

## **Timeless church mural now running out of time**

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January 30, 2008

Jon Pounds traipsed through the winter mud and goose dung Tuesday morning to look up at the front wall of the little brick church the way an entomologist might gaze at an endangered butterfly.

"It's now or never for this piece," he said.

If you've driven down Clybourn or Larrabee near what's left of the Cabrini-Green housing project, you can't have missed the Northside Stranger's Home Church. It startles. It mystifies.

In a neighborhood pulsing with bulldozers and construction crews, the small church with the giant mural has managed to stand untouched, on an island of concrete and brittle grass, looking as lonely and alluring as a lighthouse.

The mural is faded now, its reds and yellows battered by sun and snow, but it's otherwise in good shape.

"Is there any graffiti on this piece?" said Pounds, who wears his gray hair in a short braided pigtail. "No. Thirty-five years, and no graffiti. That's a real testament to the power of the piece."

But a for-sale sign recently went up on another of the church's walls, the one that faces east toward the brand-new "eco-condos." If the mural's lovers don't act fast, Chicago is apt to gain a few more kitchens with granite countertops and lose a piece of art that Pounds believes is every bit as valuable as the Picasso sculpture in the Loop.

In 1972, an African-American artist named William Walker climbed some scaffolding and began to paint this 1901 church next door to Cabrini-Green.

Chicago at the time was considered one of the most racist cities in America, and Cabrini had devolved into a lethally troubled place, isolated from the rest of the city and occupied almost exclusively by African-Americans.

But on Walker's church wall, people lived in equality and harmony. He painted four large figures merging into each other, clasping hands. One was black, one white, one Asian, one Latino.

Just below the roof's cross, in big letters, he inscribed: Why Were They Crucified.

Names followed: Jesus, Gandhi, Dr. King, Anne Frank, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy and more, along with names of such events as My Lai and Kent State.

The mural was entitled "All of Mankind."

"It represents our worst acts," said Pounds, "and individuals who have called on us to be our best."

People who weren't alive in that era might not understand the mural's shorthand history. But that's one reason to keep the mural, to connect the city to its vanishing past.

"It preaches brotherhood, speaks of inclusion," said Lee Bey when I phoned. "That message was important when it was painted, but even more important as a new community is built there."

Bey -- once the Chicago Sun-Times' architecture critic -- belongs to the Chicago Public Art Group, which Pounds leads. He offers two other reasons to keep the mural.

One: "It's a fantastic piece of art."

Two: "William Walker is a muralist extraordinaire."

Walker became famous when he masterminded a South Side mural called "The Wall of Respect." That 1967 mural, which depicted African-American heroes, spurred an outdoor community mural movement in Chicago. The movement spread around the world.

Walker, who is 80 now, is said to live quietly on the South Side. But "The Wall of Respect" is gone, and the church painting is one of only three Walker murals surviving in Chicago.

Losing this one, said Pounds, would be like "tearing out a piece of our soul."

The mural lovers want the church's congregation to get a fair deal on the sale, and a church spokeswoman said church members hope the mural will be saved. The mystery is how.

"I want to call on the city to make this imaginative leap," said Pounds. He glanced toward one of the last Cabrini high-rises, scheduled for demolition. "This piece is an artifact of a time. There's not much else that remains."

The church isn't big, and it doesn't take up a lot of land. But the mural is a big symbol, of a time when hope really was audacious. We should save it.

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