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Mural debate is good for community

By Colin Dabkowski

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Last week, Buffalo's latest piece of public art was spray-painted on a gritty stretch of Elmwood Avenue just south of Allen Street.

During the 2012 Infringement Festival, the formerly forlorn facade of a building at 41 Elmwood Ave. became a canvas for several local graffiti artists. Those artists received permission from the building's owner, Donald Kinsman, to decorate the exterior with a temporary exhibition of their skills with spray paint and wheatpaste.

The resulting artwork, which would not look remotely out of place on the front of a Denver tattoo shop or a Brooklyn bar, is overstuffed with loud colors, pasted images of skulls with Mickey Mouse ears and tags galore. If it is not exactly a successful work of art, it is absolutely eye-catching.

Which is why it has become the subject of an increasingly vehement debate in the community over several fundamental questions: Is it a blight upon the neighborhood, or a boon? Is it art or schlock? Is it street art or graffiti? What is the difference, if there is a one, between the two?

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Anyone interested in those questions will only have two weeks to ponder them, because that is how long the City of Buffalo has given Kinsman to paint over the mural. For his part, Kinsman is deciding whether to challenge the city's order and make a bigger issue out of an already controversial artwork or to accede.

"My intention was to just do it and get some attention, because this is an ugly building," Kinsman said, adding that the project was never meant to be permanent. "How much of a stand I want to make on it, we'll see. I wouldn't mind getting a little controversy going."

Mission accomplished, on that point.

Pre-Infringement, it's true that the building was terrible looking, albeit in an unobtrusive kind of way. On the beauty scale, its ill-advised '60s version of a mansard roof and resolutely boring brick exterior puts it somewhere between a suburban dentist's office and a run-down Pizza Hut.

But post-Infringement? Responses to a query on my Facebook page – hardly a scientific sample, I admit – ranged from declarations of abject horror that such a thing even existed to strongly worded take-downs of anyone who would dare oppose it.

I think the project, given its temporary nature, adds a welcome pop of color to a neighborhood already dotted with colorful storefronts and houses. What's more, it signals an increasing willingness from property owners to allow local street artists to

practice their art legally rather than vandalizing property under the cover of night. This is heartening, and hopefully will encourage the creation of more legal walls across the city.

Because Buffalo is not exactly known for its street art, many residents still do not make a distinction between graffiti perpetrated by vandals and graffiti-inspired street art. And because those areas can overlap, this town's self-appointed graffiti police tend to overreact from time to time. All this is natural.

Beyond all that, this very debate is part of what makes temporary and permanent public art projects important. They force the public to engage with art and to back up or even expand our notions of what constitutes beauty. Public debates will always rage when the city welcomes a highly visible new piece of public art – be it Nancy Rubins' gloriously strange canoe sculpture on the Albright-Knox Art Gallery lawn or this grittier bit of street art on Elmwood.

Wherever you stand, these conversations are always good for the community. And that is exactly why we need many more pieces of public art to foster them.

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