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Kevin McCloud

Open letter to Christchurch

Rebuilding Christchurch brings an opportunity most cities never get: to breathe new life into the Central City, to recreate Christchurch as a world leading exemplar of sustainable, modern living. Since I was brought on board as a judge in the upcoming Breathe design competition, I've been carefully following plans for the city's redevelopment and the resulting conversations it has sparked.

In this open letter to Christchurch, I'd like to offer my perspective on the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan. In particular, I'd like to address Rod Oram's concern (Press opinion 5 August 2012) that "Nothing in the plan distinguishes Christchurch from the pack."

So what's missing? When you look around other world leading cities, there are a few things not fully explored in the Central Recovery Plan, the most important of which is a serious dose of people power. The Plan is ambitious but, given human nature and the natural course of events, the resulting rebuilt city will inevitably have several degrees of compromise built into it. The path to achieving the very best possible is to involve the people who will populate the place and make it their own and to help them evince an even more powerful ambition.

I recently read *Tāone Tupu Ora*, a New Zealand Centre for Sustainable Cities publication edited by Keriata Stuart and Michelle Thompson-Fawcett. This book brings together themes of indigenous knowledge, Māori urban design principles, micro-urbanism, the development of Māori land, papakāinga and puts together a case for why and how mātauranga Māori (traditional knowledge) can be part of better urban development. I was struck at the similarity in approach of the Māori urban design principles for papakāinga development and some of the principles of One Planet Living (as developed by World Wildlife Fund and BioRegional), for example, Health and Happiness, Culture and Community, and Land Use and Wildlife. One Planet Living is an acceptable, proven and westernised set of guiding principles towards sustainability - even the London Olympics adopted it into their sustainability strategy.

However, One Planet Living does not set out a route to achieve its objectives. So colleagues of mine have worked with the British government to establish guidelines for inclusive design consultation that have eventually made their way into a very progressive and new National Planning Policy Framework. The table of Māori principles has the potential to amplify and enrich that process of consultation and I believe it could form a matrix for Canterbury's public consultation processes that might lead projects towards One Planet Living objectives or something even richer: a sustainability roadmap unique to Christchurch.

I'm particularly concerned to see the following phrase in the Central Recovery Plan:
“Except in relation to urban design matters in the Core, the Christchurch City Council will continue as central Christchurch's principal planning authority..”

This suggests an over-arching hidden hand controlling design and development in the Core. So it also suggests emasculation of any local say or community involvement at a time when community consultation and empowerment in the implementation of the Plan could produce a truly rounded and properly sustainable outcome. I appreciate that the Central Recovery Plan incorporates a huge amount of existing consultation but, here in the UK, we are moving towards an inclusive design process that is not just about consultation but involves residents and key non-professional and cultural stakeholders in every step of the design process. While this is a difficult concept, true social sustainability happens through sharing.

Food gets a mention in the Central Recovery Plan, but there is little mention of how the city might accommodate food growing within its confines, or how local food networks might operate or be plugged into the city's transport strategy. In my company Hab's developments, we're focussing on fruity streets, edible hedgerows, orchard car parks and even green, food-producing perimeter fencing! Is there capacity in the Plan for this and for shared food growing in community greenhouses, polytunnels and kitchen gardens? An urban farm – or at least larger food growing areas in public parks – will be an essential part of any resilient city of the future and will help re-establish connection with place, natural resources and locally distinctive and viable food products and crops.

It's good to see the suggestion of independent energy production and I believe the Christchurch Agency for Energy has an important role to play in demonstrating how energy production could be different. However, in a sustainability plan, you'd expect to see a proposal for the way energy production plugs into the surrounding landscape and resources, be they biomass, wind, wave, solar or tidal. Energy crop production has a particularly complementary role to local and regional food production, so the Plan should address how that dynamic could be balanced.

Transport is also touched on but not ambitiously explored. There is no mention of trams and little on reducing car use. Christchurch is a flat city in which bicycle use could be revolutionary. Car clubs, car sharing, bike clubs and electric bike clubs might become the norm. The river might not simply become a bike and pedestrian route but also a busy piece of waterway infrastructure bringing food into the city and removing its waste out to the surrounding productive landscape. How much of the city centre might be pedestrianised and how much of its public realm organised as 'shared space' between all users? As an example of what can be done, the city of Freiburg in Germany has produced its own Charter for Sustainable Urbanism which sets out twelve principles for 'sustainable urbanism', drawing together ideas of diversity, tolerance, walkability, good public transport, high quality design and more.

One of the least attractive words that keeps popping up in the CRP is zoning. Clearly there needs to be organisation and clustering of activities to some degree, and the idea of the city centre is essential. However, it is possible to produce the same clustering results by organising the architecture and the public realm hierarchically, with different building heights

and massing for different areas. This, of course, results in some bleeding: residents move into buildings designed primarily for offices and vice-versa; people build houses in between the low-rise offices; artisans and shop owners live above their work-place. Of course all this is absolutely desirable - it's what makes Shoreditch in London or central Paris or the CBD of Melbourne energetic and vibrant places. It's all down to the accidental, the seeding of places with lots of mixed uses and the creation of the connective tissue of sustainability. The problem with zoning is that it so often works as a straightjacket. And it's another reason why local say and community involvement are so important.

Finally, what of other One Planet Living objectives such as zero carbon and zero waste? Could Christchurch become a zero carbon and zero waste city by 2050? Freiburg has set a target of cutting carbon dioxide emissions by 40% by 2030, and being climate neutral by 2050. Malmö (Sweden) is aiming to be powered by 100% renewable energy by the year 2030 and boast the first carbon neutral neighbourhood in Europe. BedZED (UK) is a large-scale carbon neutral or zero fossil energy development, aiming to meet all its energy demands from renewable energy generated on site. Could Christchurch become another such exemplar of 21st century sustainability? That would certainly attract the world's attention to Christchurch and turn the Central Recovery Plan into a true vision for the future.

My hope is that you, the people who live in and love Christchurch, are able to find the voice to explore and drive through the best possible ideas. And, in so doing, perhaps it'll be possible to convey to the world a story and a setting for one of the most exciting urban design projects of the 21st century.

About Kevin McCloud

Kevin McCloud is the overseas judge of Breathe, the design competition leading to the development and design of the New Urban Village.

Kevin established a sustainable housing development company called Hab (Happiness Architecture Beauty). In a partnership between Kevin McCloud's company Hab and housing group GreenSquare, called Haboakus, they developed The Triangle, a high-quality 42-home development. The Triangle offers environmentally sustainable and affordable housing and emphasises building a community, with early consultation on the development's design and shared gardens, green spaces and transport.

Kevin McCloud is best known for Channel 4's BAFTA-nominated Grand Designs and for his annual coverage of the Stirling Prize each October.

About Tāone Tupu Ora

An editor of a new book on urban design says councils and urban planners need to recognise the value of Maori knowledge in making cities sustainable.

Keriata Stewart says the Tāone Tupu Ora grew out of a discussion between Maori architect Amanda Yates and Otago University Professor Philippa Howden-Chapman, the director of the New Zealand Centre for Sustainable Cities.

It includes contributions from Maori researchers, Land Trusts, urban planners and architects.

Ms Stewart says many cited the sophisticated land use at Maungakiekie, One Tree Hill in Auckland, which was built in ways that enhanced the community, bringing together gardens, community spaces, whanau houses.

“It also concentrated on water sustainability. It was a community that needed to look after itself, and a number of our contributors look at that as a model on how we can be doing things in the present day,” she says.

Tāone Tupu Ora, meaning an urban environment where nature and culture are not separated, is the third joint publication venture between the New Zealand Centre for Sustainable Cities and publisher Steele Roberts.

Through its seven chapters by multiple contributors the book brings together themes of indigenous knowledge, Maori urban design principles, micro-urbanism, the development of Maori land, papakainga and what amounts to a forward looking map of unfolding directions for the interlacing of matauranga Maori (traditional knowledge) and urban design.

Editors Keriata Stuart and Michelle Thompson-Fawcett have put together a compelling casebook of muka, or examples, of why and how matauranga Maori can be part of better urban development and “should not be seen as theoretical, or of only academic interest”.

This resulting collection of papers and transcripts from the seminars, in addition to specially commissioned pieces, consists of two driving themes. Firstly there is a wide appeal to “rethink our expectations for a more sustainable built environment” by working with indigenous knowledge and to enable Maori to determine their own urban aspirations. Secondly the book addresses, over a range of scales, “the detail of practical application of that wisdom, using specific tasks and tools”.

This then leads on to suggestions for reclaiming and integrating Maori spatial narratives into urban environments as well as re-establishing the cultural imperative and presence of tangata whenua in our cities—expressed as keeping a Maori footprint in the city.

The full cast of contributing authors includes: Shaun Awatere, Shadrach Rolleston, Craig Pauling, Amanda Yates, Bidy Livesey, Ngarimu Blair, Wiki Walker, Morrie Love and John Gray with Charlotte Hoare.

Rod Oram opinion piece 5 August 2012

OPINION: Christchurch's plan can only fail to reach its aspirations.

There's a lot to like about the plan for rebuilding the centre of Christchurch. Plenty of spaces and civic amenities will make the city an even more pleasant place to live. Tight timeframes to deliver some of them by 2016 gives a sense of urgency and action.

Rightly, many residents are excited by the goals to make the city international, sustainable and prosperous. They're relieved the centre will soon show more signs of life. But there is a chasm between expressing those aspirations and what's needed to achieve them.

This is a conceptual failure, not a lack of detail to be filled in later.

Strategies still to come on economic regeneration and transport won't bridge the gap.

Earthquake Recovery Minister Gerry Brownlee asked the right question in the foreword to the plan: "What could a 21st century city look like if its people were given the chance to 'build again', keeping the good and improving the rest?" But the Government has given the wrong answer.

It believes rebuilding existing amenities in different places to better design amid lots of green space will do the job.

That, though, is now normal in plenty of cities around the world.

Nothing in the plan distinguishes Christchurch from the pack.

Nothing in the plan puts Christchurch at the leading edge of big shifts in the way people live, work, travel and play, or how cities are designed, built and powered.

The earthquakes have given Christchurch a unique opportunity to play such a global role. It can use it to attract the talent and investment it needs to recreate itself. But if it doesn't, Christchurch will end up as a pale imitation of another city. Hopefully this was not quite what Prime Minister John Key had in mind when he said at the plan's launch that Christchurch would be "very much like Melbourne". A mini-Melbourne attracts little attention.

A global search on Google News reveals scant interest in Christchurch.

For example, Britain's Daily Mail short story began boringly: "A convention centre, sports stadium and performing arts complex are among the landmark projects planned for a new-look Christchurch after the city was levelled by an earthquake last year." As for attracting international investors, the Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times carried no stories.

The gulf between pragmatism and ambition looms large through the plan. Here are some of the main failures on critical, inter- locking factors.

The economy: before the earthquakes, the city, particularly its centre, had lost a lot of its traditional rationale and vitality.

Building a much bigger, stronger economy will take far more investment than insurance payouts and public funds can provide.

But Christchurch will only attract such extra investment if it offers some big, bold new business opportunities.

Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, the Christchurch City Council and the Government are working on an economic recovery strategy. People familiar with the work say it will likely be an update of the 2010 strategy for the city devised by the Canterbury Development Corporation, a city council agency.

But that strategy was doing little for the old city, because it was taking an incremental approach to growing existing sectors. Even enhanced, it would fail to give the new city new economic life.

If, though, Christchurch was determined to be a world-leading centre for urban design, development and operations, it could attract talent and money from the likes of IBM and Cisco.

Both IT multinationals are building big strategic businesses around systems to run cities of the future.

Similarly, the city could attract scientists and investment if it set out to create a world-leading nutrigenomics institute in the dairy sector. This would help push our existing farming and medical skills into very sophisticated, very high- value foods and pharmaceuticals.

But instead, the city centre plan focuses on five areas of economic activity, which, in order, are: retail, the convention centre and precincts for health, justice and emergency services, and innovation. The last should be first, because only it can stimulate new businesses. But it has no timeframe. The work on it is being led by the Business, Innovation and Employment Ministry, which itself is in the midst of a massive reconfiguration.

Those sectors have limited growth potential. In fact, the plan envisages retail space shrinking to between 50,000 square metres and 60,000sqm in the core of the city from 75,000sqm pre-earthquakes.

As a result, there is excess land in the centre, the Government says.

To solve the problem, it will constrain the centre by creating large, open green spaces down the east and south sides of the central business district.

Coupled with height restrictions, this will push up rents well above existing, modern and attractive office accommodation in Addington and near the airport.

It may distort the market to the point the city faces Auckland rents on Christchurch incomes.

Another big weakness in the plan is housing within the four avenues defining the city centre. Currently some 7000 people live there. The plan envisages 20,000 in the future, which would help create a vibrant city. There's nothing in the plan, though, to drive that.

Overall, the plan's overarching gulf between aspiration and future reality concerns sustainability.

Lots of people in Christchurch want sustainability. But the council and the Government will do nothing to help achieve that beyond "encouraging" property developers to improve energy efficiency. Failure is certain, because existing New Zealand building codes, energy efficiency standards, designs and materials are so far behind world best practice and the Government has no intention of improving them.

If you want a glimpse of what zero-energy housing looks like, Beddington in Britain is a good example. Built more than a decade ago, it is described at wikipedia.org/wiki/BedZED.

If Christchurch recreated itself to those high, essential standards, and did so in distinctive New Zealand ways, it would attract all the international attention and investment it needs.

It would become rich and sustainable in every sense of the words - economically, socially, culturally and environmentally. It would become a global leader for the 21st century.