

# Wall story

The ephemerality of wall art offers the opportunity to follow interwoven stories by recording the evolution of particular sites over a period of time. Indeed, by taking a methodologically planned approach to the longitudinal photo-documentation of chosen sites, an as yet small number of researchers have been able to draw conclusions about, for instance, the positive impact of graffiti (Andron, 2013), the effects of social media on graffiti's aesthetic features (MacDowall, 2016), and the existence of 'conversations' that take place between walls, artists, writers, and the wider community (Hansen & Flynn, 2015; Hale, 2018).

## An eleven-year visual record

In a small series of photographs taken on six days between 2008 and 2019, I have recorded stages in the transformation of markings on part of an inner suburban wall in Sydney, from stencil art, through tags and other forms of graffiti, to the present-day large scale artwork. My study differs from those cited above in that the longest of these lasted 500 days (MacDowell, 2016), whereas my series covered a period of eleven years. However another significant difference is that my photographs were not taken with any methodical regularity. Instead I took them whenever I saw that there had been a noticeable change, thus missing some of the more subtle modifications to the wall over time. This means that I could not analyse short term 'conversations' in the way that the other researchers have done.

## of a street art site in Sydney

Megan Hicks, Western Sydney University

However, as Hale (2018: n. p.) has pointed out, individual agglomerations of graffiti contribute to 'the palimpsest of the urban environment' and form 'part of a complex 'graffitiscap' comprising networks of actors, from graffiti artists to local businesses, municipal contractors, artists, and civic and national institutions'. So, with the help of various sources, and some local knowledge, I have been able to retrospectively trace and describe some of the environmental factors that influenced – and in turn were reflected in – the changes in the wall markings. And by poring over the photographs I took on each of the six days, I have found details that I did not originally notice.

**Figure 2.** Little Diver. Banksy. Alfalfa House, Newtown, Australia, 2008. Photograph ©Megan Hicks.

**Figure 1.** Alfalfa House, Newtown, Australia, 2019. Photograph ©Megan Hicks.



The wall in question is in Phillip Street, on the corner of the Enmore Road shopping strip and near the juncture of Enmore and the better known inner west hub of Newtown, in New South Wales, Australia. It is the clearly visible sidewall of Alfalfa House, an organic food cooperative that opened in 1981. The co-op has continued to do business since then despite (or because of) the gradual gentrification of the local area and the development of Enmore Road as a destination for non-locals. Nearby laneways have become famous for their large-scale street art, the old Enmore Theatre opposite Alfalfa House has burgeoned as a comedy and live music venue, and many of the other shops on the strip have been renovated as bars, cafes, and eateries.

In mid-2008, I photographed a fading piece of Banksy graffiti on the then paintless sidewall of Alfalfa House. It was a version of the UK artist's 'Little Diver' stencil and he would have made it in 2003 during a secretive visit to Sydney. I had often noticed the stencil but the main focus of my urban explorations lay elsewhere. It was not until 2008, when global interest in Banksy was heightened, that I finally decided to take a photograph before the stencil faded any further.

Only a few people knew about Banksy's brief visit to Australia and while the whereabouts of some of his stencils in Melbourne were known, it was curious that so little attention had been paid to this one in a fairly busy street in Sydney, especially as one of his works on a wall in London had sold for some thousands of pounds in early 2008. But by November 2008, Enmore's Little Diver had finally received attention. The names 'Vice' and 'Quid' had been sprayed over his helmet, but it is not possible to say whether this had been done out of ignorance or defiance.



It could be that an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper earlier that year had stirred up interest in the work. Even though the journalist had acknowledged that 'Graffiti artists keep the whereabouts [of Banksy's Sydney works] secret because there are fears the rocketing price of Banksy's work means they might be broken out of the walls on which they are painted', nevertheless he had been quite specific about the location of the Little Diver in Enmore (Jinman, 2008).



**Figure 3.** Little Diver. Banksy; Vice; Quid. Alfalfa House, Newtown, Australia, 2008. Photograph ©Megan Hicks.

In January 2009, two months after my previous visit, I returned to photograph the same section of wall. By now it was covered with tags, stencils, paste-ups, and paper notices. The 'Vice' and 'Quid' tags had initiated an onslaught and the Little Diver, which had remained untouched for five years, was now barely discernible under a vertically written red tag.



**Figure 4.** Little Diver. Banksy; Vice; Quid; Unknown artists. Alfalfa House, Newtown, Australia, 2009. Photograph ©Megan Hicks.



Over a year later, in September 2010, paper paste-ups and notices now seriously outnumbered new spray-painted works and covered many of the old ones. The Banksy stencil was gone. Glued over its faint remnants there were three hand-painted, hardboard plaques. All of them had been sprayed over with swirls or crosses, but it was possible to read, thickly painted on the middle one, 'Banksy woz ere/But now invisible/Lisa Marie Smith'. The wording and font style paid homage to the inscription on a symbolically vandalised Little Diver stencil in Melbourne. In Flinders Lane, around December 2008, silver paint had been poured down the back of a perspex sheet meant to protect the stencil, and 'Banksy woz ere' had been painted over the perspex. The lowest of the three plaques on the Alfalfa wall was a footnote to the one above it, a pink triangle that read 'Invisible one', with a halo over the 'one'.



**Figure 5.** Unknown artists. Alfalfa House, Newtown, Australia, 2010. Photograph ©Megan Hicks.

When I next photographed this patch of wall in February 2012, nearly everything, including the Little Diver, had disappeared under a wall-length mural, although the damaged outline of the hardboard 'Banksy woz ere' plaque and the 'Invisible one' triangle were still visible beneath the grey paint. The mural, painted by design collective Province Studio some months earlier had been commissioned by the local council for the Love Food Hate Waste campaign, whose message, not at all coincidentally, was congruent with the philosophy of Alfalfa House.

Designed to depict the seasons, with the dull colours of the section over the Banksy space representing winter produce, the mural's repetitive geometry made it unlike any other local work of street art. But, aesthetic considerations aside, in covering over what went before the mural had crossed a line, from informal graffiti to commissioned art, and the local council had become a player in the wall's dramatic narrative.



**Figure 6.** Love Food Hate Waste. Province Studio. Alfalfa House, Newtown, Australia, 2012. Photograph ©Megan Hicks.



**Figure 7.** Phibs. Alfalfa House, Newtown, Australia, 2019.  
Photograph ©Megan Hicks.



**Figure 8.** Phibs and unknown artist. Alfalfa House, Newtown, Australia, 2019.  
Photograph ©Megan Hicks.



My latest photographs, taken in February 2019, show that the length of the Alfalfa House wall is now covered by an extensive work in gelato colours by internationally-recognised local street artist Phibs. For whatever reason, by 2015 the Love Food Hate Waste mural had become redundant and the owners of Alfalfa House applied to be part of Perfect Match, an annual programme in which the local council pairs street artists with property owners. It is a scheme initiated by the council to 'tackle unwanted graffiti' and it capitalises on the area's reputation for large-scale street art.

Towards the end of that year, a match between Phibs and Alfalfa House was consummated and the Phillip Street wall became an item on the itinerary of walk-cycle-bus tours of Sydney's inner west street art. At the foot of the wall the surface of the triangular 'Invisible one' plaque has been knocked off since the Phibs work went up but, underneath the layers of paint, words on the damaged middle plaque can still be read in relief: 'ere/But now invisible/Lisa Marie Smith'.

Since its launch in 2014, the Perfect Match graffiti prevention programme has continued to expand with an increasing number of new street art commissions completed each year. They are spread across the Inner West local government area, the majority of them clustered around Newtown and Enmore, and several of them by Phibs. The council boasts that the scheme has been embraced by artists, residents, businesses, property owners, and community. Plus, of course, day trippers to the area.

But that is not the end of the Alfalfa House wall story. On the pale oval shape, just above and to the left of where the Little Diver once stood, there is a small, indecipherable message tentatively scribbled in black. Even the popular Phibs is not immune to overwriting.

Megan Hicks is a freelance museum consultant and an Adjunct Fellow with the Urban Research Program at Western Sydney University. Her research interests include museums and heritage sites, the visualisation of cities and suburbs, writing seen in public places, urban imaginaries, and the pavement as a cultural artefact. Her blog *Pavement graffiti and other urban exhibits* is at [meganix.net/pavement/](http://meganix.net/pavement/).

## References

- Andron, Sabina (2013) '100 days of Leake Street' *Sabina Andron* [Online], <https://sabinaandron.com/leake-street/>.
- Fairbank, Toby (2013) 'Banksy' *allThoseShapes* [Online] [http://allthoseshapes.com/banksy\\_street-art/](http://allthoseshapes.com/banksy_street-art/).
- Hale, Alex (2018) 'Is 52 weeks enough? Unsettling archaeology with graffiti recording' *Graffiti Review* [Online] <http://graffitiireview.com/is-52-weeks-enough-unsettling-archaeology-with-graffiti-recording>.
- Hansen, Susan & Flynn, Danny (2015) 'Longitudinal photo-documentation: recording living walls' *Street Art and Urban Creativity*, 1: 26-31.
- Houghton, Janae (2018) 'The painter painted: Melbourne loses its treasured Banksy' *The Age* [Online] <https://www.theage.com.au/national/the-painter-painted-melbourne-loses-its-treasured-banksy-20081213-6xzy.html>.
- Jinman, Richard (2008) 'Details emerge of Banksy's Sydney visit' *Sydney Morning Herald* [Online] <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/details-emerge-of-banksys-sydney-visit-20080117-gdrx5q.html>.
- MacDowall, Lachlan (2016) 'A boneyard of data: graffiti and street art's temporalities' *Street Art and Urban Creativity*, 2: 48-59.
- Pike, Laura & Dadak, Anne-Louise (2011) 'Love food hate waste' *Province* [Online] <http://www.provincestudio.com.au/love-food-hate-waste>.
- (No author stated) (2003?) 'A warehouse for Banksy and Shepard Fairey (Obey)' *SemiPermanent* [Online] <https://www.semipermanent.com/projects/banksy-shepard-fairey>.
- (No author stated) (2008) 'Banksy works snapped up at street art auction' *ABC News* [Online] <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-02-06/banksy-works-snapped-up-at-street-art-auction/1034074>.
- (No author stated) (2017) 'Inner West residents embrace Perfect Match' *Inner West Council* [ONLINE] <https://www.innerwest.nsw.gov.au/about/news/media-releases/2017-media-releases/inner-west-residents-embrace-perfect-match>.
- (No author stated) (2019) 'Perfect Match: Council plays Cupid again!' *Inner West Council* [Online] <https://www.innerwest.nsw.gov.au/live/living-arts/arts-and-cultural-programs/perfect-match>.
- (No author stated) (2015) 'Perfect Match street art for the Inner-West' *Sydney Morning Herald* [Online] <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/perfect-match-street-art-for-the-inner-west-20150802-40c46.html>.