

Celebrating Wood: back to the future

photographs by **Laurence Aberhart** accompanied by museum/gallery collection items and scientific exhibits selected by the host venues in response to the photographs.

'Wood is one of the most fundamental materials with which we make things, and is inseparably connected to the evolution of the human condition. From our earliest manipulation of sticks for warmth, shelter and gathering food, the increasingly sophisticated ways that we have used and understood this material reflect the development of the human race.' 'The evolution of tools and technologies for working with wood reflect the history of craftsmanship and the nature of human ingenuity...' 'Carving wood...is one of humanity's oldest art forms...' 'The surfaces of wooden things [patina] can record history and accrue meaning over time...' [1] 'Buildings that use timber internally and externally have demonstrated benefits for residents' well-being.' [2]

'Ngati Tarawhai [Rotorua] carving maintained a distinctive style from pre-European times through to the present day...and...were the most prolific and the most influential group of Maori carvers in New Zealand. They...occupy a critical position in the whole modern history of the development and survival of Maori woodcarving in New Zealand. Their...style...became the main recognised 'tourist' style of Maori art. Then later...this style accomplished the transition from a traditional tribal art to a modern 'national art', marked by the establishment of the Rotorua School of Maori Art in 1926.

Large forest trees such as totara and kauri were representatives of Tane, the god of the forest, who separated the Sky-father and Earth-mother by standing on his head and pushing them apart. When carved into poupou for a house, the timbers, now as named chiefs, continue to form this link, with their bases in the earth and reaching up through the rafters to the ridgepole, the place where sky spirits appear. The tahuhu, the ridgepole of the house, was also the main line of ancestry. Great chiefs could be referred to as noble totara trees and their deaths likened to the falling of a totara in the forest...Rituals were necessary to appease Tane before one of his children could be cut down. The Maori carver was limited by the shape of the piece of wood, either cylindrical or a rectangular slab...and... always worked within the bounds of his original material. Once selected, the figure was imposed on the timber regardless of imperfections that showed up during the work'. [3]

It is our contention that we, in New Zealand, have taken wood 'for granted' due to its availability, ubiquity and compliant characteristics. The frequent absence of the word 'wood' from book indexes, where one could reasonably expect to see it, may give further credence to our contention. However, the 2007 Adam Art Gallery exhibition *Primary Products*, curated by Tina Barton provided an important reference point. This exhibition focused on a suite of works by New Zealand artists [John Johns, Jim Allen, Paratene Matchitt, Maddie Leach & Fiona Amundsen] from the 1950s to the present which either make use of exotic timber as their medium or which turn their attention to New Zealand's exotic forests and the industries and trade they support. The exhibition provided an occasion to assess the evolution of modernist sculpture and photography in New Zealand in tandem with a critical investigation of the impact of the forestry industry on the environment, the economy and on society. The aim is to complicate modernist art histories by drawing attention to the wider history of modernisation and its radical effects on the New Zealand landscape and its people, especially at a time when New Zealand's ability to compete in a global market is being severely tested in an era of global warming.

The forestry industry is emblematically modern, having developed in the aftermath of colonial deforestation, and setting out to introduce a new sustainable resource which could provide valuable income and large-scale employment. Its serried ranks of *pinus radiata* and other exotic species stands in sharp contrast to the complex and layered textures of native bush, serving as both a sober reminder of what has been lost and as a symptomatic emblem of our economic development. [Notes extracted from *Primary Products* exhibition text]

Outlining his viewpoint in an early brochure [1949 - 50] for *Sovereign Woodworkers* its founder, Austin Brasell (1914 - 1985), a committed native forest conservationist, states 'Most of the accessible bush, especially in North Island has already been milled and cleared for farm lands...but the future timber supply of New Zealand is dependant upon careful preservation and regeneration of the remaining forest areas, the limitation of the use of valuable native species to special purposes, and the more general use of such exotic species as *Pinus radiata*.' He also preferred to use Maori names for trees/timbers, and his brochures contained a table of the timbers commonly used, their distribution, description, supply and uses.

Photographer John Johns, who worked with N.Z. Forest Service from 1951 to 1984, had a lifelong concern for the management and conservation of natural resources. He documented the ravages of clear-felling native trees and the urgent need for forest management and demonstrated that pine plantations are worthy introductions [subjects] taking pressure off remaining stands of indigenous timber.

A global increase in environmental consciousness, and transition to a carbon-constrained economy, adds to wood's significance as a renewable and sustainable resource. 'Wood has two important features that can make it part of the environmental solution. The first is that it stores carbon. Up to half the dry weight of wood is carbon, absorbed from the atmosphere by growing trees [the lungs of the planet] and stored for life. The second is that wood has low embodied energy, because comparatively little energy (usually in the form of fossil fuels) is used to produce it and form it into the products we use' [4].

'Is the 21 st. century the 'Wood Age'?' [2] '. A milestone may be a 84 metre wooden skyscraper, the HoHo project, which will be the tallest of its kind in the world and is to be built in Vienna in 2016. Its developers believe wood is a perfect construction material for building; it was used 200 years ago and it was perfect then and is perfect now. With 76% of the building expected to be made from wood, architects say it will save 2,800 tonnes of CO2 emissions when compared with a similar concrete structure.

Today, furniture can be made using a combination of digital design, computer-controlled cutting and traditional handwork. 'Wood can be split internally and the parts set in tension against each other, creating a new strength: a single piece of wood gains the strength of two'. [5]

Batiment B, Nantes, France, a centre for all things wood, is a fine example of sustainable tertiary building. It houses the offices of the National Office of Forests & the Union of furniture, and is a resource for information and exhibitions on woodworking.

It seems that by putting a commercial value on timber we have, in many ways, inadvertently devalued trees....their overall contribution to the quality of our environment' [6]

New Zealand, however, could be considered a culture defined, in part, by wood. It is also relevant to consider wood, as its derivative [paper] is a significant constituent of a photographic print.

Photography enriches and expands the realm of the sculptural/ object through investigation of perceptions of scale and perspective. Once independent objects are isolated in their own space, and usual scale references are altered, our perceptions change dramatically.

Maori woodcarving is basically an art of relief... conceived ideally in two dimensions...relating an image to a ground or surface...and deliberately avoided representing the visual effects of perspective. Reliefs can occupy a whole range of intermediate positions between the complete flatness of pictures and the full three-dimensionality of sculpture...Space is represented by a complicated simultaneous mixture of both actual and notional space, depending on a fusion of pictorial and sculptural techniques and conceptions. [3]

These 42 works by Laurence Aberhart span a 42 year period [1970 – 2012] and include virtually all of his subject areas: Architecture, Masonic Lodges, Northland Churches, Meeting Houses, Community Halls, Interiors, Memorials, Carvings and 'objects'. Two images are off-shore.

The photographs, a number of which include a figurative component, have been selected by us with the artist. Aberhart sits alongside Warren Viscoe, as a NZ artist with a serious interest in the material 'wood'.

The subject-reach of Aberhart's photographs [and the portability of prints] allows these images to provide a thread [virtually] connecting the wooden objects in a number of regional art museum collections illustrating our proposition, that New Zealand's material culture could be considered to be defined by wood.

[1] Brian Parkes, p. 10, 11,14 -15, *Wood: art, design, architecture*, 2013

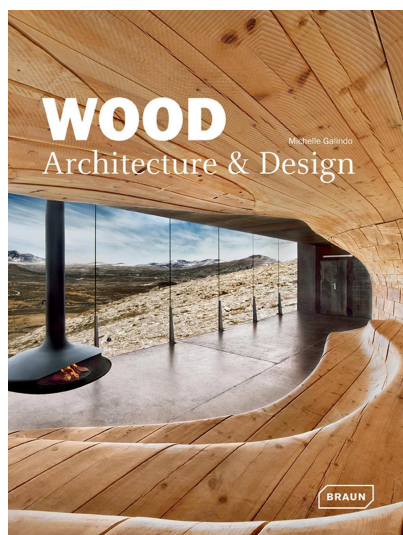
[2] Steffen Lehmann, p. 233 & 225, *Wood: art, design, architecture*, 2013

[3] Roger Neich, p. 1 & 146 – 50. *Carved Histories: Rotorua Ngati Tarawhai Woodcarving*, 2001

[4] Ric Sinclair, p. 8–9, *Wood: art, design, architecture*, 2013

[5] Exhibit label: Saleen Bhatari's Right in-Tension furniture, Pompidou, Paris, May 2015

[6] Stephen Forbes & Tony Kanellos, p. 31, *Wood: art, design, architecture*, 2013



WOOD Architecture & Design

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Braun Publishing

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Wood has always been a strong contributing factor in the creation of interesting architecture. Because of its special physical characteristics, its many possibilities of application and combination with other construction materials, since human beings began building houses, wood has been one of the main building materials. In addition, because of the increasing sensitivity for the protection of resources the ecological potential of wood as a renewable raw material wood has gained in significance. To build with wood has been for years and is still a trend topic, this volume is a road tour of contemporary wood architecture. The many possibilities for use of this natural building material are shown with texts, photos, facts and drawings, as well as the innovative construction techniques which have extended these possibilities. The architectural species diversity ranges from energy efficient passive homes to wide span supporting structures, to multi-story productions halls.

No other material is as deeply embedded in the history, culture and the lives of human beings worldwide as wood. A global increase in environmental consciousness adds to its significance as a renewable, thus sustainable resource. Wood offers unique qualities of lightness and elegance, plays of light and shadow and countless colour tones. It may be used to assemble imposing, bulky structures, as well as to erect delicate, undulating forms that seem filigree and transparent.

The many possibilities for use of this natural building material as well as the innovative construction techniques which have extended these possibilities are shown with texts and facts, photos and drawings. The architectural species diversity ranges from energy-efficient passive houses to multi-story academic facilities and fashionable bars that prove that nothing matches wood in versatility and beauty.



Wood: art, design, architecture / edited [and curated] by Brian Parkes and Elliat Rich
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ISBN: 9780980791037

WOOD: art design architecture, a touring exhibition exploring the use of wood in contemporary Australian art, design and architecture, from JamFactory and Botanic Gardens of Adelaide.

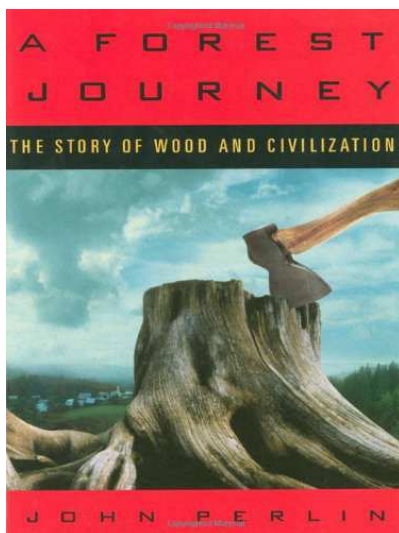
The exhibition showcases unique works by contemporary Australian artists, designers and architects engaging with the material qualities of wood.

Representing a cross-section of current creative practices, modes of thinking and relationships to this fundamental material, WOOD is the result of a collaboration between two iconic South Australian organisations, JamFactory and the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide.

WOOD: art design architecture showcases work by contemporary Australian artists, designers and architects including Queensland designers Alexander Lotersztain (Brisbane), Brian Hooper Architect (Yeppoon), m3architecture (Brisbane) and Christina Waterson (Brisbane).

National artists, designers and architects include Billy and Lulu Cooley, ARM Architecture, Catherine Truman, Damien Wright, Drew Heath, Duncan Meering, Greer Honeywill, Hossein Valamanesh, John Quan, John Wardle, Jon Goulder, Khai Liew, Lionel Bawden, Mance Design, March Studio, Marcus O'Reilly, Paul Morgan, Peter Walker, Sherrie Knipe, Simon Ancher, Tom Mirams, TreeHorn Design, Nawurapu Wunungmurra, Gary Warner and Zeljko Markov.

The exhibition includes furniture and functional objects, sculptural works (including wood carving by Indigenous artists), interiors and architectural work, and looks at the use of wood through three lenses; place and identity, sustainability and ecology, craftsmanship and technology.



A Forest Journey

The Story of Wood and Civilization

John Perlin

0-88150-676-1

A contemporary view of the effects of wood, as used for building and fuel, and of deforestation on the development of civilization.

Until the ascendancy of fossil fuels, wood has been the principal fuel and building material from the dawn of civilization. Its abundance or scarcity greatly shaped, as *A Forest Journey* ably relates, the culture, demographics, economy, internal and external politics, and technology of successive societies over the millennia. The book's comprehensive coverage of the major role forests have played in human life—told with grace, fluency, imagination, and humour—gained it recognition as a Harvard Classic in Science and World History and as one of Harvard's "One-Hundred Great Books."

This new paperback edition will add a prologue and an epilogue to reflect the current situation in which forests have become imperative for humanity's survival.