

Arts/Entertainment

Downtown art: Mural would be conspicuous for years to come

GREENFIELD — Most Greenfield residents didn't pay attention to the proposed mural at Veterans Mall until the past week, when the plan suddenly aroused controversy. Now we are all being given a second chance to express our opinions at a forum this Wednesday at 7 p.m. at Greenfield High School. If the public doesn't voice an opinion at this time, then we can't complain when we find ourselves looking at a large and conspicuous work of art that will have a dominant place in our downtown for years to come.

The forum was arranged by the Greenfield Board of Selectmen to gather community input on the mural. Town Manager Norman E. Thidemann will moderate.

What is a mural? It is often artwork painted on the side of a building — usually large scale, occasionally brightly colored, often highlighting a particular artist's style. A mural can be a way of adding new life to a rundown building or neighborhood; it can emphasize a new use for an urban space; it can decorate a vacant lot.

A mural can enhance new architecture as well as cover up a crumbling edifice or poorly renovated structure. Often walls exposed by adjacent demolition are brightened up with the addition of this painting. A good mural can be a plus for a cityscape.

Painted images on the exterior walls of buildings have more than one name. When the building's owner or community has commissioned the artist, we call this work a mural or public art. When it is added to public or private property without official sanction, then we call it vandalism or graffiti art. When artists want this official sanction, there should be an obvious and simple method to obtain it.

The two women who have been attempting to create a mural for the town of Greenfield have tried to coordinate a project that the community would appreciate. Local participation in the creative process was also a primary objective. For many reasons, plans have not proceeded smoothly.

Representing the "Institute for Cultural Understanding," Colrain resident Rebekka Tippens was inspired by the work of mural artist Janet Braun-Reinitz of New York, when the two met in the Soviet Union during a cultural exchange program involving young people. An historical theme was chosen to honor our past and endeavor to make us aware of what we have lost, or are in danger of losing from our local heritage. She conceived this project with Braun-Reinitz in mind, expecting that local talent and possible coordination with Greenfield's sister city in the U.S.S.R. also would play a part. She located a building and was given permission by its owner, an Amherst resident.

Tippens felt she had the community support for this project, as well as the official permission she needed. The artist's design was put on display in the Greenfield Public Library for residents' input. Additions and changes were made

Art Scene

Ilze Meijers



The public may express opinions about the mural at a forum Wednesday.

in response to suggestions, which were offered by those interested enough to comment. Research was done with the help of the historical society.

Braun-Reinitz feels that her design preserved "the intrinsic dignity of the space." The project, financed by the Business Fund for the Arts and local fund-raising as well as a donation of special mural paint, which was arranged by the artist, would involve no public funds.

The two women hoped to create a "participatory process" and planned to culminate the event with a dedication ceremony involving visiting children from the U.S.S.R. Although Braun-Reinitz arrived in Greenfield last week expecting to begin the actual physical work of painting, several delays have put the project itself in doubt.

It is frustrating just listening to the steps that Tippens has taken to initiate this project and the attempts she had made to go by the rules and not step on any toes. Her problems seem to arise primarily from the lack of a proper agency in our community to deal with something as important as public art. Should this really be under the jurisdiction of the building inspector or the board of selectmen?

Downtown Greenfield — despite some thoughtless demolitions, poorly throughout renovations, and the occasional "sore-thumb" architecture — still has a cohesive quality and has retained its unique architectural charm. The space where the mural would be added is of a certain mood and style. It is important that all this be maintained. It could easily be spoiled by a few inappropriate changes to the streetscape.

But who should be responsible for supervising these changes? In some towns, preservation commissions oversee districts or entire communities. In other cities, architectural review boards must approve drastic changes in the appearance of historic buildings and neighborhoods. Should Greenfield have an agency to deal with such things?

The currently proposed mural might only be the beginning of changes that could affect the total look of our downtown, for better or worse. This particular project has been delayed by con-

sidering it as a possible "sign." Some proposals might not be dealt with so easily and could slip through unnoticed. And once they are in place it is legally difficult to remove public art works. Since no one in the architectural community seemed interested, and the local arts council felt they had no say over such a project, should we see to it that someone takes control over the esthetic integrity of our town — before it is out of control.

As to whether this specific mural design is appropriate for Greenfield, that is a matter for the community to comment on Wednesday.

There is no question that Janet Braun-Reinitz is a respected and prolific muralist. Her color portfolio of designs and commissions is impressive. Comparing her typical designs with this one makes one aware that she seems to have adapted her usual bold graphic style in an attempt to be more "folksy" for our small town.

The resulting pastiche has combined three basic design elements: It is dominated by large painted "photos" of historic Greenfield places, angled like snapshots on a bulletin board. A border inspired by cross-stitch samplers and patchwork quilts has squares of generic-looking images that are meant to relate to life in Greenfield, both past and present. And a bright background landscape with river and trees also shows a realistically rendered family unit that appears to have escaped from an old grade school primer.

This is a design that has tried to focus specifically on our small town and please everyone. Although she toned down her colors, they are still much brighter than anything downtown Greenfield usually chooses. The esthetic decision to ignore the numerous windows on the wall proposed for the mural has also been questioned.

It will be impossible to please everyone, of course. But whether or not this design is appropriate for this spot in Greenfield is a decision too important to be made by the few casual passersby who did volunteer their opinions to the artist at the site last week.

Does Greenfield have an arts and architecture community? Why didn't these people, educated and influential in matters esthetic, take notice and express themselves before so much time had been wasted to create this project? Who is going to take charge of these decisions in the future?

The open discussion Wednesday evening should prove to be the first step in answering this and many other questions. A policy can be established. Now is the opportunity for those who should be involved — artists, architects, landscape designers and urban planners — to lend their expertise to the community.

And the people who have worked so hard to give this town the gift of a mural may be giving the town much more. We may get a permanent solution to the problem of how to deal with such issues in the future, even if we do not get a mural at this time.