

Finalist

2016 HOME OF
THE YEAR

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— WINNER —
BEST MULTI-UNIT
RESIDENTIAL
2016

View Finder

Intricate, intimate
and bold, a new Wellington
apartment development
by Parsonson Architects
shows how high-density
living can enhance a historic
neighbourhood.

TEXT — Jeremy Hansen

PHOTOGRAPHY — Jeff Brass



Despite ensuring plans complied with council regulations, the consent process was “a bastard,” according to architect Gerald Parsonson. Public opposition to the building has diminished since the development was completed.



Left Architect Gerald Parsonson playfully referenced the rooflines of heritage homes in the area, as well as multi-unit work by Sir Ian Athfield and Roger Walker. **Above** Finished to a high standard, the owners developed the apartments to rent out rather than sell. The kitchen cabinetry in every unit is bamboo, while the appliances are by Fisher & Paykel.



Each apartment in the complex has a different layout. The tenants in the space above moved here from a traditional 320-square-metre house, and love the 96-square-metre apartment for its natural light, spaciousness and the way the windows capture views of the hills as well as the activity of the street below. A 'Mite' lamp by Marc Sadler for Foscarini stands in the corner of the living room.

It started as a tribute. In the late 1930s, George and Eleftheria Zavos immigrated to New Zealand from Greece and moved into a villa on a prominent site in the Wellington suburb of Mount Victoria. The home became a hub of the Greek community, and the couple lived there for decades: Eleftheria remained there after George's death until she passed away in 2010, just shy of her 100th birthday.

The property then passed into the ownership of George and Eleftheria's only child, Vafilika Argus (known to friends and family as Koula) and her husband Angelos. By this time, the villa had been subsumed by a series of haphazard modifications that had all but obliterated its character. But Koula and Angelos were determined to keep the property in family ownership, and create something there that might honour George and Eleftheria's memory.

Angelos and Koula are property owners and occasional developers who divide their time between Wellington and Sydney. Architect Gerald Parsonson had once rented an office from them in Courtenay Place, which had led to them hiring him to design the Mitika apartment building in Oriental Bay, where Angelos and Koula live and which won a New Zealand Institute of Architects' Regional Award in 2005. Almost a decade later in Mount Victoria, they asked Parsonson (who worked on the project with his colleague Craig Burt) if he could come up with a multi-unit proposition for the site, but his initial suggestion of a row of two-storey townhouses that wrapped around the corner fell flat. "Angelos hated it," Parsonson says. "It was standard and mundane and really predictable." So the architect went back to the drawing board to hatch a more ambitious plan.

The Zavos Corner Apartments, as they're known, have elegantly slotted 16 bedrooms onto a site that formerly held a single villa. The eight apartments range in size from one to three bedrooms and are placed in a Rubik's Cube-like way around a courtyard. The majority are on a single level; each has a different floor plan, with small decks at each end of the living spaces bringing natural light and offering neighbourhood views (the ground-floor apartments have small fenced patios). The building's cutout roof forms playfully riff on the rhythm of the neighbourhood's heritage homes and are wrapped in corrugated steel, another nod to the older dwellings in the street.

We know many of our cities need to accommodate more people, but doing this while keeping their existing residents happy can seem an impossible task. Part of the problem is that so many people believe higher-density buildings will destroy a neighbourhood's character. Mount Victoria – an affluent suburb full of heritage homes and a fiercely protective residents' association – is no exception. Parsonson worked hard to ensure the apartments complied with regulations: they met site coverage restrictions, didn't break recession planes and shade the neighbours, and ticked every box in the city council's multi-unit housing design guide. Despite this, "it was a bastard of a consent to go through," he says. "People say, 'not

in my backyard, mate' and you can see why, but if [a new building] is done well, it's different."

The irony of this opposition is that Mount Victoria's character is partly the result of its loosely regulated origins, where homes were jammed cheek-by-jowl against one another in an almost haphazard way. And while the suburb is best known for its heritage homes, it contains a variety of homes from every era. Parsonson, who lives in the suburb, used this fact to his advantage during the consent process, pointing to medium-density buildings in the neighbourhood including a bunch of modernist concrete apartment blocks (there's one right next door to the Zavos Corner Apartments), and some multi-unit work by Sir Ian Athfield and Roger Walker.

The Zavos Corner building is actually two almost-separate structures – one that wraps around the corner containing six apartments, a smaller segment containing two additional apartments. These elements are separated by a gap allowing access to the courtyard, and connected by a "bridge" that is actually a deck for one of the apartments. Car parking is concealed in an underground garage. The corner features a digital clock at its apex, a whimsical addition that Parsonson included as a sort of civic gesture. Angelos initially balked at the expense of designing and installing it, but Koula persuaded him to go with it, and now he likes how passersby will look up to see the time or the temperature.

The apartments are being rented to tenants by Angelos and Koula, who have no plans to sell them. They are undeniably finished to a high standard and, this, combined with the fact that the apartments were created to honour George and Eleftheria's memory, has led some people to presume that the building is a money-losing enterprise. Angelos says emphatically that this isn't the case. "Economically, it's a viable project," he says. "It's true that if [I was] looking for something which gave me a bigger return we could have cut corners to reduce the cost. But we are not in that situation. We want to make sure that whatever we develop is an improvement to Wellington City."

Opposition to the apartments seems to have mostly faded away; council planners have even invited Parsonson to a multi-unit housing talkfest. "Hopefully they're starting to embrace this sort of thing," Parsonson says. But Ellen Blake of the Mount Victoria Residents' Association said via email that she still believes "this development doesn't blend in with the early 1900s character of the area at all. A well-loved mural and a public seat was lost when this was built."

The Home of the Year jury begs to differ: In our collective opinion, this project shows how density can be designed well in a character area. It's a tribute to George and Eleftheria Zavos that we hope will have an influence far outside its neighbourhood. "We wanted to put something on the site that we can actually be proud of," Angelos says. We think, with the help of Parsonson Architects, he and Koula have done just that. **H**

The Zavos Corner Apartments have elegantly slotted 16 bedrooms onto a site that was once home to a single villa. The aluminium joinery is APL's Metro Series. The apartments were built by Field and Hall.





Top This apartment is located on the second floor under the clock tower. The ceilings follow the pitch of the rooftop. The open-plan kitchen and living area lead to a patio. A painting by Tracy Croucher from Bowen Galleries hangs on the wall in the living area. **Above** Cutout roof forms are clad in corrugated steel, a nod to older dwellings in the street. **Right** The whimsical addition of a clock is seen as a civic gesture to the neighbourhood.





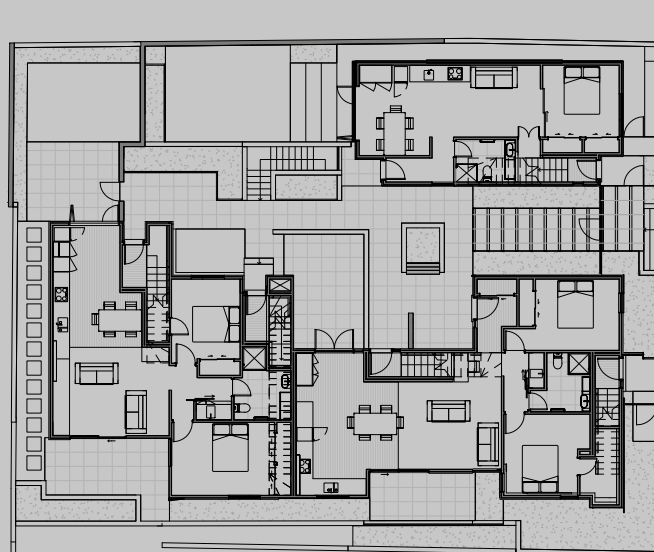
DESIGN NOTEBOOK

*Q&A with Gerald Parsonson
of Parsonson Architects*

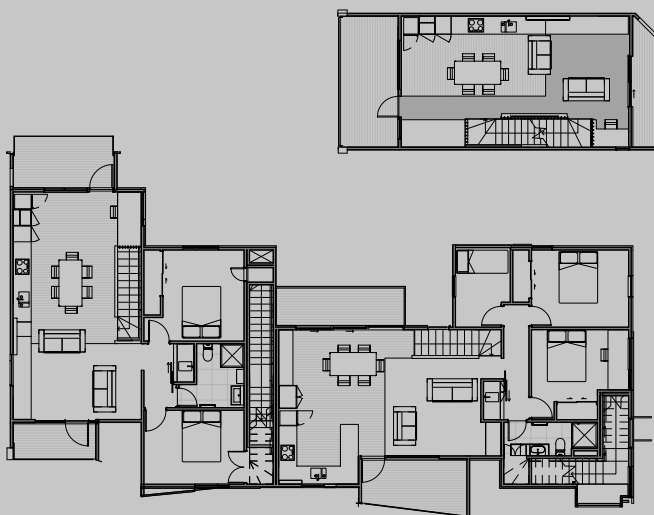
The apartments are in a neighbourhood with tough design guidelines. How did the process go? It was a bastard. Because we were knocking over a pre-1935 building, the council had the option to put us through the hoops on absolutely everything. It was expensive in terms of architects, lawyers and council costs. We were pushing for a non-notified consent because the new building complied in every way – it was under coverage, under envelope, it satisfied the multi-unit housing design guide. The Mount Victoria Residents' Association was consulted and they said they couldn't support the demolition of the existing house or the new building.

How did you decide what the building would look like? Quite quickly we came to this idea of abstracted frames that would contain the verandahs and decks and, in some cases, made them larger so they contained the windows of the apartment below. It almost confuses what were stratified apartments and gives them vertical presence – it's interweaving two dwellings together instead of identifying them as one. Angelos wanted single-level apartments, so the building is a hybrid that may look like townhouses or apartments. This approach breaks the building down into smaller elements, and we were pleased this created a reference to roofscapes by Athfield and Walker, who have been busy in Mt Vic in the past. Inside, we tried to create something that was really liveable but dense. We worked hard to make sure the spaces felt open and generous but with privacy between dwellings.

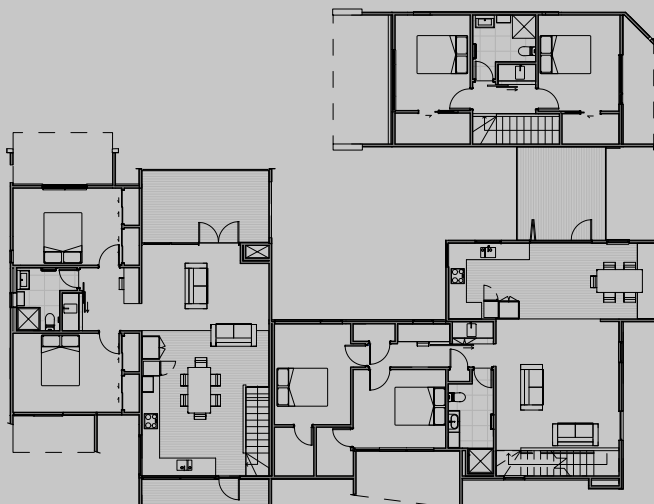
Now that it's complete, what has been the reaction to the building? The opposite of what it was beforehand. Hopefully [the council] is embracing that sort of thing. I think it's the way of the future. It's how you create denser, sustainable cities that don't have transport issues. Otherwise we'll just keep building more suburbia, more motorways, more spread.



Ground floor



First floor



Second floor