

## The dead centre of town: tribalism, dark tourism and the quest for belonging in post-earthquake Christchurch, New Zealand

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The 2010/11 sequence of devastating earthquakes completely transformed the physical appearance of central Christchurch, resulting in the demolition of ninety-five percent of the buildings within the four avenues (Meacham 2017). Yet, as an anthropology student who moved to the city in May 2018, I soon discovered that the natural disaster had caused far more damage than the easily quantifiable loss of bricks and mortar. More importantly, it had disrupted residents' urban taskscapes and exposed the social fault lines of a city with a well-known reputation for insularity. Taking inspiration from McKee (2016) and her examination of the Jewish/Bedouin divide in the Negev, this journal documents the subtle segregation of Christchurch through the eyes of a new arrival, identifying the opposing social separations of 'local' and 'outsider' through the ethnographic observation of Cathedral Square.



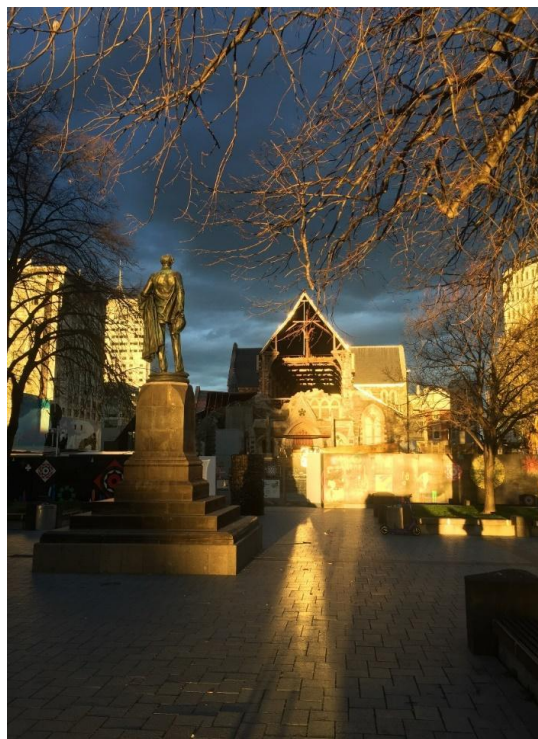
**Figure 1.** Cathedral Square with the tram tracks on the right-hand side. The permanent food trucks are situated the far corner, in front of the old Post Office building (in red).

Being the focal point for downtown Christchurch, Cathedral Square provides the perfect vantage point to observe the social relationships within the city. The diamond-shaped Square extends roughly one hundred metres along each axis and is centred around the Christ Church Cathedral, the building that gave rise to the city's Pākehā (European) name. Extensively damaged during the quakes, the church's spire and rose window were completely destroyed, leaving the nave exposed to the elements through a large gaping hole above the main entrance. This damage, and the subsequent Cathedral restoration project, has resulted in a large portion of the Square being cordoned off by a high security fence, reducing the amount of available public space. Having visited the location dozens of times in the past two years, I have found it rare for more than half a dozen people to be gathered in Cathedral Square at any one time.

Conspicuous by their absence are the 'locals'. In the aftermath of the earthquakes, most businesses in the vicinity of Cathedral Square relocated to the suburbs, and in the subsequent years many have been reluctant to return. At first glance, the lack of commercial activity along with nearby empty gravel lots and abandoned buildings would appear to explain the avoidance of Cathedral Square by Christchurch residents. However, in contrast to most other cities, Christchurch locals never truly embraced their city centre, with a recent report indicating that the current volume of foot traffic in the central business district is higher than pre-earthquake levels (Guildford 2019). Clearly there are deeper social issues at play.

A more sustainable argument revolves around Christchurch's subtle social segregation, which results in Cathedral Square being considered a neutral buffer zone by its residents, in much the same way that McKee (2016) describes the *wadi* that separates Dganim from 'Ayn al-'Azm (McKee 2016, pp. 83-93). Christchurch is a cliquy city. From my experience encountering locals over the past few years, the process of social categorisation occurs in the first few seconds of any introduction, curiously determined by the high school one attended and its associated suburban boundaries. While my disclosure of growing up in Australia produces a polite acknowledgement of my presence, it invariably results in my reserved distancing to the social periphery through my categorisation as an 'outsider'. Whereas McKee (2016) observed the Jewish/Bedouin separation through the presence of physical *moshav* boundary walls, Christchurch social segregation is achieved through a more subtle

form of collegiate tribalism, which is invisible but nonetheless present. Through their preference for working and socialising in their prized suburban taskscapes, Christchurch locals display an ambivalent mistrust toward Cathedral Square. I have seldom witnessed large gatherings of locals in the Square aside from various public protests and a one-off beer festival organised by the City Council. This highlights how locals associate the area with anarchy and destruction, rather than the welcoming public meeting space it was intended for. Rather, my ethnographic research suggests that the majority of people frequenting Cathedral Square are 'outsiders'. These tourists are immediately recognisable, often exhibiting a bewildered appearance as they slowly shuffle toward the Cathedral ruins, giving the abandoned area an unnerving, zombie apocalypse-type vibe. However, I can empathise with their plight, having also experienced a similar sensation in my first few days in the city. Drawn to Cathedral Square for its dark tourism, the tourists do not linger. Instead, they stop for a few hurried photographs of the Cathedral before whisking themselves away on one of the heritage trams that frequently rattle down one side of the Square. As a result, both locals and tourists consider Cathedral Square to be a transitory space, with its perceived danger discouraging any sustained engagement with the area.



**Figure 2.** *The damaged main entrance to Christ Church Cathedral*

Notwithstanding this apparent abandonment, there remains one group of people who use the area on a regular basis. Four food trucks are permanently located off to one side of the Square, with their numbers swelling by half a dozen or so on Friday nights. Like myself, the vendors are fellow Christchurch transplants, having made their home in the city from all over the world. Unsurprisingly, few locals attend these Friday night gatherings, with nearly all custom coming from visiting tourists.

One Friday evening after much deliberation, I ordered dinner from one of the permanent food trucks offering an assortment of dishes from my Polish heritage. Interestingly, their menu reflected the vendor's ambiguous place within Christchurch society, with *pierogi* and *kielbasa* being paired with typical Kiwi fare of fish cakes, hamburgers and hot chips. After assuming I was a local, the vendor attempted to assert his own 'localness' by emphasising his family's association with Christchurch, carefully evading any discussion about his former life in Poland. After twenty years he was still struggling to shake his 'outsider' tag.

The avoidance of Cathedral Square by locals is a result of their preference for socialising within their own suburban tribe, highlighting their reluctance to engage with outsiders. Furthermore, the precarious social standing of food truck vendors within Christchurch society is reflected in the liminality of the space they occupy. Due to their part-local, part-outsider status, vendors are barred from fully integrating into one of the city's existing tribes. As a result, the food truck vendors have carved out their own community space within this previously unclaimed area of Christchurch. By examining these Cathedral Square taskscapes, this journal has laid bare the social segregation of Christchurch, and in the process, given voice to an outsider's struggle for belonging in an adopted homeland.

## Reference list

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