



The Foo Fighters at AMI Stadium.

A resurgent Christchurch

Darren Burden explains the role of venues in the rebuilding of Christchurch

Quick sifting through Christchurch's local media and you would be forgiven for thinking that the recovery from the earthquakes which devastated the largest city in the South Island of New Zealand had stalled.

Politicking, infighting, insurance issues, lack of funding, cost blow outs and plain old construction delays all make good headlines. But let's not forget that the February 2011 earthquake destroyed, or has caused to be demolished, around 70% of the Christchurch CBD as well as entire suburbs. Put in the context of being the second largest city in New Zealand, or any country for that matter, you'd probably recognise the road to a totally rebuilt city is going to be a long one.

But don't let the local headlines fool you. Christchurch is having somewhat of a resurgence, particularly as far as venues and events are concerned and there is further good news ahead with the recent commencement of the repair to the Christchurch Town Hall for Performing Arts.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes the venue industry was quick to respond. A 'temporary' 17,500 seat stadium was completed after a mere 100 days and is now home to the Crusaders and Canterbury Rugby teams. Local insurance company AMI transferred its naming rights from Lancaster Park and a 'new' AMI Stadium was born in March 2012. Since then, as well as ITM Cup, Super 15 and international rugby,

the venue has hosted A-League football, Nitro Circus and community events. This year it hosted its first major concert with the Foo Fighters playing in front of 26,000 people, and in June it hosted nine matches for the FIFA U-20 World Cup, including the semi-final between Brazil and Senegal.

Staying with sport, in September last year the Hagley Pavilion was completed as part of the revamped Hagley Oval in the heart of Christchurch. The Pavilion can host up to 500 people, but the embankments of the rest of the ground can accommodate a further 7,500. It reached capacity in the first international cricket match with the Black Caps playing Sri Lanka in the first ever Boxing Day test in the South Island. In February this year, Christchurch hosted the opening ceremony of Cricket World



Hagley Oval.



Bic Runga and Neil Finn at the Horncastle Arena.

Cup followed by the first match of the tournament (New Zealand v Sri Lanka) and two further matches (West Indies v Pakistan and England v Scotland). For Cricket World Cup, temporary grandstands were built on top of the embankments to increase capacity to around 19,000, and for those three matches around 44,000 people came through the turnstiles. In major cities, that may not seem a great deal, but for Christchurch that equates to around 12% of the population.

For a city that lost out on Rugby World Cup in 2011, it is fitting that Christchurch has successfully hosted not just one, but two major international tournaments in 2015.

In the business events sector, venue management company Vbase entered a deal with the Air Force Museum in early 2013 to manage the venue's function spaces including its new exhibition hall. This facility is used for conferences, meetings, banquets (up to 1,000), functions and a host of other events. The market share that Christchurch had for conventions and business events in New Zealand was around 25% pre-earthquake which fell to less than 2% afterwards. However with the use of the Air Force Museum, as well as other hotel facilities around the city, the market share has increased to around 10%. The agreement between Vbase and the Air Force Museum seems likely to be in place until such time as a new Convention Centre is built, which is currently projected to be sometime in 2019.

Moving to performing arts, the magnificent Isaac Theatre Royal reopened in November 2014 after a tricky restoration project and was busy with its bookings ever since. This 1,300 capacity theatre is one of Christchurch's treasures and has been sorely missed while out of commission. The recent decision to proceed with the \$127 million full repair to the Christchurch Town Hall will also result in solving two key venue needs for performing arts in the city as both the Lilburn Auditorium and James Hay Theatre are housed in the complex. The 2,000 capacity auditorium was recently acknowledged as being one of the top ten concert halls in the world, alongside prestigious venues such as Bridgewater Hall in Manchester, Boston Symphony Hall and the Berlin Philharmonie. The revamped James Hay Theatre will reduce in size to around 600 capacity with investigations underway to explore flexibility to convert to a larger capacity flat floor. Even though the final decision to proceed with the project was made in mid-June, the construction work is already underway with completion expected in June 2018.

The redevelopment of the Town Hall will have a major impact on another key city venue, Horncastle Arena. Since the earthquakes, Horncastle Arena has hosted many events that otherwise would have been held at the Town Hall or other city venues that no longer exist. As a venue operator, Vbase



developed an intimate mode to deliver events from 1,500 up to the maximum capacity of 9,000, thereby accommodating the smaller scale events that would have been held at other venues, both in terms of community events or promoted tours. Vbase also developed its own sound shell such that classical musical performances can be accommodated.

In addition, Vbase has seen a significant increase in the number of ticketed events at Horncastle Arena, particularly with international artists. In April this year for example, the venue hosted Billy Idol, Ed Sheeran, David Gray, and Ricky Martin as well as other events. For promoters, ticket sales are high which is fuelled by a strong local economy as a result of the Christchurch rebuild. More promoters are seeing Christchurch as a compelling market and a place that they must seriously consider when pulling together touring schedules. As well as international touring acts, Horncastle Arena hosts a number of trade shows and exhibitions each year and, unsurprisingly, four key events in this category are 'home shows' or construction related.

To the delight of naming rights partner, Horncastle Homes, the utilisation of the Arena is high. Compared to pre-earthquake figures annual visitor numbers have increased by around 50%. However, with the high level of utilisation comes the issue of trying to ensure the venue remains available for high impact events, either in an economic or social sense. The re-opening of the Town Hall will help address that with events having a home to suit their size and type as well as greater flexibility in date availability for promoters and event organisers.

And as for the future? In a venue sense, that brings us to the new stadium. At this point the insurance claim on the old AMI Stadium, or Lancaster Park for the traditionalists, remains unresolved. The insurers and reinsurers argue that it can be fixed for \$50 million while the venue owner, Vbase, and Christchurch City Council believe it is beyond economic repair and the full insured amount of \$143 million is payable. As such a swift resolution is unlikely which brings us back to politicking and insurance issues. Nonetheless, Christchurch City Council has included this project at the back end of their recently agreed 10 year Long Term Plan, which therefore gives an indicative construction start around 2022. This means the 'temporary' AMI Stadium may need to last a little longer than originally envisaged unless a swift insurance settlement triggers a re-think on timing.

Based on the magnitude of the overall Christchurch rebuild, from a venues and events perspective the city is enjoying much success. Yes, there is still a way to go to get to where we want to be, but major events, international concerts, performing arts, business events, banqueting and functions are all being successfully delivered in a vibrant Christchurch.

Darren Burden is General Manager of Vbase, the venue management company that operates AMI Stadium, Horncastle Arena, Air Force Museum, Hagley Oval, Christchurch Town Hall and Ilex café and events.

The Isaac Theatre Royal (below) and plans for the refurbished Christchurch Town Hall (left)

