

Up against the wall Old murals adorn a doomed building. Can they be saved?

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This image shows detail from a panel of a restored George Snow Hill mural that now hangs at Tampa International Airport.

In July, they lost the battle to save the former home of the historic Garden Cafeteria downtown from a date with the wrecking ball. But with their defeat, local preservationists received one concession: They would be given the chance to save the Depression-era murals inside.

Now, three months after their costly victory, the St. Petersburg Preservation Society is struggling to salvage the legacy left behind by one of Florida's best known Works Progress Administration muralists, George Snow Hill.

"They are among the most important artifacts in the city," said Dr. Ray Arsenault, co-director of the Florida Studies program at the University of South Florida. "It's a real failure of our community if we can't find a way to save it."

Loosely based on a theme of Florida flora and fauna, the murals inside 232 Second St. N once served as a background for patrons of St. Petersburg's cafeteria culture of the 1930s and '40s. Other Hill murals are on display at Tampa International Airport and St. Petersburg City Hall.



George Snow Hill was a Works Progress Administration muralist.

A difficult endeavor

The largest of the cafeteria murals are painted from floor to ceiling directly on the building's interior walls.

According to conservator James Swope, these paintings are in relatively good shape, but are nearly impossible to remove from the walls intact. Other murals are painted on 64 panels of drywall and mounted underneath windows.

These are easier to remove, but are in bad condition and of lesser value because they were likely painted by one of Hill's assistants. They'll need restoration work that could cost thousands.

Then there's the matter of disassembling, storing, and displaying the panels and large sections of wall. Preservation Society members say they have contacted area museums and construction engineers, but thus far there have been few offers to help.

"This is all new to me," said Will Michaels, president of the St. Petersburg Preservation Society and retired executive director of the St. Petersburg Museum of History. "Typically our focus is on preserving buildings. This is the first time we've ever been involved in a mural project."

Michaels led opposition to plans for the development of the Sonata, a 19-story mixed-use high-rise building that will replace the existing two-story structure. Despite its being part of the Downtown National Historic District, and protests from nearby residents and preservationists, the Environmental Development Commission voted 5 to 0 last April to approve the new development. The St. Petersburg City Council denied an appeal on July 12; however, council members required developers Grady Pridgen and Dan Harvey to allow preservationists time to remove the murals.

"The building has sat empty for years and is in disrepair. We had hoped to be able to salvage some parts of it, but it doesn't look like that is going to be possible," said Honey Rand, a representative for Grady Pridgen Inc.

Saving them somehow

With the building's apparent loss, preservationists are taking steps to save some semblance of the murals. They are trying to hire a photographer to take documentary photographs of the artwork.

Others have initiated a proposal to have photographs taken of small portions of murals that can't be saved in order to recreate images on mosaics of 6-inch tiles inside the future Sonata building. Mandy Minor, a co-founder of the St. Pete Creative Network, has spearheaded this effort.

"The cafeteria culture was a big part of St. Pete history. After this there's only one other one left; the Tramor" at 123 Fourth St. S, said Minor. "If people have more of a concrete connection with this area, they will care more about the direction it's moving instead of paving it all over."