



The Ferrymead ‘Water’s Edge Apartments’: a life story

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ABSTRACT

High rise developments dominate skylines and are contentious in many low rise urban environments. Christchurch is no exception and its residents have historically been vocal in articulating their opinions on matters they care about, especially in regard to projects they perceive will ruin their ‘garden city’. At the turn of the millennium, developers were preparing yet another proposal which would get the tongues wagging in Christchurch with the development of the former Ferrymead Tavern site on Ferry Road. The planning process was a long and antagonistic one with many individuals viewing the built towers with a look of ‘disgust’ and discontent. In an ironic twist, the seismic activity in Christchurch over the last few years which has had major implications for a range of planning issues, incrementally led to the death of highly controversial Ferrymead ‘Water’s Edge’ Apartments.

1. HISTORY

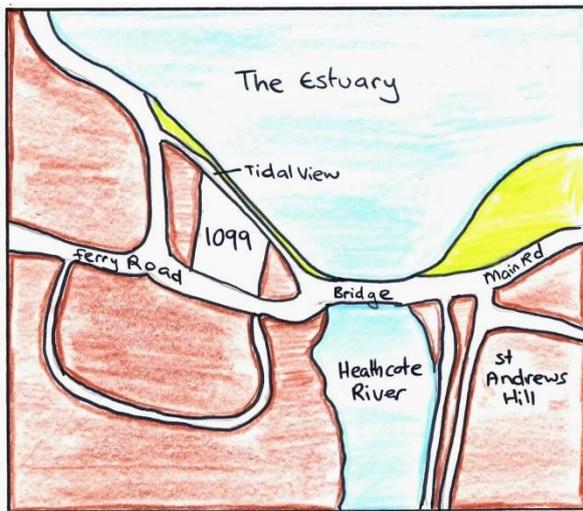
1099 Ferry Road, Christchurch is a highly visible and prominent allotment by the estuary and numerous commuters pass the site every day. The site in question has a rich and somewhat colourful history as home to the Ferrymead Tavern which resided on the site, in one form or another, since the early settler days in Canterbury. The first liquor licence granted to the site dates back as far as 1854 (The Star, 2005), making the property a water hole for almost of all of Canterbury’s existence. The Ferrymead tavern was owned by the ‘Dymand’ family for more than 25 years before development was extensively proposed for the site (Dymand, 2006).

2. PREVIOUS CONSENT APPLICATIONS

Between 2004 and 2006 a number of resource consent applications went through the Christchurch City Council in relation to the Ferry Road site. The first application was for a fourteen storey office block (height of 53m), with an adjacent ten storey car park building. The application was processed by an independent commissioner (Christchurch City Council, 2004) on a non-notified basis (Dymand,

2006) and was granted consent on December 23 2004. In July of that year a 1,300 persons’ petition was presented to the Christchurch City Council in opposition to the application, and seeking a height restriction for the Business 4 zone in the Christchurch City Plan (Christchurch City Council, 2004). In particular, residents were concerned that the plan provided no height restriction for such a prominent piece of land. “The commissioner was not able to take into account other issues such as the bulk or height of the building (the structure complies with the City Plan rules) as his discretion is restricted to the matters of non-compliance only” (Christchurch City Council, 2004). The Commissioner felt that the other issues he could legally comment on in the proposal produced environmental effects which could be regarded as ‘less than minor’.

The following year a second application for a scaled down proposal of a seven story office block with a reduced height of 28 metres (Christchurch City Council, 2005) was made. This proposal also included a 10 storey associated complimentary car-parking complex (Dymand, 2006). Again, this application was referred to an independent Commissioner who approved the proposal on a non-notified basis.



(Fig. 1): Sketch of the 1099 Ferry Road where the Ferrymead Apartments were developed. The close proximity to the Heathcote River mouth and the estuary is highlighted above. (Michelle Ruske, 5 August 2012)

3. THE RESIDENTIAL PROPOSAL

Development did not commence on either of the two previous resource consents and in September 2005 a further resource consent application was made for a seven storey (36 unit) residential building with basement car parking (Dymand, 2006). This proposal was assessed on a limited-notified basis as a discretionary activity, breaking one community standard and four development standards (Fort, 2006). A total of seven submissions were received during the submission period – two in support of the proposal, three in opposition and a further two submissions which did not state a position. A hearing was held on 8 February 2006 and a week later the Commissioner, John Milligan, granted consent subject to six conditions predominantly around such issues of landscaping, lighting and noise (Milligan, 2006).

4. WATER'S EDGE APARTMENTS

The infamous apartments designed by Warren and Mahoney were constructed in 2008 in three stages, and were marketed as offering an alternative high end residential option (NZ Herald, 2008). The apartments design has been described as 'cutting edge', 'modern' and importantly unlike the nearby Mitre 10, aesthetically matching, fitting in with the colours of the existing environment. The complimentary matching concrete and dark-hued zinc exterior and the level of detail that had gone into the apartments were elements of the design strongly accentuated to potential owners. A range of

different apartment options were included, with the asking price varying from \$750,000 to the luxury penthouse apartments of up to \$2.8 million (Dally, 2008). Interestingly, in October 2008 only two of the new apartment owners were external purchasers (not from Christchurch) showing that even though it was termed a notorious development by the local community, it was still widely supported by local buyers.

5. SEISMIC ACTION

Water Edge Apartments enjoyed a mere two years of existence before mother earth began a cataclysmic seismic attack on Christchurch in September 2010. The apartments were initially thought to have fared well in the earthquakes and it was suggested that the expensive liquefaction hazard mitigation employed was successful. The foundations of Waters Edge were strengthened during construction by drilling 12 metres below the surface to reach bedrock. The technique then used stone poured into the drill holes which was later compacted (Collins, 2011). It was well known that the site was at a high risk of liquefaction and hence measures were taken to reduce the risk.

The impact on the apartments was greater than expected with the building damaged after the February earthquake and then further damaged in the June 13 2011 aftershock (Young, 2012). The building was left on a consequential lean, the basement suffered significant flooding and the concrete was cracked in numerous places (Greer Associates, 2011). As a result, the decision was made that the building was beyond safe repair. Unfortunately, or fortunately for those residents who still viewed the apartments as a violation on the skyline, the apartment complex was added to CERA's demolition list in May 2012 (CERA, 2012).

Upon visiting the site in July 2012 with the demolition freshly completed, one could see the estuary liquefaction boils and the significant lateral spreading on the site surrounds which contributed to the buildings lean. It would arguably take a brave architect or developer with high insurance backing to attempt another high rise building on this site. The resource consent for the site promises to be an expensive process and the added earthquake mitigation requirements will likely mean that the site is left vacant for a while. It should be noted that as of July 2012 there were no plans to rebuild on the site and no

resource consents had been lodged with the Christchurch City Council.



The remains of the 'Waters Edge' Apartments following demolition.

Photo taken by Michelle Ruske (22 July 2012)

A number of planning issues are exemplified in the life story of the Ferrymead apartments and an attempt to briefly explain some of these follows. One of the major problems and criticisms of this apartment was as to whether the consent applications should have been publically notified even though the activity was permitted under the plan. The council could have shown the community that it was serious about consultation and notified regardless, going over and above that which was required. The subjective phrase regarding whether a projects effects are less or more than minor continues to be an area which lacks clarity and transparency in resource management. The general public as a whole in this development would have most likely appreciated a broken down description in non-planning jargon as to why the process occurred as it did and hence why public consultation was not carried out. Problems with the notification process and the controversy surrounding the application were hindered further by the role the media played in 'stirring the pot'. Publishing in particular an incorrect "architectural impression" of the proposed building for the site based off a consent application created more hype and confusion than was necessary. Unfortunately, this is a continuous battle for planners and developers alike. This is unproductive in assisting the planning process as it leaves the public 'ill-informed' and concerned about matters they need not be.

A further issue which the Water's Edge Apartments highlight is in relation to earthquakes. New Zealand is a geological dream, full of natural hazards of almost every kind, and as a result when rebuilding Christchurch we know earthquakes are not a once off scenario – they

can be guaranteed to occur in the future. Hence we need to ask whether we design buildings, so that they can endure numerous earthquakes (post-quake serviceability (Smith, 2011)) or whether they are designed so that like Water's Edge, they are beyond repair but perform in such a way that no loss of life is endured and that they will not collapse. When it is the human race verse Mother Nature it is possible that we ought to design so that although uneconomic no loss of life occurs.



Significant lateral spreading on Tidal View

Photo taken by Michelle Ruske (22 July 2012)

Regardless of these issues the irony surrounding this story remains – the apartments which were so hotly contested in Christchurch are no longer a part of the landscape as nature intervened. The non-notified and controversial 'Park Towers' in Christchurch followed a similar demise, exemplifying that no matter how much we plan and consider potential options we never really know what the outcome will be as planning is not 'predictable'. It is full of uncertainties which can only be mitigated, but never eliminated (Quiggin, 2007).

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