

Interweaving in New Zealand Culture: a Design Case Study

D WOOD

Abstract

Carin Wilson is one of New Zealand's significant designers and makers of studio furniture. This analysis of his career is enmeshed with New Zealand contemporary craft history, and the national Pākehā (non-Māori) organization that advocated for craft issues and education from 1965 to 1992. During this period and subsequently, Wilson negotiated his bi-cultural heritage to engage in one-of-a-kind furniture-making as well as benefit non-Māori and Māori communities and the nation. Unlike New Zealand's coat-of-arms, which portrays its founding cultures as equal yet separate, Wilson's career shows that New Zealand's cultures merge into each other, manifesting in hybrid individuals and communities.



Figure 1: "New Zealand Coat of Arms 1956,"
Ministry for Culture and Heritage, accessed May 30 2011,
<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/new-zealand-coat-arms-1911-1956>.

The New Zealand coat-of-arms (Figure 1) attests to the dual nature of the country's culture. On the left a European woman stands for the Pākehā segment of society whose ancestors came to the South Pacific in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries seeking seals, whales, timber, gold and territory; on the right a Māori rangatira represents the indigenous inhabitants whose land and coastal waters contained what was sought after.¹ The figures stand in the same plane, metaphorically indicative of the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding constitutional document.

This 1956 version of the coat-of-arms was originally designed in 1911.² Although the graphic design was refined and updated, the New Zealand government still chose to portray the country as having two mutually exclusive races and cultures. Yet the visual metaphor belies reality. New Zealanders have "a long tradition of ethnic intermarriage"³ and early colonial governments assumed that intermarriage would result in the disappearance of the Māori race.⁴ While this view was discredited by the mid-twentieth-century, the redesigned coat-of-arms reflects the "Eurocentric paradigm" whereby the "bi-racial model and the later bi-cultural model" aligns "relatively comfortably with the view that a person belonged to one group or another."⁵ Contrary to this prevailing visual representation, cultural identity, for many New Zealanders, is hybrid.

Cultural hybridity “is the result when subcultures rub up against each other, appropriating and transforming each other’s paradigms.”⁶ McCoy’s definition applies broadly to the merging of societies, races, lifestyles and beliefs. This article concerns an example of hybridity in a craft practice that better reflects New Zealand culture. My doctoral research examined the craft of studio furniture in this country and its parameters between 1979 and 2008. Studio furniture is defined as one-of-a-kind furniture of high quality made by a solo practitioner in a workshop setting. The topic has never before been examined in New Zealand, nor have its practitioners been researched in any depth. This article focuses on the practice of one studio furniture maker, Carin Wilson.

Wilson is a designer/maker who was raised in Pākehā New Zealand culture and subsequently committed to Māori. A member of the hapū Ngāi Te Rangihouhiri, he has enjoyed a varied career as a designer and furniture maker. My research into his practice reveals Wilson’s commitment to making furniture as well as his singular advocacy for craft and, especially, craft/design education. He has been associated with craft and design for over 40 years, has had opportunities to compare the international stage to his own, and is articulate. As a result I have chosen to quote him at length in order that his knowledge and personality are conveyed in his words. His words weave a story of participation in and contribution to Māori, Pākehā and Aotearoa New Zealand cultures.

A Dual Citizen

Carin Wilson’s maternal grandparents were Italian, and his paternal grandfather, a Scot named Andrew Wilson, married a Māori, Anahera Kingi. Carin (Figure 2) was born and raised in the South Island and enrolled in law school at Victoria University of Wellington in 1965 at the age of 20. Boredom curtailed law studies and he found employment as a sales representative for a Māori publishing company, during which he trained in organization and methods.



Figure 2: Carin Wilson, at work in his Auckland studio.
Photo: Artist’s Collection.

In the early 1970s, Wilson and his wife purchased a run-down cottage near Christchurch. The family needed furniture, which Wilson made out of old kauri tubs that he found on his property. This inclination to make furniture could be said to have sprung from his Pākehā roots because, as Wilson explains, furniture was not a traditional Māori practice (Figure 3):

There's no real history of furniture for the Māori culture. As far as I can tell the creative work was all developed around the location of tangata, that is the man, in the tribal milieu. So tangata, the individual, fits into the whanau, hapū, iwi continuum, and the primary form of expression is to be found in the architecture of the marae. So the work of the designers of the Māori culture, the indigenous culture, the tohunga whakairo, and tohunga raranga, that's really all concerned with how the body of the individual fits into the body of the whole. And the body of the whole is represented in the whareniui or the meeting house. And interesting, I think, is that the evolution of furniture as a form has not really evolved in that context. As far as I can tell, the headrest is about as far as we went ... we lived on the floor, we lived on our beautifully woven mats and much of what might have developed into furnishings in the western world is concentrated around the presentation of food. So the food bowls and the storage receptacles and so on, that's really where most of the effort and design work went.⁷



Figure 3: Taonga Whakairo

This taonga whakairo (carved treasure) in the reception area of the National Office of Land Information New Zealand (LINZ) in Wellington, contains traditional Māori design: carving and weaving. It was designed and carved by Rangi Hetet, a tohunga whakairo of Ngāti Tūwharetoa and Ngāti Maniapoto descent; two of Rangi's daughters wove the tukutuku panel.

Photo: LINZ

This awareness of the Māori's traditional artistic concentration on the tapu meeting house came later in Wilson's life. In the 1970s, when refashioning the discarded kauri, he was simply supporting a growing family's basic needs. He describes a moment during his early making that had a profound effect on his subsequent life and career:

One day I found an old gate under a hedge and I started cleaning back the timber underneath the weathering. And had quite a transforming experience. As I peeled back those layers I saw something in the timber that I can only describe as its spiritual essence. So it was in every way a transforming experience for me. I'd made that connection with the wairua of the timber and from then on I knew that I'd found a material that I connected with at a deep level. And that's really the beginning. I started a process of learning the characteristics of the timber, of reading and teaching myself methods that I could use to work it.

Wilson's epiphany – his recognition of the soul of the wood and a personal connection to it – was a personal experience unrelated to ethnic background. Māori carvers acknowledge that carving has “physical, metaphysical and spiritual realms of understanding”;⁸ Ranginui Walker quotes a karakia that precedes the felling of a tree to propitiate the gods for taking a resource;⁹ and Lionel Skinner identifies a “truth to materials” philosophy that pervaded Māori Modernism, whereby the grain, knots and vagaries of each piece of wood determine the outcome.¹⁰ Yet Wilson's “aha” moment was not steeped in this carving lore and was, instead, about finding truth in materials. Wilson's consciousness of the mana of the material provoked his total immersion in the craft of woodworking, a craft with origins in the European tradition. His engagement was all-encompassing: “I could work eighteen, twenty hours a day and not feel at all fatigued, coping with the physical demands of running a family and generating a viable income from this work. All seemed to be carried along with the sheer joy of being able to practice something that had such a strong inner meaning for me.” Wilson's sensation of timelessness, verified by many people engaged in pleasurable activity, is called “flow”. Flow is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.”¹¹

In conjunction with his self-teaching Wilson began to seek out the company of other artists. Noel Gregg, a blacksmith who established a group of studios called the Artists Quarter in central Christchurch, encouraged Wilson's aesthetic and techniques, prompting his continuing exploration and refinement (Figure 4). He determined that the way to become recognized was by means of exhibitions and made a commitment to produce 15 pieces (occasional tables, shelf units and cupboards) in six weeks to fill an unexpected vacancy in the Canterbury Building Centre's exhibition schedule. While sitting in the space on the exhibit's first day, he was approached by a man who inquired about prices. Wilson hastily calculated costs and the visitor, a buyer for McKenzie & Willis, wrote a check for the entire lot and gave instructions for delivery when the exhibition closed. As Wilson says, “It was a dream start.”



Figure 4: Cabinet, late 1970s. Wilson describes this as one of his favourite photos. The children are exploring his cabinet shortly after delivery. The piece is rustic in style and was designed to withstand the wear-and-tear of a young family.

The image reflects Wilson's “sheer joy” in making furniture.

Photo: Artist's Collection.

For the next five years Wilson and, later, two employees, supplied the retailer with all they could make. The confidence and stability engendered by that relationship prompted Wilson to expand his creative network, both in the Artists Quarter and beyond. He was a founding member of the Canterbury Guild of Woodworkers in 1978 and was proposed as Southern Regional Representative on the Executive of the Crafts Council of New Zealand (CCNZ). In 1981, after a year on the Executive, Wilson was elected President of the CCNZ, headquartered in Wellington, and undertook responsibilities for a national membership-driven organization.

In 1982, in addition to fulfilling his duties as President, Wilson moved his family to Auckland to be closer to his Māori roots. I would argue that his desire for closer association with his cultural heritage coincided with growing awareness of the potential of his furniture making. Relocation to Auckland permitted joining a community that was design-focused – in contrast to the Artists Quarter that was rural craft-focused – and an opportunity to compete in that milieu. Already-established connections with Auckland artists provided segues to exhibition opportunities, and once a studio was established, he continued to be a prolific and accomplished furniture maker.

One of Wilson's major commissions was for the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council headquarters in Wellington and is indicative of the standard of his work in the European tradition.¹² In 1985 nine furniture makers were invited to submit designs for three projects: a boardroom table and sixteen chairs, furniture for the Director's office, and furniture for the reception area and offices.¹³ After a two-stage selection process, Wilson was awarded the boardroom project (Figure 5). The brief for the table stated that it must be multi-purpose, accommodating both small and large meetings. The chairs were a refinement of a set of chairs commissioned from Wilson by the Department of Foreign Affairs as New Zealand's gift to the new Republic of Vanuatu.¹⁴



Figure 5: Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, Board Room Table and Chairs
Each of the eight wedge-shaped segments could stand alone or be combined into a hexagonal table that incorporated radiating tawa (*Beilschmiedia tawa*) veneers on its top.
The complementary chairs were of tawa and black leather.
Photo: Artist's Collection.

In summary, Carin Wilson, who might have pursued the customary male Māori craft of carving, instead adopted a creative and practical mode of expression that had its roots in the traditions of the European guilds. He was self-taught, except for workshops by overseas makers

(to be described shortly), and honed his craft to the degree of making one-of-a-kind elegant goods with high quality materials. Yet he was not solely a studio artist dedicated to producing luxury furniture for an elite market. His simultaneous contribution to the expanding contemporary craft community, that was almost exclusively Pākehā, was considerable. This community was embodied in the Crafts Council of New Zealand.

The Crafts Council of New Zealand

The impetus for a national craft organization came from outside the country. In 1964, Aileen Osborn Webb, the instigator of the American Craft Council, sent inquiries to prospective participant countries, encouraging delegates to come to a Congress at Columbia University. New Zealand's invitation was taken up by Nan Berkeley (Figure 6), President of the Wellington Potters' Society. Berkeley (1910-2007) was gregarious, visionary, and passionate about craft; at their own expense she and another potter travelled to New York. At that meeting Webb proposed the creation of the World Crafts Council (WCC); Berkeley brought the idea back to Wellington and established the New Zealand chapter. By 1977 the membership deemed it prudent to dedicate itself to New Zealand concerns, and a new constitution was adopted under the name of the Crafts Council of New Zealand Inc.



Figure 6: Nan Berkeley

Berkeley is seen at the Third Assembly of the World Crafts Council in Lima, Peru, 1968. She was discussing the possibility of a direct air link to New Zealand with the President of Peru, Fernando Belaúnde Terry. Shortly thereafter Terry was displaced by a military coup.

Berkeley was a self-styled New Zealand ambassador during her overseas trips and was awarded the Queen's Service Order in the Queen's Birthday Honours List, 1991.

Photo: *New Zealand Crafts* 28 (1989): 3.

New Zealand maintained its affiliation with the WCC until the late 1980s; the CCNZ survived until 1992 when its funding was terminated. Membership subscriptions had never fully supported the organization, and the Arts Council, its sole funding agency since 1987, determined that finances would be better directed to marketing. The Arts Marketing Board of Aotearoa (AMBA), established immediately upon the demise of the Crafts Council, was an inadequate substitute with respect to providing national resources and advocacy for craft. It ceased, too, in 1995.¹⁵

Although Māori craft practices were by no means excluded from the WCC or CCNZ, Māori membership was almost non-existent. Māori carvers (wood and stone) and weavers maintained allegiances within the iwi structure and formally through Te Puia, the New Zealand

Māori Arts and Crafts Institute (NZMACI) which was re-established in 1967.¹⁶ A few Māori artists joined the CCNZ, but as Carin Wilson explains, the situation in the early 1980s was not conducive to a “melting pot” of practitioners:

Talk around that time of raranga and tukutuku, they were words that were almost not in colloquial use. And I remember so clearly, it was hugely impactful on me but also I was very embarrassed about it. I remember asking Cliff Whiting to come and talk with my Executive at the Crafts Council about the possibility of gaining a better understanding of the work of Māori artists in our field.¹⁷ And at lunch time, Cliff looked completely bewildered and said to me, ‘Look, I just don’t know how I can make any contribution to this meeting.’ Here we have a prominent Māori artist and he’s finding it difficult to connect with other craft practitioners equally dedicated in their own way, but at that time we just hadn’t been able to find a common ground.

The quotation attests to Wilson’s chagrin at the separate, parallel paths that Māori and Pākehā craftspeople were taking during his CCNZ Presidency (1982-1984). But he was also embarrassed at his own naivety regarding the art practices of his ancestors. For Wilson, Cliff Whiting’s visit was the rubbing together of subcultures described by McCoy.

Therefore, Wilson’s commitment to the CCNZ was unusual for his background. But that is not all. He was the first woodworker on the Executive of the CCNZ, thereby bringing the interests of woodworkers and furniture makers to the Crafts Council. And he was the first of two CCNZ Presidents who were furniture makers, possessing a perspective that took account of this relatively new medium in the New Zealand craft range.¹⁸ Because Wilson was attempting to make a living as a furniture maker, he became a powerful advocate for craft furniture as a recognized professional occupation. Furthermore, he identified with moves toward professionalization of all the crafts, including aspirations that quality handmade objects command an appropriate financial return.

At this stage, Wilson championed Pākehā – that is, non-Māori – craft practices (pottery, glass, blacksmithing, furniture making) and was motivated by the “strong inner meaning” of working, like his colleagues, with materials. While he had begun the process of connection with his hapū, he was still largely untutored in Māoritanga. Concurrent with his absorption of Māoritanga that took place gradually during the 1980s and 1990s, Wilson made his major contribution to craft as a national presence.

Craft Education

The objectives of the Crafts Council of New Zealand were:

- a) To promote, foster and develop crafts, arts and related fields of design and to promote a high level of performance in crafts, arts and related fields of design.
- b) To encourage and assist the education of craftspeople, artists and designers and to encourage education in crafts, arts and design through all levels of the education system.
- c) To establish and maintain library, gallery, lecture, demonstration and experimental facilities ... and to print and publish any newspapers, periodicals, books, or leaflets that the Society may think desirable for the promotion of its object.¹⁹

As these objectives attest, the Crafts Council positioned itself as an advocate and resource for both craft and related design. Education in design, specific to craft, did not eventuate until 1986 and Carin Wilson played a pivotal role in instituting this instruction.

When Carin Wilson assumed the Presidency of the CCNZ in 1981 his personal mandate, was education. He explained why:

... when I first started making I wanted to find some point of contact whereby I could accelerate my own skill development and I went to the Polytechnic in Christchurch and I said, 'Do you have any courses in furniture making?' And, basically, the answer I got was, 'no we don't, but you could enroll here as an apprentice builder.'²⁰ And I said, 'well that won't really work for me.' So I let that go but it remained in my mind that what's absent from the curriculum in New Zealand is training for people who are interested in taking up what it was that gave me so much pleasure.

Wilson's pleasure derived from working with wood; his individual agenda coincided with momentum within the CCNZ for education in all craft media. In 1982 Wilson was successful in applying to the Arts Council for a travel grant to enable him to visit art schools in the United States and Europe, talk to administrators and faculty about curriculum, and look at studio facilities. He described his experience:

What I discovered, first of all, was huge support for what we were trying to do and for me personally. [I received] a great deal of encouragement from everybody that I spoke to and they continued to be encouraging for some time after this. One of the most influential, I would say, furniture makers of that time was a man named James Krenov who'd written two and subsequently a third beautiful book which resonated strongly with many of us who were interested in working with wood as a material at that time. I'd written to James and said, 'I want to come and see the school that you're working with,' which is the College of the Redwoods in Northern California. And, later, he agreed to come out to New Zealand and do a series of workshops here. So through there, what I was able to see was my own vision for resourcing, if you like, the interest in wood skills and good design and furniture design. Through James and another English artist who I talked to, Alan Peters, we were able to grow the sense of a community of woodworkers and designers.

Krenov came to New Zealand on a Fulbright Scholarship in July and August of 1983 to give workshops and public lectures. "Some 130 woodworkers with a very broad range of skills and interests attended the workshops and around 700 people crammed the lectures, often accepting seats on the floor or standing around the walls."²¹ Most of New Zealand's major furniture makers – James Dowle, Jimu Grimmatt, Humphrey Ikin, John Shaw, Colin Slade – credit Krenov's visit as being influential to their careers.²² Grassroots enthusiasm was piqued too: by 1984, Auckland and Wellington had Guilds of Woodworkers, and the magazine *Touch Wood* was launched.²³ A crafts conference in January 1984 brought Alan Peters, sponsored by the British Council, as a guest speaker; his subsequent workshops took place in the North and South Islands.²⁴ Important as they were for furniture makers, these visits were a secondary outcome of Wilson's trip. The primary outcome addressed the Crafts Council's aforementioned objective: "to encourage and assist the education of craftspeople, artists and designers."

Although Wilson's bias was his own medium, he made concerted efforts during his years in the Artists Quarter to get to know and learn about others:

I really wanted to understand the work and I learnt a huge amount from being able to associate with those other artists. I learnt about the eye of the ceramic artist, for example, who's throwing on the wheel and whose eye for symmetry and really good form is what sets a great ceramic artist apart from one who's just an also-ran. I learnt from the weavers about texture and the way they work their fibre and I guess the way they engage with it in the same way that I felt I was engaged with wood as my own chosen material.

As a consequence, when he reported about his overseas investigation of educational prospects, his recommendations were based on the two-part dialogue in which he had engaged with international educators: “on the one hand there was this dialogue about skills and practices about working with wood as a material and the other dialogue was about the design process. And it was very important for us [the Crafts Council] that we were able to marry those two approaches.” WCC and CCNZ publications, from their inception, bore witness to the high standards of execution seen in New Zealand craft exhibitions, but judges also commented on design shortcomings.²⁵ The CCNZ intended to redress its constituency’s lack of design training, and Wilson’s trip offered examples of how this could be done.

Wilson’s eight week trip through five countries and eleven tertiary institutions resulted in a document for the Minister of the Arts, Alan Highet: *A Report on Training Programmes in the Crafts at some Leading Craft Schools in Europe & U.S.A. with some Recommendations that should be considered for New Zealand.*²⁶ *A Report* is a comprehensive analysis, based on personal observation and the brochures accumulated on the trip, in which each school is summarized under the topics Background, Philosophy, Facilities, Pre-entry, Course Structure, and Tuition/Fees. By undertaking this exercise Wilson was able to write comparative summaries and advocate the programmes that could best be facilitated nationally. For example, Royal College of Art, London: “I believe that every country needs its Royal College, and if we can’t afford our own we should be sending exceptional students there”; Rochester Institute of Technology: “Although the facilities are highly impressive and the college has its pedigree, it lacked the ‘heart’ of some of the other programmes”; College of the Redwoods, California: “In a market where the standards are very high, this one would be my choice because its results are so visible after what is essentially a short period of instruction.”

One of the recommendations enacted as a result of *A Report* was a committee that would function in conjunction with the Department of Education. Between 1984 and 1986, Wilson convened the Crafts Education Advisory Council under the auspices of the Director General of Education. Ultimately, during 1986 and 1987, eleven polytechnics inaugurated a two-year Certificate in Craft Design. However, the Labour government’s egalitarian efforts to spread craft education from Whangarei to Southland stretched minimal resources – finances, premises, equipment, and, most importantly, qualified teaching personnel – and the programmes faltered. The Crafts Council had to lobby to ensure that the initial intake of certificate students could proceed to second year; then the advanced two-year diploma was funded at only four polytechnics: Carrington (Auckland), Nelson, Waiariki (Rotorua) and Waikato (Hamilton) in 1988. Geographically the diploma programme was concentrated in the north of the North Island, with Nelson as the exception.

Concurrently, education was restructured so that polytechnics were independent of government and by 1991 emphasis shifted from craft to visual arts instruction. Lack of long-term governmental vision specifically for craft – the Crafts Education Advisory Committee to the Department of Education was disbanded once the diploma programme was in place – meant that a new generation of craftspeople, both practitioners and teachers, could not develop.²⁷ A single elite institution for indigenous and contemporary crafts, another of Wilson’s recommendations, was not a politically expedient solution in 1986; twenty-five years later he still believes it was the superior model.

When asked whether he maintains educational aspirations for New Zealand youth, Wilson replied:

I’m actually quite concerned for the world that we’re now leading them into. In terms of our own responsibility as kaitiaki of the world we hand on, I feel a certain sense of failure that [there are] questions that there’s an urgent need to address now. I had those questions in my mind when I first started my life as an artist and maker and we knew thirty years ago that they were going to become highly significant and yet this

preoccupation, if I can call it that, with the art process²⁸ is one that maybe distracted us from addressing those questions more vigorously. I mean, honestly, I don't really know whether it would have been possible to make more noise – when you're talking about things happening at a planetary level, the contribution of single individuals is kind of miniscule.

During the 1980s and 90s, concurrent with maintaining his own studio (Figure 7) and fulfilling CCNZ commitments, Wilson managed several furniture import companies, and served on a number of boards: the Executive Board of the World Crafts Council (1984-87), the Designers Institute of New Zealand (Council member 1991-93; President 1994), the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council's Arts Marketing Working Party (1991-92), the New Zealand Qualifications Authority's Craft Advisory Panel (1992), and the New Zealand Craft Resource Trust (1997). The latter was one of the fleeting initiatives established to address the vacuum left by the dissolution of the national craft organization. Wilson responded as follows to the question of whether the CCNZ warranted elimination:

I think we had something that still had quite a long way to go ... it just seems incredible that here in 2011 we can talk about a government which through the Helen Clark years had sort of dabbled in the need for design.²⁹ It comes and goes in waves. But we never really get down to a comprehensive commitment to it. We don't really support it in the way that it needs to be supported to achieve the sort of change that at another level, like about performance of our economy, is being talked about constantly. But the means and the investment in it is not understood now, as it wasn't understood in 1992. As a nation we've dabbled in quite a flighty way with propositions about the importance of research and development which is essentially creativity ... but I don't see that we've ever made that comprehensive commitment to it. And I'm really sorry that we haven't and I was disappointed when that happened with the Crafts Council. But I think that there were things going on in the Council at that time that weren't helping it to go on to become what it could've been ... You get periods in organizations which, as a society we've got to learn to live with, and we've got to wrestle with what we need to do to get them back on track. You don't shut them down like that. It was crazy.



Figure 7: Royal Pain in the Arse

This chair, made by Carin Wilson for the first *Artiture* furniture exhibition in 1987, resembles the chairs made for the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council. *Artiture* was based in Auckland and

envisaged as a showcase for designers to explore furniture as art. With this chair, Wilson engaged in narrative rather than functional furniture, one of the few designer/makers to do so.
Photo: Artist's Collection.

Wilson's experience as an advocate for designer/maker education prompts his slight detour, in the middle of this passage, into "research and development." He alludes to New Zealand governments' consistent attitude toward design: it is a value-added component of products for export.³⁰ Financial support is available to companies that, having undertaken their own research and development, are earners in the international market. Design as an element of culture has not been supported and, in fact, denied. According to the Design Taskforce's report, *Success by Design: Design Makes First World Economies* published in 2003, New Zealand has little design history but instead, "a fresh perspective unencumbered by tradition (remote yet internationally aware)"; as a nation "we tend to carry less 'baggage' from the past than in some countries."³¹

The Crafts Council was one of the only organizations that promoted design at the grassroots level through its exhibitions, publications and community education. Craft was affordable and desirable until 1984, when the Government eliminated import tariffs. This withdrawal of support for local industries imposed a paradigm shift that affected every aspect of New Zealand life. The subsequent influx of cheap imports, coupled with the economic recession of 1987, seriously affected the makers of handcrafted objects. Their goods were deemed expensive and less fashionable than perfect mass-produced ones, and, as a consequence, became less visible. The craft certificate and diploma programmes came on stream in 1986/87 and lasted only four years, thereby minimizing any educational and theoretically-informed impact, before craft was absorbed by visual arts curricula.³²

John Scott, CCNZ President 1987-1992, commenting on the work of graduating Craft Design Diploma students in 1991, said: "There was some fine work and much mediocre with the work predominantly paintings and sculptural applications of 'craft media'. Where was the exquisitely designed craft, the functional ceramics, the jewellery or the glass?"³³ The elimination of the Crafts Council of New Zealand, and thereby its presence and mandate, was a blow to national craft and design. Admittedly a small country with limited resources must prioritize them, but the New Zealand state has a history of mismanagement of design. Successive governments have refused to recognize that, as Christopher Thompson points out: "no design promotion activity has been able to function without the financial and administrative support provided by the state either in New Zealand or overseas."³⁴

Māori design and craft

The demise of the CCNZ and AMBA curtailed opportunities for Wilson's Pākehā craft involvement, although he continues to make furniture and sculpture, and remains committed to crafts. However, his move to Auckland in 1982 and immersion in Māoritanga, including learning te reo, led to a gradual shift in focus. In the last ten years his energy has been devoted to the Māori community: he was one of the instigators of an initiative that grew out of a perceived need to foster not only Māori designers and makers but the creative practices within the tribal structure and community as a whole. The first hui for Ngā Aho was held in July 2007, and after some teething problems the group has matured: it designed merchandise for the 2011 Rugby World Cup.³⁵ Ngā Aho's members are "Māori design professionals," with a few non-Māori who must be nominated as kaupapa whānau.³⁶

Ngā Aho translates as the weft threads of weaving. The organization's founders adopted the weaving metaphor for projecting their ethos, wherein "the forms of objects are not imposed from above but grow from the mutual involvement of people and materials in an

environment.”³⁷ In addition, Ngā Aho’s acknowledgement of craft as central to culture signals an alternative approach to design in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Wilson says that Ngā Aho represents the pendulum’s swing the other way, relative to his immersion in the Pākehā-centric Crafts Council, but his biculturalism looks forward to a consolidation of creative advocacy and practice by all New Zealand’s races and cultures:

My aspirations, honestly, are about identity, culture and, if I may say it this way, there’s still work to be done in unseating the formidable influence of western European design training in the formal art and design programmes in New Zealand. We [have to] get to the stage where the essence of what we’re doing is bound up in our own culture, this fantastic hybrid that we have of Polynesian and Pākehā. And this wonderful geographic location. We’re fortunate enough to live on these islands in this kind of splendid isolation, a splendid isolation that gives us a chance to form a very strong sense of who we are and yet still maintain connections through the technologies available now with the rest of the world. Until we’ve got to the stage where we’ve really coalesced the essence of all of that, then I won’t be satisfied that my own work is done. And so gaining respect overseas is quite immaterial to me in that it really won’t help me to achieve that. If anything, what I’ve found in talking about some of the questions that confront us as designers here, or designers and makers, here in New Zealand, with colleagues overseas, it’s the consideration of those questions that gives me affirmation. It’s not about the work any longer, it’s more about who we are, what are we doing this for, what’s the future look like, not only for artists and designers but for the planet. You know, all of those have become the really big questions in the thirty years or so that I’ve been involved in this wonderful journey that I’ve been on.

During Carin Wilson’s gradual transition to Ngā Aho he became familiar with and passionate about wood and its techniques, extrapolating his knowledge into compassion for workers in other materials; tread a path that was populated by a spectrum of individuals from national and international design and craft communities; dedicated himself to craft education for others when he had been denied it himself; negotiated the environment for craft that extended from the studio to its umbrella agency and the government bureaucracy beyond; and adapted Pākehā precedents for Māori-lead designer makers. His story began, synchronistically, with an old gate whose wairua opened a door to a “way of life”, a way that embraced the hybrid culture that is New Zealand (Figure 8).



Figure 8: New Zealand Coat-of-Arms 2018.

In March 2011 the Sustainable Future Institute held a conference, *StrategyNZ: Mapping our Future*. The participants divided into ten groups to undertake futures-oriented tasks including envisaging a new coat of arms. The solution of “Group 8: Brown” comes closest to expressing hybridity. Image: *Sustainable Future Institute*, “StrategyNZ: Mapping Our Future,” accessed June 6 2011, http://www.sustainablefuture.info/Site/StrategyNZ/StrategyNZ_Mapping_our_Future.aspx, 2011.

Conclusion

Carin Wilson’s career is evidence of the personal transformation of paradigms that results from juxtaposed cultures. Wilson was raised in and spent his teens and twenties in a Pākehā environment. As a consequence, he adopted a European mode of artistic expression, furniture making, and became involved in its immediate community – woodworking exhibitions, clubs and training – as well as its national and international affiliates. He was an advocate for craft and design education, particularly an elite school that would have provided training and resources for Pākehā and Māori master craftspeople. With the disappearance of a New Zealand craft organization and craft education and Wilson’s immersion in Māoritanga, he concentrated on his iwi and its design culture. His facility in both Māori and Pākehā paradigms lead to his teaching design to New Zealand youth in the Auckland region and in his own studio. And while Māori practitioners of non-Māori arts, such as furniture making, have increased since the 1970s, further research is needed on the extent to which New Zealand design and art history can be seen through a hybrid bi-cultural lens and the influence on this phenomenon by kaitiaki such as Carin Wilson.

¹ Ranginui Walker clarified that the terms Māori and Pākehā are “binary oppositions”. When Māori were the only residents of New Zealand, an identity was redundant; the arrival of others necessitated the designations Māori and non-Māori (Pākehā). In addition Māori identity does not exist in direct relation to all non-Māori, but to non-Māori New Zealanders. Quoted in Bill Willmott, “Introduction: Culture and National Identity,” in *Culture and Identity in New Zealand*, eds. David Novitz and Bill Willmott, 1-20 (Wellington, NZ: GP Books, 1989), 10, 12.

² “New Zealand Coat of Arms 1911-1956,” *Ministry for Culture & Heritage*, updated May 19 2011, accessed May 30 2011, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/new-zealand-coat-arms-1911-1956>.

³ Sarah Howard and Robert Didham, “Ethnic Inter-marriage and Ethnic Transference Amongst the Maori Population: Implications for the Measurement and Definition of Ethnicity,” *Statistics New Zealand*, accessed May 20 2011, http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/population/census_counts/review-measurement-of-ethnicity/papers.aspx, c2005, 1.

⁴ Mansoor Khawaja, Bill Boddington, and Robert Didham, “Growing Ethnic Diversity in New Zealand and its Implications for Measuring Differentials in Fertility and Mortality,” *Statistics New Zealand*, accessed May 30 2011, http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/population/census_counts/review-measurement-of-ethnicity/papers.aspx, 2000, 5.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Katherine McCoy, “Hybridity Happens,” in *Graphic Design vs. Style, Globalism, Criticism, Science, Authenticity and Humanism*, edited by Rudy VanderLans, 38-47. (Berkeley: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 44.

⁷ I interviewed Carin Wilson in March 2009 and February 2010. Quotations come from these interviews unless stated otherwise.

⁸ Roi Toia and Todd Couper, *Kāhui Whetū: Contemporary Maori Art: A Carver’s Perspective* (Auckland: Reed Publishing, 2006), 42.

⁹ Ranginui Walker, *Tohunga Whakairo: Paki Harrison* (Auckland: Penguin, 2008), 213-214.

¹⁰ Lyonel Grant and Damian Skinner, *Ihenga: Te Haerenga Hou: The Evolution of Maori Carving in the 20th Century* (Auckland: Reed, 2007), 147.

¹¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York, Harper Collins, 2008), 4.

¹² The Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council was established in 1963 under the Department of Internal Affairs to fund arts organizations via lottery profits. It was dissolved in 1994 and re-constituted as Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa. See *The New Zealand Official Yearbook 1982* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1982), 217 and “New Zealand Legislation: Act: Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa 1994,” *New Zealand Government*, accessed May 30 2011, <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1994/0019/latest/DLM330162.html>.

¹³ Lynette Mulvay, “New Zealand Design and Woodwork in Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Headquarters,” *Touch Wood* 11, (1987): 13-17, p.13.

¹⁴ Mary Shanahan, “The Leading Edge,” *New Zealand Home & Building* (March 1988): 87.

¹⁵ Angela Ots, “AMBA Dogged by Sour Arts Council Ties,” *Evening Post*, December 9 1995, edition 3, 11.

¹⁶ A school of wood carving existed in Rotorua from 1927 to 1937, and Te Puia follows from this basis. “Wānanga: National Carving School: Carving School Beginnings,” *Te Puia*, accessed May 15 2011, <http://www.tepuia.com>, 2010.

¹⁷ Cliff Whiting is an esteemed carver. Between 1995 and 2000 he was Kaihautū of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and created Te Papa’s Marae. (*Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet*. “New Zealand Honours,” accessed June 20 2011, <http://www.dpmc.govt.nz/honours/lists/onzbio.html>, 2010).

¹⁸ A summary of a discussion concerning the appropriateness of furniture for a craft exhibition appeared in the 1970 WCC New Zealand Annual General Meeting Minutes. The consensus was that it must be handcrafted, “not produced in mass for commerciale [sic] sale”. World Crafts Council (New Zealand Chapter), “Minutes of the Annual General Meeting, July 26 1970”.

¹⁹ “Special General Meeting,” *Crafts Council News* (March 1982): no pagination.

²⁰ Educators in New Zealand regarded craft as being for the less academically capable. One citation comes from a summary of a panel discussion on the teaching of crafts during a 1963 conference: “The approach seemed to be that craftwork was only for the less bright in the ‘C’ forms; ‘A’ forms were not able to include it in their syllabuses because of the pressure of examination subjects ...”. Victoria University of Wellington. Regional Council of Adult Education, *Proceedings of the first study-conference ... held at Massey University College from 29th-31st August, 1963, under the auspices of the Victoria University Regional Council of Adult Education* (Wellington: National Council of Education, 1963), 11. Wilson’s experience of being referred to a trade may have been because of this presumption and/or because of his Māori complexion, apart from the absence of furniture making courses.

²¹ Carin Wilson, “Some Reflections on the James Krenov Visit,” *New Zealand Crafts* 7 (1983): 29.

²² These men talked about the influences on their careers during personal interviews in 2009, 2010 and 2011.

²³ *Touch Wood* was published in Christchurch three times per year. It became the *New Zealand Woodworker* after 14 issues and ceased publication in 1991 with issue 24. See (“Craft Notes: ‘Touch Wood’,” *New Zealand Crafts* 6, (1983): 30).

²⁴ “Conference ’84: Alan Peters,” *New Zealand Crafts* 8, (1983/84): 8-9.

²⁵ In opening the Reserve Bank National Hand-weaving Competition in 1972, Professor John Reid from the University of Auckland stated: “The key element to my mind, lies in design ... I have seen some excellent technical work spoiled by poor and unimaginative design ... It does seem to me that unless there is some instinct or training in design a good deal of weaving is wasted effort ...”. “Opening Address at the Reserve Bank National Hand-Weaving Competition,” *WCC Newsletter* (February 1972): 3-4, p. 4.

²⁶ Wilson provided me with his annotated draft of *A Report* which became *Realising the Potential: A Report for the Minister for the Arts proposing a Strategy for Tertiary Education Programmes in New Zealand Craft*. It was deposited with the Alexander Turnbull Library in December 2012.

²⁷ “And More News,” *CCNZ Newsletter* 2, (1988): 2.

²⁸ Wilson is referring to the art/craft debate that dogged the Crafts Council of New Zealand and the crafts community internationally. The debate – is craft art? – remains insoluble but, as Wilson says,

preoccupation with the issue was detrimental to more important concerns. In New Zealand the discussion caused a rift in CCNZ membership, pitting ‘amateur’ makers against those who made their living by means of craft and considered themselves professional.

²⁹ While Helen Clark was Prime Minister (1999 to 2008), in May 2002 Industry New Zealand created a Design Taskforce whose mandate was to develop strategies that would alert industry to the benefits of design. Thompson points out that this was a replication of a similar initiative that was abolished in 1967; the results of the 2002 undertaking, an entity called Better by Design, have been questionable. See Christopher Thompson, “Design Promotion in New Zealand: Historical Perspectives on the 2003 Design Taskforce Report,” *National Grid* 6 (2010): 49-66.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Cited in Thompson: 50-51.

³² Even craft was regarded as an export money earner. From the Minister of Education’s Press Release announcing the inauguration of the vocational crafts programme: “The potential value of the craft training industry for employment and as a major earner of local and overseas funds is recognised ... with the funding of Certificate courses in craft education ...”. See (“Crafts Education Programme,” *Crafts Council Newsletter* 4, (1985): 2).

³³ John Scott, “Editorial,” *Craftnews* 32 (1991): 2.

³⁴ Thompson: 52.

³⁵ Ata Te Kanawa, “Threads of Visual Significance,” *Tu Mai*, (March 2008): 32-35.

³⁶ Ngā Aho. “Kaitautoko: Membership Types,” *Ngā Aho*, accessed May 15 2011, <http://www.ngaaho.maori.nz>, 2011.

³⁷ Tim Ingold, “Making Culture and Weaving the World,” in *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, ed. P.M. Graves-Brown, 50-71. (London: Routledge, 2000), 68.