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COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND GRASSROOTS ACTION  
FOR LONG-TERM URBAN REGENERATION IN  
POST-QUAKE ŌTAUTAHI CHRISTCHURCH

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# COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND GRASSROOTS ACTION FOR LONG-TERM URBAN REGENERATION IN POST-QUAKE ŌTAUTAHI CHRISTCHURCH

Irene Boles

## INTRODUCTION

The 22nd of February 2024 marked the 13th anniversary of the devastating earthquake that hit the city of Christchurch in 2011. This tragic seismic event took 185 lives, caused permanent damage to 100,000 buildings and resulted in the demolition of 80 percent of the buildings in the Central Business District.<sup>1</sup> Such sudden and significant disruption of society and the subsequent loss of the urban environment at the heart of the city led to the rise of a prolific grassroots, community-led, city-making movement, which has been working successfully alongside local and governmental institutions to support the recovery of the city and its communities.<sup>2</sup>

Using the framework of urban commoning, this paper looks at several examples of how community resilience and grassroots action are shaping the recovery and rebuild of Ōtautahi Christchurch in order to discuss and assess their impact, evolution and their possible positive long-term effects in a quest for spatial justice.

## COMMONING AND URBANISATION AS A COLLECTIVE EXERCISE

The term *commons* describes a community of people sharing and governing resources, and their relations, production and reproduction processes through horizontal 'doing' in common: commoning.<sup>3</sup> Historically, the term commoning has been associated with the management of natural resources. In the last 25 years, scholars have shifted the conversation on commons from the natural to the urban context, looking at the relationship between "justice and geography, or social justice and the city."<sup>4</sup> *Urban commoning*, which originated in Europe during the late 1960s, describes the sustainable dynamics of social regeneration in urban contexts, where groups of citizens mobilise to reclaim decision-making power over urban matters. Similarly to the term commoning, urban commoning explains the collective production and governance of shared resources within cities, by communities.<sup>5</sup>

In Harvey's 2014 essay "The Crisis of Planetary Urbanization," the author describes the profound and increasing alienation that characterises modern urban living. This includes the destruction of meaningful social structures, the rise of social inequalities, unaffordability, violence and lack of democratic governance; a transformation of cities' "places of celebration"<sup>6</sup> into "engines for economic production, capital accumulation and speculation."<sup>7</sup> As most of the world's population now resides in cities, the impact of urbanisation has reached crisis level. Cities have become objects of intensive commodification and privatisation of housing, land and public space for the economic gain of powerful corporations,<sup>8</sup> a situation which has led to housing unaffordability, gentrification, displacement and criminality. The negative impacts on citizens has led to explorations of more equitable ways of urban living in order to overcome social and governance issues and, in turn, to the rise of revolutionary social movements aiming at reclaiming control and access over urban resources as commons.

## PRINCIPLES OF URBAN COMMONING

The four key principles of urban commoning as outlined below (and represented in Figure 1) describe the collaborative socio-spatial practices and strong social relationships at the base of political action, and highlight how the quest for spatial justice can be further enabled through the practice of the urban commons.<sup>9</sup>

1st - People	2nd - Places	3rd - Politics	4th - Participation
As urban population increases, tensions and injustice do too. Hence more need and opportunities for commoning in cities.	Cities seen as shared resources; the space of the commons.	The production and management of the commons help imagine new scenarios of governance "it opens up new spaces for politics" (Chatterton, 2010)	Commoning communities need to work with urban professionals and institutions to realize their common projects.

Figure 1. Summary of principles for how urban commoning can support spatial justice.

The first principle outlined is an approach best understood through the term *tactical urbanism* and refers to a practice of commoning that de-commodifies urban spaces.<sup>10</sup> Mike Lydon describes this approach as temporary measures aimed to improve the liveability of small-to-medium scale neighbourhoods.<sup>11</sup> They allow locals to experience short-term, alternative ways of interacting with their urban environment while building new and deeper social connections. Many significant exemplars exist globally, such as the Open Streets initiative in the United States; ReNew Newcastle, a grassroots example from Australia; and "Estonoesunsolar" ("this is not an empty site") in Zaragoza, Spain. These initiatives show how community formation happens simultaneously as urban commons are created, as people come together and find purpose around issues in a communal way.<sup>12</sup>

The second principle identifies urban commons as a socio-spatial manifestation. Felstead et al. use the term "territory"<sup>13</sup> to describe the relationship between the spatial and social components of urban contexts. The territory has a spatial as well as a political connotation, being defined as a geographical space that needs political intervention to be subdivided, organised, managed and accessed by multiple users<sup>14</sup> or, in other words, to be shared. Moreover, urban design theories suggest that communities tend to form around three key dimensions that define their relationship with their physical space: social, democratic, and friendly and safe.<sup>15</sup> The social dimension in particular can be further explained through the concepts of opportunities for interaction, the formation of a healthy social network, conviviality, fun and the development of a sense of belonging for people to feel connected to their neighbours and their living environment.<sup>16</sup>

The third principle aligns to ideas of urban commoning that lead to imagining governance in new ways, both within the long-term, as processes to maintain shared resources, but also as short-term actions to reclaim areas of the city.<sup>17</sup> However, within this context, it is also important to address the limits of short-term urban commoning practices to promote further reflection, experimentation and, most importantly, implementation. Brenner argues that short-term interventions will fail to challenge neoliberal urban practices despite their participatory nature, democratic approach and the enhancement of social connections unless the actors involved (architects, planners and designers) adopt a more systematic approach to collectively understanding and addressing the "rules that govern the production, use, occupation and appropriation of space."<sup>18</sup>

A possible way of overcoming the limits of short-term urban commoning and promoting long-term, systematic change within governing institutions and policies is articulated by Cruz, who argues that the design process can be a powerful tool to re-imagine urban environments, if considered as a collective exercise and cultivated as a shared discipline. This approach can offer teams the power to find new ways to "coproduce the city as well as new models of cohabitation and coexistence to advance agendas of socioeconomic inclusion."<sup>19</sup> This is identified in the fourth principle of urban commoning, reflecting the reality that in recent times more and more professional bodies have shifted their focus in working with community projects from 'problem-solving' to 'sense-making,' supporting and facilitating community groups as they navigate legal frameworks, design work and relationships with stakeholders.

## URBAN COMMONING IN POST-QUAKE ŌTAUTAHI CHRISTCHURCH

Ōtautahi Christchurch has been a laboratory for experimentation and implementation of community engagement within the urban environment since the first of the Canterbury Earthquakes Sequence (CES), which occurred in September 2010. Practices of urban commoning have been at the forefront of the grassroots-led, urban regeneration of the city, with several organisations enabling the collective reimagining of urban governance and co-design practices through transitional projects and bottom-up initiatives.

### Tactical urbanism and collaborative engagement practices: The Transitional City-Making Movement

More than 13 years after the first of the CES that brought devastation and loss to the city of Christchurch between September 2010 and June 2012, the city is still entertaining its residents and visitors with pop-up, transitional installations that activate and beautify some of its most prominent corners in the Central Business District.

Gap Filler was the first grassroots organisation to grasp and act upon the importance of bringing temporary, engaging and community-focused activities to the sites left vacant by the many demolitions that followed the earthquakes, ushering what then evolved into a collaborative, prolific, grassroots city-making movement.<sup>20</sup> Over the years, Gap Filler evolved into an “award-winning place-making and urban regeneration social enterprise,”<sup>21</sup> delivering hundreds of public installations around Ōtautahi Christchurch and New Zealand in collaboration with local organisations, as well as local and central government.

In 2012, the Life in Vacant Spaces Charitable Trust (LiVS) was created following a report highlighting the barriers to property owners’ participation and the need for a dedicated organisation to support the urban and social recovery of Ōtautahi Christchurch.<sup>22</sup> To date, LiVS has contributed to the realisation of over 700 projects and has collaborated with Crown-owned organisations such as Ōtākaro Limited, Regenerate Christchurch and council development company Development Christchurch (DCL).<sup>23</sup>

The Dahlias project (see Figure 2), a six-meter-long installation on privately owned land waiting for development, is one of the latest among hundreds of transitional projects that have been funded by Christchurch City Council (CCC) through the Enliven Places Programme Budget.<sup>24</sup> It illustrates the results of the fruitful collaboration between grassroots organisations and local councils, populating, enriching and activating vacant sites in Ōtautahi Christchurch.

### The Festival of Transitional Architecture: urban experimentation and re-claiming the central city

The first significant outcome generated by the collaboration between grassroots organisations, Christchurch City Council, construction companies, community groups and architecture and design schools from across New Zealand was the October 2012 Festival of Transitional Architecture (FESTA). The festival was conceived of, and directed by, architectural historian Dr Jessica Halliday – who then founded Te Pūtahi, The Christchurch Centre for Architecture and City-Making, a post-quake charity dedicated to promoting a better, fairer urban environment through engagement and collaboration.<sup>25</sup> The eight-day festival consisted of free lectures, architecture tours, open-air concerts, family activities and conversations focused on raising awareness of civic engagement, whereby everyone can contribute to the discourse about rebuilding the city and what the city could become.<sup>26</sup> Professor Uwe Rieger, the curator of FESTA’s main event, Luxcity – which involved over 350 architecture and design students in creating 16 large-scale luminous installations supported by cranes and intended to host pop-up activities – described it in this way:

FESTA is right in the global trend which is doing investigation around adaptive urbanism and user generator planning. I believe Architecture education has to change towards a much more collaborative model and this is what we can practice here in Christchurch, but this is also where we can learn from the different community groups and activities which are currently going on in Christchurch.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 2. Dahlias project in Christchurch CBD.



Figure 3. LUXCITY - Festival of Transitional Architecture 2012.

FESTA was a celebration of the re-appropriation and reconnection of the people of Ōtautahi Christchurch with their severely damaged public realm; it magnified the ways in which collaborative engagement can lead to positive and meaningful interactions between the public and their urban environment.

### Indigenous knowledge and cultural narratives: identity and inclusion in the CBD

The rebuild in Ōtautahi Christchurch provided a unique opportunity for the city to be the first, globally, to embed indigenous knowledge into the regeneration of its urban environment at such a large scale. Matapopore Charitable Trust was established in 2014 by Ngāi Tūāhuriri – the local hapu of Ngāi Tahu, the main rūnanga (tribal authority) of the South Island of New Zealand – and aimed to promote and nurture the inclusion of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), indigenous values and narratives in the Ōtautahi Christchurch post-quake rebuild:

Ngāi Tahu made history after the earthquakes, finding themselves in the globally unique position of being the first Indigenous group to be an official partner in recovery following a major disaster. And you can see their presence all around the city now in the form of public art, signage, landmarks and even its Māori name, Ōtautahi, which is quite remarkable when you think Christchurch has always been regarded as the 'most colonial English' of our cities.<sup>28</sup>

Through collaboration with architects and with a focus on landscape design, the Trust worked to embed cultural stories, values and identity into the rebuilt city, creating a more inclusive and culturally vibrant urban landscape, enriched with the stories of mana whenua woven into the new fabric of the city. This was expressed in the landscape through patterns, sculptures and symbols,<sup>29</sup> as well as through the anchor projects that were being planned for the CBD.

An example of indigenous knowledge embedded within architectural language is Te Pae Convention Centre, which is designed around five key Māori kaupapa (principles), expressed in its spaces, materials and artworks:<sup>30</sup>

1. **Whakapapa** – identity and connection to place.
2. **Manaakitanga** – hospitality, respect and care for others.
3. **Mahinga kai** – knowledge and values associated with customary food-gathering places and practices.
4. **Mana motuhake** – being able to act with independence and autonomy, being ourselves in our places.
5. **Ture wairua** – being able to exercise spirituality and faith.<sup>31</sup>

Matapopore Charitable Trust successfully led the integration of Māori narratives into the new fabric of the Christchurch CBD, transforming the urban environment into a canvas for indigenous inclusion and cultural expression.<sup>32</sup>





Figure 4. Māori patterns embedded into the landscape in Christchurch CBD.



Figure 5. Te Pae Convention Centre.

## COMMUNITY-LED URBAN REGENERATION IN SUBURBAN AREAS

The Sumner Community-Led Masterplan emerged very early in the aftermath of the February 2011 earthquake as a bottom-up response to the significant loss of built environment and services that the Sumner community suffered.<sup>33</sup> The Sumner Urban Design Group (SUDG), formed by Irene Boles, Eugenio Boidi, Max Capocaccia and Stephen Fitzgerald, produced two draft masterplan proposals between March and August 2011. These were informed by community feedback, as well as knowledge that was kindly and voluntarily shared by landscape architects, structural engineers, traffic engineers, geotechnical engineers, planners and historians.<sup>34</sup>

Community engagement played a crucial role in shaping the Sumner Masterplan. Public meetings, interactive feedback sessions and surveys were conducted to gather input from residents, business owners and other stakeholders. This inclusive approach was successful in capturing the diverse perspectives and needs of the community, ensuring that the masterplan reflected the collective vision for the future of Sumner.<sup>35</sup> Two significant long-term built outcomes emerged from the masterplan: Matuku Takotako Sumner Centre and Te Ara Ihutai Christchurch Coastal Pathway. Matuku Takotako Sumner Centre, designed by Athfield Architects following significant consultation with the Sumner community, replaced three separate pre-earthquake venues: the Sumner library, community facility and museum. The co-design process started in 2012, when a group of Sumner community members and volunteers formed a Joint Advisory Group (JAG) to coordinate with CCC over the design of the new building, which was inaugurated on 19 August 2017.<sup>36</sup>

The Christchurch Coastal Pathway Group (CCPG) was formed during the Sumner Community-Led Masterplan days and became an incorporated society and registered charity in 2012. The group guided the fundraising and design process leading to the finalisation, in late 2023, of a 6.5km, shared-use accessible path. Connecting the suburbs of Ferrymead and Sumner, the pathway provided a safe pedestrian and cycling route to enhance sustainable transport for residents and tourists.<sup>37</sup>

Another community-led project that culminated in the creation of Albion Square in Lyttelton, started as a local initiative, facilitated by Gap Filler, to create a temporary public space.<sup>38</sup> Seating areas, a sand pit, pétanque pitch and community garden were created on the site of the former Albion Hotel. The project quickly became a focal point for community gatherings, events and activities. In 2012, CCC purchased the land from its private owners, following a public consultation process to inform the suburb's masterplan, which highlighted the need for a permanent, public space for the community. In November 2014, Albion Square was finally inaugurated as a permanent public, community space.<sup>39</sup>

## EVALUATION OF CASE STUDIES AGAINST URBAN COMMONING PRINCIPLES

The projects described in this paper encompass the four principles of urban commoning (see Figure 1), demonstrating their relevance and validity in the quest to achieve a positive, inclusive, long-term regeneration of the urban realm of Ōtautahi Christchurch. The activities of Gap Filler; LiVS and FESTA in particular, through their grassroots approach, have enabled communities to reclaim participation in the future of the urban environment after a major natural disaster through inclusion and experimentation with short-term, tactical urbanism activities. This is demonstrated through projects like Albion Square, which evolved into a permanent public space created by the community, for the community.

The work of the Matapopore Charitable Trust in the central city and the SUDG in Sumner have shown how governance can be re-imagined to be more inclusive and democratic through co-design processes, and how social connections and a collective, collaborative approach among urban realm specialists can lead to meaningful, long-lasting, successful outcomes. Furthermore, the importance of local governance as a tool for the inclusion of a diversity of socio-economic groups in the decision-making processes about urban matters is stressed by Polese and Stren:

Urban policies conducive to social sustainability must, among other things, seek to bring people together, to weave the various parts of the city into a cohesive whole, and to increase accessibility (spatial and otherwise) to public services and employment, within the framework, ideally, of a local governance structure which is democratic, efficient, and equitable.<sup>40</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the positive impact of urban commoning practices in building community resilience and promoting grassroots action in the urban context of post-earthquake Ōtautahi Christchurch. The case studies demonstrate how communities can come together to challenge the status quo and create alternative governance models that prioritise the needs of citizens over profit-driven interests. By applying principles of urban commoning, including self-organisation, participatory decision-making and equitable distribution of resources, communities can create more a sustainable, inclusive urban environment.

The approaches implemented in the case studies discussed in this paper could be applied to other urban contexts facing similar challenges. Likewise, the urban commoning framework provides theoretical validity in the quest to promote spatial justice in the urban environment. The right to the city is fundamental for all citizens and, by working together, communities can create positive change and promote a more sustainable and just urban future for all.

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**Submissions** for *Scope (Art & Design)* are invited from artists, designers, curators, writers, theorists and historians. Submissions should be sent by 30 April for review and potential inclusion in the annual issue to: Jane Venis (Editor: jane.venis@op.ac.nz) or to scope.editorial@op.ac.nz.

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High standards of writing, proofreading and adherence to consistency through the Chicago referencing style are expected. For more information, please refer to the Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition; and consult prior issues for examples. A short biography of no more than 50 words; as well as title; details concerning institutional position and affiliation (where relevant); contact information (postal, email and telephone number) and ORCID number should be provided on a cover sheet, with all such information withheld from the body of the submission. Low resolution images with full captions should be inserted into texts to indicate where they would be preferred, while high resolution images should be sent separately.

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