

## Breathe

12 messages

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# Dear Christchurch - get it right



OPEN LETTER: Grand Designs presenter Kevin McCloud.

Christchurch brings an opportunity most cities never get: to breathe new life into the central city, to recreate itself as a world-leading exemplar of sustainable, modern living.

Since I was brought on board as a judge in the upcoming Breathe design competition, I have been carefully following plans for the city's redevelopment and the resulting conversations it has sparked.

I would like to offer my perspective on the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan, in particular addressing Rod Oram's concern that "Nothing in the plan distinguishes Christchurch from the pack".

So what's missing? When you look around other world-leading cities, there are a few things not fully explored in the plan, the most important of which is a serious dose of people power. The plan is ambitious but, given human nature and the natural course of events, the rebuilt city will have several degrees of compromise built into it. The path to achieving the best possible is to involve the people who will populate the place and help them evince an even more powerful ambition.

I recently read Taone Tupu Ora, a New Zealand Centre for Sustainable Cities publication edited by Keriata Stuart and Michelle Thompson-Fawcett. This book brings together themes of indigenous knowledge, Maori urban design principles, micro-urbanism and the development of Maori land (papakainga), and puts together a case for why and how traditional Maori knowledge can be part of better urban development.

I was struck by the similarity in approach of the Maori urban design principles for papakainga and some of the principles of One Planet Living, as developed by the World Wildlife Fund and BioRegional.

One Planet Living is an acceptable, proven and westernised set of guiding principles towards sustainability. Even the London Olympic Games adopted it.

However, One Planet Living does not set out a route to achieve its objectives. So colleagues of mine have worked with the British Government to establish guidelines for inclusive design consultation that have eventually made their way into a progressive and new national planning policy framework.

The table of Maori principles has the potential to amplify and enrich that process of consultation and it could form a matrix for Canterbury's public consultation processes that might lead projects towards One Planet Living objectives or even a sustainability roadmap unique to Christchurch.

This suggests an overarching hidden hand controlling design and development in the core. It also suggests the emasculation of any local say or community involvement at a time when community consultation and empowerment in the implementation of the plan could produce a rounded, sustainable outcome. I'm particularly concerned to see the following phrase in the Central Recovery Plan: "Except in relation to urban design matters in the core, the Christchurch City Council will continue as central Christchurch's principal planning authority".

I appreciate that the plan incorporates a huge amount of existing consultation but, in Britain, we are moving towards an inclusive design process which is not just about consultation but which involves residents and key non- professional and cultural stakeholders in every step of the design process. While this is a difficult concept, true social sustainability happens through sharing.

Food gets a mention in the plan, but there is little mention of how the city might accommodate food growing, or how local food networks might operate or be plugged into the city's transport strategy.

In my company Hab's developments, we are focusing on fruity streets, edible hedgerows, orchard car parks and even green, food-producing perimeter fencing.

Is there capacity in the plan for this and for shared food growing in community greenhouses, polytunnels and kitchen gardens?

An urban farm, or at least larger food-growing areas in public parks, will be an essential part of any resilient city of the future.

It's good to see the suggestion of independent energy production and I believe the Christchurch Agency for Energy has an important role to play in demonstrating how energy production could be different.

However, in a sustainability plan, you would expect to see a proposal for the way energy production plugs into the surrounding landscape and resources, be they biomass, wind, wave, solar or tidal.

Energy crop production has a complementary role to local and regional food production, so the plan should address how that dynamic could be balanced.

Transport is also touched on, but not ambitiously explored. There is no mention of trams and little on reducing car use. Christchurch is a flat city in which bicycle use could be revolutionary. Car clubs, car sharing, bike clubs and electric bike clubs might become the norm.

The river might not simply become a bike and pedestrian route, but also a busy waterway, bringing food into the city and removing its waste.

How much of the city centre might be pedestrianised and how much of its public realm organised as shared space between all users? See what the German city of Freiburg has done, for example.

One of the least attractive words that keeps popping up in the plan is zoning. Clearly there needs to be an organisation and a clustering of activities to some degree, and the idea of the city centre is essential. However, it is possible to produce the same clustering results by organising the architecture and the public realm hierarchically, with different building heights and massing for different areas.

This, of course, results in some bleeding: residents move into buildings designed primarily for offices and vice versa: people build houses in between the low-rise offices and artisans and shop owners live above their workplaces.

Of course, all this is absolutely desirable - it's what makes Shoreditch in London, central Paris or the centre of Melbourne energetic and vibrant places.

It's all down to the accidental, the seeding of places with lots of mixed uses and the creation of the connective tissue of sustainability.

The problem with zoning is that it so often works as a straitjacket, and it's another reason why local say and community involvement are so important.

Finally, what of other One Planet Living objectives such as zero carbon and zero waste? Could Christchurch become a zero-carbon and zero-waste city by 2050?

Freiburg has set a target of cutting carbon-dioxide emissions by 40 per cent by 2030 and being climate neutral by 2050. Malmo, in Sweden, aims to be powered by 100 per cent renewable energy by 2030.

Could Christchurch become another such exemplar of 21st-century sustainability? That would certainly attract the world's attention and turn the plan into a true vision.

My hope is that you, the people who live in and love Christchurch, are able to find the voice to explore and drive through the best possible ideas. And, in so doing, perhaps it will be possible to convey to the world a story and a setting for one of the most exciting urban design projects of the 21st century.

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Kia ora ehoa.

Wow wi wow!! Thanks for the encouraging update Dave. Keep them coming bro!

Kev just conveyed our design statement!

Sitting under my humble pergola here which provides almost no protection without vines growing over it (they are growing)It's the vine that completes the pergola then it works as intended and I am not sun burnt + sweet fruit to eat while relaxing. We are slowly growing beyond bi culturalism I feel.

Just a thought.