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## Mural, mural on the wall

In the same way that you get used to the artwork on your own walls, it may be hard for those who have lived here a long time to see -- to really see -- the 20 or so large murals that grace the sides of buildings and other structures in downtown Chapel Hill.

But you'd better believe that newcomers and visitors notice them. And it's worth our while to try to see them with fresh eyes, too. The murals, most of which were painted by local artist Michael Brown, are striking works that go a long way toward making Chapel Hill Chapel Hill. The sea turtles, the giant pencil, the one with the overhead perspective facing the West Rosemary Street parking lot -- they are important elements in the decor of this place.

They are also aging, in need of upkeep and in some cases may be targeted for painting over by the owners of the buildings on which they're painted.

That possibility is what lies behind a recent campaign spearheaded by Ernest Dollar, the director of the Chapel Hill Preservation Society, to preserve the murals.

The society, along with the Historic Society and the Downtown Partnership, is having an assessment done of each mural's conditions. Dollar also wants to hear from the public. Are the murals worth making a concerted effort to save and spruce up? Are some of them more deserving of such an effort than others? Should some of them be painted over with new murals?

Although they serve as de facto public art --that is, they're in public places where everyone passing by can see them -- they aren't really public art; they weren't paid for or owned by the town or the people. Almost all of them were painted by Brown and were paid for by means of small individual donations.

What that means is that it's never been entirely clear who does own or control them. Brown? The owners of the buildings? The old Downtown Commission, which commissioned many of them in the first place?

Curiously enough, Brown said, that uncertainty is precisely what has kept them in place for so long -- but it's also what makes the matter of their upkeep and preservation vexing enough to spur the Preservation Society's new effort. If we want them kept up and otherwise preserved, who pays for that?

Brown himself allows that he's particularly fond of a few of the murals and supports preserving them, but he's not really in a position to lead the campaign. Back when the project was under way, he convinced some reluctant building owners to go along by assuring them that if they ever decided they didn't want the murals, they could paint over them "and you won't hear a peep out of me."

The rest of us can make a peep, though. The murals do for downtown what art does for any living space -- they give it visual and aesthetic and cultural spice. They make it a more interesting, unique and pleasing place to be.

Does that mean we have to keep all of them, and keep them just as they are? Not necessarily. Some of them may be suitable for painting over --maybe with other murals, by other artists. And in any event, it's probably time to hang a new picture or two on the walls. "I've got a dozen ideas," Brown said, "and there

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