

# Restoring Christchurch's bell tower is a first step to easing the city's trauma

The spire lost in New Zealand's earthquake matters. Obliterating past treasures or leaving the scars of ruins never helps



**Simon Jenkins**

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 24 February 2011 22:00 GMT

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

The collapse in Tuesday's earthquake of the bell tower of ChristChurch cathedral is a tragedy both for those killed and for the heart and soul of New Zealand's second city. The tower was the focus point at the heart of this charming, peaceful chip off the old British block. Its loss is symbolic of the tragedy. It should be rebuilt at once.

Cities vary widely in their response to disaster. London reacted to terrorist attack differently from New York. The resignation of the poor of Pakistan, Haiti and Indonesia faced with earthquake and tsunami surprised western observers, as families and villages turned in on themselves and found a comfort and security the state could not supply. It is the same in time of war.

In each case someone comes along shouting for a memorial. They demand some artist's self-regarding creation of modern sculpture, like a Diana fountain. They demand hunks of concrete and steel, cenotaphs and memorial walls, the crude litterings of New York's Ground Zero or London's Hyde Park Corner. It is as if tragedy required atonement in an all too visible and eternal gesture of commemoration.

I am sure there will be talk in New Zealand of how – and if – the tower's stump should be handled. Whenever a prominent building is damaged or destroyed, there are those who see an opportunity to make some personal statement, if not to win a contract. Some will claim that the ChristChurch ruin should be left as a memorial, even an exercise in urban picturesque.

Some may claim the site should be cleared and used for something else. Some may claim there should be a new tower, but in the "modern idiom", which nowadays usually means a spike, a lump of concrete, a rolled-steel joist or a corkscrew.

I believe that the evil of a disaster, whatever its cause, is best conquered by reinstating the good that was before. This was illustrated in the postwar efforts of defeated, ruined European cities to reinstate what bombs and shells had obliterated. No sooner had the guns gone silent than the citizens of Warsaw were seen with wheelbarrows, spades and trowels, carting in materials to rebuild their Old Town square. It was the boldest possible assertion of their cultural identity and continuity. It restored their morale.

In the same spirit, Stalin ordered the restoration of Leningrad's ruined palaces, even though they evoked the age of the tsars and even though those working on them were starving in their hovels. France rebuilt Caen abbey and the centre of Tours. The recent civil war devastated the former Yugoslavia's churches and mosques. It is being redeemed, where possible, by their reconstruction.

Britain, in contrast, boasted its victory in 1945 by redoubling the destruction of the Luftwaffe. Building contractors descended on Bristol, Plymouth, Southampton and Coventry and tore down what had been left of their historic cores. Neighbourhoods that should have been reinstated to reassert respect for the country's values and give back a spirit of history to its cities were turned into banal modernist memorials to bomber and bulldozer alike.

On Wednesday the dean of ChristChurch cathedral said that the loss of his tower was devastating, "but the most important thing at the moment is not the buildings, it's the

people". The dead must be found and buried. I would question only the implied demotion of the buildings. Unlike dead people they can live again, and if revived can restore more than brick and stone. They restore morale, civic pride and collective memory.

ChristChurch cathedral tower is the totem of civic continuity. Begun in 1864, it was built apart from the nave to minimise collateral damage should it fall. The same was true of some East Anglian churches, whose flint and mortar construction made them unstable. While not the greatest work of its English architect, Sir George Gilbert Scott, ChristChurch was in the muscular two-tone gothic favoured for his overseas commissions, as in Newfoundland and South Africa. They reminded the early settlers that Northamptonshire was just a hop and a skip away.

Scott's design was vindicated in Tuesday's collapse, when the tower did not fall on the adjacent church. It had already suffered earthquakes in 1888, 1901 and 2010. On the last occasion, its bells eerily started ringing at the height of the quake, released from their locks to swing free, as if given tongue by the subterranean forces of nature.

Reinstating the past induces existential horror in architects and city planners. The rebuilding of Warsaw is still dismissed as "Disneyland nostalgia" by leftwing critics, for whom the hapless citizens should have awaited the arrival of Le Corbusier and his concrete mixer. A similar "truth to history" led the communists to argue that Dresden's Frauenkirche should be left as a heap of rubble and not be rebuilt, as it has been magnificently. Some wanted the World Trade Centre left as a gaping memorial, the same cult of the ruin as led the Picturesque Romantic William Gilpin to demand that a few more corbels be knocked off Tintern Abbey, the better to evoke the cruel transience of history.

There are those who object to English Heritage's admirable reinstatement of Norman Dover Castle as "Disneyfication", and who abuse Moscow for reconstructing its pre-revolutionary churches as "Disneyland" facsimiles, rather than as steel and concrete boxes. This attitude infests Unesco and the council of Europe, to yield such absurdities as the spatchcock Erechtheion pseudo-ruin on the Acropolis in Athens, and the diktat that the Bamiyan Buddhas, blown up by the Taliban, should not be replaced. The giant niches should be left empty and "true", presumably to punish local peasants for allowing the Taliban to take power in the first place. As Nato bombers pulverise their villages, they will doubtless be banned from restoring them too.

The Victorians of Scott's day suffered no such mumbo jumbo to impede them in the greatest ever rescue of ancient civilisation, that of medieval Europe from industrial and political revolution. From Carcassonne to the Tower of London, from Durham cathedral to the west front of Chartres, from thousands of English churches to almost every medieval structure in Europe, the Victorians studied and sought to restore the past for the enjoyment and edification of the present. Had some official fussed over their archaeological "authenticity", all would have disappeared.

For the Victorians a great building was more than the sum of its parts. It was a manifestation of human identity. Western historians may feel that when a building is damaged or destroyed the ruin should be retained as "part of its memory". But who are they to dictate? Why should the gaping scars of other people's tragedies be left unrepaired, so some pundit can exult in "the pleasure of ruins"? A readiness to restore, to make amends, to gather up the nerve-endings of history to help a community resume normal life, these are surely the best future for a devastated past.

Scott's cathedral tower should be reconstructed as a matter of priority. That way Christchurch will recover quickest from its trauma.

• This article was amended on 25 February 2011. An error in editing led to "East Anglian" becoming "East Anglican" on original publication. This has now been corrected