



by Astrid Fuller, from a talk to the Society - March, 1990.

In the summer of 1972, I worked as a volunteer on Caryl Yasko's 55th Street Illinois Central underpass mural entitled "Under City Stone." I was subsequently invited to be a member of the Chicago Mural Group, a multi-socio, multi-national group of artists. In the late fall of 1972, Helaine Billings, Public Relations Director of the Southeast Chicago Commission, asked me to paint the 57th Street underpass and I readily accepted. She had already approached merchants and residents located near the site to provide funds for the mural. The Chicago Mural Group, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, would provide my salary; the Illinois Central would provide insurance.

In the spring of 1973, I submitted a detailed scale drawing of my proposed mural. It hung in Mr. Winston Kennedy's realty office for several weeks, where it was reviewed by the prospective sponsors. My plan was received, I was told, with enthusiasm and with no reservations.

The mural wall is 207.5 feet long. The height underneath the viaduct itself is 10 feet while the eastern panels, curving out into the open air, are approximately 11 feet high. An additional 2 to 3 feet of decorative grill work, which was incorporated into the design, top these outside panels. In all the wall is approximately 2,100 square feet.

At the direction of Marshall Korshak, who was the 5th ward committeeman at the time, the city steam cleaned, wire brushed, and primed the wall. We were ready to begin at the end of June.

I then chalk-lined a grid of one-foot squares. My design was on a scale of 1/2 inch per foot of wall, and with this guide I put up my sketch in charcoal and sealed it

with a fixative. This phase was completed by mid-July.

Fifteen neighborhood children, most of them from 10 to 12 years old, volunteered to help me. Under my direction they did the entire next phase: putting in all the flat colors and working source of light. They were extremely dedicated and hardworking, so eager that I divided them into a morning and afternoon crew so that each could get sufficient attention. This phase was completed toward the end of August though my work continued - often at night, under the well lit viaduct, with the protection of Bill Walker, my mentor and a seminal leader in the mural movement in the United States - into the cold of autumn, as compositional corrections and finishing were accomplished. The mural was completed on November 13, 1973.

(The mural depicts Hyde Park history in many of its various manifestations: poverty and wealth, racism and the struggle for civil rights, the unrest caused by urban renewal and the efforts of the community to stabilize and integrate. It records events - the 1893 World's Fair, removal of the Nike sights, protests against a highway in Jackson Park - and it acknowledges institutions - the University of Chicago, the Chicago Children's Choir, the Court Theater, the architectural heritage of Hyde Park - which have distinguished our community. Ed.)

Public response to the mural was astonishing beginning with the reaction of John Forwalter, art, book, and social critic for the community's major newspaper, *The Hyde Park Herald*. On July 25th, he wrote that seven of the ten mural panels were full of conflict and violence and that no public or private group had the right to so picture the

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community. Two subsequent letters to the editor called for a design change.

I was most concerned, particularly because the I. C. had stipulated in its contract that any controversial mural would have to be removed. I phoned the parents of two of the children who had worked with me, Mr. George Anastoplo and Mrs. Sandra Jacobson, to voice my concerns. After consulting with other parents, neighbors and friends, it was decided that we should ignore the article, that the reaction was atypical, and that the issue would subside. Passers-by, but for a handful, were very positive in their remarks to me.

Hyde Parker Carole Simpson, Channel 5 newscaster, aired the controversy in a 4 or 5 minute evening news report on August 8th, interviewing Mr. Forwalter and me. She ended her coverage by saying: "Some people would say that even though this mural is only half-finished, it is already a success for it makes people think."

I was subsequently interviewed by the Chicago Tribune and a favorable article appeared on August 16th. Meanwhile the Illinois Central laid my fears to rest by publicizing the mural in its commuter bulletin and national magazine. Their only complaint - made privately - was that they were not in the mural though they had played a major part in Hyde Park's early development!

On August 17th, as I was being interviewed in front of the mural by Pat Brown of Channel 7 news, an elderly woman passing by told him at length of her disapproval of my "violent, immature mural." His news report that evening made no mention of her dissension. Rather the segment was introduced by Len O'Connor, then a Hyde Park resident, as a "wall of hope," followed by a montage of Hyde Park and the mural. I spoke of my deep affection and respect for my community. He described me as "trying to record in the mural the heartbeat of mankind in community."

City wide interest in the mural was such that it became a tourist attraction. Sightseeing buses were re-routed, students from the University of Chicago, Roosevelt University, and other schools used me or the mural for class projects, and there was further television and press coverage. The mural, or panels from the mural, have been featured in books and articles and in photo exhibits.

In all, it was a demanding, lively, educational experience. Hyde Park lived up to its reputation of being a community that gets involved.