

Christchurch: Living outside the city square

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By Sue Hoffart

Back alleys have a reputation for harbouring shady deals and bad girls.

In Christchurch a decade ago, the inner-city lanes were grubby spaces between run-down relics from the city's industrial past. Reeking of ammonia and last night's spilt beer, they backed on to disused woollen mills and dilapidated brick warehouses. They were places to avoid after dark.

Now, these same lanes are a tourist drawcard, bustling with daytime shoppers and late night merry-makers.

Smartly renovated old buildings, fancy lighting and paving have attracted retailers and office tenants. Tiny shops are tucked into narrow spaces and back streets, with pocked wooden floors and offerings of rose-studded New Zealand-made soaps, designer clothing, hand-crafted jewellery, rare used books and quirky art and gifts. While much of downtown Christchurch is arranged in an orderly grid system, this part of the city is all angles and doglegs amid century-old bricks and arched windows. Drinkers can stroll from the jazz joint to the champagne bar and on to a watering hole that overflows on to couches tucked around an outdoor fireplace. The gentrification has even spilled into formerly seedy neighbouring streets, which sport good eateries and more quirky shops selling used records, antiques and gourmet food.

The urban renewal began with property developer Dave Henderson, whose varying fortunes and colourful Inland Revenue Department battles tend to keep him in the news. Henderson's four-year fight with tax authorities was immortalised in a book, followed by the movie *We're Here To Help* released in 2007.

It was Henderson who hit on the idea of rejuvenating a cluster of heritage buildings and started buying property near Lichfield St in 2000. The area, a few minutes' walk from the Cathedral Square tourist centre of town, was synonymous with warehousing and street kids. Now, his South Of Lichfield development includes popular shops and bars, desirable office space and funky accommodation. The idea has caught on and other developers have followed suit in neighbouring streets and alleys.

When Natasha English opened her Found home design store eight years ago, the High St location was notable for its empty buildings and crumbling secondhand stores. English dubbed the shop next door Dirty Dave's for its stash of pornographic magazines and says many of the buildings were tagged for demolition.

"It was really quite divey down here but the rent was good and we didn't care," she says. "We didn't rely



The South of Lichfield area has burst into life with vibrant bars and lots of people. Photo / Supplied

on foot traffic."

These days, the street is a hot destination for fashion-conscious shoppers who trawl pricey clothing stores installed in smartly revamped old buildings.

English says the street began to change four or five years ago as the nearby lanes were developed and renovated.

Until then, developers were not interested in her corner of the city.

"The whole inner city was just dying 10 years ago or so. The council was not interested in saving buildings, so many of the buildings have gone. Look at the square – it's soulless."

But High St has retained its original facades and village atmosphere, with regular customers and retailers who know each other.

"It has lots of nooks and crannies and it's an interesting streetscape."

One street over, Imogen Taylor's Aji Global Grocery and Chocolateria is next to Peaches porn shop, along the street from three secondhand bookshops. Her six-year-old specialist food and spice shop is on the fringes of the rejuvenated area with a massage parlour across the road.

"This block has hardly changed but the neighbourhood has," she says. "Because it's slightly rough, rents are cheaper here."

Taylor admits there's a flip side to the "edgy grunge factor" she loves. It can mean encountering drunks and stepping over – or cleaning up – some foul messes nearby.

But she wouldn't want to be anywhere else. "This is the sexiest part of town. It's got the grunge factor and that's always where the culture's going to spring from, from the suburbs that have often been really down and out."

So, next time you visit Christchurch, get outside the square and explore the city's quirky side. But allow plenty of time.

Here are a few ideas to get you started:

Hotel Off The Square

Forget gleaming lobbies and uniformed bellhops. This is not that kind of hotel.

You'll probably have to double-park out front and carry your own bags up the stairs.

But look out for bowls of addictive crunchy apples in the hallways and, at night, watch the front desk guy lighting dozens of candles scattered down the staircase and on desks and coffee tables around the hotel.

Genuinely helpful staff will fish out your favourite herbal tea and a good book and give proper advice on which bars and restaurants to try, including recommendations on specific dishes. They can also tell you about the orphanage school they sponsor in Laos.

Every room is different; some come with longer beds for tall people, another boasts magnificent arched windows and several have full kitchens. Recycling bins and original art are standard issue.

The city's historic trams pass through the lower level of the hotel, which is a block from Cathedral Square, with neighbours that include Herbal Heaven party pill shop and a Russian restaurant called Red Square.

115 Worcester St, www.offthesquare.com.

Aji

This is a "global grocery" specialising in chocolates and spicy condiments – which are sent around New Zealand via a website. The shop and online store also sell teas, chocolate, spices, snails and wickedly good Turkish delight.

129 Manchester Street, www.aji.co.nz.

Alice In Videoland

Calling itself a "curious conduit to cinematic enlightenment", this astounding rental store stocks about 20,000 wildly divergent movie titles. Browse the art deco former post office building for everything from Flash Gordon and Lone Ranger to Spanish language films, a slapstick comedy section and a corner devoted to the 100 greatest films of all time.

They have a no-porn policy and out-of-towners can tap into their online home delivery system.

Corner of Tuam and High Streets, www.aliceinvideoland.co.nz.

Cherry Blossom

A bright kimono marks the entry to the upper-storey enclave for lovers of Japanese design. Find handmade notebooks, fanciful pewter insect brooches and vintage kimonos that have been reworked into purses and belts.

And check out the ornate ceiling with its stunning leadlight dome window.

Near the entrance to Lichfield Lane, at 215 Tuam St, www.cherryblossom.co.nz.

Chinwag Eat Thai

Good fun, delicious, contemporary Thai fare.

Share bowls of chilli mandarin marinated tuna with grated coconut or meltingly tender pork shanks with sweet-salty caramel sauce for dipping.

161 High St, www.chinwageatthai.co.nz.

Dusk Gallery and Store

This place stocks beautiful New Zealand-made art and gifts while neighbouring Blue Earth Store & Gallery (www.blueearth.co.nz) sells exquisite handmade soap and body products.

18 Poplar St.

Fazazz

Buy a \$60,000 Aston Martin or a wind-up metal toy car in this extraordinary shop that specialises in motoring-related paraphernalia. The "automobilia" includes books, art, motorbikes and antique pedal cars. Expect to be served by older men wearing suits and ties and wielding manual "zipzap" credit card imprinters.

84 Lichfield St, www.fazazz.co.nz.

Found

"We're magpies," owner Natasha English says. "We find things." The tiny shop fronts her interior and exterior design business and stocks artwork, lighting, Scandinavian vintage furniture and nothing made in China.

179 High St, www.found.co.nz.

La Petite Croix

Perch on chunky wooden stools outside this champagne bar, sip bubbles and pretend you're in France. Designers have had a ball with old crystal lights, a battered wooden door and beautiful toile du jour fabric print on the walls.

3 SOL Square, www.lapetitecroix.co.nz.

Smith's Bookshop

A gem of a bookshop crammed to the gunnels with old and rare tomes. The proprietor can lay his hands on just the one you seek, four shelves up, third from the right.

133 Manchester St, www.smiths.bookshop.co.nz.

Walking tours

Grab a copy of the Christchurch central city lanes walk brochure, which offers a potted history of historic buildings between Colombo and Madras Streets.

Available from the i-Site visitor centre in Cathedral Square.

Visit the Christchurch and Canterbury Tourism website at www.christchurchnz.com.