

Place, Culture and Landscape After the Christchurch Earthquake

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Place, culture and landscape all provide continuity to our lives. Continuity of biophysical settings, of people and activities, of values and memories; in short, our sense of who we are. Yet communities become most aware of the importance of such continuity only when it is threatened — whether incrementally, for example, through globalisation; deliberately, through redevelopment; or dramatically, through natural disaster or conflict. At these times the impermanence and contingency of taken-for-granted places and their wider landscape setting is revealed, and the protocols and cultural practices of managing change, both intentional and imposed, are tested and not infrequently found wanting. Yet new possibilities of place, culture and landscape also emerge, to which formal government and wider processes of governance must adapt.

In this chapter I reflect upon the experience of the 2010–2012 Canterbury and Christchurch earthquake sequence, through a lens of landscape, and focused particularly on the changing relationships between culture and place. Some brief definitions are in order, to frame the discussion. They are indicative rather than normative. I take culture to be a distinctive way of living, combining values, practices and technologies. Place is a distinctive coming together of culture and its accumulated

meanings in a particular biophysical setting. Landscape expresses a wider network of relationships between culture and nature, and comprises a mosaic of places, biophysical systems, cultural practices and infrastructure. I use the term ‘government’ for the formal public institutions and powers created by law, and ‘governance’ for a wider network of formal and informal institutional relationships that shape our everyday lives, places and landscapes.

The chapter is in five parts. First, I recount the seismic events of 2010–2012 and their immediate impacts. I then consider, in turn, the reconfiguring of everyday life, the reconstitution of identities and memories, the necessary re-evaluation of future possibilities and vulnerabilities, and the tensions this creates for government and governance. Taken together, these dynamics re-place the way culture is embedded in a post-disaster landscape.

Dis-placed: the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010–2012

The recent Canterbury earthquake sequence began on 4 September 2010 with a 7.1 magnitude event on a known fault line (the Greendale), located some 40 km from the city of Christchurch, New Zealand. There was liquefaction, building damage, and damage to infrastructure across the city and its surrounds, but despite the size of the event, its rural location and timing (just after 4 am) — and a dose of luck — meant that there were no direct fatalities. Cantabrians collectively expressed relief at having ‘dodged the bullet’. Plans for repairs were drawn up, and despite continuing aftershocks (notably on Boxing Day 2010), the assumption was that life would quickly return to normal. Indeed, on Thursday 17 February 2011 a lecture series started in the Christchurch City Art Gallery¹ to examine how we could collectively use the September 2010 event as a catalyst to reinvigorate plans to improve the urban environment.

The initiative was well intentioned but sadly premature. At lunchtime on 22 February 2011, two very shallow and locally intense quakes (6.1 and 6.3 magnitude) occurred on a previously unknown fault line that has now been revealed to run along the foot of the hills across the south part of Christchurch. This was much closer to the central city than the September 2010 event, and the nature and direction of the shock waves caused widespread devastation. The city centre itself was badly damaged, with major building collapses, including several relatively modern structures, as well as heritage buildings and numerous brick and stone facades. To the south and south east of the city there were major rock falls in the coastal hill suburbs, and widespread and major liquefaction along the river corridors towards the estuary and along the coast, causing building subsidence and extensive damage to infrastructure networks. The February 2011 lunchtime quakes caused 185 fatalities, nearly all in the central city, and most in just three locations. Official inquiries into the causes of the building collapses are concluding as I write.

Everyone who was in or close to Christchurch on 22 February 2011 has a unique and frequently harrowing story to tell. For some it was direct and tragic. I have a colleague, for example, who was the sole, badly injured survivor from a bus that was hit by a collapsing facade, and has faced a long and challenging period of rehabilitation. For others it involved heroic actions or just plain hard work helping on the day and in the following weeks. For many, it involved a period of intense worry and uncertainty, desperately trying to contact family and friends caught in the worst hit areas, or in the city-wide gridlock that followed. The technologies that we have come to rely upon, of reticulated water, sewerage, power, and road transport, were all disrupted. Telecommunications, both landline and mobile, were quickly overwhelmed, and many related services compromised or failed.

Disaster specialists recognise three main phases following a major event: immediate response (crisis/rescue); recovery (aftermath/relief); and reconstruction (rehabilitation/closure). The first is measured in days, the second in weeks and months, the third in years. In the Canterbury events, the second (recovery) phase has been prolonged by the continuing aftershocks and the uncertainty and disruption they create. Since September 2010 there have now been close to 12,000 aftershocks, and the Christchurch earthquakes have become one of the world's most financially expensive natural disasters — a status which is disproportional to the physical magnitude of the tectonic events because of the extensive insurance held by property owners, including the government Earthquake Commission scheme. Rebuild costs are estimated in the order of NZ\$30 billion.

The majority of buildings in the Central Business District (CBD) of Christchurch have been condemned due to structural damage, and are being demolished. But deconstructing modern and high rise buildings is a slow process, and some two years after the February 2011 event the city centre resembles an extensive demolition site, with growing areas of cleared land, but little new building. In the suburban areas the government has condemned large areas of residential land affected by liquefaction, and some due to rock fall, and 7,500 homes are being progressively vacated and abandoned. Many other property owners with complex damage still await insurance decisions on repairs.

On the other side of the coin, many new initiatives have sprung up, and neighbourhoods that survived without serious damage have been reinvigorated by displaced businesses. In the days following the February 2011 event, affected businesses that were able to relocate did so quickly — leases for accommodation in the relatively unaffected west of the city were being negotiated the following day. Actions by the new Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) have since released

large areas of new residential building land north and west of the city, and displaced families and businesses are driving a construction and building boom. Within the city itself there have been a range of temporary recovery initiatives, discussed below, while some badly affected communities have also launched recovery projects. However, this bald account of the events says little about the impacts of the event upon people and community, and in the next section I explore some examples of the re-placing of culture in the damaged city and suburbs.

Re-placing everyday life

One immediate effect of the earthquakes was a dramatic disruption of everyday life. For the many people who worked in the central city, their workplaces were suddenly inaccessible. Half-eaten meals, personal belongings, all the details of working life were left in suspension as people fled the dangerous buildings, and were barred from returning by the military enforced barriers around the CBD 'red zone'. For the families of those killed or injured, and for the surviving victims, life changed forever. It also changed profoundly for the thousands across the wider city and nearby settlements whose homes were damaged. Some badly hit communities rapidly emptied out, as people abandoned their homes. The fortunate ones relocated to friends, relatives or holiday houses. Others had little choice but to stay, effectively camping in their damaged houses, and many continued to do so for months or even years. Power was restored relatively quickly to most areas, but water and sewerage were more badly disrupted, and for a while Christchurch became 'Porta-loo' city, with thousands of plastic toilet cabins along the suburban roadsides. In the low-lying areas, liquefaction spread grey silt across streets, gardens and into houses, and armies of volunteers arrived (see below) to remove what turned out to be several hundred thousand tons of silt.

Over time, people's lives have followed diverse trajectories. Many have remained in, or returned to damaged suburbs,

adjusting to a 'new normal' of roads shut for infrastructure repairs, and closed or displaced facilities, such as libraries, sports centres, and shops. There has also been engagement in re-envisioning the future, and a range of temporary and longer-term projects to reconstruct familiar places. Others have left the city, with an initial dispersal to surrounding towns followed by outmigration to other cities in New Zealand and to Australia. They have literally 're-placed' elsewhere.

Perhaps the most dramatic re-placing has resulted from the decision by government to condemn large areas of liquefaction prone land. Extensive areas along the lower River Avon and around the estuary and coastal zones, and in the township of Kaiapoi, have been deemed as unsuitable for rebuilding, and the government is buying affected properties, and will soon begin clearance. Some smaller areas in hillside suburbs subject to rock fall have also been 'red zoned'. Complete neighbourhoods and some communities have thus been displaced, and the inhabitants scattered. Where their financial circumstances allow, some are buying new homes in existing or green field developments on more stable land to the west of the city, and the surrounding small towns and suburbs are expanding rapidly. For those in rental accommodation or lower value properties, the displacement has been much more challenging; there is intense competition for available homes, and re-placing becomes determined by availability and chance rather than by choice.

Employment has also been dramatically displaced. Many casual workers in central city hospitality industries lost their jobs overnight. Some small business owners were able to continue working from home, but others found their customers dissipated and were forced to close. Professionals fared better, and quickly relocated to temporary facilities — often in industrial areas. For them, the daily work routine was changed and the cafe lunches replaced by sandwiches. Again the negative impacts have been felt most acutely in the east of

the city. The economic centre of gravity of Christchurch has been moving west for some years, and many workers from the east already had to travel across town. The disruption of public transport and road congestion post-earthquakes has made this daily routine more demanding and costly.

Widespread damage to the central city also dramatically curtailed a previously vibrant cultural and social scene. Galleries, theatres, cinemas, cafes, the central library — all the activities of civic life in a large provincial city — closed immediately, as did the nightclubs, bars, and music venues. The extensive central city retail areas also closed, and many niche outlets have been unable to relocate. Central city hotels closed and city-based tourism has been hard hit.

One key service and a major employer that has continued and has anchored the western part of the central city is the Christchurch Hospital and its associated facilities. The complex continued to operate throughout the crisis, and for a while also became a temporary transport hub as bus routes were relocated to adjoining roads. The major tertiary educational establishments in the region, also large employers, have continued to function, as have most schools — although many now face an uncertain future.

The regional economy has been surprisingly resilient, as have aspects of the urban culture. The central city accounted for around 8% of Canterbury economy,² and the net effect of the earthquakes on the regional GDP has been of a similar scale (8–11%),³ reflecting the export orientation of many sectors, as well as their location in undamaged areas, and the ability of other sectors such as information technology to adapt quickly to new locations. New hospitality businesses quickly emerged in the west of the city. For example, in the inner suburb of Addington, new bars and cafes have sprung up, and the Court Theatre has reopened in a converted warehouse. Addington's revitalisation was also aided by the government-supported conversion of an existing sportsground

to create a temporary home for the Crusaders' rugby franchise. The new normal in revitalised urban centres is different, however — it is younger, more edgy — and this vitality is evident in the emergence of a range of new community organisations aimed at creating temporary urban places, such as 'Gap Filler'⁴ and 'Greening the Rubble'.⁵ Gap Filler has focused on bringing activity onto cleared sites, such as the Dance-O-Mat (a moving platform powered by an I-phone dock to provide music), or art installations, such as one that resembles a well-known board game, in which the roll of a dice determines which colour different parts of the city are zoned. Greening the Rubble, as the name suggests, has focused more upon revegetating barren sites.

For many older residents of the city, however, the vacated central city has been like an amputated limb, and the loss of familiar settings has been sorely felt. Some central city landowners have attempted to restore a sense of normality, and the Re Start project, located on the former Cashel Mall adjacent to the relatively undamaged and iconic department store Ballantynes, uses brightly painted containers to house a range of retail stores and cafes. The City Art Gallery sponsors outdoor exhibitions, with an inaugural display of maps and images of historic Christchurch along the Worcester Boulevard. The City Library has moved back into a converted warehouse next to a temporary bus exchange. The City Council has returned to its reopened building, and performance spaces have been created in temporary domes in Hagley Park — all attempts to restore familiar patterns of use in the central city, despite the destruction and clearance.

Re-placing identities and memories

As the previous examples show, everyday activity can be quickly replaced. Replacing identity and memories is a slower process. Cities are repositories of both collective and individual

memory, and their buildings and spaces may be significant as the location of important events or functions, or as examples of particular periods in social history and culture. Public discourse about individual memories can also enrich the collective identity of particular places and wider urban landscape. Poets, writers and artists in particular are shapers of a cumulative sense of identity, and artefacts, buildings and urban spaces of no great merit in themselves may come to embody such heritage. Connecting and underlying these sites, the wider patterns of the urban landscape — the street grid, property boundaries, and names — also mark earlier ways of life, people and events. Taken together, the layered urban mosaic and its biophysical fabric is one of the richest records of memory and identity in contemporary culture.

Pre-earthquake, central Christchurch was an eclectic but attractive mix of heritage features, parks and modern buildings. Framed by the colonial street grid, there were a range of 19th century civic, commercial and residential buildings in timber, stone, and brick, characterised in particular (but not exclusively) by various neo-gothic styles. To the west of the CBD, many buildings occupied their own sites, creating an open and well-treed heritage precinct. Within the CBD itself, much of the early fabric had been replaced by higher and denser modern construction from the 1960s, late 1980s, and early 21st century. Some modern buildings had become iconic (such as the Town Hall), although most were undistinguished, and some were frankly ugly. To the east of the CBD and along main streets such as Colombo Street and High Street there were still extensive Victorian and Edwardian facades and pockets of restoration. Networks of parks and open spaces across the city were characterised by many attractive mature trees. So while Christchurch was not the most beautiful of cities in a classical sense, it had an appealing character, an historic presence, and for many residents, a comfortable familiarity.

The fabric of a city is also an implicit record of omissions — of people, cultures, events that have been forgotten or deliberately concealed — and Christchurch had its absences and silences. Most notably, Maori culture was largely invisible in the fabric of the pre-quake city centre. The site chosen by the surveyors of the Canterbury Association for the new city had previously been extensively used by Maori as a food and fibre source and was crossed by route ways, with pa sites and seasonal camps. This pre-European landscape was retained in tribal memory but largely overlaid physically by the colonial grid and settlement. With the revival of the political and socio-economic role of Ngāi Tahu over recent decades, given particular momentum by the settlement in 1998 of the Treaty claim between Ngāi Tahu and the Crown, the pre-European landscape has begun to be revealed, and this process has accelerated as Ngāi Tahu have asserted a stronger role in the recovery process (see below on planning and governance).

However, it has been the contests and conflicts over the loss of European New Zealand memory and heritage that have dominated the post-quake period. Many of the most notable heritage buildings in the city were badly damaged and structurally compromised by the February 2011 events, particularly those with unreinforced masonry. The most graphic example of damage and conflict was the Christchurch Cathedral, the symbolic centre of the modern city, featured on the council logo and on thousands of publicity images. The cathedral was significantly damaged and the western facade, tower and spire collapsed — amazingly without loss of life — but much remained. However, the owners of the building (the Anglican Diocese) decided in the recovery phase that the building structure was too compromised for repair, and prompted by the government agency responsible (CERA), determined to demolish the remaining parts (much of the nave and eastern end) down close to ground level, with no plans or provisions to retain the materials for subsequent restoration. The position

communicated to the wider community was that the priority was safety, and that projected costs of restoration would be excessive and an inappropriate use of funds.

This decision became a focus for public debate over the future of heritage in the city. Heritage advocates had already been voicing concerns about the speed at which damaged heritage buildings were being demolished, under the powers exercised by CERA, and the lack of systematic conservation of materials. Drawing comparisons with post-war reconstruction in Europe, the argument has been that the cathedral more than any other building requires protection and reconstruction, as the focus of a new city centre. The costs, although significant, are considered modest when compared with the overall costs of reconstructing the city, and supporters were confident of their ability to raise what is needed. The Anglican Diocese, led by a recently appointed bishop from outside New Zealand, stood firm in their decision to demolish, which was commenced. Heritage advocates turned to the law, and at the time of writing the situation remains before the courts.

Curiously, the position taken by the Anglican administration (remembering that Christchurch was founded as an Anglican settlement), contrasts markedly with other religious communities in the city. The Roman Catholic cathedral, a classical building of major significance, is located on the edge of the central city. The basilica was badly damaged but did not collapse, and with the attention of the wider community focused upon the future of the Anglican cathedral, the dome was quietly removed and placed in storage, and the building stabilised, as it remains today. In a similar way, the Presbyterian Knox church on the northern edge of the central city has had the timber roof stabilised, pending reconstruction. Meanwhile, the Anglicans are building an innovative temporary structure on a vacant site in the east of the CBD.

Elsewhere in the central city, other iconic heritage buildings have met a variety of fates. Many of those in private

ownership have been demolished — but not all. Buildings held in various forms of community trusts appear to fare best, with major sites such as the Arts Centre being stabilised while long-term restoration programs are developed. In all cases, however, there is a wider tension between public and private interests in heritage, between owners and insurers, and between those who seek to rebuild with continuity to the past, and those who seek a completely new start. These are all polarities that existed before the quakes, but have been amplified. What makes the current situation distinctive is the sheer scale and speed of amnesia created by the rapid clearance of damaged buildings, and the lack of a systematic heritage conservation plan, or even provision to recycle and reuse characteristic and irreplaceable materials such as the Halswell stone widely used in the 19th city.

There are two lines of argument, one tightly focused, the other more diffuse, nuanced and hence more easily dismissed. The clear and simple approach is to focus upon short-term recovery. This position is strongly aligned with the economic priorities of central government (see below), and the sectoral interests of the development, construction, and hospitality sectors. It draws its moral authority from the widely felt desire to avoid any further deaths or injuries from building failures, and its cultural authority from a ‘can do’ paradigm that just wants to get on and clear up. Those who favour a tabula rasa approach see the rebuild as an opportunity to modernise, rationalise, and implement a new phase of commercial investment. They draw support from the government minister responsible for recovery, who takes a ‘pragmatic’ approach, and indeed has been infamously quoted early in the recovery process as favouring demolition of many of the ‘old dungers’ in the city.

Those seeking to prioritise heritage conservation offer a longer view, although the way this is expressed is diverse. Some are more retrospective rather than prospective, and want to

retain and restore key elements of the past as cultural touchstones. Others see heritage restoration as the basis for long-term prosperity, rebuilding the heritage tourism industry. There is also a wide but less well-focused constituency who seek a greener, more sustainable style of reconstruction, and a constructive approach to heritage conservation that would incorporate heritage elements and materials into new structures that respect the past without imitating. These are all different ways of 're-placing' the future.

Re-placing the future

The past two years post February 2011 have been a rollercoaster of hope and enthusiasm and despair for designers and planners and many concerned citizens, as government agencies, local government, institutions and organisations and a wide range of community groups have interacted with more or less success in the recovery process. Over this period, power to determine the future of the city has been systematically drawn towards central government and the sectors most closely aligned with the current administration, and away from local and regional communities. The origins of the process preceded the earthquakes, but tectonics have provided both need and opportunity to accelerate the centralising tendencies. It has not been entirely one way, however, and there have been local initiatives. In this section I focus upon the events and processes through which the future has been 're-placed', before returning to consider the overall dynamics of governance in the post-quake city, and its consequences for place, culture and landscape.

The opportunities for a 'bottom-up' process of reviewing the future directions and character of the city were quickly recognised following the initial September 2010 earthquake. While central and local government appeared to envisage business as usual, local designers saw the need and opportunity for change. The School of Landscape Architecture ran a design charette focused on the central city, for example, and other

similar initiatives sprang up across the city. A lecture series launched by the local branch of the NZ Institute of Architects focused on the theme of ‘Before After: Let’s build a better Canterbury’. Combined with an exhibition, the series intended to use the September 2010 event as a springboard to add momentum to the revitalisation of the central city. In my own presentation that opened the lecture series, I identified seven landscape planning principles to guide recovery, and argued for a multigenerational vision to better fit our city to the dynamics of the underlying landscape systems — including long-term sea level rise.

The major events of 22 February 2011 curtailed the initial series, but lent urgency to its message, and once the immediate rescue phase had been undertaken, and despite the continuing aftershocks, designers and citizens were again quick to envisage a better future. The need for a community-wide effort was now patently apparent, and meetings were held, articles written, conferences convened, research agendas developed, and best practices identified. At the beginning of May 2011, Christchurch City Council launched ‘Share an Idea’, a consultation exercise intended ‘to get everyone involved in the process, our own residents, all New Zealanders, ex-pats living throughout the world and people who may be looking to move to Christchurch’.⁶ As Mayor Bob Parker recognised, Christchurch had been presented with ‘a rare opportunity’: ‘What will be important is to ensure we future proof our Central City for future generations. We have to be bold; we have to be adventurous; and we have to be visionary as we are creating a city for the next 150 years.’⁷

The community took him at his word, contributed over 100,000 ideas, and the City Council re-engaged Danish architect Jan Gehl to advise a Council team translating the ideas into a coherent plan for the central city, which was launched in August 2011.

Local communities also took bottom up planning initiatives. The coastal suburb of Sumner developed a plan for revitalisation, led by local designers.⁸ Immediately to the north of the CBD, the inner city community of Peterborough Village *Pita Kaik*⁹ undertook a community-led process to develop its own reconstruction plans. The displacement of communities along the Avon River due to liquefaction stimulated the creation of the Avon Otakaro Network (AvON)¹⁰ to promote a city-to-sea park system across abandoned red zone land.

However, these types of community initiative all need wider governmental and institutional support to be implemented. While the ‘bottom-up’ ideas were being generated, a different ‘top-down’ agenda was emerging in Wellington, the seat of government in New Zealand. The agency established by government to lead the recovery program, CERA, effectively controls the Central City, including access to the exclusive core red zone, demolition, and now reconstruction plans. Beyond the CBD, CERA also has wide powers. It has designated different zones for land affected by liquefaction and rock falls — red, green, orange and white, and is leading the statutory Recovery Strategy for Greater Christchurch. As part of this process, in July 2012 a ‘Blueprint’ for the Central City was released by the newly established Central Christchurch Development Unit.¹¹

The Blueprint is claimed to build upon the community driven ‘Share and Idea’ vision, but changes the vision in several key respects. It will restrict the CBD area by establishing a ‘green frame’ of newly acquired government-owned land, intended to focus private rebuild investment within the core, while serving as a longer-term land bank. The reduced CBD is structured spatially and functionally by specialised precincts and a series of ‘anchor projects’. These include a convention centre in the prime central city location between Victoria Square and Cathedral Square, and a major sports stadium

adjoining the eastern frame, both conceived at a scale which serves a national rather than regional agenda, yet require major local funding contributions. The Blueprint also largely reinstates the pre-quake traffic management plan, which had been challenged during Share an Idea, and places more emphasis upon market-led corporate development projects, rather than design-led green urbanism. Heritage projects receive limited attention.

The community visions established through the bottom-up processes have thus been reframed and reformulated within a somewhat different set of priorities and paradigms. The City Council and other local institutions have been caught 'betwixt and between' their constituent communities and the newly reinvigorated machinery of central government, and it is to this tension that I now turn.

Re-placing governance

Initial media attention about the earthquakes focused upon their immediate effects on the places in which people live, and the human stories, tragedies and triumphs of the events and their aftermaths. However, debate also quickly extended to the wider decision-making about post-disaster recovery, and two years later these arguments are intensifying as they move beyond discussion over particular proposals and plans, to address the whole structure of post-disaster governance, and in particular, the relationship between local and central government and other agencies.

New Zealand is a parliamentary democracy, but has few constitutional checks and balances. Maori governance before European settlement was tribally (iwi) based and localised. The British Crown assumed wide ranging (and still contested) powers in 1840 through the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, but local and regional government and governance by both Maori and European settlers remained highly influential until the 1870s, when European provincial government was

abolished, and the power of iwi was also being progressively curtailed through growing numbers of settlers and loss of land resources. For the next 100 years, the country was closely managed by central government in Wellington, serviced by powerful ministries that controlled and frequently delivered many essentials of life such as power, transport, communications, goods and materials, and housing. The power of central government was further consolidated when the upper house was abolished in 1950, so that a single House of Representatives, currently of nominally 120 members elected for a three-year term, now has complete control over statutory law, which can be changed very quickly.

The character and wider limitations of this structure were illustrated in the ‘Muldoon’ era of the mid-1970s and early 1980s, when an autocratic leader attempted to use micro economic management to insulate the New Zealand economy and society from the effects of changing geopolitics and terms of trade, but failed dramatically. The subsequent economic crisis led to a reforming Labour administration, which from 1984–1991 radically decentralised many aspects of government, separating policy from delivery, corporatising and then privatising many government functions, and reorganising and re-empowering local and regional government. They also established the framework for significant environmental reforms, which gave local and regional government extensive management responsibilities for natural and physical resources (including water), overseen by an independent Environment Court. Local democracy was further strengthened in 2002, and it seemed that the progressive ‘hollowing out’ of the state observed in many developed countries would also follow in New Zealand.

However, by the time of the 2010–2011 Canterbury earthquakes, central government was already pulling back some of the previously delegated autonomy. The devolution of decision-making had slowed down the approval process for

resource development, but failed to halt environmental degradation. In mid-2010, the National administration led by John Key had controversially sacked the elected representatives of Environment Canterbury (the regional authority in Canterbury) and installed unelected commissioners, with a brief to improve water management and speed up approval of large-scale irrigation schemes, which would in turn boost agricultural production and export earnings. The clawback of local autonomy by Wellington is continuing as I write, with a bill currently before the New Zealand Parliament that narrows the focus of local government across New Zealand towards so-called 'core functions', removing the general powers relating to community wellbeing that had been introduced in 2002. The 2010–2011 Canterbury earthquakes have therefore occurred at a crucial time in the relationship between central and local government, both generally in New Zealand and particularly in Canterbury. The approach taken by central government to the recovery process and its governance has arguably been shaped by its wider agenda, which has heightened the existing and inevitable tensions over the governance of recovery.

There is no doubt that central government resources and powers are essential to the response and recovery following a disaster of the scale that has hit Canterbury. The debate now is how those resources and powers are deployed, with what goals, and how they relate to other agencies and constituencies. A State of Emergency was declared in the immediate response phase, and the most visible presence of central government was the New Zealand Defence Force personnel who secured an exclusion zone around the badly damaged central city, as well as providing emergency supplies to affected communities. The regular emergency services — Police, Fire, Ambulance, Search and Rescue and so on — were all highly visible. What was more notable was the emergence of non-governmental organisations, particularly the Student Volunteer Army (SVA)¹² and their rural counterparts, the Farmy Army,¹³

which quickly became the focus of community response. The SVA was initially established after the September 2010 event and used social media and information technology to rapidly assemble and then direct students and others to communities in need, particularly those suffering badly from liquefaction. It was re-energised in February 2011 and provided a major presence in the eastern suburbs, coordinating many thousands of volunteers.¹⁴ The Farmy Army was a similar bottom-up effort through which rural communities brought food and water to damaged areas. The efforts of engineering crews of utility companies also came quickly to be seen as symbols of local initiative in the hours and days after the quakes.

As response moved to recovery, the central government replaced emergency powers with new statutory powers. At the end of March 2011, CERA was established, and on 19 April the *Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Act 2011* was urgently passed by Parliament to provide comprehensive powers for the authority. CERA¹⁵ operates outside the local government legislation, 'in partnership' with existing local bodies — the Christchurch City Council, Environment Canterbury, the Waimakariri District Council, the Selwyn District Council and Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu. It has wide-ranging powers and has adopted a very different approach to decision-making to that normally followed by local government, operating instead as a government department tightly controlled by the minister, focused on preparation and delivery of the Greater Christchurch Recovery Strategy.¹⁶

The strategy narrows the visionary focus expressed in bottom-up initiatives such as Share an Idea to a more instrumental recovery program, aimed primarily at reinstating economic activity and infrastructure. The wider political economy appears to have been particularly influential in shaping this approach, as the earthquake recovery presents the National-led government with both an economic opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is that the rebuild provides a

constructive way to stimulate the economy during the global downturn, and the predicted major inflows of capital from offshore reinsurance could provide a further boost to the national accounts. The challenge is to generate growth quickly enough for it to become visible in economic indicators by the time of the next general election in 2014. These imperatives have led to a narrow focus, tight political direction, and projects intended to generate cash flow and investment.

Major government initiatives have included, first, the demolition of central city buildings that were structurally compromised, in order to enable rebuilding; second, the re-planning of the central city through the Blueprint described above; third, a massive infrastructure repair program, through a public private consortium; fourth, the repair of private properties covered under the Earthquake Commission insurance scheme, again through a public private partnership; fifth, the geotechnical evaluation of residential land affected by liquefaction or rock fall, and the purchase (at recent rateable valuations) of properties in the areas deemed unsuitable for rebuilding; and sixth, the acceleration of land subdivision around the city fringes.

The process adopted by government has been directive and corporate, with CERA working one on one with key partners and sectors, but with limited consultation with the wider public. It has resulted in regular political disagreements between an embattled City Council and the Minister, and the overall effect has been to disenfranchise many local interest groups, and those outside the bureaucracy. Environment Canterbury appears to have been relegated to a largely service role, reinforced by the recent government decision to delay the planned return to elected democracy for an additional three years 'as the job wasn't yet done', as the Minister for Local Government recently explained.

Another example of the shifting power relations and the tensions this creates has been the replanning of Christchurch

schools. In the ‘Tomorrows Schools’ reforms of the late 1980s, local school boards were given extensive governance responsibility. In recent years, this autonomy has been slowly wound back, with increased reporting requirements such as those associated with National Standards, but one lasting effect of devolution has been the strengthening of the role of schools as centres of their communities. In Christchurch, a city structured socially by school allegiance, the place-making role of school zones is particularly strong. However, post earthquake, the educational landscape has faced major challenges, with damaged facilities, others found to be below newly raised engineering standards, and changing demographics. A reorganisation plan to close and amalgamate schools, developed and administered in a bureaucratic fashion by the Ministry of Education, has proven to be highly controversial and divisive, with affected communities feeling over ruled by yet another layer of government.

The sense of local loss of autonomy has not been limited to relations with government. Insurance companies have also become sources of frustration. As noted above, property owners in Christchurch were heavily insured by global standards, with private insurance (required by banks which provide mortgages) supplemented by the coverage of the Earthquake Commission. However, ‘insurance’ has proven to be rather different in practice to how it was envisaged by those paying the premiums over many years. The scale of the events and the liabilities have meant that offshore re-insurers have had a major role behind the scenes, and households and businesses anticipating settlement of their claims have found themselves involved in extensive negotiations and multiple re-appraisals. Some face repair schedules that may extend five or more years after the event, and others have taken lesser settlements just to enable them to move on with their lives. The government’s own agency — the Earthquake Commission — has also faced much public criticism over its handling of claims, reinforcing the sense of local alienation.

However, not all local interests have been marginalised. Rather, there has been a reordering of relationships, and some appear to have benefited. Notable among these has been Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu (TRoNT).¹⁷ In the period since the settlement of the Treaty claim in 1998, TRoNT has become the second-largest landowner in the South island, after the Crown itself, and is a major property owner and investor in Christchurch. As the Treaty partner in Canterbury, Ngai Tahu has a direct relationship with central government, and has been actively promoting a stronger Maori dimension to the rebuild, expressed economically through investment; and culturally, in terms of naming and defining land use activities, and in the restoration of natural systems, including indigenous biodiversity. Selected consultants and others have also become part of the CERA process, as expertise has been drawn into the authority and its associated agencies to deliver different aspects of the recovery strategy.

The controversial governance issue in the post-earthquake period has therefore been the uneven and selective nature of engagement by central government, and the lack of opportunity for public debate over the decisions being made. In effect, place governance in earthquake-affected parts of Christchurch, and beyond, has been thrown back to an earlier era, with operational decisions relating to the reconstruction process again being made within central government, and local government demoted to a supporting ‘service’ role to a centrally determined political agenda. As prominent jurist Sir Geoffrey Palmer recently noted: ‘New Zealand is one of the world’s oldest democracies. But sometimes we do not behave in a democratic manner.’¹⁸

Re-placing landscape

This necessarily summary account has interpreted the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010–2011 as a process of re-placing culture in a dynamic landscape. Everyday activi-

ties, familiar patterns of work, schooling and cultural events, memories and heritage values, have all been first dis-placed by the tectonic events, and then progressively re-placed. The replacing has involved both physical relocation, and reconstruction in place. Underlying the complex process there have been two dynamics in tension — a bottom-up impulse focused on place and community, and a top-down government-led program of economic recovery and rationalisation.

The bottom-up dynamic has aimed to rebuild individuals' lives and communities in a way that retains values from the past but looks ahead to an enhanced and more sustainable future, most cogently expressed in the Share an Idea visioning undertaken by the Christchurch City Council. The top-down program has focused upon using the reconstruction of buildings and physical infrastructure as an economic stimulus for the wider national economy. The bottom-up dynamic has sought quick settlement of private insurance claims and wide community involvement in the deliberation and decision making over the future public landscape. The top-down dynamic has delivered rapid demolition of the central city, extensive repairs to roads and services, an extensive buy-out of houses on condemned land, and directive decisions over reconstruction, focused on corporate interests, but the settlement of insurance claims on many damaged buildings remains contested.

James Wescoat and Douglas Johnston¹⁹ have argued that landscape reveals multiple faces of power. Drawing upon Kenneth Boulding's work, they suggest that landscapes can express coercive power, economic power, or integrative power through love, respect and solidarity. All three are evident in the post earthquake re-placing of Greater Christchurch. It is tempting to suggest that the actions of government have displayed coercive and economic power, while the crisis has revealed new possibilities of bottom-up integrative power for local communities, and much of the preceding account could be taken as evidence in support of this argument. But that

account would be over-simplistic. Many of those engaged within or through the central government agencies are Cantabrians, highly committed to their place and its recovery. In a similar way, much that is framed as ‘community’ focused can disguise self-interest. But Westcoat and Johnston’s main point still stands, which is that landscape is shaped and reshaped through the dynamics of political economy, and the recovery of Greater Christchurch — the re-placing that is underway — profoundly reflects the wider political economy of New Zealand in 2012.

For a period during the 1990s, Christchurch was referred to as ‘The People’s Republic of Christchurch’. The original reference was derogatory, intended as a criticism of the way in which the city was resisting the more extreme dictates of economic rationalism being promoted by government and the business community at that time. But it was taken as a badge of honour by many in the city, and until 2010 Christchurch continued to maintain a fierce independence from central government. There are many tragic dimensions to the 2010–2011 earthquakes, but included among them is the opportunity they presented to central government to force through a wider political agenda that is not of this place. The scale of the events has made the city dependent upon central government, and this is coming at a high price.

Whether the vitality of local democracy can be rebuilt and again take leadership in shaping the city is uncertain at this stage. The city rebuild will inevitably take decades, spanning the life of a number of parliaments, but much will depend upon the outcome of the next general election, and the subsequent relationship between local and central government in New Zealand as a whole. As a designer and planner, I have shared with my colleagues the swings of enthusiasm and despair as opportunities for genuine improvements are identified, then dismissed. I remain ambivalent about the prospects of future proofing the city, given the current trajectory. One

thing is certain however — the history of the Christchurch earthquakes of 2010–2011 will be a rich and rewarding topic for analysis for many years to come, and can offer multiple lessons and insights to other cities and communities in anticipating and responding to a volatile future.

Acknowledgments

Jacky Bowring and Jenny Moore provided helpful comment on this manuscript. Jacky also helped shape my ideas on the changing city landscape of Christchurch through our co-authored article, ‘Shifting Landscapes In Between Times’ (*Harvard Design Magazine*, 36, forthcoming). This interpretation, however, remains my sole responsibility.

Endnotes

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