

## De-muralizing a church *As Stranger's Home Baptist Church goes up for sale, its mural is at risk of being lost*

By **MELISSA ALBERT**, Contributing Writer

Though the mural covering the Stranger's Home Baptist Church, at 617 W. Evergreen, has faded over time, its scope and beauty still have the power to stagger. It pervades every inch of the church's front, weathered to a hauntingly grayed palette.

Titled "All of Mankind," it was painted from 1971 to 1972 by muralist William Walker. The central image is of four merged figures clasp hands. Though the passing of the last three and a half decades has obscured some details, it's still apparent that the figures are intended to be of African American, Asian, Caucasian, and Latino descent. Massed on each side are rows of shadowed onlookers, and just below the church's peak are the names of iconic people (Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy) and events (My Lai, Kent State), as well as a row of symbols representing the major world religions.

Walker was an established artist when he created the mural, having painted the famous "Wall of Respect" in 1967. While the building holding the latter piece was damaged and demolished in 1971, "All of Mankind" has survived the church's change of ownership, the shifting tides of neighborhood residents and identity, and the razing and redevelopment of much of the nearby Cabrini Green projects. But recently the church, which dates from the early 20th century, was put up for sale. Walker's supporters now fear that the building will be torn down for the land it sits on.

The Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG; cpag.net), and its executive director, Jon Pounds, are at the helm of efforts to preserve the mural. Says Pounds, "If we're going to save it, now is the time." He considers it to be a masterpiece in both an artistic and a cultural sense.



*Photos by Frank Pinc*  
Rather than stained glass, the mural at Stranger's Home Baptist Church decorates the entire facade of the church.



Bringing attention to the way Walker eschews foreshortening, presenting everything on the same flattened plane, Pounds says, "He brings everything forward for consideration. He literally says 'everything here is worthy of consideration.'"

Walker's use of text, too, was a fairly unusual practice for public art at that time. In offering unembellished words, says Pounds, "he called on us to supply our own images," asking viewers to acknowledge their own cultural awareness and, perhaps, triggering social conscience. "It's not simply the names," he says, "but the way the names are listed, with different typefaces and different positions." They can't be read as a litany; each is seen and absorbed.

Walker is now in his early 80s, living on the city's South Side. He's one of the founders of CPAG, which was originally known as the Chicago Mural Group. John Pitman Weber, an artist and Walker's CPAG cofounder, met the muralist in the late '60s or early '70s. Not long after, they had a show together at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, which inspired them to form a group dedicated to providing impetus and funding for public artists. The Chicago Mural Group was founded in 1972 and renamed in the '80s, as the organization began to oversee more and more non-mural art.

"All of Mankind" is one of only a handful of Chicago murals left from the early '70s, and now is a precarious time for public art from that era. "They're too recent to be forgotten and forgiven, but not quite old enough for everybody to want to save them," Pitman Weber says. He considers Walker to be a valued mentor, and the ideological son of a line of great artists.

"He had a connection with the classical tradition in a way that most of us didn't," he says. But he also recalls Walker's practice of working at night, by street lamps, in order to encounter the kind of characters and street culture he wouldn't see during the day.

While Walker's art dealt with racism and cultural unity, "he steadfastly refused to separate the black struggle from that of humankind," says Pitman Weber. "He didn't engage in any kind of us versus them rhetoric...the us versus them that he showed was black people and their allies of various colors against the forces of evil."

It's this prescience, this message of unity, that has kept the mural from becoming obsolete.

"He has created a piece of iconography that we're not done with," says Pounds. "Our social conscience, our cultural mind, still is trying to figure out our relationship with each other." And beyond the meaning and the richness of Walker's creation, the fact remains that it is simply a beautiful piece of art, a strange and stunning sight in a newly-minted area. An urban neighborhood needs "a layering, a presence of the past as well as the present and future," says Pitman Weber, and this is the presence that "All of Mankind" gives.

What it comes down to, he says, is this: "Are we willing to remove this half acre from the redevelopment plan?"

## Reader Comments

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Posted: Friday, February 22, 2008

Article comment by: **James Prigoff**

All of Mankind is one of the great murals that have have been painted in public soace in the last 40 years. William Walker is one of the most outstanding muralists to paint in the US. It would be an artistic ntragedy to lose this great piece of public art. It must be saved.

Posted: Thursday, February 21, 2008

Article comment by: **Jon Pounds**

Supporters of this effort should contact [Coalition@cpag.net](mailto:Coalition@cpag.net) to add their name.

There are two small details that bear correction.

- 1) Bill Walker conceived of and painted on the Wall of Respect. The full mural was credited to the artists of OBAC, of which Bill was one.
- 2) The Stranger's Home church is currently adjoining the CHA redevelopment footprint, and so is not "in" the redevelopment plan (yet).