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City's heart beats again

Creative thinking has revitalised Newcastle's Hunter Street Mall, where cars, shops and people have replaced the tumbleweeds, writes **Helen Gregory**

MARNI Jackson's grey-green eyes have narrowed and are darting over the appointments scrawled in her A4 diary.

The Renew Newcastle general manager is nestled on a sofa inside the organisation's quiet headquarters in a former Catholic church in Morgan Street, holding her iPhone in one hand while reviewing her schedule for the week.

Renew Newcastle owns nothing, has built nothing and doesn't have a 10-year plan, but has already installed 71 projects in 42 empty or unused spaces in the CBD, including the 26 projects currently in 20 spaces.

The organisation's founder, Marcus Westbury, is now exporting the winning formula to the world through Renew Australia, leaving Jackson as the anchor for one of the most empowering initiatives the city has ever seen.

Jackson speaks softly, stopping frequently to laugh heartily.

"It's really exciting to be part of this change right now in Newcastle," she said.

Jackson and her older sister grew up in Campbelltown, in south-west Sydney, with a mother who worked in human relations for a children's charity and a father who worked in the state government and was born in Greta Migrant Camp to parents from post-war Czech Republic.

Jackson started an arts degree majoring in Asian studies but yearned to do something tangible, so enrolled at TAFE to learn about fashion design, dressmaking and manufacturing.

Jackson's interest in vintage and second-hand clothing is apparent – she is wearing a black and white polka-dot blouse, grey striped trousers, black brogues, her auburn hair in a curled updo and pink lipstick.

"I prefer to buy clothes that have had a second life, that have been reclaimed, if I can," she said.

"I'm interested in vintage fashion, in the 1930s and 1940s, but not being a slave to history, trying to make it feel fun and modern and mixing it with new things as well."

Jackson's philosophy on fashion could just as easily be appropriated to her adopted city.

She was at a Byron Bay festival when she struck up a friendship with a group of Novocastrians and started visiting them.

"They grew up with this kind of bushy beachside background – I had a nostalgia for their childhood or something like that," she said.

Jackson decided in 1998 to join her friend, who was relocating to study at Newcastle University. She worked a variety of jobs before embarking in 2000 on a double degree in arts and education with the intention of teaching English in high schools.

After two years she changed to a bachelor of arts and graduated with first-class honours in 2003, helped to establish the Sustenance Food Co-Op and contributed to the projects of friends involved in the arts.

After spending 2004 overseas Jackson returned to Newcastle and noticed a significant shift had taken place – and she wanted to be part of it. She contributed through costume making, production design and management for a performance collective and later wrote for *Urchin* magazine, where she met others involved in This Is Not Art (TINA) Festival.

Jackson was asked to be the festival co-ordinator from 2005 to 2008.

She would often meet with festival founder Marcus Westbury to discuss the direction of the festival.

The roles were reversed when Melbourne-based Westbury started research for his ABC television series *Not Quite Art* and called Jackson to discuss what Newcastle's creative community was doing and what challenges it faced.



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On one visit to Newcastle, Westbury counted 140 empty or unused buildings in the CBD.

"It was while he was coming up here and looking at what was going on in Newcastle that [he started putting together] these ideas about utilising empty space and what kind of scheme could be developed to make that happen on a big scale, and a couple of public forums came out of that," Jackson said.

"That's when I became more involved."

Not-for-profit company Renew Newcastle was born in 2008 to find artists, cultural projects and community groups to use and maintain, in the short- and medium-term, buildings in the CBD that were vacant, disused or awaiting redevelopment.

Some applicants wanted office space, others wanted gallery space and many wanted retail space.

The aim was to generate activity in the interim until future long-term activity happened and the spaces became commercially viable or were redeveloped.

Property owners with no tenants or awaiting development entered a 30-day rolling licence agreement with Renew Newcastle, which acted as a brokerage to find projects for the spaces.

The shops and galleries paid a weekly participation fee of \$20 to

Renew Newcastle and in some circumstances paid additional negotiated fees directly to property owners.

In effect, the projects traded lack of security for lack of rent. Renew Newcastle managed the short-term use of the buildings, paid necessary insurance and made the spaces safe and usable.

Jackson was appointed the organisation's general manager in April 2009 and remains the driving force behind its continuing evolution.

Westbury described her as brilliant.

"I can take credit for getting the original idea off the ground, but the practicalities of what's happening on the ground every day, that's been Marni since the beginning. If there wasn't a Marni there wouldn't be a project," he said.

Westbury said one of Jackson's strengths was her ability to balance the interests of property owners, artists, the council and stakeholders and bring them together with their different ideas to work on the same page.

On any given day Jackson liaises with the board about strategy and policy, interviews and appoints applicants and works with them on proposals for their spaces.

She negotiates with property owners, contacts consultants to ensure the spaces are safe and usable, organises repairs, writes funding proposals, oversees promotion and marketing, comes up with events and works with volunteers.

Perhaps the most noticeable effects of the organisation's efforts can be seen in Hunter Street Mall, which has the highest concentration of projects.

When Renew Newcastle started in January 2009 there were 12 projects in the 20 empty spaces in the mall. Since then the mall has been re-opened to traffic, but this win was followed by GPT Group's shock withdrawal from its \$600 million redevelopment in August last year, and a dive in the retail market.

The number of commercial tenants may have dropped but the GPT Group has actually increased the number of spaces available to Renew Newcastle and recommended any new property owners continue working with the organisation until they find a tenant.

"In terms of atmosphere and spirit it's changed tremendously and locally owned businesses are coming back," Jackson said.

"One Penny Black is a really great contribution to the way the mall looks and feels. A few years ago I don't think anyone would have [met] for a coffee in the mall."

She believes inviting creators of hand-made, local and one-off products or services into the mall has given it an original flavour.

"There's businesses offering really unique things you can't find elsewhere," she said.

The flourishing cultural space has also created a microcosm of artisans and community groups who have taken on the role of ambassadors, teaming up to promote Newcastle to outsiders and those who may not have visited the city centre for some time.

This collaboration spawned the idea of free guided walking tours through shops and galleries on the first Friday of each month.

Perhaps the only challenge in this model is the often-temporary life of the projects. In their ability to attract more people and businesses into the area they increase their likelihood of having to move or close if a tenant is interested in their space.

Those who felt they had a viable business have not been able to afford to rent in the mall, but have been successful in securing spaces elsewhere in the city.

Renew Newcastle has filled all of the spaces available to it with projects and is currently looking for more properties.

Its brief extends beyond the mall, from Tudor Street to Pacific Street, along King and Hunter streets and into Honeysuckle.

Funding comes from Newcastle City Council's community assistance program, Newcastle Now Business Improvement Association and Arts NSW.

It has a commitment of funding over the next three years from the Department of Trade and Investment and a commitment of sponsorship over the next three years from HDC.

"We're looking at developing more diversity in our income streams. We are a funding-based organisation, but we know



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our investment is good value," Jackson said. Renew Newcastle has a policy of not commenting on large-scale projects outside of their jurisdiction, including the rail line and Newcastle Post Office.

"Obviously activation would be amazing, it is an amazing site and the people of Newcastle would love to see something dynamic going on there," Jackson said of the post office.

"It's probably a bigger site than what we could activate and we believe it's at a point where lots of work needs to be done to get it to its best use.

"But any agency working on it, we'd be happy to consider temporary or one-off use once something is right to happen."

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INSPIRING: Marni Jackson, far left, and Jackson in the Hunter Street Mall, left. — Pictures by Darren Pateman