

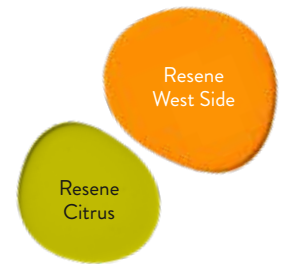
Uncharted territory

Twenty years on from first reaching international acclaim, David Trubridge looks back on his journey so far.

“What are you going to be when you grow up?” It’s a question we get asked so often in our formative years, as though we’re expected to have it all figured out – just pick a thing and go be it. But even David Trubridge, who has received the New Zealand Order of Merit for his work, didn’t set out to be a lighting or furniture designer. When David had to pick a thing, he chose naval architecture.

“I did my design degree at Newcastle University, which I chose because I was interested in boats. I love boats and the sea, and my plan was to design boats. But it turned out to be an engineering course. Everyone on the course was studying the same things together whether they were designing bridges, ships, skyscrapers – you name it. There was only one class a week that was specific to boat design, so I lost interest. I completed the degree for the sake of having the piece of paper,” he says.

“But afterwards, I became interested in doing artwork – especially carving wood and stone – and I wanted to have a place where I could do that. I bought what I could afford, which was an old ruined stone building in the north of England. It’s beautiful there, but it’s pretty wild, wet and cold in the winter. While I was repairing the building, I had a part-time job as a forester on the local estate. I was out there with the billhook pruning trees, cutting undergrowth, planting and milling. But that lovely outdoor



left: Hīnaki was David’s first exploration into lighting in 1995. This updated design, released in 2021, is based on Māori eel traps made from woven vines which could take on amazingly beautiful forms. The interior faces of the light’s modular components are coated in Resene Lustacryl semi-gloss waterborne enamel tinted to Resene West Side.

- Resene Jordy Blue
- Resene Hopbush
- Resene Trubridge Red
- Resene Half Sea Fog
- Resene Black
- Resene Niagara



above: David Trubridge kitset lights are available at his showroom and website in a curated palette of eight Resene Lustacryl semi-gloss colours: Resene Jordy Blue, Resene Hopbush, Resene Half Sea Fog, Resene Black, Resene Niagara, Resene West Side, Resene Citrus and custom made Resene Trubridge Red. Customers can also choose to have a light custom made in any Resene colour they desire for an added fee.

left: David in his production studio, which shares a building with both the showroom and design studio. “It’s quite rare for a design studio to have that immediate access to production. We can send a drawing straight down to the CNC machine. It’ll cut a piece out and we’ll have it back within half an hour, play with it, toy with it, redo it and send a revised version back so there’s a very close interaction between design and manufacturing, which is a really, really good thing to have,” he says.

job taught me a lot about trees, so when I started using wood, it no longer seemed like a dead material – it was a living material I understood from growing, pruning and tending it.”

Carved artwork, as it turned out, was not very easy to sell but David already had the machines for making joinery for his house renovation. “From there, I just carried on making furniture – and that’s where it all started,” he says.

But things in England were changing fast in the early 80s, and not necessarily for the better. David’s sons, Sam and William, were still young so he and his wife Linda decided to uproot and set out

on an open-ended adventure. They bought a secondhand boat and sailed the family across the Atlantic by way of Antigua before settling in Hawke’s Bay, where David set up a new studio and began exploring experimental forms through his furniture inspired by his adventures on the high seas. His bentwood chair design, Body Raft, was picked up by Cappellini in 2001 at the Milan Furniture Fair.

“The Body Raft was a big jump from what I’d done up until that point. I’d always made things as one-offs, which I conceived, created and sold as individual pieces. That allows you to do some interesting stuff, but you end up spending all this time designing it and then it’s

made and that’s the end of it. But with the Body Raft, I was able to move into larger scale production. It was a transition piece from my one-off studio practice to the current manufacturing practice.”

“I was doing some quite wacky pieces in the 90s that were sort of interesting but weren’t really selling, so I made a decision to go back and explore my training. So, I looked at boats, how they were made and timber was used, and out of that process came the Body Raft. It was a move into manufacturing and brought my love of the sea, making and design all together at the one time. I have that piece to thank for where I am now.”



left: David Trubridge's iconic kitset lights on display in his Whakatū showroom in all their vibrantly coloured glory cast fractal shadows on to the wall beyond. Resene Lustacryl semi-gloss waterborne enamel is used to colour the inside of the lights and sometimes the outside.

David says that finding international success didn't take the enjoyment out of his work. "If anything, it has added to the enjoyment because it has allowed me to do more of what I wanted to do. New Zealand is such a small market and the reason I went to Europe was to try and sell more of the handmade products I was designing and making in my little studio. I really enjoy going to the shows in Europe, meeting people and being part of that whole design scene. It inspired me to do a lot of new stuff I never would have done otherwise if I had just carried on as a studio maker here in New Zealand."

Once he had a production and management team to assist, the pressure wasn't all on David's shoulders to keep turning out work. "I can pick and choose what I do now, so if I don't want to do something, I just pass it onto my team members – and they're often much better at it than me anyways. I went from being a one-man band and doing everything myself, and I was doing a mediocre job of things like accounts, management, invoicing or freight. But now I have people who have core competencies in those areas, and they do those jobs far better than I ever could. That was the biggest reward which also came out of that exposure – the growth of the company allowed me to employ people to do those kinds of things and not have to do everything myself," says David.

While his Body Raft design got his foot in the door, it was his iconic Coral light that skyrocketed his career. Though David still designs furniture now and again, the geometric polyhedron's organic form and fractal shadows solidified his presence in the international community as a lighting designer and spurred a collection of nature-inspired lights that have become integral fixtures in our interiors.

"Lighting is one of the best ways to control and transform an environment in a way that makes it more habitable. Even with just one carefully placed light, the

Creating energy

Resene
West Side 

For David, the exciting part about colour is the resonance that occurs between hues. "Colour is emotional and enriches us; but setting up two or three colours to create an energy between them, that's the real power of colour. When you see a bunch of beautiful colours together and pick just one out, it's like taking a fish out of water. It sort of dies on its own. It needs others to bounce off. So, for me, working with colour is absolutely about matching hues and creating energy rather than just individual likes or dislikes."

"One of my all-time favourite artists is Anish Kapoor. He's done a whole series of sculptures in which he uses pure pigment to create piles of colour. And they're the least reflective form of colour, so they absorb light in such an incredible way and all you see is colour in its most pure form."

patterns they make scatter and suddenly make even cold, white walls become warmer, softer and more human.

"I've worked with Professor Richard Taylor at Oregon State University on fractals – which are patterns repeated in nature at different levels of scale. With a tree, you've got the branches, twigs and leaves where you'll find the same patterns again and again. There's a certain density of pattern which humans respond to – and it's no coincidence that that density of pattern is the same as what you see when you look outside to the forest and trees. As a species, we evolved in the forests over millions of years, so it's natural that we would be attuned to that pattern. Professor Taylor measured the alpha and beta waves that indicate calmness or stress in the brain when people were exposed to different environments. If you put a human in a visually cold, white cube, their stress levels go up. If you throw textures and patterns in it, the stress levels come down. So, it affects not just our psychology, but our physical health. Our lighting creates those fractal patterns, so they are part of a

biophilic design approach and making human-created environments more natural to live in.”

Nearly all Trubridge lights have a standard E27 Edison screw bulb fitting, and David says the biggest choice is often whether to opt for a clear bulb or a frosted one, which has a significant impact on the patterns that get cast. A clear bulb will give strong, dramatic patterns while those from a frosted bulb will be softer and more subtle.

His coloured lights get their hues thanks to Resene Lustacryl semi-gloss waterborne enamel. “The choice to use the semi-gloss is purely aesthetic for us as a higher gloss wouldn’t go as well with the natural feel of the design. With a gloss finish, you also wouldn’t be able to see the colour as well because you would have more light reflecting off it,” he explains.

“The colour is best viewed from a distance, but it can also be affected by the temperature of the bulb inside. A much warmer bulb will turn a blue light greener whereas it wouldn’t really affect a yellow very much, so you have to bear that in mind when you’re choosing the bulb depending on what colour the inside of the light is.”

David curated a collection of eight Resene hues that are regularly available in stock for his kitset lights: Resene Jordy Blue, Resene Hopbush, Resene Half Sea Fog, Resene Black, Resene Niagara, Resene West Side, Resene Citrus and custom made Resene Trubridge Red. Customers can also have a light custom made in another Resene colour of their choice for an added fee.

“We’ve worked quite closely with Resene and that’s been one of the biggest advantages about dealing with a homegrown company. Bamboo is not a timber, it’s a grass, so paint sticks to it differently – and not as easily as it does to wood,” says David. While the Resene primer previously used worked well, it was solventborne and he was determined to use a fully waterborne low VOC system. His team trialled several primers and found the Resene AquaLAQ system, which is designed predominantly for kitchen joinery. Resene AquaLAQ

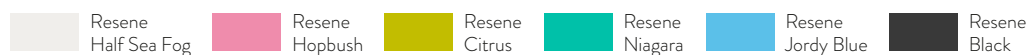
waterborne sealer works for coloured and clear finishes and achieves the durable finish needed – plus, it’s Environmental Choice approved.

If he could go back, David says he wouldn’t change anything about his journey. “Whatever I did at the time was what was possible then. Young people who are interested in design now, no matter what form it takes, can step right into it very quickly. It took me years to learn it myself, because when I started in the 70s, there weren’t really any furniture design courses of any note in Britain. Most of us who were doing it were reviving a craft that had sort of died out, and we were all learning together, so it was a long and slow process. It took me a long time to get to where I got to in the end, but design is a much more widespread and accepted profession today than it was when I started. Now people can go much quicker and that’s great because they’ll end up going further than I could. I guess that’s my regret; that I arrived where I did later in life, because if I had been able to start earlier, I might have been able to do a lot more.

“My love of being out on the sea and in the wilderness up in the mountains and the forests, it’s always been a massive part of my life,” he says. “It’s essential in my creative process to have silent space in which incipient things can form and grow. I have written a book about my experiences of being in wild places, what it means to me and how it’s affected how I work in helping me develop my ideas and creativity. That link to nature is so important for me. And now that we’ve discovered that we’re destroying it, it’s urgent that we’re more aware of our environment – which we absolutely depend on and can’t take for granted. This realisation has changed the whole balance of human existence as we’ve known it, and that’s of crucial importance to me today – more so even than design. The book is called *The Other Way* and the plan is to get it out early next year.” **BW**

To see more of David’s multi award-winning work, visit www.davidtrubridge.com.

right: Floral, seen here in Resene Black, was designed three years after Coral to offer a softer, more decorative offering.



Resene
Trubridge Red