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A CITY REBORN

On the up after two destructive earthquakes and 12,000 aftershocks, Christchurch has plans for a 21st-century metropolis.

STORY BY KAREN MCGHEE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE LANGFORD

The Avon River (top) will become a more widely appreciated feature in rebuilt Christchurch. Coralie Winn (centre), co-founder of urban regeneration initiative 'Gap Filler', is helping to encourage community spirit. Uniforms of a bygone era (bottom) dress a wall of the Antigua Boatsheds, on the Avon.





I'M HALFWAY into the 15-minute drive to the city's CBD along Memorial Avenue from the airport before there are any indications that things are amiss. Overgrown vacant blocks appear and increase in number. They're rough camouflage for recently demolished and cleared shop, office, home and apartment sites, and stand out in the otherwise picture-postcard residential suburbs of a city usually famed for beautiful gardens. The ride soon gets a little bumpy, revealing cracks in the bitumen. I begin to notice brick chimneys missing from weatherboard homes.

Then, less than 2km out from the city centre, the evidence of a post-earthquake metropolis under repair and recovery is everywhere. Buildings are surrounded by scaffolding and barricades of temporary wire fencing. Rows of shipping containers front precarious brick facades. Every other street corner that's missing a building seems to now be used as a ground-level car park, transformed to take the load of multi-storey parking facilities that have gone or are awaiting demolition.

Right in the CBD, some areas remain designated 'red zone' with access points guarded by New Zealand's Army Reserve and an official permit required for entry. The old city skyline is mostly missing. And behind a cordon of cyclone fencing festooned with 'Warning' and 'Keep Out' signs there are mounds of rubble and crumbling buildings.

Almost two years on and parts of the Christchurch CBD still look like a disaster zone.

THAT, HOWEVER, IS MERELY a first impression. And it's not unexpected, if, like me, you were watching in February 2011 as 24/7 media coverage revealed the horrifying aftermath of the deadly quake that crippled Christchurch.

It doesn't take long to find signs of optimism and renewal because they are everywhere. And they're often unusually, enthusiastically vibrant and quirky for a city once labelled as conservative. Pre-earthquake Christchurch had a reputation as 'the most English of the world's cities outside of England'; a very traditional first-world presence that boasted some of the British Empire's best Victorian-era architecture. But since the city stared down disaster and was literally shaken to its foundations, it has lost most of the 19th- and 20th-century built representations of what it once was.

There has, of course, been much grieving about this as well as the large number of lives taken by the February event. But local business operatives and civic leaders are striving to turn the massive masonry loss into a plus. And they now talk variously of a 'fresh start', 'level playing ground', 'new frontier' and 'blank canvas'. ▶



The view (far right) from atop the Ibis Hotel, captured in December 2012, shows the edge of the red zone, where construction is underway. Christchurch's cathedral (above), a city icon, is earmarked for demolition but a battle continues for its survival. Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker (right, at right), and North Island-based politician Phil Goff pause during a minute's silence for the 2011 quake victims.

Karen McGhee is a regular AG contributor. Her last feature, *Hunting for Titans* (AG 110), was on the kauri trees of Western Australia.

Mike Langford was a stalwart AG photographer before he returned home to NZ in 2002. His image of a green and golden bell frog appears on the cover of *25 Years of Australian Geographic Photography*.

The message is clear: the healing of Christchurch has begun and is worth experiencing.



Post-earthquake and pre-Christmas 2012, a banquet table is set for a celebration involving 100 guests, before the Bridge of Remembrance war memorial at one end of Cashel Mall.

Business leader
Paul Lonsdale (right) has become a driving force behind the transient shopping mall (above), built within purpose-fitted shipping containers, which have kept life pumping into the city centre.



"We've all been through multiple traumas," acknowledges Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker, one of many locals choosing to passionately espouse new opportunities, rather than dwelling on what's been lost. "Now the challenge is not to rebuild the city, but re-create, reinvent, rethink a city that relates to the way the world has moved in the new decades of the 21st century."

"In fact, you could go so far as to say the world needs a Christchurch; the world needs a city that can actually, on a large scale, respond to the stimuli and needs of the 21st century – sustainable, safe buildings utilising, as much as we can, passive lighting and heating and cooling systems."

To that end, medium-term planning for Christchurch has already begun with work due to start this year on initiatives contained in the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan, which includes a blueprint for new civic developments that are being overseen by the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA). Widely endorsed as an innovative and inclusive strategy, it contains 17 key anchor development projects (see pages 54–5) due for completion within the next five years. These will also provide a framework for perhaps decades of other rebuilding, and give structure to a new, more concentrated and well-planned CBD. The city was remarkably well insured and funding for these major anchor projects is being provided by New Zealand's central government, Christchurch City Council and private developers.

Former army engineer Greg Wilson, of CERA's Christchurch Central Development Unit, says there's no definitive schedule for completion of the plan. "But in terms of delivery of the anchor projects, we've got some clear timelines," he says. "By 2017, we'll have the vast majority of those projects delivered."

Greg acknowledges, however, that beyond that, the recovery time of an entire city is difficult to forecast. It's imaginable that full recovery for Christchurch could take decades.

This time around, the building of Christchurch will include significant input from the local Māori tribe Ngāi Tahu, which occupied the area before the arrival of the first British settlers in the 1850s. The recovery plan, says Rākihia 'Rik' Tau of the Ngāi Tahu's Earthquake Recovery Working Group, is an opportunity for Ngāi Tahu to "re-embed some of its culture and aspirations" back into the landscape of Christchurch City.

Among the Ngāi Tahu's key strategies is a vision to see the river it knows as Ōtakaro – officially the Avon – reinstated as one of the principal features of the central Christchurch rebuild and ensure it is an environmentally healthy artery with a new recreational focus for the city. On this, there's general consensus.

"We were all on the same page from day one that this will be a key feature of the city," notes Rik. "Some of our more clever people are saying maybe we should have a neo-contemporary city where you have a reflection of a number of cultures who represent [all of] the communities that live here."



"The dust was phenomenal" recalls tour guide Steve Williams (above), who watched the spire of Christchurch's cathedral crumble. The heritage-listed Peterborough Centre (right), built in the late 1920s, is to be restored; the gothic-revival building has been given a reprieve due to a recent multi-million-dollar pledge from a private demolition company.



Known as Re:START, the temporary, high-end retail centre has been located on the site of the former Cashel Street shopping mall, where most of the buildings were damaged during the February 2011 earthquake and have since been demolished and removed. The shipping containers have been deliberately painted the sorts of bright, primary colours that give so many South American cities a festive feel.

At one end of the new mall is a toughened perspex barrier through which people can watch ongoing deconstruction in the red zone. The transparent shield was introduced after people kept trying to peer over the previous blockade of boards.

Also at that end of the new temporary precinct is an enduring symbol of the former Christchurch – the department store Ballantynes, an upmarket operation, like Australia's David Jones, that remains predominantly family owned. The building – one of few still standing here – behaved like a solid two-storey masonry bunker when the 2011 quake hit and it's said that its staff, prepared for an earthquake response, may have saved countless lives by keeping people from following their natural instinct to flee outside where a deadly shower of bricks rained down from surrounding buildings.

The other end of the new temporary re:START shopping precinct is also symbolically bookended by another emblem of hope from a bygone era: the Bridge of Remembrance. A homage to war veterans, unveiled in the early 1920s that still stands, the bridge is slightly broken but salvageable and a reminder of the indomitable ANZAC spirit that New Zealand shares with Australia.

Re:START and its remarkable success have been the result of a concerted group effort, but one man has been its driving force – Paul Lonsdale. An unlikely business hero with dishevelled hair and an ever-optimistic larrikin grin, Paul is the manager of the

Central City Business association and had been working round the clock, since the 2010 quake first damaged the area, to keep the commercial heart of Christchurch viable. Not long after the February 2011 event and after much discussion about a temporary retail hub, the local business and property owner group identified a location and date to deliver what is now known as 'Re:START 29.10.11'.

"We knew we had to get the city centre up and operating within a six- to nine-month period because, anything longer than that, habits change and lock in," says Paul, explaining that the city centre needed to quickly give people a reason to keep coming. "It's been proven that if you don't, recovery is much harder."

On 29 October 2011, the temporary precinct opened with 27 retailers. It now boasts more than 40. And it bustles with life seven days a week. The first land lease agreements were for six months; they've already been extended to April this year (2013) and hope to be extended further. In fact, the temporary shipping crate retail experiment has been so successful there's now talk of its possible long-term survival.

ELSEWHERE THROUGHOUT Christchurch, businesses have been embracing another temporary fix while awaiting work to begin on the city's longer-term future – the very 21st-century phenomena of pop-ups.

With the city council relaxing regulations, temporary clubs, bars, restaurants and coffee shop 'pop-ups' have been appearing throughout the city in surprising places and innovative ways. One of the first businesses to take the approach was the Cargo Bar, which has moved into a former car wash next to its associated Bean Scene cafe. Owner Henare 'H' Akuhata-Brown lost two of his three Christchurch CBD businesses and his home in the 2011 earthquake.

New Regent Street is one of the few surviving inner-city streets that it will be possible to restore after the 2011 quake.



Johnny Moore has embraced an even more transient approach to business with his bar The Smash Palace, which serves drinks and burgers out of two buses, situated over a former hole in the ground – filled with shingles and covered in asphalt – behind canvas-covered scaffolding on a busy street corner. It's a completely mobile operation that can be packed up and moved at the termination of a lease or the first signs of another tremor.

Johnny lost his nightclub Goodbye Blue Monday and inner-city home to the February earthquake. Homeless and jobless, he and his girlfriend Juliette ended up living for more than a month – along with other displaced people – in a nearby suburb in the home of his parents, Shirley and Garry Moore. It was time in limbo while his insurance was being resolved.

"Looking back now, I was quite psychologically scarred at the time," recalls Johnny, who was working in his nightclub when the quake hit, and he counts himself lucky to have survived the bricks that fell around him. He initially contemplated leaving Christchurch, his home town, after the quake. "But if I'm going to start fresh I might as well start here, because it's sort of the land of opportunity at the moment," Johnny says.

BUSINESSES LIKE Johnny's don't advertise but never appear to be short of patrons. They rely instead on unstructured guerrilla media: word-of-mouth spread across Facebook pages and via Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.

Coralie Winn also relies on social media to get the message out about the projects in which she's involved. Coralie was made redundant when the 4 September 2010 earthquake damaged the art centre where she worked. Having time on her hands fuelled her creative side and she helped found Christchurch's quirky urban regeneration initiative 'Gap Filler' that responds to the city's ever-expanding spaces by filling them with temporary community-based projects.

"We really wanted to show that temporary activations of vacant space were a way to bring life to the city," Coralie explains. "It's a way of experimenting with community-led urban design... The whole city is completely, vastly different, and we will never be the same again."

Gap Filler is using space and experimenting with vacant sites in different ways to involve as much of the Christchurch community, as well as visitors, as it can. When AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC meets up with Coralie she is working on the finishing touches to the Pallet Pavilion – Gap Filler's biggest project so far, a temporary outdoor community venue and performance space built using more than 3000 wooden pallets. "We wanted to do a big project to truly showcase the possibilities of temporary or transitional architecture in this city," she explains.

Gap Filler usually has six or so projects going at one time around Christchurch. These have included a book exchange in an ex-commercial refrigerator, and a cinema that showed



Johnny Moore (above), at his bar The Smash Palace, which is one of many quirky venues popping up in the evolving Christchurch. So too is the Town Ball sports bar (right) – inside a giant football that once promoted the 2011 Rugby World Cup.



movies against a city wall and was powered by patrons riding bikes. Coralie says Gap Filler does more than fill the vacant space now available in Christchurch. "It's much deeper than that. It's experimenting with space, involving normal people in doing this, and [helping create] a new identity for Christchurch."

THERE ARE TWO MAIN reasons Christchurch still shows so many confronting signs of destruction. The first is because the city took such a massive and direct hit back on 22 February 2011 that it's understandably taking a long time to clear up the mess. The second is that people were cautious about starting over when the aftershocks kept coming and coming. But the rumbles have been quiet now for almost 12 months.

"We're now at the stage where we're about to see the rebuild really start," says Tony McPherson, the Canterbury-based director of the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand. The housing market is about to boom, with insurance payouts starting to pour into several housing estates previously planned by the city council and now fast-tracked as demand climbs.

Tony says that during the past 12 months, \$1.5 billion was spent on earthquake-related construction. "But \$4.5 billion is the projected spend on construction in the coming 12 months [2013] and then \$5.2 billion the year after," says Tony, explaining that a significant part of this will be residential housing.

Barriers for rebuilding are now expected to include shortfalls

vastly different, and we will never be the same again."



Christchurch is becoming a hub for a "transitional architecture" movement that celebrates temporary structures such as the Pallet Pavilion, the largest project so far for urban regenerator group Gap Filler.

in skilled tradespeople and accommodation. Discussions are already underway with New Zealand's west coast coal towns that have high unemployment levels, about workers coming by train to service the Christchurch rebuild during weekdays and returning to their homes on weekends.

Mayor Bob Parker has even had preliminary discussions with Tasmania's Premier Lara Giddings about potential opportunities for that Australian state's unemployed as a fly-in-fly-out workforce for Christchurch.

The anticipated Christchurch building activity is expected to benefit the whole country. "It's sort of going to be the saviour of the New Zealand economy, carrying us through until the world economy [stabilises] because it's not relying on borrowed money; it will be reinsurance money coming into the country," says Tony.

Dr Fred Grosse, a business coach who travels the world from his suburban Christchurch base, likens the economic phenomenon that's already starting to hit his home city to the rapid growth of an Australian mining town.

"It will," he notes, "be like Perth during the resources boom. We are about to become the boom part of New Zealand." ☑

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