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Save the murals: The pencil mural, 1991

The Preservation Society of Chapel Hill is dedicated to saving those things that make Chapel Hill unique.

The society is asking community members to help preserve the downtown murals, many of which are fading, by e-mailing their thoughts about them to savethemurals@mail.com.

If the society gets enough support it plans to create an "Adopt a Mural" program, allowing the public to save its favorite murals.

Artist's statement by Michael Brown

Henderson Street's big pencil was painted in 1991. Since I was given a long low retaining wall to work with I tried to draw a plan that would fit that space. After many failures I hit on the idea of a giant 100-foot long chameleon. Since chameleons change color it was an opportunity to use lots of color and have fun with the patterns in the scales. I figured that my student assistants would probably enjoy painting a giant animal too.

At that time the Appearance Commission was the body that regulated and approved things like signage. I submitted my idea for a "courtesy review" but they were adamantly opposed to it. They thought it might frighten children. They also felt it was an un-dignified image to have so close to a church. Irritated with them, I went back to the drawing board, but nothing seemed to be working. I threw down my pencil in disgust. It rolled across the table and stopped on the plans.

Eureka! I had (chameleon like) been changing styles every year but never thought to try Pop Art. A giant pop art style pencil would certainly fit the space well. It seemed to fit the neighborhood well too; the post office, the courthouse and the university all being right there. Most pencils have words on them, so I drew in the partial saying, "Is mightier than the sword." Now the idea even seemed to fit better with the nearby church.

The reason the lettering is upside down is that on most pencils the words appear right side up to right-handed users but upside down to left-handed users. The Appearance



Michael Brown's pencil mural on Henderson Street.


Contributed photo


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Commission did not permit any billboards in Chapel Hill, and I thought they might actually be able to regulate my project as a sign if my letters were right side up so I painted the lettering upside down. It is a pencil as a lefty would see it. That way it fits better with the whole town.

Local photographer Laura Shmania has created a photo gallery of Michael Brown's murals on her Web site at www.butterflites.smugmug.com.

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