In 2007, a now-defunct downtown Lafayette night club didn’t paint a mural on its wall. It painted a wall on its mural.

The “Cajun French Accordion” mural painted on the side of the old Lee Furniture building at 312 Jefferson St. in the mid-’80s was painted completely over when Karma Nightclub moved in. Now, the club is gone, the white wall remains, and there’s still no certain way to prevent that from happening again.

“It’s disappointing,” said Robert Dafford, globally renowned mural artist responsible for the “Cajun French Accordion” and most of downtown Lafayette’s iconic public art, “but what can you do?”

Not much, it appears. Downtown Lafayette Unlimited marketing director Kate Durio said there’s no policy in place to prevent property owners from painting over or destroying murals they inherit with their property. DLU, however, has measures “to ensure the longevity” of the pub-
Continued from Page 1A

"If we paid or helped fund a certain work, we include a longevity clause with the property owners or businesses to make sure it doesn’t get lost," Durio said.

One way to do that is to make the art “portable,” she said. For instance, the mural on the parking garage across from the old Federal Courthouse on Jefferson can be removed. Durio said the former DLU staff likely “had the foresight” to realize a building will one day fill the empty lot in front of the garage — it’s the location of one of Festival International de Louisiane’s music stages — and obstruct public view of the art.

Interest in the “Cajun French Accordion” resurfaced just last week on Reddit, a widely popular website with thousands of discussion forums. One post on the Acadiana forum asked users whether they had any pictures of the accordion mural because the only one known to exist, seen on acadianahistorical.org, is of poor quality. Dwayne Borel accepted the challenge, searching local archives and even reaching out to Dafford himself, but so far no photographic proof of the mural has been found.

“I used to ask my mom as a kid to drive by (the accordion mural) because it was my favorite,” Borel said. “I don’t even remember it being painted over. I don’t think there was any news reports of it. I was oblivious to it, but I’m not anymore.”

Of the 400 murals Dafford has painted across the globe, he estimated only 20-25 have been painted over or destroyed. The Lafayette-based artist said he painted the accordion over thousands of squares in random order so no one could make out the image until it was complete. Each of those squares was sold as a fundraiser for the Children’s Community School.

Dafford’s work includes 20 large-scale canvasses depicting the Expulsion of the Acadians from Acadie in 1765, as well as places Acadians were scattered around the world, leading to their settlement in Louisiana. Included among them is “Arrival of the Acadians” at the memorial Monument des Acadians in St. Martinville.

Although “it’s upsetting” Karma owners evidently had no interest in preserving the accordion, which Dafford admitted “probably didn’t fit their style,” Dafford said they had the right to renovate the building however they pleased.

“If there’s not a clause in the sales contract that requires property owners to maintain and utilize the building’s public art, then they certainly don’t have to,” Dafford said. “A lot of times those kinds of clauses are left out of contracts because that might stop people from purchasing the property who don’t want to keep the art or mural that comes with it.”

Lafayette City-Parish council members have shown “moral support,” but Dafford understands they serve the needs of constituents and not downtown murals. This week, Dafford has been in Paducah, Kentucky, whose historic downtown features 40 of his murals. He said this small town, whose public art draws more tourists annually than the Kentucky Derby, has recently committed to preserving its murals at any cost.

In Lafayette, the fate of public art is, quite literally, up to its beholder.

Bob Wright, owner of Jefferson Towers, funded the restoration of the building’s 30-year-old car mural last August entirely out of pocket “without question,” Dafford said. Not every property owner has shared Wright’s enthusiasm, though, and there’s not much stopping future businesses from removing public art that doesn’t match their designs.

“We are working on this for the betterment of our community,” Durio said. “We know there’s got to be some form of total protection in the future.”