There is a conventional wisdom that a crisis is a rallying point and gives the community a shared sense of purpose.

Think of the floods, droughts and bushfires which have plagued this land and the outpouring of help and donations that follow. Cities and towns across the country have experienced the devastation of natural disaster and seemingly have risen to the challenge and years on appear to be all the stronger for it.

The city of Christchurch is a prime example of a community that pulled together to get through the devastating aftermath of a severe magnitude 6.3 earthquake, centred directly below the city, in February 2011.

The earthquake destroyed much of the city’s fabric and claimed 185 lives. Masonry topped, multi-storey buildings collapsed, infrastructure disintegrated and soil liquefied causing flooding and the inundation of thousands of homes.

And, while literally living on the shaky ground delivered by multiple aftershocks, the community immediately
rallied. People spontaneously reached out to connect with neighbours in need, sharing resources and supporting each other with generosity and compassion – for weeks and even months as the city mopped up.

But, how much and for how long can a community endure? And what are the long term impacts, for the community and the city, of a disaster of this magnitude?

As a researcher of cities I got the opportunity to see the impacts first hand, and test the notions of community resilience outside of my own backyard during a recent visit to Christchurch for the first time post quake.

I arrived at midnight to a hotel I had stayed at previously but argued with the taxi driver saying that he had bought me to the wrong place. Nothing looked familiar.

He said: “Madam, I assure you I have brought you to the right place it’s just that Christchurch isn’t the same anymore.” Previously the hotel had been in a street of tall buildings, now it stood alone.

I will be spending the day with colleagues but before they arrive I do a quick walk downtown and see buildings back to use along with holes in the ground where construction is about to begin but more often than not I see buildings that are either awaiting demolition or repair.

For those buildings that have already gone their vacant sites have been turned into car parks, public art installations or even grassed areas. It seems that there is a pregnant pause while futures are decided.

I am particularly impressed with the Re:Start Mall which is the high street reinstated as a pop up mall of shops and cafes made out of shipping containers. The mall opened less than a year after the earthquake and is surprisingly cool and vibrant. There are more young families with babies in strollers than I can count. A lot of youth and energy among the cracked pavement and temporary structures, providing a sense of optimism and
innovation in contrast to the uncertainty echoed by its surrounds.

On the walk back to the hotel I stand and stare at the Cathedral, once the true heart of the city now standing like a well-loved child’s toy with bits missing and other parts crumbling, but with its body still intact.

Our host for the day is Robert Consedine, a long term Christchurch resident who has only just secured a new permanent home after the earthquake – such is the delay of settling insurance claims and finding a suitable place to live. Along for the quake tour is a research colleague and friend who lives near Queenstown and she is keen to get an insider’s perspective.

As we walk to Robert’s car he tells us that the hotel I am staying in only reopened again late last year. The staff had told me that it needed repair works but that the buildings either side had to be demolished which caused delays in getting back to trading.

We set off through the inner city and navigation is a constant headache with routes that were open last week now closed so there is lots of tutting as we swing around and take lots of detours. Out the car window I see houses that are completely intact and full of life along with others that have boarded up windows and doors which are clearly abandoned.

As we get out of the city limits our drive takes us further into the suburbs along roads that are so bumpy it takes a steady hand on the steering wheel to keep the car in check. Our destination is the Red Zone which is land that was so damaged by the earthquake it is unlikely it can be rebuilt on. Government compensation packages have been paid in these areas and whole neighbourhoods sit, abandoned, a mixture of derelict buildings and weed covered lots.

Sadly though, alongside the red zone lie homes and businesses whose future is yet to be decided and whose owners are in limbo. Still awaiting decisions on insurance and infrastructure repairs, families continue to live in damaged houses now prone to flooding due to average drops in the ground level of between 20cm and 30cm as a result of the earthquake, leaving many houses sitting lower than the water level of the adjacent river.

Robert describes how community resolve is being tested in these areas, with many people facing an uncertain future, unable either to repair the damage to their homes or move forward to a new life, all the while watching their urban environment crumble around them.

We plough on to the cliff top suburb of Sumner and are greeted by containers lining the road which act as a buffer between further landslides and the passing traffic. A gaze upwards sees houses precariously hanging over the edge.

A drive up the winding road has us looking out across the valley to the beach and coastline and admiring what a lovely place it is. However I am not sure how safe I, or many other people, would feel living there and you have to wonder about the price you would get if you wanted to sell up and move to safer terra firma.
On our way back we see so many new commercial and housing estates which have allowed Christchurch to keep functioning but I worry that. When the time comes, Christchurch will struggle to move people and businesses back into the city centre and risk becoming a city of fringe dwellers which lacks a strong heart.

The next leg of the tour takes us to a TC3 area, a government classification meaning that it is prone to moderate to significant damage in further quakes. This area was Robert’s neighbourhood for the past 43 years and includes the site of their old home and a memorial garden to a daughter tragically lost to them 20 years ago. Their home site now faces us as vacant plot of land that holds so many memories not visible to the casual passerby.

He tells us that, while not red zoned, the deep foundations now required to safely build on the property make it cost prohibitive, meaning that they have received an insurance payout for the value of the house but still own the land and are liable for ongoing Council rates.

Robert, forever the optimist, amuses us with his story of the quake bursting a sewerage main right outside their house, sending a plume of raw sewage 30 metres high into the air for days on end. Wading through the city’s waste, they still managed to have a laugh when a wag of a mate called him to tell him that “another one was coming down the line”.

Our last stop is their new home in a new housing estate. I ask him how many of his old neighbours live close by and he tells us none. His wife gives us a warm welcome but her stories of life in Christchurch today depict a community that is unsettled, whose vulnerable are struggling to navigate the maze of insurance, compensation and fractured governance, who have become weary, and who continue to grapple with the emotional impacts of constant physical changes to their city. She speaks with love and care for others worse off than herself, and with sadness for the sense of community that many have lost as a result of being displaced.
Over the two days of my visit the quake was mentioned constantly. It is simply one of those life defining events that has affected everyone and will forever be remembered as a turning point in the city’s history. Christchurch is still grieving and trying to heal more than three years on.

Thinking about the future is difficult when there is still so much immediate need and, understandably, opinions differ about the way forward. The more traditional perspective is to put Christchurch back the way it was before, a charming English style city, yet others are excited by the opportunity to re-imagine Christchurch as a new, innovative 21st century metropolis.

This sentiment is personified by the beautiful Cardboard Cathedral. Designed by post natural disaster specialist architect Shigeru Ban it is one of the few beacons of renewal in the city. It sits in stark contrast to the old Anglican and Catholic Cathedrals which stand proud yet ruined, awaiting decisions on their futures, the subject of emotional tugs of war between the deep desires of people to hold on to fragments of the past, the financial, practical and time constraints of rebuilding, and the dreams for a new future.

Having been to Christchurch a few times before the quake and loved it for its quaintness this time I leave with a heavy heart. I can’t see a clear way forward such is the tension between needing to put one foot in front of the other every day versus taking a longer term perspective. I wish its leaders well in unifying the community and setting a pathway that will serve them well for decades to come.

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