

Cross-over art

'MCLEOD'S CROSSING' IS AN ARTIST-DESIGNED PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE. HELEN SCHAMROTH REPORTS ON SCULPTOR JOHN EDGAR'S REMARKABLE PUBLIC-ART COMMISSION WEDDED TO ECO-DESIGN

IN A MOVING, EARLY MORNING CEREMONY IN MAY A NEW FOOTBRIDGE WAS UNVEILED IN HENDERSON, THE CENTRE OF WAITAKERE CITY IN THE WEST OF THE GREATER AUCKLAND REGION. New footbridges are not generally notable, except that this one was designed by an artist. John Edgar, who was commissioned for the project, became known in the 1980s for his use of pounamu—New Zealand greenstone—and made jewellery, small sculptures and medallions. He turned to using non-precious stone like argillite and basalt in recognition of the dwindling precious resource and his carved objects continued to be characterised by an elegant formality, simplicity of form, exquisite crafting and beautiful, understated detailing. Some memorable small sculptures consisted of layers—of dark grey stone contrasting with slivers of coloured stone, or stone layered with glass which caught the light and reflected and refracted it.

A few years ago Edgar started to work on a larger scale and his handling of large blocks of stone bore the same personal stamp as the earlier small pieces. The works were often quite consciously like a two dimensional image projected into the third dimension by virtue of the thickness of the material. He explored the relationship people have with the land, specifically in New Zealand, in his exhibitions *Making Amends* and *Lie of the Land* (reviewed in *Object* no 4/98, p24–25) and he sought materials that were damaged and showed signs of a previous life. Sustainability and reparation with reference to society and the environment were strong themes. In 1999 he was one of two artists invited to submit proposals for the design of a footbridge across the Oratia Stream that flows through Henderson. Edgar's response drew on the history of the area as well as his science background and he applied his modernist preferences. The proposal met with enthusiastic approval.

The design team established an interesting working relationship, the easy team dynamic being notable for all parties. Prior to submission of proposals architect Richard O'Neill provided the brief. O'Neill had worked with engineer Nick Covich of Mitchell Vranjes before, but had never collaborated with an artist, nor designed a bridge. Essentially, he relinquished his role as designer and acted more as a facilitator and technician, acknowledging that he was constrained by structure and practicalities and that he wanted to enjoy the fresh, intuitive approach of the artist. This relaxation of ego allowed the artist and the whole team to flourish.

The approach to the bridge from Falls Park sweeps around ninety degrees and the bridge takes pedestrians directly across the stream via a central circular area not unlike the passing bay of a vehicular bridge. The effect in the central area is somewhat like a crow's nest and pedestrians respond accordingly, as if on the bridge of a boat, as they pause and listen to the birds and contemplate the tidal stream. Edgar's approach to his stone sculptures, the way he modulates between two and three dimensions seems to have influenced his handling of the space. While fully three dimensional, the elements of the bridge are strongly vertical or horizontal in a way that echoes his personal repertoire.

Over the bridge are a number of community buildings located in another park on the delta formed by the confluence of the two streams that flow through the town. A hundred years earlier this delta was home to a sawmill that served the surrounding area. Kauri trees were logged in the nearby forested ranges and the mill became the centre of a growing town. The kauri, for which the district was famous, was used as Edgar's primary inspiration for a bridge that is robust and



McCleod's Crossing pedestrian bridge. Artist-designer: John Edgar. Architect-facilitator: Richard O'Neill. Kauri wood and metals. Commissioned for Waitakere City Council, New Zealand, 1999–2000.



Artist-designer John Edgar at 'McLeod's Crossing' pedestrian bridge. Shows lights based on the Kauri seedpod. Architect-facilitator: Richard O'Neill. Kauri wood and metals. Commissioned for Waitakere City Council, New Zealand, 1999-2000.

unapologetically formal. He likened his bridge to a fallen kauri, most likely the first bridge in pre-European times, the trunk straddling the stream and the network of branches visually not unlike the supporting truss.

At the outset it might have been tempting for some at Waitakere City Council to want to emulate the nearby colonial architecture of the recently restored and relocated Falls Hotel. Edgar sidestepped this by acknowledging the rhythm of the colonial style fence without directly mimicking it. A nautical reference was made with the use of stainless steel cable which was strung vertically to create an almost invisible balustrade under the wooden rail made from sustainable eucalypt. By using a readily renewable resource he continues the

theme of 'making amends' for the substantial destruction of the kauri forests.

The macrocarpa decking of the bridge is punctuated with Edgar's crafted signature pieces—38 circular medallions of argillite quietly defining the centre line of the bridge. At the approaches larger circular terrazzo inserts depicting kauri trunks and water also bear his hand. They are more pictorial than his more usual imagery yet are nonetheless restrained. It was these details that affirmed Edgar first and foremost as a maker. Under the bridge there was a large sewage pipe with an unsightly supporting structure. Rather than concealing the pier as had been suggested, he designed stonework to clad the pier which became a crafted, sculptural element in the water.

The kauri provided the colour palette: dark winter green on the obtrusive pipe, the sharper green of new spring growth on the truss and autumn gold on the lights and deck. Taking the kauri theme a step further, Edgar designed the powder coated lights using the kauri seed pod to underpin the design. Subconsciously he tapped into the 1960s, his formative design period, in the use of perforated conical light shades that evoke the era. Their jaunty appearance gives the bridge its lively personality.

Edgar's environmental activism is enmeshed in his design solution and he pays homage to the past in the resolution of his design. By remaining to one side of design fads he seeks to allow the users of his bridge to feel comfortable on the bridge and to engage with the environment.

The environment is a key platform for Waitakere City Council which is renowned for its beautiful bush-clad ranges and wild, black sand beaches that edge it. In recent years it has been dubbed Eco-city by its controversial and visionary mayor, Bob Harvey, who wanted the city to be about much more than rates, roads and rubbish. Its principles were established as 'being sustainable, dynamic and just'.

'McLeod's Crossing' is the second artist-designed pedestrian bridge created in the city during the past two years. The first, the Rewarewa Bridge, designed by Virginia King and City Design, has won many accolades and awards. Projects using artists are attributed to the council's arts advisor, Naomi McCleary. McCleary worked with Heather McNutt of the Parks department which had identified a functional 'art bridge' as part of the track linkage program between parks. McNutt's brief included the notion that where possible she should tap into the arts as a way of engaging with the community. The story goes that Waitakere City Council would now not contemplate a project like a new pedestrian bridge without using an artist.

For twelve months 'McLeod's Crossing' was part of Edgar's life. After eight months of designing and planning, construction seemed to happen rather quickly. For a craftsman the pace is generally more measured. The shift in scale and complexity of the project was considerable, yet Edgar retained the same clarity of intention, coherence of concept and attention to detail that he brings to all his work. He also retained his philosophical stance of expressing his passion for sustaining the environment in his work.

What will the impact of designing a bridge be on Edgar's personal work? It may take a gestation period before that crossover emerges but it stands to reason that there could be changes. Meanwhile there is an enchanting new footbridge and a promise of more to come in Waitakere City.

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