

Politics and Practice of Community

Public Art: Whose Murals Get Saved?

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The Getty Conservation Institute

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Preface

The following essay was originally presented at “Mural Painting and Conservation in the Americas,” a two-day symposium sponsored by the Getty Research Institute and the Getty Conservation Institute, May 16–17, 2003, at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

At this event, a cross-disciplinary roster of art historians, conservators, and artists discussed the social, artistic, and political dimensions of murals, the value they hold for different constituencies, and the rationale and conservation techniques for ensuring their long-term survival.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not represent the views of the J. Paul Getty Trust.

[Editor's note: This essay was conceived as one part of a three-part examination. The other two are Timothy Drescher's discussion of priorities in the conservation of community murals and Jon Pounds's exposition of conservation projects in Chicago.]

The community mural movement, which arose in the late 1960s, created varied and dramatic mural expressions along with a profoundly original practice, now a tradition, which has been emulated in many countries. The community murals also stimulated a thirty-year revival of mural forms and contributed importantly to the revival of interest in America's mural heritage. The community mural movement also excited interest abroad, including in Mexico, where U.S. muralists received early encouragement from both Siqueiros and Chávez Morado. Arnold Belkin, considered by some as Mexico's last important muralist, participated in the U.S. movement during the early 1970s in New York City. He later invited more than one U.S. muralist to speak at the National School of Painting and Sculpture La Esmeralda.

Obviously, the community murals were in no way an anonymous, spontaneous outpouring. Deeply influenced by a variety of contemporary aesthetic movements, the early community muralists also had organic and personal connections to older mural traditions, especially to Mexico. Nowhere was the influence of Mexican muralism stronger than in Chicago, the self-proclaimed starting point of the contemporary community mural movement. It was the classical compositional approaches of the Tres Grandes that we studied—the architectonics, not the stylistic mannerisms. My colleagues William Walker, Mitchell Caton, Calvin Jones, and others, working with limited resources, authored brilliant extensions and expansions of that tradition.

Today, all the early community murals of the late 1960s are gone. Almost all of the thousands of outdoor murals of the 1970s are also gone—demolished, erased, painted over, a few still visible as ghosts. Increasingly, 1980s murals are also threatened. As a Chicago-based muralist, an active participant in the movement from 1969 on, I am personally concerned, since large-scale outdoor mural painting virtually ceased in Chicago by the late nineties. Our once-large collection of outdoor murals is fading and disappearing. Community public art continues to thrive, with wonderful new work of mosaic and cement relief. I bear some of the responsibility for that

change, having advocated it and having helped initiate the change to mosaic and cement more than twenty years ago. The choice of cement relief (as in examples of my own work, *For the People of the Future* [Chicago, 1980] and *From One Generation to Another* [Avenue C, 1984]) in part was made in order to make removal more costly, if not impossible without demolition. Mosaic has become the favorite medium for community public art in Chicago because it does not fade. Still, I mourn the losses.

The loss of the early murals has little to do with their real or perceived aesthetic quality but everything to do with the short life span of urban America, as neighborhoods change and property changes hands. A new owner commonly either has no identification with the mural or sees the wall as simply a rental space. Walker's great *Peace and Salvation: The Wall of Understanding*, 1970, the first masterpiece of the mural movement, after lasting almost twenty-five years, was destroyed to provide an advertising space (Figures 1 and 2). One of Richard Haas's heroic Chicago murals is likewise half covered with advertising. Our greatest losses are to greed.

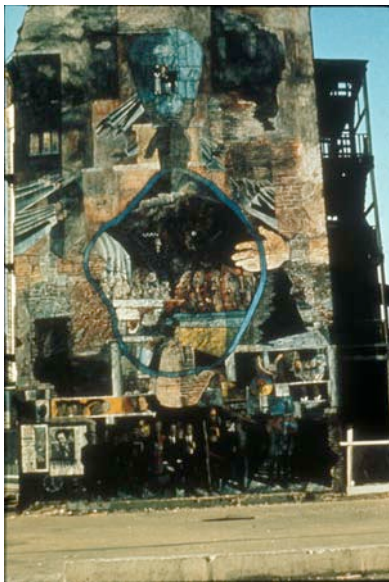


Figure 1 William Walker, *Peace and Salvation: The Wall of Understanding*, 1970. Approx. 60 x 40 ft. Locust and Orleans streets, Chicago. Sponsored by Community Mural Program, Chicago Public Art Group; reproduced courtesy of the artist. *Photo*: John Pitman Weber.



Figure 2 The same wall seen in Figure 1, in 2003; mural destroyed, replaced by advertisement. *Photo*: John Pitman Weber.

Caton's poetic *Philosophy of the Spiritual*, 1972, was hidden by a building; his *Nationtime*, 1971, was demolished. His collaborations with Jones, *In Defense of Ignorance* and *Ceremonies for Heritage Now*, both from the late 1970s, were painted over. My 1970 *Wall of Choices* was sandblasted, and *The Builders* made way for a McDonald's. Just a wall to sandblast. No notice given. *People of Lakeview*, at Barry and Sheffield avenues, was twice saved by the quick action of neighbors, but it was finally removed between midnight on a Saturday and the next Sunday morning.

Despite the relative impermanence of paint exposed to sun, despite North American winters and acidic urban atmospheres, the ultimate danger is that a mural outlasts the community consensus that it originally reflected and helped shape. Many of the lost murals celebrated the ethnic and class diversity that are quickly disappearing in condo-ized areas. A few murals explicitly addressed housing problems, as did Mark Rogovin's only masterpiece, *Break the Grip of the Absentee Landlord*, an example of late Siqueiroesque graphic style. Only a blank wall remains (Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3 Mark Rogovin, *Break the Grip of the Absentee Landlord*, 1973. Approx. 40 x 60 ft. 5219 West Madison Street, Chicago. Reproduced courtesy of the artist. Photo: John Pitman Weber.



Figure 4 The same wall seen in Figure 3, in 2003. Photo: John Pitman Weber.

All of the community murals, like any other public art, whether abstract or figurative, assert moral claims to public space, claims concerning the history, identity, and possible future of the surrounding area. Developers may prefer a blank slate, without the cultural or thematic specificities of the existing art. Thus, art may become an important symbolic element in struggles over public space, a point of contention and a rallying point. My 1976 mural *Together Protect the Community* (known as *Tilt*) was a locus of contention for several years between residents, the Chicago Park District, and a town house developer (Figures 5–7).



Figure 5 John Pitman Weber, *Together Protect the Community*, 1976; shown in degraded condition in spring 2003. Approx. 16 x 100 ft. Fullerton and Washtenaw avenues, Chicago. Reproduced courtesy of the artist. Photo: John Pitman Weber.



Figure 6 *Together Protect the Community* in restoration, August 2003. Photo: John Pitman Weber.



Figure 7 Restoration team for *Together Protect the Community* (left to right): Kristal Pacheco, Damon Lamar Reed, and John Pitman Weber. Photo: John Pitman Weber.

Developers have viewed existing murals as disposable. Municipal establishments perhaps never viewed them as anything but temporary, quick dress-ups that could also be cheaply removed. We muralists have, in our cynical or lucid moments, thought that murals were sponsored, or at least tolerated, as cheap window dressing for down-at-the-heels areas or interesting adjuncts to ethnic tourism, which happily could also keep restless teenagers busy. Local residents—and students of the urban fabric—saw them instead as much-needed social, aesthetic, and civic landmarks in the city's shifting human geography. *Razem*, 1975, now severely weathered, is Chicago's only Polish-theme mural. Designed by Caryl Yasko, it is also threatened by encroaching gentrification.

Gentrification has been proceeding rapidly throughout large swaths of Chicago. The earlier started, the greater the loss. All but one of the dozen-plus Lakeview murals are long gone, along with most of the blue-collar and immigrant population. All the murals on the once-depressed, now-leveled Near West Side are gone, as are those of Lincoln Park and of Uptown.

In 1968 in Pilsen, Mario Castillo painted what was possibly the first outdoor Chicano mural in the country, a lively abstraction entitled *Peace*. The following year he painted *The Wall of Brotherhood* on the side of a local bank. Castillo's two early outdoor murals are long gone, victims of the gentrification of East Pilsen. Others, after aging gracefully for over twenty years, are beginning to show severe losses as they approach age thirty. They need restoration soon if they are to survive. *All of Mankind* by William Walker, 1972, the only mural left in Cabrini Green, is an example. Cabrini, long a notorious public housing area, now mostly leveled, is being replaced by upscale town homes. *All of Mankind* survives only because it is on a church.

Private property: I have referred repeatedly to the problems posed by the location of many of the early murals on private property. Only in the nineties have significant opportunities to decorate schools or park district buildings become available. Early murals were on owner-occupied buildings or on settlement houses or churches. Or—as the now-faded masterpiece by Caton, Jones, and DeVan, *Time to Unite*—on abandoned railway abutments. At the time, the lack of municipal involvement was often an advantage. There were—and in Chicago there still

are—no governmental permissions to delay work. On the other hand, there is also no recourse, no requirement for notification, such as nominally required by California law. A few artists early on used one-dollar-per-year leases. Normally these ran for only five years and were voided upon sale. With few exceptions, a new owner removes existing murals. Or, less commonly, a new director of a center, without personal connection to the art, will remove a mural.

Murals are also lost through politics, as were all of Nicaragua's murals of the 1980s, as part of regime change. At the time that the mural *Homenaje a la Mujer (Homage to Woman)* by Alejandro Canales was painted over in 1990, it was ten years old, in need of a wash (not a whitewash!), a bit faded, but otherwise in good condition (David Kunzle, *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979–1992* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995], p. 94). Its fate was sealed by its symbolic portrayal of the literacy campaign.

Community public art practice was created to function as a public space for symbolic free speech in the neighborhoods—a space for expression created and leveraged by the various social activist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a space that has been narrowed or closed in the years following. The practice of contrasting problem or negative imagery with positive imagery was widespread in the 1970s. It was commonly observed that the negative imagery had a force, specificity, and conviction sometimes lacking in the more general, wishful, positive images. Critical imagery virtually disappeared after 1980 and was increasingly replaced by celebrations of ethnicity or historical themes.

In the case of both the Works Progress Administration (WPA) murals and the contemporary murals, perceived political content has been a major determinant of what survives and of what gets painted in the first place. In both cases, self-censorship, in response to the threat of direct censorship, was the mechanism for adaptation to changing political climates and political fashions.

Why wasn't Walker's *Delbert Tibbs/New Trial or Freedom, 1977*, saved? It was a composition of monumental dignity and that great rarity, a true historical document. Its wall was torn out to make space for a coffee shop, as part of the renovation of a commuter rail station.

It was the all-affirmative consensus version of community public art that spread throughout the country during the 1980s, to suburbs, to smaller cities, and to small towns. Its rhetoric was adopted by virtually every form of public art program, including those least likely to actually allow community input or participation or, for that matter, painted murals. The trough of the Reagan presidency was followed by a period of renewed funding and fresh demand for art in schools, transit, and parks, all under the control of local bureaucrats, all eager to exclude controversial imagery—with consequences for the chances of saving murals from the pre-Reagan era.

The double mural collaboration of William Walker and Mitchell Caton on Forty-seventh Street, Chicago, 1975, titled *Man's Inhumanity to Man* and *Daydreaming Nightmare*, is weathered but still readable. This striking antidrug mural, on a street that was once a focus of shopping and nightlife in the old Bronzeville, is on our priority list. The current alderwoman, however, has opposed restoration of the mural, supposedly because years earlier it scared her daughter. It has been observed that this was part of the point. Her goal is to make Forty-seventh Street a blues fantasy tourist district. The Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG)—an independent artists' group that I cofounded with Bill Walker over thirty years ago—succeeded in restoring the mural in the summer of 2003.

Where Murals Are Saved

Some part of the local elites have supported preservation. Popular concern is not enough to prevent destruction. One of the restored Bronzeville murals, Caton and Jones's *Another Time's Voice Remembers My Passion's Humanity*, 1979, on the Donnelley Youth Center, was included in the center's plan for a sculpture play park (Figures 8 and 9). The gentrification of Bronzeville (the old South Side Black Belt) has been led by black entrepreneurs and black politicians, some of whom see the now-almost-historic black murals of the 1970s as a plus.

The Bronzeville murals retained almost all of their original popular prestige, and most have never been marked by graffiti. All the restorations were done by the CPAG. Olivia Gude initiated

the restorations in 1992. Bernard Williams, an active muralist, has done most of the restoration, with the original artists as advisors.



Figure 8 Mitchell Caton and Calvin Jones, *Another Time's Voice Remembers My Passion's Humanity*, 1979; shown faded circa 1990. Approx. 20 x 40 ft. Donnelley Youth Center, 3947 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago. Reproduced courtesy of the artists. *Photo*: John Pitman Weber.



Figure 9 *Another Time's Voice Remembers My Passion's Humanity*, restored by Bernard Williams, 1991, with the support of Donnelley Youth Center, Chicago Public Art Group, and Open Lands Project. *Photo*: John Pitman Weber.

History of the Packing House Worker, by William Walker, 1975—a classic mural on the former Packing House Union Hall, now a Chicago Park District building—was restored as part of building reuse.

Current CPAG artists could agree on these works, as part of our own institutional heritage. Up until 1992, any restoration work was simply done by the original artist, usually in response to a defacement, a rare event in Chicago. Since then, we have restored ten murals, chosen by opportunity and consensus, approximately one per year, using a scrounged-up grab bag of private and public funds. Our losses, however, have been much greater.

Builders of the Cultural Present, by Caton and Jones, 1980, on a South Shore commercial building, was restored in the summer of 2002. You will have noticed some color variation in the restored mural. In some cases, the original artists may choose to make alterations or updates. We find that practice to be no less valid than that of Yeats revising his poems. Repainting does not embalm a mural: it gives it another twenty years as living art.

Why Repainting Makes Sense

The cost, over a twenty-year lifetime, assuming the wall is in reasonable condition and the roof and flashings are well maintained, compares well to the cost of maintaining outdoor sculpture. Chicago's large Oldenburg and Calder pieces needed over \$200,000 worth of care after only twenty years. Anything left outdoors will need some maintenance. Repainting, as opposed to consolidation of the faded remains, often involves some variation in color, since the color has to be based on slides and memory, which themselves may be inaccurate. The argument about the artist's hand is less convincing, because brushstroke is not a significant part of expression at monumental scale. Many of the murals, following historical tradition, were collaborations and were executed collectively.

Among the few remaining 1970s Chicano murals: the magnificent and original Benito Juárez mural by Jaime Longoria and others. Despite the artist's use of a graphic style inspired by monster comix (perhaps with more than a touch of the Hokusai manga), this mural was never popular with teenagers. It was marked early. Restored once, it has since been marked again. The problem of restoration is not just funding. Outdoor work is exposed day and night to direct-action criticism. How does artwork become and remain public, entering into the consciousness of the audience, not only as image but also as meaning—what Bruce Campbell calls its publicity. That is a process achieved through dialogue with the audience, whether carried on in the daily press, as it was by Rivera and Siqueiros, or in community forums, face-to-face on the street or in an open workshop, or in all those at once. Achieving this level of public awareness and acceptance is key to a mural's remaining unmarked for twenty years on the street. The restoration process must engage the local audience if it is to succeed.

A contrasting example is that of my mural *Unidos para Triunfar/Together We Overcome*, first painted in 1971 and massively defaced the following autumn. We had included gang colors but had overlooked one group. When we repainted the mural almost three years later, the painting was significantly revised, and, I believe, improved, both thematically and compositionally, made more compact, dense, and architecturally integrated, with chiaroscuro imitated from

Walker. Also, the tams—berets with gang-identified colors—were omitted, and the coffin of a key community organizer, killed by police in the interim, was added. In the ensuing twenty-seven years, the mural was never touched again. I reference this example not for its aesthetic value but for its illustration of the importance of understanding context and involving the community and the original artist. Much more than mere conservation was involved—and necessarily so. Simple restoration of the original would not have saved the mural. Revision was essential, based on in-depth consultation and wide-ranging discussions, with the original artist and the local community sponsors playing central roles.

Will There Be Something to Save?

Jean Charlot scolded us, in the mid-1970s, for “your apparently casual concern as regards the preservation of your murals” (Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James Cockcroft, *Toward a People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, 2d ed. [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998], p. xvii). “Clear though your motives are to yourselves,” he wrote, “a time may come when onlookers will have lost the key to their meaning. For the very reason that your murals document strictly contemporary attitudes, they deserve to last and enter history, as medieval shrines did, as Mexican murals do.” He urged us to try to guarantee the survival of at least examples, in order to pass on the idea of a socially engaged public art. He advised us to switch to ceramic tile for outdoor murals and to fresco for indoor murals. At the time, however, we had limited resources available with which to sustain and develop a popular art form. Our activity enabled the idea of community public art to take root, but today, as Charlot predicted, we face the loss of all the public work of a whole generation of muralists.

How Long Does It Take to Gain Heritage Status?

When did WPA murals become objects for conservation? The deliberate destruction or covering up of the 1930s murals, at its height during the McCarthy era, had largely stopped by the 1970s. By age forty, formerly controversial murals could be revalued as part of the common heritage. At

fifty they could be celebrated, as Detroit celebrated its Rivera murals in 1986; they could be separated from their original context. At just ten years, they were no longer in style aesthetically, and their social and political context was still too remembered, too fresh to be forgiven. The community murals today are still in the awkward years.

I employed this exact argument to convince my college, Elmhurst, to preserve our oldest mural, painted in 1972, when a major renovation forced its removal in 1999. The mural, *For the Harmony of Man and Nature*, was cut into sections, moved to a new location, reassembled, and extensively repainted. My chief assistant went on to paint her own first mural the following year.

At present, we lack programs to inventory surviving murals and lack funds to do archival documentation and renovation. Only two major cities, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, have any ongoing, funded program to conserve outdoor painted murals. Only Los Angeles, to my knowledge, has ever made an expert survey of existing outdoor murals, identifying the most significant (by both aesthetic and social criteria) and the most vulnerable. The advocacy of the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles, seconded by the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), was crucial. The conservancy was founded to save a Kent Twitchell mural, but as it developed under the leadership of Robin Dunitz, it became an advocate for all the murals. Every city with a public art collection needs such an independent group of friends of public art. As a result of efforts by the conservancy and SPARC, all the murals in Los Angeles are considered part of the city's collection. This governmental commitment came with a price, however: a complex process of prior permissions is required for any new painting visible from the public way (which is presumably not required, however, for billboards).

In Chicago the city recognizes only art on city property and then, only art commissioned directly. But even then, the art must be recognized as having value. Walker's 1980 Altgeld Gardens Parent/Child Center mural, his only 1-percent-for-the-arts commission, was painted over about two years ago, I have learned, apparently at the behest of the center's director.

Hope from Philadelphia

In the recent, handsome book *Philadelphia Murals*, a former city official is quoted, “You have to shift your resources into preservation. If you think murals are art, you’ve got an imperative. Real art is preserved” (Jan Golden, Robin Rice, and Monica Yang Kinney, *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002], p. 93). If it were only so. The quote underlines the ambiguous status of public art and especially of outdoor public art. Last January I watched the 1999 Market Street mural being demolished. It was painted by David McShane with local youth and addressed their hopes for access to education. Its destruction perhaps tells a truer story about government intentions. Nonetheless, the public commitment of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program to restore at least ten murals a year should encourage all lovers of mural art. Perhaps there is still time to save some of the painted walls.

John Pitman Weber

John Pitman Weber, along with William Walker, in 1970 cofounded the Chicago Mural Group, now the Chicago Public Art Group. He is the author, with Eva and James Cockcroft, of *Towards a People's Art*, the classic account of the early years of the contemporary mural movement, reissued in 1998 by the University of New Mexico Press. In 2000 he and Nina Smoot-Cain led Iowa's contribution to the project called Artists and Communities: America Creates for the Millennium—a mosaic plaza for Spencer, Iowa, entitled *The Gathering: of Time, of Land, of Many Hands*. In 1993 Weber painted the mural *Toward Freedom* for the Valley Cities Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles, as part of the Social and Public Art Resource Center's Great Walls project. Also active in the studio, Weber has had thirty solo exhibitions, including five in New York.