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Raising Expectations

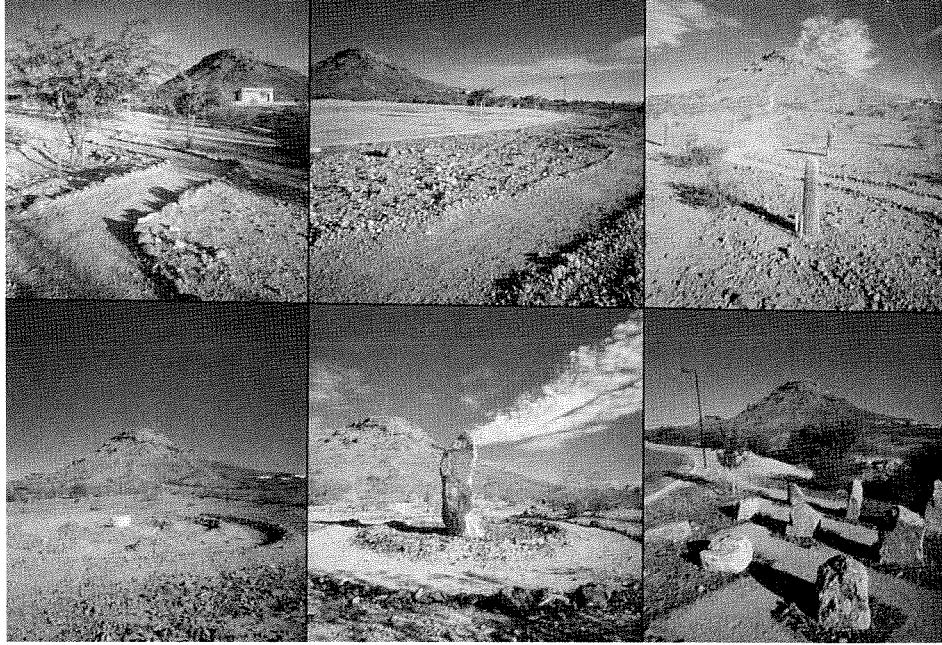
William Morrish was a co-author of the Phoenix Public Art Plan. Places asked him to reflect on the impact of the plan.

Phoenix's art program added to and was a catalyst for the idea that the city could have public places — places that are beautiful and thoughtful and ingenious. The greatest impact of the program was that the discussion of design actually began in the city. There was an explosion of projects. The new library (recently opened) won approval; the Heard Museum gained momentum.

Our idea for “working zones” was to identify projects that were powerful, vivid and compelling, and use them to inspire agencies to be creative with other projects, too. We wanted to send the message that public works can be culturally rich, rather than politically divisive. We wanted people to come to the table on their own, and some departments did start thinking that way.

We also looked at private-sector initiatives, to bring them to the game. Central Avenue is a good example. Near the Heard Museum there's a new office complex that has a sandstone fountain and public space that spills onto the street. The art program helped bring attention to places where people spend time.

On the “Wall Cycle to Ocotillo” controversy: The

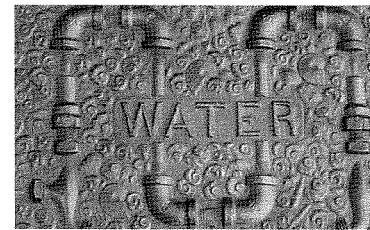


“parkway pots” were just an excuse. There was a fundamental shift in city hall, which began to argue that even general landscaping was a waste of tax dollars, that there is no economic benefit to an art program. The previous mayor believed that public art does have an economic benefit, that visible expressions of civic pride contribute to a positive social atmosphere and neighborhood stability.

The city is also maturing. Citizens are thinking about things they can do to enhance their neighborhood — revitalizing neighborhood parks, fixing streets and improving transit nodes. We always sensed that after the first wave of infrastructure, the program would have to shift to neighborhood-based projects.

On public art and urban design: It's important to remember that public art is not urban design. Urban design should be about civic art, but it also has to be concerned about city functions and services. Public art opens up doorways to creative thinking about designing the city, but being a point of entry into the imagination is not enough to sustain all the functional criteria that urban design has to address.

When you see the Thomas Road Overpass, you are reminded of a number of urban design themes, but the art is not a functional element by itself. At the solid waste transfer station, the essence of the art was to think about architecture; it's less visually didactic than it is a working example. I would argue the pots project tried too hard to solve urban design issues, but the pots themselves weren't enough to carry it off.



Top: “Desert Passages,” 1990. Artist-designed trail through Lookout Mountain Park.

Artists: Roger Asay and Rebecca Davis. Photograph: Craig Smith.

Above: Water main hatch covers, 1995. Artist: Michael Maglich. Photo: Michael Maglich.

Left: Patrick Park Plaza, 1992. Artist served on a city design team developing streetscape amenities and community plaza. Artist: Jody Pinto. Photo: Bob Rink.

