

building to connect and belong

Camia Young trained as an architect in the United States and England and worked for top practices in Europe before turning her sights on helping to build a 21st-century city in post-quake Christchurch. Now she is in the throes of forging an entirely new approach to commercial property development that has social equity and community inclusiveness at its heart.

WORDS **Kim Newth**

It feels vaguely wrong to book an hour for an interview with Camia Young, knowing how chock-full her diary is likely to be already with meetings and appointments. I may be just another obstacle in the way of her getting anything done today, but she's nonetheless very welcoming when I arrive at her Christchurch office in the Old Post and Telegraph building on the corner of Tuam and High Streets.

This softly spoken American has a big agenda to change the world for the better, and refreshingly, credits Christchurch with giving her the inspiration and courage to try. Two years ago she founded the Office for Holistic Urbanism (Ohu), which is leading New Zealand's first community-focused, equity crowd-funded commercial property development at Collett's Corner in Lyttelton. It is a project fired by principles of fairness and urban regeneration with community at its core.

As we take our seats, Camia confides that she had not so much set a foot in New Zealand before 2010, when a friend invited her over to teach an architecture course at the University of Auckland. The invitation coincided with a time in Camia's life when she was actively looking for a new direction and a place to call home. She had only just accepted when the Canterbury earthquakes came along, prompting a

shift in course focus towards 'Future Christchurch'.

She recalls sitting on a park bench in Christchurch in August 2011, in despair over the city's post-apocalyptic landscape and wondering why on earth she'd come! Then it dawned on her that here was the place she'd long been looking for: a city on the cusp of rapid change, facing unique opportunities and challenges. With her years of experience in urban architecture and planning, she realised nowhere else in the world offered such potential to make a difference.

It was an opportunity she seized with relish. Visa conditions meant she could only teach part-time; the upside was it left her free to work as a volunteer and to explore community regeneration projects. Camia took a lead role in developing the Festival of Transitional Architecture (FESTA) and also led the design team that created Gap Filler's Pallet Pavilion that gave the city a much-needed boost (from late 2012 to mid-2014). As well, she helped initiate Studio Christchurch to encourage architecture students from around New Zealand to develop ideas for the rebuild.

Camia also co-founded XCHC (Exchange Christchurch) to give the city's creative community somewhere to produce and show their work, combining it with a café so

The whole crowdfunded effort is geared towards bringing the community together and creating something that will benefit many people, rather than just a few.

people would have somewhere to meet. 'With Exchange Christchurch, I was starting to test this idea of connected space and exploring how to overlap several functions on one site to bring people together,' she says.

At another level, XCHC represents something much deeper for Camia: a shift towards an age of belonging, a rejection of production alone as the only defining value of modern society.

Now she's trying to rewrite norms around commercial property development through Collett's Corner, which aims to empower an entire community through co-design and co-ownership. Camia purchased the Lyttelton site, on the corner of London and Oxford Streets, in October 2013. Extensive community consultation then identified the preferred



development options. An open design competition concluded with a public vote to choose the winner. Planned for the site is a wellness centre, a restaurant and co-working space, combined with upper floor apartments and a rooftop deck.

All that's been required to invest in this project is \$100, and the community has been right behind crowdfunding to get it off the ground. No one can own more than 10 per cent of available shares. At the time of writing, Collett's Corner had reached its minimum equity target of \$300,000. The team is on track to start construction next year.

'It has taken years to get the legal structures in place to make this happen. When you look at them, they are so simple but it has been very hard to arrive at that simplicity!'

The whole crowdfunded effort is geared towards bringing the community together and creating something that will benefit many people, rather than just a few. This is really just the start for Ohu which is also involved with many other projects, including a co-housing development on Madras Street. Before Christchurch, Camia spent many years training to be an architect and working in high-powered practices in Europe. It is fascinating to learn how her various experiences have shaped her outlook.

She grew up in Aspen, Colorado, then 'a small hippy town'. Her parents, Don and Leslie, divorced not long after she and her twin sister Nattana were born; they were raised by their mother, who ran a health food outlet and juice bar. A few years after the divorce, Leslie remarried a local bar owner.



TOP RIGHT / Collett's Corner in Lyttelton has been designed as a vibrant place, centred around wellbeing and community connection. Image, Warren & Mahoney. **ABOVE** / Keeping the community informed: Collett's Corner signage in Lyttelton. Photo, Erica Austin.



ABOVE / Camia, who lives in a cottage in Lyttelton, says the Collett's Corner project represents a new era of architecture that is about creating places of connection and belonging. Photo, Erica Austin.



‘...there are many ways to see the world and no one right way. It follows that there is always more than one possible solution to any problem.’

LEFT / Camia Young, founder of Ohu, sees her life's purpose as being to draw out the creative potential of people and places. 'We're moving into an age of belonging,' she says. Photo, Stephanie Defregger.

Camia is close to both her father and stepfather. Her father was a builder in Aspen, who then took off to go sailing and travelling around the world. Today he lives off grid, pursuing a self-sustaining lifestyle in a remote corner of Brazil.

'I didn't see much of him in my youth but when I met him in my mid-twenties in London, I realised we had very similar values and a very similar world view. He and I are like two peas from the same pod and I think his work building homes in Aspen is probably why I became an architect.'

Her mother encouraged her creative spirit too and architecture proved the perfect outlet for it. Camia spent five years studying for an architecture degree in Boulder, before completing a two-year internship in Aspen and finishing her studies with a double master's from the Southern California Institute of Architecture and London's Architecture Association. These were two very different schools.

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In Europe, her career followed an incredible trajectory working firstly for the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) in Rotterdam, Holland, founded by renowned urbanist Rem Koolhaas. Camia spent one memorable year working on a large master plan to transform Les Halles, a

shopping and transit hub in the heart of Paris.

'This was an entire district that included not only a park but all the underground amenities. It was an amazing project. Master planning is not seen as being particularly sexy but I really enjoy thinking about the future of cities. While at OMA, I also did master planning in Ghent, London and Asia. It was a very formative time for me.'

Also, a very exhausting time; after two years, the long hours led to burnout. She took several months out, walking in the Alps, before taking on her next job with another visionary practice, Herzog & de Meuron in Basel, Switzerland. She was part of the team that designed the Parrish Art Museum in New York and the Tate Modern in London. Altogether, she was with the firm for five years, specialising in conceptual work, before starting her new life in New Zealand.

At one level, it is hard to understand why she walked away from a stellar career in Europe, but she is in no doubt that Christchurch is the best place for her.

'My friends in other parts of the world can't believe the opportunities I've had here. I'd choose Christchurch one hundred times over again. We're in this compressed period of change that means you can see all these potential trajectories for the future. My art form is urban and, for me, this is an unbelievable place to grow.' ●