



guerilla fashion

Leaving behind the world's capital of high fashion, design consultant Lise Strathee has forged an exciting new retail venture in "the Hoki". Barb Rogers reports; photos by Simon Devitt.





Owner of Rawene's Outpost store Lisa Strathee: "Ultimately what excites me is to be forging ahead in new territories and by doing so this may in some way be part of an ongoing evolution in design thought."



Rawene on a clear sunny Saturday morning is thronged with people wearing cowboy hats and western boots, with orange name tags on their denim jackets. Not what you would expect when popping in to this former pioneer trading post which prides itself on its geography and its history. From here you take the car ferry to Kohukohu on the northern side of the sand-dune rimmed Hokianga Harbour, on your way to Ninety Mile Beach, Cape Reinga and other Northland tourist spots.

It soon becomes clear that these are not the locals, at last count 400-ish; we have lucked into a country music weekend which has pulled the crowds from everywhere else. But the unexpected is simple currency here. And nothing illustrates the point better than what's happened to the old 70s post office building in the mainly old world main street.

Decked out in camouflage colours, the seemingly unpromising utilitarian concrete block structure has been reborn as style central: a store called Outpost Hokianga. Guarding the property is a 3m totem pole carved by Coromandel-based artist Hamish Williamson from macrocarpa and kauri and influenced by the so-called Siamese kauri near the 309 road in the Coromandel.

The driving force behind Outpost is Lise Strathee, a Kiwi who's lived most of her life in Europe. She speaks Italian and French and English with expressive gestures and much laughter. Her work pedigree is another surprise. You have heard of the Italian fashion designer Armani? Well, she worked for him. Romeo Gigli? Him too. Cactus & Rose? That was her own label in Milan. Max Mara? Tick the box that says design consultant and we will stop there because a few of the other fashion houses she worked for are less familiar to us but no less significant in the Italian scheme of things.

Strathee came to Rawene when she and partner Claudio were back home visiting her folks and having some time out. The story of how they bought their house in Kohukohu is a hoot and when you visit the store ask her for chapter and verse. It was, again, a bit of a surprise move. They are still smiling about their impulse a couple of years later.

Less impulsive was her plan to open an art and design store. "It's been a dream of mine to open a shop," she says.

"My peers in the high places of fashion might think I'm dreaming but I think I'm doing something completely original in the wider fashion context." She says Outpost has "an aesthetic reference both to military and the frontier land". Rawene has always been on the frontier. But military clothing has always inspired her, too.

"In design terms, the functional aspects of military garb are extremely well thought out. But, as I am a pacifist, my inspiration is to make fashion not war." Think outpost, think military, think bunker colours.

"The retail concept is important because I am plugging into the current thoughts that are re-thinking retail, such as guerrilla stores [which open for a month only in a vacant non-retail space]. Or high-end fashion going 'market' like Dover Street Market in London [steered by Comme des Garçons]. Or mobile retail – buses." It's a phenomenon dubbed "pop-up retail" by trendwatching.com She is also keen to subvert the urban rural divide. "The first thing I am hoping to do is challenge the perception that nothing happens in the country."

Strathee is determined to stay true to the town's trading principles by bringing the best the world can offer in design and fashion and art to Rawene, as well as selling the best New Zealand can offer to the world, i.e. overseas tourists. As well as her own-design clothes such as combat pants made from Chinese silks and military surplus jackets customised with embroidery and beading, she stocks Strangely Normal men's shirts, *Case da Abitare*, *urbis LANDscapes* and *urbis* magazines – she's a freelance writer and stylist for all of them, too – plus a selection of local design titles.

Art is exhibited regularly; she stocks jewellery and shoes and whatever else takes her fancy.

"Commercially what I am doing may raise business eyebrows," she says. "But I am looking at this space from the point of view of creating a shop like an art installation. It is as much about an experience one can offer as about selling a product. After years of working within established parameters on what is luxury, what is feminine, what is fashion ... it is fantastic to be free to experiment.

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