REBUILDING CHRISTCHURCH
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This winter, I traveled to Christchurch to learn from its rebuild, post 2011 earthquakes. I intended to learn how Christchurch will be remembered or forgotten in its reconstruction; how the various stakeholders are involved in the redesign, and what are the primary influences and discourses that shape reconstruction efforts. During my time in Christchurch, I met with government agencies, tribal authority, and community members to gain a multifaceted perspective on Christchurch’s recovery.

Upon arriving in the city, I found lots of flat terrain, with an expansive clear summer sky, only interrupted by cranes and a couple new hotel skyscrapers. People were few and far between. This was partly due to people being off on Christmas/Summer holiday, but also because people retreated to the suburbs where townships recovered more quickly than the core of the city. I stumbled upon many hopeful signs of life emerging from the rubble: mini-golf courses, well-tended gardens, and art installations. These projects are supported by the city council, and the website “Gapfiller” shows where to find them. Extensive interpretative displays demarcate plans for what will be rebuilt where. Shipping crates and steel bars creatively support old intact structures or walls until they can be stabilized and reintegrated into new buildings. And a bustling temporary marketplace, built of shipping containers and glass, creates a gathering place for people.

What I found most interesting were Christchurch’s community involvement and interweaving of cultures into the rebuild. Post-earthquakes, Christchurch’s city council raced in 10 months to create a master recovery plan, which included founding CERA, the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, a temporary agency that would carry out the plan. I am impressed with CERA’s commitment to rebuilding with more attention to involving all community stakeholders than meeting deadlines. For the Earthquake Memorial, which is actually an international commemoration of the 185 dead, with more foreigners killed in Christchurch than kiwis, CERA vigilantly took feedback from all stakeholders to memorialize the many lost lives in a universally sensitive way. After gathering over 300 international design submissions for the memorial, CERA reported first to the First Knowledge Group, comprised of families of the dead and survivors, and then to overseas embassies. Next CERA carried out a public exhibition with focus groups, online surveys, and audience feedback. Recording all the feedback, the project went on to various evaluation panels, comprised of designers, the city council, and the Ngai Tahu, a local Maori tribal group, to review the designs. Ultimately the Minister of Culture and Heritage will choose the design, out of the six now being considered. CERA has gone through many significant design decisions with this comprehensive, multi-faceted community process.

Christchurch has a rare opportunity to rebuild much of the city from ground up. An interesting aspect of the redesign is the unified effort to weave in Christchurch’s multicultural past and present. Christchurch wants to make its Maori and British heritage a continued part of the city life, not just in a commemorative effect, but as groundwork to support these living cultures. The Christchurch City Council, CERA, and Ngai Tahu are working together in an unprecedented effort to weave a unified multi-cultural story in the makeup of the rebuilt city. This is a welcome contrast to the tradition of one culture dominating with few retrospective callouts to an indigenous culture that has been dislocated or lost. In my interviews, I tried to better understand how we might see the interwoven cultures in the city. One way will be through the restoration projects on the Avon...
River, which runs through Christchurch and is sacred to the Maori. CERA is curating a work of public arts along the river that aim to incorporate both Maori and settler perspectives, creating a coherent story of Christchurch. The Avon is being revegetated, with a promenade built along it and extensive art projects and narrative displays to tell Christchurch’s cultural stories with a balance of perspectives.

Still, in the wider city, Ngai Tahu wishes to make Maori culture subtly but definitely present amidst all the British architecture. In speaking with a Ngai Tahu judge on the project review panel, also involved at the Christchurch Art Gallery, I learned one way that Maori culture can be visibly included and brought into the present is through the incorporation Maori architecture and landscape architecture. In the Maori view of architecture, the building personifies the ancestors, with the gable of the building as the head, the central beam as the spine, the rafters as the ribs, etc. In this way, ancestors support and shelter the living through in a structure with symbolic life. Instances of modern landscape architecture involving Maori motifs generally draw on patterns from Maori weaving and tattoo and reform them in the landscape through paving pattern, water features, and planting design.

A primary concern is that unless Maori or Maori-sensitive architects/landscape architects are hired for the projects, such Maori principles are unlikely to emerge in future Christchurch projects. This issue could have been best addressed if the incorporation of Maori culture was part of the requirements in the design brief before firms competed for the various public and commercial rebuild projects in Christchurch.

It will be a few years before Christchurch appears more built and less ground-zero, yet nearly everyone I interviewed felt overall satisfaction with CERA and City Council’s work in managing the disaster and planning the rebuild due in large part, I think, to CERA’s active efforts to involve the public. Since CERA’s work is confined to the city center, it will be interesting to see how reactivating the city core might bring life from the suburbs back into the city, and how that relationship will evolve. It was an amazing opportunity to revisit for the first time ‘the Motherland’ where I was born, and heartwarming to see how creatively and optimistically the kiwis are handling the loss of lives and destruction in Christchurch. I know there is much to learn from their sensitive approach to the rebuild.

Thank you so much, JLS Scholarship Committee, for the opportunity to pursue this research in Christchurch!
Christchurch’s iconic Cathedral, waiting for a decision on whether to rebuild or replace it. A cardboard cathedral designed by Shigeru Ban provides a temporary place of worship.

Ruins of a former skyscraper
Mini-golf, urban vegetable gardens, bike repair (out of the photo) in a downtown empty lot

Piano, giraffe, community book exchange in an empty lot
Steel supports for a historic building

Shipping crates support this lasting wall until reconstruction
Me at an exhibit of a famous NZ kitsch house at Christchurch’s Canterbury Museum

The Christchurch Botanic Garden, at the city center, having survived the earthquake more elegantly than most of the city
This Maori stonework design in the Christchurch Botanical Garden shows the sort of patterns that could be transferred into landscape works. Paving patterns along the Avon River will be based on Maori weavings.

Cave Creek, a natural beauty and now memorial to 17 students who passed when its viewing platform collapsed in 1995. This site became a natural memorial without any manipulation, out of its natural sense of quiet reverence. Perhaps the Christchurch memorial can take from this. Ferns are a cross-cultural reference, both an emblem for rugby and used in Maori design, a great potential motif in cross-cultural design.