

# OPINION

**OPINION: Christchurch, New Zealand, shares many characteristics with London, Ontario. What if destruction by a natural disaster were one of them?**

## Eerie parallel

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The iconic namesake Christ Church Cathedral remains in ruins three years after an earthquake devastated much of the central business district of Christchurch, New Zealand. (Gord Hume photo)

Three years ago this day, 10 seconds changed forever Christchurch, New Zealand.

A 6.3-magnitude earthquake followed another earthquake in the region the year before. This time, the devastation was massive. The death toll was 185.

The city is still far from recovered, as a visit last month showed. Guesses are that it will take 50 years. It will be the largest insurance

claim in the history of the world, nearly \$5 billion.

The cost to rebuild is now estimated at \$40 billion to \$50 billion. Half of the city's 220 buildings over five storeys and a thousand of the city's 4,000 buildings were destroyed or have been torn down.

The Central Business District (CBD), or downtown, just reopened last year.

It is an eerie experience to walk the streets in the CBD. Locals have abandoned the downtown, and few shops or restaurants are open. Those close about 4:30 p.m., and finding a place for dinner is a challenge.

The lovely Anglican cathedral that for a century anchored a vibrant downtown plaza had its spire sheared away, and the stained glass shattered. It now sits open to the birds and elements, supported by an ugly metal structure and surrounded by a colourful fence, while the diocese and heritage advocates fight in court about its future. City departments drift murkily in the background.

There is an overwhelming feeling of despair when you are in the CBD. Buildings sit empty. A once-thriving downtown has seen most of its offices, hotels, residences and commercial buildings either demolished or abandoned. Rubble is still everywhere, and the most valuable assets may be large metal shipping containers.

Most streets, sewer and water lines, the electricity grid and other infrastructure were damaged beyond repair. The city has to spend vast amounts of money in two or three years instead of the 20-to 30-year replacement cycle. No one is sure where all the money will come from.

The police station was red-tagged (that is, deemed for demolition). City hall survived. The city art museum, a stunning structure, became headquarters for the rescue, and then recovery, efforts.

## **THE LONDON CONNECTION**

Christchurch is exactly the same size as London. To help you understand their devastation, think of it this way: Imagine if our downtown was abruptly closed from Horton to Oxford streets and the river to Adelaide St. You couldn't enter that zone. No one except emergency personnel. No exceptions.

Block after block of homes east of Adelaide (I am trying to draw similar parallels to the Christchurch experience) are red-tagged and declared unlivable. Some 10,000 homes will have to be destroyed. Neighbourhoods are finished. Families and lives are changed forever. Your job is gone. You need to find accommodation, food, shelter, the family pet. How would you react?

The impact on families and lives would be devastating. Businesses closed. No money coming in. No services. No transportation. No water. No electricity. No waste water facilities.

Tourists who had gone on a day-trip return to find they didn't have a hotel room because the hotel is gone. No access to passports, medicine, money.

Months later, the red zone is reduced to perhaps York St. to Central Ave., Waterloo to Talbot streets. You are prohibited from entering that area for the next 18 months.

How would that change London? How would we respond? How would lives and traffic patterns change? What would happen to businesses?

At the same time, most of west London is unscathed. Life and business continue. After the initial shock wears off and the natural instinct to help your neighbour in time of need is offered, how long before bitterness and acrimony descend? That is happening now in Christchurch, where there are quite different views from people depending on where in the city they live.

As a former elected official, I spent time while in Christchurch thinking about London's emergency responses, and how city council might have reacted. It was a sobering moment. We have well-trained and dedicated emergency personnel and procedures, but in the face of such a massive disruption of our city, how would we respond?

## **CHRISTCHURCH'S FUTURE**

The city is recovering slowly. The full downtown reopened last year. Smart young entrepreneurs have created "ReStart Mall", where shipping containers have been converted into little stores and food outlets.

The "Cardboard Cathedral," a temporarily church partially constructed of cardboard tubes, was built for \$5 million and a lot of volunteer help to replace the destroyed cathedral.

Pipes and electrical lines are being replaced, although streets remain a jumble of orange traffic cones and disrupted traffic patterns. Locals hate them.

Prices are very high in New Zealand, and even more so in Christchurch. A hotel room is several hundred dollars; a simple dinner for two is over a hundred dollars. Rent is expensive, about \$800 a week for modest accommodations. There are simply few alternatives.

There is a booming market for tradespeople, many of whom have come from Ireland, central Europe and other locations. Sadly, there

was also a boom market in charlatans and con men after the earthquake; a lot of homeowners got taken when they were at their most vulnerable.

Shockingly, there are still insurance claims unpaid and there is growing anger about the treatment of some property owners by the government and/or the insurance industry. Most homeowners took a payout based on a 2010 assessment of their property, but the inevitable red tape has delayed some settlements. The business community has been slow to rebuild because there is no traffic downtown. There is talk of limiting buildings to seven storeys.

Hope is emerging. There is a growing sentiment that the city has the rare opportunity to rebuild and do it right. There is talk about a large ecopark, a precinct for sports, another one for arts and cultural facilities. Like London, Christchurch had turned its back on the river that runs through it, and there is now a concept that the CBD could be pivoted to face the river.

Brief patches of bright public art have lightened the gloom, and played an important role in breathing life back into the community. The people are resilient. Christchurch is coming back to life. Slowly.

*Gord Hume, a former city councillor in London, is an author and speaker on civic issues, including the creative city concept. He was in Christchurch as part of a trip studying cities in Oceania. His next book, Places and Spaces, will be published this summer.*