Title
Plans and Possibilities [Place Debate: Revisiting the Phoenix Public Art Plan]

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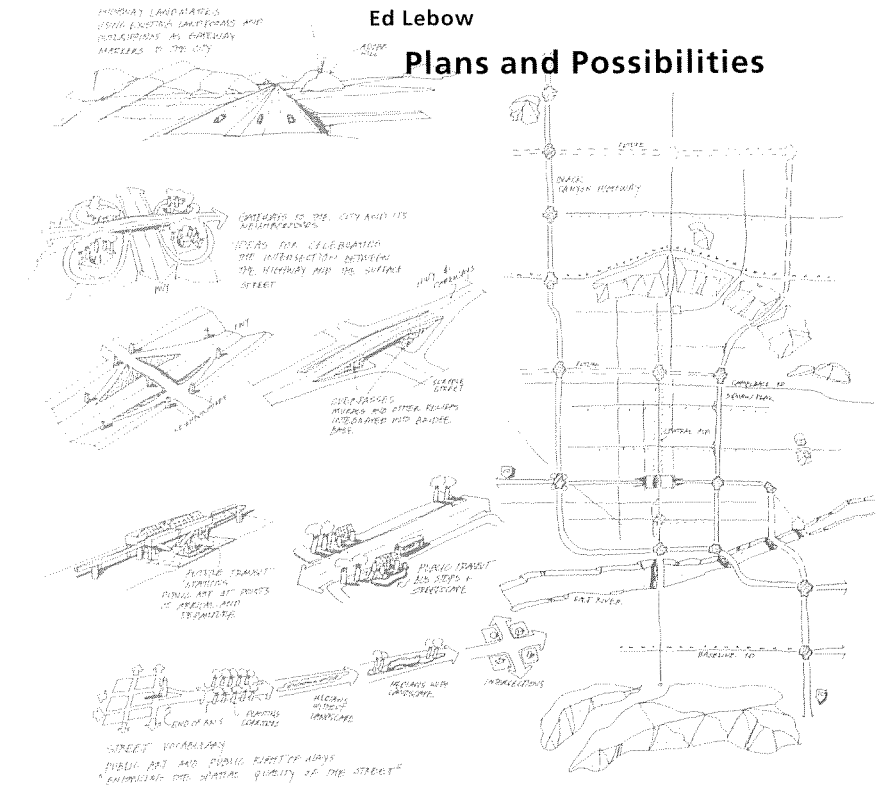
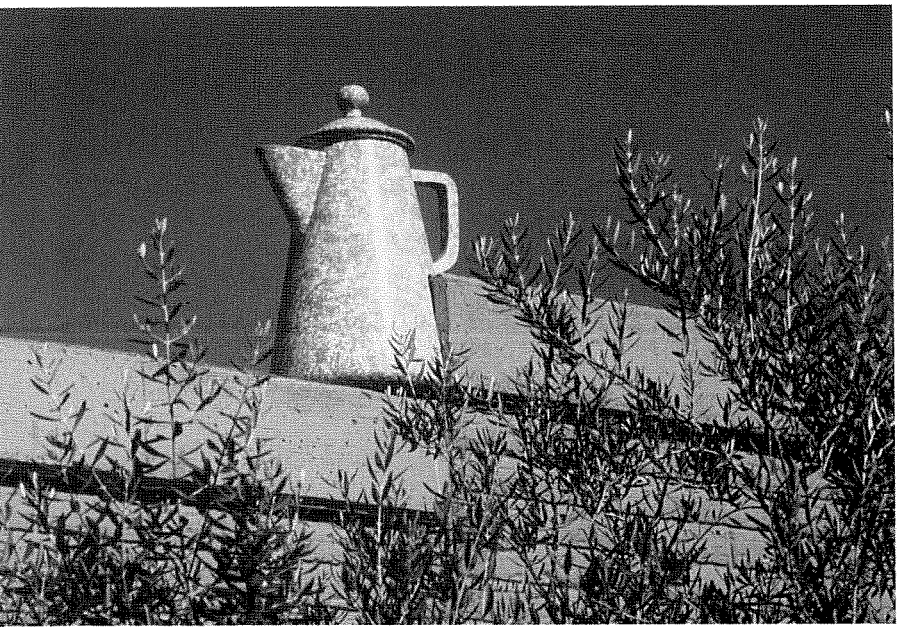




We like to think that plans are the seeds, rather than the fruits, of political vision. That may explain why Phoenix's 1988 Public Art Master Plan has been touted so widely as the real start of Phoenix's public art program — the moment when the program got its bearings and brains. In the beginning, goes the story, the plan established the now acclaimed link between public art and infrastructure and showed Phoenix how to transform itself from a sprawling act of real estate into a thoughtful expression of urban design.

In truth, the plan was largely a codification of what Phoenix had already begun to do by forming an arts commission, enacting a public art program and specifically linking public art to its infrastructure improvements. Before the plan was conceived, the city had approved more than seventy projects funded by thirteen municipal sources. The widely-praised Solid Waste Management Facility and Thomas Road Overpass were already in the works.

The plan added a flexible way of seeing the city whole. Its fifteen "Working Zones" amounted to priority areas where the city could get the best mileage out of its public art money. The zones included city services and systems — roads, mountain preserves, trails, solid waste, water and wastewater facilities — that the program was already addressing. They also included commercial cores, urban village centers and key urban networks, such as canals.

The thrust of the plan was to make something memorable out of daily arrivals and departures — to create orienting, you-are-here experiences for the average walker (who usually drives) in the city. The plan's prescription was a slew of artist-designed gateways, streetscapes and public markers. These were intended to give Phoenix's increasingly aimless expanse (up from 375 square miles in 1988 to more than 450 today) a more coherent and comprehensible pattern. They were also conceived to help the Arts Commission fulfill what William Morrish and Catherine Brown characterized in their 1988 *Places* summary of the plan as "its leading role as aesthetic urban designers for the city."

The claim sounds a little boisterous now. But, because the public art program draws from the till of every city department, the Arts Commission

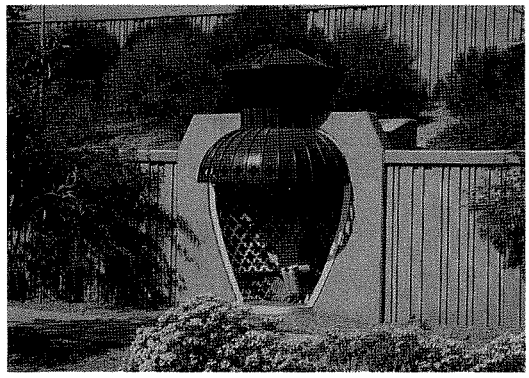
became the only agency that annually mapped out all of the city's upcoming design and construction projects. We could see the big picture of structures, systems and spaces Phoenix was about to build — where the concentrations of money were and where there might be opportunities for public agencies to combine efforts and avoid the inevitable conflicts of layering single-purpose projects on top of one another. In short, we could see how the city's new identity was being shaped.

Ultimately, the results were affected even more by the expectations other design professionals and city officials — elected and unelected — had of projects involving artists. Plenty of folks in and out of the city bureaucracy weren't enthused about artists butting into the traditional lairs of engineers, architects and landscape architects. Others were glad to put artists to work.

The Street Transportation Department was particularly receptive. The aims of the public art program suited the department's growing interest in finding new ways to soften the impact of streets on the city — to make them a friendly, even enriching ingredient of urban life. The department was attracted to the idea that involving an artist on a project gave it license to try something new, essentially freeing projects from the cookie-cutter designs that were causing the department and the city so much public grief.

Departments eager to experiment helped extend the urban design role of artists far beyond those that had been identified in the master plan. When the program got under way, the common assumption around the city was that artists could pretty up the humdrum designs of engineers, architects and landscape architects. The Thomas Road Overpass and the Solid Waste Management Facility showed that, given enough room to experiment, design teams — artists, architects, engineers and all — could invest the city's infrastructure with new forms and meanings.

The cloud in this silver lining is that few artists and city departments are really up to that task. Most of the artists who have worked here have wielded the cookie-cutter as deftly as the dullest engineers and bureaucrats. Too many have promoted tedious formulas that they defend with trumped-up pleas for artistic freedom and autonomy. Too few understand the give and take of urban design and how to address the compelling limits of a project's purpose and setting.



Opposite page, top: "Working Zone 13.0, Roads Freeways and Transit," from the 1988 plan.

Photographs: "Wall Cycle to Ocotillo," 1992. These large- and small-scale vessels and planters, painted in different motifs, are placed on the neighborhood side of the Squaw Peak Parkway and serve as bicycle trail markers, neighborhood identity features, community gardens, seating niches and gazebos. Artists: Mags Harries and Lajos Heder.

But the talent pool of artists is no smaller than the bureaucracy's ability to withstand successful public art. Distinctive works inevitably arouse curiosity. Curiosity provokes debate. Debate is supposedly good for an open society. But in a bureaucracy with a well-defined corporate structure, uncontrolled debate is as welcome as uncontrolled fire. If the bureaucratic and fiscal moods are right — as they were when the brawl erupted over "The Wall Cycle to Ocotillo" in 1992 — controversy can even be used to suggest that the program that caused it has "insufficient oversight," that it is using the talents of too many outsiders, that its administrators are not properly reporting to the powers that be, or that the program is squandering public funds.

No plan can adequately anticipate the consequences of such reactions. Nor can a plan ever teach a city how to sustain its experimental search for quality and innovation in urban design through hard times. Phoenix's public art program continues to involve artists in designing the city. But the progress of the Public Art Master Plan's comprehensive vision — the one that briefly gave the Arts Commission a leading role in designing the city — ended when "The Wall Cycle to Ocotillo" became known in dark, sober tones around City Hall as "the Squaw Peak Pots."