TEN THOUGHTS FOR CHRISTCHURCH

In response to the earthquakes of 22 February and 13 June, Warren and Mahoney proposed 10 strategies to aid the discussion around rebuilding the city.

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With so much of the central city needing to be rebuilt, Christchurch now has the opportunity to make better connections between its buildings and the surrounding spaces. The challenge will be to marry safety, quality, vibrancy, consistency, resilience and sustainability.

Forget buildings – it’s all about the streets

The 1850 City Plan offers a useful template for reconsidering Christchurch’s relationship with its streets, squares and river. A central market square, an absence of one-way streets and strongly articulated central green spaces are stand-out features.

The best European cities show that continuous built street edges, where individual buildings are connected rather than stand-alone, contribute to the most successful urban spaces, and Paris and Florence make their rivers the focus for outlook and recreation. Traffic flows or poorly sited buildings currently prevent Christchurch’s connection to the Avon.

Cities are about people

A thriving central area where people live, play and work is the secret to a rejuvenated CBD. The new city environment should envisage 24-hour occupation, be enticing and welcome businesses, visitors and new residents. Vehicles should be encouraged in ways that privilege people and streets rather than traffic.

Back to the future

The heritage building stock, so long an attraction to Christchurch for many visitors and residents, has taken a hit. The key buildings that remain offer clues to the materials and forms that might make up the new city and future heritage. The challenge is to retain the remaining quality heritage buildings and to add new buildings of an equivalent quality.

Icons are not the answer

Although it may be tempting to see the future of Christchurch as a stage for new iconic buildings, historical precedent suggests that money is better spent on maintaining high quality and consistency across all buildings. Containment, vibrancy, intimacy and cohesion are touchstones for high-quality street edges, formed by well executed façades of well designed buildings. The rebuilding should respond to long-established values of proportion, scale and form.

Consistent density, high intensity

The adoption of lower height limits will improve Christchurch’s character and visual consistency while intensifying the life and activity of the city, as in cities like Florence and Edinburgh.

Low to mid-rise city planning also reflects current trends in office and workplace planning: larger floor plates with walk-up proximity to the street and to neighbouring floors are now preferred by tenants to small floor plates in tall towers accessed only by lifts. Christchurch can benefit from the density, intensity and walkability that a low-rise city provides.

The future is green

Christchurch has an opportunity to become a recognised centre of innovation, technical development and sustainability. To build a truly sustainable future, new buildings should anticipate and provide for...
change over their lifetimes. Where form may once have followed function, now its spaces will focus on people, have generous headroom and have multiple future uses.

Current insulation and ventilation technologies and a greater understanding of the need to conserve energy and manage water use allow us to design new buildings for better performance. Energy use over the next decades can and should be much reduced.

Infrastructure and the city

New thinking can integrate infrastructure processes into the design of the streetscape. The city can be re-envisioned as a linked network of structures, spaces and systems: water management, sustainable energy and transport. We can maximise efficiency by leveraging energy differential, water use and transport links across the city.

Safe investments

The new city must be more resilient. Safety remains paramount, but asset protection is also important. Both can be achieved through renewed research and design for safe and durable structures.

The population’s capacity to fund the new built environment needs to be better understood. Property owners must be able to build and insure their assets cost-effectively for ownership to be sustainable in the future. Low-rise buildings, potentially on amalgamated titles or undertaken via joint ownership models, may allow individual owners to more easily fund (and transact) their buildings.

Tower blocks representing multi-million dollar investments for large corporate entities may no longer be appropriate in the CBD, and exiting such large investments quickly is proving difficult. A new, more agile model for building ownership will now be of interest.

High quality, high return

A long-term view suggests that economic viability equates to a well designed, high-quality building fabric. Value needs to consider whole-of-life costs, including construction, operations, productivity and people.

Future tenants will recognise quality. The market will see poorly executed, low-cost, short-term solutions as sub-par and poor value. Such buildings will be commercial failures in the present and problems in the future.

Think local and global

Christchurch can connect to locals, visitors, investors, returning expatriates and their young families as a great host – providing a lifestyle choice in which being the best living environment for families can be a prime strategic driver for the city.

Previously, such ideas were supplementary to the wider pursuit of economic prosperity. We now understand that providing the best living environment for families can be our fundamental point of difference.

Warren and Mahoney tested the above 10 thoughts with 10 Christchurch leaders. See ‘10×10 – Ten thoughts × ten leaders’ at www.warrenandmahoney.com.