

Shigeru Ban: Cardboard Cathedral by Andrew Barrie, Auckland University Press, 250 pp. (2014). \$59.99 RRP

A book review by Michael Earle

We all have stories to tell after a disaster.

In the case of Christchurch, New Zealand, the disaster was repeated thousands of times in the form of ongoing earthquakes starting in September 2010.

These devastated the city, the city centre, the city suburbs and outlying rural areas around Canterbury, causing major loss of life and property, many injured, much damage and leaving a broken city with a broken heart and a broken soul.

Amongst the damage was the iconic Anglican Christchurch Cathedral located at the very heart of the city. Its future remains the subject of major controversy involving the Anglican Diocese of Christchurch, passionate community interests and ongoing legal challenges.

This book tells the story of how a transitional cathedral with a unique cardboard finish was conceptualised, planned, and constructed in just over two years. A cardboard key was handed over to the Anglican Bishop to mark the building's completion in August 2013.

It's an easy read in a couple of hours and has an attractive front cover. It includes concept drawings and an excellent photographic record in sepia and colour of the complete building process. All of course illustrated on cardboard paper, a nice touch.

As a Cathedral Regular with no technical flair, I found this book particularly helpful in deepening my own understanding and appreciation of the story behind this particular Cathedral. It's an awesome story described so well by Professor Andrew Barrie and other contributors.

A Cathedral is a Christian church that contains the seat of a bishop. Cathedrals I have recently visited in Europe ooze history, some dating back to the eleventh century. Their purpose is to offer spaces that inspire the human spirit, enable people to gather and worship God with a sense of wonder and awe, allowing the Spirit to touch us deeply within our own sacred space. Church architecture provides a long history of such engagement.

Yet it is easy to come away with a feeling that Cathedrals to survive have become fee-charging museums for tourists with cameras, offering ornate religious paintings, statues, plaques, flags and souvenir booklets to explain their history, memorialise national dead heroes and military achievements, familiar landmarks providing security and sanctuary to describe a former period of time. And of course pillars add to the distractions.

Christchurch's Transitional Cathedral offers something uniquely different: a combination of Beauty, Light, Simplicity and Intimacy. Innovative and modern. Pacific rather than European in design. An A-frame. Geometric in shape. One big open room. A soft, inviting and warm atmosphere. No distractions from the past. No flags. No tombs. No statues. No pillars. Not a museum.

Covered by a lightweight roofing skin made of translucent polycarbonate. A simple cardboard cross to focus on at one end. A breath-taking multi-coloured Triangle at the other, providing strong links with the Rose Window in the damaged Cathedral in the Square.

Rows of cardboard tubes overhead, broken from heat changes but reflecting our broken nature. Each tube given a few coats of polyurethane by a team of volunteers, each carrying their own story. Cardboard furniture used to make the Cross, the altar, choir stalls, pulpit, donation boxes and noticeboards. A raw concrete floor below with seating capacity for 700 on simple low-cost plywood chairs (with cushions) offering flexible seating arrangements. White curtains on the sides, separating eight shipping containers used as offices, side chapels and storage spaces.

This structure marks the beginnings of renewal in the city's business district. It is the first new civic building completed since the swarm of earthquakes began and has already provided space for a wide variety of worship services, civic events, concerts, private functions and other community engagements. It combines the essentials of both Church and Community in its witness, mission and outreach.

Originally conceived as a transitional structure to last ten years while the rebuild in the Square took place, the book points out that it complies with building requirements to last at least 50 years, or 'permanently' in the words of its architect. But that came with increased costs. However, as a visiting Dunedin Bishop recently pointed out, every Cathedral and every building has a transitional life. Nothing will last permanently or indefinitely. Not even in Europe.

The man behind this innovative structure is Japanese architect, Shigeru Ban, who over 20 years has developed a global reputation for his work designing disaster relief projects in such diverse places as Rwanda, China, India, France, Italy, Sri Lanka, as well as in his homeland. His Paper Church, paper log houses and other temporary structures are all outlined. No surprise that he has recently won the Pritzker Prize, 'regarded as architecture's equivalent of a Nobel'

The book describes Ban's values and principles in his architecture to serve ordinary people, rather the privileged social classes, to design cheap paper tubes to the specific needs of disaster zones that are cheap, can be locally sourced and built by relatively unskilled labour.

Ban is drawn to simplicity and to products that are lightweight, economical, distinctive, crisp, fresh, practical and ecologically sound. He gives priority in his work to use local materials, local consultants and to be earthed in the local conditions.

He charged no fee to build this cathedral, on the condition that it was used for civic events as well as for religious ceremonies. Truly an inspirational architect, whose initial sketch in June 2011 closely matched the finished product two years later. And who made a commitment to make 20 site visits here during this process.

Yet the book also highlights that this construction was a team effort involving the skills, time and experiences of many local people involved either on the Transitional Cathedral Group or as architects, engineers, project managers, contractors, sponsors and supporters, all of whom are acknowledged. A number of companies worked at cost. Inspiring in itself.

There were plenty of challenges to face, identifying a suitable site on unstable ground everywhere, overcoming concerns about liquefaction, strengthening the roof skin and foundations as part of compliance requirements, addressing increased costs and construction time, moisture problems caused by a major storm. It still cost some \$7 million to build, even that involved cutting out a proposed Annexe Building with a café, shop and space for meeting rooms. Such a shame.

So, there it is. An unusual, but much needed story to tell. A striking design. A team project.

A symbol of hope and restoration in a broken city. A place inviting people to come together and worship God in the best tradition of Christian cathedrals.

A space to be inspired, to feel grateful and renewed. More aware of the gifts of simplicity, beauty, light, intimacy and God's love for them. Hopefully to leave as a changed person with a new heart and soul.

And it all started with an email written to Ban by Rev Craig Dixon, the Cathedral's Development Officer at the time, basically saying....Come and see for yourself, as soon as possible.

Thanks to Andrew Barrie's fine book, this invitation remains to anyone living in or visiting Christchurch. Come and see for yourself.

PS. You can buy the book at a reduced price of \$45 from the Cathedral shop.

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