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The 2015 Cricket World Cup in Christchurch

Reimagine and regeneration

Using an event for post-disaster reimagine and regeneration

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to focus on the development and upgrading of the Hagley Park cricket oval in Christchurch for the 2015 Cricket World Cup and how this hallmark event was used a catalyst to rebrand the city following the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on the findings from research conducted between 2012 and 2016. Data for the analysis were collected from mainstream media, sport organisations websites and government archives. In addition, a two-round series of semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders was undertaken in the aftermath of the Cricket World Cup.

Findings – In the case of Christchurch, the earthquakes and the destruction of much of the downtown provided a recovery opportunity, with the 2015 Cricket World Cup used to expedite the development of a new sporting venue in the city centre and rebrand the city to international tourists and sport enthusiasts.

Research limitations/implications – The Hagley Park cricket oval case study provides evidence on the rhetoric of urban competitiveness and the use of hallmark sporting events to reframe urban development in post-disaster contexts.

Originality/value – This research provides further evidence on the logics of disaster capitalism and how cities embark on costly redevelopment projects for sports and events whilst overlooking exacerbating vulnerabilities among the local community.

Keywords Destination management, Mega-events, Rebranding, Earthquake recovery, Urban branding

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The hosting of events is among the most common practices of urban regeneration with implications for city and destination branding (Spirou, 2010). Cities around the world often embark on large-scale sport development projects to reposition themselves as eventful cities (Weed and Bull, 2009), particularly after shifts in their economic and industrial structures. Examples include, but are not limited to, Athens, Barcelona, Detroit, Dunedin, Lille, Manchester, Montreal, Sheffield, Sydney, Turin and Vancouver (Amore, 2019; Amore and Hall, 2017). However, despite the long use of such strategies, there remains little agreement as to whether sports and event-led regeneration projects have a long-term positive impact in terms of urban competitiveness and reimagining. Although job creation from infrastructure



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construction and development and event hosting are clearly recognised, potentially substantial opportunity costs remain. For example, while some sports scholars argue that there is a positive impact (Baade, 1996; Higham, 1999), others suggest that there are socio-economic and socio-political negative impacts that are often overlooked (Coates and Humphreys, 2008; Weed, 2006). Indeed, there is often a failure to acknowledge the importance of power relations in influencing sports and event-led urban regeneration agendas and their subsequent impacts on host communities (Amore and Hall, 2017; Hall and Wilson, 2011, 2015).

Media coverage, the manufacturing of public consent and the establishment of local growth coalitions are key in the enhancement of an urban development rhetoric that conceives event-led regeneration projects as a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity to reposition cities in the global tourism market (Hall, 2006; Herman and Chomsky, 2010; Searle, 2009). In particular, sports-led regeneration projects are often used to justify the delivery of costly facilities as a necessary condition for the hosting of events (Hall and Wilson, 2011; Norris, 2002; Spirou, 2010). However, the governance for event-led regeneration is often highly fragmented between levels of government and different agencies, subject to lobbying from growth coalitions, and unable to fully understand how these types of projects actually contribute to tourism development and urban competitiveness (Amore and Hall, 2017; Delaney and Eckstein, 2003; Long, 2012; Weed, 2006; Weed and Bull, 2009).

Most of the literature addresses regeneration through sports and events in contexts where deindustrialisation and economic decline resulted in the physical decline of inner-city areas (Amore and Hall, 2017). Conversely, there is limited research seeking to highlight the role of event-related regeneration and branding policies to reposition cities in the aftermath of natural disasters (Amore, 2019; Amore and Hall, 2016, 2017; Gotham and Greenberg, 2014; Johnson and Olshansky, 2010). According to Saxena (2013), post-disaster urban regeneration and tourism are a lucrative opportunity for private and corporate interests seeking to legitimise their development agenda in targeted emergency areas. Disasters, such as the 2010-2011 Canterbury earthquakes discussed here, created a unique time-space condition for the development of projects that, under other “normal” circumstances, would have never been implemented.

This study presents findings from research undertaken between 2012 and 2016 on the provision of first-class cricket oval development in Christchurch, New Zealand, following the 2010-2011 earthquakes. The case study sheds light on how the suspension of “normal” planning processes in a post-disaster environment and the rhetoric of urgency, recovery and urban competitiveness were used to justify the development of a controversial sporting venue for the 2015 Cricket World Cup games to be played in Christchurch. The focus on a specific project addresses a current gap in research with regards to planning issues and episodes of governance in Christchurch (Pearce, 2011), while the focus on sporting mega-events is complementary to other studies focusing on event-led urban regeneration (Amore and Hall, 2017; Amore, 2019).

Sport and events-led regeneration

Urban regeneration strategies based on the provision of sports facilities and the hosting of mega-events are common in urban redevelopment and competitiveness strategies (Page and Hall, 2003; Thorney, 2002). These often consist of area-based projects to accommodate sports infrastructure along with “accommodation, restaurants, bars and other forms of entertainment for the visitor beyond the immediate attractions” (Weed and Bull, 2009, p. 224). Over the past 40 years, the scale of projects and the requirements to meet the standards to host world-class events has significantly changed, with international sport

organisations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and the World Rugby Union (WRU) advocating for purposed sporting venue and hosting requirements (Hall, 2012). These, in turn, leave cities and countries with the burden of funding costly projects as a prerequisite to host events, with their long-term utilisation often partial unless further investment is made to modify the infrastructure (Hall, 2012; Spirou, 2010). However, the design and development of event facilities and sports stadia comes at a high price, even if they are able to be reconfigured as multi-purpose facilities. Evidence from South Africa, Brazil, Greece and Portugal show issues with post-event legacy and the long-term difficulty of running expensive facilities in the absence of national and international sports competitions that generate significant revenue (Amore, 2019; Miller, 2015; Papanikolaou, 2013).

Saxena (2013, p. 86) argues that public-private regeneration strategies seek to redevelop “areas which have suffered a significant decline”. According to Hall and Wilson (2011, p. 134), “the reason why governments and the private sector are usually positive towards the hosting of [...] events lie in both the perceived economic benefits from attendance and construction, but also the contribution of such events to place marketing”. However, the hosting of mega-events is often a short-term urban regeneration strategy that fails to effectively reposition cities or consolidate their appeal as tourist destinations (Hall, 2006, 2008a; Malecki, 2004). As Malecki (2004, p. 1103) puts it, “the disadvantages of competition mainly concern the perils that low-road strategies build so that no strengths can prevail over the long term, which presents particular difficulties for regions trying to catch up in the context of territorial competition based on knowledge”.

In recent years, public opinion against sport events appears to have become increasingly negative given the costs involved and the benefits gained (Hall, 2012). In the summer of 2013, for example, the city of Detroit declared bankruptcy, yet the State of Michigan had made available the funds for a US\$444m brand-new sports arena (Isidore, 2013). Similarly, in 2014, there was fierce public criticism of the Italian Government’s selection of Rome as a candidate city for the 2024 Olympic Games (Vendemiale, 2014), as the country already had extremely high public debt levels (140 per cent of the GDP) and severe cuts in public expenditure agreed in the 2012 European Fiscal Compact. More recently, the city of Oslo withdrew its candidacy to host the 2022 Winter Olympics amid harsh criticism against public investment on wasteful infrastructures required in the IOC bid guidelines. While the IOC labelled the withdrawal as a missed opportunity, the public opinion and the Norwegian government were openly reluctant “to spend money on wrong things, like satisfying the crazy demands from IOC apparatchiks” (Wilson, 2014, n.p.).

Sport events as post-disaster recovery strategy

According to Amore and Hall (2016, 2017), research on the practices of urban regeneration in post-disaster and major crises context is limited and derived mainly from the US context (Passavant, 2011). This is particularly evident with urban regeneration strategies focusing on the provision of sport infrastructure and organisation of events. Empirical evidence, on the contrary, suggests that events have been used as solution to foster post-disaster recovery over the past 20 years. For example, the Japanese Government’s decision to bid for the hosting of the FIFA 2002 World Cup, the 2019 Rugby World Cup and the 2020 Olympics were part of the recovery strategies following the 1994 and 2011 earthquakes, respectively (Yamamoto, 2016).

Post-disaster recovery strategies often look at hallmark sporting events as a fast-track redevelopment strategy that can also help reposition cities after disasters. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) financed

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up to 90 per cent of the repairs for the Superdome, with the State of Louisiana providing compensation to the local football franchise to avoid relocation to San Antonio (Passavant, 2011). Nevertheless, concerns exist on the necessity of subsidies and public money to support sports and events instead of more compelling post-disaster issues (Baade and Matheson, 2007). Arguably, the use of public funds to restore sport facilities and fund the organisation of the 2013 Super Bowl heightened the vulnerability of sports in the city as future disaster events may lead to the ultimate displacement of professional teams to more lucrative urban areas (Baade and Matheson, 2007). Similarly, the findings from Christchurch, New Zealand, suggest that in the aftermath of the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes, the recovery authorities enabled a neoliberal entrepreneurial agenda rooted in the building of anchor projects (Amore and Hall, 2016; Brand and Nicholson, 2016), including new sports facilities and stadia, as a means to attract private sector investments regardless of the lack of a sound business case (Amore and Hall, 2017). It is in these contexts that “demand overestimations and costs underestimations often lead to disastrous large-scale projects for mega-events that balloon implementation costs at the expense of taxpayers” (Amore and Hall, 2017, p. 114).

Method

This paper is based on the findings from research conducted between 2012 and 2016 on the provision of new amenities for leisure and tourism in Christchurch following the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. Data for the analysis were collected from the media, organisation websites, the Christchurch City Council (CCC) meeting archives, national government cabinet papers and project reports and policy documents retrieved from the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) and the Christchurch Central Development Unit (CCDU). In addition, a two-round series of semi-structured interviews with 13 relevant stakeholders were undertaken in the aftermath of the Cricket World Cup between May 2015 and November 2015. Interviews last between 45 min and 2 h. The identity of respondents is anonymised.

Data were coded using NVivo and arranged in themes to help the authors with the review of the extracts and, ultimately, frame findings under specific narratives. Narratives “help us construct windows into how and why decisions are made” (Dredge and Jenkins, 2011, p. 362). This approach is also used in urban regeneration and tourism in post-disaster contexts (Gotham, 2017; Gotham and Greenberg, 2014; Miller *et al.*, 2017). The themes chosen to illustrate the findings from this case study – recovery and competitiveness – are at the core of the crisis-driven urbanisation model (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014). In particular, the theme of recovery sheds light on how post-disaster urban redevelopment “[can] be insulated from democracy itself, while the privatization and devolution of disaster aid [is] championed as ‘best practices’ for promoting recovery and rebuilding” (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014, p. 133, emphasis in the original). On the other hand, the theme of competitiveness via the reimagination and representation of the city emphasise how tourism and economic development marketing elevate “the status of cities for the purpose of inter-urban competition – thus contributing to production and dissemination of the urban brands themselves” (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014, p. 221).

Context

Christchurch is the second largest city of New Zealand and the main urban area of the South Island. Prior to the earthquakes, the “garden city” was marketed as the most *English city outside England* (Amore, 2016a; Berlitz, 2012). The city of Christchurch had a long-established sports tradition, having hosted a Commonwealth Games at QEII stadium

in 1974. Christchurch was also home to Lancaster Park (AMI Stadium), the second biggest stadium in the country, which was also used for one-day and T-20 international cricket and was upgraded in preparation of the 2011 Rugby World Cup ([Amore and Hall, 2017](#)). Hagley Park Oval in the Christchurch city centre also had a long cricketing tradition and was regularly used for club games prior to the earthquakes. The pitch at the main cricket oval at the park had also been upgraded to be used for first-class games, including the hosting of games for the Under-18 World Cricket Cup in 2010, but this initiative was strongly opposed by local advocates and the Christchurch Civic Trust ([CCT, 2015](#)) who had, rightly as it turned out, perceived such developments as the start of further developments of the facility for international cricket.

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When the 22 February 2011 earthquake struck, the AMI Stadium suffered significant damage, (Tonkin and Taylor, [2011](#)), and the WRU unanimously decided to remove Christchurch from the 2011 Rugby World Cup schedule ([TVNZ, 2011](#)). The rights to hosting the 2015 Cricket World Cup, jointly hosted by Australia and New Zealand, had been decided in 2006 ([BBC Sport, 2006](#)), although the final share of matches between the two countries and their location was not decided until July 2013. The choice of Christchurch and Hagley Park as a cricket venue was made before the court decision regarding the legality of the development of the project. Following the establishment of the CERA (2011) and [CCDU \(2012\)](#), the New Zealand Government had already announced that the Hagley Cricket Oval could be redeveloped for the 2015 Cricket World Cup, given the promise by New Zealand Cricket (NZC) that they would use the venue to host World Cup Cricket ([Amore and Hall, 2016, 2017; CCDU, 2012](#)). Despite opposition from local community and environment advocates on the size and location of the project, the recovery authorities used their special powers under the earthquake recovery legislation (CER Act 2011) “to bypass procedures that it would have had to follow in ordinary times” ([CCT, 2015](#), p. 189). However, some elements of the development still had to be cleared through the Environment Court, including the extent to which the site could be closed off to general access and used to host cricket games and several design elements. As [Young \(2013a\)](#) reports, the major conditions imposed on the development include:

- No more than 13 match days allocated to major fixtures within any cricket season.
- The total number of days that temporary facilities and structures associated with major fixtures may occupy the oval are not to exceed 40 days per season.
- Two or more major fixtures may be scheduled within the same week, provided that on each occasion this occurs, the total number of days that temporary facilities and structures may occupy the oval shall not exceed 14 consecutive days.
- No more than two fixtures exceeding 12,000 spectators may be scheduled in any three-year period.
- 2015 World Cup matches were not to be counted within the 13 match days.
- The light headframes have to be removed at the end of the cricket season.

Hagley Park

Hagley Park was established shortly after the arrival of British settlers in 1855 and was home to the 1906 International Exposition that eventually gave Christchurch the tag line as “the garden city” ([Hall, 2008b](#)). Hagley Park and the Christchurch Botanic Gardens, which it encloses, comprise an area of 192 ha, and it is integral to the city’s sport and recreation as well as its overall sense of place. The park has also long been an important element of the

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city's domestic and international tourism marketing, a role that has only been reinforced by its location adjacent to the Christchurch cultural district featuring art galleries, museums, arts and crafts stores, heritage buildings, restaurants and cafes (Amore, 2016b; Hall, 2008b).

Although no post-earthquake figures are available, the Botanic Gardens were "one of the most popular visitor destinations in Christchurch and certainly the most popular passive recreation area" (CCC, 2006b, p. 41), with an estimated 1.2 million entries each year (CCC, 2006a, 2006b) and as many as 75 per cent of all Christchurch residents visiting the gardens at least once a year (ibid.). Hagley Park was also a significant sport and event facility, with a number of playing fields, a public golf course as well as a number of outdoor events, including Christmas carols, food festivals and concerts. The CCC estimates together with other data led Hall (2008b) to suggest that the amount of annual visits to the park by local residents and visitors combined was possibly in the order of five million visits a year.

The CCC regarded Hagley Park as "Christchurch's equivalent of Central Park for New York City" (CCC, 2006c, p. 12), with the CCC's draft master plan for the park stating that:

Hagley Park and the Botanic Gardens are first and foremost open space areas for the enjoyment of the public, both Christchurch residents and visitors. Combined, they are a significant open space area by world standards (CCC 2006a, p. 12).

For the purposes of this paper, it is interesting to note that the trajectory for the changed use of the park, which culminated with the establishment of a permanent test quality cricket ground preceded the earthquakes. The 2006 park draft plan deleted the previous statements against sporting events at Hagley Park as indicated in the 1991 management plan (CCC, 2006c). Similarly, a statement in the 1991 management plan on the relocation of sport events to suburban venues was substantially modified in the 2006 park draft plan, giving the CCC the option to assess future occupations of Hagley Park for organised sports (CCC, 2006c).

Although the draft management plan noted the importance of "balance" between sports and informal recreation the management, planning process favoured organised interests such as sporting clubs and association. The CCC's own outline of the process indicated that any future plan would have been discussed "with affected and interested parties including residents/resident groups, community boards, sports clubs/schools, other organizations, council units" (CCC, 2006c, p. 9). Such a process, however, revealed an institutional bias in the way it openly favoured sporting associations and clubs in the policy process at the expenses of the overwhelming majority of informal park users who are not members of organisations associated with the use of the park (Hall, 2008b). A group opposed to the development, Hands of Hagley, also argued that the CCC ignored relevant legislation and failed to follow proper procedure and protocols when it committed funds in 2009 and 2012 to develop Hagley Oval for cricket. CCC recreation and sport manager John Filsell admitted that council officer reports accompanying the proposals to fund the redevelopment of Hagley Oval did not exist. However, that information could not be used in the Environment Court case because it came to light too late in the proceedings (Cairns 2013a).

Themes of analysis

Recovery

Events provide growth coalitions with the opportunity to redefine urban development trajectories and spatial planning strategies. In the case of Christchurch, the earthquakes and the destruction of much of the downtown provided similar opportunities under the rubric of "recovery". The redevelopment of part of Hagley Park as an international cricket stadium provided for a coalition of interest between the Canterbury Cricket Association (CCA), the

CCC and central government agencies. Unlike with the development of a new sports and events stadia to replace AMI Stadium (Amore and Hall, 2017), the development of a cricket ground could be undertaken at much lower cost and be achieved more easily, once legal obstacles were removed.

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The development of the cricket oval became a significant “anchor project” under the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan (CCRP) released in July 2012 (CCC, 2012), as well as the Cultural and Built Environment strategies outlined in the Greater Christchurch Recovery Strategy (GCRS) (CERA, 2012) and the Sport and Recreation Programme objectives to recover infrastructure and promote sports and recreation spaces (CERA, 2013; Sport Canterbury, 2016). Indeed, the project was the first anchor project to be completed and promoted as an example of “what can be achieved by a bold vision, dedication and hard work” (CERA, 2015a, p. 14) that ultimately promoted Christchurch as a “green” and “vibrant city” (ibid.) capable of hosting major events again.

The actual proposal to redevelop the site had been long-coming from the CCA. The latter leased the site from the CCC, which had sought to redevelop the Hagley Park Oval for international cricket matches before the earthquakes. Although the bid to host the Cricket World Cup had come from the Australian and New Zealand cricket associations with the support of their national governments, the opportunity to host games was subject to bids by regional/state cricket associations in conjunction with city and municipal councils. The recovery authorities seconded a team of architects to design a cricket venue right before the release of the CCRP in July 2012. Hagley Park Oval was thus listed as the last anchor project (Edward), with the Minister for the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery using his special powers “to make it more palatable” to the market (Sam). In September 2012, the CCC lodged a formal expression of interest to host games during the tournament (Longley, 2012).

In New Zealand, dwindling live attendance at international cricket games had led NZC to shift towards smaller, more intimate cricket grounds, capable of expanding with temporary grandstands, but which could still enable substantial live media coverage, to host international games. The CCA (2012a) considered six sites around Christchurch for the development of an international cricket venue. One of these sites, the Lincoln High Performance Centre based at Lincoln University, is an oval with a grass embankment and already had an international standard outfield and wicket. However, NZC only expressed support for a new oval development in Hagley Park. The CCC had also already spent NZ \$953,000 on the development of the wicket and outfield of Hagley Park Oval with an additional NZ\$1.65m earmarked for development of the embankment and practice nets (CCC, 2012).

The resource consent application for Hagley Park Oval proposed the demolition of the existing pavilion and the construction of a new one to accommodate player, media and function facilities (CCA, 2012b). Moreover, it foresaw the construction of a new embankment to accommodate 12,000 spectators, four lighting towers and temporary structures for the 2015 Cricket World Cup (CCA, 2012b). Opponents to the proposal argued that the project was contrary to the purpose and intentions of the founding premise of the park (Nick) and criticised the intrusive nature of the project (CCC, 2013). Opponents also raised concerns about the long-term commitment of the CCA and NZC, thus making of the new pavilion “a burden to the ratepayer” (Nick). According to the Save Hagley Park group, the project set “a precedent for the loss of open public space and further commercial development within Hagley Park” (ESPNcricinfo, 2013, n.p.). The environmental impacts such as noise, light and visual pollution were also claimed to be a major concern for residents and employees in the area (The Press, 2013a). However, the CCA, CCC and the recovery authorities were able to reduce any opposition to the proposal while overriding pre-earthquake memoranda against

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further developments at Hagley Park (CCC, 2013). Compared to other developments and demolitions in the Christchurch CBD (Amore, 2016a), the Hagley Park Oval arguably did not generate as much protest among residents. The project was promoted as a beacon for recovery, with both national and local authorities agreeing on the delivery of a world-class sporting venue for the ICC Cricket World Cup as a timely opportunity. Reports and recovery updates from the CERA and CCDU conveyed the idea that the Hagley Park Oval project was going to go ahead, regardless of protests and concerns from the residents. As stakeholders stated:

The truth is that there were really few people that protested. They were always on the front page of papers but I think they were like 14 people showing up, locking themselves to the gates and saying: "Keep your hands off! Hand off Hagley Oval" [Sam].

The area of the Oval development has expanded from 2% of Hagley as in the original proposal and the CERA designation, to 4% of Hagley [. . .] This was never publicised at the start and along with the "seagulls eye" view of the oval and lights, has conveyed a false image of what is proposed for the Hagley Oval [Martin Meehan, quoted in CCC, 2013, pp. 2-3].

Competitiveness

The development of sports venues is often promoted as a necessity to enhance urban competitiveness. The NZC made it clear that the redevelopment of the Hagley Park Oval was essential for the city being able to host three World Cup Cricket games (Cairns, 2013b; The Press, 2013a). In addition, the CERA and CCDU portrayed the Hagley Park Oval as a priority project to provide "central Christchurch with a venue capable of hosting domestic cricket matches and international test matches" (CCDU, 2012, p 87). In April 2013, the CCC staff recommended the release of NZ\$565,000 of the NZ\$1.65m set aside for the project so that work could be completed on the wicket, outfield and practice wicket. As Save Hagley Park spokesperson Martin Meehan objected, the CCC authorised works ahead of the hearings, as the decision for the new oval "was passed on to the Councillors who decided on staff advice, to proceed with the work" (quoted in CCC, 2013, p. 10).

According to the CCC's recreation and sports manager, John Filsell, these works were necessary to ensure the oval was ready for the 2013/2014 first-class season and remained on track to host 2015 Cricket World Cup matches. In his view, the improvement of the cricket pitch was "separate to the issue of whether or not the council approves the scope of other works to be carried out at Hagley Oval" (Cairns, 2013b, p. A5). In response, Martin Meehan stated that if the CCC agreed to finance the pitch and outfield work there would be no turning back: "It nails it down doesn't it? You get to the stage where you have gone so far you have to go the whole way" (Cairns, 2013b, pA5). Indeed, it was clear to many stakeholders that the development was not just about how urban green space should be managed more on how the project could be used to promote Christchurch's post-earthquake recovery and competitiveness. As Fred Woodcock, Sports Editor of *The Press*, the city's daily newspaper, stated:

Essentially, it will be a dagger to the re-emergence of Christchurch if this proposal is thwarted. Hosting World Cup matches and future internationals in a central, picturesque location will do wonders for sports fans, tourism, and city in general. [. . .] There is a minority - a press.co.nz poll two months ago revealed less than 40 per cent of 1300 responders opposed the redevelopment. [. . .] But I believe the vast majority of Cantabrians are for the proposal because it will improve the city [and] be a wonderful way to showcase the city four years on from February 22 (Woodcock, 2013, n.p.).

The Environment Court in August 2013 put some restrictions in number of major fixtures and seating capacity to the intended project, yet it ruled in favour of the CCA proposal to make Hagley Park Oval the new home of Canterbury Cricket, with any temporary facilities for big matches to be put in place for no more than 40 days in a season (Young, 2013a). In her decision, Judge Jane Borthwick stated:

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The proposal will contribute to the Christchurch earthquake recovery and promote the economic prosperity of Christchurch. Many in Christchurch will also regard the upgraded oval as a significant morale booster in that it will signal that the first of the proposed anchor projects is finally under way. [...] The proposal would not diminish the iconic value of the park and, given the nature of the events proposed to be held there, would boost its profile and potentially increase its use (quoted in Young, 2013b).

Two weeks after the Environment Court decision, the CCC agreed to grant the CCA a lease for Hagley Park Oval and release the remaining funds set aside for ground redevelopment. In the view of the then Mayor Bob Parker, “it was an easy decision [...] Christchurch had an opportunity at the 2015 World Cup to show the world a city that was in strong recovery, as well as encourage tourism” (quoted in The Press, 2013b, n.p.). Also, the local tourism board identified the new cricket venue among the top-two priority facilities to reposition Christchurch as an international sports tourism destination (C&CT, 2013). The Hagley cricket oval was the first anchor project to be completed and was promoted as a success for Christchurch during the Royal Tour to the city in April 2014 (CERA, 2015b; The Press, 2014). The new venue hosted New Zealand’s opening ceremony and match for the 2015 ICC Cricket World Cup, along with two other World Cup Games. According to Firdose Moonda (2015), writing on the Cricinfo cricket website, hosting the ICC Cricket World Cup gave Christchurch and its residents the opportunity “to show off what they have achieved so far”. In the words of CERA’s Acting Chief Executive, John Ombler:

“Who would have thought four years ago [2011] that we would not only have a spectacular new cricket oval hosting significant international games, but that we would be in a position to host the Cricket World Cup Opening ceremony?” (quoted in CERA, 2015b: 8).

Discussion and conclusions

The Hagley Park Oval project is an example of how sports and events frame post-disaster redevelopment of cities following a major natural hazard (Amore and Hall, 2017; Passavant, 2011). The post-earthquake recovery of Christchurch paved the way for the establishment of short-term urban growth coalitions in times when the affected communities dealt with more compelling issues such as housing and infrastructure rebuild (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014). The extraordinary circumstances during the emergency phase gave the recovery authorities special powers to override existing legislation to expedite recovery (Amore, 2016a; Amore and Hall, 2016; Amore, Hall and Jenkins, 2017; Cretney, 2019). Such a 2015 Cricket World Cup situation is similar to other examples from the USA (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014; Johnson and Olshansky, 2010) and shows how the rebuilding of cities follows a neoliberal-driven agenda that reprises the principles of disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007). In the view of the Minister for the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery, anchor projects such as the cricket oval “provided important guidance to the market” and were crucial in the “reviving of the city’s hospitality and tourism sector” (Brownlee, 2012, n.p.).

The Hagley Park Oval case study provides evidence on the rhetoric of urban competitiveness and the use of hallmark sporting events to reframe urban development (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014; Saxena, 2013). The earthquakes and the 2015 Cricket World Cup gave authorities and interested stakeholders the opportunity to deliver a project that

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would previously almost certainly not have been allowed to proceed. The project contributed to the rebranding of Christchurch as the “recovery city” (Amore and Hall, 2016), and the importance of hosting the 2015 Cricket World Cup was arguably an important moment of civic pride (Amore and Hall, 2017). The new oval is showcased as a prominent example of Christchurch as a liveable and eventful city, with media and local growth coalitions conveying a rather utopic narrative of the project (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014; Herman and Chomsky, 2010) that downsizes the intrusive nature of the project in what is, as a matter of fact, a public park.

This article is far from objecting to sport events as a way to promote cities. Undoubtedly, there are substantial “benefits of sports tourism, particularly when geared towards domestic competitions or smaller-scale sporting events that utilize existing infrastructure” (Page and Hall, 2003, p. 173). However, it raises questions as to whether sports and events should define the redevelopment of cities following a disaster. The literature suggests that these urban and regional strategies are short-sighted (Malecki, 2004), and that post-disaster redevelopment should diminish urban vulnerability. Instead, cities embark on rebranding and redevelopment projects that overlook risk reduction and, ultimately, heighten the risks of urban disasters in the future (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014). To the authors’ knowledge, the site of the Hagley Park Oval is not prone to serious liquefaction (Cubrinovski and McCahon, 2012), although the possibility of liquefaction on the site cannot be discounted as it is a function of the size and length of any earthquake as well as the site geomorphology. Other parts of the park were affected by liquefaction in the 2010 and 2011 earthquake sequence. Nevertheless, fast-track recovery in Christchurch allowed for the development and building of sporting venues in more vulnerable parts of the city (e.g. new rugby stadium, see Amore and Hall, 2017).

This study has some limitations. Part of the information contained in policy documents was withheld due to the earthquake recovery legislation and the regulations under the Freedom of Information in New Zealand. Moreover, unlike with other projects in the Christchurch CBD, both local and recovery authorities were in favour of the Hagley Park Oval and expedited the development of the site right after the release of the CCRP in July 2012. Further research is needed in this direction to further ascertain the rhetoric of sports and events-led regeneration in post-disaster recovery. On the one hand, it would be useful to conduct extensive archive-based research once all classified information on the Hagley Park Oval will be available to public. On the other hand, comparative research on the development of sports facilities in Christchurch and New Orleans can help understand processes of decision-making with regards to urban competitiveness and city branding in cities following natural disasters.

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