



JOANNA JHANDA

TOTLAND will be the scene of a celebration Saturday of the mural that Jennifer Burke has helped work on since March. Perry Fenton, 3, runs across the grass as Burke attaches a butterfly to the center of the mural.

Mural makes Totland sparkle

By Marc Albert

What a difference a paint job makes. The brown cinder block building at Berkeley's Totland Park that weeks ago was an ugly eyesore now is alive with pale blue skies, swirling clouds, iridescent purple hills and fiery red butterflies. Fueled by the imagination of artists age 4 to 55, the utility/restroom was literally transformed by over 400 hands into a work of art.

Last fall, after years of meetings, complaints and organizing, new play structures were installed and the park, except for one large square concrete obelisk

looked reborn. Park users then set their sights on moving another mountain.

"It's a tribute to children's art. It's all inspired by them. There's no way I could have come up with such a vibrant piece if I had to do it all myself," said artist Jennifer Burke, who will thank the people who helped turn three sterile walls into a magnificent mural Saturday at Virginia-McGee Totland, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

"Kids are such amazing artists, they are so free and inspired, I'm always trying to go back to that," she said.

The mural seems to swallow the building, which in this case is a good thing.

Problems prompted the city to close the structure in the 1970s. Strips of wood painted to resemble foliage soften sharp-cornered windows. A pipe holding electrical wires is camouflaged by a squirrel's tail. A tiny spider climbs, a small mouse scurries, dogs frolic and a Cheshirelike cat grins. Sunflowers festoon a pay phone's booth, and frogs sit still waiting for insects.

"They did a wonderful job — it gives the kids a sense of ownership and certainly reflects the diversity of the people, who you find here," said Amy Wyatt look-

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Mural

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ing over her shoulder at her two-year-old son Carter breezing down a pint sized slide.

"It looks amazingly professional and colorful," offered Holly Clemmons of Portland Oregon, watching her two toddlers, Austin and Berkeley enjoy a snack of inari zushi and California rolls. "The last time we were here it was really ugly."

Burke got help with initial designs from 7- and 8-year-old schoolchildren at Washington and Walden schools. Instructions were simple — things you would see in the neighborhood around Totland, but no people. It's a paradisaical interpretation. Tracings were made of the draw-

ings, which were then transferred to the building. Children then filled in some of the tracings and Burke cleaned up drips and errors.

The mural is in three distinct panels on each side — daybreak, midday and night. The fourth side, just two feet from a fence is not painted.

With the aid of volunteers, the bottom brick layer of the building was covered with mustard colored grout. Pottery shards and 150-tiles hand painted by local children were laid in the grout.

Children now stop by to admire their work. Burke said many "parkies" have given names to the animals on the mural and come to visit and develop stories about the creatures in the mural.

"She got the neighborhood together, raised the money and organized every-

thing with tremendous community input from design to execution," said Partners for Parks member Mark Lioios. "She has taken basically an abandoned city storage building and turned it into an art center. Saturday is a completion of 2-1/2 years of work on Totland and represents the beginning of a wonderful opportunity for children of all ages to explore their creative energy."

Thanks to generous support from the Berkeley City Council, the East Bay Community Foundation, Civic Arts Commission and Department of Health and Human Services, by late September Burke will turn the inside into a free drop in art center for toddlers age 1 to 4.

"The idea for the Young Artists Work Space is to have supplies on the table kids can come in for five minutes or two hours to play and not

be forced to make anything. I really want to allow the kids the chance to play with the materials. At that age it's more tactile." More structured after school and Sunday classes will be offered for ages five to 14 at very low rates.

Totland's transformation is a triumph for neighbors and a model for the Berkeley community as a whole. Watching over the happy faces of infants and toddlers on Totland's new play equipment is no longer an ugly but functional building, it's a beautiful building with function.

Even a boxy roof eave is disguised by an arching sign bidding welcome in French, Lao, Hebrew, Spanish, German, Swahili, Farsi, and Italian. All languages Burke says are regularly heard in the park, and yes, mommyyyy!!!! counts as a word.