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Why we should save our murals
My View

BYERNEST DOLLAR

The power of art amazes me. The capacity of a visual image to elicit joy, evoke anger, even heal, is a remarkable accomplishment of the artist.

Therefore, I was not too surprised by the responses the Preservation Society received after we asked for public comment on preserving the town's murals. I'd hoped the response would be encouraging, but we have been overwhelmed.

Several notes simply told us that the murals were a special part of Chapel Hill. "They're a delight and vital to this town, a part of its true character." wrote Jenny Walker.

Sylvia Stanat wrote to say that during the past 40 years she has watched Chapel Hill grow from a "sleepy town with a funny phone system, [and] crystal clear air" to a town experiencing the ill-effects of urbanization. Some of the saving graces for her are the murals, "each one an utter delight."

Catherine Alguire sees the murals as an example of community spirit. "These murals are the best examples in Chapel of the innovation, creativity, community attachment, and intellect of the local people. Each one is clever, together they are ingenious. I fully support preserving them."


Kathy and Roger Harris also believe the diversity of the murals reflect Chapel Hill's residents. "They are entertaining and provide visual commentary on many subjects," they wrote. "The diversity of subjects depicted in the murals matches the diversity of Chapel Hill's residents and their opinions on every subject."

We heard from several people who feature the murals as part of a grand tour they give prospective new residents or friends from out-of-town. The Tyson family recently moved to Chapel Hill and was eager to tell us that discovering the murals was "one of the most fun things to do in Chapel Hill." They continued by saying, "We each have a favorite -- and would be so sad if this unique piece of Chapel Hill's history weren't preserved. When out of town guests visit -- it's one of the first things we point out about our new town."

Margaret Terry also told us about the sense of pride the murals instilled in her and sent us a passionate plea for their preservation. "I, for one, have grown attached to them," she said. "The people most interested in destroying them will live to feel sorrow and shame."

Real estate agents such as Eric White see the murals as a welcoming sign that sets

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Chapel Hill apart from other towns. He said the murals "speak to all that Chapel Hill was, all that Chapel Hill is, and all that Chapel Hill will be." Sarah Madry linked the murals with other monuments in town, saying, "We must save public art, the murals, the statues, monuments -- all of it -- in order to see ourselves and remember ourselves and have others remember us." Emily Walter-Ryan noted in her e-mail that commercialization is wiping away so much of Chapel Hill's authenticity, the murals represent the real. "When nearly everything else is generic and common, our town does have something original."

Two of the most powerful messages we received were from people who have developed a personal connection to the murals.

Melanie Reynolds wrote how her daughter says hello to the mommy sea turtle and the baby sea turtle each day on their way to preschool.

Another message stands out as a testament to the power of history, memory and art coming together. One woman wrote to say that one figure in the Goldie's mural reminds her of her father. She grew up in Chapel Hill and spent wonderful evenings with her father going to the Ram Theater and having dinner at Papagayo's. Sadly, she became estranged from her father during her college years and didn't see him for 10 years until his death. She closed her letter by saying, "He left me nothing in his will... but I have Goldie's mural, which is on the wall where Papagayo's and the Ram Theaters were, and it reminds me of when times in Chapel Hill were good."

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