

From the collection

The large silvery ball of ferns that floats above Civic Square in Wellington is possibly one of New Zealand's most iconic sculptures.

It was produced in 1998 by Neil Dawson, who has created similarly spherical works in Paris for the Centre Georges Pompidou, as well as Manchester, Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur and Hastings. A Christchurch-based artist with an international reputation, he has also had works installed in Osaka, Hong Kong, the Australian National Gallery and the entrance for the Stadium of Australia for the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Initially trained as a teacher at the University of Canterbury, Dawson later completed a graduate diploma in sculpture at the Victorian College of the Arts in 1973. His first suspended sculpture, *Echo*, was produced in 1981 for the Christchurch Arts Centre, a line drawing of a building that seems to invert itself as you walk around it, much like an Escher drawing.

Architectural forms, especially stairs into the sky, continue to appear in many of his works, including *Throwback* (1990), the large upturned arch that resides behind the Auckland Art Gallery in Albert Park, forming a giant signature "D" but also a monument to Auckland's architectural history which suffered so much in the 1980s. Along with foliage, feathers are another favourite motif of Dawson's, emphasising the lightness suggested by his suspended works

– there is a large example floating between floors in the Aotea Centre.

Produced two years after the 18-metre *Chalice* that has become a landmark in Cathedral Square, Christchurch, *Chevron* was created for The University of Auckland Art Collection in 2003 as a special commission for the Kate Edger student amenities complex. Both these works anticipate his *Bomber Command Flyby*, 2005, which shoots into the sky like a spotlight.

Chevron, like all of Dawson's works, is solid yet ethereal, produced from steel but appearing weightless, even when fixed to the ground. It is hard but transparent, integrating with the environment and accentuating its height with the exaggerated perspective effects that make many of his works appear to sit in the air as if he was sculpting with sky.

A remarkable piece of engineering, *Chevron* transforms flat sheet materials into complex three-dimensional geometry, in this case a triangular stainless steel beam bent to form a chevron shape with a dissolving lattice at the top. As Dawson described the work in his preliminary design report, the sculpture "will be angled from vertical by 20 degrees and will bend back 40 degrees upon itself at 'knee' point at a height of approximately five metres.... The upper section will be perforated, with the density of perforations increasing with height."

Precision-cut by laser, the hexagonal lattice forms of the upper



Neil Dawson (b.1948), *Chevron*, 2003, stainless steel. The University of Auckland Art Collection.

section progressively open up, helping the cantilevered structure balance. This also makes the work seemingly evaporate into the sky, an effect that is particularly dramatic when its flame-like lighting is

accentuated on an autumn evening.

The University also owns a small wall-piece, *Skywalls*, purchased in 1987 which resides in the School of Music.

Andrew Clifford