

NEWCASTLE'S LIGHTBULB MOMENT

A hi-tech urban activation with an eye for the past.

Story: Christopher Holder

Newcastle City Council had a bright idea. The buzz term is 'urban activation' — taking a part of town that's a bit down at the mouth and give people a reason to stroll it, dine in it, and enjoy it.

Watt St. is Newcastle's oldest. In fact, before it was a thoroughfare for coal to go from mine to wharf, it was an important track for the local indigenous people. In the 1950s and '60s the area was buzzing. The Great Northern Hotel had a ballroom that was heaving on the weekends and it was a community hub. In more recent times it had less and less going for it.

Newcastle was attracting funding from a variety of sources to draw tourism and bring more life into the city, and it took one bright spark to suggest the Council pool all the pots of cash to do something extra special.

And so it was: City Evolutions... a Vivid Festival of sorts where the neighbourhood's history would be writ large on the walls and buildings of Watt St. with projectors.

WRITING ON THE WALL

The project went out to tender with two organisations sharing the spoils — Esem Projects and University of Newcastle.

Esem Projects had runs on the board. Michael Killalea and his creative partner Sarah Barns have been pivotal in Sydney's Art & About public art experience for the last two years. Esem Projects' forté is historically focussed public artworks — precisely what Newcastle City Council was after. But not in a staid, stodgy way — the council wanted something live, interactive, and contemporary as well as historically significant.

The uni team put its mind to creating interactive works that would, again, focus on the history of the area, while Esem Projects created a number of archival pieces that were drawn from the National Film & Sound Archive, Film Australia etc. As well as moving collage pieces from photographic records.

DigitalSignage spoke Esem Projects' Michael Killalea about the technical challenges of pulling together a project like this.

Michael Killalea: There are 10 installations — four from Esem Projects and six from the university. City Evolutions is tipped to be long running — two years is the outlook at the moment — and it's running around four hours a night. We needed very robust technology solutions that didn't require someone to check on it or turn it off and on every day. Personally, I don't trust wifi controls, especially not for such a long stretch of street and over such a long period of time — it's not the answer in my opinion. I did a lot of my own investigations and, based on previous experience, I wanted projectors that would turn themselves off and on without misfiring, and with timing that was rock solid. After a lot of research I ended up finding this great G Series range of Epson projector and I've specific Epson for the whole project.



(Above & Below): Two of Esem Projects' City Evolutions installations, projected onto Watt Street's historical buildings. (Left) The University of Newcastle's interactive Laneway Dancefloor.



City Evolutions:
cityevolutions.com
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www.esemprojects.com
Epson: (02) 8899 3666 or
www.epson.com.au
IDT (Brightsign): 1300 666 099
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RELIABLE & PRACTICAL

DigitalSignage: Epson is better known for its small- and medium-format projectors and not for ultra-high brightness outdoor projectors.

MK: And the Epson G Series maxes out at about 6000 lumen. But we didn't need a Barco or Christie monster because the ambient lighting is low, in fact, the council turns off the street lamps during the period the projectors are on. What's more, we couldn't afford the upkeep of massive projectors over a long period.

DigitalSignage: You mentioned not wanting to use wifi. How did you configure the hardware?

MK: It was a fairly intense installation process. We had to have high-quality, well-made cases that would keep the temperature stable, keep the bad guys out and keep the public safe. We also had all the DA hoops to jump through when fixing projects to the exterior of buildings, some of which were heritage listed.

But I've always found these types of jobs bring out the best in a local community. I always seem to end up with a pocketful of keys to people's houses or businesses, and everyone is very accommodating and trusting. It's great working with a council and gaining an insight into the city. Whatever city it is.

REAL TURN ON

DigitalSignage: So how did you program the content and ensure it's working day in/day out?

MK: Okay, I'll fess up: I load the loop of my content onto a Brightsign media player, which talks to the Epson projector via HDMI. The media player is always on, looping 24/7. Then I simply program the projector to power up at 5.30pm and power down at 10pm. While the projector is on, it's playing the content. I concede that it's not the 'smartest' tech solution but my first priority is reliability. If I was relying on wifi to turn hardware on and then schedule content, I'd be worried that one night it'd drop out and fall over. It's called risk mitigation!

DigitalSignage: What happens in the event of a power cut?

MK: Both the media player and the projector would power up when the electricity returned and automatically start looping again.

The solid state Brightsign player is awesome — it's a great product. Anything that you can turn on and it just goes on — with no menu to toggle through — is good. If there's a black out it can reset *itself*.

Meanwhile, you can treat these Epson projectors quite mean. I could shut the projector off without any cool down. I could turn it on and they'd go on directly. They have built-in scheduling on the bigger models. The new G series is awesome. They go up to about 6000 lumen and when they're as bright as the Z series they'll be even better. You can shoot on curved walls, shoot into corners and make them square... this project demonstrates only the tip of the iceberg as to what they're capable of. Really good-looking projectors.

ACTIVATION SUCCESSFUL

June 21 saw the launch of City Evolutions and it was an instant hit. Council estimates 18,000 people flooded the Watt St. area. Locals have adopted the project as their own while City Evolutions is ticking tourism boxes as well.

How will City Evolutions evolve? Already the council is asking for submissions from filmmakers and other content creators. The uni involvement means dozens of local students are already hard at work developing material. And, inevitably, Michael's routines will make way for new artwork. And that's okay, as the project finds its own rhythm and equilibrium, providing a stunning platform for emerging artists in a once no-go part of town. Perfect. 📍