Changing places: geographies of post-disaster landscapes

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ABSTRACT: This article introduces some of the ways geographers have attempted to make sense of disaster recovery landscapes. Acknowledging that geographers frame ‘place’ as layered with meaning, the article seeks to open out discussion about how disasters (and recovery from them) might change the ways in which people understand and connect with specific places. Importantly, disasters are not just characterised by material or infrastructural damage, but also by ‘ruptures’ to the ways in which people make sense of place – ruptures that can enable new cultural, political and ethical practices to emerge. The article draws specifically on examples from the Christchurch post-earthquake landscape – a city on the South Island of New Zealand that, in late 2010 and early 2011, experienced a series of earthquakes that resulted in significant loss of life and material devastation. The presented examples offer evidence for an interpretation of recovery in Christchurch as something other than a return to ‘normality’. Instead, we might think about the city as a ‘ruptured place’ through which pre-existing inequalities and senses of belonging are being contested in the construction of a ‘new normal’.

Introduction

Over the last 30 years or so geographers have been busy exploring the different ways ‘place’ is important to the way we see and understand the world. Inherent to these discussions has been a question of how places might be understood as having identities – identities that somehow shape the kinds of social, political and cultural activities that might be regarded as ‘home’ (or not) in particular places. An important figure in this regard, Doreen Massey (1994), was one of the first to propose that the idea that places have a single ‘essential’ identity based on a bounded history of a territorial place is flawed. Globalisation, in particular, has meant that places are now made up of constantly moving people, ideas and capital (among other things). The main implication here is that we should not understand places as bounded, static containers (isolated from other people and places), but as things that are intricately interconnected and therefore never complete (Pred, 1984). Place is always in a state of becoming – the result of historically-unique processes, diverse social practices, constantly moving objects/ideas and the array of meanings we attach to these (Paasi, 2003).

But why is ‘place’ an important concept when it comes to understanding disasters and how we recover from them? The effects of disasters are wide-ranging, and generally include significant material, infrastructural, psychological, psychosocial and financial damage. This means that not only are places physically altered, but so are the ways we see ourselves belonging in them (Dickinson, 2018). A casual glance at many recovery landscapes might reveal attempts to mitigate these effects and return to pre-disaster normality, however geographers argue that recovery can only ever be a kind of ‘new normal’ (Cloke and Conradson, 2018). Disasters force abrupt ruptures from the past, and force us to look at the future in new and unique ways (Pickles, 2016). They can sometimes violently force us to reconsider how and why we belong to particular places, or even who or what belongs there. For these reasons, disasters often lead to changes in political regimes (in the case of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake),
people and practices that align with our own values from the belief that particular places contain perceptions where we might ‘fit in’) generally emerge the kinds of places we would like to visit (or even disasters work to ‘unmask the nature of society’s change, two prominent academics, Antony Oliver-Smith and Susanna Hoffman, have argued that disasters challenge some of the main ‘place identity’ tropes of the city. In what follows, I briefly introduce some literature about disaster recovery, before moving to focus specifically on the Christchurch context. Through the use of images and quotes from my own research (and the work of others), I argue that the impact of the earthquakes in Christchurch is threefold. First, they have generated opportunities to redress the colonial foundations of the city; second, they have generated significant awareness of/protest about pre-earthquake social issues; and, third, the earthquakes have forced citizens to reassess how their own identity is wrapped up in ideas of Christchurch as a place.

Disasters as changing places

In the introduction, I touched upon the idea that disasters can lead to different kinds of change. In some ways this is obvious – you cannot always save homes and buildings that have been damaged or lost. In other ways, however, the kinds of changes that I suggested (the overthrow of governments, for example) may not have been quite what you expected. Observing these kinds of change, two prominent academics, Antony Oliver-Smith and Susanna Hoffman, have argued that disasters work to ‘unmask the nature of society’s social structure’ (2002, p. 9). In this section, I want to explore briefly what this means in relation to the idea of place.

Running alongside the idea that places have identities is the notion that we might associate or disassociate with those identities in different ways. Our decisions about where to live, where we travel, the kinds of places we would like to visit (or even perceive where we might ‘fit in’) generally emerge from the belief that particular places contain people and practices that align with our own values and beliefs. While we have already discredited the idea that a single, fixed identity exists for places, we still have a tendency to characterise places by the intimate, personal and emotional relationships we have forged with them (or what Cloke et al. (1991) term a ‘strong sense of place’). Although we characterise places in these ways (perhaps ‘Paris as romantic’ or ‘Bangkok as chaotic’), these are subjective characterisations that reveal only a limited understanding of a complex and ever-evolving place (Gregory, 1994).

In some ways, disasters reveal our limited perception of places. Disasters represent a situation in which reality is violently and materially disturbed – sometimes shaking the foundations, structures and relations that previously made life legible (Clark, 2011). Politically, Pelling and Dill (2010) argue that the disaster’s revealing of the limitations of life open up policy and political gaps, provoking increased attention on underlying inequalities and inefficiencies in governance. These openings are said to generate space for the formation of civil and community projects to provide alternative articulations and performances of political and social life. Meanwhile, Law and Singleton (2006) contend that, alongside the trauma and hurt generated by disaster events, ‘moving and exciting’ forms of creativity emerge that work to transform and reshape post-disaster life – in some ways the disaster creates a platform for a new city to be built. Socially, Rebecca Solnit argues that the chaotic nature of post-disaster landscapes results not in chaos or disorder, but in ‘emotional demonstrations of altruism and aid [and] also in a practical mustering of creativity’ (2009, p. 305). In all of these instances, disasters alter the make-up and practice of place – changing the way we practice or imagine community, enabling new material landscapes to be built, or even drawing our attention to the inequalities we may have previously ignored. In the following section, I introduce some of the ways this has happened in the Christchurch post-quake context.

The Christchurch earthquakes

On 4 September 2010, the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, was severely shaken by a magnitude 7.1 earthquake, which caused significant damage to buildings and extensive infrastructural disruption. This was followed by another earthquake of magnitude 6.3 on 22 February 2011. With its epicentre both shallower and closer to the centre of the city, the February 2011 earthquake resulted in the loss of 185 lives and caused extensive damage to both the city centre
and suburban homes. In conjunction with over 13,000 aftershocks, these earthquakes have been the most expensive and socially disruptive disasters that New Zealand has ever experienced (Nicholls, 2014). Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate some of the physical impacts of the earthquake sequence.

Importantly, the recovery process has been characterised by complex insurance and housing issues, which have worsened the psychological impact of the earthquakes and generated distrust in associated government agencies. The conduct of insurance companies, in both the delays in settling claims for housing damage and the pressure placed on vulnerable citizens to accept ‘low-ball’ offers, have been directly correlated with ongoing mental health concerns (Miles, 2016).

Additionally, the government response to the earthquakes has included a contentious ‘zoning scheme’ – whereby houses were zoned in relation to earthquake damage and the risk of damage from future events. As a part of this, more than 8000 homes were ‘red-zoned’, meaning individuals were in effect forced to sell their homes to the government. The actions of both insurance companies and government recovery agencies has contributed to a sense that citizens have been ‘failed’ by those political institutions they might have once trusted (Dickinson, 2019).

With this in mind, as the city has begun the long process of recovery, there is evidence that the earthquakes have changed the ways that Christchurch is understood as a ‘place’. In among the spaces of demolition and destruction in the city there has been evidence that the earthquakes have fostered activities that are re-engaging disillusioned and marginalised citizens during the recovery and rebuild periods. In what follows, I introduce three examples of the ways Christchurch as a ‘place’ is being renegotiated and reimagined. First, I present some of the ways Maori and indigenous presences (and histories) in the city are being addressed in the rebuild. Second, I discuss how the earthquakes have led to different kinds of political change and engagement in the city. Third, I examine how place is implicit in the way people spoke about a resilient ‘Canterbury Spirit’ being demonstrated during recovery.
A ‘colonial’ city?

One of the pre-earthquake ‘images’ of Christchurch as a city was of a ‘quaint and tranquil version of Englishness’ (Cupples and Glynn, 2009, p. 1). The site on which Christchurch was established was purchased from the indigenous Ngāi Tahu people in 1848, and early settlers deliberately set out to establish a place based on characteristics of English culture and nature. These practices included the introduction of neo-Gothic architecture, English-based place names (such as Manchester Street, Victoria Street and the Avon River), and landscaping that sought to pay homage to English nature (note images of punting on the River Avon – see Figure 3). Importantly, at the same time, these practices included a deliberate erasure of precolonial indigenous histories. The establishment of a material ‘English landscape’ – combined with introduction of associated colonial cultural and social practices (such as the commodification of land and religious beliefs) – generated the branding of Christchurch as a place built on ‘Anglophilia’ (Cloke and Dickinson, 2019).

The earthquake recovery process, however, has given rise to projects that seek to reflect the multidimensional nature of cultural life and Christchurch’s more varied history. For example, Bennett (2014) has pointed towards the earthquakes as generating the opportunity for Māori cultural principles and claims to the city to be built into the re-design of the city centre. Local tribal groups, such as Ngāi Tahu, have a formal place in the city’s recovery plan, and it has been argued that the exclusion of indigenous involvement in the original planning of the city can be rectified because the earthquakes represent a fresh beginning of sorts (see Ballard et al., 2015).

Furthermore, key colonial buildings in the city centre have become battlegrounds for a clash between the old and the new. While preservationists and some political figures pushed for the restoration of historically-strategic structures, others – such as the Anglican Church of New Zealand, in the case of the cathedral – argued that the civic need for such restoration is outweighed by a ‘21st century’ need for replacement spaces, which better fit the multi-purpose requirements of contemporary New Zealand community (Pickles, 2016). Here, discourses of Christchurch as an ‘English city’ appeared open to challenge as the city dealt with the physical destruction of the earthquake (see Figure 4). For example, Low wrote of the physical breaking down of the city’s conservative heritage: ‘Walking south I came to the Worcester Boulevard Bridge. It stood at the centre of a

Figure 3: An iconic image of classically ‘English’ Christchurch, which includes punting on the River Avon. Photo: Boylos/Shutterstock.
colonial vista running east to the cathedral and west to the museum. A nostalgic tourist tram ran its length. It was peopled with statues of the founding old boys. The gentle willow-lined Avon ran beneath its ironwork railings, and a long-forgotten sandwich board advertised Genuine Edwardian Punting. This was the apex of the city's conservative heritage, its visual link with the past. It was, as they say, minted’ (Low, 2012).

For Low (2012) the breaking down of a colonial hold on the city was interesting not just because it opened up space for different architectures and cultural traits to emerge, but also that the earthquakes had created space and momentum for the generation of new representations that had previously been seen as out of place in the city. In contrast, the proposition of something ‘radically different’ meant the emergence of local claims to the city and that these claims were beginning to feed into new cultural representations of the city as a whole – in a way changing the ‘face’ of the city (Cloke and Dickinson, 2019). As such, because of the earthquakes, historical narratives of Englishness, and the associated exclusion of the multifarious nature of the city, were beginning to give way to more recognisable traits of New Zealandness.

A ‘politically conservative’ city?

Another line of evidence changing ideas of place could be seen through the ways the earthquakes shifted political practices in the city. A significant characteristic of pre-quake politics in Christchurch was the presence of a localised form of political conservatism (Hayward, 2012). Pre-quake, Christchurch had been regarded as a being home to the kind of political neoliberalism that favours free-market capitalism – a characterisation that emerged in part from the city’s colonial underpinning, its relatively affluent residential occupants and its intricate connections to farming industries in the hinterland (Marcetic, 2017). Although the past few decades had seen the emergence of a growing disillusionment with the conservative nature of politics in Christchurch, numerous commentators noted that these protests and disquiets were generally disparate and ineffective (see e.g. Hayman et al., 2012).

It soon became obvious that the conservatism that defined pre-quake Christchurch politics was not sticking in the same way after the disaster. Not only did the earthquakes prompt disagreement with the government handling of the recovery, but it also engrained the idea that the government was no longer ‘working for the people’ in Christchurch (see Nicholson, 2014). Most evidently, previously disparate oppositions to political initiatives were brought together under the banner of ‘earthquake politics’ (Edwards, 2016). These ‘earthquake politics’ included vocal opposition about the government organisations running the recovery process as well as more long-standing concerns with education provision, environmental management and the free-reign given to private market industries (most notably, insurance companies). The coming-together of disenfranchised citizens and alternative political movements led a number of local writers to argue that the disaster generated a form of ‘political quake’ (see Farrell, 2011; Pickles, 2016). Hayward, in particular, argued that the earthquakes ‘exposed the wider cracks in [the] democratic and social landscape’ (2012), including revealing the extent and nature of existing social inequalities, such as welfare and healthcare provision (see also Hayward, 2013).

Perhaps the key (and unexpected) example of the idea that the city was open to something different and ‘less stuffy’ were the organisations operating in the devastated CBD during recovery. Organisations such as Gap Filler, A Brave New City and Greening the Rubble have gone about curating the potential for cultural, artistic and performative uses of temporary spaces in the city (see Figures 5 and 6). Although all these activities were designed to counter the emptiness and desolation within the city centre during recovery efforts, they acted as political statements that Christchurch was open to something new, different and more participatory (Newman-Storen and Reynolds, 2013). Inherent in the activities of these organisations has been the building of a new imagination of what the city currently is and can become (Cloke and Dickinson, 2019). These organisations have demonstrated an openness to ingenuity and experimentation that, on the face of it, appears to counter the conservative governmental approach to rebuilding and recovery (Cloke et al., 2017). As one staff member of Gap Filler noted:

‘Our activities are, on the face of it, cool and a bit whimsical. But at the same time they can be political. They stress the idea we should be thinking about sustainability… community involvement in the rebuild…how to build a more inclusive city. These projects are outlets for new hopes and dreams, for a different future’ (interview with author, 21 March 2015).

As such, these projects represent – for both locals...
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and tourists – the opportunity both to re-engage with the city and to contribute to new forms of social and political inclusivity. In partaking in seemingly frivolous activities (such as dancing on an exposed floor with a washing machine jukebox), participants are simultaneously changing how Christchurch is understood as a ‘place’ (Reynolds, 2014).

A ‘resilient’ city?
When we think of places, some of the first things that come to mind are often the kinds of personal characteristics and behaviours that might be ‘home’ to the people who live there. Although perhaps not reflective of everyone who lives in that place, our understandings are often formed by what we imagine to be the dominant cultural characteristics of the people who live there (think of associations between ‘Britain’ and being painfully/awkwardly polite, for example!) The same can be said of Christchurch – where the idea of having the ‘Canterbury Spirit’ implies someone who is down-to-earth, egalitarian, ingenious (able to find novel solutions to big problems) and fiercely protective of the achievements of locals. A localised version of what Bell (1996) terms ‘the Kiwi identity’, the Canterbury Spirit is argued to have emerged as distinct from other nationalistic traits (particular British colonial) and regions (such as the ‘big city folk from Auckland’); and has an ingenuity required to live in a relatively isolated part of the country/world (Swaffield, 1997).

Importantly, elements of a transforming ‘Canterbury Spirit’ could be found in the city in two different ways after the earthquakes. First, initial messages from government officials early in the recovery after the 2010 and 2011 events insinuated that locals needed to demonstrate elements of the Canterbury Spirit in order to survive the ongoing hardships generated by the disaster (Du Plessis et al., 2015). The then Prime Minister, John Key, appeared on national television the day after the 22 February 2011 earthquake, referring to the ‘great spirit’, ‘survivors’ spirit’, and the ‘pioneering spirit’ demonstrated presently in Christchurch, as well as ‘throughout its history’. Key then remarked that the government was limited in the resources that it could offer citizens, but was impressed that:

‘Nobody complains [in Christchurch]. They’re dealing with a really difficult situation so it doesn’t mean that they don’t want a toilet or to have things resolved very quickly, but they are incredibly stoic, they’re backing themselves to get through this. We’ve got to be very proud of the… spirit’ (cited in Hartevelt, 2011).

In this instance, and in many others during the recovery, officials appeared to be using the notion of a spirit of resilience and coping (that could only be found in Canterbury) to draw attention to the limitations of their own activity (Hayward, 2013). Other examples to a localised ability to be resilient included references to the ‘great heart of Christchurch’ (Turner et al., 2012), the idea that ‘people of Christchurch are great people and have the knowledge they are capable of rising to any challenge together’ (Fairfax, 2013), and the ‘immense spirit of the people’ (Stewart, 2011). At first glance, these comments reflect the kinds of language seen after a disaster or adverse event, here they reflected a purposeful engagement with existing ideas of what it meant to be a ‘Cantabrian’ – the idea that existing in a particular place
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Although the above example demonstrates how qualities and behaviours were ‘attached’ to the Canterbury Spirit post-quake, we can also observe another way in which the earthquakes transformed how people narrated what this spirit was about. Similar to the aforementioned growing distrust in the government, large numbers of locals spoke about how the earthquakes generated new forms of engagement in their communities. For many, practicing the ‘Canterbury Spirit’ meant not just supporting people, but also righting different forms of injustice (Cretney and Bond, 2014). In some instances this included acknowledging that New Zealand was not the ‘paradise’ everyone thought it to be. During discussions/interviews, one local resident noted to me that: ‘I practise a different kind of spirit to the one Teflon John [John Key – Prime Minister] talks about’; while another commented:

‘Having the Canterbury Spirit, for me, is fighting for the wrongs that occurred during the earthquakes. The ‘quakes opened my eyes to all the kinds of help and support people need. Having the spirit isn’t just giving food or whatever to people… it’s helping push for change in society’.

This quote, from a woman in her fifties who had decided to both join a local Parent Teacher Association and offer her legal knowledge to local community members, demonstrates some of the alternative behaviours people attached the idea of a localised spirit. Such an argument has been made by others in Christchurch (Cretney and Bond, 2014; Hayward, 2016). It also demonstrates that the meanings attached to place are open to contestation.

Conclusion

This article provides an introduction to the ways disasters can change how we understand and attach meaning to ‘place’. Through it, I have demonstrated that disasters do not just rupture the built and material environments, but that they also transform the relationship that we have with
the places we inhabit. Such discussions rely on a framing of ‘place’ that might not be familiar: they stress the idea that places are dynamic, layered with meaning and never complete. Events, even those that are less dramatic or violent than a disaster, generate new forms of movement and meaning – between people, resources, knowledge and objects. Places, and the meanings we attach to them, are not experienced uniformly, and they certainly never stand still.

One of the key questions running through this article is, if we are to acknowledge how disasters create opportunities for different ways of doing things, what is ‘recovery’ really about? Although I have not focused explicitly on this question here, there is undoubtedly an element of reclaiming a sense of normality and security, which existed before the disaster. However, importantly, I have introduced the idea that geographers sometimes frame recovery as being about how the identities of places are being contested and renegotiated. The Christchurch context evidences some of the ways locals have sought to construct something more exciting, more hopeful and more progressive than ever before – with the earthquakes creating a sort of ‘window of opportunity’ (Pelling and Dill, 2006). While the question remains as to the extent to which these practices and identities will last, it is undeniable that the disaster has caused locals to renegotiate their sense of belonging to Christchurch as a ‘place’.

Notes
1. The city of Christchurch is situated within the broader region of Canterbury. Given the widespread damage, and the epicentre of the first significant quake, the sequence is also often referred to as ‘the Canterbury earthquakes’.
2. To see the scale of change in some Christchurch neighbourhoods, see https://interactives.stuff.co.nz/2019/09/christchurch-red-zone-to-green/
3. At the time of writing (summer 2019), more than 2000 insurance claims are yet to be settled.
4. Sadly, ideas of having to be a ‘resilient Cantabrian’ have been argued to have, in part, contributed to ongoing mental health presentations in the city (Miles, 2016).

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