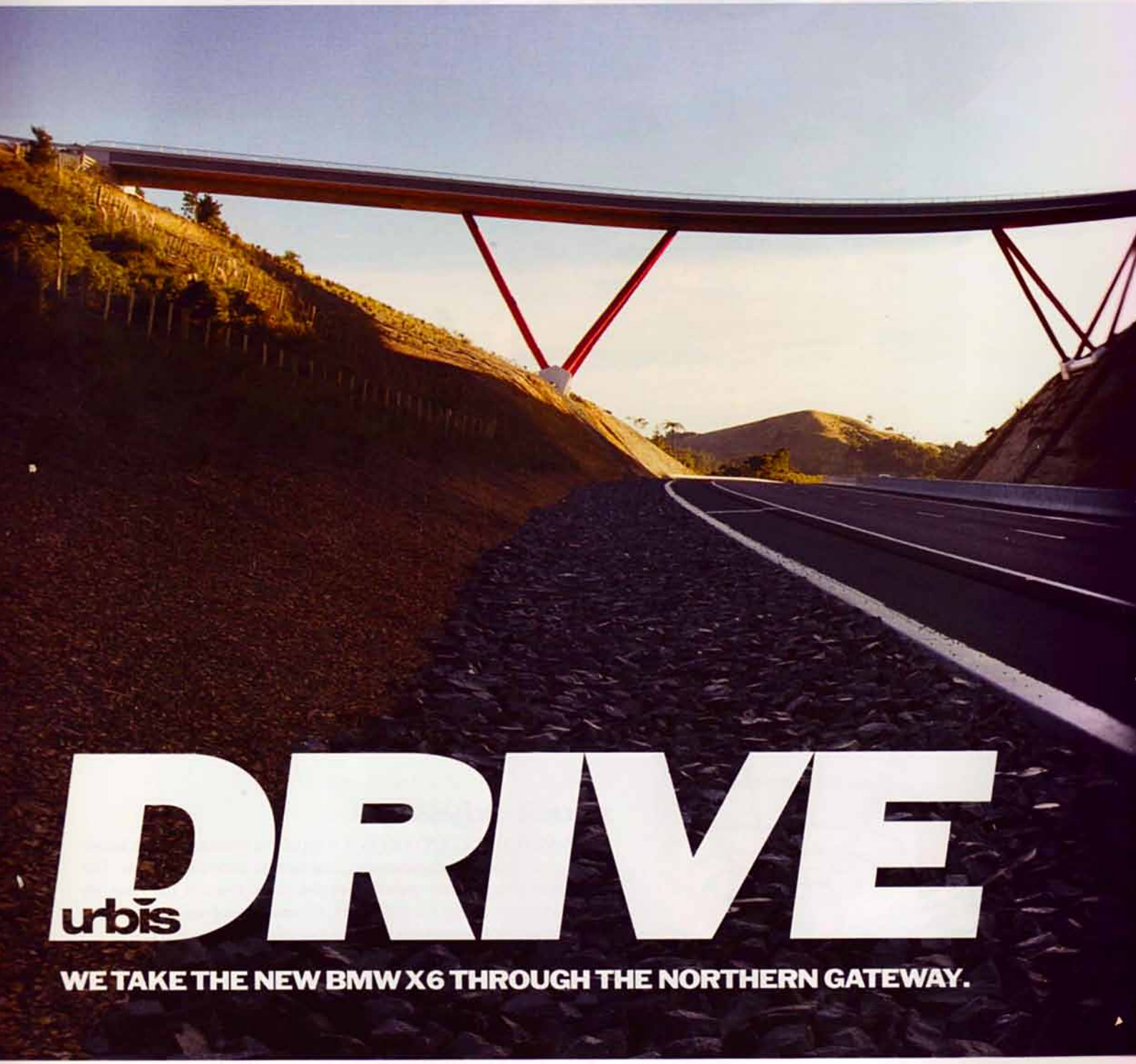
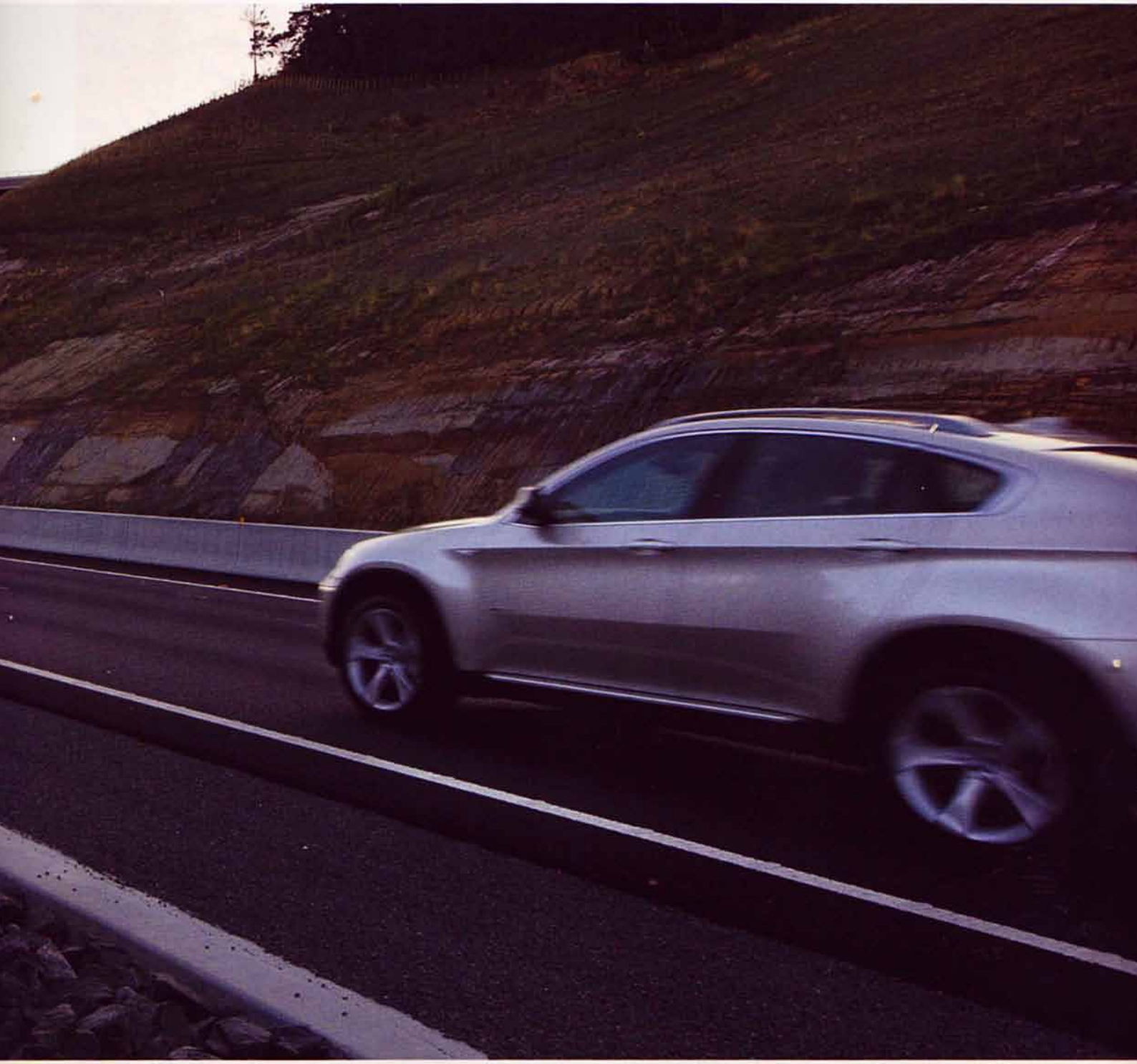


urbis DRIVE

WE TAKE THE NEW BMW X6 THROUGH THE NORTHERN GATEWAY.



WORDS JOHN WALSH / PHOTOGRAPHS PATRICK REYNOLDS

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE hitting the north when everyone else is crawling south. In Auckland, a fine, mid-week morning is the best time to take to the northern motorway: an open road beckons, and a sense of truant escape is guaranteed. So long, suckers! Have a nice day at the office – when you get there.

The reverse commute is always fun, but travelling north offers more than contrarian pleasure. A mild, if sticky, climate, for one thing, and a long, and still lightly-populated coastline, for another. But the north has always had an even stronger pull: north leads out (of this country) and north leads back (to the places all New Zealanders came from). Warmth, and the world: it's no wonder our psychic compasses point north.

Even our roading engineers, it seems, are subject to this inchoate yearning. When they came to name a state-of-their-art addition to Highway 1 they allowed themselves a little poetic licence: The Northern Gateway is what Transit NZ has called the new by-pass route west of Orewa. It's an alluring name for an inviting road; in New Zealand this is motorway design and construction of unprecedented quality. The Northern Gateway is autobahnish, autostradarian – it's highway haute couture.

We pay for it, of course, in the two dollar toll, and also in the profusion of signs advertising that toll. The excessive signage advertises Transit's concern – justified, as it has turned out – about geezer griping about methods of payment. Payment of the toll takes a minute or two on the Internet, or you can queue up at a service station and have the satisfaction of a good whinge. Really, the only thing wrong with the 7.5km Northern Gateway is that there's not a lot more of it.

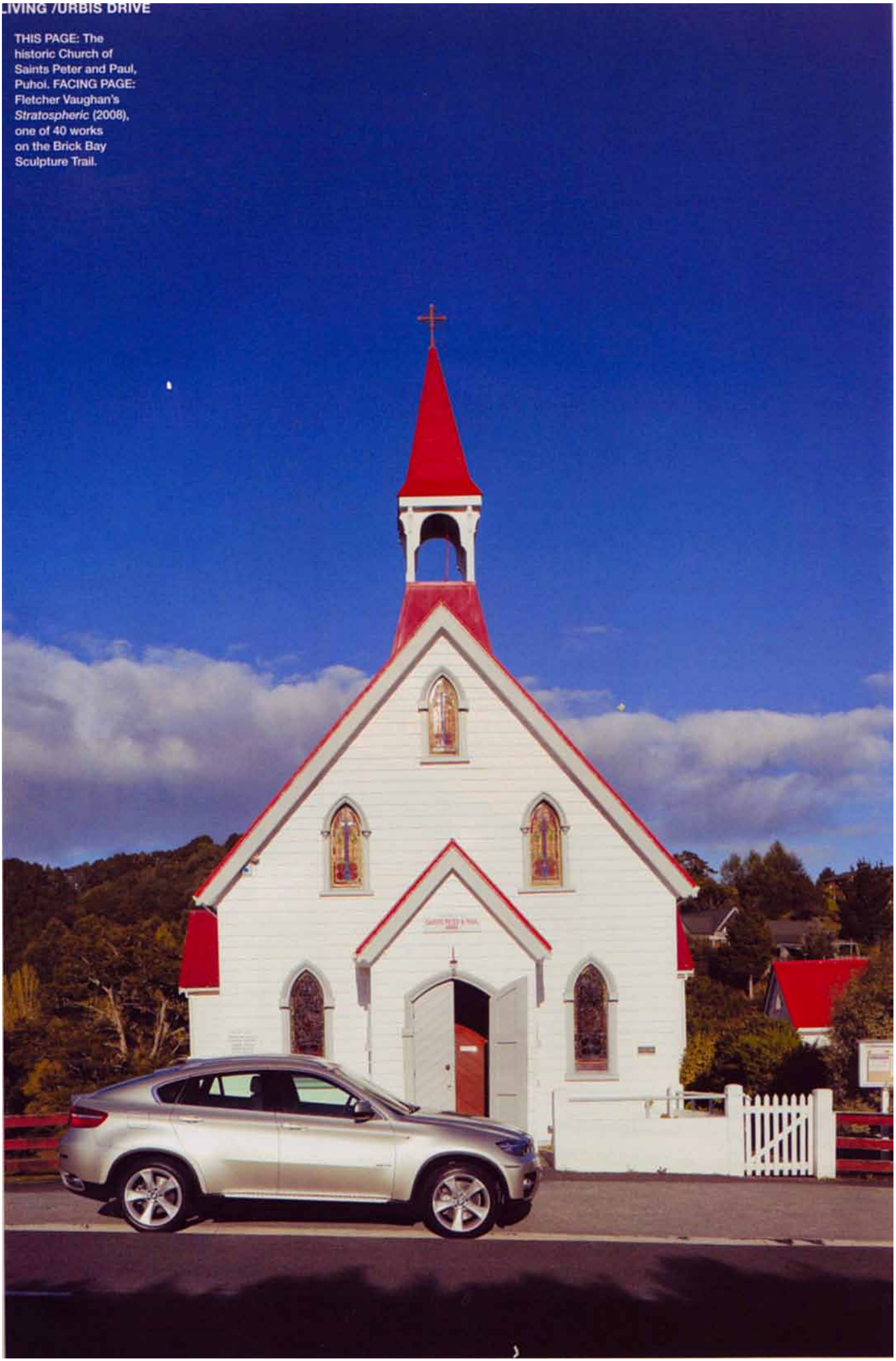
The appropriate complement to a European-style motorway has to be a European-styled car. Our getaway – I was accompanied by photographer Patrick Reynolds – was made in two tonnes of BMW road-bossing car-kunst. (The reputation of the BMW marque is almost gravitational in its attraction. Soon we'd found our *nommes de voiture*: he was Dieter for the day; I was Günter). The BMW X6 xDrive50i is what its maker calls a Sports Activity Coupe – a 'crossover' vehicle that looks like the well-nourished progeny of a SUV and a sports car. Is 'bootilicious' a technical term? BMW's new X6 is big at the back. Not big like the backside of a bassoonist in a Bavarian ompah-band, but rumpily suggestive of the dancers who grind their way through Snoop Dogg's videos.

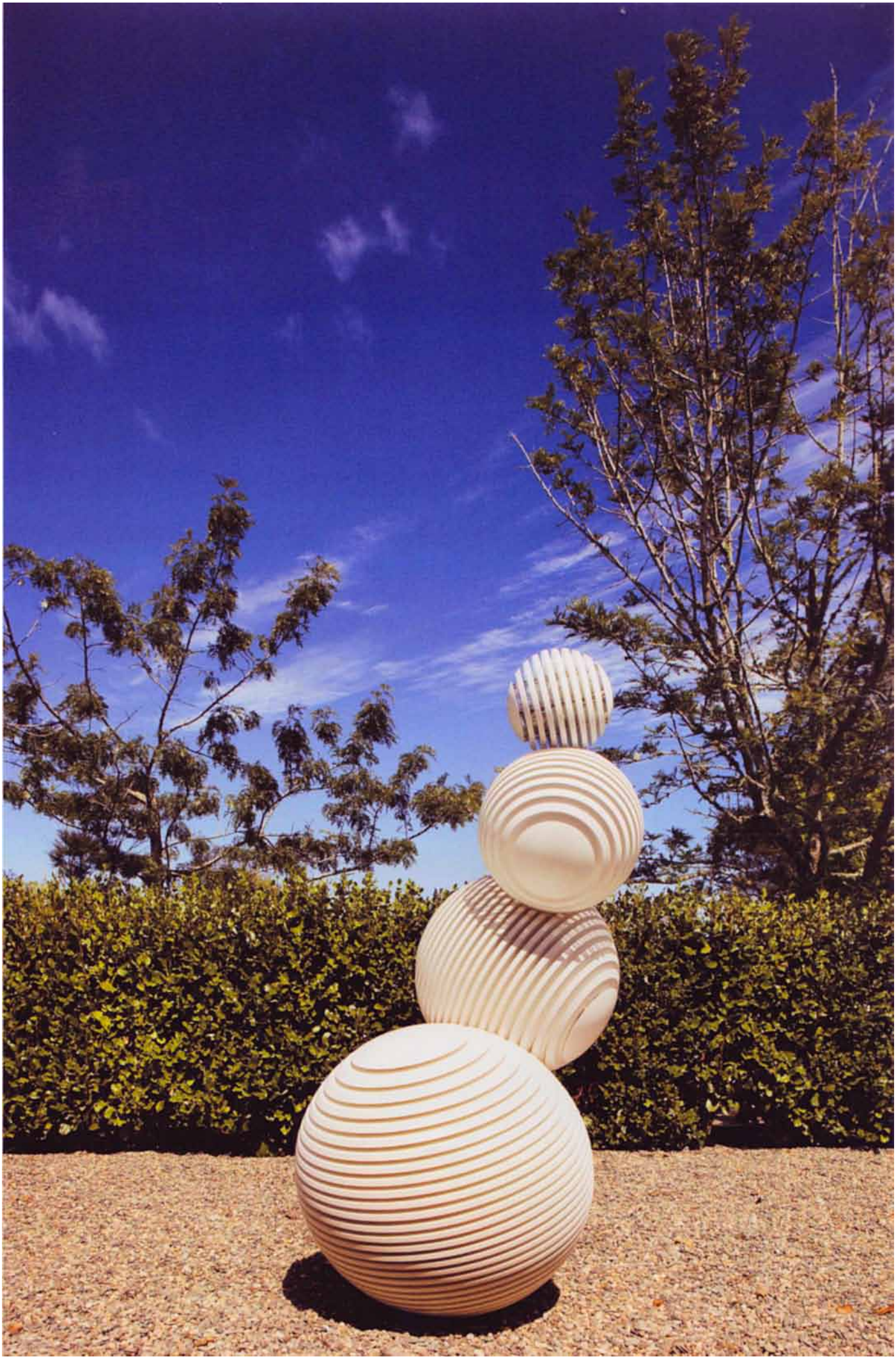
Gott in Himmel, though, the thing – cut, chiseled, and pinch-waisted – can go. On New Zealand highways, with their high hoon counts and stunted over-taking lanes, a turbocharged V8 engine is not so much the tool of a bully, but a means to get out of trouble. It's chastening to realise how quickly you can get used to the comfort and appointments of a high-performance car. It's also rather scary to discover how innate car-love now is in our species, and how early vehicular discernment sets it. My four-year old son reacted to this car with wide-eyed and slack-jawed wonder: "Wow, cool, awesome", he intoned as he climbed into his seat, where he remarked upon the cup holders, the black leather coverings, and the dashboard navigation / entertainment screen before pronouncing: "This is the perfect car". Admittedly, his point of reference is a Toyota Corolla, but back in Munich his verdict would come as no surprise. BMW, it seems, focus-groups five-year-olds to gauge the quality of the backseat experience.

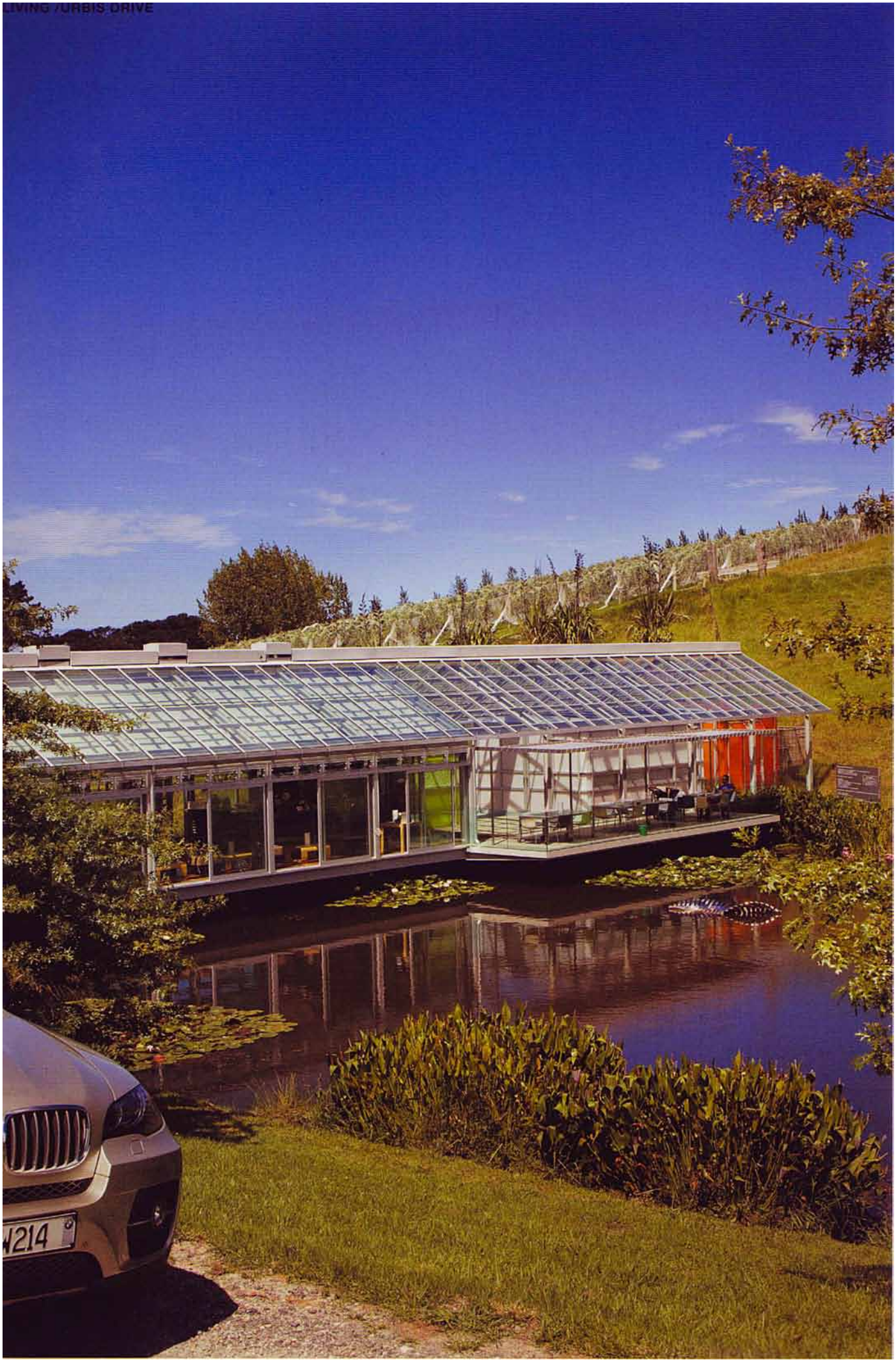
The near-North, sybaritic but still a little rustic, is a natural habitat for a car like the BMW X6 – once through the portal of the Northern Gateway we practically headed to Matakana on auto-pilot. It was a beautiful day, and a perfect day-trip (well, apart from Dieter forgetting to bring his Kraftwerk CD). Dozy Matakana has lately woken with a start, principally administered by Richard Didsbury, the property developer behind – among other things – the local movie theatre, with its bijou viewing rooms and surprising toilets.

OPENING SPREAD: Escape from Auckland on the Northern Gateway. FACING PAGE: Hand-crafted 'flowers' cover the ceiling of one of the theatres in the Noel Lane-designed Matakana Cinemas. THIS PAGE, TOP: The Cinemas' foyer, with David Trubridge lights and Dilana rugs. ABOVE: Piece Gallery in Matakana village.

THIS PAGE: The historic Church of Saints Peter and Paul, Puhoi. FACING PAGE: Fletcher Vaughan's *Stratospheric* (2008), one of 40 works on the Brick Bay Sculpture Trail.

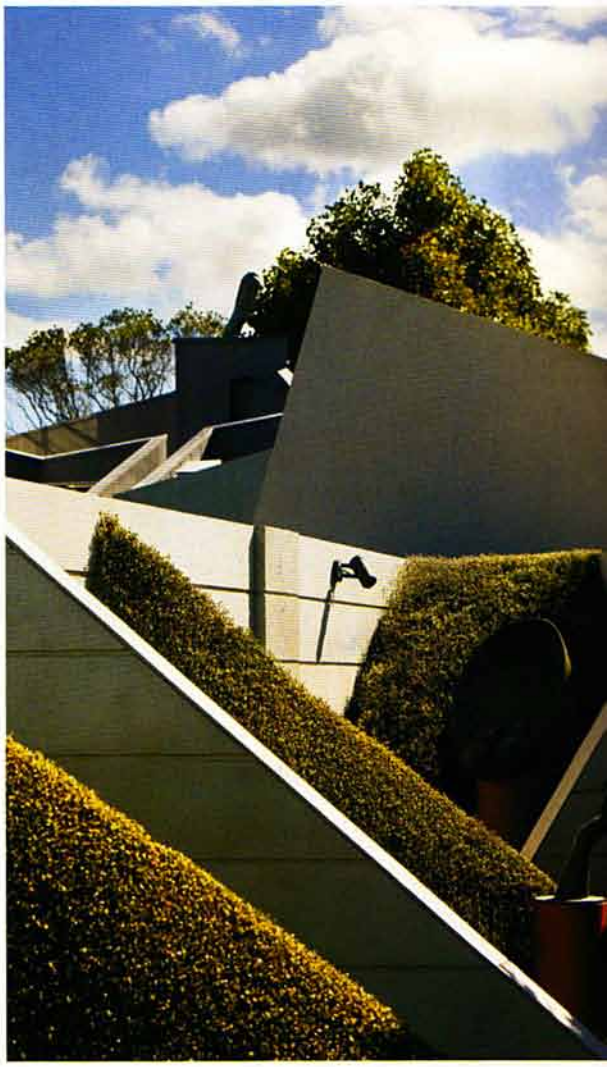





W214

Matakana, these days, is a destination for gourmands and the surrounding countryside is a centre of wine tourism. Few of the wineries are better than one of the district's outlier vineyards, Ransom Winery, where food is served and wine is sold in a building, designed by ASC Architects, that looks over rows of grapevines to farmland stretching to the west. In Matakana a smart design store, Piece Gallery, offers some relief from food fetishism. Proprietor Emma Haughton stocks tableware by ceramicists such as Kathryn Smyth and Ross Mitchell-Anyon and sculptural pieces by artists such as John Edgar and Ainsley O'Connell. "My unscientific criterion is that I have to like the work," says Ms Haughton.

A few kilometres outside Matakana is the slickest piece of regional architecture: the Noel Lane-designed pavilion at Richard Didsbury's Brick Bay winery, a facility that includes a sculpture walk featuring 40 works for sale. (Prices in this outdoor gallery start at under $1,000 and rise, giddily, to nearly $90,000, which is what you'd have to outlay for Gregor Kregar's stainless steel *Brick Bay Polyhedron*). If you're not sated by Brick Bay's sculpture offerings, it's less than half an hour – much less, in a Sports Activity Coupe – to Terry Stringer's Zealandia Sculpture Garden. At Zealandia, the Stringer House, designed by architect Pip Cheshire, is the largest sculptural work in a landscaped park that's best visited – if you can contrive it – on an uncrowded day. If you still haven't had enough of al fresco sculpture, or if you like your installation art really big, drive down Satellite Station Road, south of Warkworth, to the big steel dishes that gather signals from the sky. And, on the subject of portals to the heavens, you could wrap up your journey in Puhoi, with some stationary reflection in the pioneer Catholic church of Saints Peter and Paul.



URBIS DRIVE /MATAKANA

1. **The Northern Gateway** (www.northerngateway.co.nz)
2. **Ransom Wines, SH1, Warkworth** (www.ransomwines.co.nz)
3. **Matakana Cinemas, Matakana Village** (www.matakanacinemas.co.nz)
4. **Piece Gallery, Matakana Village** (www.piecegallery.co.nz)
5. **Brick Bay Winery and Sculpture Trail, Mahurangi East** (www.brickbay.co.nz)
6. **Earth Satellite Station, Warkworth**
7. **Zealandia Sculpture Garden, Mahurangi West** (www.zealandiasculpturegarden.co.nz)
8. **Saints Peter and Paul Church, Puhoi**

FACING PAGE: The Noel Lane-designed Glasshouse at Brick Bay Winery, on the road to Mahurangi East. THIS PAGE, TOP: A corner of Terry Stringer's Zealandia Sculpture Garden at Mahurangi West. ABOVE: Draping bird nets on the vines at Ransom Winery outside of Warkworth.