

Exclusive Lifestyle Health & wellness Architecture

From blah to bloody gorgeous: How a Newtown street corner became a happiness hub



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Newtown's Dr Laurel Hixon has spent her life trying to improve aged care and health policy, and now she is doing her bit to bring joy and beauty to a corner of her local neighbourhood by commissioning a 100 square metre artwork on the side of her Victorian terrace.

The newly completed mural by artist Sonia van de Haar, the creative director of Lymesmith, echoes the shapes and colours of the inner-city suburb.



Newtown resident Laurel Hixon commissioned artist Sonia van de Haar to paint the entire side of her house as a mural. **DION GEORGOPOULOS**

“I really love it,” said Annie Laerkesen, an artist who lives nearby. “It makes me feel so grateful when I go past.”

Locals stopped to admire the colours and shapes of the artwork on the corner of Watkin and Wilson in Newtown over the weekend. Connections and introductions were made among residents, like Laerkesen and Hixon, who may have otherwise remained strangers.

Hixon describes it as “spontaneous community building”. The mural was an antidote to the glum days of COVID and her reaction to Donald Trump’s presidency, said Hixon, an American academic and policy expert who moved to Australia in 2006 after working on health policy in the Clinton White House and for the Brookings Institution.

“I wanted nothing more than to make people happy,” she said of the work she funded at an undisclosed cost. The result has her giddy with joy. “Nothing else has made me this happy, other than the birth of my son.”



Newtown resident Laurel Hixon commissioned artist Sonia Van de Haar to paint the entire side of her house as a mural. DION GEORGOPOULOS

The only “joyless part” was the “unduly bureaucratic and expensive” process of getting approval from the City of Sydney to paint a mural on the side of her home that is in a heritage area.

“Because I used to be in health and public policy, I have always been interested in the built environment and the impact on public health and well-being,” said Hixon.

“And I am kind of like, ‘Don’t you get this? This is going to make people happy. Happy people are healthy people.’”

She sees her corner as illustrating how the arts and the built environment come together. “You can have improvements in health and wellbeing when you have beautiful buildings and beautiful art.”

In February, British Medical Journal *The Lancet* wrote about [the growing body of evidence showing art could improve health, and prevent and manage illness](#). Because of social change and uncertainty including the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an “ever-increasing need” for interventions to address health inequalities, mental illness, loneliness, and isolation.

The arts were also cost-effective. The Australia Council for the Arts says it can also provide “returns on investment across health services and social care, helping meet major challenges such as ageing, loneliness, chronic conditions and mental health”

Van de Haar and Hixon started discussing the project during the pandemic in 2021. Hixon’s brief was: “I love this neighbourhood, I love my neighbours, and I just want someone to smile when they walk down the street.”

Van de Haar said the mural had taken Hixon's home "from bland to beautiful, beige to blue, and from blah to bloody gorgeous."

The mural was named Arc Angel by van de Haar, a play on the *angle* of its corner location and *angel*.



Sonia van de Haar looks out of a window on the mural she designed for Laurel Hixon in Newtown. JULIA CHARLES

"An angel is like a messenger. The work announces the intersection saying, here is a place where people intersect, gather, and it makes that experience joyful, beautiful and uplifting."

To identify the right colours and develop the design, van de Haar, an architectural colour specialist, walked the neighbourhood looking at colours and shapes. She was also inspired by Hixon's home, which included prints by the famous colourist and artist, Josef Albers.

"Colour is a connective element," said van de Haar. "And across a city, a room, if there is repetition or pattern, our brains recognise that pattern and enjoy it."

Van de Haar has been overwhelmed by the positive response. "People tell me they are crossing the bridge [from the north shore] in the city to see it," she said.

A spokesperson for the City of Sydney said the council encouraged high-quality art like Hixon's in private developments. "On a wall prone to graffiti, this work will enhance the architectural form of the building and the cultural richness of the city."

The approval process involved checking that the artwork was in keeping with the unique character of the heritage conservation area and contributed to the public domain.

During the approval process, staff sought feedback from neighbours, and asked questions about the maintenance and lifespan of the mural.

Hixon said the wall had been finished with a special coating to make it easier to remove graffiti.

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