

Kingsland and Morningside Street Art

by Jonny 4Higher

Modern graffiti reached New Zealand in the 1980s, initially through TV documentaries and early publications, sparking some early pioneers in our suburbs scrawling their aliases on the walls of their neighbourhoods with rudimentary style. One place that it notably flourished was in the rail corridor through Kingsland and Morningside, where some of the first proper multi-coloured graffiti “pieces” began to appear.

There is no precise historical record to refer to, but so far as my sources believe, the earliest pieces were painted around 1982 by a young artist calling himself FLY. By the time graffiti had become the leading vocation of Auckland youth in the 1990s, he had already moved on and established himself a successful DJ career. One of his FLY pieces, adorned with wings, remained on the back of a building in Kingsland’s School Reserve up until the 2000s, a revered ancient relic in this very young and temporary art movement.

In the late 1980s, Pacific Island families with relatives in both Auckland and Los Angeles brought the urban culture of California to the Polynesian communities in Central and South Auckland. This shift of influence from East to West Coast USA brought about a new approach to graffiti – rather than focusing on difficult, time and resource consuming elaborate pieces, notoriety and fame would be found quickly through tagging.

Compared to a plague or scourge, no suburb of Auckland went untouched. Youths formed “crews” and competed to get the most noticeable tags in the greatest quantity. Style was still of some importance, but most wrote in a fairly uniform italicized type, influenced by LA gang graffiti. Nonetheless, a new generation of artists emerged in this fertile scene, standing out by focusing on quality rather than quantity, and the Kingsland–Morningside rail corridor blossomed as the walls were filled end to end with bright, colourful pieces. Conflict with taggers writing over pieces was a constant problem.

The volume of property damage led to a stretch in council and law enforcement resources, so many spots were left to the whim of graffiti artists where they could paint unhindered. Also, many property owners would prefer a cheerfully coloured piece rather than a confrontational roll call of tags on their back wall, so it became easy for artists to secure permission to create their work on many walls in this area.

In the 2000s, the city war on vandalism started claiming its first successes, with budgets increased and specific new by-laws introduced to deal with the problem. By the time of the Rugby World Cup in 2011, and with Eden Park within a ball’s throw of the rail corridor, the council was ready to roll out a huge graffiti eradication project. What seemed as once impossible became reality - the Auckland rail corridor would be graffiti-free. In addition, many walls that had served as Auckland’s outdoor graffiti art gallery for decades were eradicated without need for property owners’ consent under the new by-laws. In a few short weeks, it was all but gone.

As one light dimmed, another was growing brighter. Internationally, graffiti writing was being forced out of the spotlight by its new privileged cousin, which shed the focus on both lettering and the term “graffiti” and called itself Street Art. The artists who had emerged from the battleground of graffiti found themselves creating commissioned murals and exhibiting in galleries alongside newcomers with a traditional art education, using a new approach, methods and aesthetics.

Today, many great examples of work by some of New Zealand’s leading street artists and graffiti writers can be found adorning the walls in Kingsland and Morningside, where it all began.

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