



## Quake city and the beauty of lost and rebuilt things

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### 1. OUR FAULT

L'Aquila, Italy, 2010, the ground shakes. Kathmandu, Nepal, 2015. A magnitude 7.9; the ground shakes again. Christchurch, 2011, another major earthquake for the South Island of New Zealand. The natural calamities are unpredictable, while predictable are the actions of men; some of them, at least. The earthquake in L'Aquila, given its magnitude, should not have had such catastrophic effects. The documentary "Our fault", by Giuseppe Caporale and Walter Nanni, explains such deficiencies in engineering well and the incredible political choices that have led to this human and natural disaster. The responsibilities of manufacturers and politicians are now obvious.

Although buildings in Christchurch are primarily single storey, due to natural causes the damage was considerable, but at least without much human fault. And that makes a big difference. Our choices of quality control for building materials or compliance with engineering standards make a difference. The construction companies in New Zealand do not manipulate prices in order to win government tenders because they are not characterised by corruption. The competition between businesses is genuine, albeit in the post-earthquake environment where it has grown exponentially due to the significant increase in the number of construction companies.

In "the land of the long white cloud", the art of living assumes a different meaning to the typical Italian way. The art of the Kiwi way is to adapt; to live together rather than living in conflict, to dominate, to destroy others in order to grab and achieve something, losing inevitably something precious, such as, in the case of earthquakes, human lives. So fatally similar in natural disasters, yet so different in recovery and rebuilding, New Zealand can be a model for Italian thinking.

### 2. FROM FILM TO REALITY DOCUMENTARY

Telling the story of an earthquake through celluloid and images is relatively simple because the emotions of those who lived through the earthquake are too difficult to fathom. Recently, the film "San Andreas", a name taken from the San Andreas Fault in California, reminded the citizens of Christchurch of what they experienced a few years ago. Although this is a Hollywood special effects movie like scores of such films made every year in this genre, it is nevertheless based on reality: it depicts earthquakes that are shaking the earth in modern times and the fear that results from this. It is based on the idea of the "Big One", the alleged earthquake of epic proportions which would completely split the San Andreas Fault, causing the separation of California from the American continent.

Here in Christchurch, the real changes caused by the earthquakes have been documented, depicting not only destruction, but also the rebuilding of this city. Take for example the website "Rebuild Christchurch": viewed more than 350,000 times per month, with 24 amazing interactive 360-degree aerial shots, it shows significant changes that have occurred in the city in four years. Most of the damaged buildings have been demolished and weeds have emerged from soil that was once underneath them. The city emerges from its post-earthquake rubble, not only in the city centre, but also in the Residential Red Zone, in the port of Lyttelton and in the spectacular mountains surrounding the city. There is also a permanent show in the RE:START mall, a symbolic name for the Quake City shopping centre, where the City Council has organized a photo exhibition of the earthquakes, the impacts they have had on the people who experienced them, and of the reconstruction of the city. Inside the show it is possible to see shattered pieces of the canopy from the Christchurch Cathedral; a tribute to volunteer groups including the Student Volunteer

Army; and an impromptu collection of photos shot in the days following the aftershocks.

### **3. BLANK CANVAS**

The “blank canvas” that is now the city of Christchurch - one of the cities with the highest quality of life before the earthquake - is a symbol that represents it well. Observing the blanks in the city, as well as the numerous cranes working continuously, gives an idea of what was before and what will be after; what has been lost and what will be rebuilt. The beauty of what has been lost, however, is still present in the yards, in the murals, and in the abandoned and gradually rebuilding spaces. We move cautiously, watching and hoping that the identity of the city will not be washed away, the new cathedral, perhaps made of glass and steel, could withstand the force of nature.

The earthquakes appear to have had a greater effect on older generations, due to their childhood places being ruined and their memories shattered. Young people have found the unexpected courage brought about by new opportunities; the challenge, learning to recognise possibilities for growth and fun. While for some there is still an endless wait for insurance claims or grants to fix buildings in accordance with new building standards, looking at the pictures in the RE:START mall exhibition and active proposals signed by citizens on how they could manage the changes in the city serves to show the positive side of change. In fact, the citizens know that they are the intangible social capital that the city desperately needs.

Being in the midst of reconstruction requires active participation, and for the citizens it means to take part in the management of the commons, or common goods. For example, blank spaces reused by the community, or a public wood oven for sharing the cooking, or rebuilding and reopening a damaged theatre. The purpose is to recreate those spaces that result in social interactions, and made available by the City Council to help the city to be resilient and react quickly to events.

There is a strange beauty in this city. You can feel in the air the strength it takes to rebuild something that you know is not completely lost, but still has to struggle to rebuild; the story of a “Quake City” and its inhabitants.