

LIVING ON THE EDGE VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN IN

# New Zealand

To foreigners, New Zealand is an exotically bucolic, clean green land of extraordinary natural beauty—a pristine playground-destination for thrill-seekers, and a place apart from the rest of the world—a view effectively reinforced by the tourism slogan “100% Pure New Zealand.”

To the country’s quietly self-reliant inhabitants, New Zealand offers a peaceful, friendly, egalitarian and multi-cultural haven for individualists who find themselves surrounded by a moat known as the Pacific Ocean. Blessed with a temperate climate, the island nation enjoys a relaxed lifestyle imbued with a love of the outdoors and the waters surrounding it, and an enviable quality of life.

Less known abroad (under the radar, some might quip) is the wellspring of talent, innovation and design prowess emerging from the NZ creative community—it’s at the forefront of this wave that the candidly fresh and vibrant vernacular of New Zealand’s visual communication design finds itself.

## Ancient history? Not here...

Though legend has it that New Zealand was fished from the sea, geologists tell us that the landmass separated from Antarctica around the mid-Jurassic, some 170 million years ago. Hominid history records this amazing land as the last on earth to be discovered by human beings, leading to its contemporary claim as “the youngest country on earth.” Polynesian Maori first landed in what they called *Aotearoa* (literally “Land of the Long White Cloud”) in voyaging canoes as early as 800 A.D., settling throughout the fertile land, and surviving by farming and hunting.

The first European to lay eyes on New Zealand (in 1642, thinking it might be the southern tip of Argentina) was the lost Dutch explorer Abel Tasman. Over a century passed before the over-achieving Brit cartographer James Cook circumnavigated the islands, triggering the first influx of Euro migrants in the

form of whalers, sealers and (inevitably) missionaries. Ensuing decades followed a similar pattern as those of other “new world” colonizations, with the indigenous Maori being gradually diminished and marginalized (by means of social, economic and cultural imperialism—many succumbed to European diseases such as influenza and measles, others were decimated by bloody inter-tribal warfare following the acquisition of traded muskets).

In 1840, Maori chieftains entered into a compact with Britain’s Queen Victoria, the *Treaty of Waitangi* (considered New Zealand’s founding document), in which they ceded sovereignty while allegedly retaining territorial rights and tribal autonomy. This opened the door to the first organized colonial settlement (40,000 British migrants arrived over the next 20 years by dint of a paid passage). The 1860s South Island gold rush brought more migrants including more English, Scots, Irish and Chinese, and a series of land wars ended with the virtual defeat of the native Maori (and with the confiscation of 95 percent of their traditional lands).

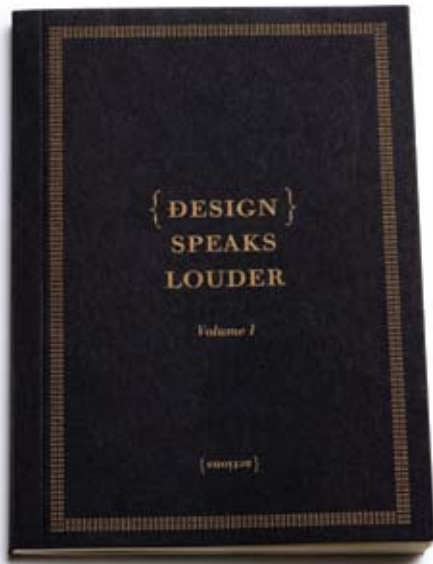
In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation in the modern world to grant women the right to vote (that same year also saw election of the first female mayor anywhere in the British Empire). In 1907, the country became an independent Dominion; then a fully independent parliamentary democracy in 1947.

## Life is good, mate!

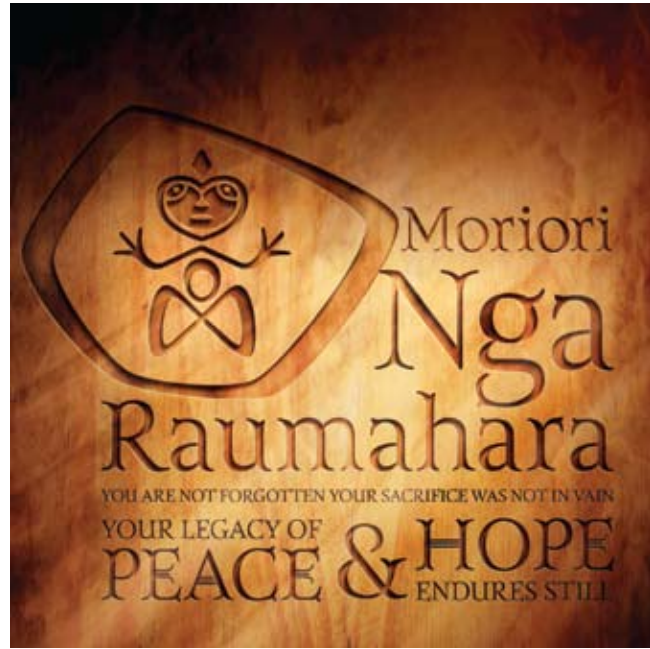
Today’s Kiwis are (mostly) happy, (generally) energetic, well educated, healthy (with publicly funded health and disability services for those who aren’t) and working (unemployment is

Right: *Design Speaks Louder* (self-promotional booklet). Henrik Drescher, illustrator; Studio Alexander, design firm/client.

“Vaka Moana” exhibition (environmental graphics). Arch MacDonnell, design director; Inhouse Design Group, design firm; Auckland Museum, client.



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a low 3.5 percent). They enjoy a rising standard of living as part of a modern, prosperous economy (and a GDP per capita comparable to Southern Europe). New Zealand has a wide range of renewable energy options, with most of today's electricity generated by hydropower. A liberal media arena and stable political environment (Prime Minister Helen Clark's Labour Party has been in power since 1999) contribute to the open, balanced society Kiwis have come to expect.

The past twenty years have seen the country transformed from one of the world's most productive agricultural producers into a more industrialized, free market economy that competes globally (with strong trade links to Australia, the U.S., China, Japan and Europe). Tourism has overtaken agriculture as the main source of foreign exchange, though agriculture is still an economic mainstay (dairy products, lamb and mutton, grains, fruits, vegetables, textiles and fish). The manufacturing sector is growing, and many have their eyes on recent successes in the film industry (the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *The Last Samurai* have brought New Zealand's spectacular glacier-carved mountains, steaming volcanoes, deeply indented fiords and lush rainforests to the eyes of the world).

The country extends more than 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) along its main axis, with over 15,000 kilometers (9,400 miles) of coast-line, and with North and South Islands separated by the windy Cook Strait. With a total land area of 268,680 square

kilometers (103,738 square miles), New Zealand is similar in shape and size to Great Britain (about equal in size to Japan or California). Yet, with a population of only 4.2 million, it is one of the world's least crowded countries. (This fact is accentuated by the estimated twenty percent living overseas—remarkably, the same-sized Diaspora as Australia with its population of twenty million—thanks in no small part to the droves of young Kiwis leaving to gain their “OE,” or overseas experience).

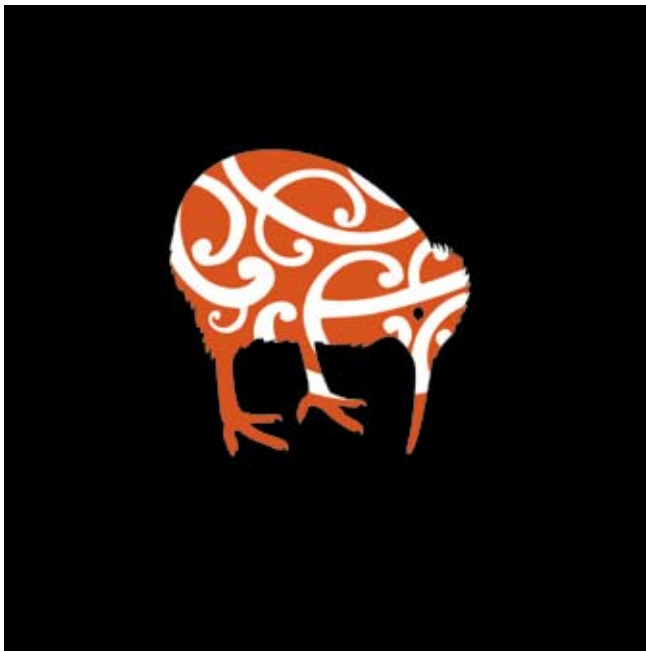
### Urban & urbane

Close to 80 percent of New Zealanders are ethnically European (collectively they are known as *Pakeha*) indigenous Maori account for 14 percent, and the rest have roots in Asia and elsewhere. Three of four New Zealanders live in urban areas of 10,000 or more, with half concentrated in the largest four cities—Auckland (1.26 million), Wellington (373,400), Hamilton (188,000) on the North Island and Christchurch (372,500) on the South Island.

Known as the City of Sails and blessed with a spectacular harbor setting, Pacific-lapped Auckland is New Zealand's business center, and is ranked with the best cities in the world. At only a third its size, Wellington competes with Auckland by means of a serious dedication to the arts, a thriving café and entertainment scene and a magnificent harbor of its own (framed by wooden Victorian buildings terraced up steep

This page: **Radio New Zealand** (corporate identity). Philip Andrew, design director; Clemenger BBDO Wellington, design firm.

**Moriori typeface development.** Charlie Ward, design director; Kris Sowersby, type designer; DNA, design firm; Hokotehi Moriori Trust, client.



hills). As New Zealand's capital it also houses the parliament and significant national treasures. Christchurch, long known for its agribusiness and manufacturing prowess (including technology-based successes, of late), is the jumping-off point for tourism on the South Island—a gateway to mountains, ocean beaches, rivers and lakes.

### Kiwis, All Blacks & bungee jumping

Found only in New Zealand, the kiwi (New Zealand's unofficial yet endearing national emblem) is a chicken-sized, nocturnal, flightless bird with hair-like feathers and a long, slender bill. Modern New Zealanders often refer to themselves as Kiwis—and on the stock exchange, the New Zealand Dollar is “the kiwi” as well. Best-known abroad, Kiwi is the abbreviated name for the delicious kiwifruit (though actually Chinese, kiwifruit was successfully introduced to New Zealand over a century ago, taking on the eponymous name when enterprising New Zealand farmers began propagating the fruit intensively for export).

Kiwis (the human kind) are known abroad for their independent thinking, principles and gutsy attitude. Exemplary of this is the anti-nuclear stance the country has held since the mid-1980s (when it famously banned nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed vessels from its waters, much to the chagrin of the U.S.). More recently, Ms. Clark's government's opposition to the invasion of Iraq raised further tensions with the U.S., a major trading partner.



Like their Aussie cousins across the Tasman Sea (with whom they compete fiercely), Kiwis are sports-crazy—particularly when it comes to the (unofficial) national sport and their national rugby team, the All Blacks. Well-known for their intimidating pre-game performance of the *haka* (a traditional Maori war dance challenge), the All Blacks boast the best win-to-loss record of any national squad, fueling the national obsession with their prowess.

Other popular sports largely reflect New Zealand's British colonial heritage, such as cricket, football, netball, golf, tennis and rowing. As one might expect, Kiwis are prolific in water sports, particularly yachting and sailing. Of late, the country has become known as a destination for extreme sports and adventure tourism—fueled in part by the popularity of the world's first commercial bungee-jumping site at Queenstown.

### Kiwiana, No. 8 Wire & Tall Poppies

Some consider Kiwiana (“the weird and wonderful quirky things” from years gone by) to be a key contributor to New Zealand's national identity—though many designers blanch at that suggestion to be sure. Major Kiwiana icons include the ubiquitous Gumboot (rubber boot, essential for herding sheep in muddy terrain—these days sheep outnumber people by a mere twelve to one, down from a former twenty per New Zealander), Buzzy Bee pull-along toys (the little striped ones whose wings rotate with a clicking noise when pulled), pau-

This page: **Kiwi card** (self-promotion). Studio Alexander, design firm/client.

**New Zealand All Blacks** (identity). Dave Clark, designer; Dave Clark Design Associates, design firm; New Zealand All Blacks Rugby, client.

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shell ashtrays (a close relative of abalone, paua is used by Maori for eyes in creature carvings) and the *Edmonds Cookery Book* or Kiwi culinary bible (published by the makers of Edmonds Sure to Rise Baking Powder—it's said that more copies have been sold of this than any other book in New Zealand).

Another enduring characteristic of Kiwi identity (some of course decry the cliché) is the country's rational, practical design tradition of “down-to-earth ingenuity, self-sufficiency, and adaptability”—also known as classic Kiwi DIY or the No. 8 Wire attitude (with reference to the inventive use of farmers' fencing wire of that popular gauge). Necessity *is* the mother of invention, is it not? Several designers I talked with referenced this leitmotif of an engineering-led culture in which function is often paramount to aesthetic.

Though there is certainly no shortage when it comes to successful Kiwi designers and inventors (e.g., the disposable syringe, electric fence, Hamilton Jet Boat, bungee jumping...), few of these creative achievers are known by name, almost none are known abroad, and there are no famous Kiwi design superstars. This may have something to do with Tall Poppy Syndrome, a prevalent egalitarian social attitude that tends to level those whose achievements would elevate them above their peers (refreshingly different from the “star system,” as seen in other countries, where accomplishment and success are typically rewarded with exalted status and flaunted fame). The late Sir Edmund Hillary (a shy beekeeper who became the world's best-known New Zealander with the first successful summiting of Mount Everest in 1953) may best typify both Kiwi drive and modesty through his own understated words: “In some ways I believe I epitomize the average New Zealander: I have modest abilities, I combine these with a good deal of determination, and I rather like to succeed.”

### Design thrives

Kiwi designers benefit from the multidisciplinary Designers Institute of New Zealand (DINZ), with its mission to have professional designers valued and rewarded for the contribution they make to the economic, cultural and social growth of New Zealand. DINZ encourages the development of professional skills, brings together the different design disciplines and works to improve design standards; it is recognized as the official voice of design, lobbies on behalf of designers and has contributed significantly to the increasing profile that design enjoys. *ProDesign* (the official magazine of the DINZ) is a handsome, eclectic, bi-monthly publication that reflects the

interdependence of spatial, product and graphic design in the country.

*Better by Design*, an assertive design integration initiative of New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, aims to help NZ companies make world-class design a bigger differentiator for their products and services in export markets by means of helping companies use design effectively (through needs and opportunity assessment, funding, workshops, as well as through designer matchmaking and showcasing of design leadership and success stories).

Post-secondary design programs graduate an estimated 500 fresh visual communication designers each year, and the portfolios I saw were impressive. In addition to the graduate work I witnessed at the Wanganui School of Design, I made a brief visit to the The University of Auckland and in Wellington I had the chance to take in the grad show at Massey University's College of Creative Arts.

### Korus galore

Due to New Zealand's geographical and historical isolation from the rest of the world, most of the flora and fauna is unique to the country—descended from Gondwanan wildlife or arriving later by flight, swimming or being carried across the sea. None is more distinctive than the ponga fern that grows wild in moist bush areas throughout the country; its koru (the spiraled “birth of a ponga” or unfolding of the tree fern frond) has long formed a central archetype of Maori art and visual expression, seen in chiseled *moko* (tattoos) and elaborately spiraled patterning (carving of *kowhaiwhai* in rafters of meeting houses, for example).

The ubiquitous koru and silver fern have evolved from being Maori cultural icons to become de facto national symbols (as seen in the identities of Air New Zealand, countless national ministries and hundreds of commercial companies and brands)—stereotyping that is frustrating at times for Kiwi graphic designers. Tanya Roberson, a master's student at Wanganui, offers a plausible explanation for the fern's popularity: “Because most people in New Zealand today are familiar with the positive meanings of the koru (nurturing, growth, peace, tranquility), when a designer adapts this into a new branding system, the audience automatically associates with these positive meanings... by so doing, they tap into the power of its pre-existing memplex.” As another designer put it to me: “The fern is our visual shorthand, and this becomes a cliché for foreigners.”

Right: **B\_E\_E product packaging.** Making sustainability sexy—eco-friendly products in “flirtatious talking bottles” that reinforce popular perceptions of clean and green. Helena Wills, designer; Geoff Suvalko, design director; designworks, design firm.

**MASH** (beer posters and packaging). Shine, design firm; Lion Nathan, client.

**TheNewDowse brand** (gallery identity and signage). The hot pink identity is augmented by the “squiggle mark,” representing creative spark. Margie Pyle/Paul Johnson, designers; Sven Baker, design director; designworks, design firm.







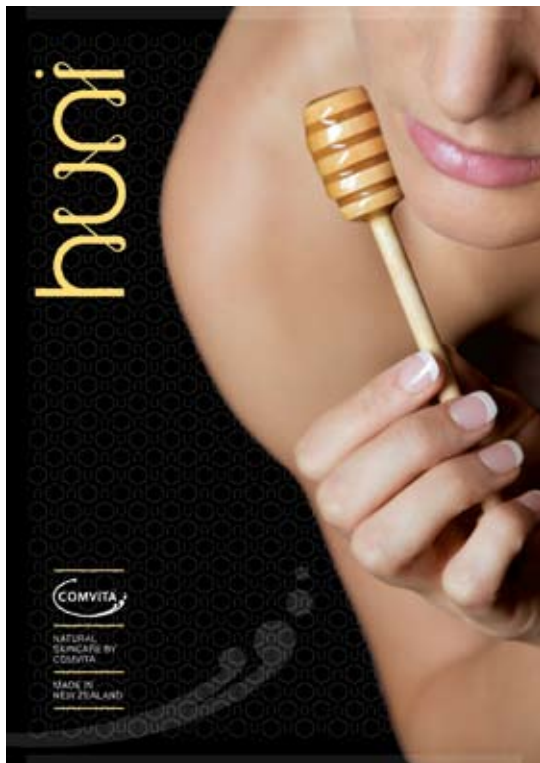
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Many Maori see this as usurpation—the issue of exploitation of cultural and spiritual iconography and tradition-based arts specifically (and the misuse and misappropriation of traditional knowledge and intellectual property more generally) has been a growing point of contention. Though the (traditionally disadvantaged) Maori have experienced a cultural resurgence in recent decades, the price of greater visibility has been increased misappropriation, both at home and internationally (and not just tied to the worldwide popularity of tattooing). Some of the best-known abuses include Danish toymaker Lego’s Bionicle product line introduction in 2001 (exploiting Maori imagery, folklore and language), the cigarette company that blatantly branded its product “Maori,” and Jean Paul Gaultier’s recent use of *Ta Moko* and Maori symbolism in a fashion show.

Vicki Campbell, a design instructor of Maori descent teaching in Wanganui, is involved in “to koru or not to koru...” research investigating the appropriation and misappropriation of cultural imagery and traditional knowledge by non-indigenous designers, and is registered as an interested party in a Waitangi Tribunal Claim (Wai 262—the indigenous flora and fauna and cultural intellectual property claim), looking at the IP and copyright of Maori traditional knowledge, practices and art forms. “In July 2007, the Ministry of Economic Development released *Te Mana Taumarua Matauranga: Intellectual Property Guide for Maori Organisations and Communities*,’ a comprehensive document that covers intellectual property issues that encompass some of the issues brought to task in the Waitangi claim.” In her view, “New Zealand is now the (global) forerunner for intellectual property related to traditional knowledge.”

### Uniquely apart = edgy

New Zealand has always found itself “uniquely apart” and handicapped as the most distant from the world’s economic heartlands. But the gripe of (sometimes literally) being left off the world’s map is today being reframed as a unique point of positioning. Mark Weldon, CEO of NZX (New Zealand Stock Exchange), has put it this way: “Every world needs an edge. This is New Zealand’s position on our planet...the most innovative and generative place in any system. The action is at the margins, where there is freedom to create—away from the orthodoxy of the centre.” He champions an edgier attitude, and suggests that



Left: **Formway launch pack** (elements from brand palette and promotional packaging for the LIFE chair developed for the innovative furniture designer/ manufacturer). Aaron McKirdy, designer; Sven Baker, design director; designworks, design firm; Formway, client.

**Not Our Future** (posters from anti-smoking campaign featuring New Zealand celebrities). Neil Pardington, design director; Base Two, design firm; Health Sponsorship Council, client.

This page: **Huni** (identity and packaging). A Kiwi skincare brand based on the core ingredient of Manuka honey. A distinctive typeface, logo, pattern and tactile honeycomb-reminiscent packaging enhance customer experience. Tana Mitchell/ Sarah Callesen/Leone Murphy/Emma Kaniuk, designers; Geoff Suvalko, design director; designworks, design firm; Comvita, client.

**Auckland Chamber Orchestra** (poster series). Clem Devine, designer; Dean Poole, design director; Alt, design firm; Auckland Chamber Orchestra, client.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE AQUARIUM AT HOME GALLERY STAFF ROOM GENERATION ISLANDS CARE

Hi my name is Aquaraut

I'm here to show you around this interactive website

# GENERATION ISLAND

Play Game

Generation Island is all about electricity generation and conservation. It's been created especially for Year 7 and 8 students and their teachers.

New Zealand has a problem... We love electricity. Every year we use more than we did the year before. But it is very hard to keep making more electricity. Our power stations are already making as much as they can.

Use this website to find out about ways that electricity can be generated and conserved.

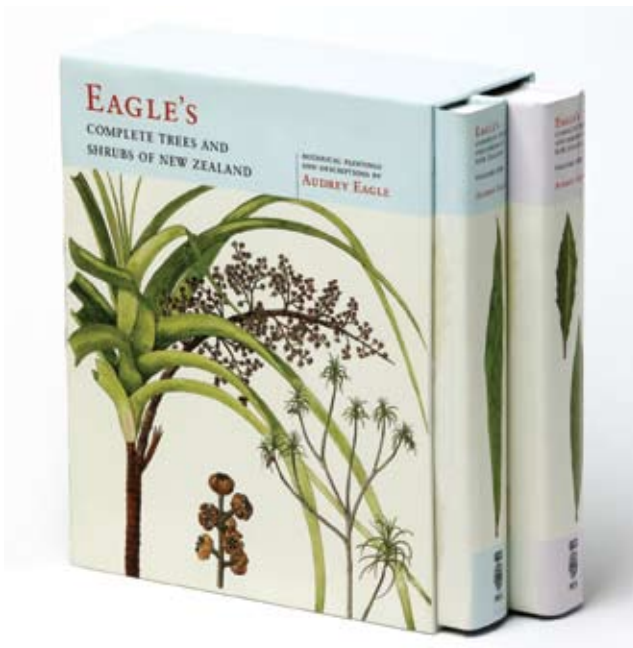
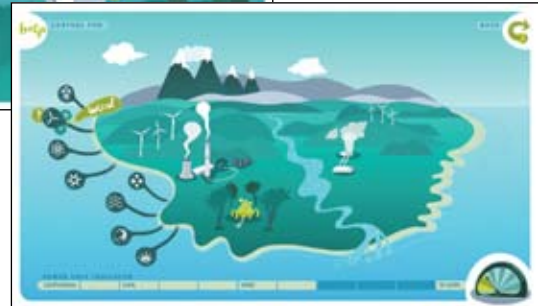
Play Generation Island to see what happens when you choose how electricity can be made.

Visit Aquaraut at home to find out how to conserve electricity.

Check out the gallery to see what other kids have done in their investigations of electricity generation.

Teachers: refer to the Staff Room and Science through the comprehensive URL given to help you teach this topic.

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“...ideas from New Zealand have advanced the world in many profound ways, but until now we have not had the metaphor and language to harness our unique global position...The world needs us precisely because we are its edge. We need to embrace our edge positioning and revel in it.”

### A style of its own

Since the 1970s, New Zealand talent has become ever more visible on the world stage, evidenced by an outpouring of creativity from writers, filmmakers, artists, craftspeople, musicians and designers (among others). Though until the 1980s, much of New Zealand’s design may have been heavily influenced by international trends, and many designers admit that they’ve had to look outward to survive. By the mid-1990s, original new ground was being broken along with a growing feeling of confidence in being Kiwi, and with designers using indigenous, Maori and Pacific Island images and materials in their work.

Through the numerous conversations and exchanges I’ve had with some of NZ’s top designers, I felt a tangible sense of patriotism, a pride of place and a reverence for what sets Kiwi designers apart. “New Zealand has really changed since the turn of the millennium. We have a new-found belief in our own ability—we have smart people here who are not tethered by traditional thinking,” explained one Wellington designer. As another put it, “We can now be world-class from here.” Wellingtonian type-designer Kris Sowersby: “Design has grown up a lot in recent years, there is definite influence from Pacific Islandom.” And, Lucien Law of Shine in Auckland: “There’s an overall newfound New Zealandness pride (in music, fashion, art, etc.), no longer the ‘cultural cringe.’”

On the issue of uniqueness: “There’s much more of a national identity here than in Australia,” stated one ex-pat Aussie designer I met in Wellington. “New Zealand design has (always had) a style of its own. Living at the bottom of the world allows a unique perspective; and our style was developed before computers came along,” explains Rex Turnbull, a Maori designer, now living in Sydney, and creative director of *LINO*.



## HOWARD WRIGHT

Admittedly it’s painting with a big brush to try to define what makes NZ communication design distinctive within the limitations of this article. It seems clear that being isolated from the rest of the world has been a major factor (in the past, at least), and that eclecticism, multiculturalism and a growing pride around unique, indigenous Kiwi traits and Maori culture play an increasing role, as does the close proximity NZ designers have to nature and the environment. In addition, I observed that NZ design is often less slick than what is seen elsewhere and imbued with a raw, edgy, energy and (often) notable for an irreverent sense of playfulness.

Len Cheeseman of Parkview Motorcamp, a “farmer’s market of creativity,” concurs: “New Zealand has a lot of really good designers starting to strut their stuff, and quality has really stepped up.” Neil Pardington of Base Two in Wellington (of mixed indigenous/immigrant heritage): “We define ourselves by our cultural uniqueness and diversity. On the one hand, we have the indigenous Maori culture, and Pacific Island cultures that are unique to New Zealand and the Pacific region. On the other we have ‘Pakeha’ culture, or the immigrant cultures. This mix...creates a level of cultural complexity that drives our creative culture. As artists and designers (like artists and designers everywhere), we take inspiration from what is happening worldwide, but we also look inward. As a nation with many immigrants we have strong connections back to the so-called ‘old world’ cultures. However, I believe there are very distinct New Zealand sensibilities that are informed by Maori and Pacific cultures.”

“You got me thinking about the ‘values’ in much of our advertising and communication in New Zealand today,” continues Pardington. “It’s probably here, rather than in more formal design considerations, that the real impact of our bi-cultural/multicultural society is seen. Here ideas such as *whanau* (family), *waiora* (health/spirit), *whakapapa* (genealogy), and *whenua* (the land) are key values that are seen played out in advertising, communication and design—perhaps even a little too often.”

Left: **Generation Island** (interactive Web site including a game to teach school students about the impact and consequences of various power generation options). Karyn Brice/Emily Loghnan, designers; Click Suite, design firm; Meridian Energy Limited, client.

**Eagle’s Complete Trees and Shrubs of New Zealand**. Neil Pardington/Robin Sivewright, designers; Audrey Eagle, writer/illustrator; Base Two, design firm; Te Papa Press, client.

**Writer’s Block** (self-promotional launch piece to market creative writing). The Pond, design firm/client.

**Giacometti Shadows** (shadows drawn or created around the central city to promote a sculptural exhibition). Guy Pask/Douglas Maclean, design directors; Strategy Design and Advertising, design firm; Christchurch Art Gallery, client.

This page: **Howard Wright** (mark for designer, maker and marketer of hospital beds and stretchers). Studio Alexander, design firm.

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### “Give it a go!”

My question, “What do NZ designers do best?” also raised some interesting responses. Creative director Jef Wong of designworks, Auckland: “Being small, we can’t afford to be specialists; we can do everything and we just get on with it! As a young nation, we don’t have any baggage in terms of how we approach design and creativity...it’s a case of if you don’t know the rules they are easier to break.” Fraser Gardyne of gardyneHOLT design partners, Auckland, concurs: “Being a small nation...and in some ways sitting in the shadow of Australia, we are by nature a bit competitive and think we are the equal of or better than anyone else. Certainly Australians. Of course this isn’t true, but it’s important we believe it!... We hate being pigeonholed. We’re adaptable.” Reuben Woods of Woods Creative in Papamoa: “We’ll give anything a go! We don’t have the big budgets international designers have to work with on a project, so we have to make the most

of what we have.” Yet another designer replied: “There’s no fat in the creative industries here...We have to be going hell-bent for leather all the time—and that makes us resourceful.”

There’s no question that the future looks bright for designers in this land with its long history of understatement. New Zealand is entering the world stage with innovative gusto—my advice: keep your eyes on the Kiwis! **CA**

*Editor’s note: Robert L. Peters visited New Zealand in November 2007 as an external moderator at the Wanganui School of Design. In conjunction with DINZ, he also visited design offices and gave talks in Auckland and Wellington. Peters would like to express thanks to the numerous Kiwi designers who contributed their viewpoints and work for this article, with special acknowledgement to Professor Hazel Gamec (Wanganui) and to Cathy Veninga, CEO of DINZ, for their collaboration, assistance and support (many of the works shown here are from recent DINZ award shows).*

This page: **Britomart Brand Book.** Tana Mitchell/Emma Kaniuk, designers; Geoff Suvalko, design director; designworks, design firm; Bluewater, client.

**New Zealand New Thinking Calendar.** Dean Poole, design director; Alt, design firm; New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, client.

Right: **Mac’s Beer** (identity, packaging, brewbars). The redesign of the much-loved but tired New Zealand Mac’s brand “changed how people look at beer” with its maverick attitude, playful personality and nod to an eclectic past. Len Cheeseman/Ken Double/John Fisher/Stephen Cicala/Eileen Schwab/Alex Gallacher/Amanda Oliver/Andy Salisbury/Craig Speakman-Oktober, creatives/designers; Lucien Law, design director; Shine, design firm; Lion Nathan, client.

**Wellington Writers Walk.** From a series of fifteen large-scale, three-dimensional concrete text sculptures honoring significant New Zealand writers who have strong associations with Wellington. “Sited along the city’s urban waterfront, each sculpture is positioned unexpectedly: suspended in water, lying on grass, even on the rocks, as if detritus washed up by the sea.” Catherine Griffiths, designer; Jason Busch/Bruce Connew, photographers; City of Wellington, client.

