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Save the murals: The puzzle pieces, 1999

FROM STAFF REPORTS

The Preservation Society of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill Historical Society, and the Downtown Partnership would like to thank the community for its emails supporting preservation of Chapel Hill's murals.

The groups encourage everyone to keep sending them e-mails at savethemurals@mail.com to let them know what people think about these community artworks.

Beginning in February 2008, look for the Adopt-A-Mural program, which will offers civic groups and individuals a chance to save their favorite murals.

Artist's statement by Michael Brown

In 1999 the Varsity Theatre alley was becoming a problem area for downtown.

Since pedestrians there are largely hidden from public view, it was an attractive place for young "taggers" to paint graffiti and a lot of it was building up there. The taggers had almost always left my murals alone, however, so we thought a mural in there might help.

The location presented some real challenges. There were many square feet to fill and, as usual, a tight budget. The student volunteers had to be given something they could execute at any skill level. The alley is narrow and the viewing distance minimal so standing between the opposing walls was extremely claustrophobic.

I decided to paint blue sky on the walls. A sky painting would seem to open up the cramped space. Sky is easy and inexpensive to do, and the volunteers could easily paint clouds.

When I realized that this plan would mean painting a Carolina blue and white mural I decided to change the plan and paint one of the walls (on the Durham side of the alley) a dark "Duke" blue. That would make that side into a night sky. With this, the painting then became a sort of a yin yang mural, containing day and night, Carolina and Duke. To emphasize the concept of interrelatedness I painted an interlocking jigsaw puzzle



Artist Michael Brown credits his mural along the alley beside the Varsity Theatre with clearing up a persistent graffiti problem in downtown Chapel Hill.

Photo by Laura Shmania

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piece pattern over the entire mural. I also liked the idea of pairing a normally small thing like a puzzle with a huge thing, like the sky.

To further develop the idea I instructed my assistants to paint puzzle pieces on buildings all over town, like scattered random pieces that had not been fitted into the puzzle yet. To this day I'm not sure where they all are. I do know that from the most constricted location I ever worked came the largest project I ever did, covering the whole town.

To see more of Michael Brown's murals, go to local photographer Laura Shmania's gallery on her Web site at www.butterflites.smugmug.com.

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