



*In the second semester of 2011 the third year Bachelor of Environmental Management and Planning students taking the Professional Practice course (SOCl 314) were set an assignment to write a short, topical article of local interest. This related directly to the content of the course SOCl 314, which provides a critical study of issues in the provision of professional services in environmental planning, design, social sciences, tourism, sport and recreation. As part of the assessment the articles were subject to the LPR review*

## **It's Not What We Are Drinking, It's How We Are Planning**

**By Justine Toner**

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The devastating earthquakes of September 2010 and February 2011 have without question upset the Christchurch City way of life for all. Families and businesses, as well as the natural and built environments have been directly affected, and our social landscapes have since evolved to accommodate the visible changes. Though not perhaps seen as a priority, the Christchurch nightlife has been profoundly altered by the quakes and the once popular CBD clubbing scene has ceased to exist. The concern highlighted in this article is the way in which this has put pressure on suburban bars and the the implications of this for local residents.

Alcohol is one of the most commonly used drugs in New Zealand, with 85% of New Zealanders aged 16-64 having an alcoholic drink in the past year. New Zealand's prominent "booze" culture has meant that one in six adults aged over 15 years of age has a potentially hazardous drinking pattern (MOH, 2011). The post-traumatic stress that many Christchurch residents have experienced, and continue to battle, has caused some to rely more heavily than before on alcohol as a coping mechanism. With the inner city CBD cordoned off, recreational drinkers have sought out new social landscapes where they may either enjoy a few quiet or become totally inebriated. The alcohol and binge culture of New Zealand is somewhat unique and the harm it causes in our society is well-documented. While alcohol is often used as a social lubricant, post-earthquake many have resorted to alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism as well.

Following the February earthquake house parties are making a comeback. Consequently, the days of young drinkers being in public places, subject to some degree of control from private security teams and the police have been replaced by a more difficult and dispersed set of arrangements. As a result of the enforced flight to the suburbs, heavy drinkers have become an issue for residents and businesses. While some areas of Merivale and Riccarton have always been popular drinking areas, and home to hotspots like NO4 and the Bush Bar, other smaller establishments are currently fulfilling the needs of our young clubbing youth.

Papanui is one of the newer social drinking landscapes, though some consider it an odd choice given its distance from the temporarily closed CBD. Papanui's proximity to the local police station was seen as a good thing when a suburban nightclub opened there in response to the earthquakes. The 21 year old female owner saw a need in the market for young drinkers to have a social space they could go to and feel safe. Its popularity meant that long waiting lines to get inside became the social norm for party goers; however, in March 2012 the Liquor Licensing Authority (LLA) denied the young owner's application for a new on-licence for her club due to her "limited experience in the liquor industry". She was, however, commended on her vision and courage in opening the club, though it was maintained that the operation needed an experienced manager if it were to continue. The club's close location to the local police station made little difference, as trouble seemed to always break out and linger (Fairfax, 2012).

The reinvention of the Christchurch nightlife post quakes has brought traditionally 'inner city' social problems, including noise, increased violence and drunken revelry to the suburbs. The diffuse nature of the new drinking establishments may also encourage drink driving. Some interesting questions then arise as to how we are planning the social spaces that serve alcohol post quakes, and whether sensible decisions are being made.

Prior to the earthquakes, in 2009, the Police requested an alcohol ban in the central city so as to prevent undesirable behaviour. In August 2011, a similar temporary alcohol ban was imposed for the Papanui and Merivale areas, as a measure to combat the increased violence and disorderly behaviour, which has been a follow on effect from the earthquakes. This does not affect those establishments that have appropriate liquor licences already but it does affect the public spaces surrounding them (CCC, 2011). This ban has been applauded by local residents, as they can now feel safer from alcohol related nuisance and crime in their areas.

The Merivale drinking vicinity was once a popular "after work drinks" area for more mature patrons, who enjoyed their social space untroubled by the antics of younger drinkers. The new reality is that the elite professionals of Merivale are now sharing their establishments with the young town goers, who consider these to be the "it" place to drink and be seen. Every weekend there seem to be more fresh 18 year olds faces out and about, ready to test out their IDs.

Planning and policy are powerful tools for shaping and influencing society, and when applied correctly it can help to control unwanted social behaviours. One commonly used planning tool is to mandate the density of alcohol outlets and thus influence the physical availability of alcohol. Regulating the spaces in which alcohol can be consumed is another tool. Local planning and licensing policies can reduce adverse social impacts by considering the best location, types of licensed businesses to encourage, trading hours and risk factors. The location of any new establishments – such as those that have been set up as a replacement for inner city venues - should be consistent with other provisions in the area. In this way the overall disturbance that can be expected by introducing new bars may be better avoided, remedied or mitigated. The spatial distribution of such venues needs to be carefully considered if the trauma of the disaster is not to be amplified for local residents by unwelcome and disruptive revelry that is seen as out of character for the area.

This can be achieved through various means as local and central government need to be able to still maintain safety, health and community wellbeing when introducing new schemes or developments. The decisions surrounding the sale of alcohol in communities are centred around two pieces of legislation, the *Sale of Liquor 1989* and the *Resource*

*Management Act 1991*. All establishments require the applicant to obtain prior planning consent under the *RMA 1991* (CCC, 2011).

As the Christchurch case has shown, however, in most cases the community only learns about new premises when the liquor licence application is publicly notified and the applicant already has planning consent. If communities raise concerns about a licensed premise, the council may then intervene and introduce planning rules subject to the concerns, usually around closing times, noise and parking. Questions remain as to whether such measures are adequate, and whether authorities are sufficiently resourced to act appropriately given the demands placed upon them in the aftermath of a disaster.

Questions also remain about the enduring legacy of the earthquakes on the distribution of city's nightlife. Though the CBD will be rebuilt, the nightspots that have sprung up in the interim may retain their popularity. The areas of Merivale, Papanui and Riccarton that have become the city's new drinking outposts, may reduce demand for business within the CBD when it is once again open for business, fundamentally altering the distribution of nightlife. Suburban revelry may become the 'new permanent' with implications for local residents as well. In more general terms, this raises questions about the post-disaster integration of inner city and suburban issues and the relative roles of CERA and the CCC. The ability to manage the (sub)urbanisation of various social landscapes is reliant on effective post-disaster protocols that will not demean or compromise the future of spatial planning for the city.

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