

Anticipating a Better City: Redesigning Post-Quakes Christchurch

Steve Matthewman and Hugh Byrd

Correspondence: s.matthewman@auckland.ac.nz

The Canterbury earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 led to the destruction or removal of 1000 buildings from Christchurch's city centre. Eighty per cent of the central city was damaged or demolished. Some 68 000 residential homes required repairs, and a further 7000 "red-zoned" residences were compulsorily purchased by the Crown (Earthquake Commission, 2017). Half the city's roads were damaged and a third of the city's sewer network. This was primarily a tragedy: 185 people were killed and over 7000 injured. It was also an opportunity for wholesale urban renewal, providing the prospect to "build back better". Christchurch became 'the theatre of the greatest single urban design project in our nation's history' (Falconer, 2015). "It's like someone picked the central city out of Christchurch," said the proponent of the Sensing City project that promised to turn Christchurch into the planet's first genuinely smart city. "No one in the world is rebuilding the heart of a living city from scratch" (Dennis, 2014).

Initial signs were promising. Arguably, no city of comparable size has had such high levels of investment. *Foreign Policy* touted it as a global city to watch: the 'massive rebuilding effort ... is a unique opportunity to rethink urban form'. The Council was feted for its Share an Idea process of public "conversations" which anticipated the central city's future. International accolades were garnered for the city's temporary urbanism programmes. KPMG declared it a magnet city, which attracts people and money and provides synergies for exciting, creative and lucrative endeavours.

Alas, the first city of the twenty-first century was not to be. The people's plan (Share an Idea) was replaced by the government's blueprint (Christchurch Central Recovery Plan), the smart city died a swift death, and KPMG quickly curbed its enthusiasm, lamenting an opportunity lost. Cynics suggest that despite the initial burst of optimism the city centre has moved from red zone to dead zone. It is all too easy to find media headlines like 'Can Christchurch be saved?' (Stylianou, 2014) and 'The future isn't going anywhere, so why did Christchurch rebuild the city of yesterday?' (McCrone, 2017).

Yet there is much still to be anticipated. The city's preeminent symbol, ChristChurch cathedral, remains a ruin. The city's centre, Cathedral Square, awaits development. Proposed anchor projects like the sports stadium have not been built. The official plan for 602 hectares of residential red zoned land has not been announced. Five thousand household insurance claims are outstanding (Canlas, 2018). The Earthquake Commission has received over 10 000 complaints regarding shoddy rebuilds, with one lawyer suggesting that there may be thousands more that have not been properly checked or repaired (Woods, 2018). Council has urged its citizenry that "normality" is at least another decade away, while proper roading will take twice as long (Mackenzie, 2018).

The future designs for the city's social and physical infrastructure need to anticipate the fallout from two "time bombs" (Grimshaw, 2018): traumatic and economic. Four out of five Christchurch primary schoolers have symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and are "neurologically different" (Liberty and Allen, 2017). Referrals to school counsellors are at an all-time high. Demand for adult mental health services continues to grow. And this was all prior to the terrorist attacks of March 15. Meanwhile, the insurance pay-outs that propelled the rebuild have plateaued. Canterbury's unemployment levels exceed the national average, and this year its regional economic growth predictions were the lowest in New Zealand (McCrone, 2019).

Using Ahvenharju et al's (2018) notion of futures research as the attempt to unpick the nexus of the 'possible, probable and preferable', this presentation examines the reasons for Christchurch's perceived failure to build back better. It draws from our three-year research project on the Canterbury earthquakes, funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand. Its focus is on how to design sustainability into the city. Putting a city back together is always going to be a protracted, difficult and contentious process. We highlight competing visions of what "better" might look like, and offer reasons for the perceived slowness of the recovery. Despite widespread belief that disasters offer the perfect opportunity to do things differently, actors still find themselves constrained in all sorts of ways. For while buildings crumble, institutions and vested interests endure.

Contestations between multiple stakeholders have been clearly discernible: national versus local government, authorities versus the people, corporations versus community organisations, the wealthy versus the poor (geographically framed as the west of the city versus the east), and the European (Pākehā) majority versus the Māori minority. The Canterbury earthquakes marked the first major disaster in which an Indigenous group (Ngāi Tahu) became an official party to a rebuild. While the top-down governance structures were labelled worst practice by international recovery experts (Ahlers, 2016), the "flax roots" Māori recovery efforts were hailed as best practice (Kenney and Phibbs, 2015). Some of the contestations have been over space – classic "right to the city" arguments (Lefebvre, 1968) that advocate for a city with co-created space for all. Other contestations are over time – what is the city's future, what should Christchurch become? Perhaps the most consciously English city in the colonial settler project, could it become a genuinely postcolonial place? As Katie Pickles (2016: 9) has written:

The earthquakes have exposed major components in the history of Christchurch, such as the dominant Anglican tradition and Englishness, the denial of Māori past, and the environmental pitfalls of building a city on a swamp... it is unhelpful and inaccurate to cling to an imagined city, or attempt to rebuild, restore and regenerate aspects of the past that were long gone before the earth moved. Rather, mindful of the past, it is important to consolidate in the present and embrace the future. It is here that Christchurch's recovery story will be useful globally as well as locally and nationally.

Drawing on the notion of Futures Literacy (UNESCO, 2014) we read Christchurch as a laboratory for an urban, unequal and environmentally threatened world.