

Using drawing as a tool to explore public space

Richard Briggs

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Abstract

With my background in architecture, my approach to better understanding public space is to use a process of exploration, observation and drawing on location, or as it's called in some forums as "urban sketching". With observation I try to understand the elements of the built environment which contribute to the vitality of a city. My drawings become comments on either the political landscape or social context of a particular place. Before I start the drawing process, I explore, observe, and talk to local people, gathering information on the layers complexity that exist in order to better understand place.

This observational approach forms a framework to work within and enables me to begin the process of making an interpretation, through drawing, of a place. A key aim of this approach is to distill what I see into a simple form.

Whether it be a large expansive wall drawing, or a small scale drawing in a sketch book, my artwork has the aspirational aim to provoke a wider discussion about our cities, public spaces, and the built environment. It also tries to look at how people use these spaces, and document what's important to a "soul" of a place and how this approach resonates with its characteristics. Using drawing as a tool to highlight a message has enabled me to express ideas on how public space can be improved and enhanced from a social, political and experiential point of view.

Keywords: observation, immersion, data, drawing, message

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In a moment of time when the balance between the public and the private is shifting in favour of the latter, it is important that a close eye is kept on the status of the public spaces in our cities. Vital public space tends to emerge as a product of numerous competing forces. Planning guidelines, levels of regulation and attitudes can strangle or let flourish behaviours which enliven these areas which are so key to thriving cities. It can be argued that the vitality of public spaces hinges on their ability to facilitate a diversity of, often unexpected, usages and interactions, by a broad spectrum of people over varied time periods.

Eva Lloyd and Giacomo Butte; Extract from Street Life Studies: Cambodia publication 2015; Faculty of Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

My approach to better understanding public space with regards to retaining and enhancing this vitality, is to use a process of exploration, observation and drawing on location, or as it's called in some forums "urban sketching". This approach to documenting the city can then be used to canvas a wider discussion on our built environment. It raises questions such as - What's good about a city? What's successful? What needs to be retained? and What could be improved? At the forefront of this process, is the question of how people use and activate space (and built form). I use the process of drawing to form a view on the city, spaces and people, highlighting issues that are either positive or detrimental and usually they will have a political or social angle. One of the positive aspects that I find about drawing on location is that it provides a very immersive experience within a city scape. This allows my mind to be fully focused on making an interpretation on what I see, which in many cases, can be visually overloading. My aim is to reduce what I see into simple terms, into simple forms, and purge the drawings to make sure that only what is necessary appears on the page. This process of reduction also allows me to make decisions on how to relate a drawing to a particular message, something which I try and make the basis of any drawing or artwork. One of the keys aspects to the process that I undertake, whether it be in a city which I know well, or don't know at all, is to explore and observe before any drawing starts.

This observational approach forms a strategy to work within and enables me to start to select "drawing subjects". These subjects usually have a common theme and provide key messages about a city's character. I look at the elements which makes a place interesting and or try to understand pressing issues from a social point of view. For example, on a recent trip to Porto in Portugal, I spent a week looking, observing and talking to local people. This process generated a greater understanding about the city and certain characteristics (albeit in this case a fairly superficial level) and allowed me to formulate an approach to any drawings that I did of the city. I was interested in the subject of change and gentrification. Based on my limited observations as an outsider, I did a series of drawings of signage on abandoned buildings, as I believe that this started to talk about the changing nature of the city.

Another positive aspect of drawing on location is the opportunity to meet local people in the street whilst doing this. This, in many cases, can lead to conversations that can increase your knowledge about a place and how people use public space. For example, you find out what type of activities occur on Saturday afternoon at the market, or what future plans lay in wait for a building, a street or a square. This level of exposure, being in

the place that you are documenting, gives license to produce a drawing that has more depth and contextual meaning. Due to this level of exposure, layers of political, social and geographical information end up being part of a drawing. Drawing on location also proves to be a valuable educational tool as well, to learn and become more aware of your surroundings. For example, you'll witness first hand over time about how a public space might respond to climate, and how this can affect how people use and move through space. You'll also see the impact of built form and vegetation and how this might provide informal opportunities for activities that will enable people to stop, linger, sit and watch, all activating public space. Jan Gehl, the architect and urban planner, talks a lot about the spaces "in between" buildings, and this is certainly one aspect that I'm interested in trying to capture through drawing.

This process of exploration, observation and drawing on location can be a valuable tool when documenting a new place with fresh eyes. The work that I have undertaken in the area of Surry hills in Sydney is an example of a "slow burner" project, whereby I have been studying the streets and spaces since 2005. This has allowed me to document through drawing changes or gentrification in the area. Some of these changes are instant and rapid, with some taking many years to emerge. It's also allowed me to form a strong connection with the area and, importantly, the community. I have listened to vast amounts of interesting stories that characterise the area and the people, most of which have in some way impacted the message I am trying to portray through my drawings. A part of this drawing project in Surry Hills, was exhibited in 2010 at the Surry Hills library, a place that forms the heartbeat of area for the local community. What was important about this milestone in this ongoing project, was that it provided a great opportunity to engage directly with the wider community in a public forum. It provided a platform for a greater understanding of the area, and thus influenced directly my drawing of the area. The exhibition was also a catalyst for a public debate on Surry Hills. A series of public workshops were also held, which gave an opportunity for the people in the area to join in and through sketching add layers of history, knowledge, and community aspirations to my drawings.

The drawing work from Cambodia is an example of how I document when spending a shorter length of time in one location, producing a more initiative response to place. These drawings were done in a series of visits to Phnom Penh which form part of a yearly short course called Street Life Studies: Cambodia. This course is for Built Environment students from the University of New South Wales in Sydney and from the Royal College of Fine Arts in Phom Penh (RUFA). I am part of a team of academics and practicing architects that co run the course, and collectively we are interested in how we can encourage students to study, understand, document public space. Again, using process of observation first, then drawing, but with the added layer of data collection. The students then suggest small scale urban interventions with the aim of improving public space from a practical and experiential aspect.

Data collection has also provided a basis for some of the larger wall drawings that I have completed. When using this approach, it can not only give the artwork great substance and depth, but it also allows you as the artist to give way to risk, surprise and control. Letting go of knowing where the artwork will go and following the lead of an acquired data is something that can lead to some very interesting results.

The wall drawing located in a foyer of an office tower on Sydney for the Naked Duck Group was, as a concept, a response to how people travelled to work. I gave over 100 office workers a survey questionnaire asking them questions such as what were their

experiences of the city, what mode of transport did they use to travel to work, and what were significant moments on their daily commute? I spent two weeks following in the footsteps of the office workers, on trains, buses, ferries, bike and on foot, trying to capture through drawings what they thought were significant moments or landmarks whilst in transit, as well as adding my own experiences. Their daily routes to work formed an organic framework and backdrop for the more detailed part of the artwork. This approach allowed the artwork to be totally experiential; to be about how at a human scale we relate to spaces within a cityscape, some of which are like large canyons, and some of which are intimate and enclosed. The cinematic nature of moving through public space allowed me to understand better how the city works from a network point of view. The networks that allow people to move through space to their destination is something that has always interested me greatly when looking at cities, and this artwork was an opportunity to explore this in the Sydney context. During the process I also observed how people use public space, whether it be a train platform, a park, a cycle lane, a street, a footpath, or a bus seat. It became an interesting study in human behaviour and also sharpened and widened my observational skills.

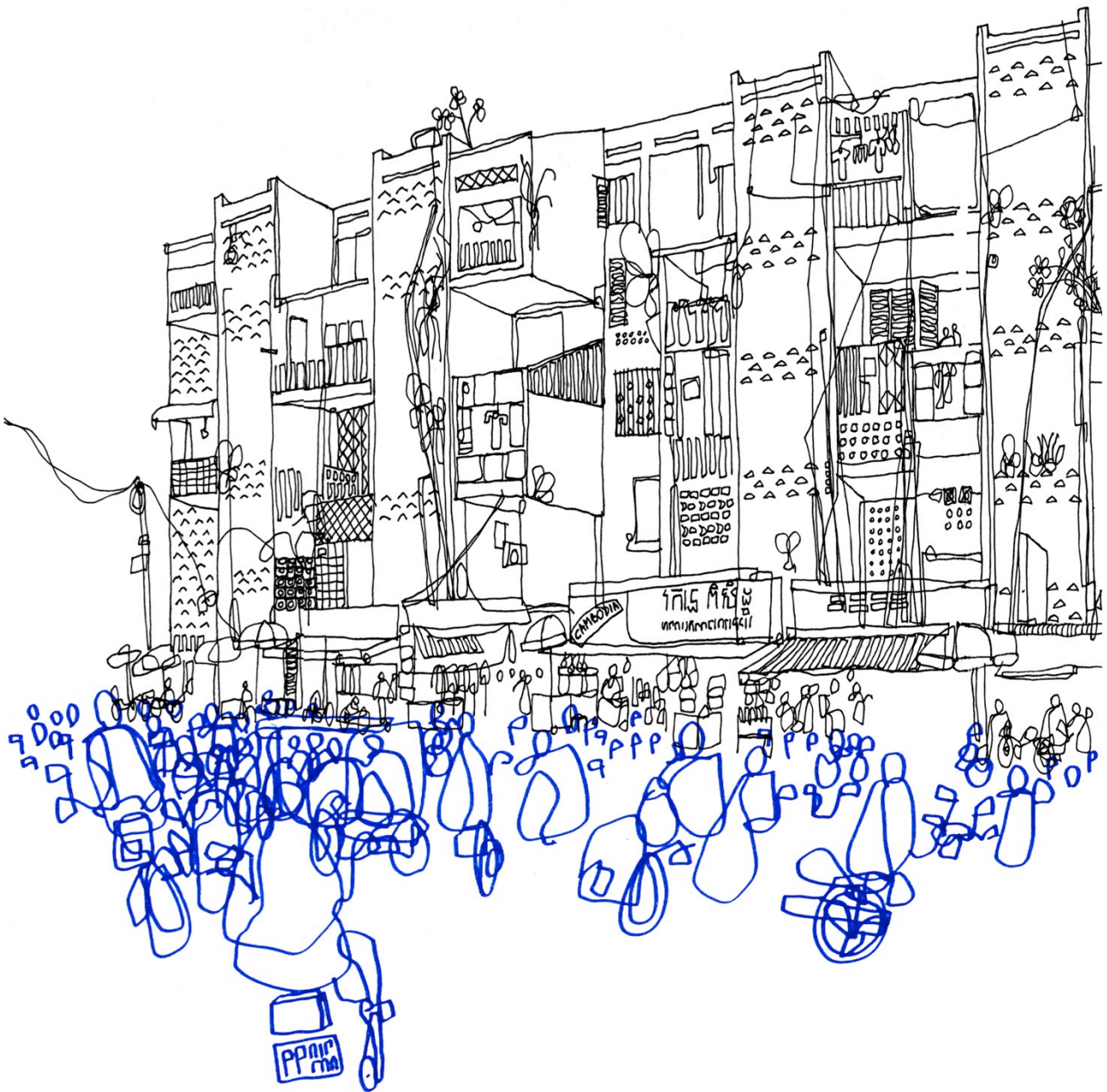
Another project that used data as a basis for a piece of public artwork was a mural completed on a garage door in Marrickville, Sydney. This was part of a local council initiative that invited local artists to complete pieces of public artwork on walls and the like that had a problem with unwanted tagging. The varied demographic of the local area was something that interested me personally. With fifty one different nationalities living in the local area and by using information from the national population census, my aim was to document and use this diversity and cultural richness of the community to drive the artwork and to highlight this condition. The garage door sits in a well-used laneway, but still provides surprise and intrigue with any passerby. As a graphic it has a certain quality, but I was more interested in the artwork forming a commentary on how as a city, Sydney's public space, its parks, its streets, its cafés, its supermarkets and local squares are occupied by a demographic that makes the city a cultural hotspot.

Whether it be a large expansive wall drawing, or a small-scale drawing in a sketch book, my artwork has the aspirational aim to provoke a wider discussion about our cities, public spaces, and the built environment. It also tries to look at how people use these spaces, and document what's important to a "soul" of a place and how this approach resonates with its characteristics. Using drawing as a tool to highlight a message, whether it be through private practise, or through an academic lens, has enabled me to explore opportunities to express ideas on how better public space can be improved and enhanced from a social, political and experiential point of view.

Richard Briggs is a practising artist and UK registered architect based in Sydney, Australia. After graduating from the Manchester School of Architecture in 1999, Richard worked for architects such as SOM in London, and SJB in Sydney before forming his own design practice in 2010. Working on a mixture of small scale residential and art projects, he also teaches design at University of New South Wales in Sydney. Richard's artworks and drawings encourage a different way of looking at our built environment. He looks at how we can describe our cities, streets and laneways, by filtering what we see to produce focused sketches which can portray a strong social, political or environmental message. Using this approach, he has completed several large scale murals for clients such as DEXUS Property Group, Lend Lease and Sydney councils. Richard is also part of *urban sketchers* (USK), a worldwide organisation which encourages drawing on location, and ran workshops and lectures at the USK Symposium held in Manchester, England in 2016. With his architectural background, his interest in the built environment, and way of conveying a sense of place through drawing, Richard co-runs a course called Street Life Studies: Cambodia, at the faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales in Sydney. This course encourages students to use drawing as a tool to understand and compare public spaces in both Sydney and Phnom Penh in Cambodia. As a past director of Emergency Architects Australia (EAA), Richard also has a strong interest in social and community based projects. He has worked on projects in Timor-Leste and spent a year working in the field as part of a rehabilitation and reconstruction program for over 100 schools in the Solomon Islands. This grassroots experience focused on the construction of a prototype school, which won the International category at the 2010 Australian Timber Design awards and the World Architecture Community award in 2011. This varied range of experience enables Richard to cross the boundaries between, architecture, art and community based design, with collaboration being a key driver in how projects and ideas are realised.

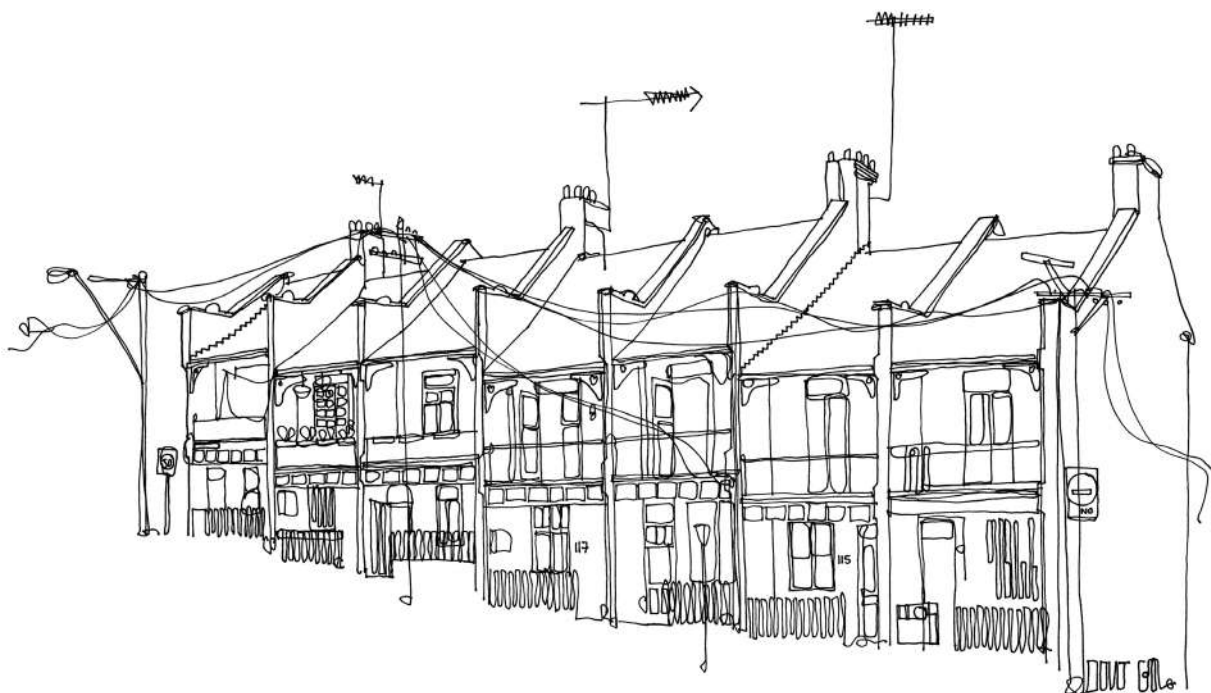
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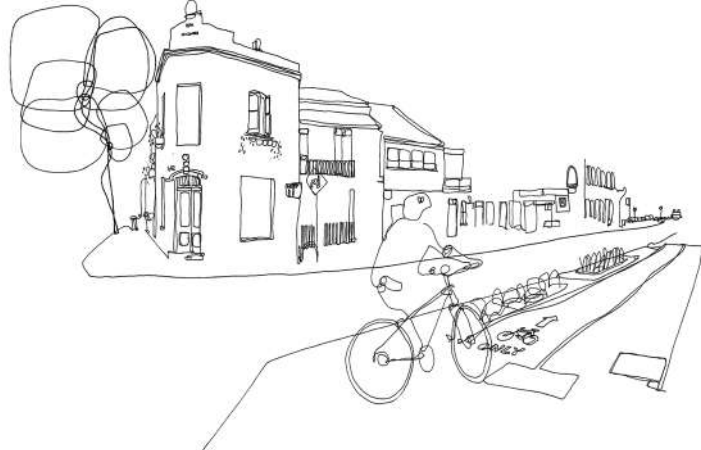
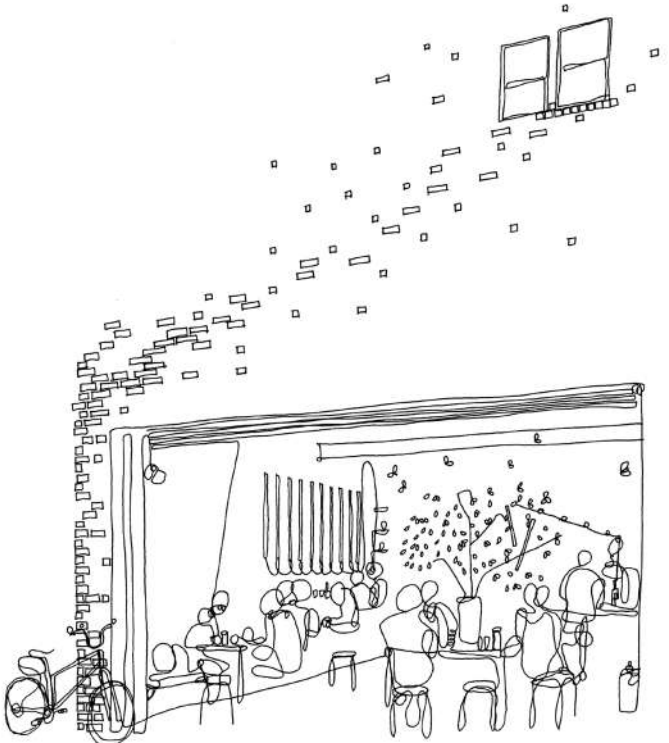


Surry Hills Survey 2005 - ongoing

The area of Surry Hills in Sydney has undergone significant change and gentrification over the last decade, and I have been documenting this shift through my practice of drawing. My interest in the area originally stemmed from the diversity in building typology in both scale, materiality, and the differing streetscapes that created different types of public space. I was interested in capturing the sense of place and was captivated by how a typical two up, two down terrace can be next to an old seven storey industrial warehouse which has since been turned a shop, then a cafe and then a pop up clothing store. This diversity and type of change meant that some areas were always in flux but others were static and this dynamic is of great interest when thinking about the nature of the streetscape. One aspect that I was also interested in was the role of the trees in the area both from a climate control and streetscape point of view. They enhance the streets, and are a key characteristic of the area that provide rest bite from the summer heat and winter rain.



Using drawing as a tool to explore public space



In 2014 I was invited by the City of Sydney to exhibit this ongoing work in the Surry Hills library as part of an overall theme of 'endangered areas' within the city; places that through gentrification could lose their identity and character. Through this theme I focused my drawing work on what I thought was worth retaining and what made the place interesting and completed a series of drawings that told a story from a cultural, social, historical and political point of view. Over 100 individual drawings formed a larger mural that was displayed in the foyer of the library. This abstract map represented my own personal view on Surry Hills and was solely based on my immersion within the community. The key aim of the exhibition was to start a wider discussion on what the local community thought was interesting about the area, what was important and what defined its characteristic, and a series of workshops were held to establish this. The local participants would draw over and add to my sketches of the area, with the aim to tell a wider story and start a dialogue about memory and future aspirations and needs for the area of Surry Hills.

This project is currently ongoing, and I have started to collaborate with other local groups that are also telling stories about the place with the overriding aim that the streets, parks, architecture and culture of the area is not lost to insensitive development.



Using drawing as a tool to explore public space

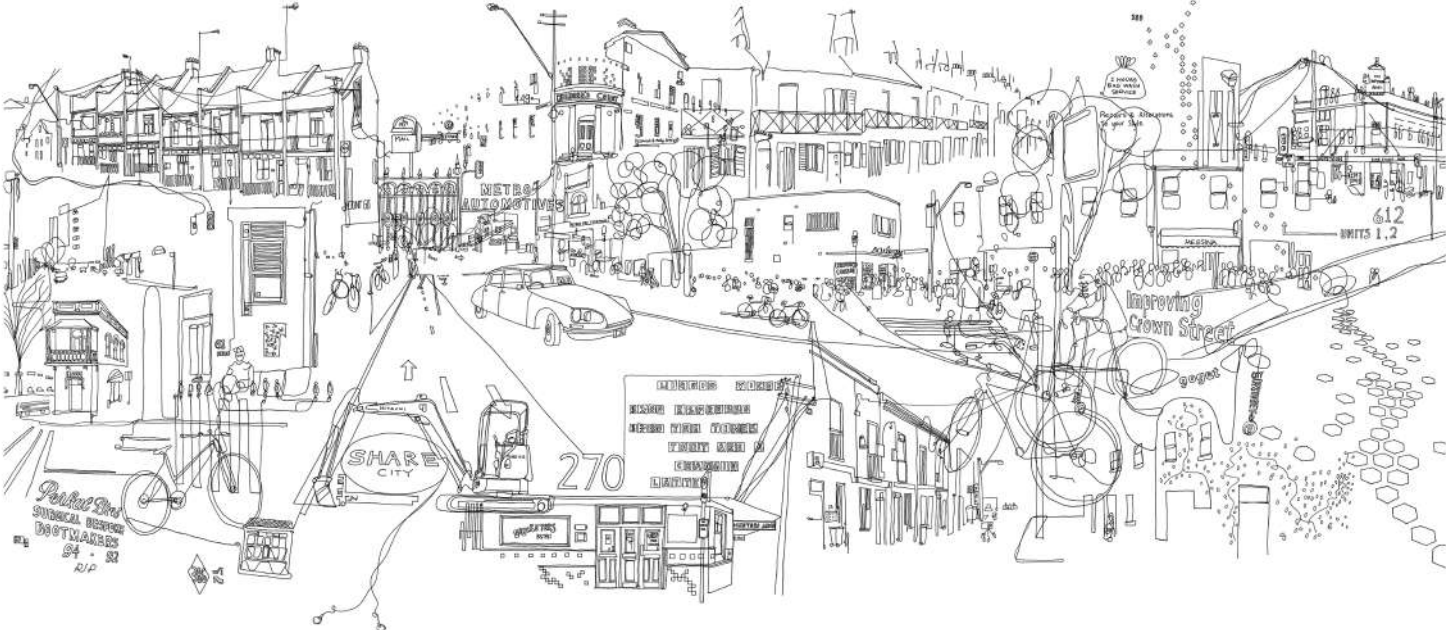


Photo credit:Victoria Johnstone



Photo credit: Amanda Sun



Urban sketching

2005 - ongoing

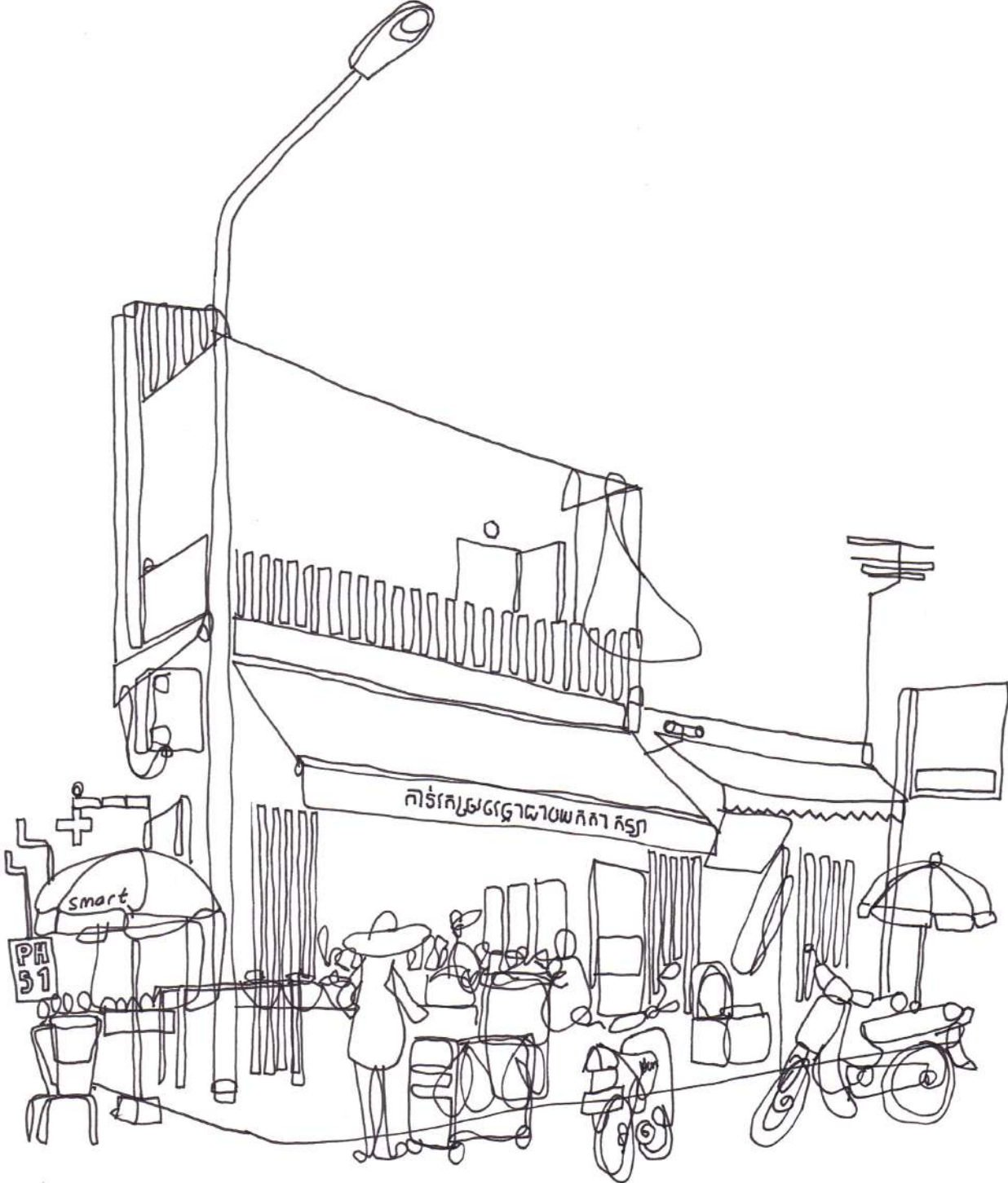
Drawing on location can help to understand how public space is used, how a city works and what makes a place interesting or unique. This approach to observing and documenting urban landscapes is an approach that I have utilised in many places around the world. I am part of a worldwide organisation called 'urban sketchers', which provides an opportunity to teach this approach in workshops both in Sydney and Internationally. In 2016 I ran workshops at the Urban Sketchers International Symposium in Manchester, England. During these workshops I encouraged participants to think about the "why" and the "what" when drawing. Not only from a public space point of view, but also how they can tell a valid story through drawing. A good example of how this approach can develop a better understanding of place over a relatively short period of time, are drawings completed in Phnom Penh, Cambodia completed in 2015 and 2017.

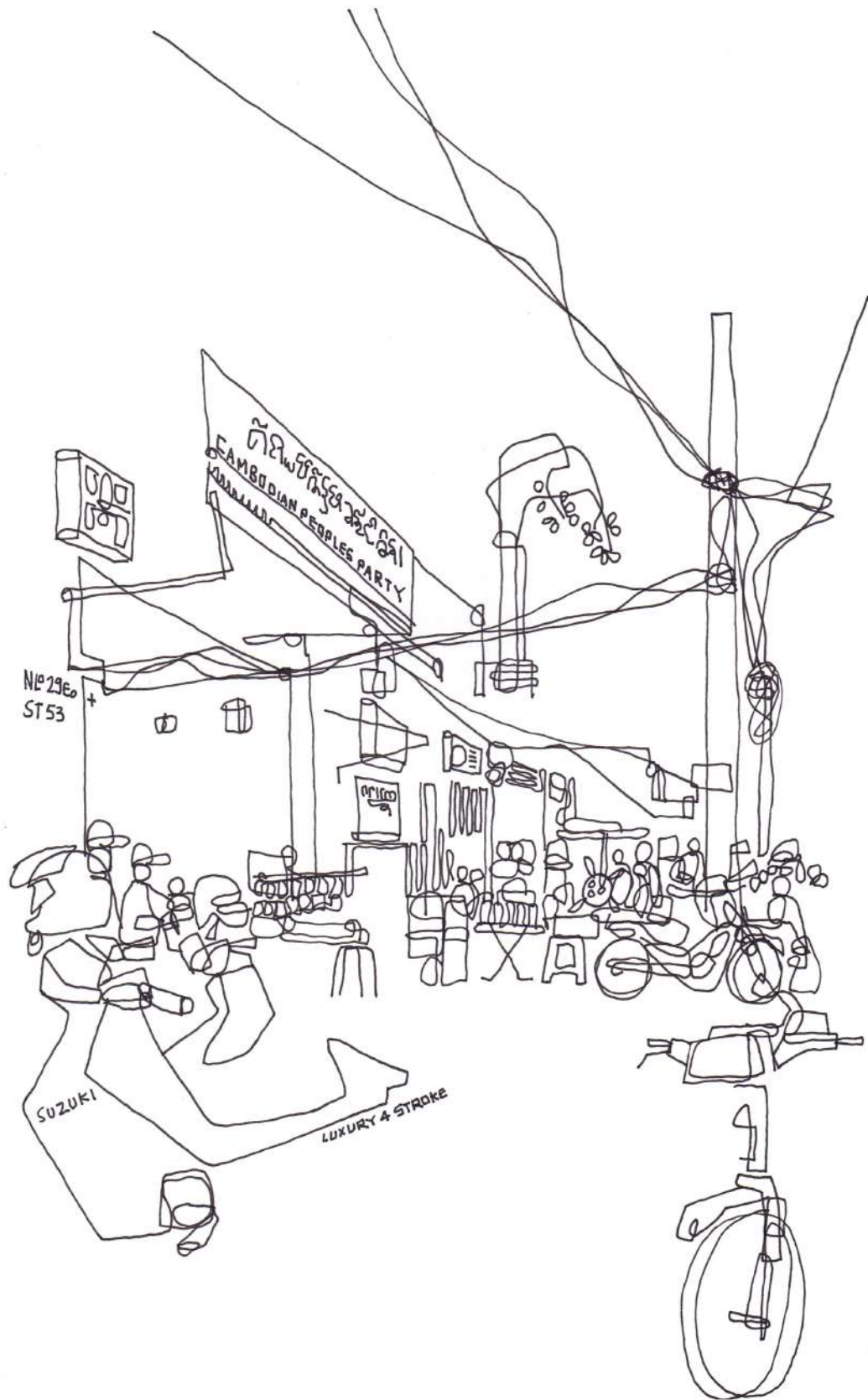
These were done in conjunction with a short elective course run annually for the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of New South Wales, Sydney called 'Street Life Studies: Cambodia'. I am part of team of professionals that guide students through a process of observation and drawing on location, with the aim of developing small scale interventions that would improve the public realm. This series of drawings was completed to provide examples to students, focusing elements which make the streets of Phnom Penh interesting. Students also experiment with graphic treatment to emphasise how people are using the spaces on the streets, or to focus in on important aspects that give the streets vitality.

This series of drawings also demonstrates the value of having a message behind a sketch with the aim to tell a story, whether it be social, political, cultural or environmental.



Photo credit: Vicki Hon Briggs







City network mural 2017

I was commissioned by the Naked Duck café group, who are based in Sydney to produce a 25m long mural that would occupy a public foyer in one of Sydney's office towers. With over 3,000 people passing through the space on an average day, I was interested in exploring the relationship between the office workers and the café itself, one being somewhat dependent upon the other on a day to day basis. The focus of the mural was to celebrate the users of the tower, and how they travelled to work through the city. It was also an opportunity to conceptually think about moving through the cityscape. You catch glimpses of parks, buildings, streets, and people which can add a cinematic quality to an everyday journey. A short simple survey was distributed to all users of the café asking questions about their journey to work; point of origin, what mode of transport was used, and what were the landmarks (obvious or less obvious) that stood out along the way. Using this data over a two week period, I became a city commuter and followed all the journeys from the surveys (over 150 were received) on trains, boats, buses bikes and cars.

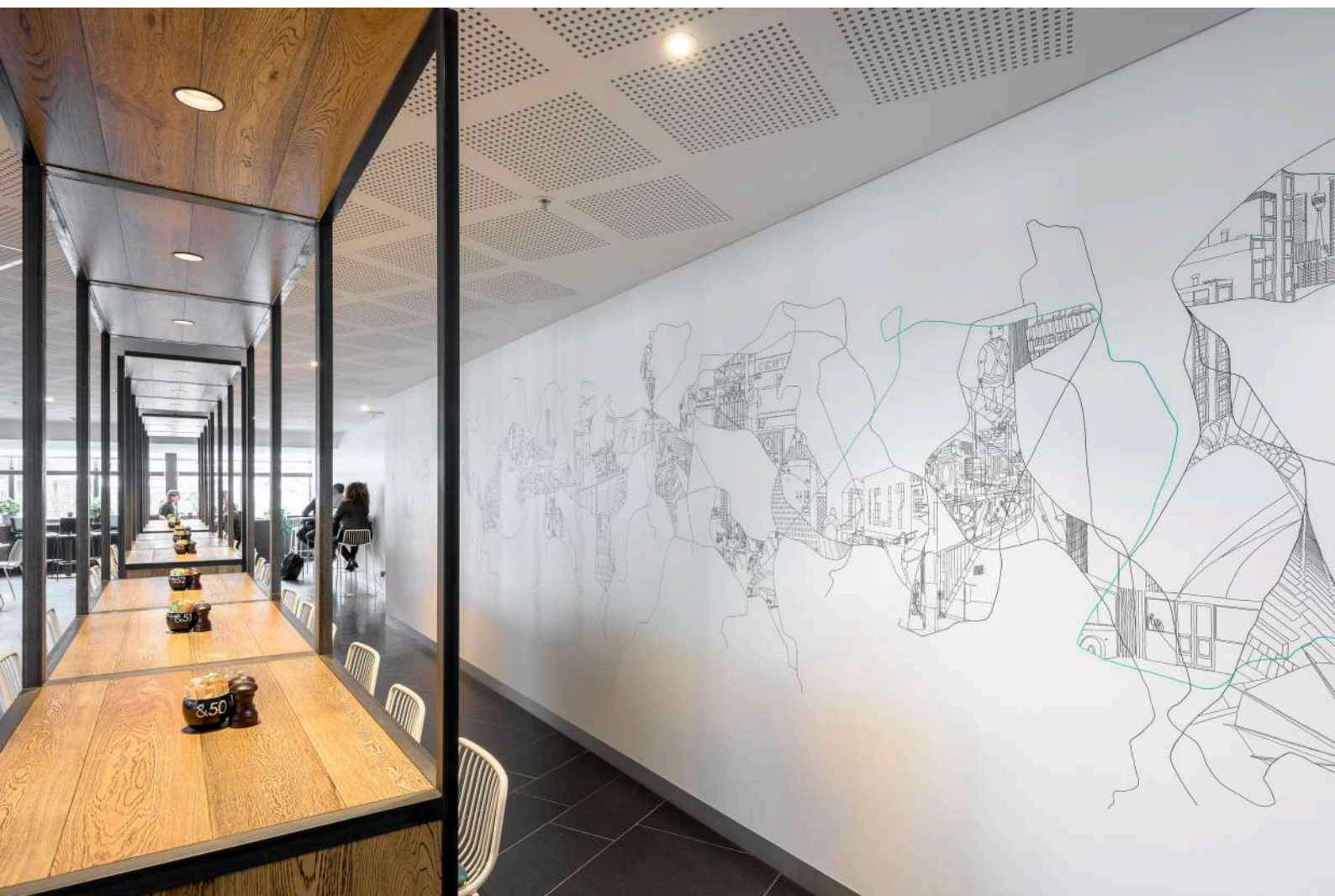
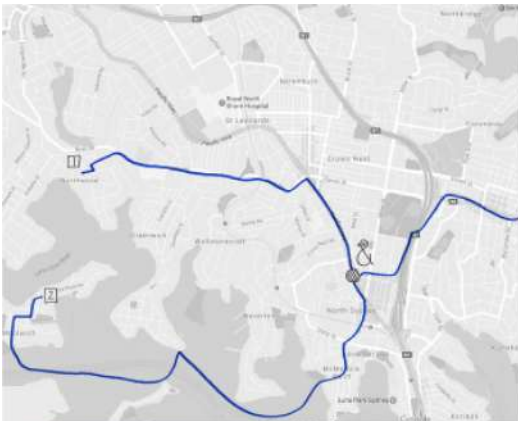
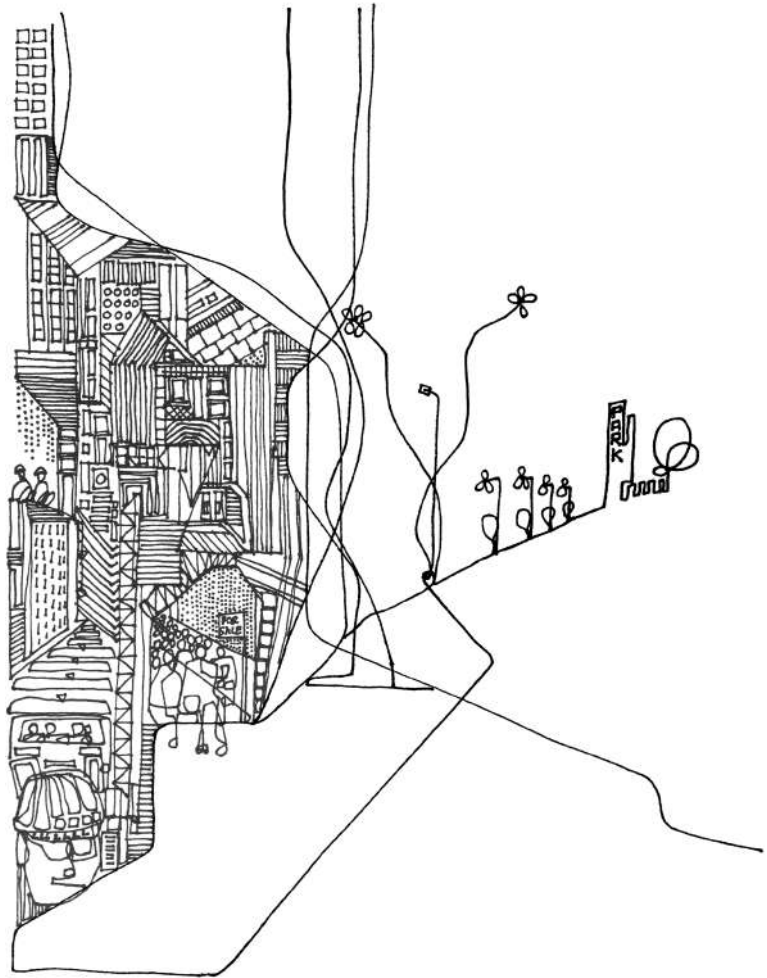
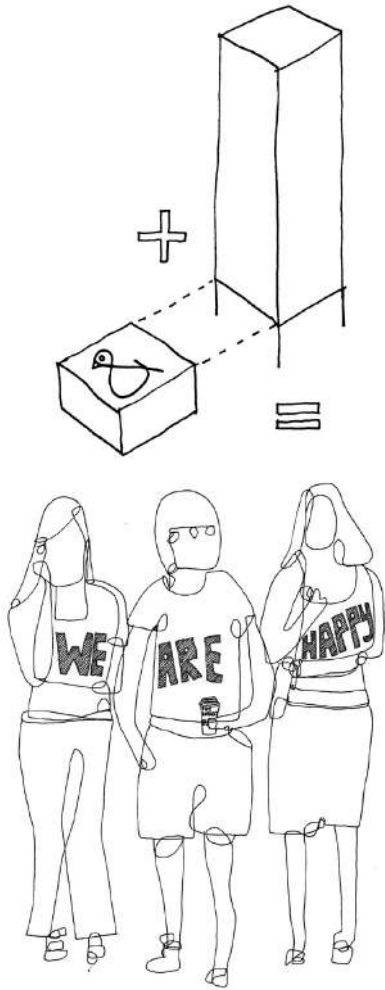


Photo credit: Ben Guthrie

Using drawing as a tool to explore public space



On these journeys, which enabled a greater understanding on how the city operates daily, I documented through drawing landmarks that were highlighted on the surveys, as well and other points of interest. A combination of over 150 individual drawings, some of which simple and some more detailed, I was able to 'stitch and overlay' these together to form an abstract mural. The journey routes were mapped out and were used to form an organic line work for the mural, with the pockets where these lines intersected and crossed filled with details from the journey drawings. This playful use of density and space through linework related directly to the experience of moving and 'slicing' through the city scape, whether it be on a train, bus, a bike or on foot.

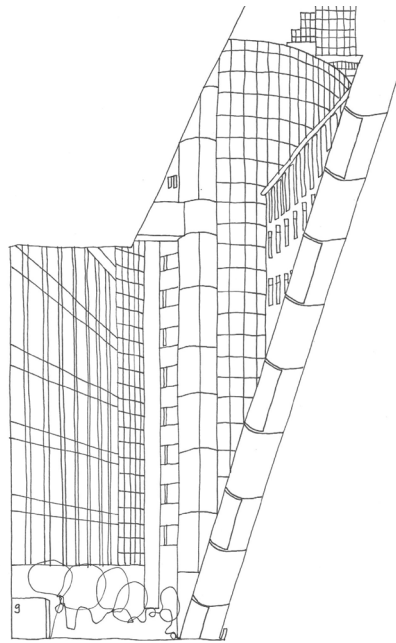
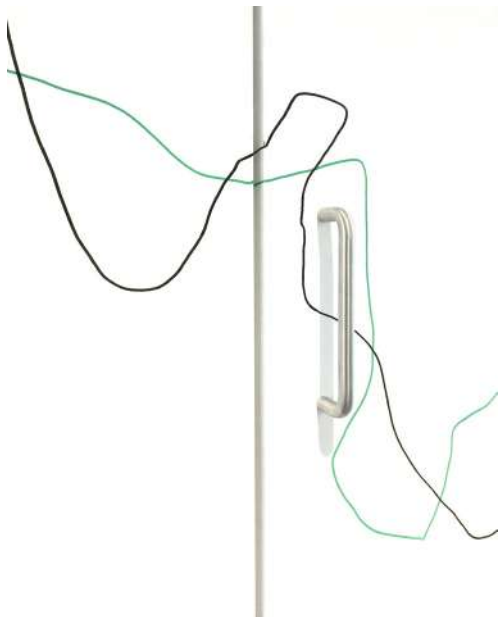
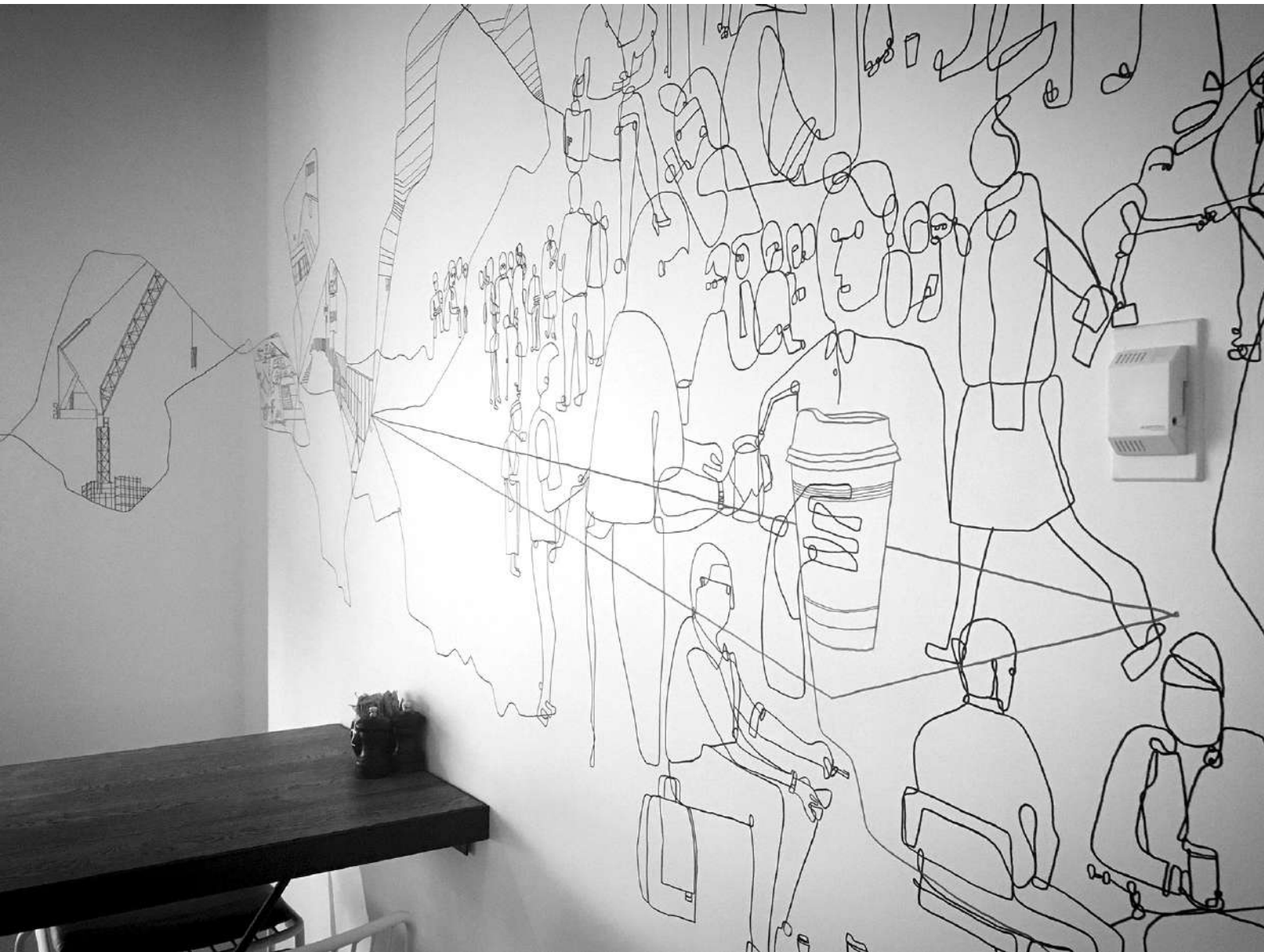


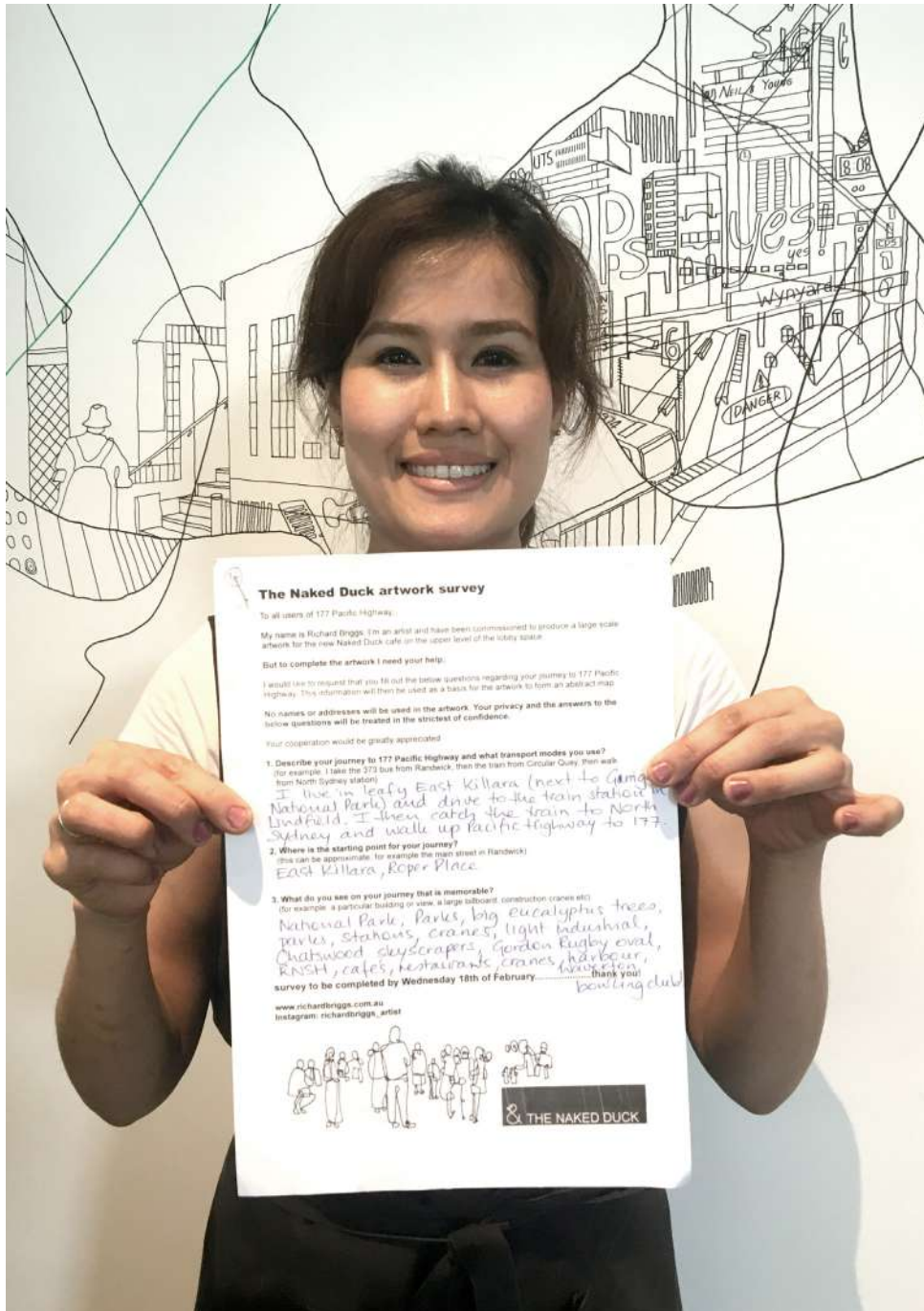
Photo credit: Ben Guthrie









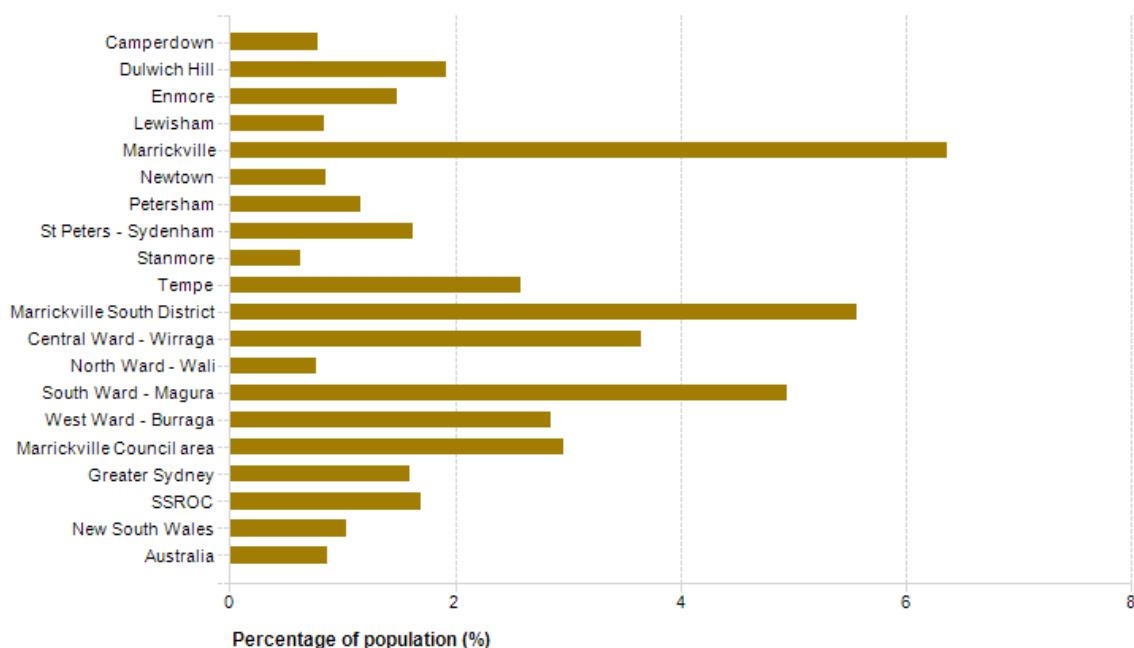


Marrickville garage door 2015

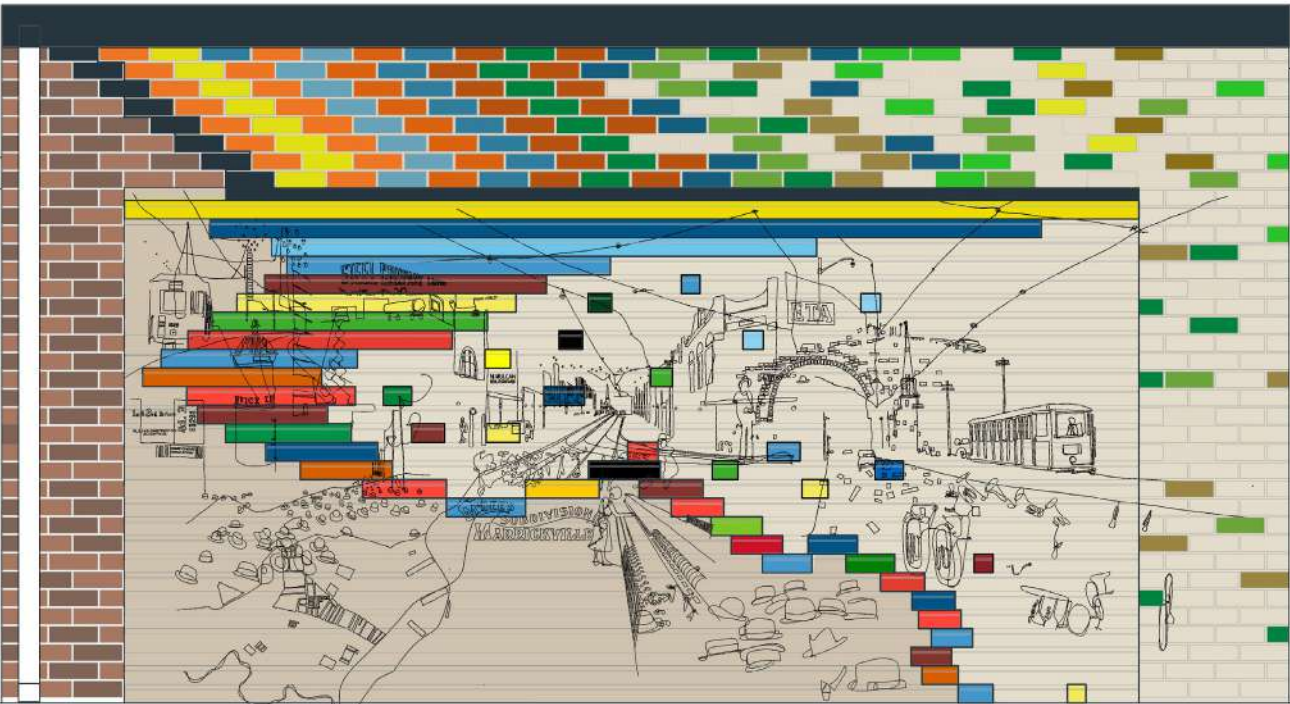
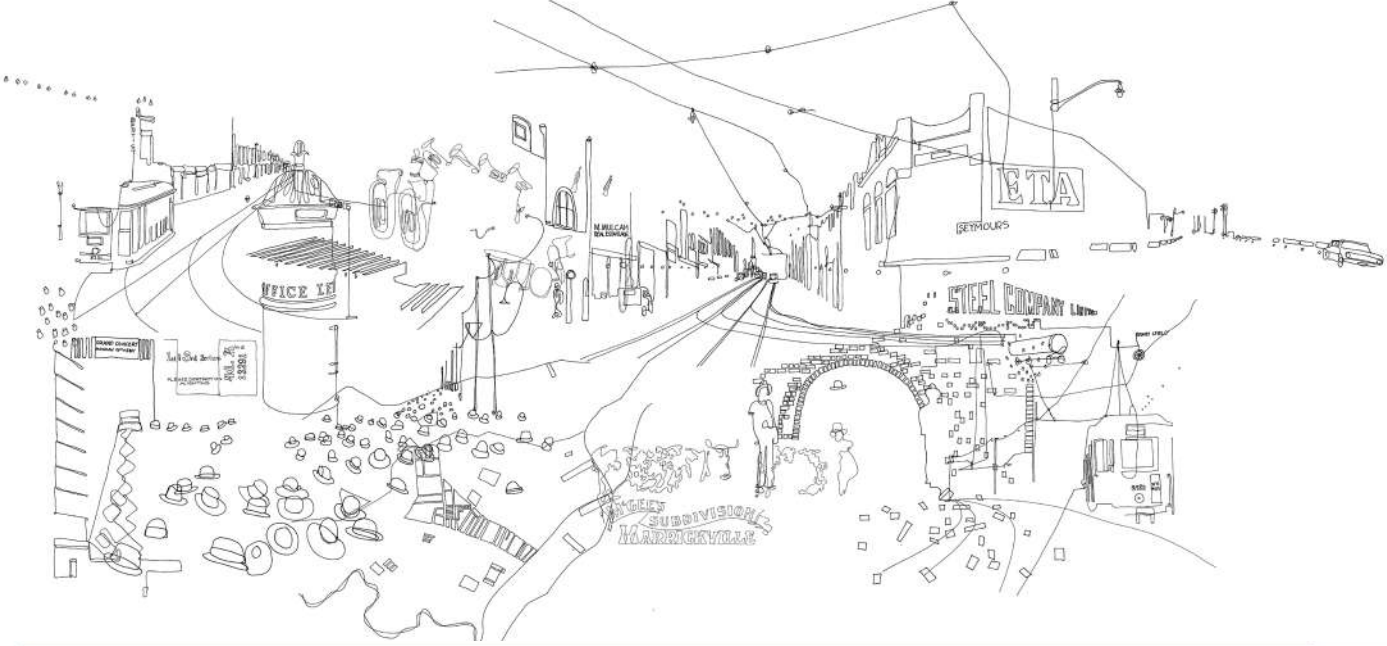
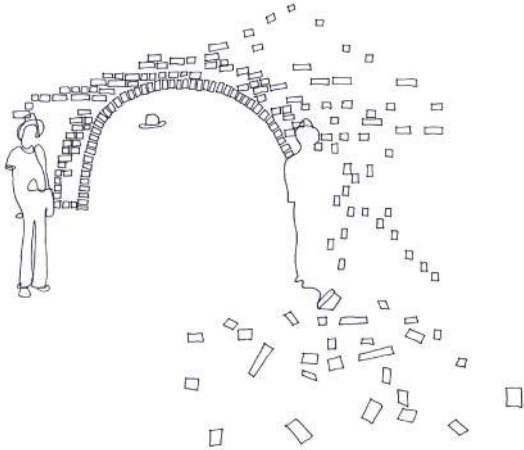
This public artwork on a private garage door in a laneway in Marrickville, Sydney was done as part a Council run initiative called the perfect match mural program. The aim of the program is that Council teams up with local residents, identifying areas where unwanted tagging is prominent. These walls, and in this case a garage door, are given to a range of local artists each year as 'canvases' which then become public art. This legalised and permanent art is usually respected by all and in many cases has been a successful program. This garage door was donated as a 'canvas' by a local resident, who like myself was interested in the demographic of the area which is home to over 51 different nationalities. Using data collection from the national census (2010), I mapped out each different nation in terms of the population in the local council area. This generated a population graphic, with the colours selected being a representation of each nation's flag. The longer the coloured line, the larger the population of that particular nation (3mm represented one person). These coloured bands, also spill over onto the brick work with a patterning that reflects the market gardens in the area. The linework over the top of the coloured bands tell the stories of the past industries of the area, such as steelworks, tram networks, potteries, and farming. This formed a dialogue between past and current, using two different graphical approaches. The holistic idea was that the garage door could be added to over time to frame any changes in demographic as each census is completed, so it becomes a live and ongoing representation of the cultural diversity of the area. The garage door after 4 years has not been tagged, whilst those without artwork on them have, proving the worth of the council run program.

People born in Vietnam, 2011

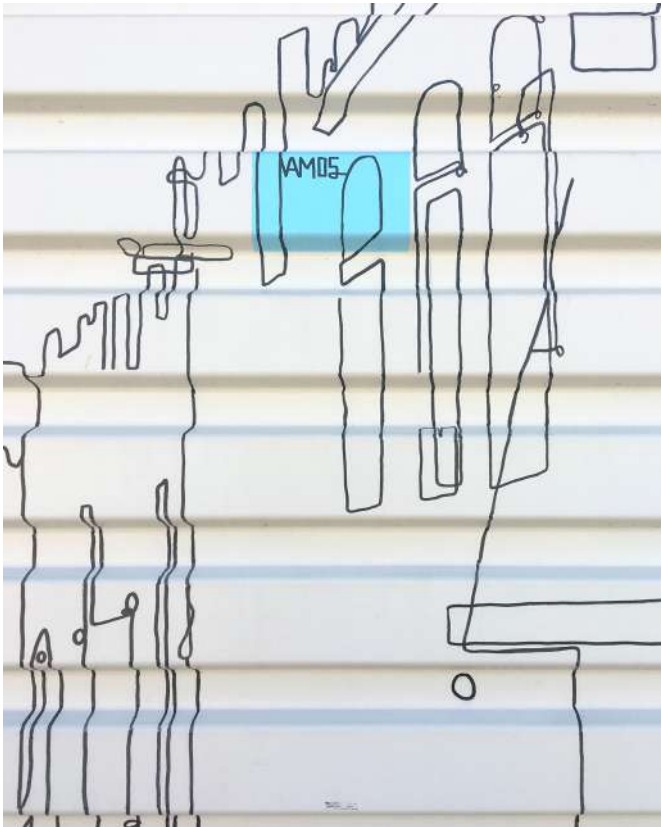
■ Marrickville Council area

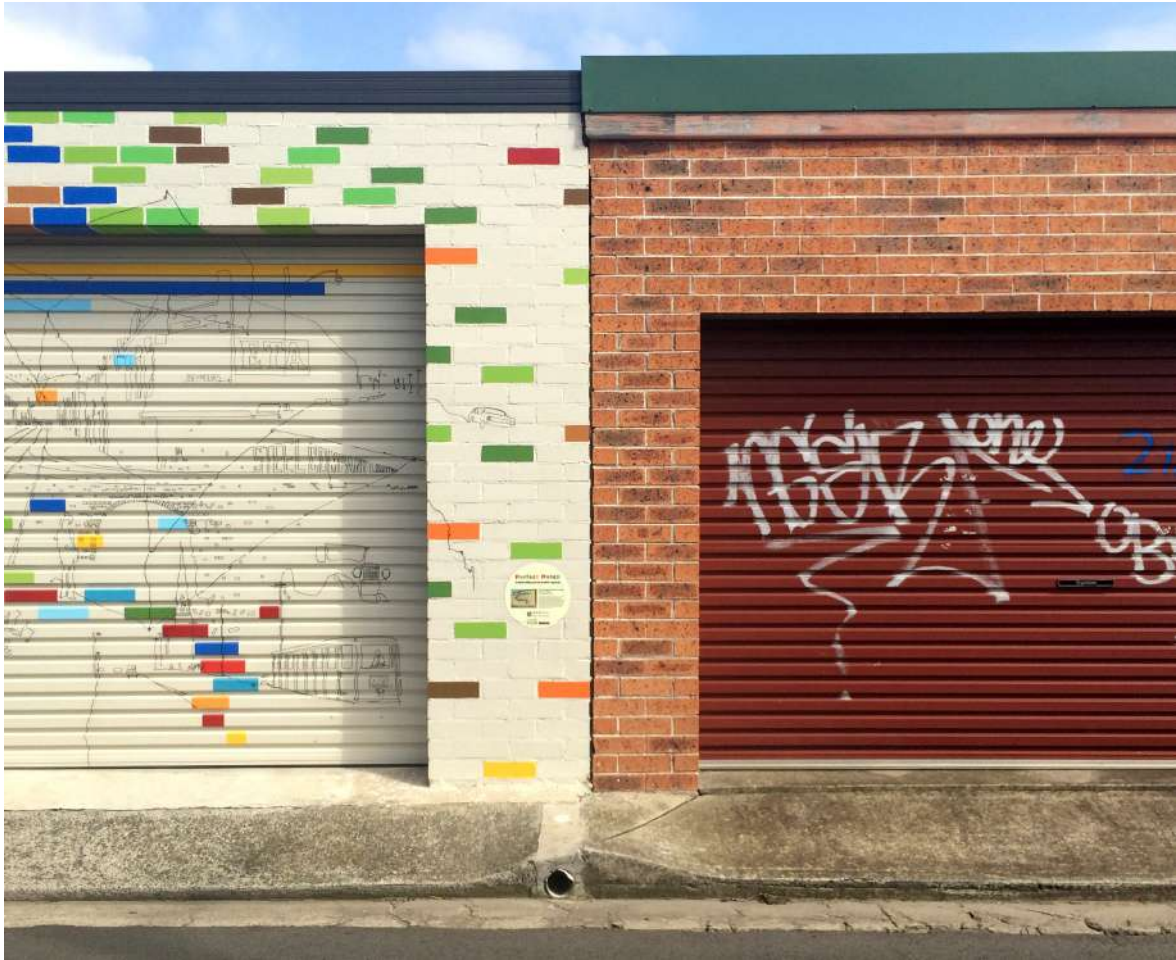


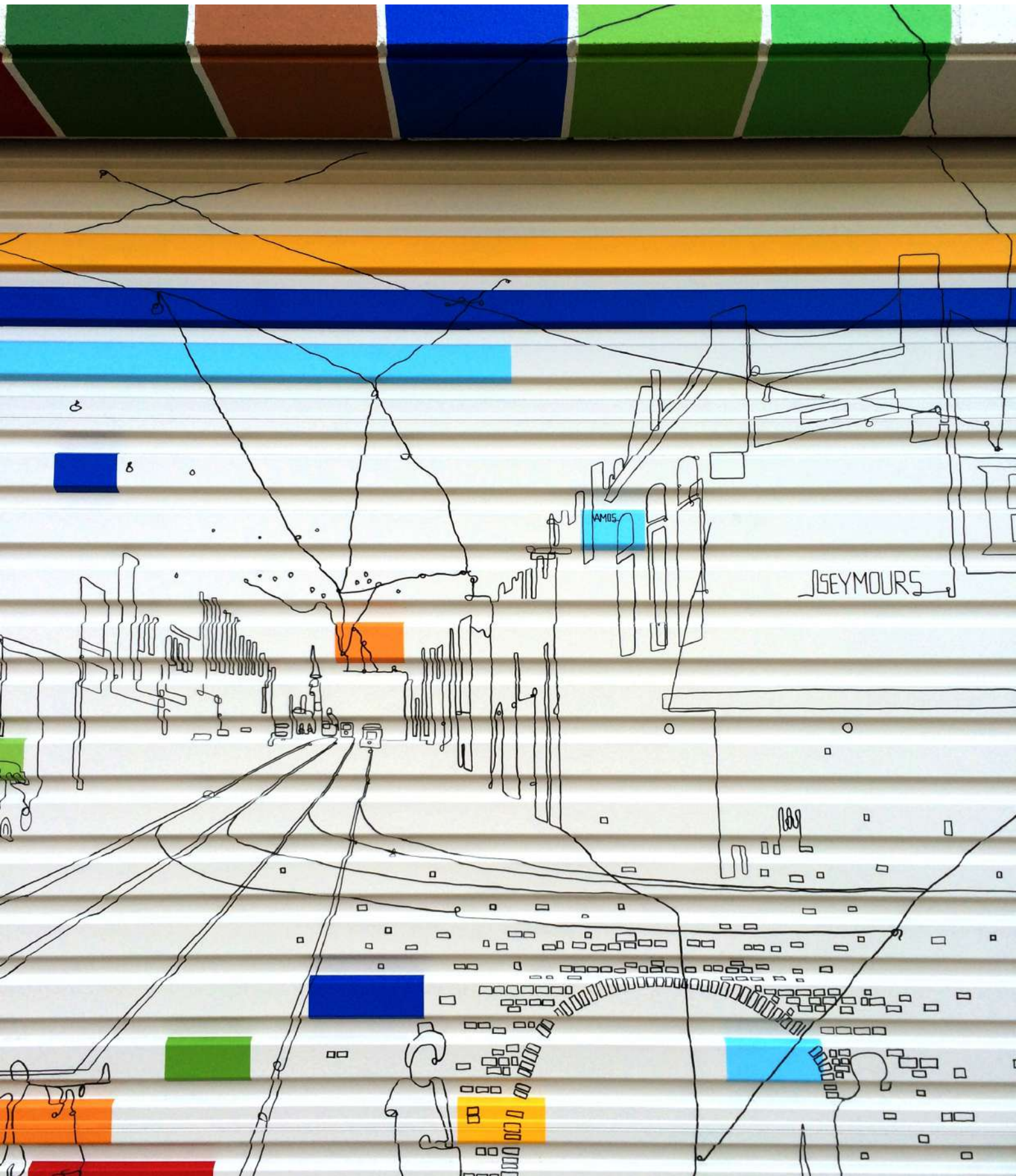
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2011 (Enumerated data)
Compiled and presented in atlas.id by .id, the population experts.











Elizabeth lane art incubator

2017- ongoing

This is an ongoing project that, from a public space point of view, plays on the idea of surprise and intrigue with art located in unusual places. Elizabeth lane in Redfern in Sydney sits at the back of a residential and industrial streets, with many unwanted items discarded and left abandoned. Thinking about these objects, I'm interested to try to give them one last lease of life before they head to their final destination (usually a waste disposal unit) by drawing onto the surfaces. It also starts to talk about how in this modern-day society items are discarded with such ease as opposed to trying to repurpose and recycle. The drawings on the items, which can be anything from microwave ovens, to chairs to suitcases, take on the form of patterns, lines, and words. The latter, borrowed from songs, relate to what's going on in the world both politically and socially, with the aim being if people stop to read the words they provide a message or ask a question related to world issues. All drawings on the items are done completely insitu, then left to their own devices. Sometimes they are gone within the hour, sometimes they remain for weeks. This laneway is also home to two other public art concepts I have; one being drawing on small timber tiles, that are left within the context. When taken out of the context, they provide a memory of where they once existed. The other experimental idea I have is using painter's tape as a medium to form simple line drawings. These tape drawings provide a temporary response to the immediate context through shapes and patterns. All these approaches are experimental, with the idea that the laneway acts as an art incubator for trying out different ideas, all of which aim to slow down the pace at which the people move through the laneway.



Photo credit: Louise Shackleton

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