

# Molecular Design and Synthesis of Dicarbazolophane-Based Centrosymmetric through-Space Donors for Solution-Processed Thermally Activated Delayed Fluorescence OLEDs

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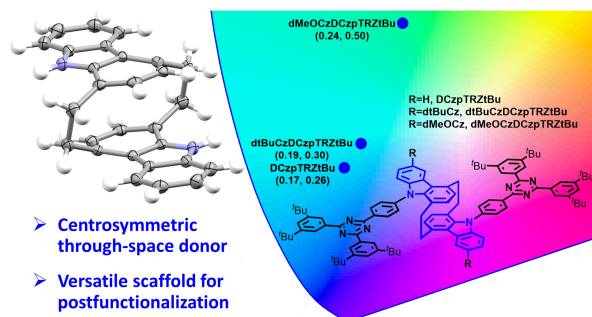
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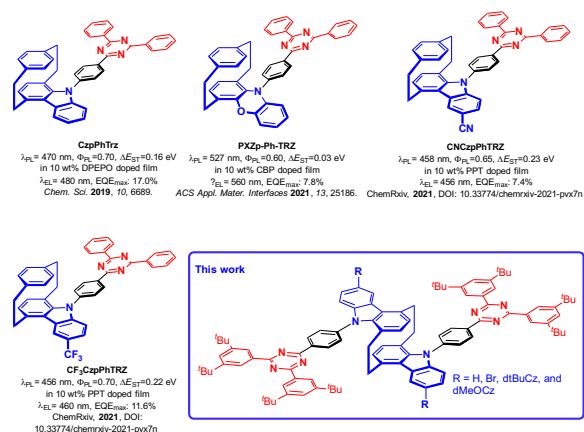


**ABSTRACT:** Conjugation-extended carbazolophane donors, dicarbazolophanes (**DCzp**), were designed and synthesized by a multi-fold stepwise Pd-catalyzed Buchwald-Hartwig amination/ring cyclization process. Further, elaboration of the **DCzp** core is possible with introduction of pendant carbazole derivative groups. This provided a way of tuning the optoelectronic properties of the thermally activated delayed fluorescence (TADF) compounds **DCzpTRZtBu**, **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu**, and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**. Solution-processed OLEDs were fabricated and achieved maximum external quantum efficiencies ( $\text{EQE}_{\text{max}}$ ) of 8.2% and EQE of 7.9% at 100 cd/m<sup>2</sup>.

The [2.2]paracyclophane (PCP) scaffolds have been used as platforms to study both planar chirality and through-space charge mobility and electronic communication in  $\pi$ -stacked molecular systems.<sup>1</sup> The configurationally rigid PCP scaffold is chemically stable towards light, oxidation, acids and bases, thus making it a promising molecular building block in organic electronics.<sup>2</sup> We first reported the electron-donor carbazolophane (Czp), that merges the structure of the PCP

with carbazole.<sup>3</sup> Compared to carbazole (Cz), this donor adopts a more twisted conformation in donor-acceptor systems due to its larger size while the enlarged conjugation in the CzP results in a stronger electron donor. Further, the inherent planar chirality of the donor translates to emitters that show circularly polarized luminescence (CPL) (**Figure 1**). Incorporation of this donor produced the thermally activated delayed fluorescence (TADF) emitter **CzpPhTRZ**,

which showed a small singlet-triplet energy splitting,  $\Delta E_{ST}$ , of 0.16 eV and a photoluminescence quantum yield,  $\Phi_{PL}$ , of 70% in 10 wt% DPEPO doped film. The organic light-emitting diodes (OLEDs) showed a maximum external quantum efficiency (EQE<sub>max</sub>) of 17.0%. Zheng *et al.* reported an analog of **CzpPhTRZ** that replaced the Czp donor with a phenoxazinephane (PXZp).<sup>4</sup> The generated molecule, **PXZp-Ph-TRZ**, possesses a red-shifted emission and a smaller  $\Delta E_{ST}$  of 0.03 eV leading to yellow TADF OLEDs with EQE<sub>max</sub> of 7.8%. Very recently, we designed and synthesized two deep blue TADF emitters, **CNCzpPhTRZ** and **CF<sub>3</sub>CzpPhTRZ**, through introduction of electron-withdrawing cyano (CN) and trifluoromethyl (CF<sub>3</sub>) groups onto the Czp moiety. **CNCzp-PhTRZ** and **CF<sub>3</sub>CzpPhTRZ** emit at 458 and 456 nm with  $\Phi_{PL}$  of 65% and 70% in 10 wt% PPT doped film, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Blue OLEDs exhibited EQE<sub>max</sub> of 7.4% at 456 nm for **CNCzp-PhTRZ**, and EQE<sub>max</sub> of 11.6% at 460 nm for **CF<sub>3</sub>CzpPhTRZ**. As shown in **Figure 1**, only a single deck of the PCP has been elaborated in each of these TADF emitters.



**Figure 1.** Chemical structures and performances of PCP-based emitters.

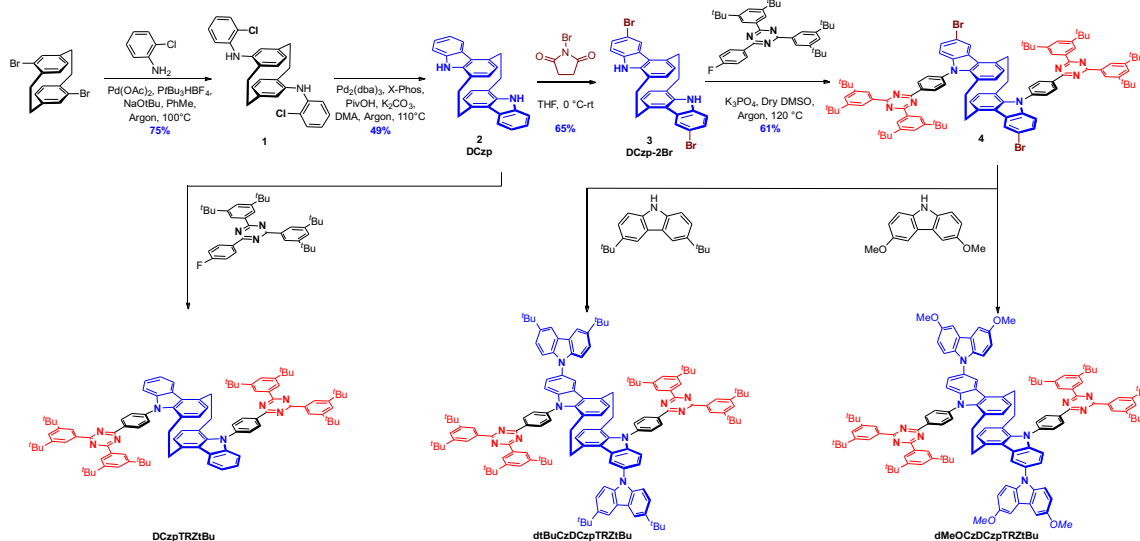
Here, we report the development of a new centrosymmetric through-space dicarbazolophane (**DCzp**) core, obtained through elaboration of both decks of the PCP. Owing to the molecular weight of the emitters, solution-processed

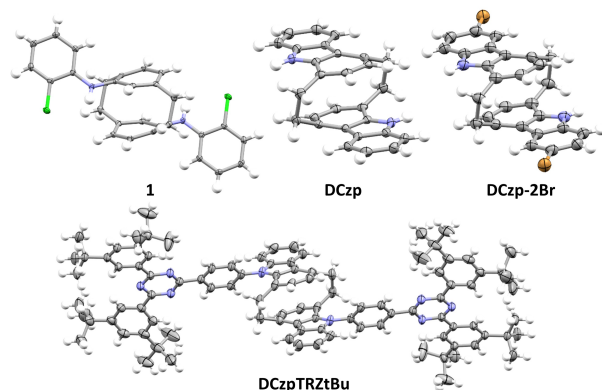
devices were targeted. Solution-processed TADF devices have been fabricated by employing polymers, dendrimers, and small molecules as emitters. Here we explored making small molecules solution-processable. This approach has given promising results,<sup>6</sup> including the reports by Lu *et al.* and Kaji *et al.*, of EQE<sub>max</sub> of solution-processed blue TADF OLEDs of up to 19.1% and 22.1%, respectively.<sup>7</sup>

For the key building block, **DCzp**, we conducted a multi-gram scale synthesis through a two-step protocol employing two-fold Pd-catalysed Buchwald-Hartwig amination using 4,16-dibromo-PCP that afforded the C-N coupling product **1** with a yield of 75% (**Scheme 1**). For the synthesis of the ring cyclization product, using Pd<sub>2</sub>(dba)<sub>3</sub> in combination with X-Phos as a catalyst system proved to be more effective for the two-fold Pd-catalysed oxidative cyclization employing the chlorinated moieties as synthetic handle.<sup>8</sup> **DCzp** (**2**) was obtained in a yield of 49% (1.89 g scale). **DCzp** was selectively dibrominated using NBS in THF to afford **DCzp-2Br** (**3**) in 65% yield. Nucleophilic aromatic substitution with 2,4-bis(3,5-di-*tert*-butylphenyl)-6-(4-fluorophenyl)-1,3,5-triazine produced **DCzpTRZtBu** and the bromo-functionalized intermediate product **4** was further elaborated by grafting peripheral donors 3,6-di-*tert*-butyl-9H-carbazole (dtBuCz) and 3,6-dimethoxy-9H-carbazole (dMeOCz) *via* a two-fold Pd-catalyzed Buchwald-Hartwig cross-coupling to afford **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**, respectively. The introduction of *t*-butyl groups onto the triazine increases the solubility of targeted emitters in organic solvents, which is important for producing high-quality solution-processed devices. These emitters were fully characterized by NMR spectroscopy, mass spectrometry, IR spectroscopy, and Elemental analysis (EA, details see ESI).

The molecular structure of the compounds **1**, **DCzp**, **DCzp-2Br**, and **DCzpTRZtBu** were confirmed by single crystal X-ray analysis (**Figure 2**). The distances between the two benzene decks of the PCP are 3.01 Å for **1**, 3.03 Å for **DCzp**, 3.02 Å for **DCzp-2Br**, and 3.07 Å for **DCzpTRZtBu**, which are somewhat reduced compared to that in the parent PCP (3.09 Å).

**Scheme 1.** Synthetic design towards dicarbazolophane-based emitters (details see ESI).





**Figure 2.** Thermal ellipsoid plots of the crystal structure of **1**, **DCzp**, **DCzp-2Br**, and **DCzpTRZtBu**. Ellipsoids are plotted at the 50% probability level.

Theoretical calculations were employed to establish whether the **DCzp**-based emitters are likely to show TADF (**Figure S22**). The previously reported **CzpPhTrz** has a calculated HOMO level of  $-5.54$  eV, and a  $\Delta E_{ST}$  of  $0.30$  eV. **DCzpTRZtBu** presents a slightly smaller  $\Delta E_{ST}$  of  $0.28$  eV and a HOMO level that is destabilized at  $-5.38$  eV. The extended conjugation present in the **DCzp** compound results in a stronger donor character that is reflected in the shallower HOMO level. The addition of secondary substituted carbazole groups act to further increase the strength of the donor, which leads to a further destabilization of the HOMO level to  $-5.17$  eV for **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu**, and  $-4.93$  eV for **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**. The singlet energy level is strongly affected by the strength of the donor, as we observe a significant decrease in its energy from  $3.11$  eV to  $2.94$  eV, to  $2.75$  eV with increasing strength of the donors present in **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**. The triplet energy level also decreases in energy with increasing donor strength, but not as dramatically as the singlet. This leads to a decrease in  $\Delta E_{ST}$  of  $0.15$  eV and  $0.08$  eV, respectively. All three materials present an intermediate triplet state that is slightly destabilized with respect to the  $T_1$  state. As a result, the increased density of triplet states should lead to an enhancement of the RISC rates.<sup>9</sup>

The energy levels of the emitters were inferred from an analysis of the oxidation and reduction potentials determined by cyclic voltammetry (CV) and differential pulse voltammetry (DPV) in dichloromethane (DCM) (**Figure S23**

and **Table S28**). For **DCzpTRZtBu** and **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** the oxidation was found to be irreversible at a potential of  $1.19$  V vs. SCE and  $1.09$  V vs. SCE, respectively. The oxidation potential for **DCzpTRZtBu** is significantly destabilized compared to that of **CzpPhTrz** at  $1.35$  V (the original value reported was  $1.14$  V; however, this has been revised upon re-examination of the voltammogram), thus, in line with the theoretical calculations. **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** exhibits a reversible oxidation at  $0.90$  V vs. SCE. The substitutions at the carbazoles in the donor moiety of **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** lead to a destabilization of the HOMOs, resulting in the expected cathodic shift of oxidation peak potentials. This observation is confirmed by the DFT calculations. All compounds show irreversible reduction waves with a peak potential of  $-1.62$  V,  $-1.78$  V, and  $-1.72$  V for **DCzpTRZtBu**, **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu**, and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**, respectively.

The absorption spectra (**Figure S24**), steady-state, and time-resolved photoluminescence (PL) are shown in **Figure 3** and the data summarised in **Table 1**. The emission spectrum in toluene is red-shifted with increasing donor strength from **DCzpTRZtBu** at  $\lambda_{PL} = 443$  nm to  $\lambda_{PL} = 458$  nm for **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** and  $\lambda_{PL} = 475$  nm for **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**. Compared with **CzpPhTrz**, the emission in toluene is blue-shifted from  $470$  nm (**CzpPhTrz**) to  $443$  nm (**DCzpTRZtBu**), which shows the potential of **DCzp** donor for deep and pure blue TADF.<sup>3</sup> The PL quantum yield ( $\Phi_{PL}$ ) of degassed toluene solutions of **DCzpTRZtBu** and **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** are  $91\%$  and  $89\%$ , respectively, and showed no significant change upon exposure to oxygen, which suggests the intersystem crossing between  $S_1$  and  $T_1$  is negligible.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the  $\Phi_{PL}$  of **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** in toluene reduces to  $31\%$  in an aerated solution from  $44\%$  in a degassed solution. This follows the trend of the decrease in oscillator strength found in our calculations (**Figure S22**). The transient PL of **DCzpTRZtBu**, **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** were found to decay monoexponentially, with lifetimes of  $16$  ns,  $21$  ns, and  $29$  ns, respectively; therefore, we assign the decrease in PL of **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** to singlet quenching since in toluene these all three compounds behave fluorescent. For all compounds the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  in toluene was measured to be  $> 200$  meV (**Figure S27**) and therefore unlikely to support efficient reverse intersystem crossing (RISC) at room temperature. However, upon rapid cooling using liquid  $N_2$ , the emitters at  $77$  K would be frozen in their respective non-

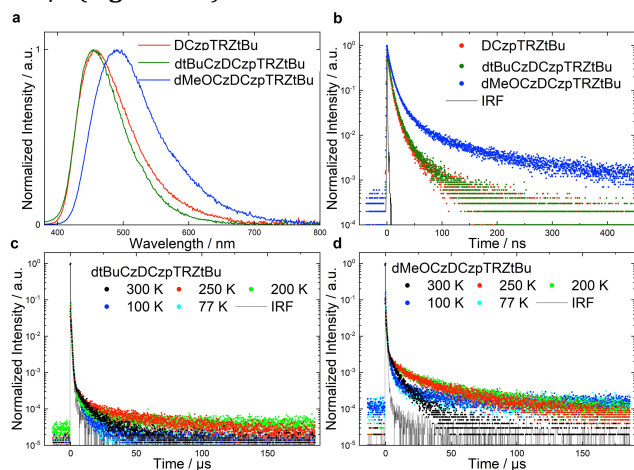
**Table 1.** Photophysical properties of the emitters.

Compound	Toluene				PVK (10 wt%) thin film				
	$\lambda_{PL}$ / nm	$\Phi_{PL}^a$ / %	$\tau_p$ / ns	$\Delta E_{ST}$ / meV	$\lambda_{PL}$ / nm	$\Phi_{PL}^b$ / %	$\tau_p^c$ / ns	$\tau_d$ / $\mu$ s	$\Delta E_{ST}$ / meV
<b>DCzpTRZtBu</b>	443	91 (84)	16	330	455	41 (40)	10	--	115
<b>dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu</b>	458	89 (89)	21	290	455	37 (35)	7.4	9.7	110
<b>dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu</b>	475	44 (31)	29	230	490	41 (38)	6.8	7.7	70

<sup>a</sup> Quinine sulfate (0.5 M) in  $H_2SO_4$  (aq) was used as the reference ( $\Phi_{PL} = 54.6\%$ ,  $\lambda_{exc} = 360$  nm). Values are given for degassed (aerated) solutions, <sup>b</sup> purged with nitrogen (oxygen), <sup>c</sup> average lifetime calculated as  $\tau_{avg} = (\sum A_i \tau_i) / (\sum A_i)^{-1}$ .

equilibrated geometries, resulting in an overestimation of  $\Delta E_{ST}$ .

The compounds were then studied as doped poly(*N*-vinyl carbazole) (PVK) films at a concentration of 10 wt%, the value of which was chosen to optimise the  $\Phi_{PL}$  (Table 1). The steady-state PL spectra and transient PL decays of the compounds are shown in Figure 3. The steady-state PL spectra show the same trends as those in solution but are red-shifted with  $\lambda_{PL} = 455$  nm for **DCzpTRZtBu**,  $\lambda_{PL} = 455$  nm for **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu**, and  $\lambda_{PL} = 490$  nm for **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**. The  $\Phi_{PL}$  for the films is around 40%, which is significantly lower than in solution. This may be due to host-emitter or emitter-emitter deactivation in the films. The transient PL decays of all films show a multiexponential prompt emission with an average lifetime,  $\tau_p$ , of 10 ns, 7.4 ns, and 6.8 ns for **DCzpTRZtBu**, **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu**, and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**, respectively. The transient PL of **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu**, and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** show a multiexponential delayed lifetime component with an average lifetime,  $\tau_d$ , of 9.7  $\mu$ s and 7.7  $\mu$ s at 300 K. The delayed emission lifetime is comparable to the delayed component of **CzpPhTrz** in PVK of 9.0  $\mu$ s (Figure S26).



**Figure 3.** Photoluminescence of emitters in PVK film (10 wt%). (a) Steady-state PL spectra ( $\lambda_{exc} = 345$  nm), (b) prompt PL decay of all emitters, (c) delayed PL decay component at different temperatures of **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** and (d) **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**. For transient PL ( $\lambda_{exc} = 378$  nm).

The delayed component is longer-lived at lower temperatures and does not show a complete quenching at low temperature as expected for a TADF emitter. The  $\Delta E_{ST}$  values are 110 meV and 70 meV for **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu**, and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**, respectively (Figure S28), and thus sufficiently small for TADF to be operational at room temperature. The short delayed lifetime and moderate  $\Phi_{PL}$  at room temperature can be explained by a strong non-radiative decay contribution from the triplet state, which is more pronounced with the introduction of the methoxy substituents. At lower temperatures this pathway is quenched due to fewer vibrations resulting in a longer delayed lifetime. In the case of **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**, RISC does not appear to

be fully suppressed at 77 K. Assuming the previous discussed measured  $\Delta E_{ST} = 70$  meV is identical to the energy barrier for RISC in **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**, we expect  $k_{RISC}$  to be reduced by four orders of magnitude at 77 K from  $k_{RISC}$  at 300 K but not entirely quenched, resulting in a long delayed emission lifetime.

Given the high molecular weights of the emitters, solution-processed devices were fabricated with the following layers: indium tin oxide (ITO) / poly(3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene) polystyrene sulfonate (PEDOT:PSS) (40 nm)/emitter:PVK (10 wt%, 35–40 nm) / 1,3,5-tris(3-pyridyl-3-phenyl)benzene (TmPyPB) (50 nm)/LiF (0.5 nm)/Al (100 nm). The electroluminescence properties are shown in Figure S29 and the device metrics are listed in Table S29. Analogous to the trend observed in the PL study, the emission colour of the devices progressively red-shifts from sky-blue emission for **DCzpTRZtBu** with a  $\lambda_{EL}$  of 475 nm, to  $\lambda_{EL} = 478$  nm for **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** to  $\lambda_{EL} = 515$  nm for **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**. The EL spectra are greener (i.e., relatively red-shifted) than the corresponding PL spectra in the PVK host at the same doping concentration. This might be due to microcavity effects in the device.

The highest  $EQE_{max}$  was found for the device with **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** at 8.2%, and this OLED achieved an efficiency of 7.9% at 100 cd/m<sup>2</sup>. Devices with **DCzpTRZtBu** and **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** exhibited much lower  $EQE_{max}$  of 3.2% and 4.0%, respectively. Based on the previous discussed PLQY of the PVK films doped with **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** ( $\Phi_{PL} = 41\%$ ) the theoretical  $EQE_{max}$  is 8.2% when considering an outcoupling efficiency of  $\chi_{out} \approx 20\%$ , and that all triplet excitons are efficiently converted into singlets. Therefore, we conclude that the OLED operates via an efficient TADF mechanism. The lower efficiency in devices with either **DCzpTRZtBu** or **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu** cannot be explained by singlet emission alone as this would lead to an expected  $EQE_{max}$  of 2.1% and 1.9%, respectively. Therefore, triplet up conversion must occur in these devices too; however, with a lower exciton utilization efficiency than in **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**, which is likely due to their larger  $\Delta E_{ST}$ . **DCzpTRZtBu** did not show any indication of TADF in doped films within our PL studies. As the  $EQE_{max}$  is observed at higher current densities as in the devices with **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu**, the up-conversion might be explained by triplet-triplet annihilation, which is facilitated by a large triplet population.

In this work, we describe the design and modular synthesis of centrosymmetric **DCzp**-based through-space donors via a stepwise Pd-catalyzed Buchwald-Hartwig amination and ring cyclization approach. The PCP-derived emitters, **DCzpTRZtBu**, **dtBuCzDCzpTRZtBu**, and **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** showed  $\Phi_{PL}$  of up to 91% in toluene and 41% in doped PVK films. Consequently, solution-processed OLEDs using **dMeOCzDCzpTRZtBu** were fabricated and achieved an  $EQE_{max}$  of 8.2% via an efficient TADF mechanism.

## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website.

Preparation, X-ray crystallography data (**DCzp (1)**, CCDC 2049645; **DCzp (2)**, CCDC 2049646; **DCzp-2Br (3)**, CCDC 2049647; and **DCzpTRZtBu**, CCDC 2049648), photophysical properties, calculation details, NMR spectra.

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### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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