

New mural brightens North Phila. rec center

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Youth from the center's after school program are pictured here in front of the new mural. — Tribune Photo by Samaria Bailey

The recreation center at Eighth and Diamond streets now boasts a vibrant, freshly painted mural, courtesy of the city's Mural Arts program's Open Source project and internationally known artist Shinique Smith.

Mural Arts debuted the new exterior last month as one of dozens of projects that are a part of Open Source — a collection of citywide art that includes “walk-through installations, skateable sculptures ... vinyl portraits, stenciled imagery ... [and] immense murals.”

The new walls feature boldly colored images of nature and patterned designs, a complete makeover from the former look. And a portion of the ground under the wall features little stars. Smith, whose art is shown throughout the world, said her goal was to not only create a visually engaging work, but an amphitheater to encourage performance by the youth who encounter the space.

“I wanted not just to create a mural...but also give kids the agency to perform,” she said. “So the piece had two roles — on a daily basis to put good vibes out and a place to take the opportunity to present.”

“I am happy that it happened,” said Jackie Clark, an instructor at the Center’s afterschool program. “It’s good for the kids to know they can come to a bright place because people say the neighborhood is bad but the kids see it differently. [And] we had so many people say it brightened the playground.”

Briannah Brown, one of the center’s after school students, shared similar feelings.

“Before this, it was all plain blue. Now, it looks much better. The blue paint was peeling.”

Brown said her favorite part of the mural is the painted image of a composition book.

“It’s more educational for us,” she said. “We are supposed to learn stuff and put it in our books.”

At the debut, students from the Mural Arts program, the Philadelphia Youth Poetry Movement, Edison High School and John C. Fareira Skills Center’s Latin percussion ensemble used the new mural amphitheater to present poetry and music.

Nelson Figueroa III, a 12th grader at Edison, presented an original poem, “Brain, Fear and History,” in which one of the line states: “My brain is something not to mess with because when I work I sleep and when I sleep I work.”

Figueroa said it was written to send a message about staying positive.

“I want them to learn to be yourself,” he said. “Don’t let anybody put you down. Always stay positive because if you stay positive you will be on the right path.”