

DUNEDIN DREAM BROKERAGE BUBBLES – LETTING LOOSE IN LOCKDOWN

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Dunedin Dream Brokerage is a local group of creative people and arts supporters who work to bring life into empty urban and retail environments through brokering a lively programme of art project occupation. We work with property owners, artists, individuals and community groups to broker the temporary use of space – be it public or commercial, empty or under-utilised – for the temporary occupation of creative projects. We support applications, negotiate with property owners and enjoy sharing our growing experience in successful audience engagement. The brokerage is coordinated by a broker and overseen by an advisory panel and a *hoe ākau* (smaller steering committee).

Dunedin Dream Brokerage aims to

- Support the work of artists and increase citizen engagement and local storytelling
- Reduce vacant space and activate the city's under-utilised buildings and spaces for creative purposes
- Deliver a lively and diverse programme of experiences and events that celebrate our city.¹

Originally a subsidiary of Wellington's Urban Dream Brokerage, a project devised by Letting Space and the Wellington Independent Arts Trust between 2012 and 2018,² Dunedin's brokerage was the only one of four satellite towns and cities to continue after Sophie Jerram and Mark Amery closed their project down in 2018. Celebrating over 40 activations, Dunedin's Dream Brokerage enables artist projects to reach a broad level of public engagement, with some celebrated examples reaching audiences in the thousands.

During the Covid-19 lockdown (25 March–8 June 2020), Dunedin Dream Brokerage experienced a raft of short-notice cancellations – mostly exhibition and performing arts projects connected to Dunedin's Fringe Festival – leaving an unscheduled absence of projects. While the CBD underwent hibernation, we identified new forms of public engagement as walkers visited suburban streets in increased numbers. Dunedin Dream Brokerage Bubbles grew from this opportunity.

We believe that creative people are an essential part of our community. Dunedin Dream Brokerage Bubbles wanted to support the creative community here in Ōtepoti (Dunedin), create visibility for artists living in our suburbs, and reinvigorate our under-utilised suburban spaces. A call went out through our community and art networks to find local artists in a number of clustered neighbourhoods to share what they had been doing during these months of social isolation.

Tracing popular walking routes through the suburbs, our broker Kate Schrader reached out to numerous business owners to see if they would consider their temporarily empty suburban shop windows as sites for local artworks. A few were asked to consider sponsoring the project (covering printing costs and a small *whakaaro* or fee for each selected artist).

While the project is still underway at the time of writing, engagement and feedback has been fantastic. Dunedin Dream Brokerage Bubbles is a hyperlocal pop-up project featuring the work of Dunedin artists, designers and writers in the windows of local shops. With the partnership of generous local organisations, Dunedin Dream Brokerage Bubbles connects the art community and local businesses, and asks us all to reflect on the “upside of the lockdown.” What connects us during this shared but isolating experience? What makes our neighbourhoods vibrant? And how do our creative local communities share their visions in ways that connect artists–viewers–business so as to help all generate a sense of belonging and shared experience?

We received five times more artworks than we could commission for our first suburb (North East Valley/Ōpoho/Signal Hill), and much social media praise. Walking audiences were encouraged to share images of our pop-up artworks on social media, with the hashtag #DDBubbles; common comments accompanying these images included “beautiful” and “fantastic!” Examples of works and artist statements follow.³



Figure 1. Craig Monk, *Practice Diary*. In situ, Inch Bar, Dunedin. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

Musician Craig Monk shared his notes and a photograph of his daily rehearsal, stating that “practice is an end in itself.”¹⁴ Game designer and digital illustrator Tom Garden sent us a haunting digital painting developed in front of a small online and live audience using game platform Twitch: “I have had a lot of spare time to paint lately. I try to make lemonade out of lemons so in this lockdown I decided to work on my online presence as a digital artist. I set up a Twitch stream and painted this live for the 4.5 viewers who attended.” Ironically, Garden’s painting has reached many more viewers in printed format in its new location in the window of the local supermarket.

“Lucid dreams” was the theme of another artist, Larissa Hinds. “During the rāhui, daytimes in North East Valley have a dream-like quality. Sleep has become a place of creativity and garishness; and many have found that their dreams have been more vivid than usual. This artwork is impish, filmic, and conspicuous. I aimed to transform the vividness and absurdity of these dreams, and make some sense of their meaning within the boundaries of my bubble.”¹⁵



Figure 2. Larissa Hinds, *Lucid Dreams*. In situ, Antidote Pharmacy, Gardens, Dunedin. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

Visual artist Liz Abbott painted her walking route at night, a suburban street in Signal Hill; this work, *Signal Hill Road 2.5.20 11.54pm*, was installed in her local store, Blacks Road Grocer. She states: "Here's an oil sketch from a late lockdown walk along Signal Hill Road by the old Four Square shop – the absence of traffic has been a real upside of lockdown for me, which has caused me to see familiar places in a new way. Perhaps the loose marks reflect the feeling of being released from home for some much needed exercise and freedom!" Many passers-by empathise with these thoughts and images.

The combination of fresh and timely reflective artists' presentations and a new (and unsuspecting) walking audience became the nexus for this project. Site-specific and social art practices are not new to Dunedin, and can already be experienced in a wide variety of expressions, from commissioned public art (the Dunedin City Council has recently run a competition to select a new artwork for the Octagon, won by Ayesha Green's *Ko te Tūhono*) through to sculpture walks and the Dunedin Writers' walking tour. Performance art festivals, such as Port Chalmers' Anteroom Gallery's QUBIT festival (2011) and the Waterlines festival at Back Beach, are examples of artists and curators employing walking as a way of engaging with and through temporary art presentations.

In relation to their travelling and mapping project "The City is Written by the City," UK artists Sarah Cullen and Simon Pope discuss walking as method – both in art-making and research. Both describe the same approach to "community building" where "community members [gather] related/linked things, people, or places."⁶

In these unprecedented times of social disconnection, the opportunity to show, tell and relate experiences to others through the work of artists – found in places where art is not normally found – has created a new sense of community, one in which artists and their work have become visible and connecting nodes.

We are currently recruiting artists from two more Dunedin suburbs and, building on our learning, are spreading our net and showing the recent work of artists in the southern suburbs of South Dunedin, Caversham, Corstophine, St Kilda and St Clair, with a final activation planned for Port Chalmers and West Harbour as COVID-19 restrictions lift.

Dunedin Dream Brokerage sits under the umbrella of the Otago Chamber of Commerce and Otago Polytechnic, and receives funding from Dunedin City Council's Ara Toi team. However, this project sat outside allocated funded activities and required community business partnership at a time when money was tight. The project has enabled connections between artists, audiences and business owners, and has drawn attention to our suburban co-location. It helped us to see opportunities for publicly accessible spaces throughout the city as windows for creative storytelling. As the city slowly reopens, we hope to continue to build relationships between artists and local businesses and communities. Artists after all live, work and shop in our neighbourhoods, and can share their experiences in connective ways.



Figure 3. Liz Abbott, *Signal Hill Road 2.5.20 11.54pm*. In situ, Antidote Pharmacy, Gardens, Dunedin. Photograph: Justin Spiers.

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- 1 Dunedin Dream Brokerage, <https://www.dunedindreambrokerage.nz/about>.
- 2 See Urban Dream Brokerage, <http://urbandreambrokerage.org.nz/about>.
- 3 Images of the original artworks can be found at: www.dunedindreambrokerage.nz/dunedindreambrokeragebubbles.
- 4 See "Dunedin Dream Brokerage: Bubbles – Sharing the Upside of Lockdown," www.dunedindreambrokerage.nz/dunedindreambrokeragebubbles.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Sarah Cullen, "Taking an Object for a Walk – Post 12 – Final Post," WalkingLab, <https://walkinglab.org/taking-an-object-for-a-walk-post-12-final-post/>.