

Muralists ready to tackle the big picture

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Abby Metty/The Oregonian

Starting next month, the city will regulate murals separately from signs, which city officials hope will encourage more artists to replace dead walls with splashy, vibrant art. The top photo on the cover is from a mural by Isaka Shamsud-Din on the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Shaver Street.

This artsy city's mute walls may soon start to speak in splashes of color and vibrant designs -- love letters from artists to neighborhoods.

Starting next month, muralists will be free of the city's sign code, which for years regulated wall art with the same demanding standards as billboards advertising everything from shoes to soft drinks. Now, all an artist has to do to paint a mural is plunk down \$250, get permission from a building owner and notify the neighbors.

"It's been a really long haul," said muralist Joe Cotter, who led the fight to drop murals from the sign code. "We now have a legal classification that murals exist as an art form. The fact that it even came to that point, that art was equivalent to signs, is appalling."

The tussle between muralists and the city has dragged on for more than a decade. Both sides think the city's new policy will resolve a key question that has played out in multiple court briefs: Is it possible to encourage art without illegally restricting advertising and, by extension, free speech?

"Some people feel our city is beautiful and we don't want to have ugly billboards everywhere," said Joanne Oleksiak of Portland Mural Defense. "This debate over murals and signage is a very important one, and how it gets resolved is going to be looked at in other cities."

Before 1991, all that muralists needed to paint was the consent of building owners, many of whom sought out artists to liven up their walls. Some artwork was overtly political; much of it amounted to inoffensive displays of neighborhood life. Murals sprouted in neighborhoods all over the city.

Isaka Shamsud-Din painted one of the oldest ones, on the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Shaver Street, depicting King and other prominent black Americans. Teenage apprentices helped Shamsud-Din paint the 70-by-20-foot mural, which took the summer and fall of 1989. That mural and another he painted featuring the Vanport flood have been anthologized in several art books.

Commercial challenge

Murals are different from other art forms, Shamsud-Din said. "You're not just blowing up a picture, you're using geography, you're using architecture. You're playing off the whole streetscape there, trying to affect the people who come into contact with it -- their emotions, their spirit."

But billboard companies wondered why muralists didn't have to follow the same rules they did. Clear Channel, Portland's largest billboard company, sued the city in 1998, saying the Oregon Constitution's free speech clause protected commercial and noncommercial speech. The city imposed a mural moratorium, then decided to regulate them as signs.

Then-Mayor Vera Katz searched for a way to encourage public art without flooding the city with ads. In 2005, the city essentially turned mural decisions over to the Regional Arts and Culture Council. That led to the creation of at least 25 murals, but the group's high standards meant amateur artists and some community groups couldn't pass the vetting process.

Both Clear Channel and the city appealed parts of the original lawsuit. Eventually, a Circuit Court judge ruled that murals could be treated differently. That led to last week's City Council decision.

Clear Channel, which has appealed the ruling to the Oregon Court of Appeals, declined to comment.

Other cities -- Philadelphia, San Francisco, even Estacada -- have established vibrant mural programs through artists' cooperatives or government financing. Portlanders can get passionate about signs -- witness the uproar over the University of Oregon's attempt to change the "Made in Oregon" sign on the White Stag building -- but there isn't a charismatic spokesperson for the muralist community.

The squabbling among muralists, the city and the billboard industry has largely played out in court, far from the attention of council members and the media. When the Oregon Ballet Theatre needed to plug a \$750,000 hole in its budget this spring, a well-publicized charity gala raised the money in one night. Muralists, by contrast, have spent their own money on legal research and held one fundraiser, in 2004, that solicited donations in amounts of \$10 to \$25.

"I don't want to see our city look like Hong Kong or Las Vegas," said Commissioner Randy Leonard, who threatened to condemn the White Stag sign if UO didn't back down. He and two other council members unanimously approved the new mural rules last week. "But the city went too far, and it clamped down on artistry in the community."

Let the creativity flow

Now, city officials hope the new policy will unleash muralists' creativity. Larry Holmes, president of the Vernon Neighborhood Association, said residents would love to see a mural on the side of Trade Up Music in the Alberta Arts District.

"Murals help establish a neighborhood identity," he said. "They're a rallying point. People feel a sense of ownership, like they're living with art and have something that represents them."

Anjala Ehelebe, who has written a history of the Woodlawn neighborhood, said she felt regret when the mural "Sunny Day," showing children playing underneath trees and a bright yellow sun, was painted over a few years after it went up in 1999. The city's new policy, she said, is a good idea because "a removal of a barrier to create beauty is a good thing."

But the muralists themselves say easing the rules for their artwork doesn't change the fact that it's hard to make a living on a couple of poorly paid commissions. Some community groups may not be able to afford the \$250 permit fee. And a few artists say they miss the free-for-all days when they could create art without oversight.

Tom Cramer, whose colorful, abstract mural is on a now-vacant building on the corner of Shaver Street and Northeast Williams Avenue, said he'll take money from anyone who wants him to paint a mural. But he bridles at the idea of government regulating art.

"With more regulation, there's less freedom," he said. "Murals should be self-regulating, based on how people grow into it and what they like. You're not going to get good art if it doesn't offend someone in some way."

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Portland's new mural policy

- Creates a new chapter in the city code for murals.
- Requires murals to be painted or affixed to a wall.
- Requires murals to be no bigger than 30 feet high.
- Requires murals to stay put for at least five years.
- Requires muralists to apply for a \$250 city permit.
- Requires muralists to notify nearby residents of the proposed mural. But neighbors don't have veto power over content.
- Does not allow murals on walls made of stone or unpainted brick.