, who formed a club of architects called “For New Architecture”, publishing the monthly magazine *Stavba* (which translates as “Construction”) from 1922 to 1938, and inviting Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, J. J. P. Oud, and Amédée Ozenfant to speak in Prague (Sayer 2014: 20). They drew inspiration from several avant garde art and architecture movements and publications: Le Corbusier’s *Vers une Architecture*, Russian constructivism, the Bauhaus, and Dutch De Stijl, turning to functionalism and constructivism to create a *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) in Czech architecture. An editor of *Stavba*, Karel Teige, was invited to lecture at the Bauhaus by Hannes Meyer, and published *Czechoslovak Architecture* in 1927 in the Bauhaus Books series (Sayer 2014: 27). Porsolt describes how he was “brought up in an anti-Beaux Arts, anti-axial design spirit, and also in the belief that artistic attitudes don’t just happen but are the outcome of deep-seated and complex social factors” (1973a: 11). Modernism represented a radical departure for him from the old way of life of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It symbolised cosmopolitanism and internationalism, as well as a new optimism.

Czech functionalism was the result of fascination with industrial development, engineering, and machine technology. Its programme was formulated by Karel Teige (1900–1951) and Jaromir Krejcar (1895–1950), and Josef Havlíček was one of its principle exponents. An image of Havlíček’s functionalist State Pension Building (1932) was published by Max Rosenfeld in his 1944 article, “The Culture of Czechoslovakia”, in the quarterly periodical *Art in New Zealand*. Highly influential for Porsolt were the slightly older generation of architects such as Josef Chochol (1880–1956) and Pavel Janák (1882–1956)—known as the Prague Vitruvius—who formulated spiritualist philosophies of design and a dynamic ideal of planar form derived, in part, from Cubist art. Janák began to move away from purely angular forms, believing that active curves could create a new, spiritually charged architecture. In 1918, he proclaimed the discovery of typically Czech architectural forms, which allegedly emerged from a sociologically conceived study of the customs of Czech family and social life, and would be described as “rondo-cubism”, the perfect national style for the new Czechoslovak state (Lahoda 2010: 223).

Following graduation in 1935, Porsolt married his first wife Gerda Porzsoltova (1909–1964) and undertook two years of compulsory military service, during which he worked as a clerk in the army, before he began to practise as an interior architect. Three days after Hitler’s annexation of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939, the young couple fled to Holland, then England, before being accepted as refugees by New Zealand, arriving in Auckland via Vancouver and Sydney on the RMS *Niagara* on June 12, 1939. Interviewed shortly after they arrived, Porsolt, fluent in English, spoke of the amazing developments in building blocks of flats in Prague. Perhaps here he was referring to Chochol’s rondo-cubist apartment building, Neklanova ulice, Prague (1913). Rather than replicate what he knew

from his home country, though, Porsolt said that he intended “to study the tastes of New Zealanders for architecture, with emphasis towards interior decoration” (“International Day” 1939: 11). Porsolt remembered:

The same day we were taken by friends to the “Jewish Welfare Society” where I was told that there is nothing doing for architects up here, and the place for me is Wellington. The same friends took us rightaway to Mr Morris van Staveren, who picked up his phone straightaway and got me an interview with his architect, Mr Alva M. Bartley, in whose office I started a three-weeks probationary period three days later (Porsolt 1984b: 2).

Working on the Design for 1ZB Radio Studios

In partnership with Norman Wade, Alva Bartley had designed the New Zealand Broadcasting Building in Shortland Street in 1934, and by 1939 had the commission for a new building in Durham Street West, to be designed for the contract price of £80,000 as the flagship for the commercial radio station 1ZB, which had begun broadcasting in 1926. Bell states that Bartley prized Porsolt for his “Continental ideas” and familiarity with both modern building types and radio (2017: 170). Perhaps he was interested to see how the “rondo-cubism” and active curves of Czech architecture would marry with the Streamlined Moderne language imported from America.

Porsolt would have been familiar with the operation of Radio Prague, which had begun broadcasting in 1919, but it did not carry advertisements. Unlike 1YA, the New Zealand Broadcasting Board’s building in Shortland Street, which was funded with money from radio licences and built with Depression labour in 1934, 1ZB was a commercial station, a different proposition from the radio stations Porsolt knew from Europe. Porsolt suggested to Bartley that the form of the building be used to create a visual identity for the station, attracting both advertising clients and audiences. In the press release for the 1ZB building, Porsolt described himself as “a bit incredulous when told that this new building was to be the first sizeable city building in the style we call ‘Modern’ in Europe” (McLaughlin 1990: 34). It is possible to interpret the design as an adaptation of the curves of rondo-cubism to the New Zealand context, giving a continental inflection to the local variant of modernism. The heavily glazed, Streamlined Moderne building featured a corner entrance with an elongated rectangular fin holding the neon call sign, “1ZB”, aloft. Its sculptured cantilevered stairwell and extensive use of glass bricks made for a breathtakingly modern foyer and attracted considerable attention in the local press. It is these features that indicate Porsolt’s hand in the design.

Czechoslovakia is known for its tradition of glass-making, maintained today in Bohemian crystal. Czech-born Sigfried Giedion (1888–1968) made much of the possibilities of glass in his first book, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*, published in Leipzig in 1928, where he argued that the main principle of the new architecture was Raumdurchdringung, or space penetration, facilitated by the new technologies of glass bricks and reinforced concrete, in contrast to the Stütze und Last or load bearing that had prevailed in architecture previously. Due to the country’s pre-eminence in glazing, Le Corbusier chose to publish all four parts of his paeon to the brilliance of glazed materials, “Glass, the Fundamental Material of Modern Architecture”, in the

Czech trade journal *Tchéco-Verre* in 1935, the year that Porsolt graduated from architecture school. It is likely that Porsolt would have studied the photomontages in Giedion's book and read these articles, or may have known of the *Maison de Verre*, a design collaboration between Pierre Chareau (a furniture and interiors designer), Bernard Bijvoet (a Dutch architect who had been working in Paris since 1927), and Louis Dalbet (a craftsman metalworker) and built in Paris in 1932.



Fig. 2 Alva Bartley and Imric Porsolt's Broadcasting House, corner Durham Street West and Durham Lane, Auckland, 1942. [Photograph by Doree & Sache. Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 915-Album-148-1]

When it opened in October 1941, the most remarked-upon aspect of Broadcasting House (as it was called) was the thousands of glass bricks used in its construction. These were considered "a stylish and futuristic blending of form and function" (McLaughlin 1990: 34). Porsolt had been vexed by "the problem of designing a façade for a function which by the logic of its planning was to remain buried in the bowels of the building" (McLaughlin 1990: 24) and wanted to maintain an honesty in his expression of materials as well as transparency of forms. Juxtaposing these "industrial" materials and fixtures with more traditional features of décor like linoleum, he sought to express the function of radio through the use of symbolism. In addition to creating a building that would become a visual symbol of modernity, he designed 1ZB's official logo, a large bolt

of lightning combined with a musical note and overlaid with the station’s name. It featured in the wall and floor coverings. Porsolt described it as “a good clean piece of technico-constructivist fun, a manifesto of structural functionalism” (1984b: 3).

Porsolt’s diffidence about the incorporation of a branding element in each street façade of Broadcasting House was counteracted by what he called “the vertically accentuated intimacy of Durham Street ... [which was] exactly the sort of streetscape known to me from Prague” (Porsolt 1984b: 3). The relationship of plan to elevation, however, ran counter to Porsolt’s training and belief, where the positioning of individual spaces and their mutual relationships were meant to correspond to the function and purpose the building was to serve. Yet he was hugely proud of the building as expressive of Auckland’s nascent modernity. Speaking years later to art historian Leonard Bell, Porsolt said that he always felt at home in Durham Street:

I feel it as part of myself ... I still think that the old 1ZB is not only an historic landmark, but a damn good piece of architecture ... Sharp-lined clarity and simplicity, curves and odd angle shapes, handled under command of a sense of proportion, and with a taste forged ... yes, by Classicism (Bell 2017: 170).

Patricia McLaughlin noted the incorporation of references to technology: rails on the fourth floor receded back, with the tower appearing as the funnel of a ship, and the interior had porthole type windows into the studios (2000: 34). Perhaps this indicates Porsolt’s knowledge of Le Corbusier’s writing in *Vers une Architecture* (1927), which praised ocean liners, aeroplanes, and automobiles for their streamlined form.

Where the “rondo-cubism” is most apparent is in Porsolt’s design for the magnificent internal staircase. Its cantilevered curved form was, he said, expressive of human movement, and creates a series of interpenetrating spaces like the forms of a cubist sculpture. Staircases are always an opportunity for technical bravura, he writes in *The History and Design of Vertical Communication*, a study paper that was published by the School of Architecture after his retirement (Porsolt 1981b: 1–26). In his treatment of this curved staircase at Broadcasting House, he tempers bold modernism with the use of classical motifs. The winged horse Pegasus, tamed by Bellerophon, is a metaphor for radio waves and electricity being deployed in broadcasting, and its inclusion over the staircase shows Porsolt’s love of classicism, as does the mural of Terpsichore with her lyre in the recording studio. Porsolt’s relationship with classicism remained fraught, however. As a Jewish exile, he recognised the potentially Fascist overtones of the Stripped Classical architecture of the National Socialists, yet maintained a life-long interest in classical architecture. As well as being the basis for his doctoral thesis, patterns in classical architecture were fundamental to many of his art history lectures, several of which were published as study papers after he retired. *Axial Symmetry in Classical Greece* (Porsolt 1980a: 1–4), for example, focused on the symmetry and patterns of nature as expressive of the deep geometries that recurred in Western architecture.

Fig. 3 Alva Bartley and Imric Porsolt's Broadcasting House, 1942. [Photograph by Doree & Sache. Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 915-Album-148-7]



Becoming an Academic at the Auckland School of Architecture

In his narrative of his early years in Auckland, Porsolt (1984b: 2) describes how he remained working with Bartley until “all architecture in the civilian field stopped after Pearl Harbour, December 1941”, and Bartley found him a role designing interiors in the office of the Auckland construction firm of Noel Cole, the builders of Broadcasting House. On advice from fellow émigré Max Rosenfeld on how to avoid being classified as an Enemy Alien, Porsolt explained that he sought a position as a draughtsman with the American Army, gaining the experience to become chief draughtsman for Gummer & Ford and then working for the Auckland architectural practice of Alleman & Land (1984b: 3). Work in the post-war years was scarce, which led him to become an academic:

Meanwhile, I tried with some success to build up a private practice (the so-called “pee-jay” = private jobs), made quite a few friends in- and outside the Jewish community; built my own house too, and joined the NZ Institute of Architects, having been compelled to take a few fourth-year subjects at the School of Architecture. This brought me into touch with a very restive generation of young architects, from whom the famous “Group” was formed—Bill Wilson and his crowd. My efforts to expand my pee-jay practice were only moderately promising, so I did jump to the suggestion of one of my friends, Mick Cutter, who was just appointed as lecturer at the School, that I should go there too. I applied, and was gladly accepted by Professor C.R. Knight, the Dean, and lecturing also in the History of Architecture. My interest in the subject was by then somewhat known. Two years later, I became permanent staff member, and another five years later Senior Lecturer with History of Architecture as my “subject” and the normal duties of a studio lecturer in design (Porsolt 1984b: 3).

Ross Jenner (2005: 32) recalls: “Imi was a memorable, if not always entirely comprehensible lecturer—he never lost his heavy European accent.” His study papers, with their frequent typewritten capitalisations and under-linings, give the flavour of the emphases of his pronunciation. In the introduction to his outline history of structural thought, for example, he explains how structure and construction are technical aspects;

... they will BOTH have a marked influence on the actual FORM of the building, although we may consider their role of less importance than those design aspects which aim at the satisfaction of human needs—both bodily and mental comfort. WE SHALL FIND THAT THESE TECHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS ARE IN FACT RESTRICTIONS, WHILE THE HUMAN ASPECTS ARE THE DRIVING FORCES OF THE DESIGNER’S CREATIVENESS (Porsolt 1980b: 1).

In this study paper, he traces the history of building from the tent and the cave (“nomadic building”), through megalithic builders, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Asia Minor and the Iranian High Plateau, Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece, Classical Greece, Etruria, Rome, The Middle Ages, Gothic Construction to The New Age, Military and Civil Engineering, Modern Times, The Concrete Revival, and, finally, The Expression of Structural and Material Truth (Porsolt 1980b: 1–26). For each, he emphasises the social and historical context of the architecture. In this he follows Semper, particularly the approach taken in *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten* (1860–63) (the title translates as *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts*), where Semper shows how construction techniques can result in particular styles. Jenner describes how these lectures were illustrated by images projected from books by deploying an epidiascope—the forerunner for the overhead projector. This technology often ended in disaster when Porsolt lingered too long on a page while he was explaining his point: “his fondness for the epidiascope often ended in smoke, if not flames” (Jenner 2005: 32). Clearly he greatly enjoyed teaching, remarking himself that, “I found what I think was my real forte: academic life” (Porsolt 1984b: 3). He remained a firm believer in the importance of education generally. Summarising his career in architecture, however, he underplayed his own achievements, remarking “To what extent I have made a mark with these [buildings] in the architecture of this city is for others to judge—probably a very modest one”. He then explained where he thought his legacy lay:

But I have stronger reason to believe that my educational activity was more effective, especially as I did not confine it to the School but branched out into art criticism in the daily press and periodicals. Through it all, however, I remained faithful to my old love: the history of architecture (Porsolt 2005: 34).

Writing on Architecture and Architects

Auckland’s ubiquitous wooden architecture was novel to Porsolt, and one of the first articles he published after taking up his lecturing position was on the Kiwi bach. His design for a hillside holiday house was published on the cover of *Home & Building* in 1950. What is so unusual in this two-storeyed structure is that Porsolt opened up one large space for domestic purposes, with partitions only for essential divisions such as the washroom. Employing an open plan, merging interior and exterior space and using only partitions to regulate space was justified

in the text as being functional, technically accomplished, and very economical, but would have struck many Kiwis as rather unusual.

Later, when writing about fellow émigré Heinrich Kulka for *Landfall*, Porsolt remarked that he himself, like Kulka, had had to “learn weatherboards” (1971: 89–92). He found Auckland’s ubiquitous colonial villas and bungalows to be quaint, writing, “In my early years this side of the Equator, I was often intrigued by an odd spectacle: greenery cut into stark cubic forms, and the florid fretwork of architecture as its complement.” Porsolt went on to explain that to his eye, the floriated fretwork belonged to nature and the cubes to architecture, and his own house designs for New Zealand demonstrated this approach.

Architectural Designs

Porsolt’s clients were the educated few—mostly Jewish like him, and active in the creative arts. The artist and muralist John Holmwood, the fashion designer Emma Knuckey, the musician Ernst Specht, the alternative bookseller Robert Goodman, the French lecturer Walter Pollard, and Czech-born Dr Ruth Black (nee Blumenthal), who was a member of the Board of Management for the Broadcasting Corporation as well as a pioneer in the field of family planning, founding and chairing the New Zealand Family Planning Council in 1963–64, and representing New Zealand on the International Planned Parenthood Federation of Southeast Asia and Oceania. None of his clients were wealthy, but they were all interested in good design.

One of his first commissions came from a fellow Czech émigré, Robert Goodman, who owned an alternative bookshop in the city. The Goodman House at 3 Canterbury Place in Parnell was built in 1956 and published in *Home & Building* in 1958, in an article entitled “Privacy in a Glass House”. It is a two-storeyed house, built in the shape of a pentagon with a glazed living room on the upper level and the exposed Oregon beams of the living area extended out over the concrete block balcony to complete the apex of the pentagon. It was designed, Porsolt said, to have great views of the North Shore, Rangitoto, and the Auckland Harbour Bridge, through floor-to-ceiling glass sliding doors. Porsolt’s specifications for the house originally had it clad in vertical boards of oiled cedar, which as it weathered would change to a soft grey colour. In this neighbourhood of multi-millionaires, the house was quickly dubbed The Chalet, locals recognising something foreign, possibly Swiss, in its design.

Fig. 4 and 5 Imi Porsolt, The Goodman House, Parnell, Auckland, 1956. [Photographs by Stephen Robinson, 2011]



The Pollard House, commissioned by Walter Pollard, a friend of Porsolt’s and a lecturer in French at the University of Auckland, was built as a pole house in the Titirangi bush, showing an appreciation of the new environment and an ability to use it in a sensitive way. It was published in *Home & Building*, where it was described in anthropomorphic terms: “The house stands on this spur, or rather has its heels dug into its flanks; the toes rest on steel pipe stilts, which, it is hoped, will soon be overgrown again by the bush” (Porsolt 1963a: 36).

Designed to be an integral part of the landscape, the house curves around the brow of a hill with a living room that fans out to encompass the panoramic bush view and a wide roof open like an umbrella over the entry way and deck. It was described as “a house that lives in the tree tops and touches the land lightly” by Bill McKay in the *Block* itinerary for modernist houses in West Auckland (2008). Porsolt himself described the reflexive relationship between site and structure succinctly: “the shape of the land approximates the geometry of the house” (Porsolt 1963a: 36). Echoing the topography, the occupant or visitor steps down into the living area and the wood-finished interior, utilising both native and exotic timbers. It adopts two features promoted by Bauhaus teacher Marcel Breuer in that it is bi-nuclear, with separated sleeping areas, and has a butterfly roof:

The narrow eastern part of the wedge-shaped central space houses the kitchen: you can’t look into it, only over it, from the western part, the living area proper (dropped three steps, approximating the fall of the spur). You look at the bush again, along the slope of the ceiling-roof. This of course means a butterfly roof, at any rate for the central space: dished shape over the living area, part of a flat pyramid over the kitchen. The living wing roof is symmetrical, the living room under it isn’t—the northern bay of the roof shelters the open deck. Logically, the straight western boundary line of the roof terminates against the sky with upturned corners. Geometry lends the roof wings (Porsolt 1963a: 36).

Fig. 6 and 7 Imi Porsolt, The Pollard House, Titirangi, Auckland, 1962. [Photographs by Simon Devitt, 2007]



Geometry also predominated in the design of Dr Ruth Black’s house in William Fraser Street, Kohimarama, from 1959. It comprised a series of flat-roofed rectangular blocks over a free plan of open spaces which were partitioned. The progressive aspect of the house was tempered by specific New Zealand devices—its steel-reinforced frame was clad in traditional wood.

Writing on Art and Design

Porsolt’s interiors were characterised by built-in furniture, a modernist feature which he championed in the article, “To Build It In or Not to Build It In” (1950b). Porsolt argued convincingly that having modern furniture would be more time effective as it would limit the amount of time moving furniture to clean beneath and behind. His use of myriad materials and forms is the signature treatment for his domestic projects. He appears to straddle the regional/internationalist divide in New Zealand architectural modernism, as Alvar Aalto did in Finland. Porsolt’s houses are architectural collages, synthesising modernist, vernacular, and natural motifs. This eclectic approach is echoed in his writing on design for the popular press.

Like Ernst Plischke in his book *Design and Living* (1947), Porsolt illustrated his ideas about furniture design—tables and chairs—with his own drawings, and continued to advocate for the use of glass:

In contrast to cabinets which are the permanent dwellings of our odds and ends, tables are temporary places of abode for the same things ... Bruised legs tell a disappointing story of anybody’s experiences ... A fully transparent glass top has the advantage of eliminating the darkness under the table and giving even a small space an airy and spacious character—the main aesthetic requirement of our day (Porsolt 1950a: 69).

Porsolt wrote about art in architectural terms, noting with approval “the suave regularity of the geometric forms” in a Milan Mrkusich painting and commenting on the “purposeful symmetry” and “geometric framework” within his compositions. These terms are reminiscent of the tools of formal analysis developed by the German art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) in his *Principles of Art History* (1929). Porsolt told *Landfall* readers that “Mrkusich also used abstraction, most determinedly among Auckland painters, his kaleidoscopic paintings which one felt to be a very geometric kind of impressionism rather than straight out constructions” (1959: 364). Porsolt’s architectural approach to painting suited the period when modernist artists were exhibiting at the Architectural Centre in Wellington, and Mrkusich was working as an architect with Brenner Associates in Auckland.

Erudite and internationalist, Porsolt was wary of nationalism and parochialism. He made connections between the arts of various periods, places, and cultures, as well as emphasising the importance of art history for contemporary artists just as he cultivated a love for architectural history in his students at the School of Architecture. While he acknowledged the importance of English art critic Clive Bell’s formalist method, Porsolt’s writing in fact appears more informed by Wölfflin and Viennese School art historians like Alois Riegl and Franz Wickhoff, writers whom he may have read in the original German. Their focus on the formal aspects of painting as the primary way to communicate the meaning in the

art led to his championing of abstraction. As Bell points out: “Against the grain of mainstream critical opinion, Porsolt vigorously promoted local abstract painting (when there was not much of it) as ‘the algebra of art’, and without ‘algebra’ there was an absence of the experimental and exploratory” (2017: 152).

How Porsolt promoted the art of abstraction was by concentrating his writing on the emotional content of the pure physicality of the painting. In this he followed the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965), whose book *Abstraction and Empathy* had argued that the key to understanding abstraction was recognising the emotional content of the physical properties of paintings—form, line, and colour. Porsolt championed McCahon as an artist whose relation to representation continually equivocated between the autonomy of the means—paint applied to the surface—and a search for the truth about the existence of God. Porsolt saw McCahon’s work as loaded with emotional expression and experiences, something he referred to as “content” (1959: 366). For Porsolt, McCahon’s content “[excluded] the possibility of rendering details, this style permits concentration on the essence of natural forms, as perceived and strongly felt by the artist. It also forces him to employ his powers of design to express his feelings” (1959: 365).

Porsolt found it useful to use musical analogies to introduce abstraction to his readers. In 1959, he wrote that *The Northland Panels* (1958):

... were perhaps the best McCahon has exhibited so far ... which should be read together like a musical suite, with rising and falling rhythms, changing lyrical moods and an intellectually nostalgic background thought which he gives intermittent verbal expression by actually writing it out in so many words as part of the pictorial but also poetic component. Beneath the visual search lurks the search for emotional anchorage (Porsolt 1959: 366).

In this same article, he goes on to write about McCahon’s *The Wake* (1958) as the “creation of a pictorial-poetic unity of music and verse in song. In that sense it is a music style painting, although of literary origin” (Porsolt 1959: 366). He commends McCahon for his wavering writing on the canvases and use of the trunks of kauri trees as interstices, seeing this as a step towards the emancipation of painting from reliance on literature towards a greater abstraction. He described New Zealand painting as having a symbiotic relationship to literature, growing like “a strange rata vine which may become a tree one day, although it is unlikely to kill off its host” (Porsolt 1959: 365). He also deploys a musical analogy in his analysis of the McCahon painting that won the Hay’s competition in Christchurch in 1959, describing its four rectangular shapes as being like the four movements of a simple symphony.

Porsolt believed that in inscribing *The Northland Panels* with the phrase “a landscape with too few lovers”, McCahon was “longing to love what one feels one ought to”, and was wrestling with the idea that his painting should reflect his New Zealand character (Porsolt 1959: 365). Wölfflin and Worringer were art historians who believed in a German style of art that reflected the national character. Like many who had escaped Nazism, Porsolt avoided nationalism but believed that local circumstances had to be acknowledged. He consciously built up the European context for McCahon’s primitive figures as “medievalizing” and related the structure of McCahon’s compositions to “Mondrian, Cézanne, Picasso, Michelangelo, Titian ... It would be absolutely wrong to regard these stylisings as

artificial inseminations of the imagination ... [rather they are] deliberate tests of the painter’s own ability to digest influence” (Porsolt 1963b: 272).

Conclusion

Porsolt was proud to call himself a New Zealander, and believed that he was responding to the environment in his own architectural design. In one of his pieces of writing on architecture, he was critical of examples of colonial architecture in Auckland which he felt failed to acknowledge local context such as the French Renaissance-styled Customhouse (1888–1890) designed by Edward Mahoney. Architectural historian John Stacpoole reacted immediately, “Not being a New Zealander Mr Porsolt cannot be expected to fully appreciate that the Customhouse built when Auckland was 48 years old was a considerable achievement then” (Stacpoole 1973: 3). Porsolt retorted in his own letter to the editor of the *Listener* the following month, “[Stacpoole] refers to me as a non-New Zealander. As a matter of fact I am one, not by the blind accident of birth, but by a conscious act of choice” (Porsolt 1973a: 4).

Porsolt’s teaching and writing at the School of Architecture emphasised the continuity of Western architecture from antiquity, particularly ancient Greece, through the classical revivals to twentieth-century modernism. His art writing sought to build an appreciation for abstraction by educating readers about the importance of compositional structure. He was a distinctive voice, not only because of his strong Central European accent, but also because he was a modernist who was outspoken in his defence of Auckland’s architectural heritage. He was well attuned to a regional dynamic, as his description of Auckland shows: “an unsettled city, roaming people from the south, from Britain, and other foreigners ... this volcanic city likes to be disrespectful of established values” (Porsolt 1962: 295). Porsolt was a significant architect, art writer, and architectural history and design teacher in the loose cosmopolitan subculture that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s in Auckland. A key supporter of the development of abstraction in painting when New Zealand-born critics decried it, and a practitioner of both rondo-cubism and Pacific regionalism in architecture, he used his “foreignness” to advantage.

The notion that European émigrés brought a homogeneous modernism with them to New Zealand has been discredited. Nonetheless, Porsolt saw himself as a kind of missionary, leaving instructions that the words “A Messenger of Modernism” be engraved on his headstone. As a messenger, he was highly important, if somewhat idiosyncratic.

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