



Civic Trust News

June 2000

All members and friends of the Civic Trust
are cordially invited to attend our

Annual General Meeting

Monday 26 June, 2000

To be held in the

Hearst Seager Room, Christchurch Arts Centre

Cnr Rolleston Ave & Hereford St

The meeting will commence

at 6.00 p.m.

This will be followed by an address by

Roger Buck,

NZIA, RIBA, Dip. Arch.

A member of the N.Z. Institute of Architects,
Canterbury Branch Heritage Committee whose topic will be

“Housing as an amenity in a technological age”

Bring a friend

Light refreshments will be served from 5.30 pm.

Revitalising the Central City

There are strong signs that the inner city may soon get some of the ingredients it needs to survive and thrive. This is a matter that the Civic Trust has been deeply concerned about for at least ten years.

In our June 1999 issue of Civic Trust News, I indicated that the University of Canterbury was planning to re-establish a presence in the inner city from whence it came. It has now announced that it will lease the Bellamys wing of the old Provincial Council Buildings. Bellamys, located on the banks of the Avon River, has been carefully restored by the Council making it an extremely attractive venue for University continuing education activities. The prospect for further University activities in the city in the future is also possible.

The City Council is also collaborating with a private developer to establish a bus interchange station in the redeveloped Arthur Barnett's and Cashfields sites in Lichfield Street. The Civic Trust has for some time been promoting such a concept for the inner city at that time we were focussed on the "Little Bosnia" site behind the Cathedral. The purpose of this concept is to create greater convenience and comfort for bus passengers; it also avoids having Cathedral Square looking like a big terminal for public transport.

The proposed development has two weaknesses. Firstly, the site is barely large enough to handle large buses; secondly, the buses will have to exit to Colombo Street by travelling west – against the designated flow of Lichfield Street's one-way traffic! No doubt the traffic signals will be programmed to provide an extra phase to enable this, but this will cause traffic delays. Perhaps the time is ripe for implementing the concept of the late John Huggins – which is to move the one-way street to Tuam Street. This would also enable an extension to the Oxford Terrace pedestrian precinct.

None-the-less the bus interchange, together with the other associated commercial developments and car park, will increase activity in this part of the city.

The Christchurch Star reported "Mayor wants \$20m to help revive central city" – this to be funded from the sale of Orion's gas network. The Mayor "and his central city board" believe that the central city needs a commercially oriented development board to buy properties, consolidate properties, produce development plans and create projects of a public nature. This board would be expected to bring financial and social returns.

On the face of it, this all seems very encouraging. A mayor who wants to be pro-active in revitalising the central business district and is prepared to financially assist to bring this about. But we need to be aware that

some of the proposals, and indeed some of the developments that are proceeding, will not necessarily protect our heritage buildings, cityscape or open spaces. It would appear that a number of piecemeal city developments have proceeded because a developer has sold the idea to the council. The proposals are not always the best possible option for the city.

The new bus interchange is probably an improvement on what we have but, for the reasons mentioned above, it may prove to be inadequate. The tram route through Cathedral Square was as a result of a developer's scheme at a time when the Square was being re-planned by the Council. Rather than creating a plan to bring the Square up to a high standard and then fitting the tram into the plan, the tram and the Cathedral's new visitor centre forced Square plans to accommodate them.

The Christchurch Heritage Trust has already shown that it can successfully purchase heritage properties, restore them to a good standard, establish a new commercial life for them to make them an attractive investment. The Excelsior Hotel building has proved to be a fine asset for the city. Perhaps the Council should support this organisation in its work rather than set up another similar group – particularly when it comes to preservation of heritage buildings. The proposed development board would have enough scope in developing the large number of non-heritage sites in the inner city.

The Christchurch City Council can be reassured by the recent reader survey taken by the "Christchurch Star" that a large proportion was in favour of preserving the city's heritage buildings.

At last some progress appears to have been made on the sale of the uncompleted John Britten "Cathedral Junction" development (aka "Little Bosnia"). This, together with progress on ensuring the future of the heritage precinct in the northeast corner of the Square, may signal a rosier future for business in the city.

A further note of encouragement comes from the Latimer Community Trust that is concerned with the lack of low-cost rental accommodation in the inner city. The Trust plans to purchase existing properties east of Latimer Square and renovate them to preserve their character. Apart from retaining some of the residential heritage character of this part of the city, it also provides affordable inner city living. This will increase business and, perhaps bringing parishioners back to some of our fine historic churches.

Ronald L Fussell

Bricks & Brickbats

The Christchurch City Council on 26 December 1999 announced the appointment of an eleven-person board to revitalise the dying town followed next day by the Mayor who spoke of "making the centre of Christchurch the centre of an international city."

If the economic well being is the only goal, turning Christchurch into say a mini Los Angeles is unacceptable with all the social problems New Zealand travellers describe. What then will return prosperity to our town? Mostly tourism, along with inner city living.

Locally tourist figures are up with more Asian groups about the streets. However, apart from those south-bound for scenery and snow sports, what attracts the other camera clickers? Simply it is because Christchurch in the midst of the South Pacific is an oddity, a small strange enclave that has retained several of its historic buildings. Buildings that ought to be kept for two reasons, the second a hardheaded financial one – to earn overseas dollars.

Every historic building put to the wrecking-ball indirectly robs the city of foreign exchange. Besides, such buildings are inevitably replaced by structures architecturally worse and often no more economically viable.

Consider that gross architectural disgrace under construction, the Park Terrace apartments, that earlier aroused protest and with the developer now publicly admitting to the financial and emotional cost. An example of quote "elegant towers" that when built translated into shapeless boxes, the type of Hong Kong high-rise from which Asian tourists are temporarily escaping.

Doubtless the developer would now wish planning consent had been refused, as does every concerned citizen.

Meanwhile, near neighbours, the two historic houses on the corner of Park Terrace and Bealey Avenue are under threat. A contradictory situation, on one hand ten storey apartment blocks that should never have received council building approval, whilst along Park Terrace two of the best remaining historic examples of Edwardian domestic architecture are doomed, if a council hearing for a demolition order succeeds.

At a public meeting to save these buildings (22 May 2000), slide talks were a prelude to launching a buy-a-brick appeal. With 200,000 plus bricks to sell, this was a useful step towards public awareness of the buildings' plight.

That same week Historic Places Trust and the Civic Trust appeared with near thirty other dissenters opposing the demolition at a three-day council hearing. There

nevertheless seems need for more than lip service and notional bricks but rather serious donations from the concerned.

After Heritage Trust's reported success rescuing High Street Excelsior Hotel with a financial return now flowing back it is said, they must now be poised for their next White Knight project, the Fleming and McKellar houses mayhap.

Another suggestion (if economic) is to sell one building as a private residence to finance the second leased out as professional rooms or for community groups. Alternatively, plans already on a drawing board show one house converted to apartments with other low-rise flats facing Dublin Street, off Park Terrace, and built below the roofline of the heritage building.

Such a scheme previously thought marginal, with sharpened pencil, some council bridging finances and say rate relief is worth fresh consideration. Such a prime site, sold at realistic prices, must be an attractive proposition.

Collectively the houses have a better survival chance than did the demolished stand alone Kaiapoi Woollen Mills building and is a reason the redevelopment of the building cluster on northeast side of the Square will finally succeed.

Recently citizens spoke out through the Star newspaper on preservation or demolition of historic local buildings. The surprise result overwhelmingly favouring preservation. This should not be lost on our city's mothers and fathers when considering the preservation of their own seats at the next local election.

"City Scene", a council newspaper distributed to householders, in their April edition say they plan a special Historic Building Emergency fund with \$200,000 paid in annually. This comes at an opportune time possibly a reaction to a public groundswell and hinting at other than an "international city".

The Star (24 May 2000) quotes the Mayor – who chairs the central city board that has worked behind the scenes for months – as saying they are seeking \$20,000 from the Orion sale for the central city revival.

When these background discussions are made public this secret plan will at last be disclosed. These plans in the overall must not exclude the mix of public money and public wishes that will play a part in enticing people into city living. Preserving the two Park Terrace historic homes is all important in attracting tourism and the foreign dollar to this unusual Pacific venue that is more than Mayor Moore's international city.

Norman Barrett

The Mysterious and Elusive Green Belt.

In the days of the jurisdiction of the 1953 Town and Country Planning Act many of us thought we had a green belt around much of Christchurch. We knew there was a green belt or town reserve around part of Dunedin and also in Wellington. We understood these were created by an Act of Parliament, which meant that they were protected from residential encroachment.

In Christchurch however no such strong protection was in place – rather we had to rely on zoning the land. That is, land around the edges of the city was controlled in its use by zoning, usually rural, which precluded urban encroachment.

Of course there were exceptions and the Waimairi District Council decided that generally no additional houses could be built on less than five acres (2.02 Hectares). Thus a “green belt” boundary around part of the city was created but it was always subject to pressure by “developers” and others.

I believe that when Norman Kirk was Prime Minister he was considering the establishment of a statutory green belt, but his premature death ended this scheme to the great disappointment of many people at the time.

Then came the Resource Management Act and any ideas of a statutory or zoned green belt went out of the window. Put simply, if the citizens through their council wanted a green belt then in the main they had to buy the land to achieve this purpose.

But why have a green belt? In the main I believe it was to achieve three purposes.

1. To create an obvious boundary to the city such that when approaching it is obvious that you are passing from country to town – you know you have arrived. Such a situation pertains in many European towns and cities.

2. To prevent sporadic urban sprawl leading to inefficient use of resources and infrastructure such as water supply, sewage disposal, transport and energy.
3. To protect valuable soils, now called versatile, from urban use and thus preserve them for food production – such soils being a very finite commodity.

Well, what is happening now since the enactment of the Resource Management Act?

It has taken time, but the Christchurch City Council has been quietly working to create a “green corridor” or green link around Christchurch to continue what for instance Waimairi District Council began, with the purchase of Avonhead Park. This process was further enhanced when the Civic Trust raised funds for the purchase of Mt Vernon Park. Now the scheme is to have much of the Port Hills, from Halswell to Godley Head, in public ownership.

The green link would continue from Ferrymead, the Estuary, Travis Wet Land, Styx Basin, around the airport and hopefully to Halswell. Of course some of the expressway corridors e.g. Queen Elizabeth Drive also add to the green ring.

With all this in place we achieve two main purposes.

1. A relatively compact city where boundaries are defined by an attractive natural buffer zone.
2. The natural features of the city will be enhanced, enabling wild life to survive and increase and to enable the citizens to enjoy the creatures that used to abound in the area.

Cities can be soulless places, but with green areas in close proximity people can escape the noise and stress of city streets and relax in pleasant, natural surroundings without travelling great distances.

Ian Clark

Apology

The Editor regrets that due to unforeseen technical problems production of this issue was delayed. My apologies for any inconvenience.

THE CHRISTCHURCH CIVIC TRUST INC.

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The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Christchurch Civic Trust Inc.