

**ADSA 2012 / Queensland University of Technology / Brisbane, July 5**

**The Arts Circus: how might the arts play an integrated and intervening role in the creation of a city?**

In April 2011, just under a month after the devastating February 22 earthquake hit Christchurch, New Zealand's Ministry for Culture and Heritage and the country's major funding body Creative New Zealand, initiated a series of meetings to explore how best to "keep artists in Christchurch" and "create a voice for the arts in the rebuild". Although I was not invited to the initial meeting, which was limited to the larger arts organizations in the city, I asked to be included, and after making the case for a new arts culture to emerge directly in relation to the earthquakes (out of the cracks so to speak), I was voted into a "steering group" that included representatives from the major organizations in the city.

While the initial meetings centred on exactly what this group naming itself Arts Voice Christchurch would do, I put forward proposals that I felt engaged with the ideas of the community; not just the arts community but also the wider public whose views were passionately expressed in the many extraordinary community meetings that followed the February earthquake. Recurrent was the notion that the arts were usually for a certain group of people, in a particular place, reflecting a broader siloed and isolating, monocultural landscape.

One idea proposed to address this situation, inspired by the Tollwood Festival in Munich, was the Arts Circus: a transitional arts neighbourhood that included a series of marquees and temporary structures that would house the city's premiere festivals and introduce new events that would engage with – play

a role in – the new city emerging.<sup>1</sup> By presenting a range of arts, hospitality, markets and interactive attractions in temporary venues constantly renewed and recycled through a Festival of Temporary Architecture<sup>2</sup>, the Arts Circus could fully engage with the transitional city and allow for experimentation and innovation to create a new sense of identity, place and community in the city, leading to cultural, social and economic revitalisation.

My aim with this paper is to reconsider what exactly the Arts Circus could be in this extraordinary period in Christchurch's existence. As part of this, I am also essentially questioning the role the arts can play in urban environments for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a question that is of special relevance in a city that has lost 80% of its building stock in the inner city (including a significant number of heritage buildings) but strangely alive like never before with memory and desire: how might the arts play a functioning role, tapping into this unique situation, and lose the tag of 'nice to have' luxury? In an era of increasingly difficulties both environmental and economic, how can the arts be sustainable and necessary? Or should we just forget about it all, get haircuts and real jobs in science, technology, engineering and maths? These are the STEM subjects that the current New Zealand government is pushing generally and a policy-direction

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<sup>1</sup> The project has been developed with a number of different parties and part of its strength and appeal is the people it has drawn together. After approaching Peter Falkenberg (the Artistic Director of Free Theatre and the Director of Te Puna Toi) with a basic idea, he proposed Tollwood as an inspiration and suggested the name Arts Circus as a way to convey the ethos of the project. The design was subsequently developed with Jason Mill (Pivnice Architecture) and Sam Martin (Exterior Architecture), and the business plan shaped with Deane Simmonds and Blair Brown. There were many who contributed to the development of the project, notably Jane Gregg, Denise Mill, Neil Cox, Paul Calder and Johnny Moore.

<sup>2</sup> This event has subsequently developed under the name FESTA (Festival of Transitional Architecture), which launched in October 2012.

that we have been directly effected by in the Theatre and Film Studies (TAFS) Department at UC.<sup>3</sup>

I reject the final question outright (I have no desire to get a haircut). Of course I would reject this question, given my choice to pursue a life in the arts in general and the theatre especially. However, it is important to pose the question as it speaks to very real concerns regarding relevance in an era of dwindling resources and perhaps, inevitably, also ties in with a question for me about what role Performance Studies and the creative arts within the academy can play in urban design and development.

This is the query at the heart of Te Puna Toi's new research project 'Transitional City', which looks to feed into and learn from the many transitional projects we in Theatre and Film Studies are involved in. In Christchurch we have an extraordinary chance to test out ideas and it is apt that a city such as Christchurch, considered conservative and provincial, might be on the verge of radical reinvention of international proportions. This sounds grandiose perhaps, but I think it is true and reflects the excitement amongst the inevitable depression and anger that many of us are feeling in the city, particularly amongst the creative thinkers and doers that see extraordinary opportunity ahead.

In order to appreciate why the Arts Circus might be seen to maximize the transitional city period towards a new Christchurch, I need to give a brief précis of Christchurch culture and society before the earthquakes. If the arts can indeed tell us something about a society – a reflection of what is – then it is fair to say that there have been two Christchurchs, and this may be seen as a microcosm of

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<sup>3</sup> In March 2011, it was proposed that TAFS be disestablished as part of the university's attempt to redress student losses post-earthquake. In August, the UC Council, following an extended debate that exposed a lack of faith in senior management's academic and financial case, rejected the proposal.

the broader New Zealand culture. On the one hand, there is the established arts culture, which includes large organisations such as the Christchurch Arts Gallery, the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, and perhaps most notable of all, the Court Theatre, considered the crown jewel of Christchurch society and the flagship for Creative New Zealand in terms of New Zealand theatre.

On the other hand, there is a strong undercurrent of artists, movements and organisations that have emerged in Christchurch that distinguish it as an epicentre for the pursuit of a distinctive New Zealand identity. This includes the Caxton Group emerging in the 1930s, and growing in the 40s, 50s, an assortment of writers, poets and the painters and musicians they socialised with – Allen Curnow, Denis Glover, Ursula Bethell, Leo Bensemann, Toss Woolston, Colin McCahon, Rita Angus, Douglas Lilburn to name but a few; the Flying Nun music label set up in the 1980s by Roger Sheppard and credited with the emergence of a distinctive New Zealand music culture; the Free Theatre founded by Peter Falkenberg in 1979 and now the country's longest running producer of experimental theatre; Pacific Underground, the pioneer of theatre that explores the experience of Pasifika people in New Zealand, beginning with the renowned *Fresh Off the Boat* (written by Simon Small and Oscar Kightley), which was staged in the Free Theatre in 1993.

I don't want to set up a simplistic dichotomy here and suggest that the 'established' and the 'new' are mutually exclusive or clearly delineated. The Christchurch Art Gallery for example is a home for New Zealand contemporary art and is always attempting to foster new audiences via new work and initiatives that encourage diversity and innovation. However, there is perhaps a distinction, broadly speaking, between the 'new' and the 'established' in that the

'new', growing out of the cracks and from the ground up, is more likely to address concerns that are of the place and time. And then of course there is the funding, which tends towards supporting the established cultural flagships in large 'iconic' buildings (that reflect some other time and place), often disproportionately and to the detriment of the new and experimental. My experience is of the latter and so my point of view is based on a number of years working on the 'ground floor', so to speak.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the difference between the 'established' and the 'new' is the Court Theatre. The Court has survived like no other mainstream theatre in the country. It has run continuously since being established in 1971 by Mervyn Thompson and Yvette Bromley.<sup>4</sup> The success of the Court can be attributed to its commitment to programming an assortment of classics of English theatre in a conventional style, mixed with bawdy British comedies. A smattering of new New Zealand work, usually sees a standard style of presentation that along with the rest of the programme is designed to assure a middle class, middle aged audience of their place in the world. Theatre in this instance speaks to a long-standing colonial hangover that always sees the real world as "over there". In this way, the Court Theatre may be seen to have followed the amateur tradition it grew out of, staging plays in content and style that reflected a notion of English colony and may be seen as a tool of the colonial project, extending empire to the far reaches of the Commonwealth.

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<sup>4</sup> The Court Theatre, like the Free Theatre, lost its base in the Arts Centre (currently off-limits). The Court set about building a replica (albeit with more seating) in an old grain store in Addington. Over the year that the massive fundraising effort took place to construct the venue (a mixture of private and public funds were sought), the Court discontinued production and became a "symbol" for the rebuild of Christchurch reaching their \$4m target and reopening in December of 2011. Meanwhile companies such as Free Theatre (*The Earthquake in Chile*) and The Loons (*Macbeth*) set about producing work that gave places for the community to gather, beyond their usual working spaces.

But it was not necessarily intended to be this way, at least, if founder Mervyn Thompson had got his way – and in this there is a direct relation to circus. Thompson, reflecting his roots in the coal mining communities of the West Coast of New Zealand, was renowned for his incorporation of popular working class forms, including vaudeville, music hall and circus, towards a national New Zealand theatre that would replace the colonial one. It was not that he intended for the Court to adopt these styles in particular, they were simply his way of trying to engage with the New Zealand experience (and a broader New Zealand audience beyond the ‘theatre people’) and opposed to a dominant notion of theatre from elsewhere. Thompson eventually left the Court with a view to developing this notion of performance and went on to present what are now considered important milestones in the development of a distinctive New Zealand theatre.

In many ways, I feel the Arts Circus might be considered an example of what Thompson originally intended – a mixture of the established and the new: a variety of performance and art forms, not simply for the arty crowd, but for a wider public that might be attracted to the site based on its markets, hospitality and, by happenstance discover a diversity of art forms. This is the principle that underlines the name Arts Circus – a name that has attracted some criticism – a deliberate confusion of the high and low with a view to creating an inclusive, explicitly flexible urban environment that engages rather than ignores the time and place.

Objections to the name Arts Circus perhaps arise due to the limited notion of circus. Today, the circus is broadly understood as a ‘dirty cousin’ of The Arts: a place for elephants, giraffes, trapeze artists, clowns, dodgy fairground games and

even dodgier operators. But of course the social historical origins of the circus are far more broad and inclusive, based in the notion of carnival and the agrarian festival discussed for example in Mikhail Bakhtin's examination of Rabelais. Bakhtin argued that the philosophy encapsulated in Rabelais' literature reflected the inversion of everyday symbolic and hierarchal order and divinity in the bawdy medieval festival, with a view to considering the past in relation to the present and future.

As Victor Turner has noted, this inversion of social order in the carnivalesque allows for an experience of *communitas*, albeit with a view to reimposing the status quo of agrarian society. Yet in ways that are discussed in Turner's notion of the liminoid, might it be possible for a more radical disturbance of the status quo that allows for a reimagining, a new discovery of community, identity and place?

Post-earthquake Christchurch allows for just such exploration, experimentation and re-thinking, with the Arts Circus proposed as an intervention into the return to the status-quo ante pre-earthquakes and with a view to creating something much more radical. By embracing impermanence, taking seriously the transitional as more than a just a gap-filler between post-demolition and a 'permanent' city, it may be possible to build a flexible, 21<sup>st</sup> century urban environment that conceptually thinks more in terms of movement than stasis in creating a sense of place.

In his essay 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', Martin Heidegger uses the idea of the bridge as opposed to the building to discuss the creation of place as a rite of passage. The bridge, he says, is not a place, but is instrumental in bringing the notion of place into existence: "The place did not exist before the bridge... Thus,

the bridge is not a place in itself but it is only from the bridge that the place originates". Robert Kronenburg, in his book *Flexible Architecture that Responds to Change* (2007), refers to Heidegger's bridge example in his argument that the notion of fixed and permanent architecture is a relatively new phenomenon in evolutionary terms, as human existence has always been "based on the capacity for movement and adaptability; indeed it is to that we owe our survival as a species" (10). Kronenburg suggests that this notion of the flexible is again becoming a priority, as the sedentary nature of contemporary urban life is rendered obsolete by "technological, social and economic changes... forcing, or at least encouraging, a new form of nomadic existence" (10).

With very little effort, it is possible to see in Kronenburg's notion of flexible buildings, a parallel re-think in terms of the arts – not just in the buildings that house them but perhaps more in the underlying ethos and activity driving them as a response to (and agent in) change. Kronenburg says:

"This is architecture that adapts, rather than stagnates; transforms, rather than restricts; is motive, rather than static; interacts with its users, rather than inhibits. It is a design form that is, by its very essence, cross-disciplinary and multi-functional; consequently it is frequently innovative and expressive of contemporary design issues" (11).

So in Christchurch, rather than returning to the old way of thinking about the arts as relating to buildings (particularly large cultural icons) that house a standardized form of performance that usually serves as a distraction from everyday life, it makes sense to think more in terms of community-building through activity that "interacts with its users, rather than inhibits" and is "cross-disciplinary and multi-functional". This makes, cultural, social and economic

sense, particularly when we are thinking in terms of sustainability and encouraging fresh new thinking.

The Arts Circus in many ways points to a new way of thinking in Christchurch, which parallels Heidegger's belief that the notion of place is brought into existence by more than just building buildings. Although buildings play a part, as Kronenburg notes, a sense of place can also be created by "less costly and time-consuming acts... such as rearranging the furniture in a room or even unpacking a suitcase!" (13). If we view the transitional period of the city engaging with projects such as the Arts Circus, which make a point of constantly "rearranging the furniture" or "unpacking the suitcase", an alternative image of a new Christchurch begins to emerge.

Heidegger's bridge is an exciting provocation to start re-thinking how we create a sense of place by privileging movement over stasis. However to be more specific to Christchurch, a better touchstone for a sense of place as something that is always moving, always being discovered, might be the river that precedes the bridge – after all, Heidegger's bridge reflects its significance in the social historical emergence of cities in Europe. So at the risk of mixing metaphors... in Christchurch the dominant feature running through the centre of the city is the Ōtākaro, renamed the Avon by the English settlers. It was along the banks of this river that the original migrants, Ngai Tahu, developed communities around sites where the community gathered food, but also travelled to particular mahinga kai (customary food) sites according to the seasons. As a result, Ngai Tahu identity makes much of food (kai) with stories of ancestors travelling and creating

particular mahinga kai sites and rituals, most based around rivers and the ocean.<sup>5</sup>

And herein lies a powerful image upon which to found the Arts Circus as a wellspring for a larger River of Arts that flows through the city: a sense of place based around kai and community gathering, developing in the transitional city period and building on the extraordinary sense of community we have experienced. The transitory, nomadic nature of Ngai Tahu settlement can signal a rethinking of space that has to be re-colonised, accepting what is there – the Ōtākaro/Avon river that runs through the centre of the city – and acknowledging the impermanence of place; not a hard thing to do when you live in a city where the earth is still moving and evidence of its power and the your flimsy notion of reality lies all around you in piles of rubble. In this way, architecture and the urban environment, like art and life, is not eternal or forever, it is impermanent, changeable, reacting to the new that is coming.

Such an approach should not deny buildings, and especially the few heritage buildings we have left – essential markers of our identity – but develop around them and rationalize the creation of new, interdisciplinary spaces that integrate the arts with the other sectors of urban life towards a new sense of community. Indeed, the Arts Circus was originally proposed to be sited next to, and include, the historic Odeon Theatre (built in 1883). Although the theatre is currently a sorry sight, the Arts Circus proposal included a deconstructed Odeon in the first instance, with the façade, marble foyer and internal properties covered and used for performance, before being slowly rebuilt as a space for a

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<sup>5</sup> Whereas the waka was particularly a feature in the life of Northern iwi, used to travel up and down the river, Ngai Tahu were known to build a vessel out of reeds known as a mokihi for travelling from bank-to-bank. My thanks to Sacha McMeeking for steering me straight here.

variety of performance. In this way, a restored Odeon Theatre would act, in principle, like a marae or community hall – a place that acknowledges the past in a discussion about the present and future of our community, a necessary step towards allowing the community access to the creation of their city.

In a small way, this access is already being provided in terms of performance. In October 2011, Te Puna Toi commissioned the Free Theatre to work with guest Professor Richard Gough of the Centre for Performance Research (Aberystwyth, Wales) to create a performance in and around St Mary's Church in Addington. Directed by Peter Falkenberg and titled *The Earthquake in Chile* after the Heinrich von Kleist short story that inspired it, the performance began in the church, enacting the first part of the Kleist story via a catholic-inspired mass and making allusions to pre-earthquake Christchurch. The Kleist story is set against the backdrop of the great earthquake of 1647 in Santiago, where the earthquake destroys not only the physical structures of the city but also a brutal and oppressive social hierarchy to be replaced by an extraordinary *communitas* – much as we experienced in Christchurch. In the Free Theatre performance, a simulated earthquake saw the audience ejected from the church and moving through a series of stations around the church square that related to communal acts of post-earthquake Christchurch (particular the sharing of stories, resources and food). These stations saw the audience becoming more and more participant in the performance. The final return to the church followed the Kleist story and particularly the depiction of the old hierarchies returning with a vengeance, serving as a warning of where we don't want to go.

But sadly, this is already happening in Christchurch. For a project like the Arts Circus to happen, to show how the arts can be an integral and integrated

part of a new, living, breathing city, it requires the old guard to embrace what might be considered a subversive notion of the arts, architecture and urban design. And community. While I and many of my colleagues may see this as necessary in terms social and economic, the view of the establishment – its power hidden by so-called orthodox “economic rationale” – is that building big and iconic will draw the money necessary for the rebuild. In this light, it is likely that the Arts Circus and the radical transitional ethos it represents and embodies, if it happens at all, will be driven to the fringes, to be contained as a place for the young to blow off some steam before growing up, getting hair cuts and returning to work in the ‘real world’. The Arts Circus’ potential to act as an agent for change, for re-thinking the way we live, is a difficult sell – and even though the Arts Circus has to date received favorable responses from the community and the powers that be, it may be that my part of this panel will be more “what could have been” than “what will be”. I hope not.

### References

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Notes excluded:

[Whether this original idea holds, it is hard to say and the Arts Circus is indeed designed to be flexible (as circus' are) and can be located and relocated in a variety of spaces (there has for example been a suggestion it might be based around the ruins of the cathedral in central Christchurch).

But the very real concern here is that if the transitional is not seen as affecting the new city – if it is seen merely as a gap-filler with the arts in particular to play a distracting role while the 'real' city is being built – the result will simply be to rebuild to the old notions of the city. The old Christchurch was famous for driving away the young innovators, the fresh thinking that the city will need if it truly aims to stand up, let alone fly. There needs to be a rethinking in terms of community-building that embraces movement and change in architecture and the arts, time, place, life. Thus the Arts Circus is proposed for short-term experimentation with long-term gains sown into the social and economic fabric of the city.]

[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 that surrounded and choked the inner city. They only came back to get drunk (often to excess) 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 – people who will make this city their place.

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. 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, confidence and excitement.]