

## Glue and Gumption

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**Abstract:** *Between austerity and excess lies the caravan. This paper looks at a recent project by Auckland designer Katy Wallace. Wallace's mission was to rethink the interior of that ultimately austere space – the caravan. Firstly, the paper positions Wallace's project within the historical context of the modern caravan. Secondly, it looks at how Wallace has responded to the dual needs of the contemporary interior and those of confined spaces of an existing caravan. Finally, the paper examines the caravan in the wider context of recent New Zealand holiday location architecture. In a period in which a new breed of holiday houses strives for austerity and seemingly achieves only excess, this paper questions whether the caravan will ever again find a place at the twenty first century beach.*

**Keywords:** *caravan; design; beach architecture*

### Introduction

In 2002, Katy Wallace, a leading New Zealand furniture and lighting designer, turned her attention to the re-design of a caravan interior. The project, which explored notions of storage, assemblage and transportability, was, as the designer saw it, a natural extension of her work thus far. To Wallace, a caravan provided a logical next step – a box into which to place her ideas. Other connections could also be made between Wallace's recent work and the traditions of caravan design. Like many contemporary designers Wallace's work was full of references to the recent, modernist, past. There had also been a certain material commonality between Wallace's previous work and the traditional building materials of caravans – plywood, folded metal, laminates and applied decorative vinyl.

The logic of the shift was less obvious to the design community. The New Zealand caravan industry is neither large nor innovative. Where there is design input at all, it follows the 'international' model. In this, opportunities for designers are identified as limited by the extreme maturity of technology used, and by production methods that have not changed substantially for many years. In New Zealand, as elsewhere in the caravan industry, the design process is 'incremental and customer-led' (Davis, 1993, p. 376).

At the same time, the New Zealand caravan industry is in decline, and has been for decades. The beginning of this decline is usually traced to the Muldoon government's (1975–84) decision to tax new caravan production. This, combined with the rise in world oil prices in the later 1970s, contributed to a dramatic fall in the sale of caravans. At the time many caravan manufactures collapsed. Among those that survived there was a significant decline in

research and development, already at minimal levels. As a result, the caravan, at least in the public imagination, failed to progress past a technical, social and aesthetic highpoint – the late 1970s. It was into this climate that Wallace launched the Katy Wallace Caravan Project (KWCP).

### **Historical background**

The modern caravan, as we know it, emerged in America in the 1920s. These first generation vehicles were called auto-campers and ‘tended to be jerry built home made contraptions – often part car, part tent’ (Busch, 1995, p. 115). By the 1930s however, the appeal of auto-camping was becoming evident and caravans began to be mass-produced. A new caravan (trailer – in American English) industry saw the caravan transformed from ‘scrap heap assemblage to technical object’ (Wallis, 1991, p. 15). In Britain, the caravan followed a similar developmental trajectory and where, after 1995, the design and manufacture of caravans became highly industrialised.

A number of caravan manufacturers were active in New Zealand and Australia in the post war period. However, in both of these countries caravan development varied somewhat from American and British models. In both Australia and New Zealand, the post war caravan retained strong connections to its homemade roots. Caravan building and design remained a popular pursuit for do-it-yourself home handy men. The role of the amateur in the dissemination of new ideas in caravan design was widely recognised by caravan professionals. Ted Palmer, ‘one of Australia’s most experienced caravan builders,’ wrote in 1962: ‘There are no special tools needed for making this caravan, but if you are inexperienced in building, redraw all the details to familiarise yourself with measurements and fitting in. Use plenty of glue and gumption ... There is always room for improvement in all things’ (Winser, 1962, p. 23).

Professionals like Palmer both manufactured readymade caravans and sold plans to amateur builders. Similarly, in New Zealand, professional caravan builders, such as Bruce Webster, the original designer and maker of the *Lilliput Caravan* (on which Wallace’s KWCP was modeled), launched themselves into the industry after making home made prototypes in their garages. Often these manufacturers proceeded to build runs of caravans in those garages until such time that the business was able to expand into bigger premises.

### **The existing formula**

Ted Palmer’s 1962 10ft *Pleasure Van* was an update of his earlier *8ft Glamour Van*. The floor plan of both employed the typical layout found in most post war caravans. A single door was positioned to the front of the left wheel. This opened onto an arrangement of table, partnered on either side, by a banquette seating arrangement. This could, at night, double

as a third berth – by removing or lowering the table. Immediately in front of the open door was a kitchen sink and stove. A small bench space was provided. At the tail end of the caravan, under a panoramic window, a sliding lounge bed provided both a daytime couch and a double bed. The remaining space, on the door wall featured a pantry cupboard and a wardrobe. In most cases a ceiling hatch ventilated the interior. Although the caravan would expand in size, throughout the 1960s and 1970s variations to this basic plan were unusual.

The austerity of caravan planning is seldom replicated in the furnishing of caravan interiors, which closely replicate the excesses of the suburban home. Gillian Horn in her essay 'Everyday in the Life of a Caravan,' suggested that caravan: 'Interiors are the stage sets of home, with images of homeliness veneered onto every surface. There is a discernable formula behind the caravan interior founded on iconic images of the home, which are grafted together to form a ready-made house-set, a distillation of the domestic suburban interior' (Horn, 1998, p. 28).

Ted Palmer, caravan designer extraordinaire, had recognised the importance of such allusions when he advised would be caravan builders to include two additional features – venetian blinds and a mirror. Palmer described the mirror in particular as 'really important in the decorative set-up'. He wrote: 'colourful flowers in front of the mirror are doubled in reflection. On the shelf in front of the mirror complete the picture of a home. Important indeed, believe me, when touring under adverse conditions' (Winser, 1962, p. 24). Caravans were not suburban homes but they had to feel like them. The provision of a mirror and a vase implied the existence of the missing mantelpiece and fireplace that provided the focus for the domestic interior of the day.

The *Glamour Van* and the *Pleasure Van* were by the 1960s essentially 'classics' of caravan design – their ovoid silhouettes and plywood construction had been common since the 1940s. As the decade progressed other, more rectangular forms, were emerging that offered occupants more space. Models like the *Interstate* and the *Beachcomber* both reflected the newer external forms of the sixties and 'seventies caravan, however the interior layout of the caravan remained close to that of earlier designs.

Even as the Winser Handbook, in which Ted Palmer's designs featured extensively, reached its ninth edition, caravan culture was beginning to see the emergence of changes that would later have a major effect on the caravanning world. Already there was a trend towards camper vans – in which the accommodation and the vehicle are the same. These physical changes were however minor in comparison to the issues of status that would increasingly affect caravans through the 1960s and 1970s.

Even as caravans experienced their first increase in numbers they were, somewhat ironically, beginning to have image problems. In Britain, representatives of the caravan manufacturing industry, concerned with the declining status of the caravan, gifted *The Royal Caravan* to Princess Anne and Prince Charles as a playroom, in the hope of reversing the trend away from caravans. In the United States the establishment of trailer parks, initially envisioned as retirement communities, increasingly gained a poor reputation. The caravan, or trailer, became symbolic of the lowest level of social status. Furthermore the middle class family of the 1950s, who had enjoyed the mobility that the caravan had given them, had by the 1970s and 1980s discovered a new international mobility brought about by cheap international air travel and budget accommodation.

The caravan, it seemed, succeeded with the wider public so long as the idea of home evolved slowly and the ambitions of homeowners remained relatively egalitarian; that is, before the age of a high degree of individualism came to dominate the design of domestic interior spaces and holiday destinations became linked to status. The caravan, which had 'been founded on iconic images of the home, grafted together to form a ready made house-set: a distillation of the domestic suburban interior' (Horn, 1998, p. 29), began to represent something (the suburb) that the middle class were keen to escape. The caravan began to be seen as 'unaspiring, unglamorous and unwelcome in our upwardly mobile communities' (Horn, 1998, p. 28).

### **The redesign project**

The tasks Katy Wallace faced, in attempting to re-design a caravan for a contemporary audience, were multiple and complicated. A contemporary caravan had to reflect current ideas about the interior, while at the same time dealing with issues surrounding the decreased status of the caravan form itself. Given this, Wallace's choice of a 1966 *Lilliput Caravan* as the starting point for her re-design was potentially problematic. The reasons for Wallace's choice were two-fold. The resources available to the designer did not make the design of a new caravan from the ground up possible. The notion of sustainability entered the equation. If a new caravan can be rebuilt from an existing largely redundant shell then an undervalued resource can be reused. Elements of the caravan were recycled. Similarly other elements of the caravan's original fittings were re-used, the stove and fridge for example. Secondly, by using the recognisable form of the *Lilliput caravan* Wallace was able to reference the more desirable aspects of caravan iconography.

The discovery that the recent past, or history, can where needs be, be carefully managed to the designer's advantage, is a characteristic of much contemporary design. It matters little

how the 1960s or 1970s actually occurred in New Zealand, or Australia, it matters only to what extent remnants of those decades can be remade into the current idea of the 1960s or 1970s. Wallace's use of the existing caravan brought with it a familiarity that guaranteed a wider audience.

Wallace started by stripping the interior down to the bare shell. The components that were removed from the caravan became part of an exhibition at Lopdell House Gallery in Auckland, (the site for the eventual debut of the completed caravan). In this exhibition, Wallace rearranged components such as cupboard doors, drawer fronts, and a folding table on the wall of the gallery in such a way that the outlines of the arrangements duplicated the cross sectional form of the caravan. Each of these components remained functional – opening a door or cupboard revealed a different section of applied pattern adhered to the gallery wall. On the floor of the gallery the floor plan of a *Lilliput Caravan* was laid out in white tape. Together the two components of this exhibition served to remind viewers of the traditional form of the caravan and to signal the designer's intention to make changes.

With the caravan reduced to a skeleton superstructure a rethinking of the interior spaces could begin. The first problem was to bring about a closer relationship between interior and exterior forms of the caravan. Although the traditional caravan interior is directly modeled on the generic suburban home, the caravan exterior makes no similar gesture. To a contemporary audience the most desirable aspect of caravan iconography is of course its exterior profile.

Wallace began with the windows. Traditionally caravan designers had chosen to maximise window area to provide an additional sense of space. Over time, new glass technologies allowed for more and more expansive areas of glass. With its under-seat banquette, the large caravan window replicated the bay window of the suburban home. As Horn states: 'the interior layout of the caravan is arranged under the orthodox principle that separates private sleeping and washing areas from the more public cooking dining and socializing areas' (Horn, 1998, p. 29). The positioning of the caravan with a park, however, radically departs from the suburban conventions that ensure privacy. With the physical boundaries of site, essentially ending at the caravan perimeter, the result is that the caravan's occupants become over exposed. The desire for privacy within the park had, paradoxically, led to extensive curtaining of the interior space and further extending its references to the suburban home.

Creating an interior space in which the occupant felt in control of views (both in and out) presented the designer with her first problem. Wallace dealt with this by removing one wall

of windows from the caravan, thus reducing the penetrability of the interior. At the same time this provided a solid wall around which to rearrange the interior functions. The reduction in light brought about by these changes was compensated for by the addition of two doors to the left hand side of the caravan. The first door replicated the scale and form of traditional caravan door – although not the half and half stable door recommended by many traditional caravan designers. The second door was a wider door that occupies a third of the elevation. The use of a large window in this door brought a new vertical orientation to the view from the caravan. At the same time the dramatic sweep of this door in the process of opening, created a screen that, used in tandem with the other door, acted to define, and co-opt, an outdoor space for the caravan.

The introduction of a solid side to the caravan helped redefine the spatial schematic of the project. In implementing her changes, Wallace adopted a bay structure in the caravan scheme. This was drawn from the very location that the caravan might eventually find it self. As Wallace put it 'there is always one view on a holiday you don't want' (Lloyd-Jenkins & Wallace, 2003). The bay, or cove form, provides dwellers with both protection and a clear point of approach or welcome. It is a typology suited to the caravan. The protecting wall



*Figure 1: Exterior Katy Wallace Caravan Project (2003)  
(Photography: Katy Wallace)*

of the caravan becomes home of storage and supplies. The element of nurturing provided by the sheltering headlands of a bay, are here employed as a storage unit. The use of strips of red neoprene rubber, in what is a bandage-like effect, enforces the idea of nurturing. However the use of red rubber also introduces colour into the caravan. This dramatic use of colour provides the key motif through which the interior of the caravan can be individualised to suit different clients.

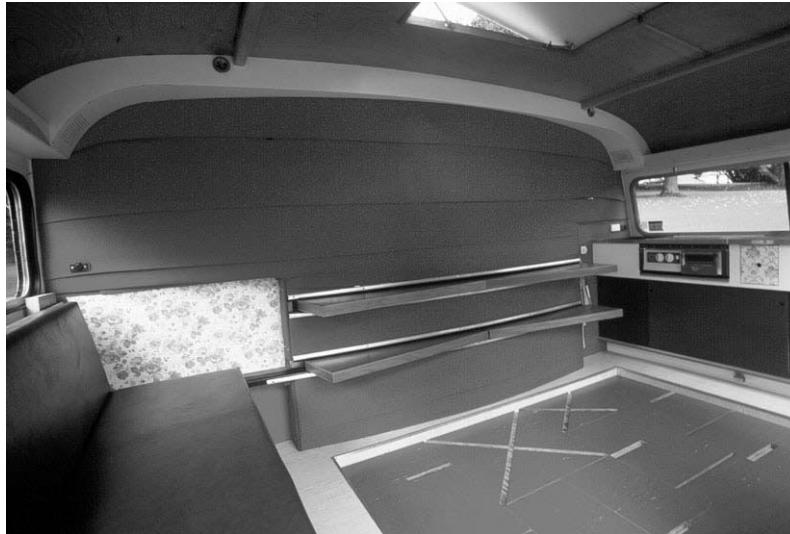
The solid wall, referred to by Wallace as 'the activity wall', gave the designer the opportunity to rethink the distribution of interior functions throughout the remainder of the caravan. Traditionally, the caravan has placed eating and entertainment functions and sleeping functions at opposite ends of the interior, and cooking at a central point in the caravan (possibly to take advantage of greater head height). Wallace regroups these functions – placing the sleeping and kitchen quarters at opposite ends of the caravan. Utilising a recessed floor plan courtesy of the original designer of the *Lilliput* solved the potential problem of headroom.

The activity wall includes a series of slots into which are slotted a series of wooden planks. These can be arranged into different functional groupings as required. Four identically sized and shaped wooden components, act as a small shelf when in the closed position parallel to the wall, can also be rearranged to provide seating at a table – for between one and four people. An alternative arrangement provides a small desk used in relationship to either bed or couch. The same arrangement at the other end of the room provides an additional bench space – or as the designer puts it, perhaps somewhat hopefully – 'a cocktail bar'.

In the Katy Wallace Caravan Project, the kitchen has been accorded a greater status than with traditional caravan design. This position offers the person cooking increased bench space. This responds to changed notions of the idea of the kitchen and cooking that have impacted significantly on the design of house and apartments. Cooking is now a spectator event. Whereas in the old caravan the table was made to double as kitchen preparation space – dining and preparation are now two distinct areas of activity. The cook must be able to work – thus bench space but must also be observed – thus the arrangement of bench seating and flexible activity wall at the other end of the space.

### **On the road**

With the caravan completed, the initial gallery exhibition was followed by a tour of museums and galleries throughout the North Island. The tour attracted national publicity most notably on the six o'clock news broadcast. Early publicity surrounding the caravan described it as



*Figure 2: Interior Katy Wallace Caravan Project (2003)  
(Photography: Katy Wallace)*

'retro'. Similarly, writing on the caravan identified it as 'new design' but the idea of the caravan itself was presented, particularly by television, as nostalgic.

Nostalgia is an understandable reaction, given that the caravan is intimately linked, in the public imagination, to the past. Wallace's interior refit of the caravan might connect both caravan exterior and interior together but to link the caravan with the wider community – as a desirable, and contemporary, design commodity – might be all together more difficult

As we have established, the traditional caravan took its references from the suburban house. In turn, the caravan park took its references from the wider suburb. In the parks, residents 'lived out what is considered to be a nostalgic ideal of community: friendly connected and informal' (Horn, 1998, p. 30). However, today the suburban ideal that produced the caravan is itself in tatters. With the middle class obsessed with the acquisition of assets, the caravan has failed to establish itself in the hierarchy of appreciating assets. The caravan has lost status when compared to the caravan's primary rival as holiday accommodation – the bach.

The bach is a small basic shelter built by New Zealanders at key beach, lake or mountain locations. Although traditionally seldom more than a couple of rooms covered with a sloping corrugated iron roof, the constant references made to the bach by architects, filmmakers and other icon makers has seen the bach grown in status since the 1970s. To this should be



added the knowledge that the handmade nature of the bach meant that the interiors were usually highly individualised. On the whole, bach structures are seen as 'big on personality' and reflecting a 'certain way of life, a more primitive existence' (Male, 2001, p. 9).

The success of the idea of the bach lies in its placement on a plot of land. More than that, the bach is connected to that highly desirable commodity beachfront property. This has brought about a rapid change in the bach. Indeed the 'humble' bach is disappearing in favor of beachfront holiday homes that mimic the original form of the bach although at a vastly increased scale. The appearance of these architect-designed homes characterised by the phrase popular in interior magazines to denote a lack of pretension: 'keep it simple I said to my architect', has brought about a change in the nature of beachfront locations. Whereas the bach had humble beginnings and an egalitarian agenda, increased property values and expensive homes have seen the introduction of security fences, burglar alarms and trespass notices.

If the beach is becoming rapidly less egalitarian, rapidly less middle class to the point that even its permanent resident the bach is disappearing, what then of its uninspiring unglamorous, unwelcome and essentially transient visitor – the caravan? Wallace's re-design of the caravan could be seen to satisfy the demand of a newer generation of design conscious urbanites who demand a certain standard of design in their interior spaces – even on holiday.

## **Conclusion**

It waits to be seen whether the Katy Wallace Caravan Project will succeed; it is a prototype after all. Yet, it is worth recalling here that from the beginning Wallace's project made overtures to a seemingly moribund industry uninterested in design. Success of a project like the Katy Wallace Caravan Project is difficult to measure. However at least one thing is sure, the contemporary beach has less place for the caravan than ever; with camping grounds and caravan parks being subdivided and sold up for individual housing, even apartments. Wallace may have been able to turn the old caravan into something new but it remains to be seen whether a fleet of caravans, even with cocktail bars as standard fittings, can make a foothold in the space of the new New Zealand beach.

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