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DAC LEGAL

Timber landscapes for 'idea farm'

Imagine a series of timber 'landscapes' rolling freely from inside to out and you have the core idea for this award-winning design for a law firm in a small rural town.

Waipukurau, in the Hawke's Bay region of New Zealand, is all about farming, open spaces, wonderful landscapes and fresh air. So when a local law firm with a mix of big city and home-grown clients bought an existing industrial 'sawtooth' structure as the basis for its new offices, the architects faced a dilemma.

"They needed to be utterly rural to justify being there at all," says architect Sam Kebbell, "and, equally, connected to urbanity to survive. The dilemma made it possible to understand the law firm as something like an 'idea farm': cultivating and producing advice and knowledge that are then efficiently sent to bigger markets.

"The architecture could then work with ideas quite familiar to the farming community, yet spin them to the so-called 'knowledge economy'."

The end result is an artificial landscape of sorts, constructed with macrocarpa timber strips that accommodate the individual legal teams, undulating above and below the production spaces to become, as much as possible, a part of the working environment.

Each strip stretches from the archive space at the centre of the building, through the working spaces and out into a raised garden that shields the car park from the view of the 'idea farmer' inside. The strips also operate as a device to achieve aesthetic coherency, continuity between inside and out, and produce a certain scenic environment for intellectual labour.

Kebbell says the artificial landscape idea has been used on other projects. "It is an interesting way to explore the continuity between architecture and the found landscape of its immediate context. The idea of a landscape is most often understood as something open and continuous ... and it was our feeling that this particular office in a small town relied on being open at many levels."

Timber has been used to highlight this startling idea. "It was important to get material that could perform in several situations, including the floor, wall lining, a screen, desktop, shelf and outer deck. The continuity we could achieve with timber enabled us to produce this artificial landscape."

High-quality macrocarpa was used inside, with kwila delivering additional durability for exterior surfaces. A cork strip separated the timber and adjacent concrete pads.

"We have been trying to use more and more timber," says Kebbell, "not only in the context of large surfaces but also in the structure. We try hard to keep our spans down and available depths up to make timber an option. This is mostly driven by our desire to reduce the embodied energy in a building."

The project won the 'commercial or public' category in the 2006 Origin Timber Design Awards.

OPPOSITE It was important to use material that could perform across many applications

ABOVE Timber 'landscapes' roll freely through the building

CLIENT Davidson Armstrong Campbell
ARCHITECTS Kebbell Daish (Sam Kebbell & John Daish) with Bernd Benninghoff & Rafe Maclean
MAIN CONTRACTOR Waipukurau Construction
PHOTOGRAPHY Simon Wilson
TIMBERS Macrocarpa (interior), kwila (exterior)