

The May Lane Street Art Project: Making a better city through better graffiti

— Kurt Iveson

May Lane should really be dead. On the planner's map, its main function is to provide rear access to houses and businesses (including a brothel) with addresses on the Princes Highway and May Street, St Peters. But May Lane is alive.

Dr Kurt Iveson is a Senior Lecturer in Urban Geography at the University of Sydney.

The May Lane Street Art Project has helped to transform this out-of-the-way little lane into a dynamic space of creativity and interaction, which has now become a destination for people from far and wide. As this exhibition demonstrates, some great artwork has adorned the lane's walls during the life of the project. But what an exhibition of art panels does not necessarily convey — and what is equally important — is that the project has also produced a great *urban space*. The ongoing transformation of May Lane is a powerful demonstration of the ways that making space for graffiti and street art can actually make cities better. Before considering how this has happened in more detail, I want to consider the wider context in which the May Lane Street Art Project exists.

The long war on graffiti in Sydney

Sydney is an increasingly hostile city for graffiti writers and street artists. In the name of 'quality of life', governments of all persuasions have

waged a war on graffiti that has now lasted almost three decades. They have pursued a range of strategies in an effort to win this war. They have increased fines. They have introduced community service orders and custodial sentences. They have established specialist police squads. They have restricted the sale and possession of spray paint and ink markers. They have given urban authorities new powers to remove graffiti from private property without needing permission from property owners. They have deployed rapid removal teams to paint the town grey. They have erected countless kilometres of barbed wire and thousands of surveillance cameras. They have even censored graffiti magazines and computer games. And they have been assisted by companies who have developed 'graffiti-proof' materials and new forms of surveillance. This long war has cost hundreds of millions of dollars. In NSW alone, the removal of graffiti is now estimated to cost well over \$100 million every year.¹

Historically, this repressive approach has been offset by the existence of a few safe spaces for graffiti writers and street artists. For example, some community-based youth services such as nearby Marrickville Youth Resource Centre

have run legal aerosol art programs, often with state government funding. Some local governments have established 'permission walls' for legal graffiti. And a few enlightened property owners have commissioned graffiti pieces or even made free spaces available for artists. But even these programs and spaces are increasingly under threat. The current NSW Labor Government has withdrawn its support for legal graffiti programs, claiming there is no proof that they will eradicate illegal graffiti.² (Of course, that has never been their sole purpose, but that's another story.³) Many local governments are heading in the same direction. The City of Parramatta has recently demolished its legal graffiti walls, in a process vividly documented by Camneron McAuliffe.⁴ The City of Sydney has even authorised its contractors to paint over commissioned street art and graffiti, regardless of the wishes of property owners (who are now required to seek formal planning approval if they want to commission art on their property). And in some parts of the city, gentrification is also taking its toll alongside state and local government repression, reducing the amount of 'leftover' space for artistic expression. Such gentrification pressures led to the eventual closure of the old Graffiti Hall of Fame in Alexandria, for example.⁵

So, is the war being won? Those waging the war can point to some localised victories — a particular 'hot spot' attracts less graffiti, maybe, or an individual graffiti writer is prosecuted. These victories are talked up by both the politicians and the growing graffiti-removal industry, which is profiting handsomely from the war. But even if some battles are being won, the war is being lost. As is plain for all to see, graffiti has not been eradicated from the city at large. Rather, the war on graffiti has had two perverse outcomes.

First, waging war on graffiti frequently results in the *displacement* of graffiti. For every 'hot spot' that is cleaned up, a new one springs up to take its place. Consider Sydney's trains. Years of efforts to make them graffiti-proof have had some success in reducing (although certainly not eradicating) the piecing and tagging of train exteriors and interiors with spray paint and markers. But over the same period, we have witnessed an increase in the amount of tags scratched into train windows. This form of graffiti has grown because it doesn't expose its writers to as much risk of arrest, and it can be executed rapidly. It's also pretty ugly, and it is damaging and costly to remove; it is hard to see how this could be defined as 'success'.

Second, the attempt to eradicate graffiti is actually reducing the *quality* of graffiti. Policies like rapid removal, harsher penalties and expanded surveillance are intended to stop graffiti by increasing the risks of graffiti writing and decreasing the exposure of completed work. The outcome, however, is quite different. In reality, we are pushing the culture towards quick and dirty styles that are less risky to execute, and can be reproduced in bulk no matter how many times they are covered up. The zero tolerance approaches discourages graffiti writers and street artists from investing the time and effort it takes to complete a complex piece. Even worse, it attacks the very graffiti culture that regulates quality. Pushing this graffiti culture underground through criminalisation only serves to isolate young people who feel the urge to pick up a spray can or marker and express themselves. This doesn't stop them writing; it simply stops them developing the skills and ethics that might improve their efforts beyond serial reproductions of their tag.

This last point about the quality of graffiti is very important, given that the war on graffiti is waged on behalf of 'quality of life'. Those who wage the war refuse to engage in a discussion about the quality of graffiti. They are only concerned with the *quantity* of graffiti — for them, more is bad, less is good, it's as simple as that. Of course, there's a reason they want to focus on quantity and not quality. To admit that there might be aesthetic criteria for talking about the quality of graffiti would be to admit that 'good' and 'bad' should not be reduced to 'less' or 'more' (or 'legal' and 'illegal', for that matter). It would be to recognise that rights to the city are broader than property rights, and to acknowledge that some forms of graffiti might actually contribute to quality of life in the city.

From eradicating to curating graffiti: the outdoor gallery and the graffiti commons

All of which brings us back to May Lane. The May Lane Street Art Project has carved out a small space in the city that models an alternative to the war on graffiti. The goal of the project is not to eradicate graffiti, but to *curate* it. The curatorial process is, at its heart, pretty straightforward. There are three core principles at work. First, provide some space where artists can invest some time in their work without fear of arrest. Second, invite some artists to paint it. Third, document and promote their work. This curatorial process inverts the incentive structure associated with the war on graffiti — it reduces the risk, and encourages exposure. The result is that May Lane has *more* graffiti than your average lane, but it also has far *better* graffiti than your average lane. This is because at May Lane, you can paint any time of the day or night, you can take your time with your work, and you know that lots of other artists and art lovers will be coming through the lane to check





out the latest work. Simply put, at May Lane artists have the opportunity and incentive to do good work.

The panels in this exhibition give you some sense of the quality of the work produced for the project, but they are only a part of what is going on in the lane itself. In situ, the commissioned art bleeds off the panels and onto the walls, and viewing the panels in their wider context gives you a completely different perspective on them.⁶ JUMBO and ZAP's panels from 2009 are a case in point — mounted in May Lane on the Graphic Art Mount building which hosts the project, they were surrounded by some seriously loud typography that lent them another scale and impact entirely.⁷

Alongside the works commissioned for the project, an ever-changing display of graffiti and street art now extends well beyond the Graphic Art Mount building itself and further down the lane. For instance, while DMOTE was at May Lane producing his skull panel (*Untitled*, 2010), he also painted a fabulous throw-up on the wall opposite.⁸ Alongside large-scale pieces like this, street signs and telegraph poles have been plastered with stickers and wrapped with yarn. The gutters and footpaths are covered with paint drips, tags and stencils. These little interventions are vital to the character of the laneway, another reason to keep coming back. To appropriate the language of the anti-graffiti crusaders, May Lane is definitely a 'hot spot' ... to catch some fantastic graffiti and street art!

Now, to say that this curatorial process is relatively straightforward is not to say that it is *easy*. What makes things tricky is that the space being curated is not a white cube, but an inner city laneway. The notion of an *outdoor gallery* generates a series of conceptual and practical challenges that don't really exist for a conventional indoor art gallery. This is

because the outdoor gallery has a very different relationship to the public sphere.⁹ Where the indoor gallery is designed and set aside solely for the artistic public invited into its space, the outdoor gallery is *in public*. As such, it shares its space with a range of other folks including neighbouring residents, neighbouring businesses and their customers and suppliers, and pedestrians and drivers passing through.

As with any public space, the sharing of May Lane by these different users is supposed to be managed through a combination of planning regulations and laws that prescribe and proscribe the activities that can take place there. Now, we know that the orderly sharing of space imagined by these plans and laws is never achieved — indeed, graffiti is an example of a practice that refuses to recognise the authority of the authorities to dictate the potential uses of urban space.¹⁰ The art project in May Lane sits somewhere in between the orderly arrangement of people, practices and places imagined by planners and the anarchic confiscation of private property practised by graffiti writers in other parts of the city.

The project does not overturn private property rights, but it puts them to work in a fairly unique way. Tugil Balog, owner of Graphic Art Mount and curator of the project, has worked tirelessly over many years to organise several other property holders on May Lane to make their property available for use by graffiti writers and artists. The result is that private property rights have been pooled together to make certain parts of May Lane into what we might call a 'graffiti commons' — a street canvas available for use by anyone who wishes to participate. A couple of property owners have tried to opt out of the commons. Unprepared to cede any sovereignty over their patch, they've put up signs either requesting or

warning people not to paint on their property. Fair enough. The occasional blank spaces produce interesting juxtapositions, reminding us of the differences of opinion that exist on urban aesthetics without resolving those differences completely by favouring of one view over the other (as typically happens when a 'zero tolerance' approach is applied).

Remarkably, given the wider anti-graffiti context in Sydney, the existence of the outdoor gallery and the graffiti commons has been condoned, and even tentatively supported, by the local planning authority, Marrickville Council. This is very significant given that the rights of private property owners are limited by planning codes that regulate permitted uses on behalf of the 'public good'. Notionally at least, the council has the power to prohibit private property owners from making their property available for graffiti writers and street artists.¹¹

Part of the reason Marrickville Council has been prepared to allow the outdoor gallery and graffiti commons in May Lane is because it is an out-of-the-way location, rather than a highly visible and highly trafficked public space. However, even when they are out-of-the-way, the outdoor gallery and graffiti commons raise interesting dilemmas for council planners. As noted above, the artistic activity on May Lane tends to spill over and beyond the explicitly permitted spaces, and this makes the 'graffiti commons' impossible to map in a conventional sense — its boundaries are fluid and fuzzy rather than rigid and clear. This tends not to sit well with planners, who are used to permitting land uses by drawing a line on a map that tightly defines the space where an activity is permitted. In this context, the question of whether Marrickville Council will seek to contain the place of graffiti more rigidly is one of the most interesting questions for the future of May Lane.

Pressures to that relative have been co in recent years. Of course, th and permission by property is also the 'e In May Lane the fact that permitted in the city, mad different way do well to re and street ar here, not just council.¹² Th been granted the actions o they have a r means break May Lane lo it, and witho and street ar Project woul As such, the commons are of conduct on and street ar This is where these codes o In curating g Street Art P a space whe are negotiate fraught relat forms of gra is a case in pe these scenos hostile to one invited artist

Pressures to do this are perhaps inevitable, given that relatively expensive apartment complexes have been constructed at either end of May Lane in recent years.

Of course, the complex layering of commissions and permissions on May Lane is not only shaped by property rights and planning codes — there is also the ‘code of the street’ to consider.

In May Lane, we are directly confronted with the fact that maps of property boundaries and permitted land uses interact with other maps of the city, made by different groups of people with different ways of using urban space.¹² We would do well to remember that it is the graffiti writers and street artists who are ‘giving permission’ here, not just the property owners or the council.¹³ The graffiti commons has not just been granted, it has also been *claimed* through the actions of artists and writers who insist that they have a right to do what they do, even if this means breaking the law. There was graffiti in May Lane long before anyone invited or curated it, and without the approval of graffiti writers and street artists, the May Lane Street Art Project would not have survived and thrived. As such, the outdoor gallery and graffiti commons are profoundly shaped by the codes of conduct operating in the graffiti writing and street art scenes.

This is where things get interesting, for these codes of conduct are far from settled. In curating graffiti and street art, the May Lane Street Art Project has turned the lane into a space where criteria for defining ‘quality’ are negotiated and sometimes contested. The fraught relationship between more ‘traditional’ forms of graffiti and newer forms of street art is a case in point. Unfortunately, in my view, these scenes are often separated and sometimes hostile to one another. But the project has invited artists working across a range of styles

to paint there, and both the art panels and the rest of the laneway bears witness to the diversity of artists who value the opportunities it affords. For me, one of the great things about May Lane is that it is a space where some kind of dialogue takes place between artists working across this spectrum of styles. That dialogue is frequently mediated, and occasionally heated, but no less interesting and important for that.

A few years ago, for instance, Mini Graff stencilled a little urban skyline on top of a piece in the laneway facing Graphic Art Mount. I loved it — like lots of Mini Graff’s work, it felt like a kind of reward for paying close attention to the wall. And to me, the stencil was taking part in a respectful conversation with the piece in question. However, the artist who did the original piece — DMOTE, a legend of Sydney graffiti — was not amused. He felt his piece had been capped and disrespected, and he told Mini Graff as much when they met at a May’s exhibition a few weeks later. No disrespect was intended, and apologies were made. A couple of years later, in an unrelated incident involving another player, Mini Graff (along with Deb) found her own commissioned panel tagged on the very night it was launched. In this case, disrespect was certainly intended, and veiled threats were made. Putting your art on the street — even when that street is a laneway curated as a kind of ‘outdoor gallery’ — is an unpredictable business that makes the work open to modification.

At the outdoor gallery, these debates about quality also involve others who are not connected with the graffiti and street art scenes. One piece by Josh2000 was infamously censored after it generated complaints from nearby residents and passers-by for its use of the word ‘sluts’. While the piece would have created less fuss had it been hung in an art

gallery somewhere (where critical commentary and controversial imagery is meant to be contained), its exposure to wider publics in a laneway gallery gave it a different meaning and impact. The open street invites commentary — and given that the graffiti writers and street artists who paint in May Lane are often the providers of that commentary in the city’s public spaces, it would be a little weird if May Lane was somehow roped off from that dynamic.

The quality of graffiti and ‘quality of life’ in May Lane

The shift from eradication to curation, then, generates a series of interesting questions and tensions. How are all these tensions likely to be resolved? As the May Lane Street Art Project and its associated graffiti commons have expanded and gained wider recognition, we have reached an interesting moment in their history. Can different graffiti and street art scenes continue to share the space relatively amicably? And perhaps most importantly, will Marrickville Council allow the experiment to continue, or will we see an attempt to reimpose the legal and planning codes that it challenges? In the end, this last question should indeed be answered with reference to some wider concept of the ‘public good’. I want to conclude this essay by arguing that the May Lane Street Art Project and the graffiti commons make an important contribution to the public good. Yes, May Lane has become a haven for graffiti lovers and practitioners. But that is only part of the reason that the experiment is worth supporting. Just as importantly, May Lane is now a vibrant, lively space of *encounter* in the city.

The experience of May Lane demonstrates that what is good for the quality of graffiti and street art can also be good for ‘quality of life’ in the city more generally. This is a crucial point, for it

puts a different twist on the ubiquitous 'broken windows' theory of crime prevention that is used to justify the war on graffiti. Purveyors of this theory argue that, like a broken window that goes unfixed, graffiti sends a message to people that no-one cares, that minor crime is flourishing, and that further dangers must surely lurk around every corner. This establishes a vicious cycle, where fewer and fewer people are prepared to use the space, which makes it feel even less safe, which further reduces the number of people prepared to use the space, and so on — or so the theory goes.¹⁴

Now, what the 'broken windows' theorists have got *right* is that our perceptions of safety in a given place are indeed shaped by visual cues, and these perceptions are crucial to whether or not we will use that place. What they have got *wrong* is the notion that graffiti by definition sends a message of danger and disorder that makes everyone feel uncomfortable. This fails to recognise that there are different kinds of graffiti, which send different kinds of messages to different kinds of people. In fact, the process of curating good quality graffiti in May Lane has had the opposite effect to the one predicted by the 'broken windows' theorists. The art project and the graffiti commons have brought *life* back into May Lane, rather than turning it into a dead space. This has happened in a number of ways. The regular painting sessions and the launch parties have been directly responsible for populating the laneway at certain times. And beyond these events, the ever-evolving art on the lane has become an attraction that many people are now going out of their way to see on a regular basis. By bringing these people into the laneway, a *virtuous cycle* is established whereby others feel more comfortable using the laneway because it is populated. What is more, the graffiti and street art in May Lane actually send

a message that there are people caring for this laneway, that it is not a neglected space. Even for those who don't like the art, it provides a visual cue that the lane is cared for.

I was powerfully reminded of all this on Sunday, 2 May 2010, the day that the NSW Government teamed up with Keep Australia Beautiful to stage their very first 'Graffiti Action Day'. The aim of their event was to paint over as much graffiti as possible, in yet another strategy designed to help win the war on graffiti. I spent that Sunday in May Lane watching PUDL and SET from Sydney graffiti crew Big City Freaks paint a truck with fresh pieces. We were taking part in an alternative event called 'Keep Australia Colourful', which involved a bunch of graffiti artists and graffiti lovers taking a stand for graffiti art and culture by beautifying the city in our own way — with legal graffiti pieces.¹⁵ As usual, May Lane was full of life. PUDL and SET attracted some teenage onlookers, who hung back to watch the accomplished artists in action. A few well-known graffiti artists dropped by to check out the pieces in progress. Locals walked past on their way to and from nearby St Peters railway station. A few stopped to say hello, and most took away a leaflet I was handing out about the campaign. Some car enthusiasts stopped in the lane to use its artwork as a backdrop for photos of their freshly polished and modified rides. A couple of university students making a documentary about graffiti came by to get some footage of PUDL and SET in action and to ask them a few questions. They also interviewed another young artist who was producing a piece on a garage door further down the laneway with his father watching on. A steady stream of amateur photographers came through to document the latest artwork in the lane — including a very respectable middle-aged couple who regularly

pop in to May Lane to check out the walls on their weekend bicycle rides from the Sutherland Shire, several kilometres away. As they told me, 'We don't have anything like this in the Shire.'

To find all this life in a semi-industrial back lane on a Sunday is pretty remarkable. In caring for and populating the lane, then, the May Lane Street Art Project has turned a formerly dead space into a lively place. And because it is a space where many different people's trajectories cross, it is now a valuable space of encounter in the city, where people have learnt how to share space with others who are different from themselves. Crucially, the encounters between graffiti writers, street artists and the wider public that take place in May Lane suggest an alternative to the long and futile war on graffiti. In May Lane, members of the community who know nothing about graffiti and street art beyond the hype they've seen in the mainstream media might come to realise that there is a wide variety of styles, some of which they like and some of which they don't. They might even see some of the artists in action, and find out that there is a high degree of skill involved (and that they aren't going to try to sell you drugs or mug you when you walk past). Similarly, I know that some of the artists who paint in the lane are constantly surprised by the sympathy and support they have received from some passers-by. It turns out that not all older people hate graffiti! Here lies the prospect that prejudices on both sides can be broken down. None of these encounters are possible when graffiti writing is pushed to marginal spaces in the dead of night, as it is by the zero tolerance approach.



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Of course, we should be wary of overly romanticising these encounters. It's not as though everyone who passes through the lane stops to admire the art and talk to an artist. And it's not as though everyone who does stop and talk to an artist has positive things to say about their work! But we don't need to romanticise the nature of these encounters to recognise their importance for the quality of urban life. That's because our capacity to engage with difference is central to urban social justice.¹⁶ Even where prejudices are not transformed through encounters like those on May Lane, in such places differences of opinion are placed on a more even footing whereby they have been negotiated politically rather than settled forcefully.

Precisely because genuine encounters are unpredictable, they can only take place in spaces where some measure of disorder is allowed. This is why our society's response to graffiti is significant — it is a kind of barometer of our collective capacity to live peacefully with some level of disorder and difference in our cities.¹⁷ Forty years ago, American urbanist Richard Sennett argued that our cities seemed to be increasingly characterised by an 'inability to deal with disorder without raising it to the scale of mortal combat'. He worried that every instance of disorder was turned into 'a situation in which the ultimate methods of aggression, violent force and reprisal, seem[ed] to become not only justified, but life-preserving. It is a terrible paradox that the escalation of discord into violence comes to be, in these communities, the means by which "law and order" should be maintained'.¹⁸ This neatly sums up the logic that has resulted in the escalating war on graffiti. May Lane is so valuable because it provides us with some clues about how to end the war and make a decent and just peace.

Certainly, there was no better place to be on Graffiti Action Day. The stated aim of this event was to make the city better by getting members of the community to take care of their neighbourhood by giving its walls and fences a fresh coat of paint. This accurately describes what has been going on at May Lane for several years — except that in May Lane, graffiti writers and street artists have actually been included as part of the community in this process, rather than excluded as enemy combatants. And that makes all the difference in the world.

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 3 Kurt Iveson, 'War is over (if you want it): Rethinking the graffiti problem', *Australian Planner*, vol. 46, issue 4, pp. 24–34, 2009
 4 See <http://ccrw.scribd.com/writingwags/>
 5 Kurt Iveson, *Politics and the City*, Blackwell, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 130, 2007
 6 The May's website has pictures of most works in context; see <http://www.mays.org.au>
 7 Pictures of pieces in their wider context can be found on the May's website: <http://www.mays.org.au/>
 8 A good glossary of graffiti terms can be found here: http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti_glossary.html
 9 Joe Austin, 'More to see than a canvas in a white cube: For an art in the streets', *City*, vol. 14, issue 1–2, pp. 33–47, 2010
 10 Alison Young, 'Negotiated consent or zero tolerance?' Responding to graffiti and street art in Melbourne', *City*, vol. 14, issue 1–2, pp. 99–114, 2010
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 14 The original formulation is James Wilson and George Kelling, 'Broken Windows: The police and neighbourhood safety', *Atlantic Monthly*, pp. 29–32, March 1982
 15 See <http://www.keepaustraliacolourful.org>. The truck was kindly donated to the campaign by Gould's Book Arcade in Newtown.
 16 Ruth Fincher and Kurt Iveson, *Planning and Diversity in the City: Redirection, recognition and encounter*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008
 17 Kurt Iveson, 'War is over ...'
 18 Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal identity and city life*, Knopf, New York, pp. 45–46, 1970