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Outside the square



Can Christchurch's vast barren demolition sites be revitalised with a new kind of lively, transitional urban design?

by REBECCA MACFIE • photos by MARTIN HUNTER

At the corner of Colombo and Wordsworth streets is a precinct of hope. It's a small smell-of-an-oily-rag cluster of creativity and commerce that fills the space left scarred and empty after the diggers cleared a row of earthquake-damaged buildings. It faces brightly and optimistically to the street, offering a glimpse of how a better future might look.

At one end, there's the 10sq m relocatable Gap Filler head office, built by volunteers from the Sustainable Habitat Challenge with

recycled materials. It rests lightly on the dodgy ground and is powered entirely by the sun. There's a prototype mini-golf green, a new Gap Filler project that is soon to be unfurled at multiple sites around the city. Write large on a concrete block wall behind, a line from Wordsworth addresses the city's lingering grief: *The things which I have seen I now can see no more.*

Greening the Rubble has installed planter boxes and gardens, there's street furniture made from recovered materials, and wooden pallets reborn as hard surfacing. Alongside is Ian Carter's relocatable Coffee Zone

kiosk, and a couple of ubiquitous shipping containers from which two of the owners of this strip of land run their businesses, one a picture framer and the other a dairy. Over the months, the site has grown and evolved. Bike past one day, and Coffee Zone has shifted 20m to the north; another day a painted piano has appeared, or there's a new outdoor nook under construction.

On another site a couple of blocks up the road is a giant chess set, courtesy of Gap Filler and University of Canterbury students. Further along there's Wayne Youle's enormous 37m shadow board painting, I

quare



seem to have temporarily misplaced my sense of humour, looming over its barren plot.

Around the corner, outside the offices of design company F3, architectural graduate Andrew Just talks me through the detailing of the prototype steel-framed relocatable "box" he and his colleagues have designed as the module for a transitional arts precinct on a vacant site in Madras St. It will provide studio space for a creative community starved of venues since the quakes began.

A few blocks farther, on a site still locked behind the red zone cordon, is where – it's hoped – the performance arts will soon be



housed in a riot of marquees and domes known collectively as the Arts Circus.

A little to the northeast, past where the Anglican church will put its temporary cardboard cathedral, is James Meharry and his radio station, RDU. It's a converted horse float, parked on the lawn behind a couple of badly damaged villas. Meharry lost his studio at the University of Canterbury in the February quake, so he bought the second-hand float, kitted it out with studio gear, lined it with luscious artificial grass and, with technical help from lots of supportive geeks, got the RDU on air last July.

As the desertification of the central city continues – a breathtaking 80% of buildings in the CBD are either down or coming down because they are uneconomic to repair – it's easy to feel defeated by the sheer vastness of the wasteland left behind. Although a few – very few – brave property owners are getting started on new buildings, most are holding their breath. Progress towards the rebuild continues to be frustrated by the freeze on new insurance and the reluctance of tenants to pre-commit. Most are also holding

out for the new Government-appointed Christchurch Central Development Unit to come up with its blueprint showing where "anchor" projects like the convention centre and rugby stadium will go, and whether their land might be compulsorily amalgamated or requisitioned for such developments.

Even when the detail of the anchor projects are known, they'll take time to design, approve, fund and build.

HEROES OF THE RECOVERY

In this prolonged and uncertain interim, the heroes of the recovery are those without deep pockets or grand blueprints, who are getting on with the low-cost, low-risk transitory projects that make life in Christchurch worth living – not in some strategically planned distant future, but right now.

In this "transitional" city, Gap Filler has led the way from the beginning. Ryan Reynolds, a lecturer in theatre and film studies at the university and chairman of the Gap Filler trust, says the idea of enlivening vacant spaces in the central city pre-dates the September 2010 earthquake, when he and colleagues from Christchurch's Free Theatre would walk daily from their Hereford St performance space past the multitude of persistently empty shops and ponder on schemes to rejuvenate them.

The Free Theatre was touring in Wellington when the September 4 earthquake struck, and watching the images of destruction from a distance was painful but galvanising. Inspired by Wellington's Kreuzberg summer cafe, which fills a car park at the top of Cuba St, Reynolds, his partner and fellow thespian Coralie Winn, F3's Just and other friends dug into their own pockets and got to work on ▶

One freezing Friday night I learnt ceroc, salsa and swing among dozens of strangers; it didn't matter that we were surrounded by demolition sites.

Bus to happiness

One Christchurch bar owner has battled bureaucracy to find a new way to serve his customers.

If Johnny Moore had known back in October last year what he came to learn over the subsequent seven months, he'd have headed to Wellington or Auckland rather than staying put in Christchurch and fighting to get his family business back on its feet.

Moore's central city bar, Goodbye Blue Monday, whose shareholders include his father, former mayor Garry Moore, was destroyed in the February quake. (The building the bar was in stood up to the shaking, but the neighbouring building collapsed onto it.) He was unhurt, but had to wait months to regain access to the property through the red zone cordon. When he finally got inside, he found the place "comprehensively looted": cases of alcohol, computer equipment, tills and cameras were gone. "It was methodical. Someone needed to have had a ute and trailer to get that much stuff out. It wasn't just a kid who'd jumped the fence at midnight."

He put the experience behind him, drew down on his business interruption insurance and went hunting for a venue to get started again. Eventually, he alighted on a bare section at the corner of Victoria St and Bealey Ave, and came up with the idea of parking an old bus on the site and converting it into a relocatable bar. There'd also be a caravan where his sister Rosie would run a cafe, and a couple of temporary buildings for toilets and



kitchen. The wind and dust would be kept out by plastic sheeting attached to scaffolding around the perimeter of the site.

The city council's planners were enthusiastic, as was business support agency Recover Canterbury. Lots of people lent moral and practical support.

He started working on the site in October, with ambitions of having the new bar, called Smash Palace, trading by Christmas.

Then began a protracted Kafkaesque battle with the Christchurch City Council's consenting division. Because the bus was judged to be a building, it needed building consent.

That meant concrete foundations had to be laid, and the body of the bus tied down. The handrails had to turn down 90 degrees at the end, and the way they connected to the decking around the bus had to be drawn up by an architect. The wheelchair ramps had to be at a gradient of 1:12. A

near-enough 1:10 was not good enough.

Then it turned out the scaffolding was also classed as a building. Moore mounted futile protests before complying with the consent department's demands to provide engineering certification – only to be told the council needed to farm out the approvals to a consultant in Auckland. At his cost.

Then he realised he'd mistakenly

"I got to the point where I was seethingly angry. I'd go to bed angry and dream hateful dreams towards the council and I'd wake up hateful."

the first Gap Filler project on a Colombo St demolition site. Within a few weeks of the quake, they'd created an outdoor cafe, art-house cinema and music venue.

With no money to pay musicians, they put a call out for bands to come and play. "We thought, oh, a few might come," recalls Reynolds. "But in the two weeks that we ran

that site we had 41 bands play."

The project was an unreserved success. Witt, who'd lost her job at the Arts Centre as a result of the September quake, threw herself unpaid and fulltime at Gap Filler, and more projects followed. Then the deadly and far more destructive February 22 quake struck; the couple's house fell

down "spectacularly" and they wound up camping with friends. They wondered publicly on Facebook whether it was appropriate to carry on with Gap Filler.

"The response was overwhelming," says Reynolds. "They [supporters and volunteers] said 'you have to keep doing it'." Since then, Gap Filler has become a charitable trust,



Johnny Moore (centre) and clients at converted bus bar Smash Palace.

positioned one end of the toilet block 900mm too close to the boundary. Since the neighbouring property was a car park, his fire engineer suggested getting the neighbour to sign a letter saying he was happy with things as they were, provided Moore made the block compliant as soon as the neighbour wanted to rebuild. The council found this unsatisfactory. He was told he had to build a fire wall, designed by an architect, signed off by a fire engineer and builder, and inspected by the council.

Eventually, after much anger and argument from Moore, the council said that provided the neighbour signed a legal encumbrance agreeing to have the toilet block left as it was, there would be no need for the fire wall.

Smash Palace finally started serving beer

Winn has become the paid co-ordinator, and many more gaps have been filled. One of the most outrageously successful was the Manchester St Dance-O-Mat – an open-air dance floor and a coin-operated washing machine converted to provide 30 minutes of light and power to an iPod and speakers.

Reynolds: "People said Christchurch

to patrons in May, and the place is now humming with revellers and eclectic gatherings even on cold winter nights. But Moore believes the whole process cost him an extra \$50,000, and it drove him to his wits' end. "Personally and mentally it broke me down. I got to the point where I was seethingly angry. I'd go to bed angry and dream hateful dreams towards the council and I'd wake up hateful."

He found himself drinking and smoking too much, losing sleep and chewing his nails.

Without more pragmatic interpretation of the rules for temporary outfits like his, quake-hit businesses will be driven from the city, he says. "The Building Act is fine when it's business as usual. In Christchurch at present it's not business as usual."

The council's building operations

people wouldn't dance in public. Well, Christchurch showed us."

On one freezing Friday night in late May I learnt ceroc, salsa and swing moves among dozens of strangers; suddenly, it didn't matter that we were surrounded by demolition sites and that the central city was gone.



manager, Ethan Stetson, is unapologetic. Yes, he says, post-quake Christchurch needs creative entrepreneurs like Moore, who are "the life-blood of the city." But building quality, fire protection and disabled access still matter.

"The city council is trying to be reasonable, and we want to be reasonable, and there are many institutions where we have been able to stretch ourselves in terms of accepting solutions to satisfy the building code. Unfortunately, what Johnny Moore was asking for in terms of the bus, we weren't able to go there with him because it was not acceptable in terms of the building code."

Stetson says Moore's experience should be a lesson to others trying to set up temporary premises: get the engineering documentation right first time, and hire a project manager. The whole thing was painful for the council, too, he says. "Trust me, we made a loss on the whole experience, but we are bound by the Building Act."

Based on the number of \$2 coins pushed into the slot over the project's two-month life, Winn calculates the floor was danced on by 2000 people. Although the dance floor's now been packed away for winter, she says the Christchurch City Council is keen to re-establish it permanently. "So we may gift it to the council."

It's hard to overstate just how powerful and invigorating this is: young, clever creatives with little money but a huge appetite for trial and error are doing urban design on the fly, and proving that small-scale, inventive spaces will draw people out and restore life to a wasteland.

And, says Just (who is also a Gap Filler trustee), it's radical on another level, too. "It's turning private space into public space. So a 60-year-old becomes an urban activist by dancing on the Dance-O-Mat."

Winn: "Ryan and I both speak the language of performance studies, which actually is the same language as urban design and architecture – it's how people interact with and move through space, and how space performs and how it causes you to perform."

None of this has been easy. Although the projects appear faintly anarchic, they happen only with agreement from landowners, many of whom are hurting badly because the demolition of their buildings means they've lost their income. And Gap Filler's primary competition for vacant land is Wilson Parking, whose signage is spreading like a rash because it provides landowners with cashflow. There's also public liability insurance, health and safety, and traffic management plans to attend to.

But after 18 months, Gap Filler has figured out how to negotiate the barriers and the concept is about to be scaled up. Life in Vacant Spaces (LIVS) is a new programme based on Gap Filler and on research carried out by Reynolds and Winn showing how the temporary activation of derelict spaces has been a successful driver of urban renewal internationally. Funded by the Christchurch City Council, LIVS will be an independent brokerage connecting community groups with landowners willing to have their properties used. It will also handle the hassle of insurance and health and safety management. Projects will operate under 30-day rolling leases, enabling the landowner to take back the site at any time for a permanent rebuild or alternative tenant.

Reynolds: "We're talking about projects that will be paying no rent or a token fee. They'll be small-scale, maybe a few hundred dollars. They might only last 30 days, they might get kicked out after 30 days, they might fail after 30 days. So what? It means someone has had a chance to take an idea that would otherwise only be an idea, and give it a shot."

"I've heard people say, 'Why waste money with temporary things, let's just build the new permanent thing that we need.' But that's so presumptuous that we know what's right and best right now. We don't."

MUCH MORE THAN BOXES

The proposal for a "boxed" quarter for the arts and music scenes on a Madras St site takes the ideas of experimental transitory urban design up a notch. It began when Martin Trusttium of Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology asked F3's Just if he could figure out a way to turn shipping containers into a temporary precinct for studios and galleries. Immediately after the quake, CPTT urgently found accommodation for around 10 displaced arts organisations, but Trusttium knew if the city was to retain its cultural fabric it was vital to create cheap spaces for artists to work and exhibit in.

Just reckoned they could do far better than shipping containers, and he came back with the design for the ArtBox module – a steel-framed, insulated unit with a see-through polycarbonate frontage, which can be bolted together and configured in different ways. It's designed around the standard length of ply and other building materials, and is small enough to be put on the back of a truck and moved without an escort vehicle. The box is bolted on to small concrete footings – a design that enables it to be easily re-levelled if the ground buckles in another quake, or tweaked to fit another site.

"This deals with the uncertainty," says Just. "And if it doesn't work you can withdraw and put it somewhere else at little cost." And although the boxes are designed for flexible, temporary uses, he says they wanted to do something that was sustainable and lasting. To prove the point, F3 co-owner Pippin Wright-Stow is building his Lyttelton house from the modules.

ArtBox will be a precinct made up of 18 boxes assembled into four pavilions. The bulk of the \$600,000-odd cost will be met by donated materials from New Zealand Steel, Placemakers Riccarton and other suppliers that, says Trusttium, understand from a business point of view how important the arts are to the city's recovery. The first pavilion will go up later this month.

Christchurch bands desperately need

"Christchurch can become a centre of creativity and innovation ... Projects like this are about generating confidence and activity."

space, too, and so there's room in the boxed quarter for BeatBox. Jeff Fulton, the key driver of the concept, says the loss of cheap downtown real estate has forced bands into suburban garages or – worse – out of the city. BeatBox will be a pavilion of four different-sized boxes providing affordable space to rehearse and mingle. He's about halfway towards his funding target of around \$700,000. "Contemporary music has always been a hard sell but we'll get there, I'm pretty sure we will."

ArtBox and BeatBox will be the anchor tenants of a larger boxed precinct that will use up to 200 of the F3 modules to create a multi-level mixed-use precinct with offices, hospitality and retail. This is being driven by private developer Daniel Godden, who sees an immediate opportunity for a funky quarter where office workers and gallery shoppers rub shoulders with musicians and sculptors, creating an economic spillover for nearby businesses and property owners.

ARTS CIRCUS

Of all the proposed transitional projects, the arts community is most impatient to get the Arts Circus going. The vision of a flamboyant village of temporary buildings, marquees and tops, snuggled near the site of the historic Odeon theatre, is being pushed passionately by George Parker, a director of the University of Canterbury's Te Puna Toi performance research project and also a long-time member of the Free Theatre.

Parker says the Arts Circus is modelled on Munich's Tollwood festival and will provide a home for the city's displaced cultural festivals, as well as for one-off performances and new events. There'll also be space for circus arts, theatre, dance, film, comedy, bars and a market. Like ArtBox, it will also be a chance to play around with different configurations – to see what attracts people and feels right, and what doesn't – from which the developers of permanent buildings can learn.

"Originally it was all about retaining artists. But this is also about attracting them. If we can do that, Christchurch can become a centre of creativity and innovation," says Parker. "Projects like this are about generating confidence and activity." Think no further than Glasgow or Melbourne for examples of a vibrant and innovative arts sector being at the centre of urban renewal.

The cost of the Arts Circus is thought to be around \$3 million – a third of the cost of the temporary rugby stadium in Addington, the bulk of which was paid for by the Government and whipped up in three months with no one batting an eyelid. But this is the arts, and so the money is harder to find and



Andrew Just (left) and Pippin Wright-Stow of design studio F3; and concept drawings and the prototype of the modular ArtBox designed by F3 to provide flexible, movable spaces.



the political will is more fickle. The project hasn't yet secured the right to use the site, and funding decisions are yet to be made. The Christchurch City Council is enthusiastic about Arts Circus and other transitional projects like ArtBox, which it sees as catalysts for economic recovery in adjacent parts of the city, says senior urban renewal planner Michael Fisher. But just how much influence the CCC will have on any of this remains unclear, given that central government has usurped its responsibility for the CBD recovery plan and put it in the hands of its new Christchurch Central Development Unit.

The wheels of bureaucracy are turning slowly, but the likes of Parker, Reynolds, Wirtz and Just are doing their damndest to show that these transitional developments could make Christchurch a living lab of creative experimentation that will attract interest from around the world.

"If we're smart about the transition, we can build on Lonely Planet's rating of Christchurch as the most exciting city in New Zealand," says Parker. "And when we are talking of financing the rebuild, it's essential that sort of international attention is drawn to Christchurch."

In the meantime, small gaps will keep getting filled, and James Meharry will keep the music coming from the RDUUnit. Whenever he hosts a live gig or supports an advertiser who has just got back in business, he takes the horse float on the road, drops down the side to form a stage and puts the show to air.

Post-quake Christchurch has been all about experimentation for RDU, he says. "You're free from constraint, and you can find ways of doing things and creative outcomes that you wouldn't have found otherwise ... We definitely feel as if we are recovering, and helping the recovery." ■