

Drawn to New York

Sydney-born illustrator James Gulliver Hancock is so enamoured of NYC, where he now lives, that he has decided to draw the buildings in the city's five boroughs, all 900,000 of them

There's something about James Gulliver Hancock's relationship with New York that reminds you of a romantic comedy. It tracks that moment in the film when the guy at first isn't sure about the girl, then he realises it's love.

"When I came to New York ages ago with my girlfriend on tour [he and singer Lenka have recently married], I was amazed but I also thought I never want to live here," says the Sydney-born illustrator.

"It's just so intense. That's initially why we decided to move to LA." The couple spent three years there while Lenka pursued her music career but eventually moved east when they were finally ready to experience New York. And Hancock discovered the city of brownstones, skyscrapers and Beaux-Arts architecture was the perfect place to indulge his passion for drawing buildings.

"You just want to grab New York, don't you?" he says of his emotional reaction to the city. Sinatra and Minnelli immortalised in song. "I think that's why people buy 'I Love NY' T-shirts. You want to pick it up and hug it, and I think drawing was my way of doing that." So, after unpacking his bags there in April 2010, Hancock began, along with a print project (about the city's buildings), drawing those that interested him for their history, emotion or aesthetics. Soon afterwards he launched a blog, All The Buildings in New York (allthebuildingsinnewyork.com) that has become quite the conversation piece there and beyond. (It even landed him on *Good Day Sacramento*.)

All *The Buildings in New York* chronicles his attempt to draw all – yes, all – the buildings in the five boroughs that make up the city. "I think New Yorkers love it when outsiders reflect their city for them," he says of why he thinks his project has garnered attention. Earlier this year he had an exhibition of his project illustrations in downtown Manhattan. (His career also includes eight solo exhibitions of drawings, collages and installations in Australia, Germany and Japan.)

New Yorkers are, of course, old hands at seeing their city presented as a character on film (think Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee) but having their brownstones, row houses, office blocks, shopfronts, fire stations, even schools drawn by one person – and an Australian – is new for them. There are over 900,000 buildings in New York City and so far Hancock has documented 500 (and counting) in a style that marries a charming whimsy with obsessive detail. Clearly he'd need to clone himself to draw all of them but Hancock seems to be seriously enjoying the attempt. "I'll try," he says of his ambition. "But it's like painting the Harbour Bridge. The minute you get to the other side, you have to start again. Buildings change and new ones go up all the time."

James Nevis is co-author of *Inside the Apple: A Streetwise History of New York City*. He thinks what Hancock is doing goes beyond a standard illustration blog and has a cultural significance. "Buildings are our best form of time travel. The people are gone, we don't live in that era, so buildings are the gateway into the story of the city's history and the people who lived there,"



Property portfolio: James Gulliver Hancock, presently drawing one NYC building a day.



explains Nevius. “In New York there is a very high signal to noise ratio,” he adds. “So when you’re on a street it can be hard to focus on a building because there’s so much going on. What is nice about these drawings is they divorce the buildings from the surroundings and noise, allowing you to really look at them.”

Like some people who need to run every morning, Hancock has to draw constantly and confesses he has been like this since childhood. “I feel not great if I don’t draw every day. I have been a little obsessive, sure. I feel I should draw everything in the world at least once, so I have ownership of everything around me a little bit.” He laughs talking about Lenka, who is used to him picking up a pencil wherever they are. (The bonus is they collaborate on her videos.) “When we go out for dinner, I start drawing and she has to put up talking to my head.”

Hancock, 34, earned his Bachelor of Design at Sydney’s University of Technology, worked and ran an art gallery for five years. Since 2002 he has undertaken artist residencies in Vienna, Paris, Indonesia, New York and London, and in most cities drew something he connected with that typified the culture. In Paris it was rooftops, in Berlin bikes. Unsurprisingly, once living in Los Angeles, he drew cars. New York was a city he felt he already knew through movies but, once on the ground, it spoke to him through buildings.

“I have always drawn architecture, I like drawing technical things,” he says. “I like the straight lines of buildings and the sculptural aspect. So the project for me is about extending the idea of looking at a city.

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After a year you start living in it fully but this keeps me looking at it like a tourist every day,” he says appreciatively.

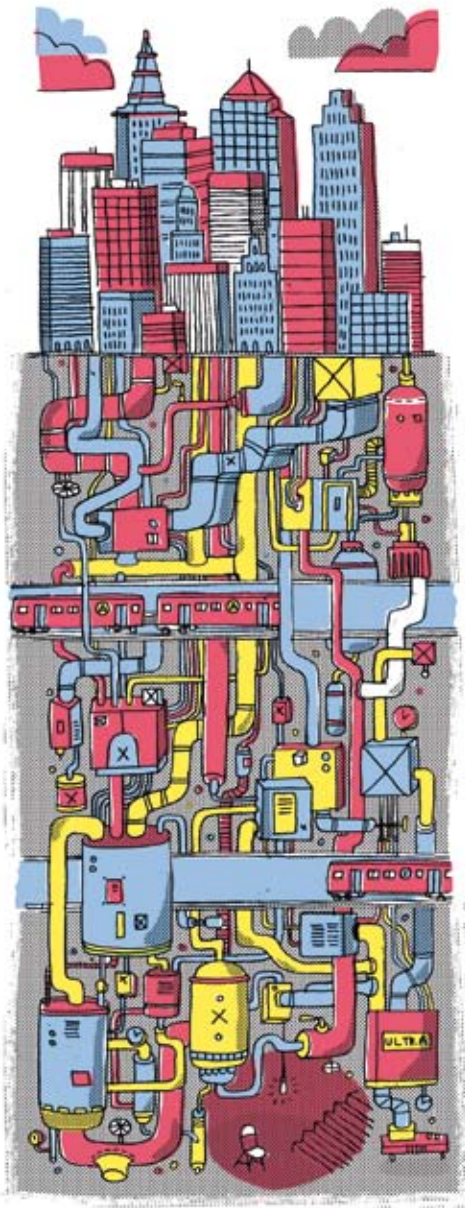
“I really love the architectural details, the funny little cornices, finding little alleyways. I like noticing how things really change on a street in New York. You will have a factory, then a three-storey townhouse, then a little bodega [deli] and then an amazingly ornate bank. It’s just incredible the juxtaposition. I don’t remember seeing that in other cities so intensely, and I like it.”

Nevius explains the reason New York architecture changes so dramatically, not just block to block but within the same streetscape, is because the city has never been a “clean slate”. “New York never had a fire like Chicago or London that wiped out so much of the city [allowing planners and architects to start over again]. New York also has this relentless energy, where every generation comes

through and wants to build something new. But individual developers don’t do it wholesale, they do it piecemeal, so you get an 1820s building next to a 1920s building.”

Hancock is reluctant to name a favourite neighbourhood to draw, although he is particularly drawn to Brooklyn, where he lives. “I do love it for all the *Sesame Street* clichés of the stoops and the brownstone buildings,” he confesses. While his focus is drawing local architecture before the trusty New York guidebook landmarks, he does appreciate them. “In LA, the Hollywood sign is an ad but the Chrysler building has all this history. Even the clichés here are kind of great, they have depth.”

He tries to draw a building a day around his illustration work for publishers and musicians (clients have included Warner Music, *The New York Times*, publishers Simon & Schuster, *The Sunday Telegraph* and the PowerHouse



Museum) and works out of an artists co-op space in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. He will draw either a single building that intrigues him or a whole block and, more and more now, he receives commissions. “Sometimes I will sit in a cafe and draw the building across the street on a napkin. Other times I will see a building I like, stop to do a sketch, then come back to the studio and, using photos I might have taken or Google maps, bulk up the sketch with a painting or more detailed drawing.” While sketching on the street he works in pen or marker, later in his studio he will finish the drawing in acrylic or ink, on either wood or paper. “There is this idea that if you want to be a real artist you must do something on canvas but I have struggled with it, the way it moves around. Wood is so strong and you get all these instant textures.”

When he’s working, it’s not uncommon for locals to stop, ask questions and get involved. “I love the way New Yorkers will engage you. You see it on the subway, they’ll say, ‘I’ve read that book, what do you think of it?’ When I draw, I’ve had a few people look over my shoulder and say that looks cool, or tell me a story about when their grandfather lived in the building.”

Australians might aspire to home ownership but Hancock has noticed New Yorkers have a different relationship to their architecture. “I went and taught a class at a school and the students were drawing their buildings. What fascinated me was how proprietorial they felt [towards them], even if they lived on the fifth floor of a 30-storey block. It’s so different to the way we think about ‘home’ in Australia. Here everyone lives a

“So far he has sketched everywhere but Staten Island, although he’s drawn the ferry that gets you there”

distance from the ground.” They also live cheek-by-jowl in comparatively smaller spaces, which naturally forces them out more. With few backyards, parks for instance become of great importance. “It makes me wish Sydney was more dense because I think density is great,” Hancock says. “It gets people out and interacting.” The downside of NYC for him? No beach, or beaches that can compare to Sydney. But the music and museum scene more than compensate, he admits.

As far as Hancock can tell, he is the only person right now crazy enough to declare an attempt to draw all the buildings. Illustrator Jason Polan, at his blog (everypersoninnewyork.blogspot.com), has thrown down the gauntlet to draw all the people. There are approximately 8 million people in NYC so he, like Hancock, will be kept busy for a while.

Once his project kicked up interest, business and

publishing opportunities materialised. Hancock is collating images and creating new material for an All the Buildings in New York book and has been approached by a US homewares company to collaborate on a series of buildings-themed mugs and plates. He does sell prints of his work, though the most recent addition to his repertoire are pillow cases screenprinted with NYC images. “It’s the city that never sleeps but you can sleep on it.”

Yet some locals aren’t thinking about bed linens, they just want to make sure their buildings don’t miss out on the Hancock treatment. So far he has sketched everywhere but Staten Island, although he’s drawn the ferry that gets you there. “This guy wrote to me and said, ‘If you ever want to come to Staten Island, I have a car, so if you want to draw our buildings, I will take you around.’” Hancock might take him up on it. 