

The Chapel Hill News

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Murals' days numbered?

Age, building owners threaten local landmarks

BY LEAH FRIEDMAN, STAFF WRITER

CHAPEL HILL -- There's been lots of save the's.

Save the whales.

Save the turtles.

Save the manatees.

Now, the Chapel Hill Preservation Society wants to "save the murals."

The 20 murals -- everything from larger-than-life sea turtles to a flautist and violinist duet -- are painted on buildings all over town.

And they are on the endangered list, said Ernie Dollar, director of the preservation society.

For one, the mural population is aging and in need of care, he said.

But they also face possible extinction.

Some building owners want to get rid of them, he said.

"Murals exist in a gray area on who owns them," Dollar said. "They are just sort of there, but no one is taking care of them." So Dollar is kicking off a campaign to save them.

The society is partnering with the Chapel Hill Historic Society and Downtown Partnership. The groups have hired an assessor to take note of each mural's condition. Dollar is also conducting a public comment survey to see what residents think of the murals, (send comments to: savethemurals@mail.com). Then, he wants to start an adopt a mural program.

"We'll look at the public feedback to see if it's worth doing, but from our perspective they're cool," Dollar said.



The owners of this building on Franklin St. near the intersection with Robeson St. want to paint over this mural when the old furniture store is made into a martini bar. The Chapel Hill preservation society wants to save the mural.

Staff photo by Chris Seward

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Artist's Statement By Michael Brown, Special to The Chapel Hill News

"This mural, on the corner of Franklin and Roberson streets was painted in 1995. It was commissioned by the owner of The Avid Reader Bookshop, Barry Jones. It is one of only two of the 18 downtown murals commissioned by an individual.

Barry loved history, (which is no surprise for a rare book dealer), and asked me to paint some of the buildings on that particular corner as they appeared in the late 1940s. I painted the old Dairy Bar, which was across the street. My dad used to take me there for milkshakes when I was at Franklin Street Elementary. It seems like the only thing left from that era now is the cow weather vane on top of the building.

The church is Rock Hill Baptist Church. It was an African American church which stood where the auto dealership parking lot is now. It was torn down (according to one of its older members) in the late '40s. The other building depicted is the old Riggsbee Hinson furniture building. That is the same building that The Avid Reader moved into, and that this mural is painted on. I thought it would be fun for viewers to realize that

The Artist

For the save the murals campaign, Dollar has enlisted the help of the artist who painted most of them.

"If the owners get rid of them, that would be a pity," said Michael Brown, who lives in Chapel Hill.

Brown painted his first mural about 20 years ago. He was commissioned to do the paintings with school groups.

One his earliest was the mural of the big hands on West Franklin Street, across from McDonald's.

He wanted to do something every child could help with.

"Everyone can put their hands in paint and print them on something," he said.

He even grabbed passersby to include their hand prints, including a minister and a Carolina basketball player. Plus, he thought it was funny the hands were going on a building that used to be a dry cleaners shop.

"You go to dry cleaners to get big messy hand prints out," he said.

Brown also painted the giant sea turtles on the parking lot along North Columbia Street/Martin Luther King Boulevard.

They were supposed to be dinosaurs "because all kids love dinosaurs," he said. But the appearance commission didn't like that idea. So he went with turtles instead.

In pre-historic times, Brown said Chapel Hill was under water, so the creatures probably made their home here. Plus, they are endangered, and Chapel Hill is a conservationist town, he said.

At first, he didn't care if store owners painted over them years down the road. He sort of half expected it, especially after two decades, he said. "But what I failed to predict was how much people enjoy them," he said.

Now, he wants them preserved.

Painted Over

Dollar and Brown have heard rumors of businesses wanting to paint over the murals on the sides of their buildings. The area has already lost one mural. In May, three men painted over the mural on the Jade Palace Chinese restaurant in Carrboro. The mural

they were looking at the actual building that is depicted in the mural.

I put the Dewey political button in there to help people understand the time frame and because I was told that Chapel Hill was the only place in North Carolina that went for Dewey. Every one else voted for Truman. Sound familiar?"

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depicted logos for Weaver Street Market and Open Eye Cafe, monkeys and musical notes.

Francis Chan, who owns the restaurant at 103 E. Main St. with his wife, told police he saw three men painting the wall without his consent. The three men said another man paid them to paint over it.

Dollar said the murals are an integral part of the town's culture and economy.

They're landmarks for businesses, he said.

"We want to show how valuable these are for an economic standpoint," he said.

The town has created a walking map with each mural numbered.

"The map is a direct road map to businesses," Dollar said.

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