Title
On Phoenix Garbage Facility [Place Debate: Revisiting the Phoenix Public Art Plan]

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Author
Connery, Nancy

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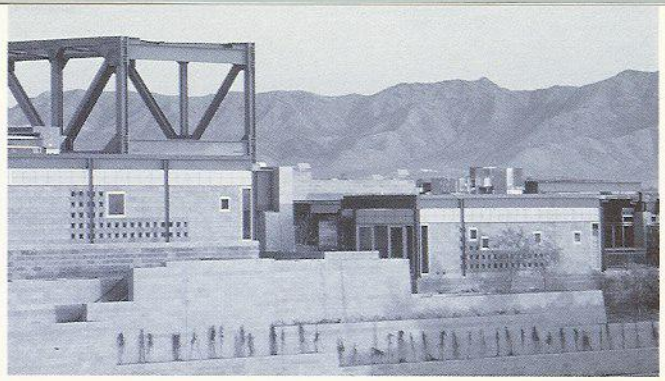

friendly and education-oriented facilities that meet a range of community needs, rather than just provide a basic service. These projects will be the products of multi-disciplinary teams operating in an open environment with extensive citizen input.

While public works often meet resistance, many public art projects have become well accepted and sources of public pride. The vision that comes from the involvement of artists can add a new dimension to infrastructure projects, balancing the elements of engineering design that protect public safety and meet operational requirements.

When our department agreed to work with the arts commission on the waste transfer facility, we made it clear we were not simply going to plop a statue at the corner and call it art. Rather, we wanted a vision for making the facility really open to the public. We wanted to counter the NIMBY syndrome and help people understand that they share in the responsibility of processing and disposing of their solid waste.

We wanted to include environmental education to help the public learn about recycling by watching the process. We did not want to have a strictly utilitarian project in which tours would be unsafe or would not portray what really goes on. We wanted to design educativeness in from the very beginning.

We envision this facility to be the first phase of an environmental research park. Nearby, there is a wastewater plant whose effluent is channeled in canals to farmers for irrigation. One of the artists' concepts, upon which we are expanding, was to divert some of that effluent into the flood control basin behind the waste transfer station. It would flow through a series of ponds and channels, with cattails, reeds and water hyacinths. At this research park, we could undertake research on wastewater treatment and create a habitat for water fowl.

Bringing Artists and Communities onto the Team

The future offers many opportunities for expanding the new infrastructure. Involving communities and creating multi-disciplinary teams of artists, architects, engineers, planners and managers, will be critical to this approach. I have a pet saying, "Involvement breeds commitment." If you get people involved in a project, they will become committed to its success.

Not all artists or engineers are able to function well in a multi-disciplinary, team environment. Many artists insist that what they create and sign their name to must be all theirs. Many engineers are fixed in the concept of doing things the same way, following established standards.

It takes an enlightened individual to work successfully on a team charged with creating the new infrastructure. Participants must be willing to be involved in give-and-take, they must be willing to consider factors of cost and function, even when exploring new ideas. There must be a process for balancing contrasting concepts and opinions.

The support of a citizens group can be the driving force to completing an infrastructure project. And my experience is that citizens are eager to learn more about their roles in recycling solid waste and conserving water. The power of the public should not be underestimated.

Nancy Connery

Years before Phoenix' new garbage facility was built, public works director Ron Jensen bragged it would become the city's "second biggest tourist attraction after Camelback Mountain." That kind of bravado is rare among public works officials. His gamble seems to have paid off in lavish press attention, along with a few snags and small ironies.

I went to see the facility late in 1994, just as it began operation. It is at once a soaring, cathedral-like structure and a gritty utility on the outskirts of Phoenix's industrial zone. Cascading gardens adorn the public entrance. Inside, state prison inmates sort through tons of garbage to extract "recyclables"; giant trucks convey the rest to a city landfill.

Chuck Hamstra, a civil engineer and impromptu tour guide, gave me a tough insider's look at the place. From his technical vantage, the artists (and the project's consulting engineers) had overlooked lots of practical concerns that now vexed its operators. For example, the dramatic external trusses drew hordes of pigeons and corrosion problems. A cracked window in the public viewing area would cost thousands to replace because of its unusual size.

But when I asked how he liked working at the facility, Hamstra became ebullient. He described the sense of peacefulness and pride he felt there. He liked the steady stream of international visitors. He ended the tour with an eloquent description of how the project should be expanded to foster greater public environmental awareness. His vision was remarkably similar to one offered by the artists.