

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Conceiving a Courtyard

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/985931v0>

### Journal

Places, 6(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Pally, Mark

### Publication Date

1990-04-01

Peer reviewed

## Conceiving a Courtyard

The three proposals for the Pasadena Police Building Public Art Project represent a range of individual approaches to the integration of landscape architecture and public art, and they provide insight into several current directions in the creation of public art.

The competition sponsor, The Pasadena Arts Commission, required that each submission be prepared collaboratively by teams composed of artists and landscape architects. Prior to the extreme specialization of the modern age such professional distinctions would have been rare. One individual might embody the skills and insights now divided among a number of disciplines, and “fine arts” and “design arts” were not regarded as independent activities.

Including the perspective of artists in the process of designing specific projects and in creating design plans is a relatively recent practice. Only during the last decade has public art begun to emerge as a coherent and distinct discipline within a family that includes the fine arts; sculpture and its dependent, environmental or site-specific art; architecture; landscape architecture; and city planning.

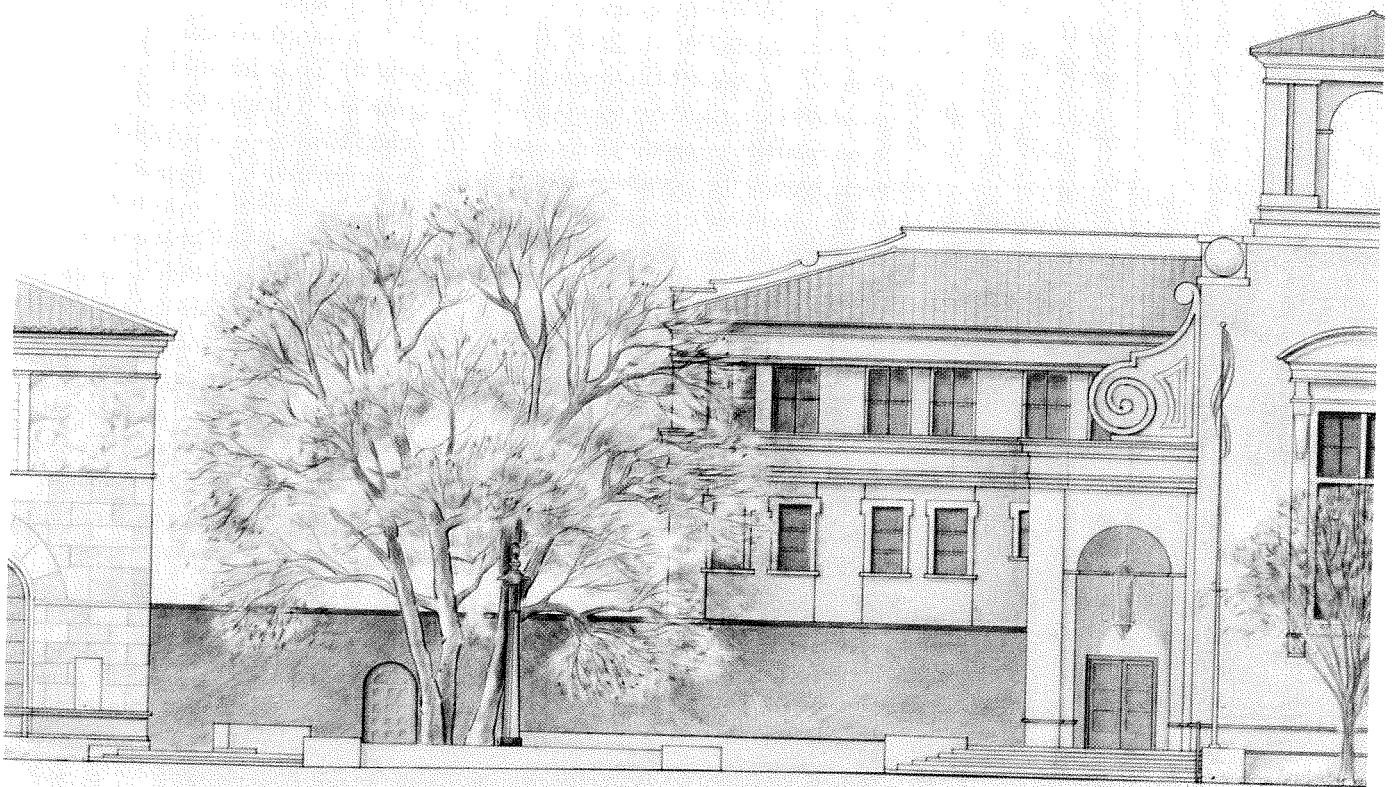
There are numerous levels of collaboration. In some instances, the roles of the individual design team members are clearly revealed; in others, the working process is so collaborative and integrated that it is virtually impossible to assign specific elements or ideas to specific team members. Proposals for the Police Building courtyard were more representative of the latter mode and thus are particularly worth discussing.

Despite its geographic location in the Los Angeles region, Pasadena is an independent city with an independent mind set. While the region is generally characterized as future-obsessed, Pasadena respects its traditions, historical buildings and civic designs. The three proposals respond to the city’s history, climate and topography; some are more direct than others, but each acknowledges the courtyard as one in a series of many courtyards that have provided resting and restful places within the history of Pasadena.

It is possible to see three generic forms among the proposals. Douglas and Regula Campbell and Robert Irwin (the competition winners) pursued an approach dependent on color and a few key elements emphasizing mood and a composition flirting with nat-

*The Pasadena Police Building Public Art Project was a competition staged last year by the Pasadena Arts Commission. Places invited the three finalist teams—each consisting of a landscape architect and an artist—to comment on how collaboration influenced their proposals. The winners were Douglas Campbell, Regula Campbell and Robert Irwin. The other finalists were Martin Puryear and Michael Van Valkenburgh, and Andrew Leicester and Thomas R. Oslund. Places also asked jurors Donlyn Lyndon and Marc Pally to comment on the competition.*

*The competition was organized by Joyce Chambers Selber, then the City’s executive director for the arts.*



**Douglas and Regula Campbell  
and Robert Irwin's winning  
proposal, with a multi-colored  
wall to the rear.**

**Courtesy of Campbell and  
Campbell.**

uralism. Andrew Leicester and Thomas R. Oslund's proposal directly articulates historical information from Pasadena and operates in a narrative/historical fashion. Michael Van Valkenburgh and Martin Puryear placed historical and associative referents into a formal orientation.

### **Discerning an Artist's Imprint**

Robert Irwin's career as an artist has long been associated with the integration of perceptual psychology and aesthetic form. His sculpture and environmental installations from the 1960s and 1970s emphasized atmosphere over substance and could be characterized as dematerializing the art object. During the 1980s he moved into the public arena, completing projects in Washington, D.C., Seattle, San Diego and Los Angeles.

This work continues Irwin's commitment to expanding the possibilities for his artmaking to the realm of situations in which the alteration of a total spatial experience is emphasized over the presence of an object or series of objects. Irwin would just as soon not know what constitutes art, what part of any situation is art.

A common denominator of many Irwin projects is the play of light, the

passage of time and, by extension, the rhythm of nature. One could, however, ground much of this rhetoric in the traditional art of landscape painting. These very issues in fact constitute the concerns of such painters as Claude Lorraine in the seventeenth century and the Impressionists of the late nineteenth century. The Police Building courtyard proposal uses an extensive color palette in the blue light sentinel, the ground cover, the two main trees (California sycamore and the Western rosebud) and most importantly the multi-colored rear wall.

It is rather hard and perhaps unnecessary to pinpoint the derivation of ideas in a collaboration such as this, where the artist is determined not to leave a signature. Perhaps in such cases true collaboration is most possible. Ironically Douglas Campbell, a landscape architect, and Regula Campbell, an architect, have used sculptural elements as part of their work: a fine dragon, for instance, on the Santa Monica Pier project. With the artist refusing to interject specific elements into a scheme, team members must find a model to replace the traditional role of the artist/artisan supplying ornamentation and refinement to an already determined form or plan.

In the proposal from Puryear and

**Proposal by Martin Puryear  
and Michael Van Valkenburgh.  
Courtesy of Michael Van  
Valkenburgh.**



Van Valkenburgh, the participation of the artist has left a distinct imprint. As with many artists active in creating public art, Puryear has long been identified as a sculptor. His career has advanced the reductive attitudes of minimalism into a body of work that resonates with associations yet maintains a formal purity. His public pieces have proceeded in a linear manner from his exhibition pieces; that is, they exist as objects in space.

Yet there is a good deal of affinity between Puryear's and Van Valkenburgh's work, particularly in their insistence that form reflect character and meaning beyond itself. They both strive for significance and evocation through visually formal systems.

The over-scaled vessels for the courtyard are sculptural elements, but their placement on the edge of the courtyard and sidewalk and their functional association lends them more a ceremonial air than an artistic one. The actual shaping of space in this proposal and the choreographing of elements seems very much in the tradition of Van Valkenburgh, who uses formal orders and symmetries to organize and give both meaning and function to space.

Andrew Leicester has consistently tackled the issue of content in a direct

manner, bringing into a contemporary idiom the notions of commemoration and collective memory that were an intrinsic part of public artworks from earlier times. His projects typically include extensive research, interviews and interaction with the community.

The proposal from Leicester and Oslund includes numerous elements that provide the viewer with information both in direct written form (for example, the police credo encircles the fountain and quotations from police publications occupy a frieze on the rear wall) and formal association (for example, the star-shaped fountain). These elements, together with others like the paving materials and patterns, terra-cotta medallions, masonry globes and light standard, are associated with the body of work Leicester has established since his first significant commission, "Prospect V-III," in 1982.

Leicester's contribution to the Police Building courtyard is evident in the thematic approach and its various manifestations. Oslund's expertise in planning and plant materials give the proposal form and relevancy.

### The Art of Association

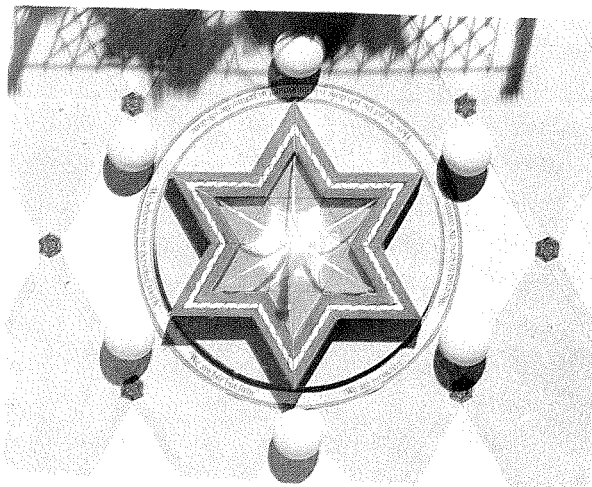
What is apparent in these proposals is the evolving nature of how we think

not only about our cities and our public spaces but also about the disciplines that usually design them. It seems particularly appropriate that two of the three artists (Irwin and Puryear) can be associated with extending the vocabulary of minimalism and the stripped down, hyper-specialized aesthetic that movement represents. For just as artists are discovering a more visually complex and evocative language, we are also becoming aware of the limits of overly specialized thinking about the design of public spaces. The cooperation and/or collaboration of many disciplines is now generally accepted.

The role of the artist in the development of our cities and public spaces can be more active and civic minded, hence the great interest in public art. Artists who are generally accustomed to a hands-on and tactile relationship with their work are now finding themselves in group decision making, community review boards and client-oriented work.

While it may be worthwhile to pinpoint the specific contributions of artists or designers to collaborative projects, the larger task is to refine our understanding of related disciplines to work toward a synthesis that is capable of better responding to the needs of our communities.

Andrew Leicester and  
Thomas R. Oslund translated  
historical references into  
contemporary form.  
Courtesy of Thomas R. Oslund.



Plan of Campbell and Campbell  
and Irwin proposal.  
Courtesy of Campbell and  
Campbell.

