Music in the streets

What a 'mall' used to be before the name was appropriated by suburban shopping centres. This new heart for central Christchurch is designed to draw the masses back from the 'burbs.

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ABOVE: Tram tracks incorporated into the lanes. Sustainability goals were a core element, say the designers, even with the challenges faced in this highly modified, hard cityscape with poor under-surface drainage and high use. Timaru bluestone pavers were selected even though they were more expensive, as they were shown in a matrix of considerations over a 50 year timeframe to be competitive, and the council supported the use over cheaper overseas product. Existing paving units were removed and relaid at a city park and the use of Vitex timber for the seating was commended by Greenpeace.
The gentle sounds of Vivaldi floating across Stewart Plaza welcomes visitors into City Mall on a sunny Christchurch afternoon, creating a calm counterpoint to the busy movement of people. There is a sense of 'things going on' in City Mall; it is an active place with people walking through or dawdling, chatting in small groups, or enjoying the late afternoon sun while having a quiet coffee and catching up with the Press. The strategy for enlivening the Mall seems to have recaptured the feeling of Friday night shopping in Colombo Street in the 1960s, before malls or all-weekend shopping. Then, Friday nights were real social events, with people wearing their Sunday best, visiting the department stores, bookshops, bakeries and boutiques to prepare for the weekend, bringing people into the central city.

A renovated Christchurch City Mall was planned to be one of the first major projects to be realised from an overall city revitalisation programme that began in the late 1990s. It was initially a response to the growth of suburban malls, with falling foot traffic counts in town leading to shop vacancies, increasing crime and vandalism. The strategy to revitalise the central city was based on encouraging people to come back to shop and live in the city heart, supported by the creation of a more vibrant and attractive destination.

The Mall has been the flagship pedestrian precinct for central Christchurch since the 1980s, when Cashel and High streets were closed to vehicles, and clay pavers laid directly over the existing road profiles. Trees and planters were located where services permitted, greening the streets and reducing their scale, but largely fragmenting the space. That approach dated rapidly, and City Mall could not compete with the attraction of suburban shopping malls. A multi-disciplinary design team was appointed in 2005 to develop ideas to reinstate City Mall as a premier retail street, and regain that activity and vibrancy of earlier years.

A major contributor to the success of the project was the formation of an alliance between the client (Christchurch City Council), the contractor (Downer EDI) and the designer (Isthmus Group). The alliance leadership group took responsibility for the major decisions on the
ABOVE: The processionary way along High Street. OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: Underlit street furniture on Caleb Street helps form 'green rooms'. OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: Square seating blocks edge the Triangle Reserve.
project, and directed the work of a multidisciplinary collaborative team of landscape architects, urban designers, traffic engineers, building architects, planners, a lighting designer and PR consultant. Garth Falconer FNZILA, who gained his postgraduate diploma in landscape architecture from Lincoln University (then College) and more recently completed a Masters degree in Urban Design at Oxford Brookes University, was the project design director. He has been leading design teams that, over the last two decades, have completed a range of town and city centre projects in places such as diverse as Otahuhu, Brown’s Bay, Mount Maunganui, and Whangarei.

The project required an extensive consultation period, to establish the needs and aspirations of the diverse group of users and organisations who are a vital part of the city fabric. The design response led to a proposal for a vital public realm in the central city, with a clear identity, a sense of community, social spaces and with a strong retail strategy.

The final design emerged with some very simple ideas. High Street as an ordered linear walk celebrating its diagonal across the city grid, Cashel Street as a remembrance walk linking to the bridge of remembrance, and the terminal points of those streets as pedestrian plazas. Artwork such as the flower plaques from different theatres of war in the remembrance walk was integrated into the design, and large sculptural pieces associated with each plaza.

Continuity of the spaces in City Mall has been achieved through framing lights, bands of paving, tall columnar trees, and removal of the overhead sky-bridge structures to get people back onto the ground plane, and recover the long views. The team wanted to keep people together, and reinforce the vitality of a busy inner-city population. A series of garden rooms, planters and parkland trees, particularly in Cashel street, celebrate the idea of garden-in-the-street, and link to the garden promenade characteristics of the Botanic Gardens.

The pedestrian plazas were deliberately fragmented to avoid large 'special interest' groups dominating one space, and a sun and wind analysis undertaken on Stewart Plaza led to the provision of seating for smaller groups of people in the most sheltered and sunny place in the Mall.

Timber was chosen for the seating for its warmth, and natural character. Vitex was sourced from managed hardwood plantations in the Solomon Islands, gaining a Greenpeace award for that choice.

Paving similarly needed to be a high quality long-term choice, with a good texture for pedestrian movement but also able to cope with vehicular traffic. Timaru bluestone was finally chosen over (cheaper) stone sourced from China; the comparison of performance characteristics over a 50-year lifespan meant that the local stone was competitive. The bluestone has a rich, comfortable texture both visually and experientially, complemented by clay and aggregate pavers which add warmth to the space.

Planting beds and tubs were included for seasonal displays, adding colour and texture to the ground plane. Bright yellows and oranges in the planter boxes contribute to the ‘feel good’ factor, simple but effective colour highlights that enliven the space. They work well partly because they are so contained; broad swatches of bedding plants may be appropriate in the Botanic Gardens, but those bright spots of colour work their magic in the Mall because they are discrete, linked through their structured placement. Star Jasmine will eventually cover the framework surrounding the base of lights in Cashel Street to create vertical columns of plant material.

Lively enclaves of afternoon coffee-drinkers flow from Cashel street around the corner past the Bridge of Remembrance to the river bars
and cafes, and provide a strong sense of continuity between the spaces. This will be enhanced when stage 1 of the tram extension begins running down the Mall and around the river back to the square, planned to be functioning before Rugby World Cup fever hits town.

The quality of the materials and finishing in City Mall highlights the dated and run-down treatment of the Bridge of Remembrance, which looks faded and tired in comparison. Perceptually the Bridge is a continuous precinct with City Mall, and there is clear potential to extend the pedestrian spaces and physically connect it to the Mall, reducing the emphasis of the roadway which currently separates the two.

Some parts of the Mall are now showing signs of high use - staining of paving from spilled food and drinks around Stewart Plaza, and seat-tagging in places on Cashel Street - but the numbers of people using the City Mall is a testament to the success of the alliance collaborative.

Falconer believes that we are continually raising the bar in our urban design projects, and that City Mall is one of the most sophisticated responses to urban living in New Zealand in recent years. He and his classmates dreamed of projects such as this when they were students over 20 years ago, and he encourages our current generation of students to also “dream of great things, and while it might take you a number of years to really learn your craft, you can make a positive difference and lead multidisciplinary collaborative design teams working on key places in our cities and around the country - it is a fantastic job”. **LANZ**

Footnote: The Christchurch City Council has just released on its website the report prepared by Gehl Architects 'Christchurch 2009: Public Space, Public Life' which encourages further enhancement of the spatial framework for the whole of the inner city.
Selected Credits

Landscape architect/designer
City Mall Alliance - Christchurch City Council, Theus Group, Reset Urban Design, Downer EDI Works

Client
Christchurch City Council

Project Manager
Christchurch City Council

Main Contractor
Downer EDI Works

Stone Supply
Timaru Bluestone

Lighting design
Lighting Design Partnership

Traffic Consultant
Traffic Design Group