

Exploring and enriching the void

Reflections on the ways in which environmental planning and design practice
Boffa Miskell enriches the landscape and the life of a place,
 enabling people and nature to connect.



01 Boffa Miskell's Puhi Kai Iti/Cook Landing National Historic Reserve redevelopment in Tairāwhiti Gisborne was designed in conjunction with Ngāti Oneone. Image: Brennan Thomas/Strike Photography.

WHO WE ARE

The work of landscape architects is often unseen and, frequently, considered when it is too late. We do our best work when we are part of a project's inception, designing outcomes that fit the environment and make it better, for people and place. Our design ethic is inspired by place; we are not imposers of an aesthetic or a mantra. Each place – the people in it and the purpose of change through design – is different. We respond to the specific, seeking better outcomes and leaving our own personality out of it. That has been the Boffa Miskell mark from the beginning and it's one we still value today.

In September 1972, Frank Boffa left his role at Lincoln University to go into sole practice as a landscape architect and, now, Boffa Miskell comprises more than 200 employees. Here, across eight offices, landscape architects and urban designers work together with ecologists, planners, cultural advisors and technical specialists.

The step towards a multidisciplinary consultancy was taken after 17 years, in 1989. The decision to bring on an ecologist, rather than the perhaps-more-obvious choice of an architect or engineer, was a conscious one: a deliberate reinforcement of our commitment to, and connection with, the land. A gesture of intention: we would avoid becoming a practice that imposes its work upon the landscape. So, we moved even further towards a role of supporting and collaborating with the natural world.

The shared day-to-day experience of a designer at Boffa Miskell is being surrounded by a diversity of experts – these are the skills, experience, technical knowledge and professional backgrounds on which we draw. Rather than diluting our identity, these seemingly disparate points of view inspire and challenge us as designers; our work reflects this – not only in outward expression but in the technical challenges, innovation and new thinking that continually moves us forward in our practice.

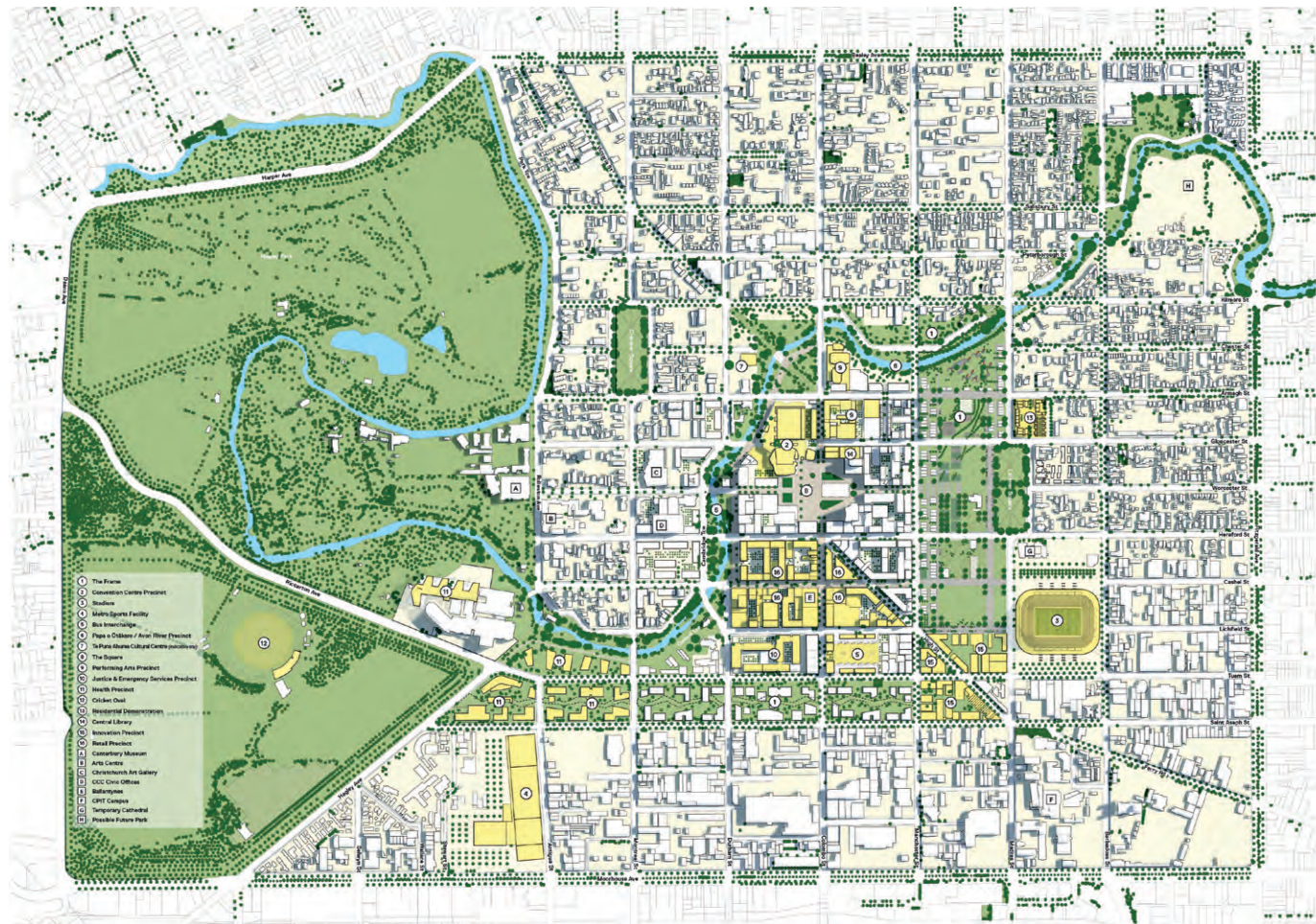
The practice has grown from a three-person office in Christchurch to eight offices across Aotearoa; we seek to be present in the communities in which we work, supported by the talents of a wider national team. We invest in our people, and Boffa Miskell's direction is influenced by the crossover of their individual journeys to explore professional growth and find

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places and projects where they are inspired and challenged.

Embracing our diversity fosters a constant dynamism that feeds into a supportive environment of shared learnings across design, ecology and planning, and our practice is better for it.

WHAT WE DO

In our design practice, we explore and enrich the void, using form to define, rather than occupy, space. In seeking to connect with the environment – including people and culture – we create enduring places that grow with occupation and use. This reminds us of the power of the natural world to inspire and nurture us and also of its fragility and our responsibility to care for people and place.

We connect to place and people on both the macro- and the micro-levels, by traversing disciplinary boundaries. Responsible for leading

the delivery of landscape architecture, urban design and architectural outcomes, with sub-consultants Warren and Mahoney, for the multi-award-winning Waterview Connection (2012–2017), we advocated for shared landscape outcomes that greatly enhanced the public open spaces whilst providing improved ecological outcomes for Auckland's longest urban stream.

Our design methodologies evolve and adapt but remain grounded in the simple rigour of survey-analysis-design: observing, listening to, and understanding a place and its people to inspire design interventions.

Dichotomy is always present. We believe that constraint is the crucible in which creativity is forged. Whilst our 'business' follows processes and procedures, Boffa Miskell (the design collective) actively avoids repetition and the limitations of a distinctive vernacular identity. We do not have a single design style – the thought is abhorrent – but, in every instance, we draw on the physical

02 The Blueprint for the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan set the spatial framework for the redevelopment of central Christchurch. For this spatial master-planning project to be led by a New Zealand landscape architecture consultancy was a milestone for the profession.

and dynamic attributes of place and people to inform distinctive but quiet, environmentally sound and beautiful design responses.

Paradoxically to some of our peers (and sometimes to ourselves), Boffa Miskell's landscape architects feel our efforts are most successful when the outcome appears simple – even to the point of disappearing. This often belies the complexity of thought and technical skill required to conceive and deliver these outcomes; however, an unobtrusive result reserves the opportunity for people and nature to connect through unanticipated and revealed activity. This brings identity and 'life' to a place, in a dimension beyond mere physical materiality or applied aesthetics.

We avoid over-designed embellishment; whilst meaning can be layered, our spaces should breathe and allow – even seek – creation of their own further meaning through use and an enriched environment.

Ego has no place in our approach to design. Rather, the alternative: we feel pride in being sought for our true enjoyment of shared work. This starts within the studio but pervades our work with others: our clients, collaborators and communities. This humility doesn't equate to lack of certainty, or opinion, or strength of design intent. We are clear thinkers, well able to argue our case, but we do it for the project and the outcomes, not for ourselves nor simply to be the loudest voice.

HOW WE DO IT

As a practice, we actively seek evolution and growth: to be innovators, early technology-adopters, adapters and give-it-a-goers. There is a Kiwi spirit of finding a way – not quite No. 8 wire but exploring opportunities – that is encouraged and admired. Like Frank Boffa and

Don Miskell in their day, we know there's benefit in proceeding until apprehended and in not seeing constraints as roadblocks but as options for divergent ways forward.

As artisans, we are ever-mindful of sharpening our tools, improving our techniques and seeking inspiration, and then not falling into repeat-mode but keeping going, exploring again. Our company-funded research grants encourage our designers and scientists to 'deep-dive' into their passions, and resurface with new and better tools and perspectives to feed back into our practice, for ourselves and our clients.

We keep moving forward. Sometimes, it's easy to forget how much so. But, in surveying the past 50 years, we see the evolution is immense; yet there's much that can be revisited, remembered and re-purposed for a new context and time.

We are grounded by, and adhere firmly to, the values Boffa Miskell has been built on: Manaaki (caring); Takohanga (accountable); Whakapono (trusted); Ngākaunui (passionate); Kotahitanga (collaborative); and Auaha (creative).

03–04 New recreation facilities and pedestrian/cycle routes were outcomes for the Waterview Connection project. Communities and places that could have been severed by an above-ground motorway were connected and enhanced. Image: Boffa Miskell.



Confident in the heritage of our stable foundation and buoyed by imagination, we are not afraid to challenge the expected response. We see the need to question the presupposed standards (particularly engineering practice) and assumed outcomes in response to social, cultural and environmental issues of the time. We embrace mindful change in response to knowledge gained, stories shared, histories revealed and nuances emerging. We know that both the quantitative and the qualitative have roles to play, and the best design outcomes acknowledge objective needs and subjective desires in proportional measures.

Our landscape architects have always had an ability to think broadly – from the tiny detail to the site scale and the wider landscape – but the growth of our planning and urban design teams has added more holistic strategic thinking to our approach. The process is expanded beyond the ‘design and delivery’ stages to understand more significantly and influence the formation of projects, clarifying the vision, making the strategic case and drawing together broad interests through planning stages. Our influence shapes outcomes that avoid unfortunate later compromise and achieve optimal success for all aspects – for the environment, for people, for clients and for the quality of place. Our motivation is to draw out the benefits of change and to find new expression to enrich the ‘life of a place’: where landscape comes into its own as a dynamic element that matures and sees aspiration fulfilled.

Our ability to be pragmatic and achieve gains that are realistic and realisable makes us trusted as navigators of increasingly complex processes.

A defining moment was the opportunity presented to lead the delivery of the Christchurch Blueprint. The intense time-frame pressure of a 100-day visionary response was a moment for practitioners to work alongside one another and collectively with our project partners: Warren and Mahoney, Sheppard & Rout, Woods Bagot, Populous, RCP and Greenwood Roche. Whilst broad in scope across spatial and statutory planning dimensions, our role as project lead included the city’s open space framework – the ‘spaces and places’ part of the Blueprint that is very evident in the regeneration of the city today. These spaces and places include: Te Papa Ōtākaro/Avon River Precinct; the siting of the Oi Manawa



Canterbury Earthquake National Memorial; the child magnet of the Margaret Mahy Playground, bringing families back into the devastated central city; and the bold move to shrink the city and redefine the original Black Map eastern frame – now the focus of the regeneration of central city living. This was followed through the Te Papa Ōtākaro/Avon River Precinct and East Frame where, together with sometimes-competing firms, we collectively delivered New Zealand’s largest public realm project.

WHO WE WORK WITH

Our shared values inform how we work with others, whether individuals, communities or allied professions. In particular, our collaborations with architects are at their most successful when they transcend traditional

05–06 Te Māra Hūpara playground (2018), in Auckland’s Mount Albert, brought traditional Māori play artefacts back into public consciousness. Several more playspaces – each unique to its own whenua and tangata – are under way throughout Aotearoa. Imagery: Jay Farnworth and Tom Mansell.



disciplinary boundaries in favour of mutual respect for the expertise each person brings.

We place a high value on continued learning and new challenges through which our skills and experience evolve. We seek to bring and share knowledge whilst learning from others, in turn. In this respect, success means a mutual sense of shared achievement and enjoyment of the process as well as the end result.

We have no fixed allegiances but remain independent, valuing insight gained from a diverse range of colleagues. We enjoy long-standing relationships with many remarkable individual designers and design practices, each of whom is at the top of their game. We challenge one another, knowing that we can each rely on the other to bring out the best in ourselves and deliver stronger outcomes together.



LOOKING FORWARD

Designing and managing sustainable environments has underpinned our work from the outset – before sustainability was its own discipline or the term was in common parlance. Our design practice has increasingly become focused on an urbanising society, with our core methods remaining steadfast but expanding and finding new expression in response to a world that is rapidly changing on multiple fronts.

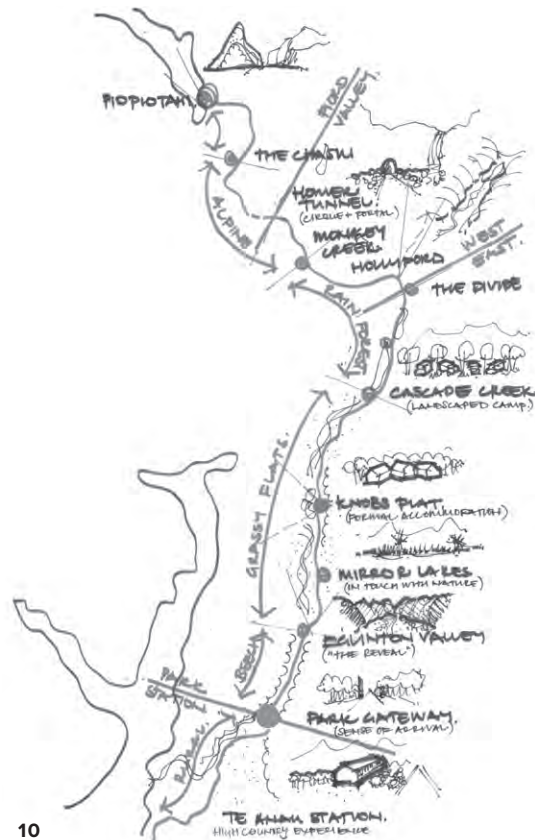
This can be seen through our influence on the public realm of central Auckland, which sparked in the mid-1990s with a piece of work titled the ‘Central Area Public Spaces’ or CAPS Plan, collaborating then with Dennis Scott for the pre-super-city Auckland City Council (ACC), as it then was. Through this project, we recommended investment in the established streets, lanes and spaces of the central city as opposed to knocking down buildings to create new parks, as the original brief forecast (it was a ‘90s’ thing).

Roll forward 30 years and our work is integrating public transport and active modes choices into our streets. Access for Everyone is continuing to deliver on the earlier recognition of the importance of the pedestrian amenity and public life of the central city over streets dominated by through traffic and private cars. In the interim, we have led the way with delivery of the city’s first shared streets – Elliott, Darby, O’Connell, Fort and Federal Streets – to our

07–08 Marine Parade has given new life to Napier by connecting the city to its coastline with a significant public space that reflects the natural and cultural landscapes of the bay. Imagery: Nik Kneale/Boffa Miskell.



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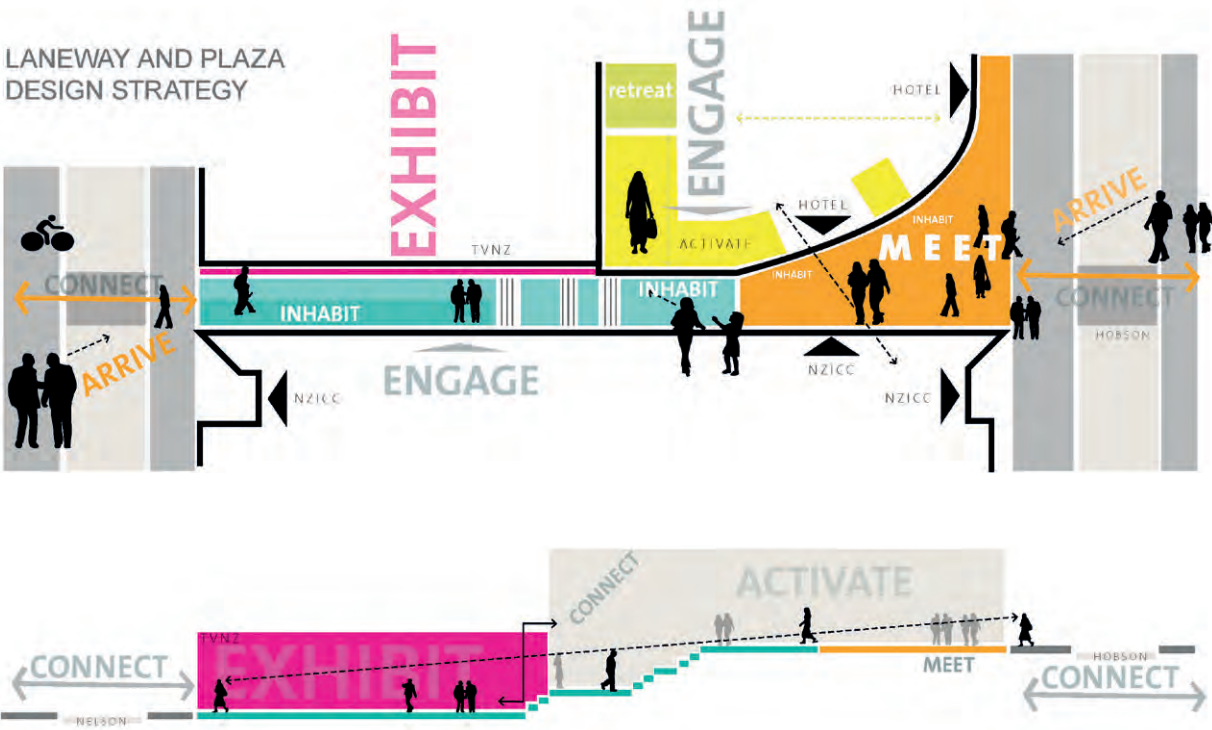
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name and the transformation of the city's western green oasis, St Patrick's Square.

Working with the stakeholder neighbours of St Patrick's Square to garner support and push for transformational change, the design of the Square, overtly and through abstraction, draws on its cathedral connection and integrating commissioned public art to enrich the meaning and experience of the city. And now, as we collaborate with Warren and Mahoney and Moller Architects, the New Zealand International Convention Centre (NZICC) project will deliver a new model of a truly urban convention centre with three pedestrian-prioritised street frontages and the inner workings of truck, service vehicle and hotel pick-up/concierge internalised within the block. The tragic delay of the project as a result of fire damage makes its ultimate delivery all the more anticipated. The new NZICC lane will give further life to this coarser-grained western flank of the city, whilst Hobson Street's reduced vehicle lanes and widened pedestrian plaza will give a place for gathering and a new generosity to the public realm.

09 Victoria Square and the Te Papa Otākaro/Avon River Precinct make up the first anchor project in the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan to be completed. Image: Jay Farnworth.

10 The Milford Opportunities master plan addresses not only physical infrastructure but also cultural and social impacts, with environmental and landscape considerations firmly in the centre.



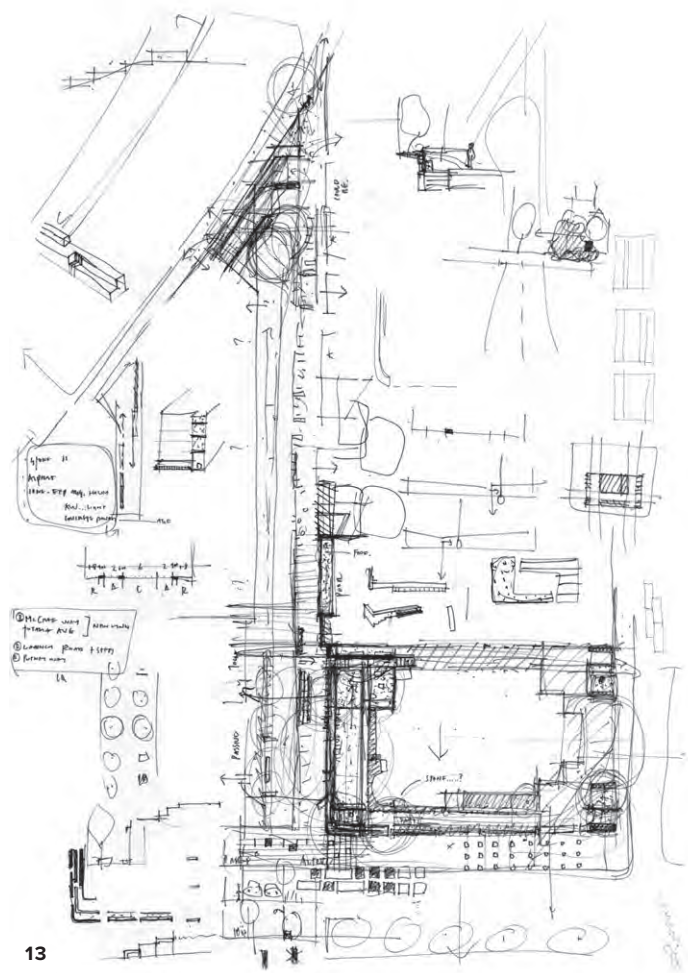
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11 The proposed design for the NZICC site and surrounding streetscape responds to the strategic vision of the Auckland City Centre Masterplan (CCMP) by creating a laneway and an arrival plaza that will make a major contribution to the 'east and west stitch' – a key element of the CCMP.

12 In 2004, Auckland City Council set out a plan for reshaping and revitalising Auckland's city centre. Shared Streets demonstrated the positive value that good public realm design can bring to urban environments. Image: Claire Hamilton.



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At Auckland City Mission's HomeGround just up Hobson Street, our urban designers and landscape architects collaborated with Stevens Lawson Architects to create a distinctive new and restored heritage central city oasis. Incrementally, Hobson Street – perhaps one of the city's most vehicle-centric arteries – is re-balancing, as have other streets, to become more about the city's people.

Much like the spaces with which we work, Boffa Miskell is continuously re-balancing in response to the future, reflecting our initial commitment to the land and our increasingly urban context. As designers, we are energised by the recent additions to our disciplines – biosecurity, transport planning and climate change impact. We are confident that the perspectives and knowledge they bring will find expression in our creativity – whether overtly visible or not – and ensure that we continue to be progressive in our approaches and solutions,

rather than supporters of the status quo.

Aotearoa is at a critical point. We need to adapt, to do things differently, to reflect a diverse society and address unprecedented environmental challenges. Our diversified internal skill sets equip us better to take on these challenges in support of the natural world and to do so through a design-focused lens. We see opportunity and the ability to effect meaningful change. As communicators, we also know that listening, understanding and conveying options for change in ways that are clear and relevant to affected communities will be of service to the challenges ahead.

Increasingly, our science is imbued with mātauranga Māori and the meeting of ways between te ao Māori and te ao Pākehā approaches and practices; similarly, in design, we see the evolution of a deeply founded authenticity of respect and interpretation of cultural values in a contemporary world.

13 This is one of the early sketches for Federal Street Stage 2, between Wellesley Street and Mayoral Drive, Auckland. This will continue Federal Street's transition into a world-class laneway, end to end.

14 The success of St Patrick's Square is well recognised. The juxtaposition of heritage architecture and contemporary landscape architecture is a rare occurrence within the city of Auckland. Image: Simon Devitt.

With the perspective of 50 years, we draw on our past and embrace new perspectives: learning from new generations and advocating for our shared future. The challenges ahead are not easy individually or collectively and we are motivated to bring our diversified skill sets to greater collaborations. Creative thinking is a powerful tool for exploring opportunities and providing real alternatives. We are privileged to play a part in the future. 🌱



Bioluminescence, designed by Boffa Miskell landscape architects Anna Li and Topsy Steele, was a finalist in the Nohonga Design Competition at Brick Bay and a 2021 Resene Colour Award winner.



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