

THE BEAUTY OF IT

The epic, undulating, pine spiral that welcomes visitors to this year's Sculpture on the Gulf nearly wasn't built at all.

TEXT JEREMY HANSEN — PHOTOGRAPHY TOAKI OKANO

What has become of our number-eight-wire nation? We once took pride in our she'll-be-right practicality. But now, here on Waiheke Island, a gorgeous, undulating timber structure of great complexity and no practical purpose at all is being painstakingly erected by a team of almost 30 people. Its laminated pine ribs provide no shelter from rain or wind and very little shade. It's a folly, the kind of frivolous structure beloved by landed English gentry but generally regarded as a time-wasting indulgence here in the hard-working colonies. Until now, it seems. "It's not really useful other than it's useful for the mind and the spirit," says Jonathan Rutherford Best, the co-owner of Waiheke's Oyster Inn and the driving force behind the project. "That's the beauty of it."

The structure, a continuous spiral that creates a dramatic passage framing a view of Rangitoto, is made of just under a kilometre of laminated pine cut into 257 individual pieces. It was designed by Nicholas Stevens and Gary Lawson of Stevens Lawson Architects, and serves as the gateway to the biennial Sculpture on the Gulf exhibition (which opens on Friday 27 January and runs until Sunday

Right Designed by Stevens Lawson Architects, the gateway (shown here under construction) will have a floor allowing visitors to walk through it.





19 February). It isn't billed as an artwork, but a pure architectural experience that welcomes visitors to the exhibition of sculptures on the walking trail around the neighbouring headland. It begins and ends in a frame resembling a simple whareniui-shaped gable, but in between it morphs, swooping and diving towards the Hauraki Gulf and seemingly inevitable fame as the summer's favourite Instagram backdrop.

The gateway's surprising presence here near the Matiatia ferry terminal sprang from a series of serendipitous encounters. It was originally designed in 2011 by Stevens and Lawson as New Zealand's pavilion at the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale, but was scuppered after insufficient funds were raised to build it and get it to Italy. "It was just gutting," Stevens remembers. "We invested a lot personally into trying to get it to happen. It was a model on the shelf – a great idea that was fated not to go ahead."

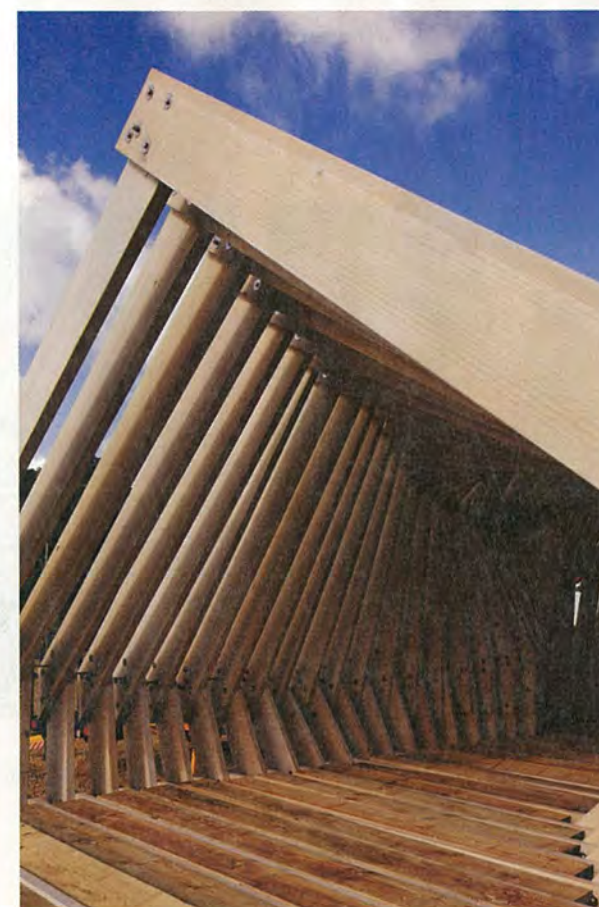
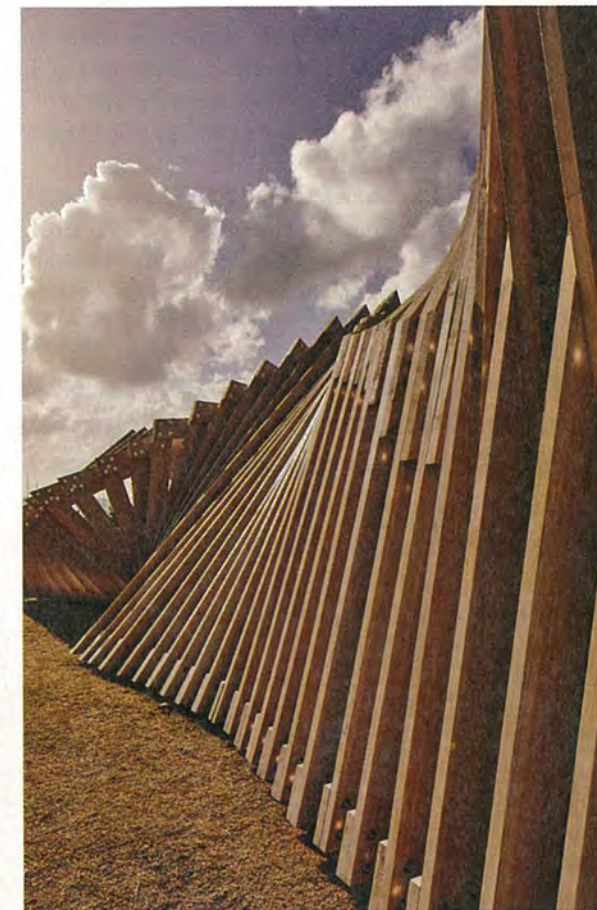
The duo hadn't reckoned with Rutherford Best, who joined the Sculpture on the Gulf board last year with the intention of creating an architectural folly along the lines of London's famed Serpentine Pavilions, temporary structures designed by a different world-famous architect each year and erected in Kensington Gardens for the summer. When Rutherford Best first saw the model

created by Stevens and Lawson for their abandoned Venice scheme, he thought he'd found a project that could attract the necessary support to get built in time for Sculpture on the Gulf, and add an alluring new element to the exhibition in the process. "When we've shown people the model, it's just a visceral response," he says. "People understand it the second they see it."

"When we've shown people the model, it's just a visceral response. People understand it the second they see it."

They not only understood it, but wanted it built. First, Rutherford Best found a Waiheke couple willing to purchase the structure (it will be dismantled after Sculpture on the Gulf and re-erected on their island property). Then he needed someone to build it. Enter Unitec, where very practical students from the carpentry, engineering and architecture departments volunteered to help fabricate and erect the gateway (with the assistance of engineers at Holmes Consulting, who collaborated with Stevens and Lawson on their Venice proposal and refined the structure for its installation on Waiheke).

These pages "It's not really useful other than it's useful for the mind and the spirit – that's the beauty of it," says Jonathan Rutherford Best, the Sculpture on the Gulf board member who helped mastermind the making of the gateway welcoming visitors to the exhibition.



A group of students helped work on the finer details of the design, then precision-cut the timber on the mainland, while 22 of them camped on Waiheke for two weeks to erect the structure after its components arrived by barge. “We’re on a beautiful site. It’s like a working holiday,” says Stephanie Wade, an architecture graduate who’s also studying carpentry at Unitec and describes the structure as “a timber slinky”. Adds her fellow architecture student Carl Salas: “When I saw the little model that they had I was pretty much hooked.”

It isn’t billed as an artwork, but a pure architectural experience that welcomes visitors to the exhibition of sculptures on the walking trail around the neighbouring headland.

They’re getting course credits (and wages) for all this work. But in a world where the work of academics often seems locked away in a separate universe of performance-based research funding and students are accused of lacking real-world experience, the presence of the students on this Waiheke Island site seems refreshing. “Students can be isolated in their own disciplines, which isn’t the real world,” says Renee Davies, Unitec’s dean of Engineering, Construction and Infrastructure who, far from being tucked away in an ivory tower, is herself in a hard hat and high-vis vest on site. “A project like this allows us to give them the experience of communicating and collaborating



Above A view through the structure from near Matiatia Wharf.

with other disciplines. What we’ve also found is when you put students into a project that’s giving benefits to a community they’re more engaged and passionate about it.”

Indeed, people seem passionate about Sculpture on the Gulf in general. On its last outing in 2015, the event attracted over 60,000 people to Waiheke to walk around the headland and admire the artworks. In recent years, the exhibition has sometimes been accused of putting showbizzy spectacle before artistic integrity, but this year the presence on the Sculpture on the Gulf board of Zara Stanhope, the principal curator at the Auckland Art Gallery, should nix any suggestions of superficiality. Stanhope headed up the cultural committee that selected proposals from 34 artists to create works for Sculpture on the Gulf, including well-known names like Chris Booth – who is creating a five-metre-high work made from recycled timber and grapevines that fungi will grow on – and others including Brett Graham, Tiffany Singh, Robert Jahnke, Denis O’Connor, Sriwhana Spong, Jeff Thomson, Olivia Webb and Michel Tuffery. Not all the works will be edifices in the landscape, as the committee has also accepted proposals to create experiential art pieces “where sculpture becomes more about working with the public rather than physical objects,” Stanhope says.

The artists have all been paid fees for their efforts, and their work in the exhibition is for sale (Sculpture on the Gulf raises funds by taking a small commission on the sale of works in the exhibition – some of which goes to the local Waiheke art gallery – as well as asking visitors for a \$10 donation to see the show). All their works are new,

specially created for Sculpture on the Gulf. “This time around we really wanted to work with the artists and help them develop projects that would be ambitious for them and the event,” Stanhope says.

The gateway by Stevens and Lawson sits apart from the sculptures, and the architects aren’t suggesting it is an art piece. Nevertheless, it has a richness that serves as a perfect drum-roll welcome to the coastal walk. Stevens offers a number of possible readings of the structure: its Glulam ribs evoke a seafaring vessel; the straight

The gabled shapes at each end give way to something more akin to an undulating landscape in the middle.

pieces of timber collectively form something that looks a little organic, creating an interesting dynamic between the manufactured and the natural worlds; the gabled shapes at each end give way to something more akin to an undulating landscape in the middle. “It’s the idea of taking a normal unit and doing something with it to create a more expressionistic piece,” he says.

It’s strangely comforting to think that something entirely impractical could feel so satisfying. The gateway feels like a suitably inspiring object to have in this place at this time. You can only hope that, like the Serpentine Pavilions that inspired it, it might become a regular thing, a temporary landmark of the imagination, a space to dream whose arrival the city anticipates every two years. ●

HIT PARADE

34 New Zealand artists will show work in the Sculpture on the Gulf biennial. Here are some of the highlights.



‘Forbidden Tree’ 2016, by Phil Price.



‘Whimori’ 2017, by Jae Kang.



‘The Plum Tree’ (detail) 2017, by Sriwhana Spong.



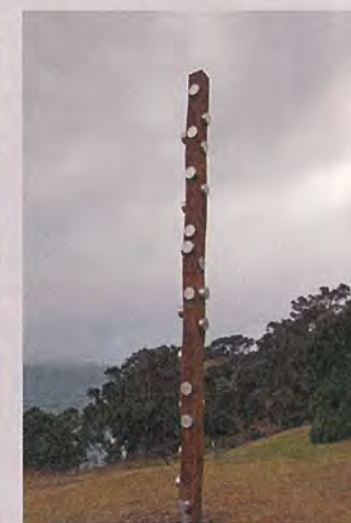
‘Mesh’ 2017, by Jeff Thomson.



‘Kaikōura’ 2016–2017, by Ioane Ioane.



‘Te Rerenga o Tikapa Moana’ [The flowing waters of Tikapa Moana (Hauraki Gulf)] 2017, by Chris Bailey.



‘Myopia’ 2017, by Anton Parsons.