

Rebuilding great neighbourhoods

The Christchurch rebuild has created a unique opportunity to incorporate the best of what was previously there with a new and vibrant central city culture - including city dwellers. But what makes a quality, liveable city neighbourhood?

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REBUILDING a city is a massive challenge. Rebuilding a neighbourhood that is liveable and promotes wellbeing within that city can be just as complex and relies on understanding what the people in that neighbourhood need.

Survey explores what people need

What do people need to have a good life in the central city over the rebuild? What services do they need, and how far will they have to go for them? What would a 'good' central city neighbourhood look like to them?

A study funded by Opus International Consultants, the Christchurch Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) and supported by the National Hazards Research Platform is asking these questions to build a robust, evidence-based picture of the new central city.

The answers will help decision makers to deliver the living environment that city dwellers need.

Compact, amenity-rich environment

Earlier studies from New Zealand and overseas have established that creating a liveable central city requires a compact built environment and good quality of life for residents.

A key feature distinguishing quality central city living from a suburban lifestyle is that many activities can be undertaken locally, including employment. Additionally, infrastructure, amenities, housing and smart environmental design all play key roles in successfully overcoming the negative limitations of compact urban living, such as noise and a reduced sense of community.

Need pioneers early in rebuild

With the Christchurch inner-city rebuild expected to take many years, revitalisation of the area will rely on early adopters or pioneers willing to move into a partially rebuilt environment.

The provision of desirable and affordable housing and sufficient amenities and neighbourhood qualities will help attract the initial market and engender market confidence for later developments.

Trade-offs during rebuild explored

Opus Research developed an online computer-aided survey that incorporated complex scenarios and involved survey participants answering questions that revealed the trade-offs they would make to meet their needs and preferences. It allowed participants to build a picture of what their life might look like if they lived in the inner city at different stages of the city rebuild, including:

- early in the rebuild process
- part way through the rebuild process
- the fully rebuilt central city.

Rather than being a hypothetical, open-ended 'what would you like in the inner

city?’ exercise, participants faced real-life trade-offs. These were situations such as limited services during the early stages of the rebuild, ongoing construction disruption part way through or more expensive property prices once the rebuild is complete.

The realistic ‘what if’ scenarios and the process by which participants arrived at their conclusions generated the kind of deliberation Opus Research hoped to provoke.

Living well top consideration

The survey reinforced what we already knew about inner-city dwellers in other cities: Christchurch residents need to be able to live well before they look at other considerations.

Inner-city dwellers are generally more interested in restaurants, cinemas or other entertainment than suburban dwellers. However, what counts as a good place to live still includes quality housing, supermarkets, healthcare and open spaces - the same as for those living in suburbs.

Another important message for the rebuilders is that potential residents will want many of their everyday needs met in the local urban setting. Accordingly, their living environment would be based more on walking than that in a typical suburban lifestyle.

Need quality of life during rebuild

To achieve a vibrant central city long term, it is important that there will be adequate support for a reasonable quality of life for residents during the rebuild, not just once the rebuild is complete.

For example, if the central city is made safe and walkable throughout the rebuild construction, this sends a message to potential and current residents that their needs are prioritised. It says that they can expect to live an urban lifestyle rather than drive everywhere as in the suburbs.

Similarly, encouraging relatively low-return developments such as food retailers and public open spaces to support central city residents may also be vital to establish



New Regent Street in central Christchurch draws locals and tourists.

the core liveability services and qualities participants identified.

Planning for interdependency needed

From an urban design and property development perspective, this is crucial information. It demonstrates that, if you build high-quality housing and services in the central city, people will want to live there and central city businesses will have a local market.

Acknowledging and planning for the interdependency of residents, infrastructure, developers and businesses is critical for a successful central city.

By building in complex scenarios and allowing subjects to make choices within a constrained environment, the survey provides modelling as close to real life as possible. The survey results reinforced other studies showing that people’s behaviour and interaction with services is influenced by their environment.

Sets up realistic living scenarios

The potential for this kind of consultation and evidence to inform decision making about the future is exciting. It means we can work closely with clients to try

alternatives that test how people might realistically respond in different situations.

For Christchurch, we could show people what their lives might realistically look like if they lived in the central city, without them having to move there. We guided their decision making but left them in control of their choices, giving them real ownership of their decisions and a solid understanding of how they had arrived at them. From a consultation perspective, this gives us a deep understanding of what people bring to the decision-making process.

Many benefits to getting it right

Having established what it takes to encourage central city living, the next challenge for is to identify and address potential roadblocks.

Downstream consequences of a healthy, liveable central city over the rebuild are:

- reduced transport pressure on the whole city by people living close to where they can work, shop, socialise and be active
- reduced car dependency
- a natural market provided for the central city beyond daily workers and tourists as residents expect to use local services and facilities
- more lifestyle choices provided. ◀