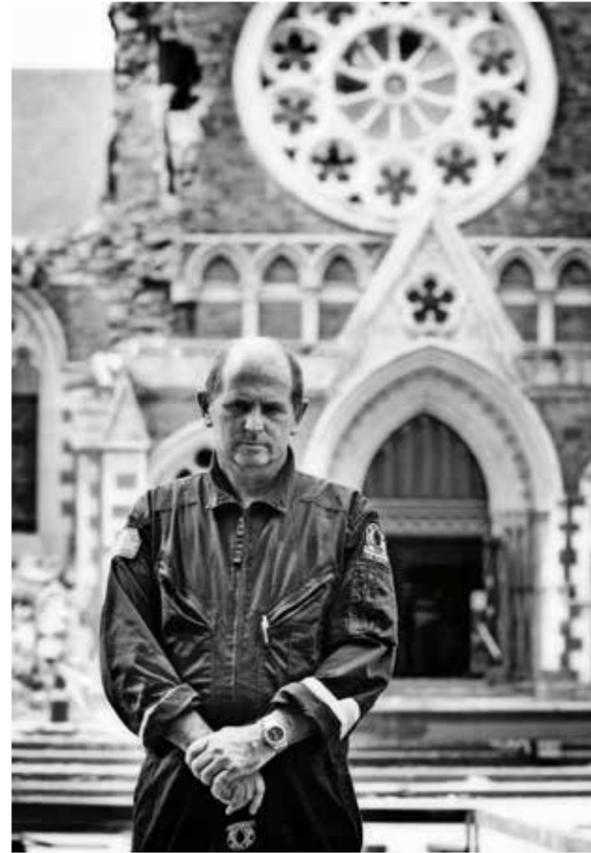


Christchurch Botanic Gardens



Rising from the rubble

WORDS PAUL ROBINSON



Pop-up restaurants, street art where buildings used to be, free libraries in abandoned fridges: Christchurch has responded to disaster in an innovative way.

BOTANIC GARDENS PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN LAURIE/BAUER SYNDICATION.COM.AU; CATHEDRAL: GETTY IMAGES; CHALICE: NICK WATY/BAUER SYNDICATION.COM.AU

SINCE suffering three massive earthquakes in six months – the third, in February 2011, claiming 185 lives – Christchurch has picked itself up out of the rubble, washed off the dust and embarked on an innovative and exciting urban-renewal project. In a response to tragedy as courageous as it is farsighted, there has been a major rethink as to what constitutes a modern city.

With “Christchurch Reimagined” as the theme, the new Christchurch will be more compact, low-rise (a seven-storey height restriction), easier to get around. The Avon (Otakaro) River, snaking its way through the heart of the city, is key. Its banks will provide a ribbon of parkland. On one side there will be paved walkways, a cycleway and seating areas; on the other

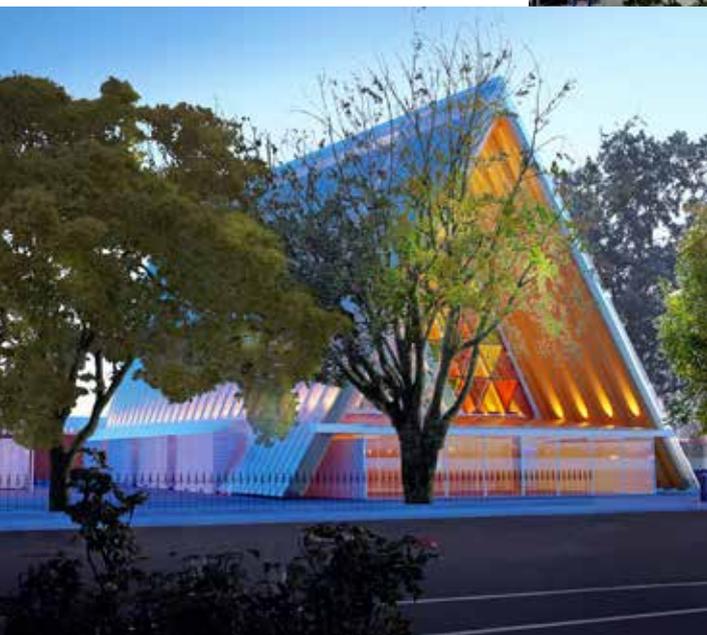


The Chalice sculpture in Cathedral Square (pictured prior to the earthquakes) was a survivor; not so lucky was the cathedral itself (left)

grassed areas and plantings. Wall and roof gardens are mooted to filter the water that runs into the river. With some 40 bridges, getting from one side to the other isn't a problem.

The “making do in the meantime” ingenuity shown by Christchurch has taken the form of pop-up restaurants and bars, “Gap Filler” street art installations in the empty spaces where buildings have been removed, free libraries in disused fridges on street corners and often quite confronting “Red Zone” tours of the earthquake’s ground zero.

Locals have found clever new ways to re-establish cultural, dining and entertainment norms. Imagination and creativity have been allowed to flourish. A particular success has been the Re:Start initiative in Cashel Mall, now well into its >



Artist's impression of Cardboard Cathedral (above); Re:Start in Cashel Mall (right)



second year of trading. Initially a focus for retail, it has become a major tourist attraction in its own right; indeed many locals would actually like it to stay put. Constructed from shipping containers Re:Start resembles a retail Legoland, occupied by brands such as Hunters & Collectors, Ballantynes, Cosmic, Johnson's Grocery and Trelise Cooper. Close to the bus station with free wi-fi, this "colourful labyrinth" has become a popular weekend hangout.

While deemed structurally sound to be rebuilt on, the inner city is still an eerie wasteland. Once home to some 6000 businesses and 51,000 workers, it is now open space and rubble, devoid of pedestrians and traffic. Most of the old buildings have collapsed; scaffolding surrounds some of the sites, at others ubiquitous shipping containers are used as bulwarks against further collapse until the site is cleared. Up to 90 per cent of the building material is being recycled. The rebuild is a \$NZ40b (\$33b) project that will require at least 40,000 skilled workers, some 24,000 in the construction sector alone, many of whom will be recruited overseas.

THERE were winners and losers in the earthquake lottery. The Art Gallery is structurally sound and set to reopen in May 2014, but the Convention Centre has been demolished (events are now hosted at the Air Force Museum). The Catholic Basilica still awaits restoration, but the bunker-like casino is going strong. The 300 or so heritage Gothic revival buildings Christchurch was so renowned for have suffered badly - more than 65 per cent of them will be lost. Wooden buildings stood up to the

tremors much better than stone. The Diamond Jubilee clock tower on Victoria Street is one survivor, although its clock has stopped at 12.51pm - the time of the February 2011 quake.

The landmark Anglican Cathedral in the main square was badly damaged, but demolition has been stayed by court injunction while emotive debate over its future rages. Its temporary replacement is another example of the ingenuity the city has displayed in its reinvention. Designed by Japanese "emergency architect" Shigeru Ban, it will be constructed of more than 90, 20m-high cardboard cylinders in Latimer Square at a cost of \$NZ5m (\$4.1m). Compliant with the earthquake code and designed to last for more than 50 years, it will be one of the safest buildings in the city. The "Cardboard Cathedral" is due to open later this year.

Red Zone tours have turned bad business into good business and are part of the reason Lonely Planet included Christchurch in its list of Top 10 Cities for 2013. Touring the earthquake's Ground Zero, dubbed the Red Zone, is a sobering but fascinating experience, one the city has embraced as part of its history. Quake City in Cashel >

RESURRECTION CHRISTCHURCH



Clockwise from left: punting on the Avon; "Gap Filler" street art; brave eatery, Fiddlesticks



Street, an interactive exhibition coordinated by Christchurch Museum, provides a backstory to the disaster. Discover Christchurch (hasslefree.co.nz) runs tours through the sites of the devastation on a red, open-top, double-decker, 1960s Routemaster London bus – admittedly an incongruous sight on the Canterbury Plains, but ideal for scoping out the “deconstruction”.

Christchurch is the supply base for the NZ and US Antarctic stations and another interactive experience unaffected by the big shake-up is the International Antarctic Centre near the airport (iceberg.co.nz). Endure a snowstorm where the temperature plummets to -12° accompanied by howling winds; or take an exhilarating ride in a Hagglund all-terrain vehicle. In a clatter of tank tracks, these Antarctic workhorses go through

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water, float, cross crevasses and traverse extreme slopes.

Despite the upheaval, good dining options are plentiful, with many of the “temporary” pop-up sites showing signs of permanence. Like Smash Palace, which inhabits two old buses on a vacant lot on the corner of Victoria Street and Bealey Avenue. Festooned with coloured lights, this bar has craft beers on tap and great burgers. (One side effect of the quake was that many pub contracts with major breweries were rendered null and void, enabling them to sell boutique and craft beer.)

With Mexican skull wallpaper and rock attitude, King of Snake (kingofsnake.co.nz) in Victoria Street oozes cool. The Asian fusion menu mostly works and a Trinidadian punch cocktail in the intimate bar is liquid dynamite. Fiddlesticks on ▶

STAY

THE GEORGE 50 Park Terrace. (03) 379 4560. thegeorge.com
In a quiet location by Hagley Park and the Avon, this five-star low-rise 1970s hotel was recently refurbished. The demeanour is old-world plush, the staff highly efficient without being obsequious and its 50 Bistro exudes low-key sophistication. From \$NZ295 (\$244).

PEPPERS CLEARWATER RESORT Clearwater Avenue, Harewood. (03) 360 1000. peppers.co.nz

Modern luxury one- to three-bedroom villas set in rustic peace and quiet around Lake Kaikainui. With golf, fly fishing, tennis and walking trails. From \$NZ265 (\$219).

HERITAGE HANMER SPRINGS 1 Conical Hill Road, Hanmer Springs. (03) 315 0060. hanmersprings.co.nz

Built on the site of an old lodge that began hosting travellers in 1897, the Spanish Mission-style hotel has self-contained chalets on its rambling grounds. In-house restaurant Isabel's serves a hearty dinner (pork shoulder with apple and fennel sauce), possibly one reason the Qantas Wallabies stayed here on R&R during RWC 2011. From \$NZ164 (\$135).



Akaroa Harbour; Hanmer Springs (below)



Worcester Boulevard (fiddlesticksbar.co.nz) caters to the after-work crowd and serves a wicked organic rice pudding. Few eateries would be brave enough to furnish the walls with green Astroturf.

New projects are everywhere. First up in this rugby-mad city, which lost lucrative Rugby World Cup revenue when fixtures were cancelled after the quake, is an 18,000-seat (35,000 for concerts) covered sports stadium in the heart of town. Other planned facilities include aquatic and convention centres, and new cultural venues. Alongside health, judicial/police, retail and performing arts precincts, they will be centrally located along the river and efficiently linked to a transport hub.

Accommodation is also on the increase, the latest opening being the Rendezvous Hotel last month, with The Heritage Christchurch due to launch in August. March figures showed a 4.1 per cent increase in food and accommodation services for the first quarter of 2013. The New Regent Street central city retail area, with its Spanish Mission architecture, reopened in April, just after the Port Hills Gondola (March). Repair of the heritage tramway is also underway.

Talk about picking yourself up off the canvas!



OUT & ABOUT There is distraction aplenty in Christchurch – and much more to enjoy – whether coastal or alpine, just a short drive out of town.

HANMER SPRINGS

Driving north on a two-lane blacktop through the foothills of the snow-capped Alps, the gorse is in flower and giant slabs of rock jut out of the ground like Easter Island *moai*. The rivers are swollen with snowmelt.

Hanmer Springs is a subalpine spa town about 90 minutes from Christchurch. Apart from relaxing in a hot thermal pool, there is bushwalking, trail-biking, horse-riding, quad-biking, bungee, whitewater rafting, paintball – and skiing in winter. However, the Thermal Pools (hanmersprings.co.nz) are by far the main event and have been for more than 125 years. The combination of natural mineral water and pristine alpine air is hard to beat. Spa, body and beauty treatments are on offer, plus a freshwater lap pool.

AKAROA

This sleepy village on the Banks Peninsula, a 70-minute drive from Christchurch, was settled by French colonists in 1840, giving it a unique Gallic flavour still evident in its street names, original wooden cottages and sixth-generation descendants.

Akaroa Harbour is a volcanic crater, 17km long and popular for recreational boating. An Akaroa Dolphins (akaroadolphins.co.nz) nature cruise is a chance to see one of the world's smallest and rarest marine mammals, the Hector's dolphin, which grows

to 1.4m, as they devour whitebait. Penguins, Canadian geese, cormorants and curious NZ fur seal pups also venture close.

Returning to Christchurch, Canterbury Guiding Co's (canterburyguides.com) David Hiatt drives along narrow back roads winding across the peninsula around the crater rim. It has a stark, desolate Scottish moor feeling, until we reach the garden at the end of the world.

At Fishermans Bay Garden (gardenstovisit.co.nz) the Simpson family has created a floral *tour de force* in what was once a dairy farm. The view goes on forever and the South Pacific pounds the rocky cliffs. In the next bay is a Maori *pa* (fortified village) site, its defensive terraces still visible.

PEGASUS BAY

About 3km off the highway, some 30 minutes from Christchurch, is the Donaldson family's Waipara Valley winery (pegasusbay.com). In the statue-strewn gardens, a natural amphitheatre is used for classical and operatic concerts. An intriguing cellar tour features giant casks more than 100 years old imported from Romania and the award-winning eatery (best winery restaurant four years running) is bookings-only on weekends. Using fully accredited, sustainable viticulture, Pegasus produces excellent wine (most of which is exported) named to reflect the matriarch's love of opera.

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