THE MAJOR AND SIGNIFICANT ROLE FOR ARCHITECTS IN THE RECOVERY OF URBAN AREAS FOLLOWING A NATURAL DISASTER

This paper draws on and is inspired by the situation faced recently by the relatively modern city of Christchurch New Zealand, devastated by a succession of major earthquakes in late 2010 and throughout 2011. Though it is a small city by world standards (current population 400,000), it was a thriving metropolitan area, served a large rural catchment and was a vital home and place of work for its many inhabitants and businesses.

For the Architects and allied professions, the key task has been how to assist in the massive challenge of recovery the city and its residents are facing. They possess many skills that can be brought into play, including assisting in the all important formulation of the vision for the city’s future.

From its colonial inception Christchurch was planned as an Anglican church settlement hence the centre piece of the neo gothic cathedral, designed by leading 19thc English architect Sir Gilbert Scott, as the focal point. The talented local architect Benjamin Mountfort carried on this vision of the neo gothic ideal city making a significant contribution to Christchurch’s neo gothic architectural heritage. The damage of much of this and in particular the cathedral has been deeply felt as a loss of cultural identity. When the Bishop of Christchurch saw the opportunity to substitute this substantial building with a smaller, cheaper model a local wag suggested she could be deconstructed instead of the Cathedral recommending that she be replaced by a cardboard replica.

The City and how it recovers is being watched closely with great interest by the International community. It is on the list of just 16 cities around the world whose future could provide leadership in urban development badly needed at present all around the globe.

It is exciting but an extreme challenge for this particular City and no less so for the Architectural profession working within it. There is evidence everywhere of the need for action, ideas, help and hope. It is, however, early days in the city’s recovery and lots of calls for help have been received from the international architectural community.

This example is the design gift from Shigeru Ban, the noted Japanese architect, who has offered a very exciting temporary option with this cardboard cathedral design.

With the destructive February 2011 earthquake event a National Emergency was put in place and a Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority was established. The economic cost of rebuilding the city is considerable but some provision for possible earthquake damage has been in place for over 60 years with an Earthquake Commission, a Government organization drawing levies from all domestic insurance policy holders in order to cover a major part of earthquake risks (this is covering over $15 billion of the costs of rebuilding domestic dwellings) With private insurance making up the difference and covering all
commercial building costs the economic input to the city rebuild could well be over $30 billion.

While the Architectural profession continues to be active in generating the rebuild vision many major and potentially far reaching decisions for the City have been made at a high level by central and local government without the benefit of professional advice and considered thought. The outcome of many of these decisions often run counter to what could or should have been done.

The situation following a significant natural disaster in close proximity to a large urban area is not limited to just that event but can be a magnification of problems that can occur in more normal, stable eras. At these times, tasks suited to the skills possessed by many members of the Architectural profession frequently have been taken over by or simply passed to other parties, particularly project managers and property developers. Major decisions are often made in the political arena without much or any consultation with or use of valuable research and experience possessed by relevant professionals in their field(s).

As most of you here today will be aware, there has been increasing erosion of the Architects’ role and responsibilities in planning, design and construction. This erosion has been occurring at an advancing pace over the 20 or 30 years, to the extent now that many commissions are to and given out by project managers. This is in stark contrast to the traditional commissioning of work by client or property owner. It must be observed here that it has been in the interests of the intermediaries such as the project manager to step in between the client and the professional to control and direct the commissioning of work.

The erosion of the Architects’ role and responsibilities has been perpetuated to some extent by the Architects’ expectation to provide professional services in the traditional manner and an assumption that these are still sought by those considering planning and construction. This situation, sadly, is just not the case when others are now offering different concepts of services and competitive costs (fees). This situation is further exacerbated by the advent of computer technology and the development of computer aided design tools for many project types and buildings. At the touch of a button or two, a building company, structural engineer or even property development group can analyse a site or produce a design and basic set of working drawings for even quite complicated building types including dwellings, shops, factories, offices and medical facilities.

Even though official/autocratic acknowledgement of the architectural profession is often lacking the profession remains proactive as this stimulating exhibition project demonstrates. Stating that: “every architect needs a client brief and the people of Christchurch are that client and together they need to come up with the brief to rebuild the city”, the exhibition sought to find processes which could turn the earthquake disaster into opportunities to improve the city’s urban design. The exhibition was specifically designed to engender public response and debate provided space for peoples’ ideas which were also published on the associated website.

In the recovery phases, the situation has been difficult and it has taken much effort for the Architectural profession to get their feet under the table and to participate in the formulation and development of recovery plans. Those at the table have been largely local and national politicians and government department staff, directors of large construction companies and project managers. Many of the plans that have resulted have been politically driven and influenced by vested big business interests. While these play an important role in the recovery of any badly damaged urban environment, they can dominate any concerns the local community might have and the benefits of long term planning can be overlooked in the rush to recover and make money as fast as possible. That is, short term plans that benefit the political picture and the construction and development industries can take precedence over planning for long term benefits for a greater number of citizens.
The approaches made by the Architectural profession to those in charge of the recovery effort, (following the all important search and rescue phases), generally have frequently been waved aside and it has taken repeated effort to be accepted as having something worthwhile to offer. Whether by deception or by misguided belief, those leading the recovery have tended to consider the Architect as being unnecessary to the recovery effort and to the planning stages and although it is promised that "the Architect will get his Opportunity to participate once there are buildings to design". This clearly indicates to the profession and the Institute that the Architect is viewed essentially as a technician dealing only with the nuts and bolts of getting buildings designed and built rather than having anything to contribute to the development of the future pattern of the urban environment and the complexity of city building. This is a narrow view of the Architects' role and it is convenient for those in control that the Architect is thereby excluded from these broader and extremely important considerations/issues. This view also ignores their efforts and accomplishments over the past few centuries in contributing to and realising major changes and improvements in the built environment. These major changes have included redevelopment of existing cities to improve living conditions and their environmental quality, bringing light, air and sunshine back in, introducing new concepts for city design and towns, advocating urban design.

There have been imaginative ‘Pop up” and temporary responses to immediate commercial, cultural and social needs of the city which have resulted in some lively and innovative projects. These includes this pop up shopping mall, Art Box exhibitions, temporary bars and cafes and the ubiquitous “Gap fillers” created by young designers, artists and students on the empty blocks of land which have become available as the result of the considerable demolition in the city. The result has been funky and fun and has led to the “Lonely Planet" tourist guide currently listing Christchurch as one of its most interesting, different and enjoyable tourist destinations throughout the world.

I must acknowledge that the profession could be taken to task to some extent for allowing the role of the Architect to be eroded as much as it has and for its failure to assert the unique skills that many Architects possess. The majority of successful Planners and certainly of the emerging urban design professionals come from an Architectural background or training. Their unique skills include visualising in three dimensions, understanding and communicating cause and effect relationships in urban planning. Certainly, a lot of Architects are happy to focus their efforts on the design and documentation of individual buildings but there are many more, especially those in training today, that are focused not only on these but also on understanding and working at a broader level. Many practices are also teaming up with allied design professions in Landscape Architecture, environmental management, innovative structural engineering and sustainability, to name a few. Teams comprising and offering these skills are being sought out today.

I have to register some success on these fronts in Christchurch for the Architectural profession, in the aftermath of its major earthquakes over the past two years. Due to the sustained efforts of a large group of local professionals and of persistent contact with those in charge of the recovery effort, a number of the group was finally engaged as a team to prepare, within a very limited time frame of 100 days during 2012, a blueprint for the recovery of the central area of the City. This followed a detailed submission prepared by the local Branch of the Institute which attracted the interest of some of those in charge of the recovery. The Blueprint was launched by the Government on July 31 2012 and it has been widely accepted. It sets the stage for the recovery of the central area and located key anchor projects vital to the economic recovery of the City as a whole. Implementation of this plan is underway.

While the profession has not become an integral part of the implementation team, at least it has become more visible as a result and its continuing efforts are now being reported on more frequently by the media. There is also a lot more architectural work ahead for the Architects.
Also included in the blueprint projects has been an exciting proposal presented by the indigenous people of the region. As you may have observed in the original colonial settlement planning for the City of Christchurch in the 19th century, little or no consideration was given to the cultural values of the first people of the region but over the last decades there has been growing recognition of the vital contribution the Maori people make to New Zealand’s cultural identity. The significant numbers of talented architectural graduates who identify themselves as Maori now make certain that this rich cultural heritage is fully acknowledged and indeed celebrated.

So, the market for architectural services is now much more competitive and cost driven. For the Architect to survive he/she has to sharpen their game and be prepared to compete for work and not just sit and wait for clients to knock at the door. It also behoves professional bodies and teaching institutions to recognise these changes and educate for them.

The situation in even more stressful times such as post a natural disaster is, as stated earlier, a magnification of the terms and conditions under which an Architect will be working. With the weakened position of Architects at the best of times, those more active and entrepreneurial in their approach will be the ones who score the work.

Also, it is clear that those that those who will need to appreciate the changing scene ahead will be the upcoming generation. The major opportunities that the Christchurch Earthquake has provided has certainly been grasped by this group of students from New Zealand’s various architectural Schools in this January’s Summer School workshop and symposium assures as that architecture still offers a rich field of endeavour.

In this paper I have avoided dwelling on the nature and scale of the devastating damage sustained in the city as a result of the earthquakes over the past two years. In relative terms the damage may be considered as small when compared with the number of people rendered homeless in Port au Prince, Haiti by the earthquake there, the damage in New Orleans caused by hurricane Katrina and recent Tsunami damage in Japan and Indonesia. In these examples many more people died and the geographic extent of the devastation much greater than ours. Instead I have concentrated on what lessons we can learn and pass on to others and, importantly, for us here today as an audience of Architects, the unique skills we have that we can put to great use in planning in the aftermath of a disaster and also in planning to avoid them wherever possible in the future.