prodesign

prodesign 92 \ 2007

"You see things and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, 'Why not?'" (George Bernard Shaw)

ISSUE 92 \ 2007 $9.90

Futuristic students wow global icon \ Kiwi designers foot it at Nike \ Inside Meridian's clean, green offices \ Licensed logo fiddling

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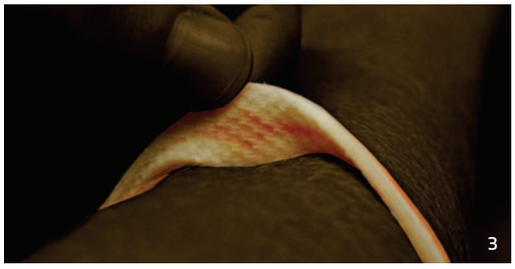
Wellington students wow global client

Imaginative thinking by Design Led Futures design students at Victoria University has impressed contract partner Nike in the programme's first international project.

Words **Zirk van den Berg**



1 \ On their visit to Nike's US headquarters, Design Led Futures programme heads Ross Stevens (left) and Professor Simon Fraser check out this statue of a legendary US baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan, constructed of paraphernalia from his sporting life.

2 \ This latex display screen appears to project digital health information through a patient's skin with the use of a 'intelligent' plaster dressing.

3 \ Imagine: an 'intelligent' bubble gum that could, for instance, be used as a wrist band to record muscle action during training runs, before it's chewed up.

4 \ Projecting 80 years in the future, design students quite seriously imagine a time when human bodies might be more sustainably efficient; operating only awake parts while others can rest in sleep.

The Design Led Futures programme at Wellington's Victoria University has taken a huge step toward securing its own future, completing its first international contract just as government seed funding was coming to an end.

Twenty-five senior industrial design students this year engaged in some seriously exciting future market thinking for none other than global giant Nike. Part of Victoria's School of Design, Design Led Futures (DLF) was founded in 2005 with funding from a Tertiary Education Commission scheme to develop innovative education programmes in collaboration with industry.

"The intention was to get a programme and infrastructure up and running to then be sustainable," says Professor Simon Fraser, former assistant design director at Porsche Design, who heads Victoria's School of Design. "We now have financial support from the university and with our growing track record, it will become easier to involve industry partners."

The programme evolved from a sponsored project with Fisher & Paykel in 2004. Realising there was value in this work beyond just a one-off project, Fraser then made a funding submission to the Tertiary Education Commission.

The whiteware manufacturer subsequently committed to another project, as did tapware maker Methven. In 2007, DLF engaged its first international industry partner, US-based sportswear manufacturer Nike.

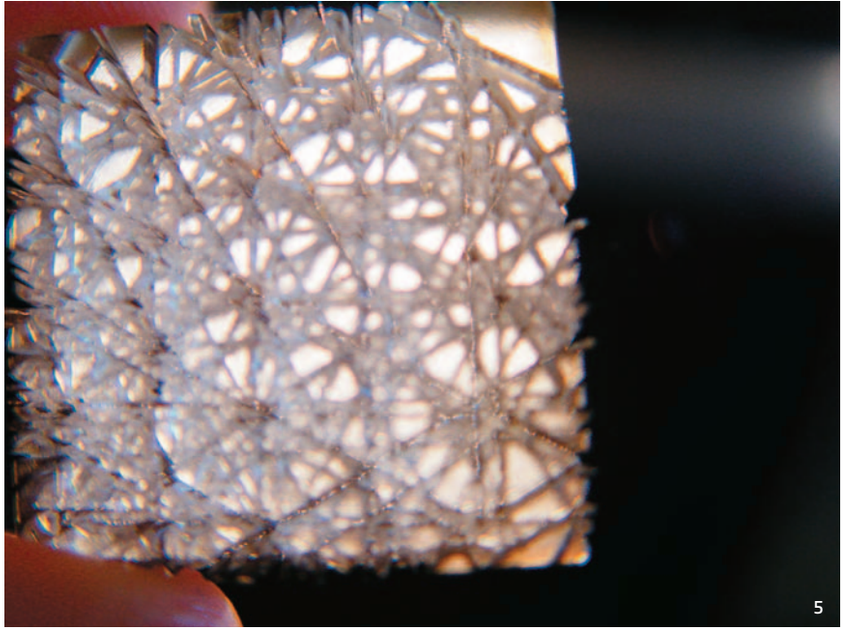
Each time, the industry partner provides much of the funding for the project. "We work out a programme that meets academic requirements and brings benefits for our partner," says Fraser.

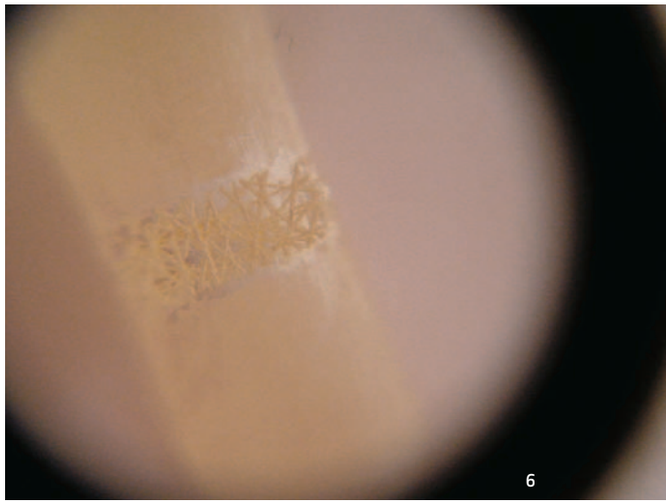
"I'm not aware of any international precedents. Other design schools have speculative projects, but they tend to be done on one-off basis rather than an ongoing concept like Design Led Futures."

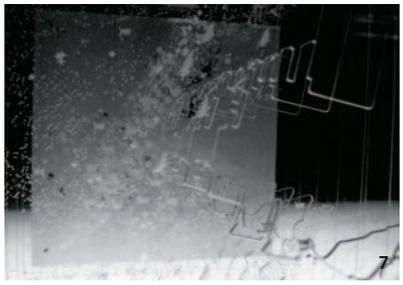
DLF does one project a year as one of the core industrial design courses for students in their final year. "The students are at a point where their thinking is already sophisticated, but not yet constrained by the requirements of industry. So you get that freshness or unbridled thinking, free of the preconceptions that inevitably grow out of daily practice. That is what captures our partners' interest. It gives them perspective on what their future market or industry might be, in ways may never have thought about."

The course is run by Ross Stevens, who had worked with Fisher & Paykel before, as well as for the French design doyen Philippe Starck. "Both Simon and I have a background in the professional world," says Stevens. "Our programme is between industry and academia."

What they find is that businesses are so busy with the







challenges of today that they struggle to do very long term future-driven work. That's where DLF sets out to help.

Stevens acts as intermediary with the client. "We're careful not to get the client near the students, because typically they'd tell you they want research done in an area they already understand. We try not to duplicate the capabilities of their in-house design team. We can't do what they do, but we can do something different."

For the Nike project in 2007, for instance, students were not allowed even to think about shoes. They had to look at Nike as a brand and consider what the company could look like in 10 years' time.

"When Nike's chief designer said they want all the IP from the project, I said you're welcome but there won't be any, as the thinking is too far out."

Minds meet

The contact between Nike and Victoria University came about because of bad geography, says Stevens. At Fisher & Paykel, Stevens had worked with Matt Holmes, who had since gone on to become design director for Nike tennis. "I was going to San Francisco and had asked Matt to meet me for a chat, not realising that he's based hundreds of miles away in Portland. Anyway, we got together and decided to present the idea of a DLF project to Nike."

The proposal fitted with Nike's attitude of tapping into new ideas. Nike had done comparable projects with other universities before, but they had all been very product focused. This time they got something different.

Armed with a broad brief to explore how the Nike brand could extend into digital technology, the DLF students split into four teams to consider a response.

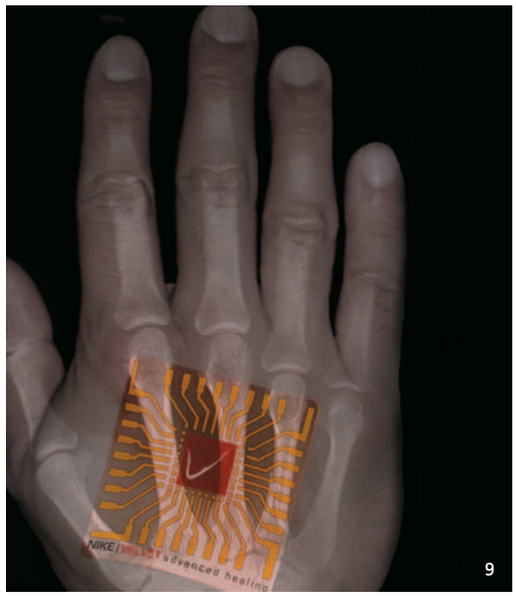
One group said Nike needs to become a world leader in how to programme digital images into textiles. If it does that, the company could use it for more than shoes and look at clothing and other uses for fabric. Another group suggested Nike should make cosmetics with nanoparticles displaying images or even changing information on the skin. An idea was even mooted to use confectionery to carry digital information. The fourth group stretched the brief from a 10-year to an 80-year time frame, investigating the possibility of migrating to a virtual world.

Once the students finished, their ideas were recorded, edited and polished by video producer Morgan Barnard and web design company Resn. Fraser and Stevens then travelled to the US present the work at Nike's company headquarters. Matt Holmes and fellow Kiwi designer Andreas Harlow were there at the presentation, along with Nike's other top designers. →

5 – 6 \ Future technology might grow cyrstaline-like 3D human mutations (in a good way) – like today's 3D prototype printing. For instance, here marriage partners' DNA is swapped to grow wedding bands on their ring fingers.

7 \ A virtual 3D data map of Wellington.

8 \ As music players become ever smaller and less physical, this project envisages music graphics embedded in textiles, in this case moving butterflies that each play different songs to the touch on clothing fabric. The DLF video is online from late January.



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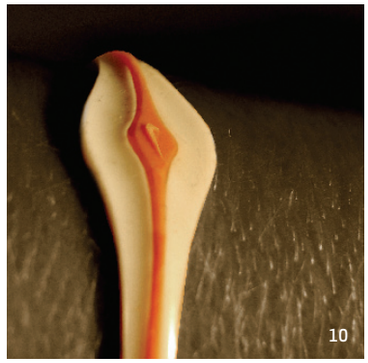

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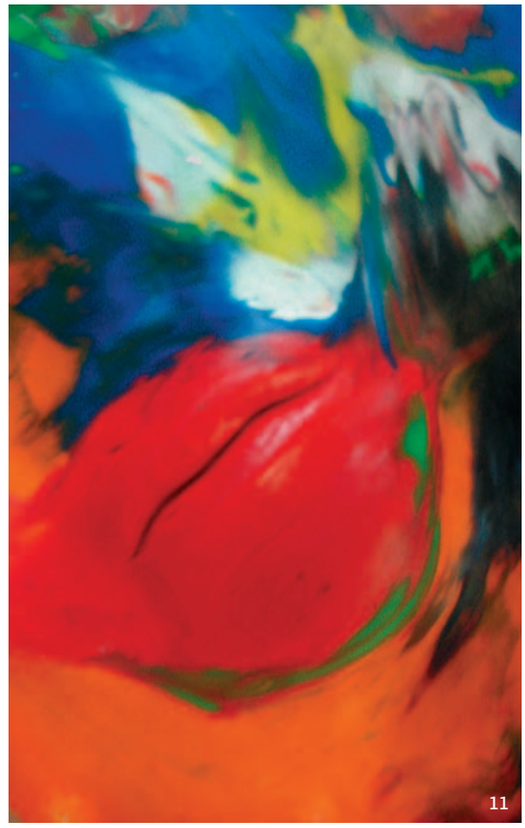

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9 \This First Aid dressing of the future would contain ultra-sound sensors that digitally reveal what's going on inside the body.

10 \ Clever confectionery could, perhaps, be worn as a digital training device to measure an athlete's heart rate, before itself offering up a source of glucose.

11 \ Students used Plasticine to sculpt body masters to mould their latex display screens for digital health information in one of the project groups.

More information and videos of the student's 'design fiction' futuristic research — coming to a world near you probably sooner than we think — will soon be loaded on the dedicated website: www.designledfutures.com

Harlow, who had lectured at Victoria University before leaving for the US 10 years ago, says the students were very adventurous. "The project was more about the Nike brand than about a specific product, which is how I think these projects should be. It was an exploration of where we could go as a business."

Holmes was equally impressed. "It was quite an eye-opener for us. Most schools are very product focused, Vic Uni thinks at a different level. It was an amazing project. When people left the room, they were saying wow!"

Next year, DLF intends to build on the work that was done for Nike, possibly for another client suggested.

Stevens says he recognises that their DLF work stretches the definition of industrial design beyond the normal meaning. "If you take industrial design as trying to produce solutions to the problems people have, and the way they interact with products, this does sit in that notion. For instance, I wear a watch now; that's unquestionably industrial design. If I were to put a lotion on my skin that displays the same information, it seems to me that's still industrial design. We're going through a paradigm shift; certainly our school is."

Next year, they want to involve the university's digital media students in the DLF project as well. "Products are collapsing into virtual things. Products such as photographic film have already dissolved into software. There isn't a company who doesn't need to think about how digital technology impacts on it," says Stevens.

"We tell students, 'Don't worry if your concept is not immediately useful to the client, because whether what we suggest is right or wrong is not as important as that it helps the company decide what they want to be.' Sometimes that's done by having something presented to you that you say no to. You can't make decisions on ideas you don't have yet."

Nike says it understands that top designers are in short supply in a world where there is an increasing demand. "We are constantly on the lookout for the finest design talent and partner with the best design schools to keep our finger on the pulse of the community," the company said in a statement for *ProDesign*. "It's a two-way street. We get a lot in return for our partnership projects. Whether it's long term fresh thinking, working through specific problems or engaging designers in the academic world, all parties benefit in new and inspiring ways."

Stevens adds that the DLF project also gives students new insight into the potential of their role as designers. "For our students, the value of this programme is that they see design is bigger than the object. Design has a powerful social role and has the power to drive change." pd