

Recovering a History of Public Art in Chicago

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As partners in an archival consulting firm who work on a project-by-project basis, we're often approached by potential clients who want to resurrect archives that were once cared for but have fallen into disrepair. The Chicago Public Art Group's (CPAG) archives is a striking example of this type of collection. This not-for-profit, grant- and donation-funded arts group in Chicago prioritized spending on creating new artworks and assessing the condition of/restoring older murals in their care. While they kept documentation of their organization and project history, the decades' worth of material outgrew basic organization. However, the approach of the CPAG 50th Anniversary and the group's desire to celebrate by holding a public exhibition opened the door to rebuilding and preserving their archives.

CPAG's mission is to forge partnerships between artists and communities and to use public spaces, such as walls, streets, and structures, to amplify stories that matter. It began in 1967 when William Walker and a group of fourteen other African American artists and activists painted a mural called *The Wall of Respect* (since whitewashed over) on the side of a South Side tavern. CPAG, then called the Chicago Mural Group, was founded out of a reproach to Black erasure. Fifty years of enhancing public spaces with art and affirming that every community has a voice was indeed worthy of honoring.

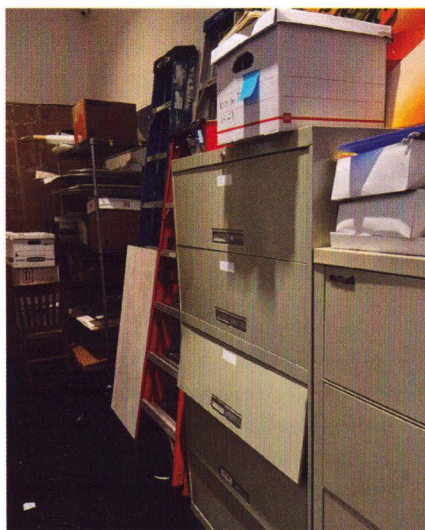
Mining for Hidden Gems

CPAG knew they would have to reckon with their archives—or a hallway containing file cabinets of papers, 35 mm slides, photographs, AV materials, and fine art—when they decided to put on an exhibition. While the group knew the collection contained documentation about the hundreds of public art projects it had sponsored to date, as well as the history of the group itself, they suspected that much of its contents was a mystery. They also had no idea how to locate those gems.

It was at this point that CPAG engaged our services. We are Hilarie Pitman Pozesky and Claire Mokrauer-Madden, co-founders of Sepia Archival Management. Our archival consulting firm does hands-on archival work and advises clients on how to manage their archives.

In many ways, CPAG's archives needed to be rebuilt from the ground up. Traces of the last time the archives had been arranged appeared in the named chronological folders and the cabinets of chronologically ordered sheets of slides. The first step was to devise a strategy for organizing, preserving, and positioning the collection for efficient future use.

Once a strategy was in place, the next task was to begin cataloging. A key step in this process was to create the structure for naming the items in the collection. The plan was to describe down to folder level; Hilarie began with paper files documenting public art projects from the 1970s and 80s, and Claire began with the slide sheets. Handling both materials in parallel allowed the team to suggest and refine naming structures until there was a system that worked



Above Left: The CPAG archives at the start of the project. *Courtesy of Hilarie Pitman Pozesky.*

Above Right: Part of the newly arranged CPAG archives. *Courtesy of Claire Mokrauer-Madden.*



CPAG's Exhibit *Our Passions' Humanity* contained images and documents retrieved from their archives. Courtesy of Tim Seed.

for multiple media and could be carried through the entire collection.

Most of the first day of physical work was spent playing the game of "Let's Try to Break Our Labeling Structure!" Every time the system broke down, we knew we had to tweak it. Over the next six months, all the documents, images, and fine art in the collection were physically reorganized, cataloged, and entered into the newly created DACS-compliant finding aid. With the new label names established, the labeling, re-folding, boxing, and shelving were completed in a matter of days for this collection of more than 60 linear feet of material. A room in the CPAG gallery where the temperature could be controlled was designated as the new home of the archives.

An Archives Rebuilt

The impetus for the project had been to access the materials for use in CPAG's 50th anniversary exhibition, so, similar to the early tests done to ensure that the labeling system worked, requests

for materials from the curatorial team also served as a helpful test for the new findability of items in the collection. When the curators requested the names of artists who had been prolific with the group in the 1980s, we were able to generate a list quickly by searching the finding aid. When an academic from outside the organization asked if CPAG held a photo of William Walker working on *Peace and Salvation: The Wall of Understanding*, we were able to retrieve the image in under five minutes. While these are basic uses of archival materials, it is easy to take these tasks for granted until a collection becomes disordered.

Many positive results have come out of rebuilding and organizing the CPAG archives. As mentioned, they now have a robust finding aid that offers descriptions of the organization's history and the various series within the collection. CPAG's 50th Anniversary Exhibition, *Our Passions' Humanity*, showed the organization's rich history of creating public art in Chicago as well as representing the artists' processes and the group's evolution. The show was peppered with works of art, newspaper articles, and stories that were long forgotten until access to the archives was restored. The work we've done with CPAG has become a springboard. Once the organization saw the benefits of

having an accessible archives, they wanted more. We are in the planning stages for digitizing their most fragile or requested materials to aid their goal of increasing accessibility. Setting this digitization strategy became a snap once they had a comprehensive catalog of the materials they held and a sense of how the archives would be used. Knowing what they now know about the contents of their archives, CPAG and Sepia Archival Management are working hard to widen access to the collection, and in so doing, to CPAG's story.

Public Art Isn't Forever, Archives May Be

Public art is special because of its exposure to the world around it. Placement on the sides of buildings or evolving spaces makes it particularly subject to wear and tear and even destruction. Buildings may be sold, with new owners not wanting to keep the murals on their walls, or new structures may come up that block or destroy the artworks that preceded them.

The materials in CPAG's archives are sometimes the most lasting evidence of a work of public art that has been lost. It's heartening to revive archives for organizations without full-time archivists and to provide them with plans to keep their collections functioning long into the future. It's also inspiring to know that there are many archival institutions like CPAG that are working toward that. ■

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"In questioning myself as to how I could best give my art to Black people, I came to the realization that art must belong to ALL people. That is when I first began to think of public art...and of realizing how art can become more relevant to the people of the world."

— William Walker, *The Artists' Statement*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1971

