

Christchurch – 2025

Rob Greenaway*

The 2025 biannual International Symposium on the Rebuilding of Canterbury was drawing to a close. Keynote speaker, Ernie Bedford, the local private developer behind the successful Turners and Growers Centre, was offering his perspective on the past 20 years of post-quake growth in Christchurch and the region.

Bedford had presented various papers at the conference, and his latest on the long-term benefits of converting unstable residential land in the suburbs to public open space, had summed up the gains that could be made from what were controversial decisions immediately following the 2011 quake. The Council had decided to negotiate with insurance companies to buy destroyed homes, avoiding the need for owners to rebuild where they no longer wished to live, and massively expensive remedial land works. The new areas of parkland and pathways were acclaimed for enabling the high-quality low-rise apartments scattered throughout the suburbs. The earthquake had put many people off home ownership, and under-insurance forced others to accept an alternative lifestyle. Bedford's personal wealth was founded on some wise, but possibly risky investments made at the time.

The audience was in a jovial mood, having just returned from a field trip to Canterbury University, always a highlight of the Symposium. The University's International Centre for Earthquake Recovery and Construction had timed the engineering students' design tests to coincide. The structural integrity competition was won by three Korean students whose four-storey model building had, as planned, withstood the equivalent

of a 7.3 earthquake with the students standing on it, but had collapsed with a shake of 7.8. The objective had been to have it crumple at 7.7.

Bedford called the gathering to attention, starting with a review of Lyttelton. Bedford had grown up there and still missed the Timeball Station, although the earthquake memorial on the site was a stunning piece of work. Older residents had taken time to adjust to the new Lyttelton, but it was the show-case for the region. In 2012 it was decided to rebuild the port town quickly as a model for Christchurch, and particularly for the CBD, which had languished while the City argued over its future. Promises of substantial national funding had not materialised and time was wasted in expectation and dispute.

In Lyttelton, the opportunity to encourage private owners to design and build within a set of themes was tested, and new rules in the City Plan were put through their paces. It was not easy, but there was no arguing that the town had led the resurgence in regional tourism. Guests at boutique hotels enjoyed the market atmosphere of the town centre, and the very quirky and unique local architecture. No one was comparing it to a mini-Melbourne or a tiny Nice, it was Lyttelton, and well-known internationally. The redeveloped Harbour Lights building centred the village and led the design theme, giving the main street a Bohemian air, perhaps something dreamt of by a child of Hundertwasser and Colin McCahon. Real estate agents joked that the only way to move into the town was to inherit a house.

Bedford turned the audience's attention to the city centre. This had been a challenge, but it was now the most modern CBD in New Zealand. Energy-efficient architecture was agreed as an early requisite for reconstruction, as well as – naturally – high construction standards for earthquake and fire risk. That part had been easy.

Design was another game altogether. The City Plan allowed the opportunity for several monstrosities to be built in the first few years as businesses struggled urgently to get back to work. These were the largely despised, 'warehouses without tutus'.

Over a five-year period, the CBD got back to work. Five precincts were carved out of the rubble and a consortium of private and public landholders was convened for each. Building codes and the hastily-revised City Plan defined the core principles of energy efficiency, construction standards, a pedestrian, cycle and parking framework, and 'future proofing' (although everyone agreed that they didn't know what this meant). Otherwise, each consortium was left to get on with it, with the oversight of a rather dictatorial steering group ensuring that network infrastructure functioned.

The word of the decade was 'charrette', and a successful local cafe bore the name. On its walls were framed sketches from the early brainstorming sessions (charrettes) of the nation's leading architects, engineers and planners. Some designs were plainly mad, but had led to the creation of a city centre which took visitors and residents on a voyage of discovery. It was also a pleasure to work again in a central-city office. Professional businesses and their staff had shifted to Rolleston and Rangiora, and as far as Ashburton and Timaru, to keep functioning. It had taken years for the drift to reverse, although Addington was still in hot competition. Property owners had taken risks in

redeveloping in the CBD, and, for some, the gamble paid off.

Not everyone liked every precinct, but each had a charm suited to particular people, which was the intent. Students clearly owned the lower High Street precinct, and it was thriving. Suits had moved into the precinct around the Square. Viewing the Cathedral was still an emotional experience for many, even though you couldn't tell that only a few years ago it was still missing the final stonework on the spire.

Each consortium had identified a local design theme, had shared engineering and architectural input, saving landowners and the City millions of dollars in planning and design costs. Only one precinct had failed. A consortium was unable to reach agreement and there was an unwillingness to invest in an area which lacked a clear future. It still featured many of the popular inner-city pocket-parks where buildings had not yet been replaced.

Bedford's presentation concluded with a varied response. United Council staff had mixed feelings. The developer's drive and connections with several politicians had over-ridden some good long-term planning, and the merger of the Canterbury Councils in 2015 had created a short-term power vacuum which Ernie and his ilk had taken advantage of. Those from the private sector had seen opportunities come and go, some had won, some had lost.

Delegates handed in their conference ID badges and wandered slowly in small groups from the Conference Centre to enjoy the sunshine in Victoria Square. Locals were picking up their bikes and cycling home, a few keen to avoid Bedford, several shaking his hand enthusiastically. A tui was feeding on a flax bush by the Avon River. It must have flown from the predator-proof wildlife sanctuary on the Port Hills. Bedford's Real Estate had a stall set up nearby. Ernie always got a couple of new buyers after each conference.

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