ART AND SOUL OF THE CITY

T he public artwork, constructed out of a number of large yellow plastic sheets, stowed in the middle of a busy road in Frankfurt – until the head of the local sanitation department drove past, assumed it was a pile of obnoxious building materials and ordered his garbage collectors to take it away. “I think there was nothing to show it was art,” protested Peter Pooth, after he noticed a story in a newspaper about an exhibition of public art too late to save the masterpiece from the council incinerator.

Around the world, public art has endured mixed fortunes from admirers and critics alike. Here in Australia, with some of the country’s biggest developers making a new commitment to providing public art, we’re likely soon to surpass our fill of the good, the bad and, sadly, downright ugly. “Art is always very controversial because no one likes the same thing,” says Tasman Storey of HPA Architects, who advises developer Mirvac on its artworks. “Some people find a piece confronting, while others say, ‘Isn’t that lovely’. It’s difficult to please everyone.” Sometimes it’s even hard to please anyone. One of the best-known pieces of developer-commissioned art stands at the side of an Australand apartment block at the entrance to Sydney’s Kings Cross. Conceived by admired artist Ken Unsworth as a number of large granite boulders pierced by tall steel rods as one of his Stones Against the Sky series, cut-and-transformed into it large polystyrene and chicken wire balls atop a bunch of poles, and it is popularly known as “the poo sticks.”

Another series of artworks, commissioned by Multiplex for its elite Darling Island apartment complex, has also sparked controversy. Some residents fiercely critical of the technicolour pieces, plan to bring up at their next owners corporation AGM the idea of having them replaced. The fact that their by-laws oblige them to maintain them, and prevent them from substituting the pieces without the consent of the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, has further angered them. “It’s outrageous,” says one resident, who asked not to be named. “This is our home, yet we’re not allowed to have any say in what our environs look like.”

Most developers are anxious that their public artworks add value, colour and, yes, some urban sophistication to their buildings. “I think art can provide something that architecture doesn’t always provide,” says Jennifer Turpin, who works as an art consultant to Multiplex. “It can activate the imagination and soul of society. Artwork in the city is a wonderful way of reminding busy people of aspects of life that they may forget about. It can bring people a lot of joy.” Turpin has most recently brought artist Matthew Johnson to the company’s new Monument building in Sydney’s Darlinghurst. Johnson has designed a strip that wraps around the building, changing colour all the time. She also brought New Zealand artist Sara Hughes to Darling Island, where Hughes created big, extremely bright canvases, made up of thousands of tiny pieces of painted vinyl, in nine spaces in the complex.

“It’s my largest project to date,” Hughes says. “Each lobby area is different, but the same concept runs through all of them. As people were moving into the building, they seemed fascinated by what I was doing. Some people told me they really liked it.” Developers tend not to commission public art purely for its own merits, however. With local councils and planning authorities increasingly demanding that they introduce artworks around their complexes as a condition of planning approval, they’re often being forced to do so. The artworks usually go before a committee of the developers, council members and arts groups for approval.

In Melbourne, the MAB Corporation has committed about $3 million to public art at NewQuay in Docklands. MAB’s owner, Michael Buxton, has named buildings in the precinct after artists and architects – there are the Conder, Nolan, Boyd and Arkley towers – and the precinct is also being dotted with sculptures. “We are extremely confident that visitor response to the urban art is testament to the way it defines the vibrancy of the mix of art, dining and the waterfront,” says Rod McDonald, MAB’s general manager development.

“The pedestrian activity creates a safe environment that encourages people to visit the precinct again and again.” He says the commitment to public art is something that’s evolved in the past five years. At Mirvac, it’s a similar story. Marketing director James Bell says developers are increasingly looking at providing public art in prominent locations. “Certain sites need something special,” he says. Artworks installed in Brisbane include Grant Leebham’s bronze and kerbside art sculpture at the Sebel Hotel, the Mandy Ridley sculpture Bloom in cast aluminium and automotive paint, and Deb Robbins’s award-winning interactive sculpture with catenary lights, illuminated seating, LED in-ground lights and granite paving at South Bank’s Arkbour on Grey. In Sydney, there’s a sculpture designed by Malcolm Scholl from recycled timber at Pier 67 in Walsh Bay, a large Brett Whiteley sculpture nearby next to the Towns Place residential project, sculpture at Pacific Place in Chatswood and “a piece of urban art made from planting, water and hard works” at Encore, Elizabeth Bay.

Storey says they all fulfil an important function. “Public art can offset the scale of some big developments and make them feel appropriate to the space,” he says. “When you come up against larger buildings, you can find something you relate to. People can feel the space and understand its scale. It also benefits artists.”

The largest public artwork in Sydney is to be installed by Multiplex at the King Street Wharf, where the balconies of a new $83 million commercial building are to be etched with one of photographer Max Dupain’s best-known images, Bondi Beach.

At World Square, there are two kinetic sculptures designed by Suzann Victor called Skin to Skin. “We’re slowly rolling out our program of public art elsewhere, but probably we’re more advanced with it in Sydney because of the Sydney City Council’s requirements to provide art,” says Nathan Campbell, director of Multiplex Development Australia. “Other suburban councils are pushing art, but not to the same extent.”

“We have a real commitment to encourage particularly Australian artists in our developments, whether residential, commercial or retail, and to make sure the art really complements the buildings.” While major developer Australand declined to comment, Lend Lease says it is also committed to introducing a combination of art and interpretive elements around its developments. At Jackson’s Landing, its Pyrmont development, there’s sculpture and the re-use of old metals and timbers from former buildings on the site to create new objects. The street names are also chosen to create a narrative. “It’s probably something we would like to do more of,” says group executive Ron Cutler. “But with public art, it always has to be something that’s resilient and stands the test of time.”

The The top five public artworks in the world, according to Edmund Capon, director of the Art Gallery of NSW:

1. Dumbrooks, Scotland: Henry Moore, King and Queen in bronze, (c. 1958-59), located on moors on Glenkirk Farm Estate.
3. Bilbao, Spain: Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim – it may be a building but it’s still the greatest work of public art.
4. Chengdu, Sichuan province, China, in Tianfu Square (Tianfu Square), the vast (86-metres high) statue of Mao Zedong – it may be wacky but it’s one of the few surviving.