

The Rules for a Successful Mural Project

1. Do NOT paint on unpainted masonry. Use a paneling system instead.
2. If the surface is stuccoed, go ahead and paint directly on the surface, but prepare the surface first.
3. Do not paint over historically significant murals, even if they are faded or a new business is going in the building. New signage can be incorporated without damaging the ghost sign.
4. Do not "over restore" historic wall signs.

For more information on mural location, content, etc., please download this [presentation](#).

Mural Considerations from a Design Perspective

July 2013 Main Street Matters

Article written by Audrey Holt, Project Design Assistant, Texas Main Street Program

A mural can be an exciting and beautiful addition to downtown when carefully planned and executed. Murals are desired for many reasons: to act as a gateway or entrance to downtown, to brighten and add color to a location, to advertise a business or product, to depict a city/region's heritage, or to tell a story. When done well, a mural can accomplish many of these things as well as foster a sense of community involvement. Choosing the right surface, materials, and artists are key design issues to consider in ensuring a successful mural project.

Choosing the right surface

An ideal surface for a mural is an already plastered or stuccoed wall with a very smooth texture. If the existing texture is not very smooth, a mural that does not have a significant amount of small detail is suggested. In a simpler mural, the texture is not as important. It is possible to apply products to make the wall surface smoother in the higher detail areas. The wall should be cleaned (no sandblasting at all or power washing over 200 psi) and primed before the mural is begun. Ensure that after cleaning the surface is allowed to dry completely before priming or painting. A wall with loose paint or extensive cracking is not a good candidate, as these are indicative of serious issues that will likely carry over onto the mural, even if repaired before the mural is begun. If there is an existing coating on the surface that cannot be removed, proceed with caution as it may not be compatible with the paint to be used. It is usually a good idea to test the wall's pH levels which

measures the acidity or alkalinity of the surface if any issues are suspected. Inspect the wall to ensure that there are not visible moisture issues. If there are moisture issues on a wall, this moisture will be very detrimental to the longevity of a mural. Metal walls can also be a good candidate for a mural surface. Choosing a north facing, or otherwise shaded wall, will help minimize fading.

A brick surface that has not previously been painted should not have a mural painted on it. Painting masonry creates an ongoing maintenance problem and can potentially cause brick failure. Normally occurring moisture originating from within the building (showering, cooking, even breathing) makes its way through the brick on its way to the atmosphere. To allow for this, brick is designed to breathe so that moisture can pass through the brick and evaporate. When trapped by the layers of paint, moisture buildup causes paint to bubble and peel. After a relatively short period of time this paint failure necessitates the application of a new coat of paint. Moisture trapped within bricks will also directly cause the bricks themselves to deteriorate and fail. In a freeze, the trapped moisture will expand the brick, which can cause cracks as well as the surface of the brick to pop off, a process known as spalling. If a brick surface is already painted, it can be considered for a mural as long as the texture of the brick and the potential decreased longevity of the paint application is taken into account. If an unpainted brick surface is found to be a highly desirable location for a mural, as much surface area as possible should be left unpainted (see the Midland, TX example). This will allow the brick wall to still breathe through the unpainted areas.

In many instances, painting the mural on panels and mounting them to the building is the recommended course of action (see the Bill Haley mural in the spotlight article.) This method leaves the masonry intact and does not risk the building's envelope. Some widely available materials for these panels are marine plywood or sign painters' boards, often known as Crezon board, or even aluminum skinned panels. Before beginning a project, these surfaces must be well prepared according to the manufacturer's instructions, and primed with a compatible primer. The edges and joints of the panels must be sealed and flashed to ensure water does not infiltrate. Panels have an advantage in that they can be painted in a conditioned studio. Conversely, if the mural painting is to be a community event, mount the panel, or series of panels, to the building and start painting. Use an armature or mounting system with rust and corrosion proof metal fasteners to attach the mural panels to the wall. This sets the panels away from the building to allow air to circulate behind so that moisture issues are not created. Drilling into masonry can allow moisture to seep into the brick, and cause the brick, or even the wall, to fail, so fasteners should be installed only through the mortar joints of a masonry building.

Materials

High quality paint is recommended for exterior murals. Exterior house paint (acrylic latex) and artists' quality acrylic paints are popular choices that come in a wide variety of colors, but that may have issues with fading. A harder medium can be added to increase durability. Silicate paints provide a more permanent bond with the surface, and are a good choice, although industrial paints such as auto paint are options that can hold up well to the sun. The most important consideration is that the pigments have high light stability rating (lightfast rating of one is recommended) to limit fading. Titanium oxide white can decrease the colorfastness of the colors it is mixed with; therefore, it should never be used. Florescent paints are also not recommended because of the high potential for fading. Using all paints from the same manufacturer can ensure compatibility. Talking to mural artists and communities with existing murals about what products they have used helps provide accurate information on product longevity. Timing the mural so that the extreme weather conditions are avoided is necessary for proper and long lasting application. Too hot, too cold, or too humid weather conditions can decrease the lifespan of your mural. All colors and products used should be carefully documented in case they are needed for future touch ups, or in case of maintenance issues. Always look into health and safety issues related to the application of all products used for the mural, such as if a vapor mask is recommended. Local paint stores may donate the paint or materials in exchange for recognition. Stencils, charcoal and over-head projection are all design application tools that are helpful. Some of the necessary painting supplies are drop cloths, multiple width brushes, scaffolding or ladders (ensure proper harnessing is taken into account), access to clean water, small cups and large buckets to hold water, paint palettes and tape for straight lines.

Once a mural is complete, sealers can provide protection for a mural. Before application, the pros and cons must be weighed. The most common reasons to desire a sealer are: to protect a mural from fading due to ultraviolet rays from the sun, to provide stain protection due to wear due to touch and dirt, and to allow for ease of cleaning if the mural becomes soiled or tagged with graffiti. Sealers can create very serious issues, such as yellowing, discoloration, clouding, peeling, and the trapping of moisture inside. If a sealer is decided upon it is important to use a breathable sealer that is chemically stable and compatible with the paint used. Before deciding upon a sealer, it is important to fully investigate the options. As when deciding upon paints, talk to other communities or mural artists who have used sealers, and get some recommendations of those applied on projects similar to yours. Contact the sealer's manufacturer for information on the coating's properties and recommended use. Test the sealer on a similar paint and surface, if possible, and assure that the manufacturer's instructions are followed for proper application. It is better not to apply a sealer than to apply one that could damage your mural. It is also important to judge by the location and the amount of direct sunlight received on the mural area if a sealer is even necessary. A tree can be strategically placed to help with shading.

Choosing a design and artist

As mentioned in the Spotlight article, professional mural artists can be used. Another option is a community and volunteer lead mural. The design should have some cultural or historic relevance to the community or building. Designs should be presented to, and approved by, the Main Street Board. A rendering should be created to advertise what the final outcome will look like, as well as a basis for the mural itself. Advertising to the community allows the opportunity to ask for volunteers and increase community involvement.

It helps to have one person in charge of the design and execution, and this person should be an accomplished artist. This person can be in charge of organizing the people painting and finishing the project. The person in charge of design should be able to identify the painters' strengths and specific areas for them to paint based on their talents. However, you may find that these talents are revealed on site and you may want to switch them to different areas based on their talents. If volunteers are used, time blocks should be set up. You may find a few community artists that will ask if they can paint at their own pace, when the group is not working. This can be helpful if they are supervised or know the area they should work on. Kids are good press, but it can be difficult to get them to work for long periods of time, and quality should be carefully controlled. Two consecutive weekends organized for the community to work on the mural is a concentrated time that will keep the excitement level high. It is very possible it will not be done in two weekends, and the person in charge of the design and execution should expect to finish it, asking for additional help as needed. Document the entire process with photographs. Be sure to thank all volunteers and artists at an official city meeting and present them with a token of thanks.