

WONDERWALLS WOLLONGONG



Transforming a regional city: recognising the potential of a street art festival to drive lasting change

Better for community:

Street art brings the city to life and creates options for new businesses, encouraging people to enjoy the city centre and see it with a fresh vision. In 2016, Beastman and Georgia Hill collaborated on a mural occupying a walkway between the CBD and train station. The transient place previously offered very little for commuters to reflect upon, let alone inspire their daily work. By using intricate patterns and bold colours, the artists have created a welcoming thoroughfare. Beastman and Hill sketched ideas together and co-created the mural through many conversations, additions, edits, and overlays. Image: Verb Syndicate.

QUICK FACTS

PROJECT TYPE:

Public art and annual street art festival

LOCATION:

Wollongong, NSW

REGION:

Illawarra–Shoalhaven

ABORIGINAL CUSTODIANS OF THIS COUNTRY¹:

Dharawal people

CLIENT:

2017 – Wollongong City Council, Destination Wollongong, Wollongong Central (GPT Group)

PROJECT SCALE:

Large: 8 km²

PROJECT COST:

2012: \$8000 with additional in-kind support of \$60,000 from paint suppliers and artistic community
2017: \$150,000 including in-kind and financial donations

YEAR:

2012–17 (no festival in 2014)

PROJECT TEAM:

Founded and organised by Verb Syndicate; many artists and organisations have participated since 2012. See wonderwallsfestival.com/history for a full list of artists and sponsors.

PROCUREMENT PROCESS:

Artists' expressions of interest are sought nationally, plus three international artists are selected and invited to participate

AWARDS:

2014 FBi Radio Sydney Music Arts & Culture (SMAC) Awards: Winner, Remix the City

Wonderwalls is a three-day annual street art festival that has helped to transform Wollongong from a city defined by its industrial past into a vibrant, productive, future-focused urban centre.

Wonderwalls has helped Wollongong rediscover its value. In the past three years the city centre has seen \$1.3 billion invested in new development, and the opening of 65 cafés and small bars. An increase in visitors, new businesses, and an influx of skills have driven Wollongong's transition, becoming a diverse hub of creative, cultural, and learning pursuits. Urban transformations like this are sought by cities worldwide, and offer regional Australian cities new social and economic opportunities.

Revitalising the city centre

Wonderwalls Wollongong attracts massive crowds – its events sell out every year. Since the inaugural festival in 2012, the city has seen a 20% rise in numbers of visitors, increasing foot traffic and passive surveillance and contributing to a safer city centre.

The interactive Wonderwalls maps encourage walking, cycling, and using public transport, and these healthier and more social transport alternatives also reduce city traffic.

Capturing the local community

For the 2016 festival, 27 property owners granted permission for Wonderwalls artists to convert building facades, underground parking stations, and concrete walls into 35 vibrant street murals. The festival draws crowds to community events such as street parties, public discussions with the artists, and creative workshops. Through its captivating murals and artworks, and by forging productive relationships that last beyond the festival, Wonderwalls has generated a new appreciation of public space.

Wonderwalls street art has engaged the city's population by paying homage to Wollongong's industrial heritage while imagining the future. Over the years some murals have sparked particular attachments, with imagery relating to personal experiences. The large-scale paintings have revealed the rich character of existing buildings, laneways, and community venues, and staged a new vision of the city's spaces without the significant investment that comes with development.

In recognition of the festival's success, the event has been replicated in Port Adelaide which is undergoing a similar transformation, establishing a post-industrial identity.

“We consider Wonderwalls a major driver in enhancing the perception of the city. It strikes a chord with the youth demographic, achieves outstanding social media traction and encourages repeat or first-time visitation outside the event period.”

—Destination Wollongong, festival sponsor



Better look and feel:

(left) International artist Felipe Pantone's mural (Argentina) transforms a blank wall, using geometric illustrations, glitch imagery, and 3D shapes. (above) International artist, Amok Island (Amsterdam/Perth) putting the finishing touches on his mural in 2015.

Images: Luke Shirlaw.



Better value:

Melbourne's Cam Scale worked to cover the northern facade of a warehouse in McCabe Park in Wollongong's CBD. Murals like this have helped to reshape and redefine the city. Image: Luke Shirlaw.

“It’s amazing how artwork can completely change how people look at a space. It makes people walk through their town a different way, and value the space themselves. Like anything, if you show it a bit of love and attention, it can turn into something else completely.”

—Georgia Hill, Wonderwalls 2016 artist

Responding to a collective desire for change

In its first year, Wonderwalls Wollongong was initiated by Verb Syndicate and “The Hours”, a local street artist collective, to reinvigorate the city in response to growing community desire for change. By involving local street artists, the inaugural festival inspired conversations with many city stakeholders.

As the event grew, the organiser sought international artistic talent to inject new ideas into the local community. From 2015, Wollongong City Council, Destination Wollongong, Wollongong Central (GPT Group) were secured as financial partners, alongside existing supporters Taubmans and Ironlak, and the event’s reach was expanded.

Promoting public art and artists

The festival has been instrumental in promoting emerging artists. Australian-born internationally acclaimed artist Smug (based in Scotland), committed to join Wonderwalls in 2013 for his first official homecoming to Australia as an artist. Following the festival, in 2017, Citipower commissioned Smug for Melbourne’s largest mural (four storeys) at the corner of Spencer and Lonsdale streets. Wonderwalls artists continue to add value to public spaces across Australia.

The effectiveness of Wonderwalls has led Verb Syndicate to become a pseudo-agency for street artists in Wollongong. They now work to match briefs from developers with street artists, and have been able to demonstrate to developers how successful creative direction can be led by artists.

Design objectives for NSW

Seven objectives define the key considerations in the design of the built environment.



Better fit
contextual, local
and of its place



Better performance
sustainable, adaptable
and durable



Better for community
inclusive, connected
and diverse



Better for people
safe, comfortable
and liveable



Better working
functional, efficient
and fit for purpose



Better value
creating and
adding value



Better look and feel
engaging, inviting
and attractive

Find out more
ga.nsw.gov.au



Better look and feel:

"We had a bunch of artists that wanted somewhere to paint, and I lived in a city where I wanted to see the street scene be reinvigorated." Simon Grant, Verb Syndicate. Pictured is Sofles (Brisbane) painting in 2015. Image: Luke Shirlaw.

Good process: use a structured process to select artists and locations

The festival's success is largely due to its remarkable curation and artistic collaborations. The artist selection process is carried out each year across two tiers: three international artists are invited to participate while local artists are selected through a national expression of interest. The selection panel includes the festival founders, artists, and financial donors. This structured approach to artist selection maintains design excellence across the festival.

Beyond the artist selection process, the location of each mural is carefully considered. While all murals are required to be within a 1-km radius of the city, ensuring the festival is walkable, some walls are deliberately left untouched to emphasise nearby mural clusters.

Key considerations

Securing the enduring cultural impact and longevity of a festival of this scale requires a substantial financial commitment. Like most start-up events, the 2012 festival ran on a shoestring budget that relied heavily on artists' in-kind donations. In 2015, the festival secured significant support from developers as well as local and State government. This enabled marketing and communication efforts to increase in line with visitor volumes. The funding also secured expertise (e.g. with digital applications) to match the design excellence inherent in the street art.

MORE INFORMATION

GANSW policies:

Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW

GANSW guides:

Integrating Urban Design

Urban Design for Regional NSW

GANSW advisory notes:

Collaboration

Strategic visioning

1. Horton D (creator) & AIATSIS (1996), AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia, Aboriginal Studies Press, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and Auslig/Sinclair, Knight, Merz.

This case study has been developed in conjunction with the Urban Design for Regional NSW guide.