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with Sam Kebbell

A new agora: A project(ion) on the sub-centre

Perhaps no space or time in recent New Zealand history has presented such an opportunity to speculate on architecture's urban operativity as did the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes. Out of the devastation and destruction came both enthusiasm and experimentation, fed as they were by the uncertainty surrounding the city's future. Undertaken from late 2011, this design research project was propelled less by the tens of thousands of damaged and destroyed buildings (upon which so much work was already being undertaken), than it was by the resulting structural transformation of Christchurch's urban realm. With its centre rendered largely uninhabitable and made inaccessible for immediate safety reasons, the city's monocentric structure was ostensibly supplanted by a *polycentrism* that had always been latent, but never hitherto realised. The eventual city-centre rebuild blueprint notwithstanding, Christchurch's peripheral suburbs were asked, overnight, to perform a direct 'urban' role, catering for increased density, diversity, and vitality in the sudden absence of a functioning CBD.[1] Collectively, these emergent *sub-centres* presented a condition worth deliberating architecturally.

While the spatio-social implications of *polycentrism* have gained currency within global urban discourse in recent years, they remain markedly underexplored within a New Zealand context, despite the fact that several of the country's cities appear to increasingly defy a monocentric narrative.[2] In addition, the paradigmatic shift toward multiple, interconnected urban centres is further complicated by a deep-seated and unabashed 'cultural' aversion to density—or, a profound affectation for spacious, detached housing and daily commutes to a within-relative-reach CBD.[3] To this end, the challenge for architecture in post-quake Christchurch (not least for design-research partially suspended from the immediate rebuild efforts) was seemingly two-pronged: to probe the demand for new programmatic arrangements and proximities (live-work being one example) alongside the socio-cultural shift implicit in the city's urban restructuring. How might the repercussions of this larger urban transformation be synthesised into tectonic and programmatic opportunities, opportunities which dared contemplate alternative urban futures to those eventually being proposed?

Tasked with the challenge of forging a denser, more vital urban condition in one of the city's emergent *sub-centres*, this design-research project sought a

productive, site-specific dialogue—one that married an acute sensitivity to the local with unique forms of catalytic intervention. While aspiring to invoke this more vital urban *milieu* in a selected site, the design endeavour also set out to 'test' architecture's capacity to both *affect* and *embody* the larger urban transmutation taking place.[4] At the root of these musings was the very agency of architecture itself: as urban environments transform in unprecedented fashion, and as Architecture (with a capital A) appears ever on the brink of irrelevance, the grounds to explore the discipline's productive, self-conscious relationship to *the city* are both fertile and ever-pressing.[5] By bringing this thinking into focus within Christchurch's unique setting, the question was formulated: how might Architecture speak to, and become a medium for, Christchurch's emergent polycentric condition?

Re-appropriating a latent (sub)urban centre

The chosen site—an under-utilised sports field in the seaside suburb (or *sub-centre*) of Sumner—had originally been laid out in the late 19th century as a central village green. However, this plan was soon thwarted by developers' conflicting goals for the town's subdivision—today manifested in the curious schism in the town's otherwise regular grid. Perhaps still more suggestive than the site's untapped 'central' purpose was Sumner's uncanny resemblance to New Zealand's capital city in both scale and topography. If nothing else, it aided the imagined potential of this township within the wider Christchurch context (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Author (2013). Sumner (left) and Wellington at the same scale and orientation [Composite multimedia drawing]
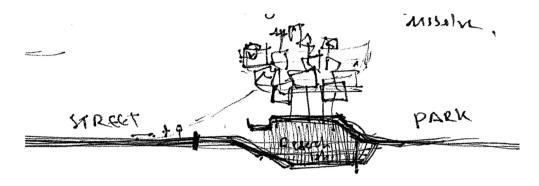
In a myriad of ways, St Leonard's Square represented a natural centre for Sumner in its emergent *sub-centre* state—only further reinforced by the fact that many of the suburb's cliff-straddling public spaces and buildings lay in disrepair.

The site's existing recreational use became the basis for initial typological testing. Drawing from the ubiquitous grandstands and pavilions dotted throughout New Zealand's provincial landscape, and driven by the intuition that in order to

Fig. 2 Author (2013). Early concept
sketch [Multimedia drawing]

assume a more central, *gravitational* role, the perimeter of this large open space must transition between 'park' and 'street' (proxy respectively here, for civic and commercial, rarefied and dense; unbounded and bounded) (Fig. 2).

Disregarding specific programmatic requirements in the first instance, iterative studies toyed with the tectonic possibilities of a more dense and intense mixture of public and private uses in a way that, through the deployment of typology, could begin to resonate with the site's former use. (Fig. 3).
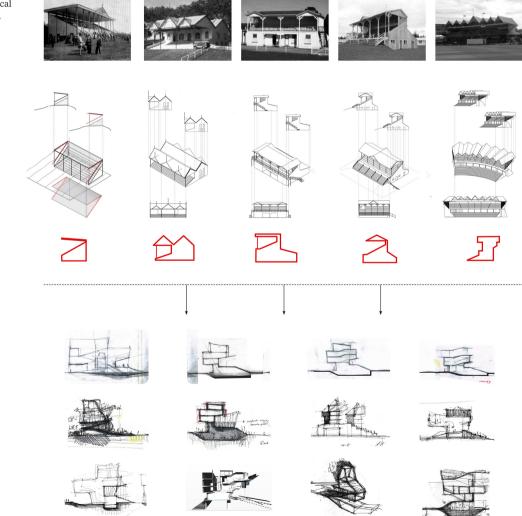
Fig. 3 Author (2013). Typological
Studies [Multimedia drawing,
author's own]

A deliberately 'flickering' design process

As the design process evolved, programmes reflecting a more mixed, dense 'ur-ban' environment were gradually introduced. To achieve 'medium density' by national standards (deemed a bare-minimum if an 'urban' sensibility was to be invoked) the entire site would need, for example, between 33 and 66 dwellings. The injection of such programmes prompted further manipulation of form and sectional configurations, so as to advance (and distort) the grandstand/pavilion types. This process was experimental and fluid, being neither a case of *form-following-function*, nor an uncompromising tectonic-led endeavour. Intention-ally, it entailed a reflective, playful flickering between typology, existing context, and desired qualities of 'urban-ness'.

In turn, this 'flickering' process enabled self-imposed and often highly-specific programmatic constraints to produce and reassert the larger conceptual '*parti*' for the project—an urban (sub-centre) microcosm. A veritable mix of intercon-nected urban functions—from dwelling, to working, to recreation, to commerce —began to emerge, manifesting themselves both organizationally and formally. Reflecting the desire for a significant proportion of dwellings to be configured as live-work, for example, a central 'chasm' drew these often separated programmes into active dialogue, while imparting a dramatic spatial experience. Similarly, the impetus to create a connective, two-sided public-commercial space at ground level dictated a unique horizontal configuration, with levels folding into one another and exterior spaces seamlessly becoming interior. Such formal decisions embedded in the otherwise quotidian nature of the architecture an urban sensi-bility (Fig. 4).
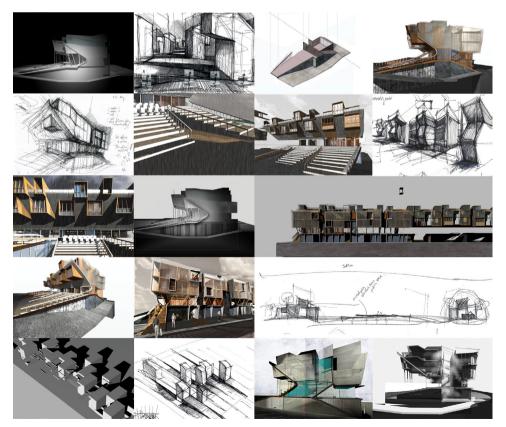

Fig. 4 Author (2013). Iterative Design Process [Collage of multimedia drawings]

A new agora as an intervention on an emergent sub-centre

In the final design outcome, two elongated pavilions straddle the site, re-casting the central open space as an identifiable public realm (Fig. 5–7).

Fig. 5 Author (2013). Site Section [Multimedia drawing]

Fig. 6 Author (2013). Site Plan, "A Forged Familiarity" [Multimedia drawing]

Fig. 7 Author (2013). Sections through Pavilion. [Multimedia drawing]

Exploiting the vastness of the site, the grandstand-pavilion types are given greater built density and more social intensity, while registering the vacant quality of Sumner's original village green. As such, each pavilion boasts an expansive *public porch* overlooking the street on one side while tapering into the centre green by way of staggered terraces on the other. Lurching out, the upper portions of the pavilions hold individual dwellings that playfully project into the open space below. Reacting to the double-edged condition presented by this large, open and fully surrounded site, the pavilions address the 'street' and 'park' in distinct fashions: each side foregrounding the activities of *working* and *living* respectively. This dichotomy is softened on the interior, where the primary functions interface—horizontally and vertically—in novel and intriguing ways (Fig. 8–12).

The design plays out tensions between rarefication and density, contextualism and newness, individual and collective forms, and between monumentality and the vernacular. Further, the 'internal' open space—serving as a domain of everchanging activity and programmability—is afforded new intensity and multifaceted meaning by the two mixed-use pavilions that bookend it.

Fig. 8 Author (2013). Park-side Perspective [Multimedia drawing]

Fig. 9 Author (2013). Street-side Perspective [Multimedia drawing]

Fig. 10 Author (2013). Section through housing, public porch and communal spaces [Multimedia drawing]
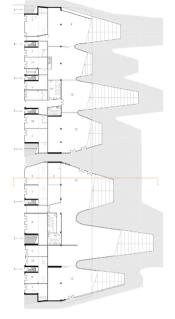
THE GROUND FLOOR
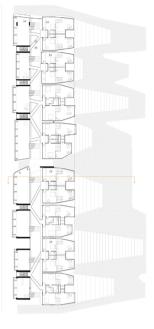
(a veritable mixture of public
and commercial activities)

1. Retail space
2. Gallery
3. Public entrance to first floor
4. Entry to housing
5. Boulangerie
6. Dance studio
7. Hairdresser
8. Store for delightful goods
9. Delectable cafe
10. New-age pet shop
11. Strip club
12. Changing /club room
13. Hobby shop
14. Public bathroom
15. Resident bike storage-room

THE FIRST FLOOR

(a pavilion-esque public space
spanning between park and street)

17. Public lounge area
18. Temporary kiosks
19. Casual meeting spaces
20. Possible convention areas
21. Internal 'deck' strip
22. Main entrance to workspaces

THE SECOND FLOOR

(studio apartments and work-spaces reaching
over the live-work chasm)

23. Apartments
24. Work spaces
25. Live/work bridges
26. Void

THE THIRD FLOOR

(larger apartments with and work-spaces reaching
over the live-work chasm)

27. Apartments
28. Work spaces
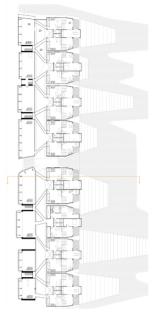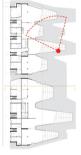29. Live/work bridges
30. Void
31. Stairs to roof garden

Fig. 11 Author (2013). Floor plans 1–4 [Multimedia drawing]

Fig. 12 Author (2013). Exterior perspective from lower terrace [Multimedia drawing]

A retrospective conclusion—architecture keep up!

In ancient Greece, the *Agora* was the centre of religious, political, social and athletic activity; it was a complex place of public, community assembly. In an effort both to provoke and to provide an alternative way forward, this design-research project rethought this spatio-social possibility for a contemporary, polycentric setting.

Through both process and outcome, *A new agora* thus began to speculate on what Christchurch's emerging polycentric condition—and its *sub-centre* components—might mean for architecture, and vice versa. By taking this urban context as its provocation and attempting to distil it architecturally, the project became a catalyst for the *sub-centre*'s emergence (forging a radically more 'urban' setting, eighteen times the existing density of the Sumner), while simultaneously reflecting the conditions and culture of the site and township in its previous incarnation as a suburb of a monocentric city.

Of course, this project (and the *Agora* itself) is but one architectural project(ion) of an emergent polycentric condition. Despite little acknowledgment officially, this condition has generated wide and impassioned explorations since 2011. These efforts have viewed Christchurch's polycentric *sub-centres* as an inevitability, or indeed, already a reality, one into which design-research must be channelled.[6] The importance of these efforts is self-evident. In 2016, Christchurch's CBD hardly looks like being halfway through the predicted decade-long rebuild period, while in the meantime, several outlying *sub-centres* are flourishing. It is clear that the city's *sub-centres* have a momentum that bypasses the official blueprint.

There is a second, and equally salient assumption, at stake in this design-research: architecture's ability to relate to, ask questions of, and interrogate urbanism. If architecture is to maintain its agency within urban contexts that are becoming more complex, interconnected, and fragmented than ever before, novel approaches must be sought which insist that architecture can—*does*—have a role in its urban context beyond its immediate site or 'inhabitants'. Whether this role is spatio-formal, rhetorical, referential, symbolic, programmatic or ecological (to name but a few possible mechanisms), design and design-research are charged with interrogating this question of agency. To that end, the question is not only whether Christchurch is becoming polycentric, but whether architecture can have anything to do with it. What's certain—if not ironic—is that by passively accepting and limiting itself to 'the' centre, architecture risks becoming marginal.

Endnotes

[1] A '100-day blueprint' was released in 2012. Known as the *Christchurch Central Recovery Plan: Te Mahere 'Maraka Ōtautahi'*, it outlined a proposal to rebuild Christchurch's CBD through the concentration of development in a reduced geographic area. Aiming to restore the city as a single-centred model, the blueprint implicitly resisted the reality— and the opportunity—of Christchurch's post-quake polycentrism.

[2] Extensive international literature in the last decade has sought to translate lessons from one polycentric city to the next (for instance, Lehmann 2010, Vasanen 2012, Hall & Pain 2006). In 2011, there was a clear opportunity for Christchurch's post-quake situation to learn from and contribute to this global discourse on polycentricity.

[3] This *anti-urban* sentiment continues to rear its head: as a precient example, Auckland's recently-proposed Unitary Plan recommended densifying a significant portion of the city's existing residential areas. The backlash has been exemplary of a presumed cultural 'right' to large sections and detached housing, even when residing in relatively central areas and in the face of a substantial housing crisis.

[4] Discourse around architecture's microcosmic relationship to the city was given considerable

momentum by *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas 1997), which explored architecture's capacity to subconsciously embody the essence of the city. The thinking is continued today by authors such as Pier Vittorio Aureli (2008 & 2011), who argues for an 'Absolute Architecture' that distills the political nature of the city within resolute architectural forms. Albeit less explored in an Antipodean context, this discourse formed a basis for understanding how the site-specific project may be framed in relation to Christchurch's larger urban structure.

[5] A host of contemporary thinkers have contemplated how architecture might re-assert its agency within ever-complex urban settings. Of particular influence on this project was Cuff and Dana (2011) and Lee and Jacoby (2011).

[6] See for example the work of *Studio Christchurch* (2014). For an overview of this multi-institutional Studio, see Bogunovich, D., and Budgett, J. (2014).

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