

SYDNEY'S MURALS OF THE 1980s: LOVED OR UNLOVED - TREASURED OR TRANSIENT

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"If you just destroy everything, eventually there is nothing left in the memory of the city"



Fig. 1 - Garry Shead in front of the Ultimo TAFE mural of 1984, in 2003

Garry Shead, the respected artist, made this comment when part of the Ultimo TAFE mural, which he painted with his fellow artist and wife, Judith Englert-Shead in 1984, was relocated nineteen years later, in 2003. Nine metres of the mural, attached to one tonne of brickwork were carefully moved prior to demolition of the building. Although he was disappointed that only a section of the original fifty metre mural was saved, he felt it was important for Sydney to retain significant parts of its past.

Sydney, in common with many cities, has many public murals, which have survived twenty or thirty years and are in need of repair, redesign, removal or relocation due to the pressure of development.

Background

Mural painting, often as social and political comment, developed as a vibrant and idealistic art movement at the tail end of the 1970s and flourished in the 1980s. It is a movement that developed simultaneously in many countries, in particular in cities such as New York and London. It largely took its inspiration from the work of political artists such as Diego Rivera, and was influenced by the growing community arts movement, that promoted community involvement through community arts centres, community gardens and inner city adventure playgrounds.

From the late 1970s, mural art appeared on walls in many Australian cities and somewhat later, in country towns. Taken up enthusiastically by community groups, they were generally funded by councils, trade unions and schools. The artists were typically art school trained, young, idealistic, socially and politically motivated - often committed to the projects on a volunteer basis. With minimal budgets, the artists often took on the role of fundraiser as well. It was integral to the project for the communities to be involved in all aspects, from planning to execution, and such projects in turn enhanced the socio-political dimension of their agendas.



Fig. 2 – Think Globally, Act Locally mural, Redfern by Public Art Squad (Humphries and Monk) 1985

Stylistically, the murals were populist in their realism, the colours often bright, and the skies sunny and blue. Public housing, Aboriginal land rights, the women's movement, the union movement, anti – development, and anti – nuclear sentiments were popular subjects. Public Art Squad proclaimed, *"Our goals are unashamedly idealistic - to celebrate joy and peace through universal creativity."*

Whereas political and social idealism inspired Australian mural projects in the 1980s, such inspiration had waned by the close of the 20th Century. In line with art trends, mural artists moved towards conceptual, sculptural and interactive art works in their own art practice and in their public commissions. Some mural artists found their experience and skills could be applied to other purely commercial decorative projects such as hotel lobbies and shopping centres. For example 'Skygarden' Shopping Centre and 'Harbourside' in Darling Harbour, Sydney demonstrate the decorative trend, while Janet Laurence's 'Edge of the Trees' sculptural project at the Museum of Sydney demonstrates the conceptual interactive trend.

The Challenge

Like any painted surface, the painted mural has a limited life span and those from the 1980s are almost all faded and delaminating due to exposure. Painted surfaces have a maximum life span of ten years after which pigments begin to fade and the surfaces flake. Graffiti further exacerbates the problem. Most commonly, water based exterior house and sign paint was the medium used on these projects. Those painted with imported mineral silicate paint are faring better because it makes a more permanent bond to the substrate. However, although the pigmentation and surface is more sustainable, the mural still requires regular maintenance and cleaning. The ancient art of *buon fresco* (the traditional and most durable paint system of all) has only rarely been used in Australia.

Some of the many dilapidated murals have been restored; others have been repaired or totally repainted. Many have been demolished, painted over or languish in disrepair. Originally intended to enhance a site, dilapidated murals contribute to a site's general deterioration and eventually become synonymous with a sense of social decay.

Murals in small towns, universities and school campuses tend to be less exposed to attacks of vandalism compared with those in urban public thoroughfares such railway tunnels. It seems that the stronger the sense of community ownership of the mural, the more likely they will be maintained.

Kurri Kurri, a small town in the Hunter Valley NSW has adopted the title of 'Town of Murals' and prides itself on fifty fully intact murals. Cessnock Council actively promotes the murals as a cultural asset capable of increasing tourist visitation to the area. However, it is true that all murals require some degree of maintenance.

Bondi Public School re-commissioned Carol Ruff to paint their mural in 2003 (Fig. 3). The twelve panels were painted off site, to the same design. Sydney City Council is negotiating with Peter Day to repaint his King George V mural in The Rocks, Sydney, Fig. 4 below.



Fig. 3 - Bondi Public School mural by C. Ruff 1986, repainted in 2003



Fig. 4 - King George V mural by P. Day 1983, The Rocks, soon to be restored.

Various Strategies

There is a range of restoration methods available for remediation of dilapidated murals. Murals get covered over, painted out, left to decay, restored or painted over with fresh designs by incoming younger generations of artists or the walls are simply demolished. A key factor in the consideration of the appropriate conservation strategy is always based upon the agreed community significance.

Murals considered to be of high social, historic or aesthetic significance are regarded to be worthy of restoration. A panel of professionals, the artist, the building owner and the community may make decisions affecting the fate of a mural, as happened with Shead's Ultimo TAFE mural (Fig. 1). Sometimes the impetus comes from the community, such as is the case with the Bondi Public School (Fig. 3). In some cases, it can take the removal or obliteration of a familiar mural to galvanize the community into action.

This was the case of the 1981 "Woolloomooloo Green Ban Murals" which are located on the pylons of the railway viaduct in Woolloomooloo (Fig 5). Painted by a team led by Michiel Dolk, Marilyn Fairskye and Jeff Stewart, the murals have suffered neglect for decades and it was the sudden disappearance of some of the murals that prompted public interest and outcry. They were located, consultations were held, a report undertaken and their restoration is currently underway - panel by panel. One of the original artists, Marilyn Fairskye, is involved in the restoration. A similar event occurred with the 1983 'Peace Justice Unity' mural by Public Art Squad's David Humphries and Rodney Monk (Fig. 6). Developers painted this mural out in 2003. Following public reaction, the artist was re-engaged and it was repainted, again to its original design. The mural at The Settlement Neighbourhood Centre in inner city Chippendale was painted over in 2005 despite having a council protection order. Painted by indigenous artists Tracey Moffat, Jeffrey Samuels, Fiona Foley and Avril Quail (now established artists) its fate is presently undecided.



Fig. 5 - Woolloomooloo mural by M. Dolk and M. Fairskye 1981, being restored



Fig. 6 - Peace Justice Unity mural by Public Art Squad led by D. Humphries and R. Monk 1983 repainted 2003

A number of the original artists of the 1980s are still practicing locally and abroad as artists and as art educators, and many have extended their practice into other mediums. Most of the artists hold the original sketches and designs for their murals. Those to whom I spoke, expressed a general willingness in principle to repaint their murals, provided they were paid, from the start, for their time as consultants to the project and subsequently as artists. These artists are now in the mature phase of their art careers, and therefore their participation in mural restoration is becoming more conditional i.e. they insist on being paid adequate fees as consultants to the project and need to be assured the project will proceed.

There is a general reluctance to give unpaid time in order to attend meetings and help draw up heritage reports, strategies, methodologies etc. They strongly believe that their skills and time have value. Some artists have already given up time, only to see the projects stumble on issues of funding, and ownership of the building. They understandably feel less inclined to participate in each successive restoration initiative on a pro-bono basis.

Interestingly, some of the original mural artists express the view that they no longer have a strong attachment to an artwork; that the particular mural was of its time and never expected to be permanent and; should be seen as part of an ephemeral art movement. Others postulate the view that mural art should be constantly renewed by successive generations. There is currently much interest at a professional and academic level in contemporary street art. In recognition of this, such artists encourage renewal as opposed to restoration.



Fig. 7 – International Women's Day Mural 1982 Sydney Domain by C. Ruff and others 1982, in 2009



Fig. 8 - Detail dilapidated Sydney Domain mural C. Ruff

"I am not precious about the piece", says Carol Ruff, the creator of the Sydney Domain International Women's Day murals of 1982, which are severely dilapidated, and for which there are no plans to restore when the site is developed (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). She too is interested in the abundance of street art in cities such as New York, and considers that murals can be a vibrant and renewable form of creative social expression.



Fig. 9 - Example of street art in Bondi 2009



Fig. 10 - Street art May's Lane St Peters with guerilla knitter, Denise Litchfield, in foreground

The idea of mural art as a temporary art form is consistent with flourishing and ephemeral street art. It is evident in many urban environments today, and has been embraced at an academic level and by social authorities such as local government and community groups. There is much published on the subject, including numerous books on street art, to satisfy the interest in this art form.

The notoriety and controversy generated by the English street artist, Banksy demonstrates the degree of interest and value placed on ephemeral street art (Fig. 11). There have even been

attempts to steal parts of walls painted by him. The Japanese mural constructed of metro tickets is another example of temporary public art (Fig. 12). Guerilla knitting, another variety of street art, is part of a global movement (Fig. 10) where hand knitting is applied to street furniture to humanize a public space.



Fig. 11 - Banksy mural Palestine 2007



Fig. 12 - Mural constructed of 138,000 recycled Japanese metro tickets Tokyo 2008, made by volunteers

Issues re Conservation

In Australia, the Copyright Act 1968 was amended in July 2007 to provide moral and intellectual rights protection to authors of literary, dramatic, musical and artistic works and this has relevance in the determining the future of a mural. The Act states that the artist has three rights. Most relevant in this discussion is the right of the artist to be consulted before any change is proposed including demolition and/or removal of a site-specific artwork without impinging on the rights of the owner to determine the use of their own building. The intention of these amendments was to encourage respect for the creativity of artists, authors and performers by consultation and negotiation between all interested parties. In 2006, the famous American mural artist, Kent Twitchell, won a \$US 1.1 million settlement after his Ruscha mural in Los Angeles was deliberately erased, in violation of state and federal laws.

The decision to conserve or repaint a mural has to be based on several criteria: the quality of the design, the social and/or historical significance, the condition of the mural, the reputation of the artist, the possibility for the re-engagement of the artist and the regard in which the mural is held by the community. Not all murals can or should be conserved. Their meaning may be locked in time to issues that are no longer relevant. The Bondi Public School mural is still much loved by parents, teachers and students alike. In such a case, funds were enthusiastically raised for restoration.

The Woolloomooloo murals are highly significant as representative of the mural movement of the 1980s. They may be divided into two categories; those painted by trained and professional artists and those painted by amateurs in the local community, including school children. A decision was made to restore only those panels undertaken by the professional artists as it was demonstrated that these would carry a greater degree of social, historic and artistic significance. The subject matter of the Builders Labourers Federation Union (BLF) Green Bans has assumed greater historical and social significance with the passing of time. Juanita Nielsen, whose anti corruption anti development stance led to her disappearance in 1975, is portrayed in one of the panels and her status has grown. Similarly, Jack Mundy, the Secretary of the BLF, has been awarded the Order of Australia for his services to the environment movement as a result of leading the protests. The Woolloomooloo murals are more politically radical than others in this study.

In addition to the historical and social significance of these murals, they possess aesthetic significance. They were well designed by professional artists, well composed, skillfully executed and have stood the test of time as artworks in their own merit. Tim Maguire, who painted passages of these murals, is now a respected exhibiting artist. With regard to their social significance, the murals have proved to be highly regarded by local residents as well as by the many passersby who use this busy thoroughfare.

The surfaces of murals can be stabilized in preparation of being repainted or touched in. Murals on panels present a simpler challenge as they can be removed and repainted on new panels or taken off site to be worked on and then returned to site or alternatively stored for posterity. New materials in the form of lighter weight panels and mineral silicate paints are available while traditional materials such as mosaic, ceramics and terrazzo offer the possibility of greater longevity.

It is possible to relocate murals that are painted directly on walls by protecting the face and then carefully cutting and removing the masonry and attaching it to a backing. Conservators adopted this approach with the Gary Shead's Ultimo TAFE mural. However, this is costly and would only be considered in certain cases.

There is a long running philosophical debate amongst conservators and artists. The first school of thought is that the integrity of the original artwork should be maintained. A brushstroke in 2009 is not the same brushstroke of 1983 even if applied by the same person. Therefore repainting changes the work and only minimal change should be affected such as simple cleaning and maintenance.

The other school of thought includes many artists that believe that repainting areas of their own work is the best approach and that their confident brush strokes will boldly announce the re-generation of the work. The artist may prefer to repaint using better quality materials than were originally available. Artists subscribing to this school reject the alternative as overly precious. The debate hinges on a number of factors including how defaced or degraded an image has become, whether parts of it are capable of restoration or revival, and whether the artist is still available. If the artist is available, should the most be made of their ability to become involved? The artist may not be available in the future, especially if they are in their maturity at the time of restoration. Leonardo da Vinci painted his "Last Supper" mural in 1498 and it immediately began to deteriorate because he used experimental materials. If the artist had been available, would the mural have been touched in minimally to conserve its decaying state, or repainted afresh by the artist, this time using proven reliable materials? The availability of the original artist for possible re-engagement seems to be the key issue, and should not be underestimated.

If a mural is being extensively repainted, it may be worth considering substituting with panels or possibly using other media such as mineral silicate paint or even mosaic (Fig. 14). This is because paint will only have an additional life of ten to fifteen years, after which the same problem will arise in the future. For this reason, mosaic is a medium to which many mural artists have gravitated for its obvious longevity. Mosaic can be worked on in the studio and installed by qualified tilers. It would be worth investigating the longevity of methods employed by other artists. Kent Twitchell has developed a method of painting in the studio onto large pieces of a special type of paper, which he calls "parachute paper". This method enables him to mount a three-storey mural in one day. It also enables him to remove the murals for safekeeping or to change their location. Individual pieces of the mural can be removed and replaced if they become defaced.

Occasionally, an artist may alter or seek to improve on their work while they are restoring it, and if done without any warning, this can cause community dismay and opposition, as happened with the repainting of the Valhalla Cinema mural in Glebe. Discussions therefore need to be held between all parties, including the community. A public mural belongs as much to a community, more than a painting in a gallery ever does, and the strength of feeling that erupts when a mural is removed or altered is considerable. Therefore, consultation is the key. In the present case of the restoration of the King George V mural (Fig. 4) there are previously bare sections to be completed, and again consultation with the community will be the priority.



Rodney Monk's mural at the Crescent, Annandale is typical of the style and content of the 1980s community mural (Fig. 13). It contains local identities and references to the Green Bans. Council commissioned him to restore it in 2005. He has subsequently been developing terrazzo as a medium with longevity.

Fig. 13 - The Crescent Mural by R. Monk 1980

Conclusion

Frequent and regular maintenance reduces the ultimate extent of repair work and maintains a mural's appearance, while discouraging graffiti. It is preferable that murals are inspected, cleaned and repaired regularly to ensure that they are conserved in the long term.

Once the decision has been made to restore or conserve a mural, funding should be made for the re-engagement of the original artists (many of whom are now in their late 50s or 60s) to act as consultants and/or painters.

If the original artist is unable to become involved in the restoration project, younger apprentices under the original artists' tutelage may be available to assist. Scenic artists from the film industry also possess the necessary skills. It would be preferable for the artist to help select alternative artists, on the basis that their style and approach will be sympathetic to the original. It is possible to train interested young people, possibly in conjunction with an art school or sign writing college to participate in such projects, thereby passing on skills of design, scaling up, and painting on a large scale. Many of the murals of the 1980s had several hands working on them. Trained conservators have the knowledge and skills to stabilize and clean surfaces.

Finally, improvements in the fabrication and materiality of a work might be investigated at this stage. Consideration should be given to reproducing the design onto removable panels as they will be easier to maintain, more accessible to paint and will reduce costly Occupational Health and Safety considerations. Scaffolding consumes a high proportion of a mural's budget, both in hire costs and in the time that is lost in working off it. Panels offer better prospects for posterity and allow the work to be stored in cases where the building is to undergo major work or scheduled for demolition. All of the original artists I spoke to would prefer to work in the studio on panels rather than up on scaffolding. *"I am fifty eight after all,"* protested one artist.

Paintwrights recently completed a mural constructed of twenty-four 900 mm square panels, the majority of which were sheet metal coated with vitreous enamel medium and then fired (Fig. 15). This material was chosen to ensure the longevity of the work beyond that which painted works are capable. Enamel is colour fast, durable and vandal-proof. It has long been the preferred cladding for railway and underground stations in the United Kingdom.

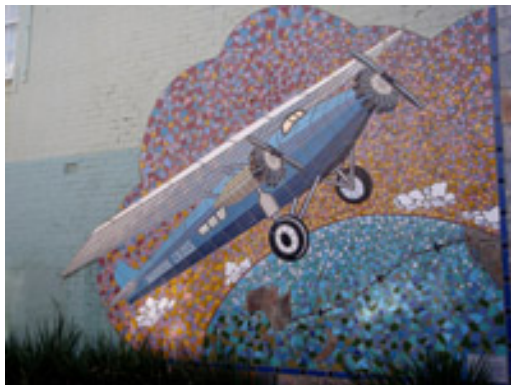


Fig. 14 - Mosaic mural Kingsford Smith by L. Keleman 1990



Fig. 15 - Old Fire Station Parramatta vitreous enamel mural, by Paintwrights (Davies and Dewell) 2008

In all instances, it would be desirable, in the interest of posterity, for the artists to be invited to pass on their design sketches and any other documentary records of the work in progress to institutions such as the Powerhouse Museum and the Art Gallery of NSW for reference and safekeeping. This includes sketches, working cartoons and stencils, jottings, photographs and diaries. It may be worthwhile to commission from the artist a scaled painting of a mural if it has vanished or is threatened. The

Powerhouse Museum already holds the four panels that constitute a 1980 Michiel Dolk and Marilyn Fairskye mural. This mural was located in the ACI Glassworks canteen and is one of the first examples of a political mural. The Art Gallery of New South Wales holds designs for the Woolloomooloo Green Ban murals.

The Council of the City of Sydney is preparing a register of the several hundred public art works and murals within its borders, including community, private and graffiti murals. This list of works, artists, and the materials they used will assist in future maintenance and will facilitate communication with the artists.

In 2009 many of the dilapidated murals of the 1980s fall into the category of eyesore, and are tainted with the stigma of urban decay. Their once bright colours have faded and their idealistic messages seem at odds with the world today.

However, I would suggest that with the passing of time, those murals of the 1980s, selected on the basis of their social, historical, cultural and artistic significance, which can be properly restored and subsequently regularly maintained, will become a valuable interpretive reminder of a very particular and brief period of art history that has been described in Bernard Smith's summary of Australian art, *"Australian Painting 1788 - 2000"*,

"All over the world the mural movement sought a purely public art.....(that) drew on aspects of working life and community history...designed boldly, with bright colours and clear effects....the mural movement had sprung from social and political passions: detached from them, it has withered.

Its brief season in Australian painting was, however, a lively one."

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