

Thursday, May 17, 2012

The choice the CCDU makes for its **anchor arts, culture and heritage project(s)** will signal what sort of Christchurch we aspire to be. It is crucial we get this right.

In the last week, two stark choices have emerged. On the one hand, there is the restoration of the established in the form of the 'Court Plus' proposal tied to the convention centre with a number of related venues, hospitality and retail. This would seem to align with the 'Arts Plaza' idea put forward by some members of the civic music council. It has been suggested the primary driver for this is to offer entertainment for conference delegates and established arts patrons.

On the other hand, there is the new of the 'Transitional City' projects, chief among them the Arts Circus, which would provide a home for the city's festivals (established and new), hospitality and markets in an interactive, transitional environment. Aligned with this are other Transitional projects such as neighbours ArtBox/BeatBox, EPIC, Gap Filler and Life in Vacant Spaces. New events are proposed that tie them together such as a Festival of Temporary Architecture. These transitional projects are designed to engage the wider community (and the international community) in the creation of the city.

Ideally, both of these projects would be the anchors – two streams of a River of Arts. But if a choice must be made then an investment and focus on the transitional would serve as a signal that the new Christchurch is a place for the bold, the fresh, the creative and innovative. If the relatively cheaper transitional projects can also be used to attract international attention and people, then there is a greater chance for ongoing investment in the city over a longer period of time. Christchurch has already been cited by international publications as a place to watch based on transitional projects (eg Re:Start and Gap Filler); we must capitalize.

A signal that we are returning to the pre-earthquakes status quo ante, in which the disproportionate support for the established was to the detriment of the new, would be extremely disillusioning for those that see in Christchurch a new, unprecedented opportunity to make this their place. Before the quakes, the young in general were forced to leave the inner city as this was not their place. They went to the malls. They only came back to get drunk in the weekend because there were so few alternatives. Many of our most innovative and creative people also left the city entirely because the alternatives beyond the established to foster their talent and passion were limited.

Now, this can all change. There needs to be a strong signal that in the new Christchurch there is an alternative – that the new Christchurch *is* an alternative to not just retain our young creators and innovators but to *attract* them. This has already started happening. But if we signal that we are going back to business as usual then we will lose people – people who see in the current situation an exciting, unique opportunity.

And as a well-spring for the River of Arts, the Arts Circus as a transitional arts neighbourhood actually presents both the established and the new – as the name suggests the point is to mix it up to engage established and new audiences for the arts. It would, for example, be great to include Court 2 in the mix – a collaborative space between performing arts groups. This would signal that the new Christchurch encourages inclusion, diversity and innovation to replace the old, siloed monoculture. This is about so much more than 'The Arts'. It is about building a sense of community, place and identity. The transitional is the place where this search has begun and can continue. But this needs to be very strongly signaled to inspire hope and confidence.

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