



# NAPIER AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE: RECONSTRUCTION AND PLANNING IN THE 1930S

BY JOHANNABELL, POST-GRADUATE STUDENT, MASSEY UNIVERSITY, PALMERSTON NORTH

On 3 February 1931, a major earthquake devastated Napier. The central business area was left in ruins, with considerable loss of life. The disaster presented Napier with both challenges and opportunities. This paper explores three themes – rebuilding the central business area, developing Napier's Marine Parade, and planning and establishing a new suburb along "garden suburb" lines.

Immediately after the earthquake, activities focused on rescue, clearing debris, and restoring essential services. The Napier Citizen's Control Committee, formed the morning

after the earthquake, was for five weeks the entity primarily responsible for rescue and rehabilitation. In mid-March 1931, administration of town affairs passed to two government-appointed commissioners, J.S. Barton and L.B. Campbell, who acted in place of the Napier Borough Council until delayed elections were held in May 1933.

## Central Business Area

The Commissioners adopted a pragmatic approach in planning and facilitating the reconstruction of the central business area. Although entitled to act alone,

they were assisted by the Napier Reconstruction Committee, a voluntary group of citizens who represented local organisations.

The Commissioners were aware that the earthquake provided an opportunity to produce a well-laid out town and to correct errors of the past. They acknowledged, however, that this opportunity was seriously limited by finance and time. The earthquake had occurred in the midst of the Great Depression, and business people wanted to get their business premises rebuilt and operating as soon as possible. Consequently, the town planning scheme initiated for Napier was limited to street widening,

LEFT: Paria and Marine Parade Gardens.

RIGHT: Marine Parade Gardens and Tom Parker Fountain.

BELOW RIGHT: Masonic Hotel.

splaying of street corners, and opening several new streets and service lanes.

The Hawke's Bay Earthquake Act 1931 and the Town-planning Act 1926 provided the legislative background for reconstruction. Regulations issued shortly after the earthquake suspended rebuilding in the central business area until planning matters were resolved. The Town-planning Act required every borough council with a population of 1000 or more to prepare a town planning scheme and submit it to the Town Planning Board for approval. The Commissioners did not want to prepare a comprehensive scheme covering all of Napier Borough. They believed a scheme of that scale would take at least two to three years to complete, too long for Napier to wait before rebuilding commenced.

What was needed was a scheme that applied to the central business area only, and which could be approved as quickly as possible. To facilitate this, regulations were made that permitted a scheme to cover part of the borough only and which also abridged required periods of public notice. The draft regulations comprised 251 clauses and presented a comprehensive code for town planning. These were reduced to 50 clauses, covering only those matters seen as essential for street widening and related matters such as compensation and betterment (Barton, 1932).

Preparation of the scheme included negotiations with land owners. Many were happy to forego compensation for land taken for street widening, because a widened street would result in some betterment or was for the general good. By December 1931, the scheme was open for inspection and making objections. The Town Planning Board considered the objections, and gave final approval for the scheme in March 1932.

A Daily Telegraph editorial acknowledged that although the scheme was much less than originally contemplated, the street widening and related improvements would allow rebuilding to proceed and would be of lasting benefit to traders and shoppers once completed (31 March 1932, p.6).

At the time the scheme was finalised, it was announced that, in the central business area,



all power and telephone lines would be placed underground, and verandah poles would be prohibited. The intention was to create a shopping area that appeared clean and tidy. Undergrounding of services began in October 1932. The cables were buried in trenches beneath footpaths that were formed in concrete slabs, so repairs could be made easily and without the need to excavate in the middle of streets.

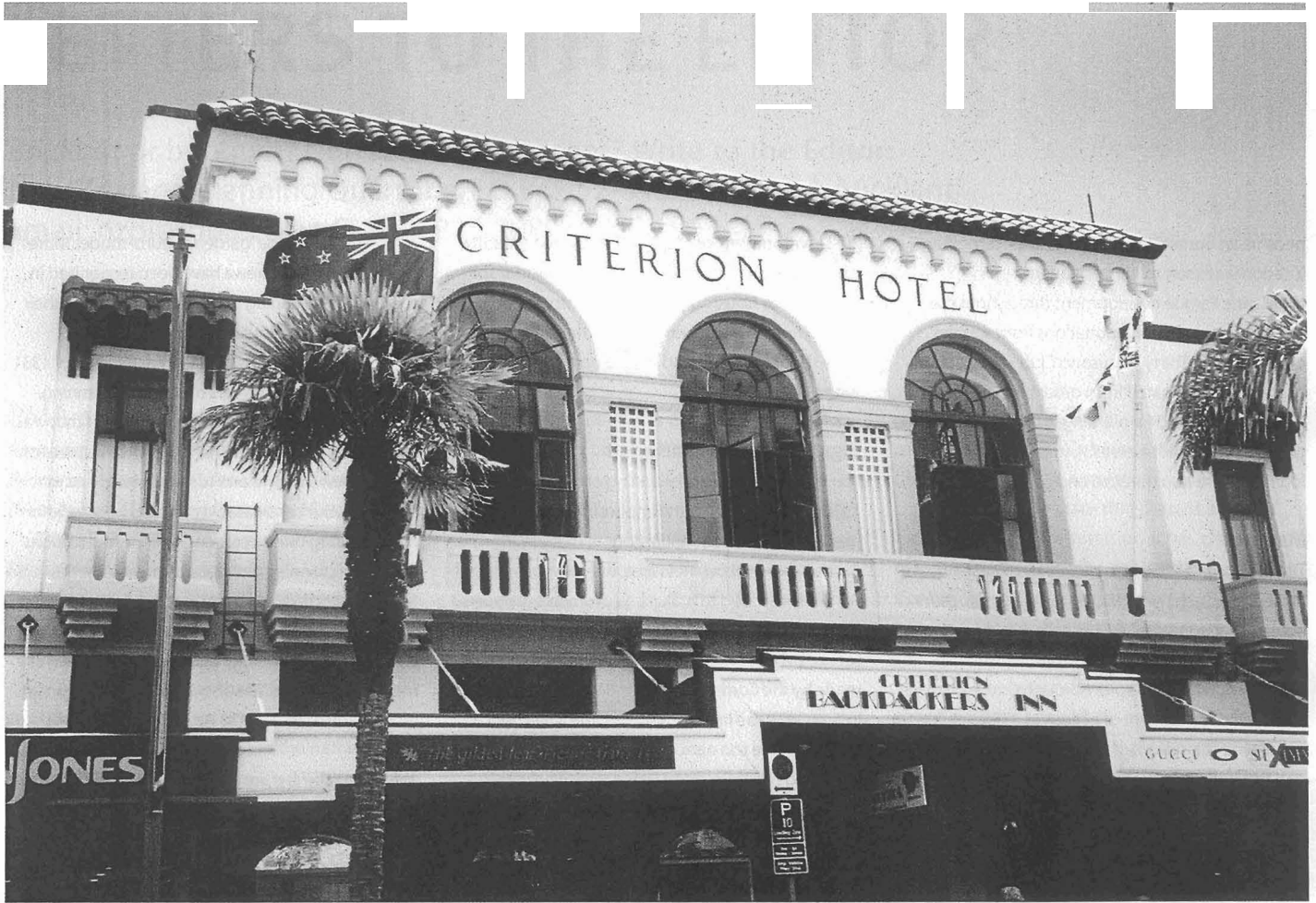
Shortly after the earthquake, it was suggested that Napier should be rebuilt in a definite style of architecture. The Daily Telegraph, in an editorial in

April 1931, commented favourably and referred to Santa Barbara, which, after an earthquake, had adopted a Spanish style of architecture. Not only should Napier be a safe city, but it should also be "one that is in every way beautiful and should, for all time, be regarded as one of the show towns on New Zealand." (22 April 1931, p.4).

In 1932, when many buildings were constructed, there were numerous reports in the Daily Telegraph highlighting the design features of individual buildings. Most descriptions explained that the building concerned would be constructed







to meet new building code requirements, and many remarked that the Spanish mission style would be followed.

Although much of the central business area had been rebuilt by the end of 1933, construction proceeded throughout the 1930s. Important buildings completed during this period included the Art Gallery and Museum, the Municipal Theatre, and the iconic T&G Building with its dome clock, located on the Marine Parade. Several more extravagant proposals never eventuated, partly because of lack of finance.

### Marine Parade

George Henry Swan, Mayor of Napier from 1885 to 1901, provided the inspiration for early development of the Marine Parade. His vision included planting Norfolk pines along the Parade and creating an esplanade and other amenities. The Thirty-Thousand Club, formed in 1913, provided further impetus for Parade development.

After the earthquake, there was much discussion about the Marine Parade and many plans were suggested. With the raising of land by about two metres, the beach area was now wider and better suited for development. Proposals not adopted included an entertainment centre, which would have straddled the Parade, and a design for a pier, stage and outdoor dancing area. Those involved in the negotiations and debate included the Napier Reconstruction Committee, the Thirty-Thousand Club, the Commissioners, and the Borough Council. The *Daily Telegraph* also contributed through editorial comment and publishing correspondence on Parade proposals throughout the 1930s.

In late 1931, work began on beautifying the Marine Parade. Shingle on the beachfront was leveled and covered with spoil from a nearby bluff that had collapsed in the earthquake. A large concreted open-air auditorium and paths were laid, and shrubs and trees planted. Later, the Parade was enhanced with the building of the Veronica Sun Bay, the Sound Shell,

*OPPOSITE (clockwise from top): Marine Parade; Daily Telegraph Building; and the Public Trust Building (which survived the earthquake).*

*ABOVE: Criterion Hotel.*

and colonnade with commemorative arches. These structures defined three sides of the auditorium, and were funded by the Borough Council and Thirty-Thousand Club.

The Sun Bay was a flat-roofed structure and pergola, where people could sit and watch the ocean, protected from the prevailing wind by glass windows. The Sound Shell was a stage enclosed in a semi-circular dome, intended for concerts and other entertainment. The building of the Sound Shell followed intense public debate, in which there was some concern that the building would reduce visibility of the "sweep of the bay". Consequently, Borough Council consent was on the basis that the Sound Shell could be moved elsewhere if the existing site was found to be unsuitable. The Sound Shell

became an immediate success, and its "temporary" location was soon made permanent.

Marine Parade development throughout the 1930s was assisted with donations from sources other than the Thirty-Thousand Club. Shrubs, plants and seedlings donated from other parts of New Zealand were used for planting in the Marine Parade gardens and other reserves. A sundial and colour fountain were also donated and constructed.

## Marewa

The raising of land by two metres by the earthquake allowed land adjoining Napier to be developed for housing and industrial purposes. In 1933, the Napier Harbour Board, which owned this land, reached agreement with the Napier Borough Council for the lease and development of a block of 475 acres, later to become the suburb of Marewa.

Detailed plans were drawn up for the block, with the assistance of J.W. Mawson, former Director of Town Planning. [See also Caroline Miller's article on the life and work of John Mawson in this issue.] The proposed road layout abandoned the traditional

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chessboard style in favour of angular and circular roads. Roads were divided into three classes according to use and were to be lined with trees. Three major parks were proposed. Shops were planned for two specified sites, but would not be permitted outside those areas. Dwellings would also be regulated to ensure a high standard, and there were provisions to cover such matters as the position of houses on sites, fencing, garages and outbuildings.

Development began in 1935, and the area was promoted as a model garden suburb at the time. An early difficulty was that the restrictions designed to control development could be placed only on leasehold sections. This difficulty was resolved in 1938 when the Town-planning Board finally approved the Napier (Marewa) Town-planning Scheme 1936, prepared under the Town-planning Act 1926.

Development of Marewa proceeded steadily during the later 1930s, augmented considerably by the state housing programme introduced by the Labour Government. It was thought at the time that Marewa could house up to 8000 people when completed.

## Significance and Conclusion

The reconstruction and planning of Napier in the 1930s has had a profound impact on the town's heritage and subsequent history.

In the central business area, the Town-planning Act 1926 was used to make improvements to streets. Other improvements, such as undergrounding of services, were simply the result of good decisions made by the Commissioners or Borough Council. In time, with the increase in traffic, the streets once again became too narrow, and in the 1990s the main shopping street, Emerson Street, was transformed into a mall. In the 1980s, the buildings erected immediately after the earthquake were rediscovered as Art Deco, and have now become a premier attraction for visitors to Napier.

Planning of the Marine Parade, like the central business area, partly follows the "city beautiful" ethos. There was a desire to produce a townscape that was attractive, beautiful, clean and tidy, both to residents and to visitors. Such descriptive terms abound in contemporary newspaper reports. Development on the Marine Parade has continued over the years as new attractions have been added. For some years the Parade languished a little, but another redevelopment is now underway.

Marewa was not fully developed until the 1950s, but provided the model for later suburbs in Napier that were planned in a similar manner, and with the participation of the Hawke's Bay Harbour Board. Planned developments of this nature and scale were unusual in New Zealand outside the main centres. The original planning of Marewa clearly included

many features of the "garden suburb" model. More recently, parts of Marewa have been recognised in the Council's planning documents because of their Art Deco or State Housing character.

In summary, the Hawke's Bay Earthquake of 1931 was followed by nine years of intensive planning, reconstruction and development in Napier that was remarkable for the time. The 1930s were depression years in New Zealand and town planning was in its infancy. But considerable progress was made in Napier during those years and laid the foundations for further planning and development after the Second World War. The legacy, at the start of the twenty-first century, is a city that still possesses some characteristics of the "city beautiful" and "garden city" movements. Napier has also achieved international recognition because of its Art Deco architecture.

*John Annabell is a part-time postgraduate student, enrolled for the degree Doctor of Philosophy, at Massey University, Palmerston North. His doctoral thesis is a case study of the planning history of Napier. He is currently Legal Counsel for Palmerston North City Council.*

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