

Young artists' vibrant murals shine a light on New Orleans East goals of revitalization



The mural on the East New Orleans Regional Library depicts children reading books. Symbols of New Orleans culture seem to pop up from the pages.

Jeff Strout 2022

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APR 22, 2022 - 7:20 AM

New Orleans East is now home to a collection of vibrant public murals, primarily created by local youths with the surrounding community in mind.

The mural series is part of a multiyear project launched by the New Orleans Business Alliance and Arts New Orleans, and it coincides with broader revitalization efforts in New Orleans East.

“Many people always say things are going to happen in the east, but it never comes to fruition, so this project gave the community some hope about the future of the east as it relates to economic growth,” said Greg Lawson, senior vice president of strategic neighborhood development for the group.



The mural on the East New Orleans Regional Library is titled 'Colors of Our Culture.'

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In 2020, Lawson launched the strategic neighborhood development team, which focused on seven neighborhoods that haven't experienced the same post-Hurricane Katrina economic growth as other neighborhoods.

Just before the pandemic began, they held a public meeting in New Orleans East and heard from residents and business owners about their hopes for this section of the city.

“One of the things they wanted to really do was make New Orleans East a jewel for the city,” Lawson said. That is the moment the mural series was born, he added. From there, Stella Jones, a resident of New Orleans East and owner of the Stella Jones Gallery, formed an art committee.



'Resilience, represents the East's ability to recover from hardships. The appearance of sedimentary rock formations symbolizes layers of history and change.

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Lawson and his team contacted Arts New Orleans (formerly the Arts Council of New Orleans) for its expertise in sourcing local talent for the project, along with such potential partners and funders as RTA, Audubon Nature Institute, The Helis Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Twenty-one youth artists were chosen through an open call.

“We did publicize that we were particularly interested in muralists who had some sort of connection to the east, and we got a lot of excitement there,” said Sarah Woodward, the programs director of Arts New Orleans. “There are some amazing artists who are from the east, or who work in the east.”



The 'A' in 'EAST' shows two children enjoying the pool.

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The creation of the murals began this past November, when the young artists learned about the history and community of New Orleans East and embarked on a collaborative design process with a handful of lead artists.

The lead artists assembled preliminary designs, which were sent to community members for feedback. They began painting in January, battling through “all kinds of terrible weather events,” said Woodward.

The four murals were completed in March and officially unveiled to the public on March 19. Thanks to NOVAC filmmakers, a 5- to 15-minute video, highlighting the history of the murals, accompanies each one.



'EAST' depicts the community's public pool, with swimming children and elders.

The “Colors of Our Culture” mural on the East New Orleans Regional Library depicts children reading books, where symbols of New Orleans culture seem to leap from the pages.

“EAST” honors the community’s free, public pool, accessible to all ages, races and ethnicities. The mural shows swimming children and elders.

“Resilience” represents the east’s ability to recover from hardships. The design was inspired by an interview with gallery-owner Jones, a longtime New Orleans East community leader who shared her memories from when she was younger and her vision for the future. The appearance of sedimentary rock formations symbolizes layers of history and change.



In 'In Our Nature,' 'In our Nature' depicts a tranquil setting inspired by the Audubon Zoo. An image of a family in a boat, anchored to the land, stands for community.

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“In our Nature” depicts a tranquil setting inspired by the Audubon zoo. Culture is represented through musical notes and food found in nearby waterways. An image of a family in a boat, anchored to the land, stands for community.

All participating artists were paid for their work.

“Putting money in the hands of artists is essential at this time,” Woodward said. “Our artist community has been deeply impacted by the pandemic and the loss of opportunities.”

She described the experience as a workforce training opportunity for young artists, since they have a chance to develop skills in both art and design, and leadership and collaboration.



On the wall of picnic shelter 2, 'In our Nature' depicts a tranquil setting. Culture is represented through musical notes and food found in nearby waterways.

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The next goal of the project is creating and showcasing large sculptures throughout select areas of New Orleans East.

“All of these skills that, regardless of whether they go on to be an artist, can be transferable to other job opportunities,” she said.

“I think for young people, to be able to see their voices elevated and represented in public space in a permanent way can be really transformative. They’ll be able to see that work of art that they created for their community for decades, and I think that's incredible.”