

Why Christchurch Should Rebuild its Cathedral

I write this six hours after a magnitude 6.0 earthquake killed six people, injured 50 and seriously damaged houses, churches, towers and castles in Emilia-Romagna, 150 km north of my family home in Italy. It set me thinking once again about the situation in Christchurch and, in particular, the plight of the cathedral.

Seismic disasters are milestones in the lives of people who live through them. I write as someone made homeless by an earthquake decades ago, an event which led me to 32 years of patient study of disasters in all their manifestations. Under normal circumstances, home is a sanctuary against the hard knocks of daily life: buildings offer protection against the vagaries of weather and climate. To those who have not had the experience (and who would wish it upon them?), it is hard to convey the tension caused by earthquakes when abruptly that sense of sanctuary is turned inside out: fresh air is safe, indoors has become dangerous. The tension can last for months or years, as the pervasive menace of the earthquake is invisible and can strike at any time. The sense of precariousness that this induces can be very debilitating, especially at night, when fears are magnified (and so, when one is lying down, is the sensation of an aftershock).

In the midst of the hardships and uncertainties of life after a major earthquake it is difficult to develop a sense of perspective on the future. Fundamental problems must obviously dominate the agenda: work, safety, rebuilding, insurance payments, developing a new lifestyle. It is easy to forget or underestimate the role of *genius loci*, one's sense of place. There may even be a negative reaction in the form of a desire for the *tabula rasa* (the "scrubbed table" or "clean slate") in the form of a clean start and an entirely new city. The damaged buildings of the past are mute reminders of danger and lack of success in facing up to the seismic threat—perhaps they should be torn down and forgotten.

While no one ought to quibble with the slogan "build back better", there is something very tragic and misguided about the *tabula rasa* mentality. More than 30 years ago the architect Christian Norberg-Schulz wrote a book titled *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980, Rizzoli, New York). In this classic work he explored people's relationships with the built environment in diverse parts of the world. The conclusion was obvious: despite the depredations of war and natural disaster, people need to relate to places and their histories. This is perfectly true even when the histories are brief: nowhere has a more active local historical preservation society than Santa Barbara in California, even though the city has only one building that antedates 1935. In New England townships there is a deep reverence for buildings that are 150 years old, for they embody the continuity of life and the roots of the community as a living organism that evolves over time.

Of course, it does not need an earthquake to sweep the past away. In 1960, the UK train operator British Rail decided to redevelop the London station of Euston and turn it from a Victorian relic into a sleek, modern, functional building fit for high-speed travel on clean electric trains. The original Euston station, dated 1840, was designed as a grand gateway to the north, introducing the new-fangled idea of train travel that so upset contemporary ideas about the speed at which life ought to be conducted.

Technological changes gradually rendered the complex of buildings unfit for purpose. Hence, after 120 years, the Grand Hall was summarily demolished. So was the Doric propylaeum, a great arch inspired by Roman prototypes. This symbolic gateway to the north was knocked down and the stones were tipped into a flood relief channel in the east of the city.

The then Minister of Transport argued that the cost of demolition was only 6 per cent of the money required to relocate the arch, and so in 1961 it was brought down. Eminent authorities mounted a last-minute protest, but to no avail. For more than half a century the site of the arch has stood vacant. Londoners and travellers, if they are knowledgeable about architecture and the city, bitterly regret its passing. There are now definite plans to rebuild it and the stones have been fished out of the river. The cost of rebuilding will be 800 times the cost of the original demolition and 52 times the projected cost of moving the arch (but why was it ever considered necessary to move it at all?). The new station of the 1960s proved to be a dismal failure—ugly, dysfunctional and detested—and vast amounts of money will now be spent on redeveloping it yet again.

This apocryphal tale has a message for those who would demolish historic buildings after earthquakes. If Christchurch loses its cathedrals (Anglican *and* Catholic), it will have lost some of its *raison d'être*, its identity, and the continuity of its history. When he was president of ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, Bernard Fielding wrote that no historic building should be considered beyond rehabilitation on technical grounds. The Iranian Government, which has a terrible reputation for wanton destruction of the country's heritage, nevertheless rebuilt the Arg, the castle at Bam, which was practically raised to the ground by the earthquake of 2003. It serves no functional purpose other than to attract tourists (who are anything but numerous in Iran). Yet it is a UNESCO World Heritage site and the largest mudbrick complex in the world: fragile, vulnerable, but priceless. To be strictly accurate, international funds paid for most of the reconstruction, but that merely underlines the importance of such buildings, not merely to local life, but to all of us in the world.

In Italy, the earthquake of 6 April 2009 very seriously damaged eleven churches in the city of L'Aquila. Santa Maria in Paganica is the sixth most important of these, and this huge building lost almost all its vaulting, which cascaded into the nave, leaving only the four walls standing. It is now heavily buttressed and has a plastic roof supported on scaffolding. Rather than being deconsecrated, mass has been celebrated amid the ruins—pending, of course, reconstruction.

In fact, Italy puts considerable priority on rebuilding churches, large and small, after earthquakes because that is a means of rebuilding the social fabric and neighbourhood relations, as well as being a symbolic and spiritual act. Consider Lioni, a town of 6,400 inhabitants in southern Italy. In the magnitude 6.8 earthquake of 1980, 228 of its citizens died. The main church, Santa Maria Assunta, collapsed onto worshippers. Lioni's five churches have been completely reconstructed, despite catastrophic damage, in a work that took 16 years. Lioni is a small and isolated town, but it did its best: in fact, it received the national 'Gold Medal for Civil Merit' for the courage and sensitivity with which it tackled the reconstruction process. Further down valley, Romagnano al Monte (population 399) is the smallest and poorest village in

the entire region of Campania. It does not have the funds to rebuild its parish church and has little prospect of obtaining them. But it has not demolished the building because even under such adversity it hopes to start the rebuilding one day.

There is no technical reason why Christchurch cathedral shouldn't be entirely rebuilt. The abrupt, dismissive deconsecration of historic churches around the city puts one in mind of Pontius Pilate, not spiritual care. The lessons from other places suggest that in 20 years' time the people of Christchurch will bitterly regret the loss of their landmarks, even if now the whole question of retaining them merely seems tiresome and irrelevant.

Prof. David Alexander

Chief Senior Scientist, Global Risk Forum, Davos, Switzerland

From October 2012:-

Professor of Risk and Disaster Reduction, University College London, UK