

# DESIGN ROUTES

CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT  
DESIGNS, PRODUCTS &  
PRACTICES

## Design Routes case study: Rekindle

by Amy Twigger Holroyd, June 2015

### Summary

Rekindle is a social enterprise based in New Zealand that works to divert reusable resources from waste through creativity and craftsmanship.

Founded in 2011 by Juliet Arnott, the enterprise works in Christchurch and Auckland to reclaim and rework a range of materials and provide meaningful work opportunities through community partnerships. This case study focuses on Rekindle's activities in Christchurch, salvaging wood from homes being demolished following the 2011 earthquake and working with designers and makers to convert this material into furniture, interiors, sculpture and jewellery.

The case study is based on an interview with Juliet Arnott. All images are courtesy of Rekindle.



*Rekindle products made from timber reclaimed from earthquake-damaged homes in Christchurch*

## Background

Although Rekindle was founded only a few years ago, Juliet Arnott traces the influences behind the initiative back through her previous personal and professional experiences.

Juliet grew up on a rural farm in New Zealand, where she was encouraged in natural play and self-sufficiency. After training and working as an occupational therapist, she moved to the UK in 2000. She recalled being struck by the consumerist culture and amount of waste in Britain: 'I was amazed that shopping was an actual pastime! And so was redecorating – what I'd call unnecessary redecorating. I remember going to the local tip and watching people dumping things that were perfectly good. That had a really big impact on me.'

Around the same time, Juliet took classes in willow weaving and green woodworking, which fed her interest in creative craft practices. She also travelled to Orkney in order to learn how to make a traditional Orkney chair; this vernacular design has a long, curved back to provide protection from draughts and is created from driftwood and straw, some of the few materials readily available on these remote islands in the past. As Juliet explained, she was attracted to the chairs partly because of the beauty of the objects, 'but also because of what they symbolise. There's something really beautiful about that responsiveness ... people responding to scarcity.' In another interview, she discussed the chair: 'It's so regional and honest and it showed me that craft is a mechanism that allows us to harness the qualities of waste materials.'<sup>1</sup>



*Orkney chair made from driftwood and straw by Juliet Arnott*

Juliet combined these interests in craft and waste as she developed her own creative practice, creating large-scale outdoor structures and sculptures in collaboration with communities using locally available reclaimed resources. As she described, 'by the time I moved back to New Zealand in 2009, I'd got into that practice of looking at the materials around me, and looking for the opportunities to do something.'

## Development

After returning to New Zealand, Juliet was living in Auckland and noticed large amounts of wood being thrown away, particularly from old wooden homes that were being renovated in her local area. As she explains, she was intrigued by what she could do ‘to show reverence for that material, to draw people’s attention to it, and say how valuable it is’.

Juliet started to develop the concept for Rekindle – a social enterprise working with this waste stream to produce furniture and other products – in Auckland and began the process of forging links with relevant organisations in the city. However, she soon became aware of the scale of wood waste occurring in Christchurch following the devastating earthquake of February 2011. The earthquake killed 185 people and damaged many buildings; it was estimated that approximately 7,000 homes – many of them timber-framed – would need to be demolished.<sup>2</sup> She explains that this massive task was taking place at a rapid pace: ‘When a house is demolished there are complex insurance issues between the homeowner and the demolition company. There’s real pressure on time – a house can be demolished in just two days.’<sup>3</sup> The rate and volume of residential demolition activity meant that homes were demolished by diggers, rather than taken apart by hand; thus, a huge amount of timber was being taken directly to the scrapheap, with no opportunity for reuse.



### *Waste timber after demolition in Christchurch*

Juliet developed an idea for a one-off project in Christchurch, Whole House Reuse, which was intended to highlight the issue of this waste. While in the process of setting up the project, she decided to relocate Rekindle to the city. This meant that two complementary initiatives were running in tandem, both working with the waste materials of Christchurch: Rekindle, an ongoing social enterprise, and Whole House Reuse, a one-off project facilitated by Rekindle.

The waste wood of Christchurch is particularly interesting, with two layers of meaning in terms of provenance. Firstly, much of it is indigenous rimu and kauri timber logged in the early twentieth century, of a quality that is no longer available, due to sustainable forestry practices in place today.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the material is emotionally significant to the inhabitants of the city, and – more specifically – the owners of the damaged homes. Thus, in reclaiming materials for Rekindle and Whole House Reuse, Juliet and her team were keen to capture the stories of the homes they had come from. She explained that this approach provided some relief



to homeowners after the 'disempowering' experience of the earthquake and its aftermath: 'The constructive impact of acknowledging those materials is significant in itself, I think. It's saying that the fabric of someone's home is valued, even in a small way, compared to the great scale of waste.'

### **Rekindle in Christchurch**

As Rekindle became established in Christchurch, Juliet developed relationships to salvage weatherboard, flooring and timber framing from the demolition process and work with designers and makers to turn it into furniture, interiors, sculpture and jewellery.



*Weatherboard table and chairs by Rekindle*



*Offcut Cityscape and Offcut Bangle by Rekindle*

As she described, it takes a great deal of time and effort to work with the reclaimed wood: 'It's quite rough, it needs quite a lot of refinement, in some ways. It demands

that of you.' Juliet feels that this investment of time is important in order to convey the intended message, 'to show the materials in their best state so that their story is something that people can perceive and understand.' The stories behind the materials are carried through to the finished items, with each one stamped and labelled with the name of the house the wood was salvaged from.

With her background in occupational therapy, Juliet saw this time-consuming craft process as an opportunity to create meaningful work for people who need it. As the Rekindle website states: 'Our mission is to support communities to utilise their waste fully and in doing so, maximize the benefits of the purposeful work involved. Rekindle works to support creation of paid work and learning opportunities through community partnerships that actively enable people to engage with meaningful activity.'<sup>5</sup>

In the first phase of the enterprise Rekindle worked with professional furniture makers, with the smaller items being produced by people who were newer to woodworking and in need of employment. The wood recovery was carried out by an organisation supporting people with mental health issues; the making of some small items was outsourced to a community workshop supporting people with intellectual impairment. In the future Juliet hopes to integrate more social involvement to the creation of all items in the workshop. As she explains, the social impacts of Rekindle are central to its existence: 'To me the furniture is actually a by-product. It's about meaningful work and creativity and working with your hands and the tangible sense of worth that brings. Rekindle is about the social experience.'<sup>6</sup>



*Chairs by Rekindle*

Operating from a workshop in Christchurch, Rekindle sells via its website, [rekindle.org.nz](http://rekindle.org.nz), and occasional pop-up shops. The enterprise has gained support

from the media; further promotional benefits have emerged from collaborations with well-known designers. As Juliet pointed out, 'it's useful to strengthen the brand in that way, because it shows that it's possible to design to those materials.'

In November 2014 Rekindle announced they would be ceasing production of their first range of limited edition products made from reclaimed Christchurch timber as demolition practices had changed, affecting the supply of materials. 'Working with waste as our supply means we have to be ready to change tack and respond to what is available or needs to be addressed, and so it is time to look at new waste streams, and that means new materials and designs ... We are excited to be working on a set of materials provided by Housing New Zealand and that will feature strongly in our new Christchurch work.'<sup>7</sup>

### **Whole House Reuse**

Whole House Reuse is a project facilitated by Rekindle and supported by Creative New Zealand, Canterbury Museum and the Sustainable Initiatives Fund (SIFT). The initiative set out to salvage the materials from every part of one Christchurch home and work with creative practitioners to transform them into an array of new items. While Rekindle is an ongoing enterprise, Juliet conceived Whole House Reuse as an intentionally 'extreme' initiative which would highlight the waste occurring through demolition and promote problem solving and innovation.

The process of the project is summarised on the Whole House Reuse website:

'Over nine days in August and September 2013 a professional salvage crew fully deconstructed the single storey red-zoned home at 19 Admirals Way situated in the Christchurch suburb of New Brighton. Along with a team of volunteers, the entire material of the home aside from the concrete ring foundation was dismantled by hand and transported into storage.



*19 Admirals Way, before and during dismantling*

'From there, 480 materials listings were recorded in the Catalogue of Resources ... This amazing record of the material of one home was contained within a book, *Whole House Reuse: Deconstruction*, that was released at the launch of the Design stage.





### *Documentation of materials salvaged from 19 Admirals Way*

'Since then, over 250 people from around New Zealand and the world have invented ways of reusing these resources and the result is a huge collection of objects from delicately carved taonga puoro (flute) by master carver Brian Flintoff, to a finely crafted backyard studio by artist Nic Moon and architectural designer Lyn Russell.

'The exhibition at the Canterbury Museum from 5 June – 23 August 2015 showcases original works by some of the country's finest designers and craftspeople and it also includes works by school children, retired experts, community organisations like Kilmarnock Enterprises, and students of various arts and crafts ... The reused materials have taken on a new life in the form of nearly 400 objects.'<sup>8</sup>

Juliet explained that even before the exhibition had taken place, the project had achieved its aim of provoking discussion: 'Politically, it has made an impact ... the people in government who have pushed the pace of the demolition activity, they've acknowledged the project, and it's caused conversation. That's really important.' The day after the exhibition closes many of the objects will be auctioned, raising funds for future socially engaged work by Rekindle in Christchurch.

## Challenges

Juliet discussed the challenges she has faced in setting up and developing Rekindle and Whole House Reuse. The first challenge was core to the concept of the enterprise: 'Initially, it was being determined enough to find the materials. I'd literally go and wander round the red zone, where the demolition was happening, and find someone working a digger and go, "see those bits of wood there, do you think I could have those?"'

She explained that the business model for the social enterprise presents another challenge, considering the time-consuming nature of the salvage and remaking process and the importance of social engagement within the organisation's mission. 'It would be naïve for us to think that the artisan furniture manufacturing industry is anything but a challenging one. But so far we are holding our own. There's been no large injection of capital; we're developing our use of business principles to achieve social aims.'<sup>9</sup>

Given the poignancy of the story behind the reclaimed materials from Christchurch, it is interesting to note that Juliet has received orders from customers who have little or no interest in the provenance of the materials. Items of Rekindle furniture were featured on a popular television makeover programme in New Zealand, which led to an influx of orders; while this supported the business, Juliet explained that many of these customers were 'coming at it from a very superficial aesthetic', requesting items in particular colours, for example – demonstrating that they had not grasped the one-off nature of the materials, or the overall concept of the organisation.

## Future plans

In 2014 Rekindle began to extend its activities, working in Auckland as well as Christchurch, and moving beyond timber into other materials. Juliet described plans to gather ten different types of waste material in the Auckland area, with the support of the local government. Unlike the demolition waste in Christchurch, much of this material was likely to be more generic, with less of an emotional backstory. As Juliet explained, she still considers it important to communicate the materials' provenance in this situation: 'I guess that's where the mechanism of the brand becomes very important, and increasing our storytelling around that.'

In December 2014 Rekindle ran a dual purpose pop-up shop in Auckland, 'showcasing a variety of products from both Christchurch and Auckland designers, all made from wasted materials ... With support from Auckland Council, Rekindle will also be presenting information to the public about waste minimisation in relation to the Council's goal of zero waste in Auckland by 2040 ... Rekindle is hopeful that this popup will ignite discussion around the exciting possibilities that waste minimisation brings to Auckland city's development, environment and culture.'<sup>10</sup>

In her interview, Juliet described some of her ambitions for the future. She explained that she hopes Rekindle and Whole House Reuse will have a wider impact, demonstrating effective ways of making waste materials available to



designers and initiating ‘a process of thinking that will lead to some more enduring products or processes that might allow those materials to be re-used in a higher volume across the country’. She also hopes to feed back to industry, in order to address issues of waste at a different level: ‘I think ultimately, a lot of the stuff that we’ll be looking at in Auckland, ideally that wouldn’t come about in the first place if the design was more efficient.’

## Reflections

Rekindle is a fascinating case study for the Design Routes research, representing an example of an initiative which seeks to establish – rather than revitalise – a truly local range of products, through a combination of traditional craft skills, locally available resources and innovative design. In this case the local resources are both material and human, with Rekindle using local waste streams to create opportunities for meaningful work for local communities.

The initiative demonstrates the value of an engaging and inspiring example, with Juliet clearly seeing the Orkney chair as representing an inspirational concept that she could transfer and re-apply in quite a different location and context. This idea of creating a strong link with place through the combination of craft and local waste materials can be seen in a range of other initiatives, from the conceptual work of maker Will Shannon – who develops mobile craft workspaces, often based on the re-use of locally discarded materials – to a number of Brazilian artisan craft enterprises described in *Design + Craft: the Brazilian Path*.<sup>11</sup>

One of the problems associated with this approach is enabling designers and makers to be aware of what materials are available locally, and to see their potential. As Juliet explained: ‘I worry that for people to really connect with the materials, to really design to them, they really have to be quite attracted to them, you know? And just speaking from my own experience, it’s quite easy to be overwhelmed by the scale of them or the state that they’re in.’ Thus, she sees the sorting and documentation of materials – as occurred in the Whole House Reuse project – as a crucial process. ‘I guess I’ve come to see what I do as a facilitatory kind of thing, and connecting that creative genius of design with the materials, raising the awareness and the profile.’ In the case of Rekindle, this sorting and documentation is not just about the physical characteristics of the materials, but also the story behind them.

Finally, Rekindle provides an interesting example of an initiative which explicitly identifies design as central to its strategy; as the website states, ‘We see design as the tool that unlocks the qualities of resources undervalued when seen as waste.’<sup>12</sup> It is evident from the success of Rekindle and Whole House Reuse that this creative design approach not only applies to the creation of new objects, but also to other processes involved in the enterprise, such as the management and presentation of resources, branding and promotion.

## Update: March 2016

Rekindle are now undertaking their fourth large project, *Resource: Rise Again*, which commissions designers to develop community-based reuse solutions for commercial waste streams.<sup>13</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Juliet Arnott, quoted in Warnock, A. (2014). A Burning Ambition. *NZ Life & Leisure*, July/August (56).
  - <sup>2</sup> McSaveney, E. (2014). Historic earthquakes - The 2011 Christchurch earthquake and other recent earthquakes. *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* [online]. Available: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/historic-earthquakes/page-13> (accessed 3 June 2015); Akina (undated). *Rekindle* [online]. Available: <http://akina.org.nz/venture/rekindle/> (accessed 3 June 2015).
  - <sup>3</sup> Juliet Arnott, quoted in Warnock, op cit.
  - <sup>4</sup> Rekindle (undated). *Provenance* [online]. Available: <http://www.rekindle.org.nz/pages/provenance> (accessed 3 June 2015); Warnock, op cit.
  - <sup>5</sup> Rekindle (undated). *Mission* [online]. Available: <http://www.rekindle.org.nz/pages/mission> (accessed 3 June 2015).
  - <sup>6</sup> Juliet Arnott, quoted in Warnock, op cit.
  - <sup>7</sup> Rekindle (2014). *End of the first Christchurch collection* [online], 4 November. Available: <http://www.rekindle.org.nz/blogs/news/15742112-end-of-the-first-christchurch-collection> (accessed 3 June 2015).
  - <sup>8</sup> Whole House Reuse (undated). *About* [online]. Available: <http://www.wholehousereuse.co.nz/about/> (accessed 3 June 2015).
  - <sup>9</sup> Juliet Arnott, quoted in Warnock, op cit.
  - <sup>10</sup> Rekindle (2014). *Auckland Waterfront pop-up December 2014* [online], 12 December. Available: <http://www.rekindle.org.nz/blogs/news/16241608-auckland-waterfront-pop-up-december-2014> (accessed 3 June 2015).
  - <sup>11</sup> Twigger Holroyd, A. (2015). *Willow, smocks and The Closet Craftsman: a diverse research trip* [online], 30 March. Available: <http://designroutes.org/willow-smocks-and-the-closet-craftsman-a-diverse-research-trip/> (accessed 3 June 2015); Borges, A. (2011). *Design + Craft: the Brazilian Path*. São Paulo: Editora Terceiro Nome.
  - <sup>12</sup> Rekindle (undated). *About* [online]. Available: <http://www.rekindle.org.nz/pages/about-us> (accessed 3 June 2015).
  - <sup>13</sup> Rekindle (2016). *Design for Reuse – Resource: Rise Again*. Available: <http://www.rekindle.org.nz/pages/2016-resource-rise-again> (accessed 15 March 2016).