

Mural's removal stirs outcry among lovers of history, art

The Boston Globe



Verizon plans to donate "Telephone Men and Women at Work," which was taken down after the company sold the building. (Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff)

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The mural graced the old Verizon building in the Financial District for more than a half-century, a towering illustration that paid homage to the men and women who toiled as telephone operators, connecting distant relatives and dear, old friends.

But Verizon sold the building last year and quietly took the mural down over the summer as part of the sales agreement. The removal has triggered a storm of protest among local preservationists, who worry about the loss of a significant piece of New England history, as well as the future of the Art Deco building where it long resided.

"We are outraged about the removal," said Tony Fusco, president of the Art Deco Society of Boston. "This is undoubtedly the most important mural of its kind in Boston."

Fusco said the removal is tantamount to stripping the murals out of Rockefeller Center in New York or the Boston Public Library.

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“It is that important,” he said.

Verizon said it removed the mural at the request of the new owner, Commonwealth Ventures, a Connecticut-based company that wants to renovate the interior of the building, including the lobby, where the mural was located.

Philip G. Santoro, spokesman for Verizon, said the company recognized the historical significance of the mural and hired a specialist to carefully remove it. Verizon plans to donate the artwork, he said.

The mural is now in storage, its destination unknown.

Santoro said Verizon has consulted with representatives from several museums across the country, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, on how to properly preserve the mural and relocate it for public display.

“Since the building was sold last year, Verizon has undertaken an extensive process at considerable expense to carefully remove the mural from the lobby and preserve it until we find a new home for it,” Santoro said.

An announcement on where the large mural will be located is expected in coming weeks, he said.

But Fusco is miffed that neither Verizon nor the new owners contacted area preservationists to confer about the mural or the historical significance of the building it occupied at 185 Franklin St., on Post Office Square park.

Sarah Kelly, executive director of the Boston Preservation Alliance, said the mural is a well-known artwork.

“A lot of people feel that this is an important piece of art,” she said. “It tells the history of New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. and the emergence of the telephone. It’s a really dramatic and significant mural, and that is why this has created some alarm.”

Going forward, Fusco said, he is hoping the companies can be persuaded to return the mural to its original setting.

The New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. commissioned Dean Cornwell to craft the mural in 1947. It took him three years to create the oval structure, which is 160 feet long by 12 feet high with 197 life-size images, Fusco said.

Commonwealth Ventures, which did not return a call for comment yesterday, notified the Boston Redevelopment Authority yesterday of its renovation plans, which include upgrades to the building’s façade and lobby and the addition of retail space.

Kelly said her group has not seen the renovation plans but is concerned, in general, that renovations can damage the architectural integrity of Art Deco skyscrapers.

“This is a highly significant Art Deco building,” Kelly said. “And Boston doesn’t have a great number of them. We want to make sure that any restoration is done in a sensitive manner.”

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