Three Museums, Two Arenas, and a Theater - To Go, Please

Building Cultural Infrastructure in Phoenix

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When the Phoenix Art Museum moved into its Alden Dow-designed facility in 1959, it served a modest city carved out of citrus groves, cotton fields, and cattle yards. The museum shared its new space with the Central library and a community theater.

Today, the citrus, cotton and cattle are gone, replaced by subdivisions, service industries, and strip malls. And for the first time since 1959, the Art Museum is expanding — into an addition and renovation by Todd Williams/Billie Tsien that will more than double the original project. The library is moving. Designed by Will Bruder, its 5 storey home is going up two blocks south of the Art Museum, at the edge of a new city park built over a 6 block long freeway underpass. By themselves, these two buildings represent a significant design and cultural investment by the city. But they are only the beginning. Seven other major commissions are also under construction or recently completed, and another is on the boards. Together, the projects represent more than 1,000,000 square feet of construction, and an investment of over $500,000,000.00 dollars.*

What is happening right now in Phoenix is nothing less than the creation of an entirely new cultural infrastructure — instantly. It is a process which more or less mirrors the recent history of the city. Like 19th century Chicago, most of Phoenix has been built in a breathtakingly short time frame. At the end of World War II, the city had fewer than 250,000 inhabitants. Today, the metropolitan region has over 10 times that number.

The speed and exponential parameters of the growth have created a city where time and place are read very differently. In the 1950's, Phoenix was a compact little town well outside the largest 50 cities in America. Today it covers nearly 2000 square miles, and is the nation's 8th most populous urban area. In the 1950's 'Phoenix' was always followed by 'Arizona' in press references. Today it is not.

Like other later 20th century cities which experienced rapid growth, Phoenix is less a single city than a loose aggregation of smaller, contiguous municipalities—19 in all—with only changes in street sign color to differentiate them. The entire Valley is organized by a vast Jeffersonian grid of one mile squares oriented along the cardinal axes, stretching with almost uninterrupted regularity for 50 miles east to west, and more north to south. The result is a uniform metropolis whose very order has the unfortunate corollary condition of dislocation: it can be quite difficult to distinguish a neighborhood in Mesa from one in Tempe or Glendale. Further, the dispersion of political and financial authority works against the creation of a recognizable locus of cultural resources. Each of the smaller communities jealously guards the fiction of its own identity and sovereignty, thus jeopardizing centralizing regional culture and infrastructure improvements.

Freeways are illustrative. Until the 1980's, Phoenix had only one lonely strip. When a comprehensive system finally was deemed unavoidable, construction began simultaneously at locations across the city on 250 miles of roadway. Funding shortfalls now threaten the original vision. So while citizens await a resolution of the schedule, isolated, fully constructed overpasses sit like megalithic sculptures in a Salvador Dali landscape at the city's edge, anticipating the roadways which may one day connect them. Meanwhile, the various municipalities and the state wrangle over who will get what of the remaining resource pie.

The new cultural facilities, however, mark an interesting departure: a determined effort to create a cultural center of gravity in a city whose development has, up to now, been ruled by centrifugal forces. It is an ambitious undertaking, the scope of which is unprecedented in American cities: imagine New York doubling the Museum of Natural History and the Met, increasing the Public Library by 1000%, getting another Bronx Museum of Science, another City Hall, another Madison Square Garden and then another one, and throwing in the renovation of the Ed Sullivan theater — all in 5 years.

According to former mayor (and former chairman of the League of Cities) Terry Goddard, "no city modern I can think of had ever tried anything on this scale before. We were living in a place whose cultural facilities had been built when the population was only 1/10th of what it was now—and we decided to bring them all up to date at the same time. And I wanted it all downtown".

In many ways, the ambition of the agenda reflects in miniature (though at a vastly accelerated pace) the Paris of Francois Mitterand — but without the advantage of a national treasury. And without the advantage of traditional cultural funding mechanisms.

To be sure, Phoenix has both corporate and private patrons. But is has no Rockefellers, no Whitneys, no Mellons. It simply has not been around long enough to establish a significant benefacting class. The scope of the current cultural production here is therefore even more impressive, given that it has been underwritten almost exclusively through ballot initiatives and municipal funding—and this in an era of general public parsimony, and in a city with a long history of fiscal, social, and cultural conservatism. Let's not forget that Arizonans were at the vanguard of those who knew in their hearts that Goldwater was right.

Phoenix bought its Art Museum expansion, new Central Library, History and Science and Technology Museums through voter approved bond issues totaling more than $1 billion, of which the cultural projects (and some parks) amounted to approximately 20% of the total. Each of the cultural projects also had to raise substantial money on its own. City Hall (which included the theater renovation) was funded through separate municipal bonding instruments and lease savings. A large measure of the success in getting the bond issues passed is due to the foresight and resolve of Goddard. "Prevailing wisdom was that the cultural [bond] issues would not pass," he recalls. But with his very public enthusiasm, a grass roots effort was launched. "I heard from all kinds of people—mothers who told me they had grown up here with nothing in the way of culture, and they wanted something better for their kids."

It was also Goddard who spearheaded an international competition to design the new City Hall, a process which yielded a thoughtful post-modern essay from Barton Meyers. Although it suffered somewhat from clich_ post-modern stylings, the Meyers scheme (as well as several others in the competition) proposed spreading the bureaucracy out along several arcaded blocks of low-rise buildings marching from the central business core toward the state capitol, creating a governmental mall, and reclaiming a wasteland of ramshackle warehouses and abandoned historic structures. The 5-storey City buildings would have been wrapped around a series of large interior courts, public "rooms" in which the more ceremonial functions of government would be arrayed. The scheme thus anticipated the creation of the city's first truly urban spaces, while at the same time offering a strong sense of identity for the downtown.

Unfortunately, the Meyers proposal fell victim to post-Goddard City Council intrigue, the architect's own refusal to play ball in a changed and difficult political arena, and questionable financial analyses which projected massive construction budget overruns during a time of financial difficulty for the city. Fearful politicians become architectural micro-managers, and the City Hall which ultimately was built is a far cry from Meyers' expansive vision. Instead, working on an extremely tight budget, Langdon Wilson responded to an emasculated program brief with a 20 story econobox trimmed in just enough deco-inspired brushed stainless to give the building a slightly grander gloss than the standard office tower it really is.

Bruder's much more daring—and therefore more vulnerable — library came in for similar scrutiny, resulting in program changes and battles over design issues with Goddard's politically adroit but culturally naive successor, who felt that since it was city money being spent, he and the Council had every right to ride herd on the project. Bruder's design survived, as did Predock's Science and Technology Museum, and the Williams/Tsien addition to the Art Museum. The History museum did not fare as well, with an indignant Emilio Ambasz leaving the project under circumstances which never have been explained adequately. Meddling on the part of city management and elected officials added little or none of the "value" it was promised to bring to these projects: City Hall got a strange and symbolically inappropriate "crown;" the copper-clad library was barely saved from a "more southwestern" green oxidized finish (in fact, copper does not oxidize green in southern Arizona). City interference mostly brought delays, ill will, and aesthetic and programmatic confusion. The experience offers a cautionary tale about the process of building with municipal funding, but no less commitment from its supporters.

"Across history, the 'State' has always constructed the great monuments," notes Goddard. "Public funds provide the shell, private funds fill it."

In the case of the library, Goddard's analysis could not be more true. Budgetary shortfalls will allow only the construction of the building, not its furnishing (private efforts are underway, but are running very far behind—the building may open with nothing in it but the books). Bruder's design, at least, is largely intact, and with it an engaging architectural response the atomization of the city. Bruder sees the library of the future as a competitor in the fluid information/entertainment market, and therefore a magnet for those (especially kids) who might spend their leisure hours at suburban shopping malls—which are increasingly not only merchandising centers, but the locus around which entertainment and leisure activities cluster. Thus his new library is organized as a "shopping center" of information. The ground level groups new acquisitions, popular readings, music, educational and entertainment CD's, videos, periodicals, and children's literature into a "mall" of high circulation materials, complete with a food court. Bruder envisions a highly socialized space, a place of gathering and interchange, and provides a strong dose of visual dynamics (5 storey elevator lobby with glass cabs, stainless steel and copper detailing, interactive display cases) to push the concept. The ground floor is his "hook," his way of getting people in on the adventure.

But the architectural pies de resistance is at the top, where with a vigorous nod to LeBrouste, Bruder gathers the entire non-fiction collection of the library onto one open, skylit

floor, with a tensile roof and walls of glass to the north and south. 300 feet long, 170 feet wide and 30 feet high, the cavernous space creates a spectacular, one acre "City Room," a latter-day hypostyle hall of slender, tapering columns, generous reading areas, and panoramic views through more than 10,000 square feet of glazing (and elaborate louver and sail systems to control daylight—and educate visitors about solar energy and design).

Bruder's airborne reading room in this way provides a dramatic replacement for Meyers' lost public spaces, and does so with a kind of bravura that is rare in this city—the kind which will likely attract a curious and appreciative crowd. When they come, they will also notice that this building does something else unusual for Phoenix: it pulls itself right up next to the street. Like many other western cities, the urban morphology of Phoenix is that of building blocks set back from the street behind a buffer of parking; street edges are indistinct, or ragged at best. Bruder's behemoth muscles its way up to the sidewalk with a gleaming, ribbed, windowless facade that towers 100 feet above Central avenue (the main north-south thoroughfare in town), less than 25 feet from the street. It is a massive presence, and immediately establishes an edge the likes of which is rare in this city. Were it to exist in isolation, the gesture would be meaningless. But the elegant, linear Tod Williams/Billie Tsien addition to the Art Museum plays the same card, less than one block away, and on the same side of the street. The visual magnetism is quite powerful, creating one of the strongest definitions of urban space in the city—a strong, clean definition for Central, and a clear indication that visitors are entering a part of the city which is quite distinct from others.

But will that gesture be enough? These are isolated projects, and the Phoenix grid is so big that even the new Science and History museums (which also pull themselves up to the street front) are more than a mile south, and half a mile west—probably too far to encourage meaningful pedestrian traffic, and certainly too far to support a sense of downtown as physically different than the rest of the city. Nevertheless, as Goddard hoped they would be, the new facilities are all downtown, and compared to the city as a whole, relatively close together. Further, they are supplemented by the existing Suns arena, a planned baseball stadium, three live theaters and symphony hall, all of which bring even more visitors, and strengthen the notion of the area as an identifiable alternative to the suburbs. The recent arrival of a rather tame, but still tasteful Rouse company development, even adds a retail and restaurant concentration to the mix .

Despite budgetary and aesthetic controversy, and the efforts of city staff, the overall quality of most of the projects is surprisingly high, and the wealth of talent represented extraordinary. This is due in part to the work of the Central City Design Review Board, established by Goddard to select architects and review their projects. Influenced by the persuasive and at times polemical rhetoric of vice-chairman John Meunier (Dean of the Arizona State University College of Architecture and Environmental Design), the Board set out to chose "world class" architects whenever possible. According to Meunier, "we wanted culturally significant buildings, facilities which would establish Phoenix as a leader in the design arts. We therefore sought architects whose work indicated the ability to deliver those qualities."

"World Class" status is very important to the people running Phoenix these days, although who confers such designations remains unclear. After being named one of the two "Best Managed Cities In The World" by an organization which measures those sorts of things, nearly every city limit sign was altered in a matter of days to reflect this exalted state. The preoccupation with being taken seriously on the world stage is not surprising in a city which has so recently landed on it: young people crave validation, why shouldn't young cities? In Phoenix, that search for validation has long been characterized by a confusion of quantity for quality: bigger was thought synonymous with better. To a degree, the nearly instantaneous addition of over 1,000,000 square feet of cultural facilities parallels that fevered logic. But according to local political and urban design patron Grady Gammage, the cultural bond election signaled a change as well. "By the early 1980's, Phoenix still wasn't a 'city,' more a patch of desert with a lot of people in it. But when folks realized just how many people were here, and how little there was for them to do besides shop, eat and watch movies, a broad public debate began about 'what we were all about.' Should there be more to this place than Bullock's and burritos? Apparently the voters thought so."

Phoenix wants to be a first-order city, a place with all of the advantages that large-scale urbanism offers as the reward for its substantial costs. Great cultural facilities are the top prize in that reward system. And like most adolescents, Phoenix has little patience for a slow climb. The results of that impatience are now under construction all over downtown. The question remains, however, whether these projects, all of which take place within a 4 square mile area, will provide the critical mass necessary to bring an urban identity to a city which at present is little more than a developers showroom of the latest styles in subdivisions. Also lurking in the background (although in the face of this much positive effort, one hesitates to ask) is the question of whether Goddard's rather traditional vision of citymaking is appropriate at the beginning of the 21st century. Could it be that there is a more appropriate distribution of resources in a city which is built on the premise of open land as an inalienable right; how does centralization fit into this schema? What does the age of telecommuting and virtual reality make of expensive infusions of capital into an area of town where many people may never go? These questions make Phoenix an interesting model of urban evolution.

One project whose approach challenges traditional notions of creating cultural infrastructure is, low and behold, a freeway—or rather, the mitigation devices along the edge of one, devices which make the Squaw Peak Parkway one of the

more interesting stretches of roadway in the United States. The Parkway itself is a partially completed, locally controversial commuter roadway built through a series of established neighborhoods and a major urban park. Utilizing funds generated through a levy on city construction budgets, the Phoenix Arts Commission hired a number of artists to create "installations" along the freeway intended to in some fashion make it more palatable to the neighborhoods which it vivisects.

The pieces commissioned include a 5 mile long series of urns, pots, and other vessels which sit atop, alongside, and occasionally embedded into the freeway's sound walls. They range in size from 5 to 30 feet and have generated heated debate among neighborhoods, motorists and politicians who stake out polar positions about their aesthetic quality and financial responsibility. More popular are other works: one which converts a standard overpass into a meso-American sculpture forest, and another which is a series of outsized tire treads used as patterning in parts of the sound walls. Though interesting in themselves as art pieces, the installations become fascinating as responses to the dilemma of place-making in the autoplex. Phoenix has grown so big that perhaps it is unreasonable to assume traditional notions of how and where to provide cultural infusions. Not everyone goes downtown, or uptown, or here, or there. But everyone rides the freeways—they become common thread in the neutralizing grid, the universal infrastructural element. Says former Arts Commission director Deborah Whitehurst (who hired the artists): "We've lost a sense of public space in America—infrastructure is one place where we can reclaim that. Public art helps to humanize infrastructure." It not only helps humanize it, it invests that infrastructure with the layers of meaning that so many of our contemporary buildings fail to do. In a society which worships automobiles, freeways are in many ways the pilgrimage path. What could be more appropriate than lining them with the relics and coding devices of contemporary and historical culture?

And so, Phoenix is engaging the issue of how to create cultural infrastructure on a number of levels, many of them promising, all of them tenuous. They are tenuous because they are disbursed, single, and discontinuous. In a way, they thereby mirror the city itself. The process of their creation is exciting and somewhat unnerving. However, the aggregate ambition and quality represented in the results, and the fact that discussions in the form of built projects is occurring at least suggests the emergence of a new influence in the growth cycle of this city: maturity.

***New Cultural Infrastructure in Downtown Phoenix**

Sliding Roof Baseball Stadium ($235,000,000), Ellerbee Becket, proposed.

City Hall (550,000 square feet, $80,000,000), Langdon Wilson, completed.

America West/Phoenix Suns Arena (20,000 seats, $80,000,000), Ellerbee Becket, completed.

Symphony Hall/Civic Plaza Remodel ($31,000,000) HNTB, SH&G, Communications Arts, others, under construction.

Central Library (300,000 square feet, $30,000,000), Will Bruder with DWL, under construction.

Phoenix Art Museum, (160,000 square feet, $25,000,000) Todd Williams/Billie Tsien with Leschaer and Mahoney, under construction.

Science and Technology Museum (125,000 square feet, $15,000,000), Antoine Predock with Cornoyer Hedrick, under construction.

Heard Museum of Native American History and Culture, (45,000 square feet plus renovation, $10,000,000), Langdon Wilson, design development.

Orpheum Theater Renovation (1500 seats, $7,000,000), Van Dyk Pace Westlake, under construction.

Phoenix Museum of History (20,000 square feet, $2,000,000), Langdon Wilson, under construction.