

Books

Once in a Lifetime – City-building after Disaster in Christchurch

FOREWORD BY HELEN CLARK; EDITED BY BARNABY BENNETT, JAMES DANN, EMMA JOHNSON, RYAN REYNOLDS; FREERANGE PRESS; ISBN: 9780473289409; \$45.00

It is not easy to write about a national disaster and try to cover all the aspects equally but this book appears to have done it. My alternative title for this tome, might be: "How to keep your head when, all around, people are losing theirs". The editors and the large swathe of authors they have amassed for this particularly worthy publication, from Freerange Press, are all to be congratulated for their work in achieving the publication of this book and the end result looks good. A foreword from Helen Clark sets a high standard for the project; this is a book that the Government probably would rather was not out there but which certain politicians should be forced to read. While no doubt Gerry Brownlee feels that all is going swimmingly down south, readers of this book will understand in no uncertain terms that all this Government appears to have done is make a terrible situation even worse.

The book is organised into nine chapters, each with a number of contributions, either written or photographic. With numerous essays (55 written and 39 visual), there is, of course, a huge range of opinions and styles of writing, although one collective feeling seems to overlay them all: How Not to Run a Rebuild. As a result of so many viewpoints in close conjunction with each other, at times it is hard to establish a good flow; the good thing about this format is that it makes it an easy book to pick up, open at any point and read. Some of the stories within almost make you want to weep; ineptitude on all sides of the Government is steadily destroying the city and I suspect that it is only through the sheer goodwill of the people to stick with it that we still have a population down there at all.

The wide range of contributing authors is what makes this book such an interesting read.



Two Italians, Giovanni Tiso (Bat Bean Beam) and Claudia Mattogno write on how the L'Aquila earthquake in 2009 affected them and how that rebuild went – or is still going on. Jessica Halliday writes forcefully on the importance of heritage architecture for a city. Kevin McCloud (the man off the telly) writes an essay from the heart imploring Christchurch to become a diverse, super-sustainable city of the future. Skye Duncan, a former student of mine who is now a Senior Urban Designer in New York, writes a fascinating piece dissecting the importance of the pavement as an interaction between the city and its people. Ryan Reynolds writes on Gap Filler, which may have started small but has grown to be a strongly positive force for humanising the ruins, despite being run on a shoestring. These people are all inspirational figureheads and deserve to be read.

Juliet Arnott writes about the vexed question of what to do with all the rubble and why it isn't being recycled – despite there being half a million tonnes of debris so far. Apparently, the answer so far is to build a big mound in the forest and presumably hope that people will forget it is there, like some lost Aztec city ruins. Personally, I despair at the sheer waste of materials going on down south although, of course, the economics of it all means that it is easier and less costly to smash it up and cart it to the tip, than to carefully sort through and recycle.

There are musicians, artists and festival organisers, each of whom has a different focus on the post-quake events, but all of whom have

contributed so much to the city in the last few years. There are essays exploring all sides of the equation in here: something from everyone/ something for everyone.

There is evidently still quite a lot of life left in Christchurch, despite various insurance companies and government agencies, which seemingly are intent on kicking the city to death. The editors of this volume include Barnaby Bennett, an absolute powerhouse of connectivity: architect, musician, chief egg at Freerange and a guru of getting things done. I'm certainly confident that Bennett, for one, would be an infinitely better choice to head the rebuild instead of who we have. But this book very carefully treats a line that does not involve stepping on people's toes – in the current climate, it can't afford to. No doubt, if Brownlee had been asked to contribute to this book, his piece would have been gung-ho with superlatives on how well they were doing. Roger Sutton, the head honcho at CERA, has written a piece where he posits that what they have achieved so far is "remarkable and inspiring". Others, it appears, would not agree: I've not picked up a single other reference to CERA's outcome being any kind of inspiring performance. Instead, at last, this is a book for those who have not had a voice for the last three years but have been slogging away making the glue that holds the city together. This book, a companion volume to *Christchurch: The Transitional City Pt IV* from last year, should be sitting on your bookshelf. Go, buy, read, learn.

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