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# PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

## Inner City East – One Christchurch community’s story

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### Abstract

The process of recovery for communities adversely affected by natural disaster is often conceived as a steady journey back to what was. Experience in Christchurch following the 2010/2011 sequence of disastrous earthquakes tells us that recovery is actually very complex and will, in large part, depend upon the strengths of the community before the disaster. This article is the story so far, of one inner city community, how it responded to the disaster and how it is participating in its own recovery.

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### Introduction

Our experience confirms what the theory and literature tells us. In times of disaster we need, more than ever, to come together as family, as friends, neighbours and communities. We need to support each other, to help each other make sense of what has happened and figure out what to do next; we need to share resources and just be together.

During and after the Christchurch earthquakes<sup>1</sup> neighbourhoods and communities came together in extraordinary but also quite predictable and natural ways, especially in the emergency period. In many communities this energy has continued as we face the long process of getting to a ‘new normal’.

Typically disasters are conceptualised as a process from ordinary life to emergency when disaster strikes and normal social and economic activities cease and change; then follows a restoration period when patching up occurs and some activities resume. The next period is one of replacement and reconstruction followed by a period noted as the commemorative, betterment and development reconstruction period (Kates & Pijawaka, 1977). This will seem familiar to readers in Christchurch, not only because they are travelling the journey but also because official activity is pretty much based on this linear process. While it is helpful to understand a process, what we all know is that such process is never linear or simple. The

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<sup>1</sup> On September 4th 2010 Christchurch was rocked by an earthquake measuring 7.1 and entered a period of seismic activity. Thousands of aftershocks hit the city and region, the largest and most destructive of which was on February 22nd 2011, when the city was brought to a standstill, 181 people died and many more were injured.

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experience on the ground is much more complex and it is here on the ground in geographic communities that recovery needs to happen. In Christchurch we are coming to know this as we live through it. This article looks at the process toward recovery in the Inner City East of Christchurch and attempts to critically examine how well we are doing as a community. More importantly it tells the human story of a special group of people who live in this neighbourhood and how their lives have been changed.

## **The Inner City East**

The Inner City East is the area of central Christchurch bordered by Latimer Square and Fitzgerald Avenue to the west and east, Hereford to Kilmore Streets to the north and south. This is an old and diverse community with a number of unique features. In the early days of European settlement some richer families – merchants, industrialists and farmers who could afford a town house – built mansions in this part of town. Perhaps they knew a thing or two about solid ground and not being too close to the river. The fashionable area to live soon moved west, however, leaving many of these larger houses to be converted to boarding houses and small flats that, over the decades, housed low-income workers, beneficiaries and, until the university also went west, university students. Deinstitutionalisation and community care boosted the need for low-cost, single-person accommodation, provided largely by the private sector. Landowners are often second or third generation family owners but some landowners in recent years have been ‘land banking’ and not investing any more than necessary into the buildings or tenants.

The many non-familial households created their own unique community over the decades that is complex, supportive in its own way and around which social services with a focus on vulnerable adults have gathered (the City Mission, Te Whare Roimata, and the Hereford Centre in particular). The majority of other households in the area are moderate-cost rental flats and houses occupied by the young workers and small families who serve the city. Only 30% are owner residents. We estimate (pre-earthquake) that some 600 people lived alone in low-cost (\$120-140 per week) bedsits and small flats. This was a reduction from ten years earlier when the availability of both affordable and low-cost housing in the area was seriously diminished in a Council move to open the area to intensive building. This policy pushed up the land value and saw the demolition of many multi-roomed older houses and the proliferation of large sterile blocks of apartments that the displaced residents could no longer afford. Supported by the community, Te Whare Roimata took the Council to court to force them to consider the social implications of the City Plans for the inner city areas. The fate of low-cost housing and those who live this lifestyle have long been a concern for the community.

## **Te Whare Roimata**

Jenny has worked in this community for over 20 years, since she was appointed as a community worker at the City Mission and given a grocery voucher book to manage. She knew on her first day this was not the kind of community work she wanted to do. Jenny describes herself as working from the feminist-Marxist perspective that was introduced to her in her early social work education on the Otago Polytechnic certificate course in Invercargill and developed more strongly in her later studies at the University of Canterbury. Jim Ife’s (1995) integrated model and the Marxist approaches of the 1970s<sup>2</sup> fitted well for her as a practitioner and latterly she has embraced other newer development models and ideas such

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as those of Susan Kenny (2011). For her the process is simple: raise awareness – organise - empower - act - change. Needs assessment and community profiles developed for the Inner City community gave Jenny a starting point (Smith, 1987). At the heart of Jenny’s approach are the Treaty of Waitangi and a commitment to bicultural practice.

Te Whare Roimata was established as a grassroots community development organisation. Services and programmes reflected the high number of Maori in a community of marginalised people about whom no-one else was really concerned. The streams of service, cultural, support and outreach, political action, art development, income-generating opportunities and neighbourhood-based pre-employment work groups all work to a bicultural kaupapa and involve full resource sharing, self sufficiency and self reliance. Te Whare Roimata’s projects, the Linwood Community Arts Centre, Support and Outreach, Maori Community Work and the Labour Group all played key roles in responding to the earthquakes<sup>3</sup>.

### **And then the walls came tumbling down...**

It was the February 2011 earthquake that shook us the most. Many of the older residences were built in the early 1900s, when regulations allowed semi-detached housing, as long as there was a firewall of double brick. But these deceptively solid walls were the first to fall; the wooden houses that clung to them rattled and cracked. People ran into the streets, clung to each other, frightened, in panic about family friends and neighbours. The ground shuddered and shook every few minutes it seemed; the street was the safest place. Some rescued a chair but many just sat in the gutter confused and shocked. The neighbourhood was devastated but soon people became aware that the disaster was huge, the whole city had fallen. Dazed city workers and shoppers started staggering along the streets, a river of shocked people leaving the city on foot, the only reliable form of transport. We all have our own earthquake story of things that flew around us and walls that failed to stand, fissures and holes that opened in the earth and the uncontrollable liquefaction that gushed out, destabilising everything. This story is about the Inner City East, however, and a particular group of city dwellers whose little rooms and flats were located in the quirky (some would say slummy) houses whose firewalls had made them look solid and secure. As the afternoon ticked on and the magnitude of the disaster started to become clearer, Jenny and Bob from Te Whare Roimata walked around the streets seeking out the vulnerable and directing them to shelters. Many shattered houses were dangerous and could not be entered but somehow people managed to drag a few belongings out on the pavement as they huddled together wondering what to do. Everyone shared whatever information they had, whatever resources they could retrieve, a drink, a functioning telephone, a transistor radio. People continued to stream past on their marathon foot journeys home from the city. Latimer Square became

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<sup>2</sup> Community development approaches are discussed in: Chile, Love M. (2006). The historical context of community development in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Community Development Journal* 41(4), 400-406, Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> The Arts Centre offers lower-income people opportunities in the arts, such as inexpensive arts classes, arts information and multicultural events. The Support and Outreach project provides neighbourhood support, referral to appropriate agencies, and outreach in the local community. The Labour Group is a group of volunteers who provide physical labour assistance in the community, such as furniture removal, house-shifting, gardening, or lawn-mowing.

Te Whare Roimata’s main funders are: Partnership Health, Christchurch City Council, Christchurch City Mission, Ministry of Social Development, New Zealand Lottery Grants Board and the Canterbury Community Trust.

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a gathering and triage centre and witness to the tragedy unfolding at the CTV building. The emergency period is documented as characterised by coping actions, normal social and economic activities cease or are drastically changed (Kates & Pijawaka, 1977). This feels descriptively light for our experience. The work of Japanese researchers with Kobe communities adds an understanding of complexity. These researchers identified and applied a different conceptual model, with three phases in victims' disaster response behaviours: disorientation, development of disaster utopian society and maintenance of disaster utopian society. Then people begin to return to normalcy (Tatsuki & Hayashi, 2002). Certainly we saw and felt the disorientation and in those first days the development of very local utopian disaster societies, very well illustrated in the movie *When a City Falls* (2011). What happens beyond the early phases will, we believe, have a lot to do with how well the community functioned before the disaster, what mechanisms and leadership are there to sustain and develop community effort.

In the emergency period the Inner City East was enclosed behind an army and police-guarded cordon; no power, no water and very few people. Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) and building inspection teams worked their way around and those of us able to stay here or at least able to come to secure our houses wished their efforts (welcome as they were) could be directed into the critically damaged areas further to the East. The focus was safety not welfare.

How long this period lasts is documented in the disaster literature as relating to the capacity of the society concerned to cope with disaster, both local and official (Kates & Pijawaka, 1977). Christchurch and New Zealand will be assessed and judged on its response in February 2011 as evaluative studies and research emerge over the next few years. From our point of view the responses both locally and officially were overall pretty good. In the inner city area, for two weeks it was not possible to reach beyond the cordon and check on the welfare of known vulnerable people, many of whom were not connected to family or the health and welfare services that in a patchy fashion were trying to reach out. While this caused some frustration, several community members who had residential access to the closed area biked around and gave out information on where help was available.

The emergency period is followed by a period of restoration and patching up – utilities and housing, social and economic activities (Kates & Pijawaka, 1977). For this community, maintenance of the disaster utopian society where the community builds resources to care for itself feels like a more fitting description (Tatsuki et al, 2007).

When the cordon was shifted further towards the central business district, it became clear that the big issue for this area was, as we suspected, the loss of the older boarding and bedsit houses. It was still summer and some displaced residents were still here, sleeping outdoors in the parks or the cemetery. Some had crept back into red-stickered houses, from which they would soon be ejected. Vulnerable people sustained by neighbours in the emergency period needed individual help now. Fortunately there was Te Whare Roimata. Despite losing its own house, Te Whare Roimata was able to set up services from a temporary shop, a former restaurant with a functioning kitchen, space to gather and a tiny office from which to run the services. The physical community expanded rather than contracted, and moved eastward as people from a wider catchment sought support. The historic Linwood Library, for many years the Linwood Community Arts Centre, was red-stickered and fenced off, and following the September 2010 quake had sustained more damage. Indeed much of the

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Linwood Village was destroyed, and two people well known in the community lost their lives. The community was hurting. The team at Te Whare Roimata sought out the people they knew would need support, but also turned to the community to see what other services needed to be developed. The work team headed out to help people in damaged unsafe houses with temporary repairs; they dug toilets, fetched water and helped people move out. The immediate focus was on essential needs for shelter, food and support. The well-established community newsletter, *News on ICE*, produced in partnership with the Inner City East Neighbourhood Group was fortunately able to be produced and used as an essential vehicle for communication with 3,000 households. While public information disseminated through *The Press* and radio was very good, it never reaches everyone and local responses to local problems proved essential. There were no buses, and no local supermarkets or service centres so a shopping bus was set up to take people without transport to essential services. Volunteer drivers were recruited to ferry people around medical centres, banks and pharmacies. This was essential in an area with higher than average numbers of disabled residents. The Te Whare Roimata team visited people, arranged a family fun day, set up weekly lunches, daily information and advice services and held a self-care day for women.

### **From restoration to replacement and reconstruction**

The many people who called into the temporary hub not only sought personal support and help, but also talked of their concerns for the city and the neighbourhood. The central city was the neighbourhood for many of us, but army tanks and wire fences locked most of our neighbourhood away from us and, while we all knew why, it was hard to find any rhythm or life in the streets. As the barriers shifted and this 'red zone' reduced, the emptiness echoed with the wind and the weeds and dust. A sequence of community meetings identified a huge range of concerns at personal, community and city levels. The task was overwhelming, but it was clear to many of us that it was here on our own doorstep that our efforts needed to focus first. An informal response group (ICE Earthquake Issue Group) joined in with the established service teams and Inner City East Neighbourhood Group. It was not the moment to worry about who belonged to what. The damage at the Linwood Village or Stanmore Road shops was concerning people and provided an early focus. The much loved little Library building was hanging by a thread and further collapsed under a dumping of snow when winter hit. This energised many in the community and so the issues group set about lobbying the Council through the Community Board to take some action on the historic building. A special meeting with the esteemed architect Peter Bevan (now deceased) was organised. He cycled over the rough streets to present to us a beautiful drawing of a possible rebuild design for the Centre and the shops. It gave such hope and the Council planners, to their credit, picked up the challenge. They held meetings with the community, building owners and former tenants of the shops and businesses. Summaries of each meeting were pulled together onto a chart and it amazed us all that the expressed needs and desires of all groups were very close. Over the next months a draft master plan was produced and accepted, and more consultations held. Nothing could happen quickly but participating in the exercise brought people out and became an avenue to express concerns and anxieties as well as offer ideas and hopes. The broken shops were demolished by spring and wild flowers bloomed thanks to the Ashburton Garden Club who threw seeds over the bare ground. We all enjoyed a colourful garden in the following summer months and found exactly the right place to hold our community memorial service on the first anniversary of the February earthquake.

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At the same time reaching people in need and assessing the changes in the community was the daily focus for community workers and volunteers, who set about making a preliminary assessment. First of all we walked the area to make a rough count of the housing loss and to try to find lost people. This was hard and it was clear we needed more detailed data. A citywide door knock organised by Civil Defence had of course included this area, and all welfare needs identified in that process were referred onto the Salvation Army Social Services. The Red Cross had subsequently also door knocked the area. Not wishing to overdo it (an issue for some inner-city residents subjected, they felt unnecessarily, to the rigors of USAR teams) we tried through several avenues to get this information so we could reach out to the vulnerable in our community. Unfortunately, despite an advertised process of working with communities the information simply was not shared. Not a problem if the people were being assisted, but we knew they were not and so we undertook our own multi-pronged needs assessment effort. Every week on Tuesday two people sat at a little table on the street beside the remains of the shopping corner. They just talked with people, asked how they were, offered whatever advice was appropriate and engaged those who needed further help. We also designed a short, focused questionnaire to assess people's wellbeing, identify and respond to immediate need and get a snapshot of the community. A band of volunteers were given some basic training and set out in pairs backed up by Jenny and Raylee. By this time it was winter and really cold, some days even snowing. Houses were being pulled down, the area was bleak and still empty, indeed at that time our snapshot showed us that in the Inner City East area 50% of the houses were empty, red stickered, falling down or deserted because the tenants had left. We found men living rough in decrepit, unsafe houses near to the City Mission where food and support were available. It was clear that many of these men and those we could not find but knew about, had lost their bed-sit homes. It was also clear that this area was their home and many wanted to stay. We knew that any effort to restore this particular community would be complex, multi-layered and long term.

The replacement reconstruction period sees the community looking toward the future, toward returning to pre-disaster levels of activity, to populations returning, to new ideas and activities (Kate & Pijawaka, 1977).

## **Participating in the plan**

When the Council held its citywide Share an Idea weekend, we went along as a community group and posted our hopeful notes: 'replacement of affordable housing', 'repair and replacement of social housing', 'preservation of the character of the Inner City East', 'Ensure the Inner City East remains a residential area', 'Community participation in all planning', 'Sustainability', 'Green spaces', 'Cycleways', 'Fairy lights in the trees', etc.

In August 2011 the City Council put out its gorgeous draft plan for inside the four avenues<sup>4</sup>. Included in the plan, if very lightly, were some prospects for affordable and social housing. The next stage for us was to present written submissions; of course the Council would be interested in this unique part of the four avenues and we wanted to assist in a vision for affordable housing. It was rather late in the week when we got to present and no

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<sup>4</sup> The central city of Christchurch, since it was originally planned, has been within four mile-long avenues. This area is under the restoration control of the Christchurch City Council; the wider city and region is the responsibility of the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, a Government department.

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doubt the listeners were tired, but they were animated enough when the presenter before us outlined his scheme for a stadium slap in the middle of our neighbourhood. We sat in the back sniggering at the prospect of watching sport from a nearby balcony but feeling some disquiet at the interest this idea stirred and the underpinning discourse that capital generation and betterment were the keys to restoration. Our turn. The Mayor engaged with us for fully 10 seconds before he dropped his eyes to his cell phone to read his texts and within a minute he and his neighbour were giggling about a shared text or photo. Other councillors were similarly distracted. It was very clear that against the discourse of capital generation the plight of the marginal has little political pull. Only one councillor was courteous enough to thank us and ask a question. We went for dinner at the pub and had a laugh at the experience. We realised we needed a range of tactics and figuring out how to work with the Council was just one. We needed to get a lot more political and lot more local.

## **From restoration to betterment**

Many communities in the wider Christchurch area complain (with feeling and justification) that they are forgotten and neglected in these restoration and replacement phases. The Inner City East might complain that too much interest is taken in our area; planners, developers and various encroachers mostly seem to look at the area as a blank canvas, lots of good land and spare houses. Betterment rather than restoration. There is an underlying disinterest and lack of responsibility for a forgotten, powerless population who have lost their homes and way of life. The suspension of 'regulation' has enabled mixed use of residential houses and previously very good housing stock is now temporarily housing citywide social services. Of course they need to operate and these houses were empty, as the population of overseas students and city workers have left and will probably not return. Businesses of whatever type, however, do not enliven a community, especially businesses that do not service the population of that community. How to conceptualise the issue is a moral dilemma for well-meaning people, but the concern is that this is an encroachment into a residential zone that further undermines any effort to maintain the residential character of the community and meet the needs of its own population. We all meet together and try to be congenial but our long-term interests are not compatible. It is beginning to feel like the thin end of a wedge. The chances of the 300 displaced single people returning to the area they have called home for years are sadly diminishing. Disasters frequently result in a downward mobility of the population; we see this happening across the eastern city and suburbs and we see our single bedsit dwellers falling out the bottom.

The fourth phase of the model is Commemorative, betterment and developmental reconstruction; in this phase, the top-down nature of policy is unambiguous. The Blue Print for the Central Business District (CERA, August 2012) plans a huge rugby stadium in our neighbourhood (there is a surprise) and the loss of local loved amenities to a green strip. There is no consultation. The cost of good land rises rapidly, as it is now ideally situated for hotels and motels to feed the stadium and other 'key facilities'. The wedge widens. We will go on fighting this as hard as we can with our strong community behind us. It is not all we are doing. The services from Te Whare Roimata and LCAC are stronger and busier than ever before, embracing the earthquake-widened community. The Latimer Community Housing Trust, which grew out of concern at Te Whare Roimata about the earlier loss of bedsit accommodation, has been passively waiting for years and is now actively pursuing some very positive options and partnerships to buy and build suitable low-cost accommodation. Of

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course that will not be enough so we are also working collaboratively to develop mechanisms to assist underinsured landowners rebuild their low-cost rental accommodation rather than sell their land to developers. An energetic citywide group is developing a housing plan, an exercise triggered by the neglect (so far) of housing in restoration and betterment planning by CERA, despite it being in their brief. Tatsuki et al (2007) identify this stage as a return to normalcy and, while this fits for this community, it is, as Christchurch people are heard to say, a new normal. For the Inner City East a central aspect of the new normal is the more energised and active community.

## Conclusion

This story of the Inner City East of Christchurch is really a chapter in a narrative that started many years earlier and that will continue for many years to come. The back-story of Te Whare Roimata is a book in its own right, about an understated but large and dynamic community organisation. The capacity of this community to respond in the time of disaster absolutely reflects the strength of the networks and collaborations that have been built up over many years and many issues. The personal service response and the political activism are testament to very effective community leadership based on in-depth understanding of community development at its best<sup>5</sup>.

Reflecting on our experience so far and studying the literature on disasters and recovery, especially the Japanese research but also other case studies (e.g. following Hurricane Katrina 2005) it is becoming clear that relying on market forces and the top-down models floating above us will not work for recovery if the communities affected do not participate. The Inner City East will fight to stay involved and participate in its own future, especially in preserving affordable housing. We are working collaboratively with other inner city neighbourhood groups, we are staying active in the development of housing research and planning, we are developing alternatives through a housing trust while we continue through Te Whare Roimata, to mind the vulnerable people and work to develop the community.

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<sup>5</sup> An excellent analysis of this is contained in the recently released research report: Thornley, L., Ball, J., Signal, L., Lawson- Te Aho, K., & Rawson, E. (2013). *Building community resilience: Learning from the Canterbury earthquakes*. Health Research Council and Canterbury Medical Research Foundation.