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Conceiving a Courtyard

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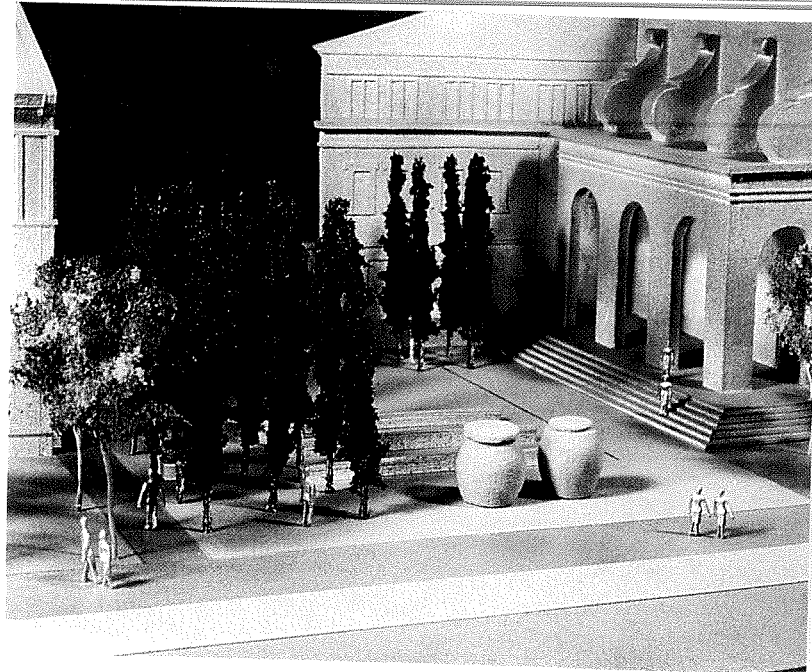


Photo by Hadrian Millon. Courtesy of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates.

Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates and Martin Puryear's collaborative design for the courtyard attempts to reinterpret this type of small civic space by using artistic references to water conservation in combination with actual conservation techniques.

The design focus draws from the spareness of early twentieth-century courtyard gardens of Pasadena with their raked earth and simple plantings of drought-tolerant species. But the visual symmetry of earlier Beaux Arts courtyards has been reconfigured here to allow for the increased usage of today's public spaces—such as this courtyard, which incorporates the main entrance to a new police station.

The idea of water conservation as a symbol in the courtyard is expressed by the placement of two large (eight-foot-tall) water carrying vessels at the street edge. Three troughs of water raised 18 inches to also provide seating are incorporated on the east side of the courtyard parallel to the sidewalk. As a series, these troughs recall the tradition of irrigation in the agricultural fields of early Pasadena. The water is visibly and audibly transported by a rill in the pavement surface to an underground storage tank. Both the rill and the tank are covered by open grating. The form of the troughs and the rill

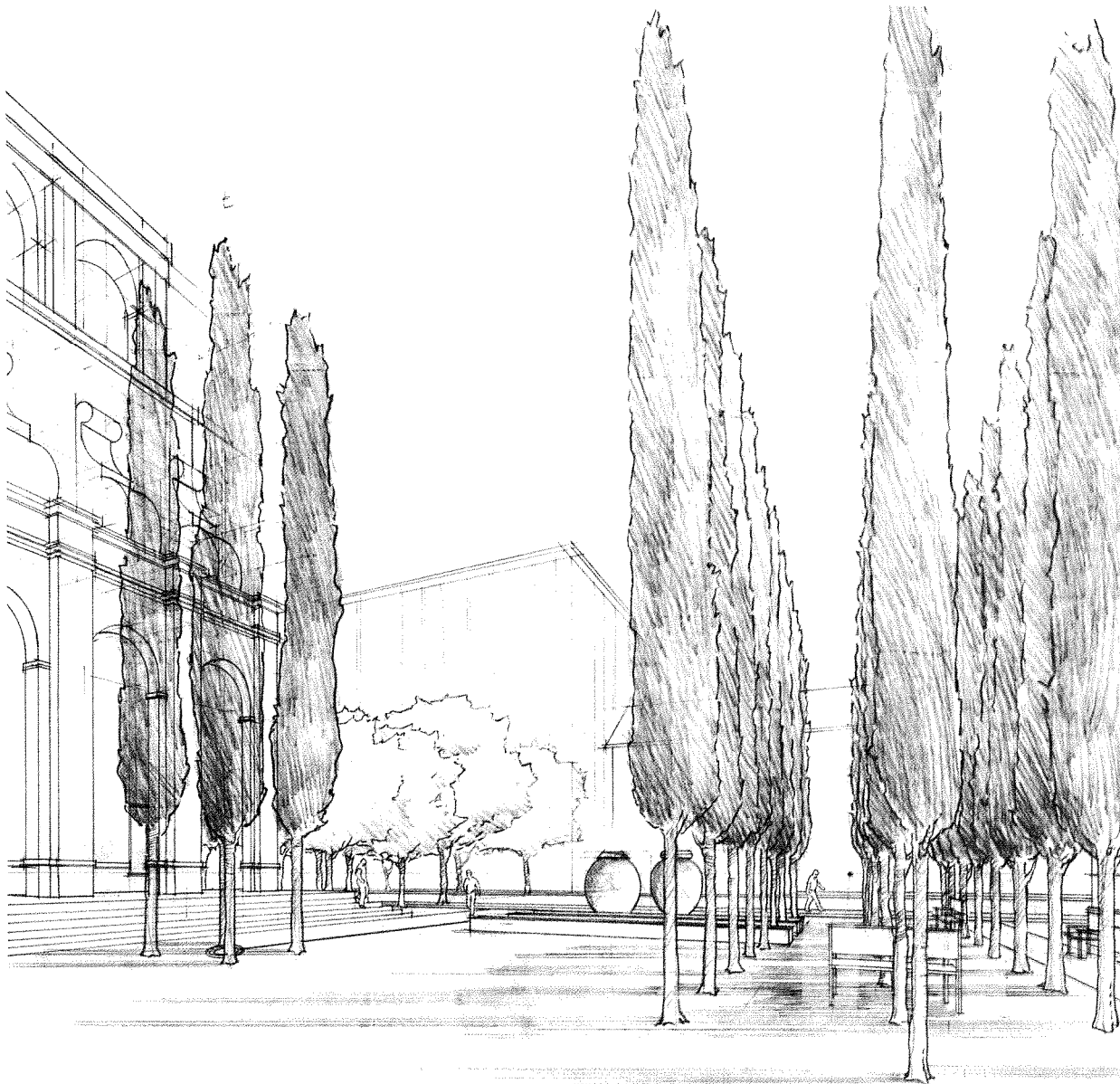
minimizes direct evaporation with a reduced water surface while allowing the sound of flowing water to resonate within the courtyard and the loggia of the police station. The location of the water storage tank is marked symbolically by the presence of four cypress trees at the inner corner of the site.

Further concern for water conservation guided the choice of a decomposed granite ground surface, which allows rain to seep into the ground.

The existing grass panels that currently flank the sidewalk would be eliminated because of their high water-consumption requirements. The cooler south wall of the courtyard—formed by the facade of the Pacific Gas Building—shadows the courtyard which is planted here with a widely spaced grove of cypress trees that would a cool respite in contrast to the courtyard's warmer central area.

On the east side of the courtyard, bordering the Garfield Avenue sidewalk—a shady *allée* of drought-tolerant golden rain trees parallels a row of existing carob trees at curbside. The carob trees and the golden rain trees, once established, do not require additional water during the hot, dry months of summer.

—Michael Van Valkenburgh
Carol Van Valkenburgh



View from courtyard.

The design team for the Puryear/Van Valkenburgh entry included Tim Barner, design; Matthew Urbanski, design and model; Tim Barner, perspectives.

For me, the Pasadena project took the form of a swinging pendulum. I hadn't responded initially to the invitation to submit because I didn't think I had the time. Also, although a police station shaped like an Italianate villa is probably a wonderfully humanizing gesture, I couldn't imagine what my work as a sculptor could add to it.

Then I got a note from Michael Van Valkenburgh inviting me to collaborate on a submission. I agreed because I respect Van Valkenburgh's work and he had an office that could develop the proposal. Suddenly the pendulum had swung. The project began to seem as if it could be an interesting challenge.

We had one day of actual collaboration in Michael's office in Cambridge. It was a brief, satisfying session. I felt strongly that against the background of that police station we'd best drop to the ground and keep our plans horizontal—aim for a strongly articulated floor. Dry desert gardens, Islamic garden carpets, sunken water runnels all came to mind. I also felt that we should let any vertical elements move out toward the street, away from the building—that way we might gain a bit of stylistic independence. Our plan thus ended up reversing the architects' original scheme,

which had a kind of open fountain close up to the building.

Michael seemed to like this idea so we developed it further to include a water feature right next to the sidewalk, but on the opposite side of a tall, probably pierced, wall. The idea of hearing and seeing water just behind the wall as you walked by on the sidewalk seemed attractive.

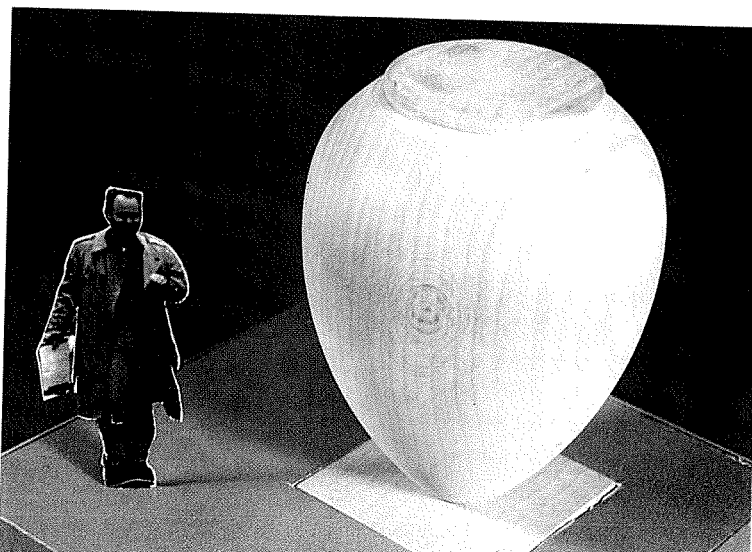
I wish we could have worked together further but I had to get back to my studio in Chicago. We planned to communicate via fax and overnight delivery services.

The pendulum swung again and difficulties began. Sending ideas back and forth was unwieldy and imprecise. The deadline was right around the corner, and I needed more time. Also, the budget seemed to eliminate most of the detailing I felt would be crucial.

Michael's experience and pragmatism pulled everything together in time, and he made the final presentation in Pasadena.

I think to make meaningful art that is truly public in the sense of being open to and appreciable by the majority of the people who will eventually live with the work, seems to me next to impossible today. This is probably why the attempt is so difficult to resist.

—*Martin Puryear*



Eight-foot tall water vessels embody a concern for water conservation.