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Places

Title

Connecting Infrastructure to Deep Structure [Place Debate: Revisiting the Phoenix Public Art Plan]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/06j1h6w2>

Journal

Places, 10(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1996-07-01

Peer reviewed



water results in new concentrations of vegetation, called “green ups,” and the same thing was supposed to happen at the City Boundary Project.

At ground level, the City Boundary Project is a disappointment. One is impressed by the craftsmanship of the walls but they are dominated by both the immediate environment as well as the larger landscape context to the point of blending in without distinction. There has not been a noticeable green up behind the terraces. Instead, there are several dead or dying plants. Too little distinguishes this place from others in Papago Park: a gateway or boundary should make a more obvious mark.

The lack of connection or reference to the overall context is the biggest disappointment. To the south is the main body of the park, with power lines cutting across its edge. Catty-corner to the northeast is the Scottsdale Auto Park. To the north, the Oakland Athletics spring training facility continues to sprawl and the National Guard launches frequent noisy overflights of helicopters. Since the project was completed, there has been an increase in turf and high-pole lighting because of baseball fields and an overall degradation of environmental quality, rather than an effort to encourage the restoration of the former glory of the Sonoran cactus-dominated landscape.

The Thomas Road Overpass provides a significant connection between infrastructure, community and deep structure. The plan identified the Squaw Peak Parkway as a prime opportunity in designing the city’s infrastructure because of its scale and centrality. Artist Marilyn Zwak called her design of the overpass “Our Shared Environment,” an apt title. Zwak and engineer Jerry Cannon created six reptile-shaped support columns, each twenty-four feet tall, to support the bridge. Eighteen relief panels of human, abstract and animal images adorn the columns and the walls.

Hohokam artifacts found at the site during the

freeway excavation inspired Zwak’s imagery. She literally dug into the deep structure of the region for the construction material of the column surfaces. Zwak and two assistants spent 4,000 hours applying 150 tons of adobe to the overpass columns and walls. Adobe is, of course, a traditional southwestern building material, comprised of earth, water and straw.

The Thomas Road Overpass looks organic, as if it grew out of the place, and is certainly unlike any other highway bridge. It was an instant success, which is amazing because the parkway was controversial, having divided neighborhoods and antagonized community residents. Zwak responded in an almost clichéd way: involve people in a project and they will take ownership in it and be its stewards. The theory works, a truth too often overlooked in public projects.

Zwak invited residents, city officials and other members of the overpass design team to leave their marks in the wet adobe. Some imprinted their hands and feet, several inscribed names, others imbedded things with meaning from their lives, such as drill bits, a wrench, a padlock, a hubcap, treasured rocks, shells and a lucky penny.³ Zwak supervised the placement of all the objects and interacted with each of the participants.

The reaction to the Thomas Road Overpass is in sharp contrast to another Squaw Peak Parkway project: “Wall Cycle to Ocotillo” (known locally as the “parkway pots”). The artists sought to connect their work to the region; many of the vessels have obviously Native-American-inspired markings, others incorporate plants, water features or solar lighting. But the result was superficial; the pots appear to be more decorative than inspiring. Nor were these artists as successful in involving the community as Zwak. The artists did consult the community and design a few sheltered sitting areas, but the overwhelming public reaction was negative.

The Phoenix Arts Commission plan sought to put “place back into infrastructure.” Many of the projects inspired by the plan have, indeed, created links between project and place, between human culture and the deep structure of the region. The surface landscape now reflects the deep structure in new and interesting ways. But the most successful projects still require connections to the local population.



Left and above: “Our Shared Environment” (Thomas Road Overpass), 1990. Artist: Marilyn Zwak. Photographs: Craig Smith.

Notes

1. Phoenix Arts Commission, *Public Art Works: The Arizona Models* (Phoenix: 1992).
2. Frederick Steiner, “Basins Designed to Retain Water, Aid Vegetation,” *The Phoenix Gazette* (27 March 1992): E1-E2.
3. Lynn Pyne, “City Stops for Roadside Art,” *The Phoenix Gazette* (14 June 1990): D1.