



ON THE TRAIL OF
SUCCESS



VISIONARY AUCKLANDERS RICHARD AND CHRISTINE DIDSBURY
HAVE PUT SLOW-TOWN MATAKANA ON A FAST TRACK ... WINERY,
SCULPTURE TRAIL, CINEMAS AND FARMERS' MARKET
ARE JUST THE BEGINNING

WORDS SUE MOODY PHOTOGRAPHS MARK SMITH



IF THE RURAL VILLAGE OF MATAKANA had a mayor, it would most likely be Richard Didsbury. A major landowner in town with his wife Christine, he has almost single-handedly put the community firmly on the map. Over the space of three years, his entrepreneurship has seen Matakana metamorphose from sleepy backwater to burgeoning tourist centre.

The catalyst was a Saturday-morning farmers' market, started by the Didsburys in 2004, where they sold their Brick Bay wines alongside other stalls showcasing goods from local producers and small farmers. The market's phenomenal popularity – 30 stall-holders and up to 5000 customers each week – led to the opening last summer of a handsome new Noel Lane-designed complex on the site of the old timber yard. Encompassing three cinemas, brasserie, wine bar, specialist retail and community gathering area, it grafts city sophistication on to rural rootstock. Matakana's main street has also seen a revamp with Richard owning and leasing out a cluster of the shops and cafés.

What has brought it all about? Richard, an engineer by training and founding shareholder of Kiwi Income Property Trust whose latest endeavour is the highly visible Sylvia Park shopping centre in suburban Auckland, firmly believes that bricks and mortar go hand in hand with visionary ideas. He is the initiator of the Committee of Auckland, a group "thinking about issues from a non-political point of view. If the city is going to do a project [we want] to provide leadership to make it significant – to push the boundaries and ensure it is done to the highest international standards." ▶



The Glass House was conceived as "akin to the original colonial veranda ... a confined space of conflicting activities, transience and rest," says creator Noel Lane. Areas for private use – food preparation, administration, ablutions and storage – are defined as "containers of colour and light and are clearly visible from the adjacent communal areas".



ABOVE RIGHT: Anna Didsbury is site manager for the sculpture trail. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT: David McCracken's *I-Beam*; Pauline Rhodes' *Two Tangles Touching*; Phil Price's *Quattro*; Mary-Louise Browne's *Meteorol*. PAGE 25: Christine stands in front of Gregor Kregar's *Brick Bay Polyhedron*.

One need look no further than the Didsbury's newest accomplishment, the Brick Bay Sculpture Trail on their 80-hectare coastal property, to see this philosophy in everyday working order. Set up as a charitable trust, it's planned to return all income to the arts community after meeting the running costs of the project. "I try to look over the horizon a bit more than others. If I have a visionary role it's because I like to take other people to spaces they haven't gone to already," says Richard.

"With Matakana, we weren't starting with a blank sheet. It was an historical village, and with its wharf it became a significant trading post in the 19th century. The pub and the church were a great foundation for us to build our plans around. Noel has taken historic reference points and dealt sympathetically with them to introduce interesting architecture and to reinterpret in a modern idiom a village that might have been here."

With some of the country's ritziest and richest coastal properties lying comfortably in its hinterland, the newly ranked Matakana Coast Wine Country stretches from historic Puhoi to pristine Pakiri. Most remarkably, this playground for the affluent and influential is an enticing one hour from Auckland. Which is what brought the Didsburys north 21 years ago. "We were looking for a small property as a weekend bolt-hole from Auckland," recalls Christine. "We'd load the kids in the car and drive out in all directions, like spokes in a wheel. We enjoy the East Coast beaches so in 1986 we bought a 65-hectare farm. We had sheep and cattle to begin with, then goats to pay the way." When the goat-meat and angora-wool markets overheated and collapsed, the couple ended up with a "freezer full of goat meat and some droopy hand-knitted jumpers." They had spent more than they anticipated.



... THEY CONCEIVED THE SCULPTURE TRAIL TO BRING TOURISTS ON TO THEIR LAND WHERE THEY COULD TASTE WINE AND ART IN THE SAME VISIT



The brick tower forms a cornerstone of the big house overlooking Brick Bay. The pottery at the bay is long gone but the brick-tower image, which also alludes to lighthouses, has become the symbol of Brick Bay Wines. The red wines are named Pharos, a variation of lighthouse.





Christine and Richard have collected art and artefacts during years of travelling and display them throughout the house, with its idiosyncratic confluence of beams, galleries, large and intimate spaces.





"We started to think about grapes," says Christine. "We had always been interested in drinking wine and there were a couple of successful vineyards already in the area." A consultant was engaged to establish whether part of the property would be suitable for a vineyard. "It must be perfect," instructed the perfectionist Didsburys. Nine years after the farm purchase, Brick Bay Wines was established with a planting of pinot gris on three hectares, followed by cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and malbec. The vines were tended and harvested by hand and the fruit trucked across the isthmus to winemaker Anthony Ivceovich at West Brook Winery in Waimauku.

Brick Bay's first vintage was a gold-medal winner at the Easter Show. "It was a terrific start," says Christine who by that time had enrolled in a three-year distance-learning certificate in viticulture and winemaking. Family life with teenage daughters Anna and Margot was seesawing between suburban Remuera and seaside Matakana.

Christine and Richard recognized the challenges involved in running a small winery (its production today stands at 1000 to 1500 cases from 4.5ha) in the face of growing globalization. "The flip side is regionalism," says Christine. "What makes your wine local, individual and unique – the French concept of terroir – is important for wine tourism." A cellar door seemed an attractive option, but the Didsburys had grander plans. Their private passion is sculpture and they conceived the sculpture trail to bring tourists on to their land where they could taste wine and art in the same visit.





Combining the activities spelled a sustainable business model to Richard, the risk-management expert: "We could put initial capital into the project without then moving into our old age still having to subsidize it." The couple's 28-year-old daughter Anna, trained in art and viticulture, is employed as site manager for the Brick Bay Sculpture Trail, a two-kilometre boardwalk trail through bush, wetland and manicured vineyard.

"A unique outdoor gallery experience" is the description the Didsburys apply, having been influenced by visits to international sculpture projects such as Goodwood sculpture park in England and Storm King Art Center in the Upper Hudson Valley, north of New York. "At Goodwood your relationship with each work was more intimate," says Christine. "All the works were for sale and this crystallized our thinking. We sell on behalf of the artists, taking a small commission for staffing and maintenance. We also have a fund to assist artists with materials because that can be a very costly part of sculpture."

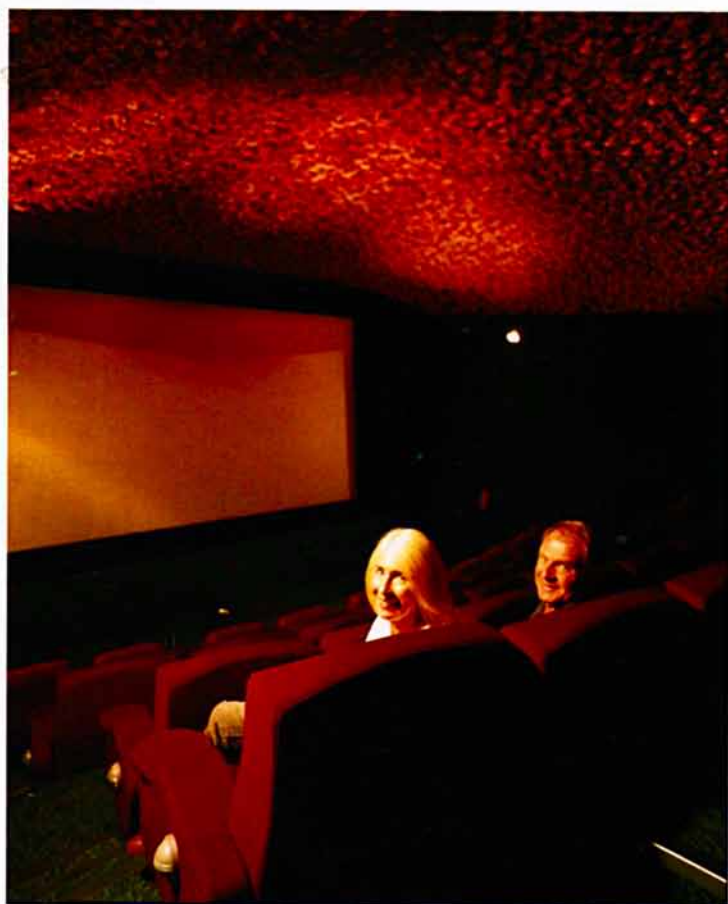
Two years ago Christine and Richard severed their ties with city living, keeping a pied-à-terre in St Mary's Bay and moving fulltime to their Brick Bay home designed by Noel Lane. Their relationship with the architect has been both enduring and highly productive. "It came about when we initially briefed him for the big house right at the beginning of 1986," says Richard. "We knew we wanted something that wasn't a city house and we knew that Noel would give us something unusual – unashamedly the house you wouldn't build in the city. It was a big gesture. When the big financial crash came in 1987 we were committed but things became much tougher economically. We didn't prune or panic. We didn't compromise. We had to stop building. It took five years to complete."

The grandly proportioned house, with its over-scaled doors and spaces and landmark brick chimney echoing the bay's historical supply of bricks for the copper mines on nearby Kawau Island, won acclaim and awards. A tennis pavilion/drinking fountain/gazebo/guest house followed, garnering another slew of awards for Noel Lane. "The big house is solid and earthed – it was Richard's influence – while the pavilion is much more mine – ephemeral, feminine, floating," suggests Christine.

The couple had commissioned a private collection of sculptural works for their farmland but had become frustrated by sightseers arriving – "even huge camper vans" – expecting them to be on public display. With another successful collaboration underway in the foyer of the Kiwi Income-owned Vero Tower in Auckland's CBD, Richard and Noel Lane had made art more accessible for the public. They embarked on developing the sculpture trail and Noel was commissioned to design the resource centre and wine-tasting gallery. The Glass House, a spectacular structure cantilevered over a lake, references both Brick Bay's pastoral past and horticultural present. Noel says of his latest creation: "As a gateway, this structure straddles the original dam bar and transfers the visitor from the new urban surrounds to the mysteries of the concealed sculpture walk beyond." ▶



The elliptical roofline threatens to float off the pavilion in a puff of wind. Its self-contained living space is an understatement of style. OVERLEAF: Cinema Paradiso in Matakana celebrates fey beauty with its ceiling of 35,000 paper roses. Christine and Richard were part of the team hand-tying and fire-retarding each flower.



And so back to Matakana village. The main building, accommodating three art-house cinemas run by the redoubtable Heather Hart, lately of Auckland's Academy and Bridgeway theatres – “we lured Heather out of retirement to do it” – has been designed to function as a community gathering area. “We want to attract businesses that aren't part of a national chain but have the passion of the individual operator,” says Richard. “These are the retailers who will help differentiate Matakana and make it attractive to a wide range of visitors. At the same time they have to appeal to the local community who will sustain it on weekdays and over the winter. The reality is that there has been a change in the whole dynamic of the wider area – moving from a retirement focus to drawing in a new generation of younger people who are embracing the concept of living at the beach as well as being able to run a business from here.

“It's an enormous responsibility for Christine and me when we are so dominant in a small community. Change can be threatening but the vast majority of local people have been incredibly supportive. We are quite sensitive to listening to groups and not imposing our own views.” Unwilling to disclose the costs but conceding “it's a big number”, he is confident the development will pay its way. “We take the long-term view. I hate the term ‘developer’. It infers expediency and that you will move on. Christine and I look at ourselves as long-term investors. We don't own everything in the village, just as we didn't set out to be leaders. We only want to do the right thing and lead by example. The huge amount of positive feedback that we are getting for both these projects makes it all worthwhile.”

The Brick Bay Sculpture Trail is open every day from 10am to 5pm.
www.brickbaysculpture.co.nz

