



Astrah Howard (right) showing her Village Voices wall. Image credit: Katherine Griffiths, City of Sydney.

Giving a Voice to the Village

Got something to say about living in Surry Hills or life in general? There's a place where everyone can read it.

Words by **Lachlan Colquhoun**

On the wall of a laneway off South Crown Street is an innovative public art project which tells the stories of Surry Hills, as authored by its residents.

Village Voices is the creation of Astrah Howard, who combines a unique career in social services in Surry Hills with a career as an artist, which has taken her from the UK to France, the USA, China and Vietnam.

Over that time she developed the idea of "action research" to drive her work, a combination of observation, activation, collaboration and recording which has found new form with Village Voices.

The work is a changeable sign board, a little like those used by churches or cinemas to post their messages or advertise features.

In this more secular context it is used as a vehicle for the stories of individual Surry Hills writers and authors, and also for stories created through collaborative

workshops Howard takes with various groups around the area. They range from homeless youth seeking refuge in shelters, to long term residents of public housing.

The stories can be about anything, as long as they fit the format of 30 characters per line over six lines.. It's a different type of urban haiku.

Some of them have been dark and poetic. Others have a strong narrative while others are obscure. While most have been serious in tone so far, there might be some comedy coming up soon

"I'm looking to have a mix of stories and narratives from every walk of life," says Howard.

"I want different ages, backgrounds, and also for this to be a way for people who might not have an opportunity to have their voices heard. It's all about getting a diversity of stories."

Located on a wall on the Wilshire Through Link off South Crown Street, the first Village Voice story went up in September 2016, written by local writer and dancer Coralie Hinkley.

Now, Howard aims to change the story every two months, a task which takes her about five hours and inevitably draws a crowd.

Already there are ideas about how the idea can be developed further. The changing of the stories could become a regular event, almost like a ceremony, with spoken word performances (there are plans for one during the Surry Hills Festival in September).

There are also plans for an author gathering, where people who have written the stories or collaborated in creating them can meet and exchange ideas.

Beyond that, there are suggestions for a spin off publication, with the stories both photographed and in the handwriting of the authors. Then there is the fact that Village Voices doesn't have a social media presence, as yet.

The City of Sydney, which funds the project, is committed to Village Voices as a four year pilot, after which it could become a permanent feature in the area.

For that to happen, locals need to continue to engage with the project, both as authors and readers.

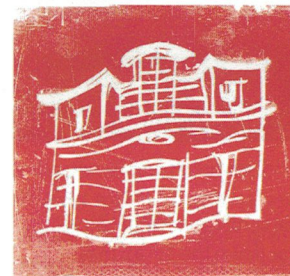
"On the day I do the change people hang around and watch me and comment," she says.

"It makes me understand that people really are responding to it, and that people have really taken this on as part of the community.

"I get emails about it and people stop me in the street to talk about it. Whenever I stop past and even look at it I'm often joined by someone wanting a conversation about it."



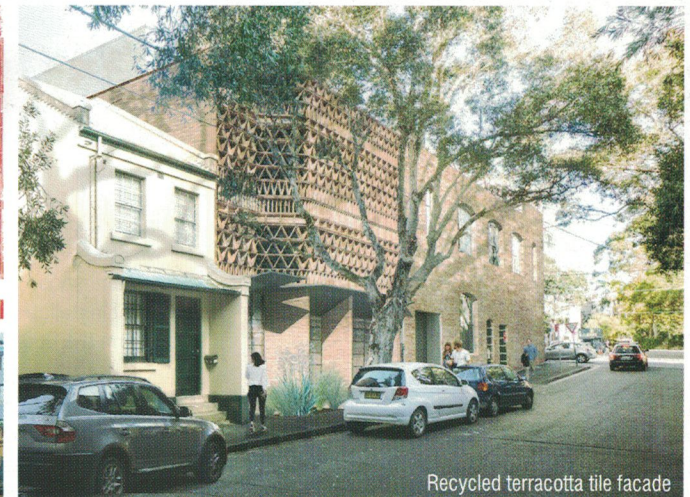
Submissions for Village Voices can be made to a dropbox at the Surry Hills Library on Crown Street. There is a proposal to put a dropbox at the Wilshire Through Link site, so watch that space.



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