

# A sailor's jigsaw

DAVID TRUBRIDGE'S INSPIRATIONAL LIFE HAS TAKEN HIM FROM SAILOR'S JIG TO DESIGNER'S JIGSAW. THE CUTTING EDGE DESIGNER AND DARLING OF MILAN, TALKS TO VIV HALDANE ABOUT HIS LIFE AND WORK.

Photographs and Words: VIVIENNE HALDANE



A commercial jigsaw cutting the complex patterns of David's interlocking pieces forms part of a low-scale production model



**DESIGNER DAVID TRUBRIDGE'S** studio is in the heart of industrial Whakatu on the outskirts of Napier. Workers in blue boiler suits have only a glimmer of an idea about their neighbour when asked for directions. "Oh yeah, there are people who make crafts over there..." they say vaguely, pointing to a sprawling brick building that houses Cicada Studios.

They might be surprised to learn that the clean, sculptural lines of their neighbour's lighting and furniture designs have met with world-wide acclaim.

Having originally trained as a naval architect, and deciding not to work in this field, David instead went to live in rural Northumberland where he began to design and build furniture. To supplement his income he worked part-time as a forester on a private estate. Disillusioned with Margaret Thatcher's Britain, in 1981 David, his wife Linda and sons Sam and Billy sailed their yacht 'Hornpipe' (named after the sailor's jig) for brighter shores and after many adventures across the Caribbean and Pacific, fetched up in Hawkes Bay in 1985.

Along the way the people and places they'd seen made lasting impressions (the family lived and worked in the Virgin Islands and Tahiti) which seeped into David's work. Evocative names for his designs such as: 'Kina', 'Body Raft', 'Glide', 'Flax' and 'Ulu' point to these influences.

Eventually David's naval training became relevant. "Although I had good reviews for my work - it wasn't selling well. That's when I decided to utilise my training as a naval architect; I made the first of my body rafts - a piece of furniture that's also sculptural," he explains.

In 2001 David was accepted as an exhibitor at the furniture show, *Salone Satellite* in Milan, Italy. As a result of this, prestigious Italian design company Cappellini purchased the Body Raft 2000 and commissioned further work. David says, "Milan is *the* place where reputations are made, more than anything. I went there originally as a craftsman to sell a few more of the expensive pieces that have a limited market in New Zealand and it's grown from there."

David has returned to Milan each year with a new show and these persistent efforts have built a keen following for his work both overseas and locally. ➤





LEFT: David Trubridge's organic forms have met with world acclaim; BELOW: Designs take a cue from nature; RIGHT: Cicada Works employs 10 designers and workers

An outcome from Milan was his transition from craftsman to designer to maker-designer. "The perception in Europe that I was a designer; being treated as such and asking for more product changed everything for me."

He moved from his home studio in Havelock North to a bigger space at Whakatu and began to employ designers to work on projects. David says "The big problem with studio craft is you make four or five new pieces a year, having spent months developing a new design which you then only make one of. It's a waste of good ideas when there's a potential to develop them in larger numbers. Hence, I still use that craft knowledge and apply it to a low-scale production model."

Cicada Works employs 10 designers and makers who are currently working on a wide range of commissions from furniture, lighting to carpet designs and sculptural installations. David says, "We're making a series of large hanging sculptural light forms - in conjunction with a Brisbane company called Urban Art Projects for a new city in Saudi Arabia called Kaust."

Using a computer to create 3D designs was another advance and one David took to readily, given his background.

"You have to understand the material you're working with when you design for it," he says. "When I work on the computer I know what the material can do. I can feel how it would bend and how I can join it. The artistic, craft and design contents are a balance and for me that's the key; not letting anything get out of hand." >

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The thread running through his work and central to understanding it is David's personal philosophy. Close to his heart are issues affecting the world today such as global warming which he sees as being the result of excessive consumption. He says, "Too much of the stuff we buy is effectively junk food; it's designed to make us unsatisfied and want more. It's unsatisfying because we're getting no nourishment from it. I want to make a product that satisfies and lasts."

This isn't a new or trendy idea for this thoughtful designer who says he'd like to retreat to the family bach to write a book on his artistic and physical journey. "I'd like to show that the sustainable design ethic is something I've always lived. It's not a sudden conversion as the result of recent events. It's my lifestyle. You can't take it on as a creed you suddenly adopt. You have to do it because you care about it and if you did get out and walk in the bush or see the rest of the world, you would care."

In April, David and one of his designers, Amy Lynch, will make the annual pilgrimage to Milan. His method of transporting the exhibit will be down-scaled, in line with sustainable beliefs. "In the past I've taken things in a big crate and it's sent at great expense by air. We are taking a couple of suitcases and assembling it there. It's an installation based on the Maori myth of the three baskets of knowledge, so it's not just a new product, but has meaning as well; it conveys the message of the importance of balance in our world, of not allowing our rational knowledge to drown out our sensitivity for nature and spiritual nourishment." ■