



### Re:START mall, Christchurch

Established – October 2011
Retailers – 50 businesses
Funds needed – \$3.4 million (NZ)
Construction – 61 days

1. North Hagley Park
2. Horncastle Arena
3. The Palms
4. Lyttelton Harbour
5. Governors Bay
6. Mount Vernon Park

*An act of God is no match for a community of dedicated people.*

*A slow and steady rebuild has been unfolding in the city of Christchurch after an earthquake demolished 80 per cent of the city's centre in February 2011.*

# Shipping the heart back into Christchurch

The second quake in five months and much deadlier than the first, the February 2011 tragedy saw 185 people lose their lives and more than 7200 homes deemed beyond repair.

A cordoned off 'red zone' was established in response to the earthquake, with the CBD located at its feebly beating heart. This no-go area stretched 11 kilometres along the Avon River, gathering a series of suburbs in its wake.

Lives and homes had been lost but so too, it appeared, had the city's heart.

Businesses that had served locals and visitors for more than a century, organisations and workplaces that drew people out of their homes and into the city each day, had vanished in an afternoon.

Some locals vowed they'd never set foot in the CBD again.

Yet, eight months later, a tiny pocket of the red zone was opened to the public. It comprised a temporary retail site of brightly painted shipping containers called Re:START and the refurbished family-owned department store, Ballantynes.

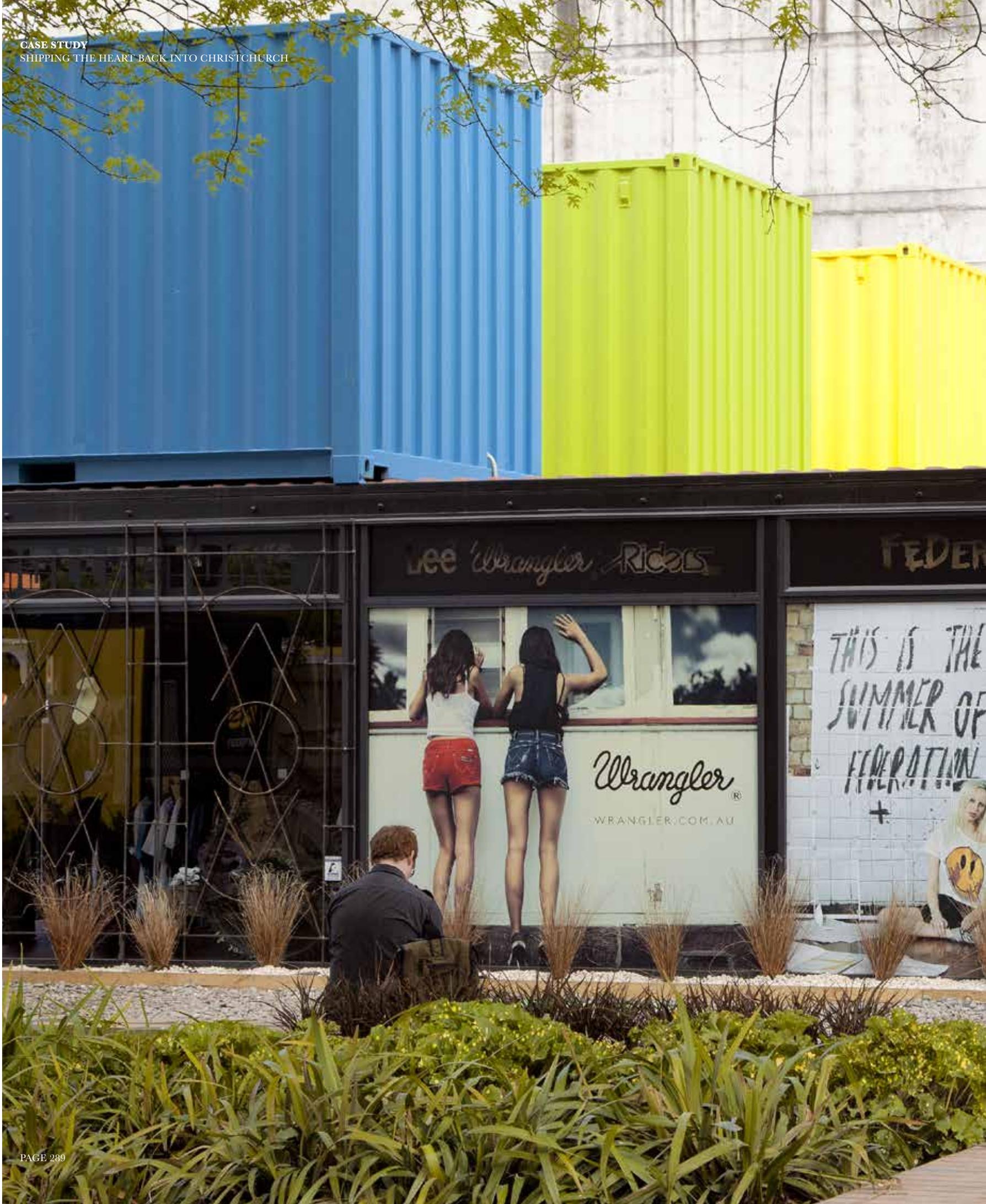
Prior to the earthquake, a group of business and property owners in the retail core had been meeting to lobby council and represent the retail sector in response to plans recently released for the CBD. Within a week of the disaster, the group, led by chair John Suckling, met to discuss what could be done to restore people's faith in the city.

"We realised the extent of the damage at our second meeting. None of us could get into the red zone where our businesses and properties were," says John.

"It was going to be years before the city would come alive again. We faced a combination of challenges: the practicality of rebuilding and the emotional response to the event. ➤

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**John Suckling,**  
Re:START the Heart Trust





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REIMAGINING RETAIL  
AT RE-START.
- 02** CONTAINERS OF ALL  
SIZES.
- 03** PEDESTRIAN  
FRIENDLY.
- 04** ONE OF FOUR LIFE-  
SIZE SCULPTURES  
BY CHRISTCHURCH  
ARTIST HANNAH KIDD.
- 05** LANDSCAPED LUNCH  
AREAS.
- 06** PUBLIC ART AND  
SCULPTURES.
- 07** STURDY CONTAINERS  
REASSURE LOCALS  
POST-QUAKE.
- 08** OUTDOOR CAFES.
- 09** A POPULAR  
ATTRACTION.



*“From observing other cities, we saw that citizens are proud of their city when there’s a downtown area that’s vibrant and functioning well.”*

**John Suckling,**  
*Re:START the Heart Trust*

The scale of the damage was enormous and people were scared to go back into the centre of the city.”

The group believed that if Christchurch was a red zone for more than a year, the perception that the city could do without a centre might take root; they feared that Christchurch might lose its heart and become a string of suburbs.

“We’d learnt from other disasters that if you don’t start changing how people think about things early in the piece, you can get into trouble,” he explains. “From observing other cities, we saw that citizens are proud of their city when there’s a downtown area that’s vibrant and functioning well.”

What followed was a whirlwind undertaking that defied the odds. A temporary retail space was built with shipping containers on the location of the original city mall, in the red zone. Eight months after the earthquake, this precinct attracted close to 30,000 people back into the CBD on the first weekend of trading.

Christchurch’s main retail blocks were located just inside the red zone, next to Ballantynes, one of the few buildings able to be repaired and relaunched with Re:START.

Within a month, the group had put a proposal to the cabinet minister in charge of the recovery, requesting access to the area to install temporary retail. By April a press conference announced plans to build Re:START with pro bono

assistance from Leighs Construction, Buchan Group Architects and Colliers International.

The deadline – 29 October 2011 – barely eight months after the earthquake, was a mandatory one, needed to attract retailers before Cup and Show Week leading into Christmas trading. The Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) began clearing damaged buildings, while the group worked with Leighs and Buchan on the design.

They decided on containers (modular, strong, reassuring to the public, easy to paint) and set up a trust (Re:START the Heart Trust) to manage the project. As the design evolved, they realised NZ\$3.4 million was needed to build the site.

“In these situations you have to take risks. If we hadn’t we would have missed our deadline,” says John. He and another trustee authorised the order for the containers before the finance had been finalised. This came later from the Christchurch Earthquake Appeal Trust.

The deadline was non-negotiable and everyone knew it. The containers arrived at the end of August, leaving just 61 days to prepare the sites, modify containers and move in the retailers. Leighs and Buchan were contracted to deliver the project.

“It was a stressful but exhilarating experience, pulling it off against all odds. Even the prime minister said he didn’t expect us to finish on time.” ➔

John believes the project's success was due to many factors, the main ones being:

1. There was a huge emotional void after the earthquake and everyone wanted to be involved in something positive.
2. There was total agreement on the concept, design and deadline among all the parties.
3. The landowners were most supportive and the contribution made by Leighs and Buchan was exceptional.
4. A quick and efficient relationship with CERA due to the one point of contact. The team worked wonders to clear the land and help with cutting any red tape.

“More than anything, it was how well everyone worked together for the good of the project. There were so many people involved behind the scenes who had the will to make this happen. And the initial manager, Paul Lonsdale, worked absolutely tirelessly,” says John. “It reminds me of a comment by HS Truman: ‘It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.’” The credit went instead to the city herself.

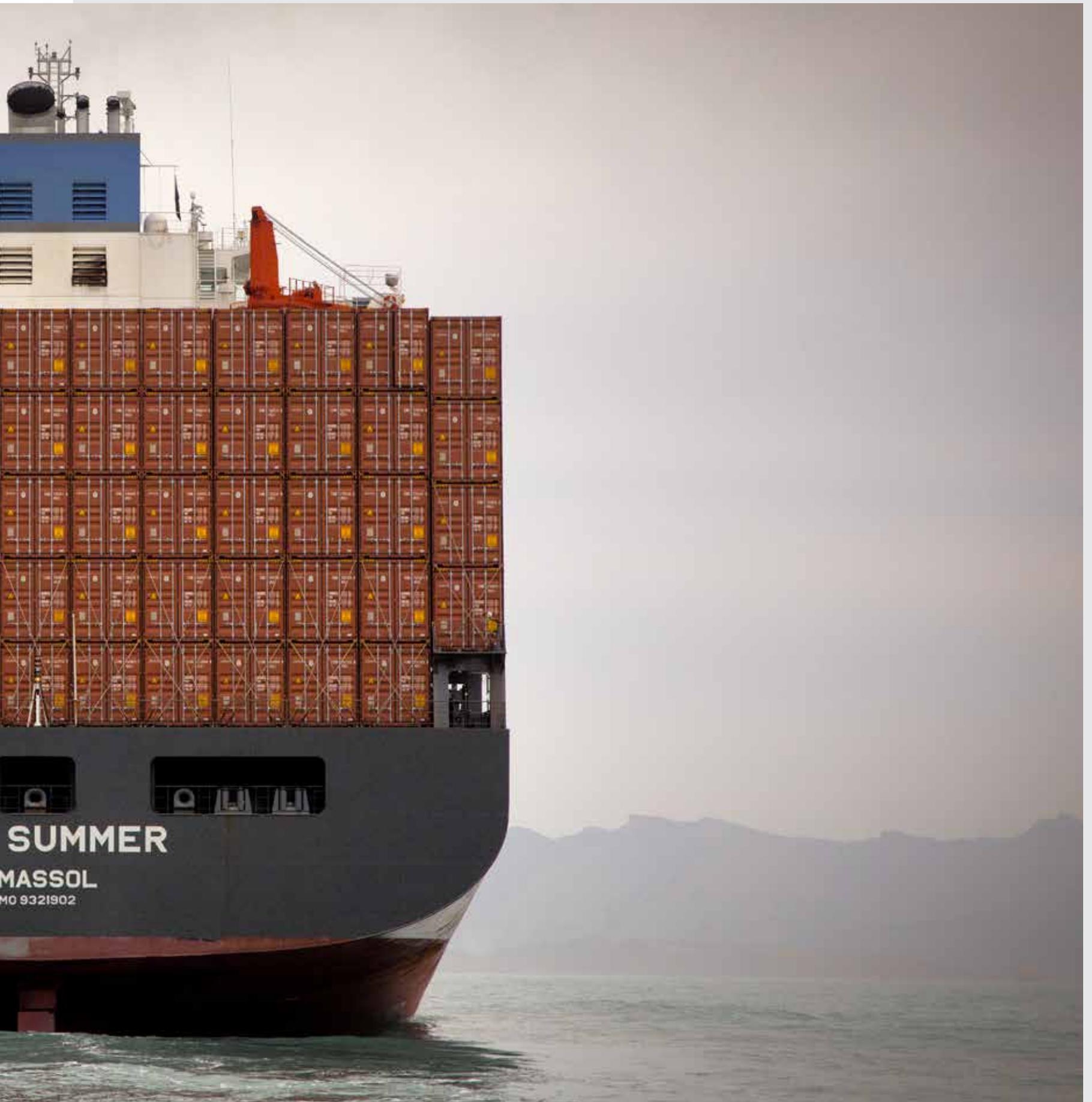
Opening on the same day as Re:START, Ballantynes offered an excellent anchor for the temporary site and strengthened the impetus for punters to return to the city. For a long time, these two sites were the only businesses trading in the core of the city. ➤

*“I’ve never been involved in a project where there was so much harmony and buy in for what we were trying to achieve. It was very humbling and very thrilling. There was no dissent. Everyone just wanted a positive outcome.”*

**John Suckling,**  
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CONTAINERS ARRIVE  
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HARBOUR,  
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Visitors came into Re:START at the beginning partly because of the shops and hospitality, partly out of curiosity.

“Some were in tears, saying they were never going to come back into town, but felt they had to have a look at what we’d done,” says John.

“In the early days, people wanted to see what we’d done, but also look through the fence into the red zone,” says John. “As time went on, people came to show their support for what we were doing – trying to show that the city was being rebuilt again.”

While today there’s no red zone in the CBD, there are still buildings that haven’t come down yet, largely due to wrangles with insurance companies.

While Re:START has stayed open longer than anticipated, with the grace of the landowners and the help of CERA, in keeping with the original intent, it will close when there’s enough new retail space available in the city.

“It was always a transition space,” says John. “The public wants us to stay, which is lovely, but we don’t want to compete with the new buildings.”

While there’s been no budget for surveying visitors, making it difficult to quantify the economic benefit of Re:START in the city, the site received huge local and international media attention and was top of the list of visitor attractions in Christchurch.

Re:START provided a heart for the city when it was at its most vulnerable. The brief was to invite smaller, privately owned businesses badly affected by the earthquake into the space, with a few chains to fill out the mix. The story of how it came together reflects that.

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*“It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.”*

*Harry S. Truman,  
33rd President of the United States*



**ABOUT**  
JOHN SUCKLING

*“Some were in tears, saying they were never going to come back into town, but felt they had to have a look at what we’d done.”*

John Suckling is chair of Re:START the Heart Trust, the organisation that pioneered the internationally acclaimed container mall in Christchurch following the lethal 2011 earthquakes.

Now aged in his 70s, John first worked as an economist in Wellington, before returning to Christchurch in 1979 to take over the inner-city shoe store his parents opened in 1934.



The business closed after the earthquake; its 1901 brick building was demolished after the front part collapsed into the road.

John is a long-time advocate of the

importance of the Christchurch central city and has been instrumental in keeping its heart beating until the CBD rebuild provides the next chapter in the city's evolution.

