

NEXT STOP | CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND

After Earthquakes, a Creative Rebirth

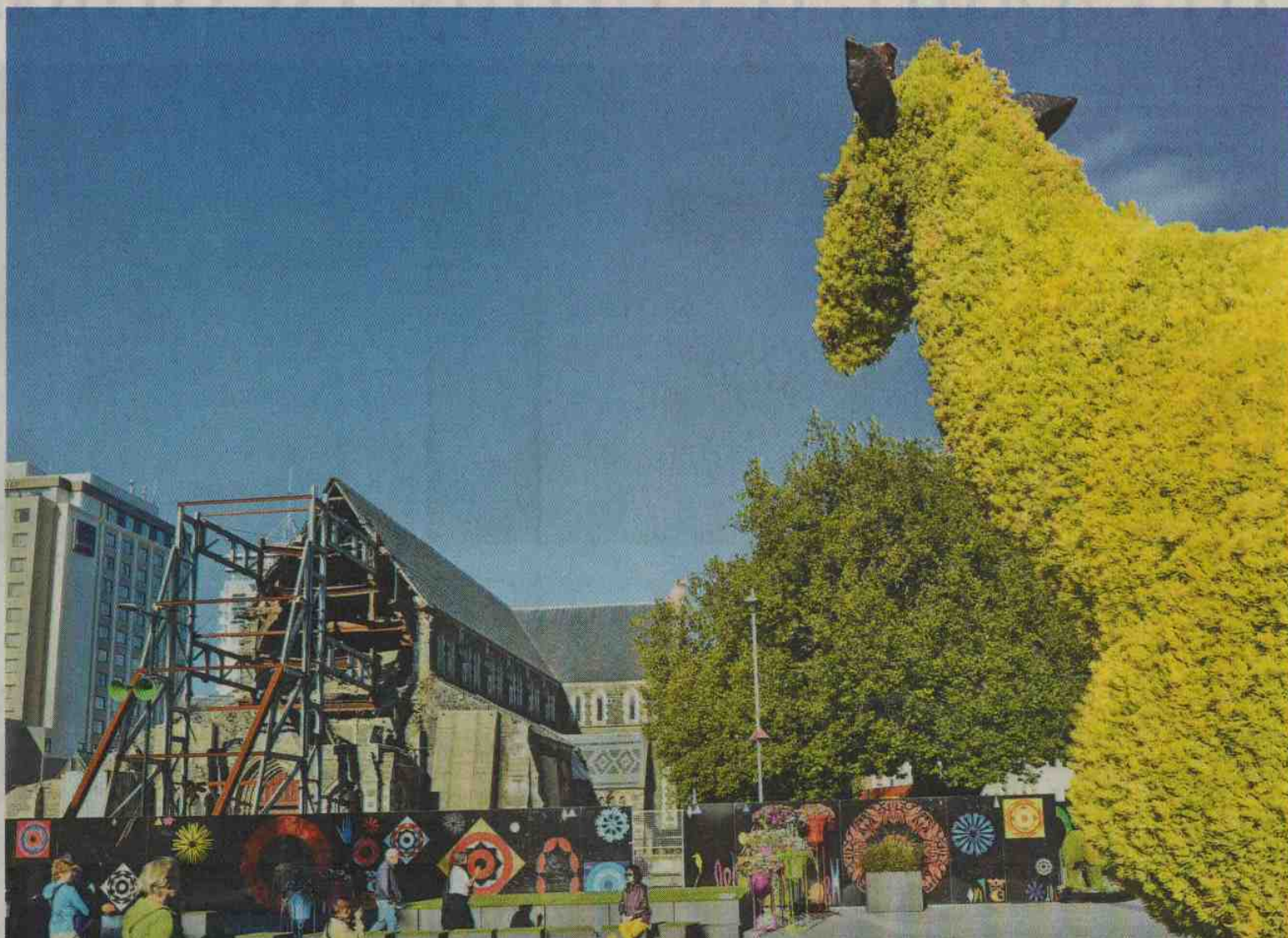
Coping imaginatively, with outdoor discos, wall art and a cardboard cathedral.

By JUSTIN BERGMAN

On the afternoon of Feb. 22, 2011, as the C1 Espresso cafe in Christchurch was in the midst of a busy lunch rush, the walls and tables suddenly began shaking, windows started popping out of their frames, and the lights flickered out. The region had been experiencing aftershocks from a large earthquake that had struck six months earlier, but this one was different. In a span of minutes, the entire city center was devastated, including the cafe, which was eventually demolished. Nearly 200 people across the city died.

Less than two years later, C1 reopened in an Art Deco space, once a post office, across the street from the old location. The rebuilding process was not easy for the owner, Sam Crofskey: He was deeply in debt, paying off one credit card with the next, and had a new baby to support. "It was absolutely terrifying," he said. "I didn't sleep for a very long time." But leaving Christchurch was never an option. Like many entrepreneurs, artists, designers and other hardy residents who have chosen to stay in the city, he was determined to see Christchurch rebound — and become a better city than it was before.

New Zealand is accustomed to earthquakes, but few have been as destructive as the 6.3-magnitude tremor that hit Christchurch, the South Island's largest city, in 2011. The central business district, which was cordoned off from the public for more than two years, still looks like a war zone. Fences that stretch for blocks enclose vacant lots piled high with rubble. Deserted buildings await demolition, some with gaping holes where windows should be, some without walls. There are so many safety pylons on the sidewalks and roads that locals joke that the region's traditional



sporting colors — red and black — should be changed to fluorescent orange. The everyday sounds of the city have been replaced by jackhammers, bulldozers and the endless beeping of construction vehicles backing out of building sites.

Yet amid such scenes of desolation are flashes of artistic whimsy. On one block, an impromptu installation called the Sound Garden has been set up, with chimes fashioned from hollowed-out fire extinguishers and a rain stick made from a pipe filled with wooden beads and rubber balls. Across the street is something called a Dance-O-Mat — an open-air dance floor with speakers and a disco ball where passers-by are invited to drop a coin into a washing machine, plug in their smartphones and get down in front of construction workers for a half-hour.

SLOWLY, LIFE IS RETURNING to Christchurch, in part thanks to creative endeavors like these. “The city is irreversibly different and irreversibly changed. It’s mostly gone,” said Coralie Winn, a co-founder of Gap Filler, a collaborative group formed after the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 to develop innovative ways to make temporary use of empty city spaces, including the Sound Garden and Dance-O-Mat. “So we have to do something new and different, because what choice do you have?”

Gap Filler’s projects were instantly popular among young people who lost their cinemas, theaters, clubs and bars and were in need of entertainment. An open-air performance space constructed of shipping pallets, known as the Pallet Pavilion, proved so successful that the program raised more than 80,000 New Zealand dollars (about \$70,000 U.S.) in a monthlong, crowd-sourced drive to keep it running for an extra year. A miniature golf course spread out hole by hole in gravel-filled lots across the city has also been a hit. (“It’s the world’s first post-disaster mini-golf course,” Ms. Winn said.)

The group’s witty response to the quake — not to mention the agonizingly slow rebuilding of the downtown — soon inspired other residents to find imaginative ways to revitalize a city in transition. Another community group, Greening the Rubble, began



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THE NEW YORK TIMES

cultivating small parks and gardens in vacant lots, all designed to be moved at a moment’s notice — literally, sometimes — when a construction project began. Other spaces were turned into memorials, like the poignant arrangement of 185 empty white chairs set up by the artist Pete Majendie on the first anniversary of the quake, in remembrance of those who died.

A group of young artists who founded a collective called the Social has at times taken a guerrilla approach — one member, for instance, lobbed duck decoys over fences into the rain ponds created in the foundations of demolished buildings. Another artist, Gaby Montejo, a co-founder of the group, erected tongue-in-cheek emergency boxes on walls around town containing items like a pair of Crocs and a “Titanic” VHS cassette.

“Christchurch has a reputation as a really conservative city,” said Audrey Baldwin, a performance artist who stages works in empty lots. “But one of the positives from the quake is that it’s really shaken things up and made people pay attention to the possibility in art and how important that role is. There’s so much more opportunity

There is contention over whether to restore Christchurch Cathedral, top, or build a new one. Above, from left, New Regent Street is intact; the Cardboard Cathedral. Below, from top, Re:START houses businesses destroyed in the quakes; C1 Espresso re-opened in a former post office.

kindle, using salvaged wood to design rough-hewn tables, chairs, stools and benches, some still bearing the homes’ original paint jobs. Even the off-cuts are turned into chunky bracelets and cuff links, all sold in her Spanish-Mission-style showroom on New Regent Street, one of the few historic streetscapes left in the city.

ARCHITECTS AND ENTREPRENEURS, too, have found creative opportunities. Perhaps the most ambitious and well-known building to rise amid the rubble is the Cardboard Cathedral, an ingenious design by Shigeru Ban, who received the Pritzker Architecture Prize last month for the transitional emergency shelters he’s built for disaster victims around the world.

The cathedral was intended to be a temporary replacement for the city’s 19th-century Christchurch Cathedral, which was damaged in the quake and is now at the center of a pitched legal battle between preservationists, who want to restore it, and the Anglican Church, which wants to “deconstruct” it and build a new one. In the meantime, Mr. Ban’s cathedral, with its

IF YOU GO

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

To find many of the transitional projects in town, the city guide **Neat Places** publishes a handy creative Christchurch map, which can be found all over the city and online (neatplaces.co.nz).

Gap Filler also has a map of its projects on its website (gapfiller.org.nz), as well as a Gap Map App for iPhone users.

The **Cardboard Cathedral**, 234





role is. There's so much more opportunity now for creatives than there was before."

Even the Christchurch Art Gallery, the city's pre-eminent art institution, was driven to the streets, though out of necessity. For six months after the quake, it was taken over by recovery authorities, and then it was shut down for its own repairs. Without a home, the gallery began commissioning murals on walls across town. Jenny Harper, the gallery director, said the goal was not only to keep the staff engaged, but also to provide work for artists who lost studios in the city. There was some creative flight after the quake, but many artists remained.

"Part of our motivation was to make sure we kept the creative community here as far as we could because we just couldn't imagine Christchurch without a lot of these people," she said.

There are so many murals and public artworks now — some commissioned by the gallery, others by the long-running SCAPE Public Art group — the entire city center feels like a giant exhibition space. Competition for wall space is fierce — one of the gallery's murals was even tagged by a graffiti artist who not so politely requested the gallery keep its art indoors. Ms. Harper tried to take a hospitable attitude: "We thought, well, it's engagement."

While some artists did leave after the quake, others have come to be part of the creative rebirth. Juliet Arnott, a designer and occupational therapist, was lured back from Britain after seeing how much wood from the thousands of homes being demolished in the suburbs was going to waste. She started a furniture company called Re-

The Cardboard Cathedral, 234 Hereford Street; 64-3-366-0046; cardboardcathedral.org.nz).

The Christchurch Art Gallery (64-3-941-7300) is not expected to reopen until 2015. A map to the public murals can be found at christchurchartgallery.org.nz/outerspaces. The gallery also has two temporary exhibition spaces at the Art Box (corner of Madras and St. Asaph Streets) and above C1 Espresso.

The Social lists its events on its Tumblr page (chchsosocial.tumblr.com).

RETAIL

Rekindle, 35 New Regent Street; 64-21-0242-1208; rekindle.org.nz.

Re:START, Cashel Street; restart.org.nz.

BARS AND RESTAURANTS

C1 Espresso, High and Tuam Streets; 64-21-380-386; c1espresso.co.nz.

Revival, 92-96 Victoria Street; 64-3-379-9559; revivalbar.co.nz.

Tequila Mockingbird, 98 Victoria Street; 64-3-365-8565; tequilamockingbird.co.nz.

the meantime, Mr. Ban's cathedral, with its soaring A-frame roof built with beams encased by cardboard tubes, serves as a stand-in for the old church's congregation — as well as a new tourist draw for the city.

Sam Heaps and Brett Giddens took a risk on a new business for a very different reason — they saw a city in need of an infusion of night life. Only months after the quake, they set up a pop-up bar in a shipping container optimistically named Revival, and within days of opening, they had a line 100 yards down the block. The duo have since added a Latin tapas restaurant, Tequila Mockingbird, next door.

Mr. Giddens said that people may have called them "idiots" at the time for opening downtown, but that they were confident residents would return." Mr. Heaps added: "We knew what we were doing because we were the target demographic. We were listening to what our peer group wanted."

Mr. Crowskey, the owner of C1, believes pre-quake Christchurch was a staid place in steady decline, but there's now opportunity for not just revival, but also innovation. That is immediately evident at his cafe, which features a system of pneumatic tubes along the ceiling that delivers sliders from the kitchen to each table, and a miniature organic vineyard on the roof. It's also completely self-sufficient; waste heat is pumped into the restaurant from the kitchen and coffee roaster, and solar panels provide electricity.

"I want people to say, the best cafe in the world is in this city called Christchurch," Mr. Crowskey said. "They were destroyed, they were on their knees and they got back up and they did it again."