

# FLAT CHAT

Urban observer  
Megan Hicks  
requests that we  
slow down and lower  
our eyes as we pass  
through the streets  
around Newtown.

*Tarflowers is what grows best in Newtown*

*Tarflowers*

*In concrete gardens*

*Where we draw our best pictures*

*With bits of tile that fell*

*Off Mrs O'Leary's toilet roof*

*And we even draw real grass*

*To walk on*

*And lie in ... up to your ears*

*But ladies wash the gardens in the morning*

*So we have to draw them again ... tonight*

So wrote poet Terry Larsen in the 1960s when the Newtown pavement was a parchment for the ephemeral efforts of backstreet kids. But Newtown is a different place today – its footpaths and roadways controlled by a surfeit of official stencillers commanding you to *Keep Clear*, *Look Right* and *Think Before You Cross*.

Unofficial scribes have commandeered the concrete too. The civic surface beneath your feet has become a free billboard for local news and views. It's a repository of heritage, history and the here and now. So watch where you're walking! There's a world going on, on the ground.

Heritage is conserved in the durable iron lids that punctuate the pavement. In manhole covers, committed drainspotters can study an archive of public utilities and their predecessors, from AWA, PMG and Telecom to City of Sydney Electric Light. And on gutter drains in King Street the letters NMC recall Newtown Municipal Council, a long-lost casualty of the ongoing municipal border wars. While you're looking down, pause to appreciate the ornamental gardens of hardy weedlets, cigarette butts and Smarties that colonise the cast-iron grooves.

PHOTOS: MEGAN HICKS

↓ AWA service cover, Newtown Bridge  
Alison Gooch plaque, King Street, Newtown



There are ornamental garlands on the pavement too, where successive waves of Reclaim the Streeters have marched by. The history of their annual outings is documented in the worn layers of their painted decorations. Other disgruntled pedestrians have made more practical improvements by spraying their own zebra crossings at vexatious intersections.

Writers in wet cement are rarely that organised. Their inscriptions are impetuous acts of opportunism. Some merely attempt to immortalise their names, others have managed to proclaim their romantic attachments, tribal allegiances and personal revelations: *Matt & Angie still mates*, *Bathurst rules!*, *Junkies suck*, *Today is the day*. Profundities and crudities jostle for legibility amongst the concrete's stony aggregate. But if deconstructing text that's set in concrete becomes too stressful for you, relax and enjoy the laid-down humour of the local wags instead: *Put George in cement*, *Question everything??*

Wet-cementers are not the only ones who publicise their passions on the horizontal noticeboard. Birthday girls are feted, desirable girls are courted and detested girls are vilified in large block letters on paint-friendly public thoroughfares. And on a tiny metal plaque in the middle of a shopping strip, a murdered girl is mourned.

On streets once haunted by Arthur Stace, the 'Eternity Man', nocturnally-active proselytisers and advertisers mimic his method of repetitive message-making with spray paint and stencils. But why the stealthiness? Who is going to prosecute them for making footpath graffiti? Probably not Marrickville Council, whose own dot-gov grabline appears on the municipality's civil infrastructure.

Other, low-tech successors to Stace still prefer the textural interaction of chalk on asphalt. Decipher their faint traces and you will find that there was once a garage sale in London Street, The Duke held weekly

pool comps, an exuberant nutter found the devil at Central Bakery, and an Asian schoolboy affirmed his cultural assimilation by chalking *Eternity* on the footpath outside his parents' shop.

Now read on. The pavement is a complex document, crowded with information about social relations and cultural practices. Maybe the tarflowers have been washed away permanently, but other inscriptions are still thick on the ground.

*Megan Hicks is Curator of Medical Sciences at the Powerhouse Museum and a long-time habitué of the streets of Newtown.*



↑ Clockwise direction from top left:  
*Pedestrian crossing*, Wattle Street at Broadway  
*Eternity boy*, Enmore Road, Enmore  
*Man made booze*, Eddy Avenue, Central  
*Satan eats bread*, Enmore Road, Enmore  
*Red and yellow decorated base of signpost*, King Street, Newtown  
*Trish + crossings out*, Eliza Street, Newtown