

## DUNEDIN STREET ART

Glen Hazelton



Figure 1. Wall by Sean Duffel (NZ), former Otago Harbour Board offices, 43 Jetty St. Photograph by Simon Clayton.

Over the last 18 months, Dunedin Street Art (DSA) has facilitated the installation of more than 20 street art murals around the city, focusing in the area south of the Octagon. They range in scale from small, discrete works that offer a sense of discovery in alleyways to massive works that stretch across blocks and multiple floors of the city's buildings. So far, street artists from Belgium, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Poland, Australia, France and South Africa have joined artists from Dunedin and New Zealand to begin the transformation of the city's walls.

The work has been hugely supported by the community. In addition to the almost 10,000 followers on Facebook, we have printed 6,000 maps of the street art trail. We are up to the third edition of this map and cannot keep up with demand. The works have garnered significant international attention, with some posts of Dunedin street art walls experiencing more than one hundred thousand shares around the world.

The following article discusses how DSA came to exist and the challenges and issues we have faced along the way.

Dunedin Street Art formed incrementally, almost accidentally over 2014. It started when street art fan Justin Cashell worked with building owner Luke Johnston to attract Belgian artist ROA to paint a mural in Bath Street. After the success of this work and the positive public response to it, discussions amongst a group of potential collaborators began on attracting further artists to the city. A few months later, Justin worked with building and business owners Chris James, Lawrie Forbes and Riah McLean to bring British muralist Phlegm to Dunedin. Only a few months later, a more formal group had started to form and in October 2014, with only a couple of months' organisation, it organised a street art festival during which ten walls were painted by three international and six New Zealand artists. Following the success of the festival, the collaborators committed to continuing efforts to facilitate the painting of more walls around the city and established the Dunedin Street Art Charitable Trust to continue the work into the future.

Dunedin Street Art has ten major goals:

1. To coordinate and liaise with private building owners and public space providers to make wall space available in and around the Dunedin City area for the creation of positive and constructive urban contemporary art.
2. To support the creation of spectacular works of art for the whole community to enjoy for free.
3. To invite, and extend networks to include national and international artists to facilitate a way of locating contemporary art practice, produced locally, in a wider global context.
4. To promote and support public appreciation of the craft and skill requisite in creating urban contemporary art.
5. To offer opportunities for local artists to showcase their work alongside international artists in Dunedin.
6. To provide inspiration for young street artists to explore possibilities of careers in the arts and creative sectors.
7. To establish and maintain network and educational support for local artists, and the wider Dunedin community, through providing opportunities to support professional practice development and public discussion.
8. To contribute to, promote and support the beautification of urban areas adversely affected by graffiti and urban decline.
9. To contribute to the positive engagement of the community with its urban environment by promoting and supporting positive outcomes for amenities and urban renewal by promoting positive public engagement with and public awareness of the process of urban renewal.
10. To align with likeminded national and international art networks.



Figure 2. ROA (Belgium), *Tuatara*, 7 Bath St. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community.

A number of these goals are particularly important to the group and help explain the focus on international artists alongside our local talent – a source of discontent to some of our detractors and something that is also covered in more detail below.

The opportunity to showcase art for the community to enjoy for free is one of the strongest motivators for DSA. Dunedin is a relatively low-income city. It has a large number of residents who will not have the opportunity to travel overseas. DSA believes that by attracting international street artists to Dunedin, everyone in the city has the opportunity to experience some of the world's best street art – not only those who can afford to travel overseas to see it.

DSA also hopes young Dunedin artists will be inspired by these visiting international artists, particularly as people they can relate to. Seeing international artists making a living from painting walls and travelling the world shows young Dunedin artists that creative careers in the arts, and street art specifically, can be achievable.

DSA also sees street art as a relatively open, democratic form of expression. It is accessible to all of the city's residents, no matter how much or little specific knowledge they have about art. There is no need to visit a gallery or exhibition, where people may still feel uncomfortable or out of place, no matter how welcoming these places are made. Street art can be accessed any time of the day at people's own convenience and enjoyed in the way



Figure 3. ROA (Belgium), painting at Diesoline Espresso, 7 Bath St. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community



Figure 4. Hyuro (Argentina), *The Exchange*, carpark, 48 Bond Street. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community.



Figure 5. Hyuro (Argentina), *The Exchange*, in progress, carpark, 48 Bond Street. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community.

they want to experience it. We are always heartened when we see the range of people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds out there enjoying the trail, street art map in hand. Street art has broad appeal and while this mainstream attraction may not be to all critics' taste, we believe the strong community support and interest that has been fostered through this work will have positive spin-off effects for the support of all types of arts and creative endeavours in Dunedin.

While a lot has been achieved over the last year, more work goes on behind the scenes than people might appreciate. For each wall, we have to liaise with building owners for permission to use their wall and the types of artists they would be happy to host. We then have to find and match artists to the walls

available. Once this connection is made, we need to raise the funding for a koha for the artist's fees, materials, and hire of equipment like lifts and scaffolding. We need to apply for resource consent from the Dunedin City Council and work through any issues raised in this process and address any concerns. For international artists, we also need to organise travel and cover the cost of this. Once artists are here, we typically host them in our own homes, both to reduce costs but also to give them an authentic Dunedin experience. As much as possible, we try to get them out and about to enjoy Dunedin and its surrounds. We also act as their assistants on walls, fetching supplies, food, and helping out wherever it is needed. In reality, each wall normally represents weeks, if not months, of work from our group of volunteers even before the artist starts work. While each project has had its own challenges, it has also





Figure 6. Phlegm (United Kingdom), *The Songbird Pipe Organ*, Dunedin Musician's Club Building, Manse St. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community.

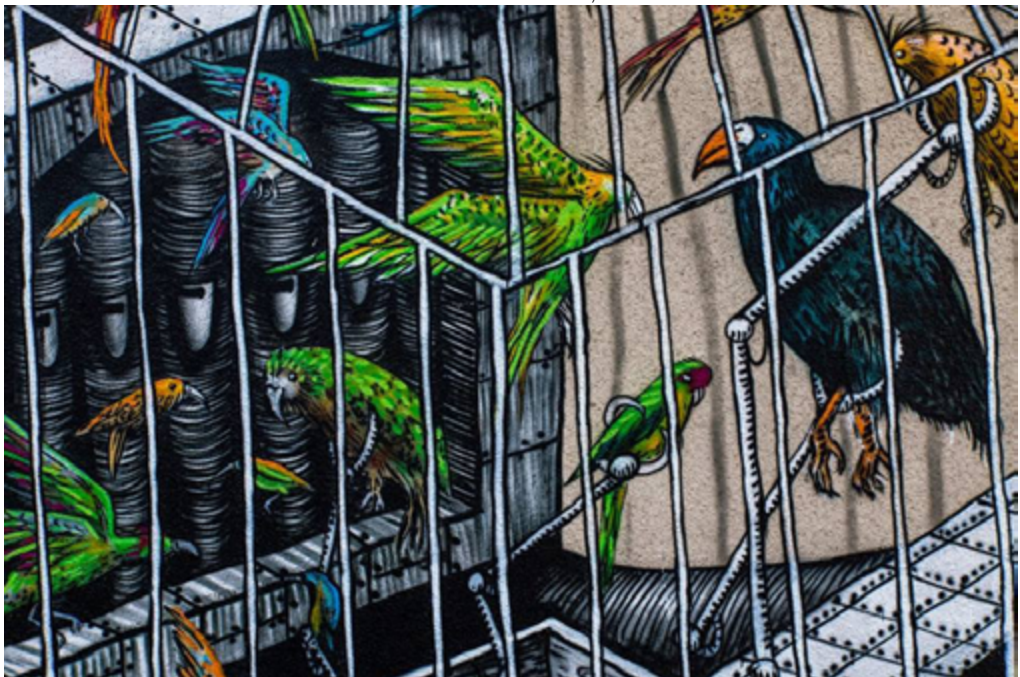


Figure 7. Phlegm (United Kingdom), *The Songbird Pipe Organ*, detail, Dunedin Musician's Club Building, Manse St. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community.



Figure 8. Bezt (Etam Cru) (Poland), 142 High St. Photograph by Pam McKinlay.

been special to see each one come together as well as the steady stream of people visiting while they are underway to watch these amazing artists at work.

On top of this, there is the ongoing task of producing and updating maps, responding to media requests, continuing discussions with other artists and potential wall owners, as well as the big one – fundraising and working with sponsors to cover the costs associated with each wall. Funding remains the biggest constraint on our work. The interest from artists and wall owners is continuing to grow, and the only thing holding our efforts back is the ability to fund the many potential projects. For a group of volunteers, DSA has quickly grown into something much bigger than we ever expected. This expansion has been strongly driven by the positive public reception to the street art created.

Of course, for something that has become so visible so rapidly, DSA has not been without its critics. As a group of volunteers this can be difficult to deal with, particularly when detractors has personally targeted our members or the artists we have worked with.

One of the main criticisms has related to the use of international artists rather than focusing solely on local artists. The reasons for our attraction to international artists are partly described above, in terms of providing the ability for the community to enjoy the work of some of the best international street artists, right here in Dunedin. DSA also recognises the value international artists have had in terms of helping to legitimise street art in the eyes of the public as something more than just 'graffiti on walls,' and the national and international attention they have focused on Dunedin. There is a sense of local pride that Dunedin has been able to attract so many big international names, and this has lent the overall project great community support.

We believe that publicity generated by the international artists also provides great opportunities for local artists to showcase their work on an international stage. There are numerous examples of international media not only





Figure 9. Fintan Magee (Australia), *Chasing the Thin White Cloud*, Scenic Circle Southern Hotel, 149 Rattray St. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community.



Figure 10. Dal East (South Africa), *De Foliation – Haast Eagle*, My Mate John's customer carpark, 19 Stafford St. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community.



Figure 11. Dal East (South Africa), *De Foliation – Haast Eagle* in progress, My Mate John's customer carpark, 19 Stafford St. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community.

highlighting the international artists, but also the work of local artists in their coverage. This is great exposure for the city and its arts community. It is also important to note that of the 24 walls so far completed, six have been painted by artists living in Dunedin at the time and three others (including one wall with four different artists) by others based in New Zealand. For a city that was not renowned for a strong local street art scene, and that has had very few official public art commissions for a number of years, we think these developments represent a growth in opportunities for local artists and something we hope will only expand in coming years.

Another set of criticisms relate to specific walls and the content of the artwork they contain. We have had complaints and criticisms about almost every wall that

has been painted. This is probably to be expected. The works are highly visible. Art is subjective and people will see in each work what they want to see. What for some is a robotic child joyfully playing on a horse is dark and creepy to others; what is an extinct Haast eagle to some symbolises an unravelling United States government to others; and what is a twee, chocolate-box cover depicting two children on a seat to some is hetero-normative and sexualising for others. As broadly as we draw on different styles and artists, we cannot be everything to everyone and we cannot control how people will receive the works. We try to allow the artists we are working with as much freedom as possible. Of course, given that the walls are visible to the public, there are constraints. Owners





Figure 12. Mica Still (NZ), *Wolfpack*, 8 Stafford St. Photograph by Dunedin Street Art Community.



Figure 13. Andy McCready (NZ), Union Steamship Building right wall, 38 Water St. Photo by Alan Dove Photography.



Figure 14. Sam Ovens (NZ), C3 Church left wall, 22 Vogel St. Photo by Alan Dove Photography.



Figure 15 & 16. Natalia Rak (Poland), *Love is in the Air* (left) and detail (right), carpark on 48 Bond St. Photographs courtesy of the artist.

of walls exert some influence through who and what they will allow to be painted on their walls. The resource consent process demands that we provide sketches of the proposed works and gain 'affected persons' approval if it is deemed necessary – these affected parties can also place constraints on exactly what goes up. Conditions in the resource consent require that if works are deemed offensive by the consents manager; they will have to be removed, limiting the boundaries of expression.

Experienced artists working in the public realm on large commissions also tailor their work themselves to suit the location and audience, often avoiding more controversial topics. Sometimes the artist will adjust their work during the process of painting, as occurred recently with a work by the Polish artist Bezt. On this occasion, the artist had already changed the work from the design approved for resource consent. As the mural went up, we started receiving feedback which raised concerns that we might not be able to get the variation to consent we required. We had these discussions openly with the artist, and he altered the final work so as to omit the parts of the image that might have been controversial to some. Whether this was the right decision is open to interpretation and it is easy to second guess. Unfortunately, working under tight time frames in public environments meant that there was not the time for the full debate and consideration that we would have liked. At the end of the day, we took this as a learning experience and prefer to focus on the fact that we have an amazing mural where once there was a blank wall. We are sure it will be debated as long as it is there. This debate is healthy and helps us understand where boundaries may, or may not, exist.

A further group of criticisms centre on broader intellectual debates relating to issues like the co-opting of an underground social and political form of expression and the mainstreaming or commercialisation of an alternative art form. These are major debates that are occurring around the world as street art has become more socially accepted. DSA is only one tiny player in this much larger process and it is well outside our control or influence. Our goal is not to make money from the works we support – although we do need sponsorship to pay our artists, so this is a double-edged sword. While we recognise the importance of these wider debates, our focus is on working with artists operating in this area to find places for their work in Dunedin and on delivering street art the community can enjoy. That is where we feel our energies and skills are best employed, rather than at the level of academic or esoteric debate.



Figure 17. Pixel Pancho (Italy), *Riding Dreams*, Chipmunks building, 361 Princes St. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

As a final point, for all of the positive feedback and criticisms discussed above, DSA does not see itself as having a monopoly over street art in Dunedin. We have never set out to be the only group facilitating street art in Dunedin. We acknowledge that there are others out there working hard to provide a voice for different communities and taking alternative approaches to the one we have chosen. Some of these will respond to elements in our approach that they do not like or create new opportunities. We welcome the establishment of other groups which will naturally take a different focus from ours and which can push street art in Dunedin in new and different directions.

We also do not seek to replace the organic, experimental, unregulated work that occurs at the fringes and drives innovation within street art as a medium. While this is not an area we can operate in directly (due to our need to maintain relationships with sponsors and building owners and to continue to be able to get resource consents from the council), we recognise that this is where most of the artists we have worked with started out and from where much of the future talent will emerge. At the end of the day, DSA believes that we will all benefit from further opportunities to interact with more art in all its various forms throughout our city, rather than less. If nothing else, we hope that what we are doing demonstrates that there is a hunger out there in the community for more public creative expression, and we are excited to see exactly where this might take Dunedin over the next few years.

**Glen Hazelton** is a member of Dunedin Street Art. Members volunteer their time with a view to securing walls, artists, and fundraising for commissioned street art around Dunedin. The group formed in 2014 and is looking forward to supporting further commissions in spring and summer 2015/2016.