

# How green is the Garden City?

The Christchurch rebuild was promoted as a chance to reshape the Garden City into a vibrant green-tinged utopia. Three years on, does the reality live up to the ambition?

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**NOT LONG AFTER** the earthquakes, the people of Christchurch recognised the rebuild as an opportunity to do things better. To create more sustainable buildings that are more energy efficient, create less waste, have a smaller environmental footprint and are more pleasant places to live and work.

The philosophy of building a greener city is so important to the people of Christchurch that it became a core theme of the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan.

From its inception, the plan was designed to develop a greener, more accessible city with a compact inner-city core and a stronger built identity. This encompasses more integrated green spaces, more sustainable building and urban design and a city better prepared for the effects of social, economic and environmental change.

## **Plan for the inner city**

This objective is partly addressed by the Blueprint Plan, a spatial framework to guide the rebuild of the central city. The Blueprint

Plan reshapes the central city into a series of interlocking precincts. It defines the likely locations of critical anchor projects, bordered by what the Recovery Plans calls the Frame, a belt of green spaces that both limits and defines the new central city's core commercial areas.

New zoning provisions and a consent process that considers urban form are intended to ensure a higher quality and more sustainable type of building within the confines of the Frame.

The Recovery Plan lays out the role that greener, healthier and more resilient building approaches and technologies must play in the city's sustainable future and offers incentives to developers that choose to take up those options. However, it stops short of stipulating sustainable building practices, preferring instead to allow market forces to drive the demand for green buildings.

## **Council leading the way**

Some developers, most notably the Christchurch City Council, have openly

declared their commitment to more sustainable buildings. Wherever possible, the Council says it will design and build public facilities that are rated at least 5 Green Star by the New Zealand Green Building Council. It is a leadership stance that the council hopes will encourage other developers to follow suit.

So, is it working? Is the rebuild living up to the cleaner, greener and more sustainable vision that the Recovery Plan cemented for Christchurch almost 3 years ago?

David Hill, Director of Christchurch-based Wilson & Hill Architects and past Chair of the Canterbury Branch of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, believes it is. Mostly.

## **Vision versus economic reality**

'Many developers have become much more aware of environmental and sustainability issues than they used to be. Groups that were probably interested in green building before the earthquake now want to set an example, help realise the vision and really commit to building in a more sustainable

way. For others who know about green buildings and tools like Green Star, it still comes down to an economic decision,' he says.

They believe that, if they spend the money on a green building and get it Green Star rated, it should attract a higher rent in return. There is certainly overseas evidence to suggest that investors and tenants place greater value on green buildings, and in the hands of an experienced designer, a green building needn't cost more than a conventional project to build.

'I think a lot of developers need to gain some confidence and see other people using these buildings before they become comfortable with it. But it is certainly gaining momentum and you can go around the city now and see a number of buildings that have been built or are being built using these technologies,' he says.

### ***Encouraged but not mandatory***

He believes that more could be done to further encourage uptake of green building, but the Recovery Plan was right not to impose green buildings on Christchurch through legislation.

'I think every building should be Green Star rated, but we don't necessarily need a heavily regulated approach to achieve it.

'With the increased costs of foundations and more-resilient structures in Christchurch, it is hard enough for a private developer to build and get tenants who are willing to pay the increased rental. For them, something like compulsory Green Star is seen as just another obstacle. You then run the risk of them not developing at all or building somewhere else that isn't so difficult,' he says.

The reality is, however, that just as every building in Christchurch cannot be an architectural masterpiece, it cannot be a paragon of sustainability.

'You just have to walk around Sydney or Melbourne or any other city to see that not every building is a great building. And you can't expect it to be. ➤



The Forté Health Building by Wilson & Hill Architects is the first Green Star-rated building completed in central Christchurch during the rebuild.

PHOTOGRAPHER – STEPHEN GOODENOUGH.



The Forté Health Building has a built-in energy-optimising building management system.

PHOTOGRAPHER – STEPHEN GOODENOUGH.

‘But Christchurch is starting to get some very exciting buildings, and the mood among developers is that they want to do a good job and give something back to the city,’ says David.

**Opportunities taken and lost**

Nevertheless, an apparent standstill has dogged development in the central city. Private developments have been very slow to get under way, partly because the old CBD was in lock-down for such a long time and partly because of uncertainty surrounding some of the anchor projects in the central city. Progress has picked up speed in 2014, but it will take a while to catch up.

In the absence of inner-city alternatives, demand from tenants in temporary accommodation looking for more permanent premises has propelled development outside the Frame, and the auspices of the Recovery Plan, and areas like Victoria Street and parts of Addington have shot ahead.

Christchurch architectural graduate Clayton Prest has watched these areas develop with interest. Clayton works for Christchurch-based design firm Leadbetter Carr and is a member of Generation Zero,

a youth-led organisation that advocates for smarter transport, more liveable cities and independence from fossil fuels.

‘Victoria Street is an example where one developer didn’t want to wait to deal with the bureaucracy in the central city. He went ahead and did his own thing. For him, that has paid off, and he has at least half a dozen new buildings finished and occupied with a few more under way,’ says Clayton. ‘But in a lot of ways, those builds were just business as usual, let’s just get something up, and they may have missed a few opportunities to build more sustainably.’

While he believes the sustainability and urban design ideologies put forward by the Recovery Plan can provide a sound framework for a greener city, he says it is becoming clear that there is a lack of cohesion between the aspirations for the CBD and what’s going on in the rest of the city.

**Shared infrastructure**

‘The difficulty with the central city plan is that it’s so isolated from the greater Christchurch planning regulations,’ he says. ‘For example, there is a real disconnect between the transport infrastructure

planning and the spatial planning of the Blueprint Plan precincts.’

Road repairs have been a top priority for Christchurch City Council since the earthquakes. The general approach has been to complete as many repairs as quickly as possible, and there’s been a large amount of money invested in replacing like for like.

‘The problem is, the Blueprint Plan precincts do not follow the same transport thinking as the rest of the city. There is a huge missed opportunity to create a more shared, accessible and integrated transport network, which could have incorporated things like walkways, cycle paths and priority bus lanes. It’s one of the biggest shames of the rebuild, and I think transport is going to be one of the most prevalent issues for Christchurch in the next few years,’ he says.

‘But it is never too late. Cities are always changing, and right now, Christchurch is still virtually a blank canvas. But if we don’t do things properly, if we don’t really look to a future sustainable city, then we’re really just building for the short term, and that will come back to cost Christchurch in the end.’