

# CHRISTCHURCH CITY MALL

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Originally designed to be Christchurch's premier shopping district, City Mall, comprising of Cashel Street between Oxford Terrace and High Street, and High Street between Cashel and Hereford Streets has experienced declining shopper numbers in recent years (Philip: 2007). Factors contributing to the decline include competition from existing malls, inconsistent opening hours among retailers, and perceptions of the area being unsafe. The problem of inner city decay is not unique to Christchurch; it is experienced by many cities where retail and leisure activities have relocated to suburban locations (Thomas & Bromley: 2000). In order to combat this, the city council adopted a Central City Revitalisation Strategy which included renovating City Mall. Stage 2 was affirmed and adopted in September 2006.

In the Long Term Council Community Plan 2006-16 the Christchurch City Council allocated \$10.5 million to the upgrade of City Mall. The original plan proposed by the council was developed by Auckland urban design consultants Isthmus Group after consultation with local retailers and interest groups, including representatives from schools in the area (Research First: 2006).

The plan involved removing the Stewart Fountain from the corner of High and Hereford Streets, and the grassed amphitheatre known as 'Hack Circle' from the corner of Cashel and High Streets. Seated areas were proposed along the edges of the streets, lighting was to be

improved, and traffic was to be reintroduced to the area by constructing a slow road through High Street and a 2 way movement corridor along Cashel Street West. (Figure 1) Designers for Isthmus Group recommended the reintroduction of traffic to the mall because they thought the pedestrian-only nature had contributed to its decline, and that, at 520 metres, City Mall was too long to be a successful pedestrian mall. Local business owners supported reopening the roads to traffic because it had the potential to increase the visibility of stores in the mall. After consultation revealed the public were opposed to reintroducing traffic to the mall, the proposal was altered to include a service lane only.



Figure 1: The overall plan for the City Mall upgrade  
 Reproduced courtesy of Christchurch City Council and the Isthmus Group Ltd

Once the final mall design was approved, the council required resource consents to be granted for some parts of the project that did not comply with the City Plan. The proposed 4.8m wide Cashel St service lane required consent as the Plan requires roadways to be at least 7.5m wide. Consent was granted for the road to be formed as the traffic engineers considered any adverse effects from the roads width to be negligible.

Alterations to the Stewart Fountain site also required resource consent, as the site is listed as a Group 3 heritage item in the City Plan. The City Plan states that alteration of a Group 3 heritage place shall be a discretionary activity, with council's discretion limited to the heritage values of the site. The fountain itself was not protected as a heritage item, and had in fact been removed before consent was granted. The heritage protection relates to the High Street Triangles, which mark High Street's original design cutting diagonally across the grid pattern of the central city's streets. The resource consent was granted, with the Heritage Planner noting that no consideration had been given to the original design form of the area, but as this form had not been present for many years the new proposal would not affect the heritage

values of the area. A condition of the resource consent was that interpretation panels be developed and placed close to the protected area. These panels are now in place in Stewart Plaza.

A third resource consent was sought for proposed seating areas along the pedestrian mall, and the installation of new 8.7m high lighting poles. The pedestrian mall is zoned a special purpose pedestrian precincts zone under the City Plan, and rules for this area state that any building within this zone must not exceed an area of 5m<sup>2</sup>, or be more than 3m high. Resource consent was granted as any adverse effects related only to the visual amenity of the area, and were deemed to be insignificant as the design of the seating and light poles was compatible with the appearance of Cashel Mall and they would not obstruct pedestrians' sight lines. While the council, local business owners, residents and members of the public seemed to agree that City Mall was in need of an upgrade in order to function successfully, public consultation revealed widespread disagreement about what should be done to improve the area (Research First: 2006).

The plan was released for public consultation in September 2006. Members

of the public had strong views about many aspects of the new Mall design, particularly the reintroduction of traffic to the mall, and the removal of the Stewart Fountain.

The public were strongly opposed to the reintroduction of traffic to the mall. Those who made submissions stated that cars would detract from the amenity of the area, making it noisier, smellier and unsafe for pedestrians (Research First: 2006).

The proposal was altered to keep Cashel and High Streets as pedestrian malls, and the council decided to construct service lanes only, which allow emergency and service vehicles to access the mall while restricting other traffic (Gamble: 2006).

The Stewart Fountain, named after Sir Robertson Stewart who donated \$200,000 towards its development, was situated at the intersection of Colombo and Hereford Streets, and contained tiles decorated by school children. The council proposed to remove the fountain because problems with its pumps and jets meant that it did not function well, and its location and design resulted in rubbish being blown into the fountain. However, unlike the reintroduction of traffic to the mall where there was a clear majority opposed, public opinion was divided on whether the fountain should be removed, with 41% of respondents supporting the removal, and 36% opposing it. Many of those opposed to the removal of the fountain were teenagers and school children who used the fountain as a meeting place. People who had designed the decorative tiles as children also expressed disappointment at its removal.

The council proceeded with plans to remove the fountain and, when the final mall design was approved by council in December 2007, the fountain was demolished. The decision was unpopular with some members of the public, and the consultation process was criticised. The council's response to those who expressed disappointment at the outcomes was that those involved in the consultation process represented only a small part of the city's population and the council also have to act on behalf of the 'silent majority' who have not chosen to participate, but who are still affected by the decision making process (Gamble: 2007).

The City Mall upgrade has highlighted the issues faced by planners and decision makers when undertaking public consultation. 'The public' are not a homogenous group, and consultation may make decision making more difficult if participants have conflicting opinions. The removal of the Stewart Fountain was a contentious issue in the mall upgrade, and although there was support for its removal, some of those who opposed the demolition felt that their opinions had not been considered by the council when the decision was made to remove it. (Ross: 2007).

Submissions made to council during the consultation process also revealed that many people felt that their ideas would not be considered and that the council would go ahead with the proposal with or without public support (Research First: 2006). Outcomes such as this, that leave some participants feeling as though their input has not been taken into consideration, may have negative implications for public participation in decision making. If people think their views will be ignored, they may not see any point in having a say and being part of the planning process in future.

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