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**STUDIO**  **CHRISTCHURCH**

Summer School 2014



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**FOREWORD**

*The Polycentric City: What does it Mean for Christchurch*  
*Dushko Bogunovich, and Jeanette Budgett*

## THE POLYCENTRIC CITY

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR CHRISTCHURCH

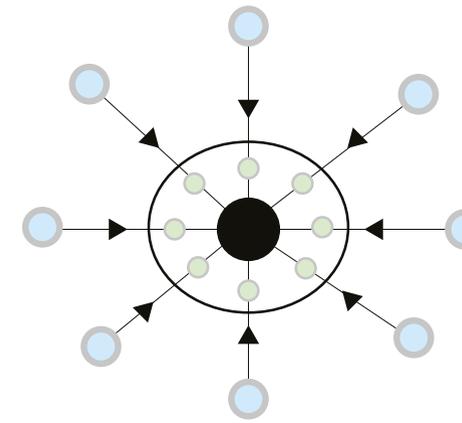
The Polycentric City theme of the 2014 Summer School addressed a much broader Christchurch area than the inaugural 2013 Summer School, which reflected on the Blueprint plan for the CBD and, in particular, its major feature - the Green Frame.

Almost three years after the Second Earthquake, it is becoming clearer that the CBD has a long way to go to full recovery. It may take 20 rather than 10 years before a new Central City Christchurch emerges from the present wasteland. That poses the question whether there are alternative, or additional, strategies beyond the Blueprint. Larger Christchurch has more centres of activity than the CBD. And indeed, some of them are manifesting themselves quite robustly already. They are also proliferating in numbers, to the point that Christchurch increasingly looks like a textbook example of ‘doughnut city’ – an urban area with functional suburbs, but an almost empty core.

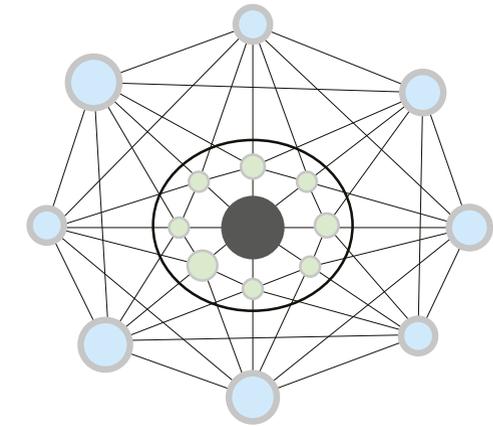
This year’s Summer School opted to investigate the ‘polycentricity’ of Christchurch – whether as real, potential, or desirable - in an attempt, not to undermine the hard work of rebuilding the Centre, but to make propositions complementary to the Blueprint. The three studios interrogated the concept itself; what it means in an era of rampant urban sprawl and the quest for sustainability; and whether Christchurch’s given physical conditions offer specific opportunities not present in other cities.

Polycentricity is not only possible in Christchurch: it already exists – as you would expect in a city of this size, with such flat topography and such low density. Before the earthquakes, it manifested itself mostly in the form of one dominant CBD and many suburban sub-centres. These sub-centres were originally modest local shopping centres with community facilities, but over the past 20 or 30 years some of them morphed into shopping malls, which now anchor the major suburban centres. After the earthquake, the city all but lost the main centre – the CBD – while the existing malls prospered. Compounded by the housing shortage, and the Council’s allocation of new green field sites for residential developments on the fringe of the city, new suburban centres are appearing further out from the centre.

Polycentricity is also desirable in Christchurch. The city is growing horizontally more than ever and the CBD is proving to be less accessible for a growing number of people. What this studio has shown is that polycentric development is not only possible but likely very desirable at the inner city scale. The successful recovery of Addington and Sydenham shows that these original inner suburbs of Christchurch retain a strong role to play in the economic and cultural life of the city. In fact, they may be crucial in the recovery of the CBD – which at the moment seems to be in trouble. Short of some financial miracle, the CBD will not



MONO-CENTRIC CITY



POLY-CENTRIC CITY

#### MONOCENTRIC vs POLYCENTRIC

recover within the predicted decade as the initial government estimates suggested. Consequently, it is proposed here that the inner suburbs – such as Addington, Riccarton, Sydenham, and perhaps even Waltham and Linwood – will recover first. This means that the recovery of Christchurch may take two distinct stages, each taking about a decade. First, a cluster of small pockets inside the CBD and a number of old suburban centres just outside the CBD will regenerate; followed by the CBD overall and the rest of the CBD fringe will develop.

The three studios that comprised the 2014 Summer School have taken quite different angles at the subject of Polycentric Christchurch. The Christchurch Theatre District (CTD) looked into a single pocket of the new CBD and argued the case for a cluster of city-boosting activities which, once established, would radiate its rehabilitating energy to other parts of the CBD. The Sydenham East 2020 (SYDM-E) studio endeavored to re-populate the once residential Borough of Sydenham, as well as recover its industrial past, all towards creating a ‘green-tech innovation hub’ as an entry point for Christchurch into the ‘green knowledge economy’. The Christchurch Polycentric City (CPC) studio accepted the dominant

presence of the Big Malls in the late 20th century urban landscape but made a heroic effort to turn the areas by and around the malls into proper town centres, where life does not necessarily revolve around shopping.

Each of the three studios generated some specific fresh insights.

The CTD project seems to lend some credibility to the proposition that the CBD – even in this reduced, 21st century version – is too big to recover all at once. There just isn't enough demand and the costs of development are extraordinary. It seems more realistic that a few selected corners or hubs in the CBD have a 'natural' advantage and this is where CCC and CERA should focus their energies till 2020.

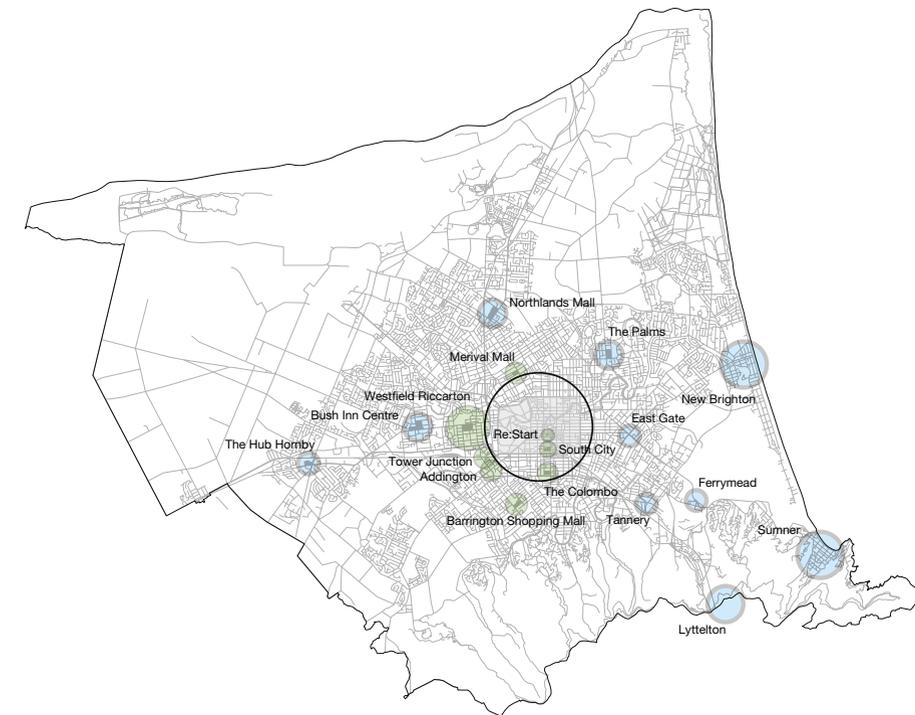
The SYDM-E studio set out to demonstrate that Sydenham east of Colombo is a very special area and deserves to be a hub in its own right. The entire 'borough' has a great location and significant history, and the urban fabric pattern east of Colombo is very amenable to modifications in line with the advancing 'green and smart' design and 'green and smart' technology wave. Consciously planned as a 'greenovation cluster', Sydenham East could lead the economic recovery of Christchurch south of the CBD.

The CPC project has shown that not all is lost with malls sucking in life from the street – the time has come for Christchurch to think of itself as a collection of towns, each one with its own centre. In such conception of the entire structure of the city, it is quite plausible that Christchurch could have dozen or more local downtowns, operating as well rounded civic, retail and business hubs.

It is however, even more interesting to speculate what all three studios might mean together.

If we assume that polycentric development is indeed 'natural' for a city of this size, and of such low-density, low-rise form, and that it does not necessarily weaken the original city centre (CBD) - then we can discern a subtle but very important signal in all three studios outcomes:

***In Christchurch, the polycentricity is potentially a very sophisticated and finely balanced game of multiple hierarchies, reinforced with an amazing functional and physical variety and diversity.***



#### **POLYCENTRIC CITY**

*The structure of Christchurch's system of centres.*

Put in simpler terms, in Christchurch we can see sub-centres at least at three spatial levels:

- inside the CBD;
- just outside the CBD (the original, early 20th Century suburbs);
- in the outer suburban belt (the newer, late mid-to-late 20th Century suburbs).

Additionally, at all these levels, if we look carefully, we notice how different these places are in terms of what they look like, how they got to be what they are, and what they do for living.

Drawing on Christchurch's famous original town plan layout as a grid with diagonals, in an oblong (the 'Union Jack' 8-directional radial pattern), we could present this configuration in the following manner:

But even this is an oversimplification. Although the city-regional scale was not the subject of this Summer School's studios – we are aware of two more spatial levels

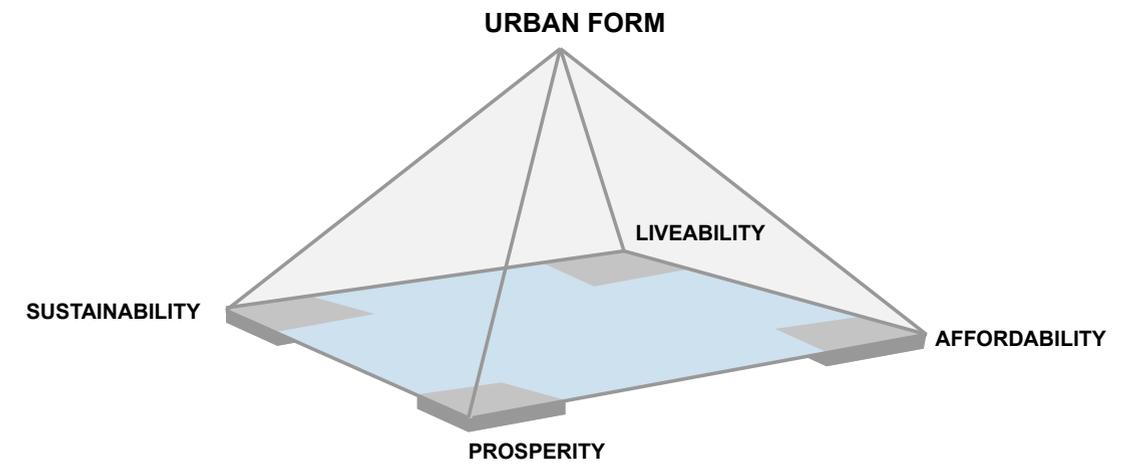
of polycentric development. One is at the outer urban fringe, in the form of the presently growing and emerging ‘most recent’ suburbs (e.g Hornby). The other one is outside the city, in its peri-urban belt; these are the old and new satellite towns, villages and subdivisions. They have been there for a while but have gotten a big boost in the aftermath of the earthquakes.

Rather than despair over the apparently un-containable ‘urban sprawl’ – a relentless force over the past 50 years, turned into a ‘tsunami’ after the earthquake! – perhaps the local and regional authorities should direct their attention and their energies at the **potential that lies in the Flat Polycentric City** in front of us? Would it not be more effective to steer the seemingly anarchic -but in fact quite organic, and therefore imbued with some inner logic - constellation of all these centres towards the best social, economic and environmental outcomes for the city of Christchurch and the region of Canterbury?

Recent developments in the theories of urban form and urban planning, triggered by observed trends in information and communication technology (ICT) and green (or environmental – ET) technology, indicate that we might be at the cusp of a paradigm shift with respect to the idea of what makes city sustainable. The 30 or 40 years-old wisdom that urban density is ‘good’ and sprawl is ‘bad’ is under question mark. The advent of decentralised - and decentralising - technologies of energy generation and conservation, water harvesting and localized sanitation, in combination with the recent spectacular development and proliferation of ICT innovations like mobile internet, cloud computing, ubiquitous sensing, etc – have all reinforced the centrifugal forces of the shaping of urban metropolitan form. It seems likely that a sustainable city might as well be a very flat, low-density agglomeration – as long as internet is used to delete some demand for transport; whatever transport is still necessary is done in small, super-efficient, clean electric cars; and buildings provide at least half of their key supplies (power, water, sanitation, food) themselves. There is a case for low-density urban form which harvests solar energy and water, and grows food, fuel and fiber in its midst, just as there is a case for the high-density urban form which enjoys the efficiency of low traffic volumes.

Looking at an even bigger picture, cities seem to be moving towards a new aspirational paradigm as well. If you believe that global warming, peak oil, peak water and peak food are real and imminent threats, then adaptation is perhaps more pressing than mitigation. Which means that the new urban quest is for resilience, rather than sustainability. If this is so, then the case for a denser, more compact urban form is further weakened.

Finally, a more balanced view on the future of cities may not necessarily put forward the environmental dimension ahead of everything else. We could argue that a ‘perfect’ city is the one that balances the goals of economic prosperity, social justice and good quality of life with



#### URBAN FORM

*The perfect urban form balances four agendas: prosperity, liveability, sustainability, and affordability.*

the constraints in the supporting ecosystem. If we code these four agendas with the words ‘prosperity’, ‘affordability’, ‘liveability’ and ‘sustainability’, we then arrive at the proposition that an ideal urban form is the one that equally delivers on all four.

In visual terms, we could represent this as a conceptual model which looks like a square pyramid:

There seem to be no reason to argue that Christchurch as it is – flat and polycentric – does not have a good urban form and therefore needs radical spatial reconfiguration (which then translates into an aggressive urban planning and growth management policy – never terribly popular). On the contrary: the city should be quite content with the way it is. It seems that in the era of the brave new world of ‘smart’ and ‘green’ technology the flat, polycentric Christchurch is quite close to meeting successfully the extraordinary challenges of the 21st century.

*Dushko Bogunovich, and Jeanette Budgett Feb 2014*