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From Infrastructure to Identity [Place Debate: Revisiting the Phoenix Public Art Plan]

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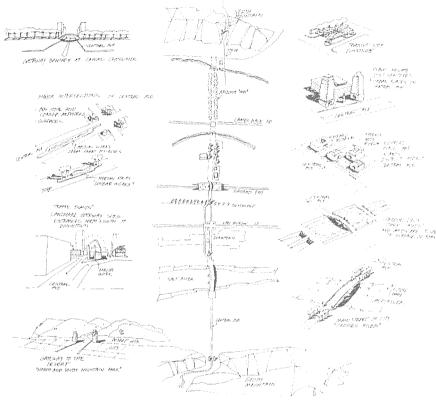
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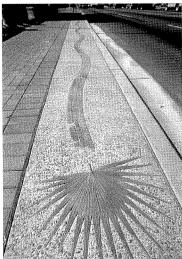
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# Reed Kroloff From Infrastructure to Identity





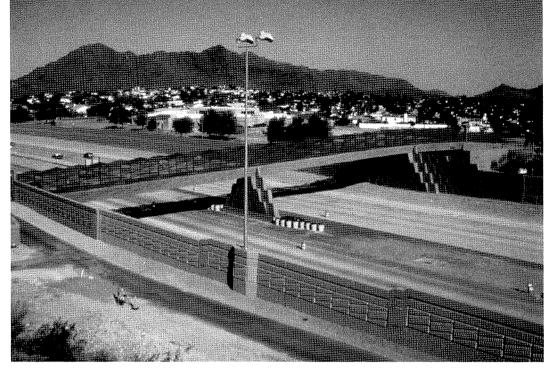
Top: "Working Zone 2.0, Central Avenue," from the 1988 plan. Right: Streetscape for Dunlap Avenue, in the Sunnyslope neighborhood, 1990. Artist: Kevin Berry. Photograph by Tarah Rider Berry. Fifty years ago, Phoenix was a sleepy little oasis of 50,000 people nestled together on about 25 square miles of the desert floor. Today, the metropolitan region boasts a population of 2.3 million occupying nearly 2,000 square miles. With growth like this, little wonder the city struggles for a sense of identity that includes anything more than the mountains heaving up out of the landscape, and the human-made net of streets that ropes them in.

In 1988, Bill Morrish, Catherine Brown and Grover Mouton imagined an extraordinary enrichment exercise for the city of Phoenix: a fusion of urban infrastructure and public art into a new system "connected, prepared and endowed with meaning" for the residents of the city. Art would transform roadways into cultural pathways, subdivisions into communities. The hope was to offer a model that would help ameliorate somewhat the "vast distances and long lines of formalized development that...overwhelm...and disorient... the observer..." They proposed nothing less than a new cognitive mapping system for city residents, one that would supplement the natural and humanmade structures already laid out across the valley.

The strategy brilliantly turned the city's worst enemy — its vast size — into hope for salvation. The plan would co-opt the very transportation and irrigation networks that enabled sprawl by giving them cultural legibility. The proposal was exciting for the clarity of vision and almost Confucian simplicity it offered for solving the complex problem of endowing a commonplace conurbation with a distinct character.

After seven years, the Phoenix Arts Commission can point to some smashing successes. Artist Kevin Berry's streetscapes for the Sunnyslope neighborhood are a playful, convincing abstraction of the suburb's history as a mining town and tuberculosis sanitarium. The city dump has become an unlikely, subversively, instructive sculptural presence in the form of a new reclamation and recycling building designed by a team of engineers and environmental artists.

The vision comes closest to fruition along the Squaw Peak Parkway, which, thanks to the plan, is certainly among the most beautiful in the nation. The landscape design is outstanding, and the roadway serves as an armature for several major



Left and below: Dreamy Draw pedestrian bridge, across the Squaw Peak Parkway, 1995. Artist: Vicki Scuri.

art installations. The installations — ranging from tire-tread-inspired sound barriers to bits and pieces of domestic bric-a-brac-cum-sculpture — are easily understood as part of a considered system of challenging public art. It has become a landmark that attracts tourists and locals alike.

Sadly, the parkway also sowed the seeds of destruction for the Morrish, Brown and Mouton plan. A great political uprising about the quality of the parkway's art and the distribution of public funds for "non-essential" and "un-Arizona" design ultimately led to the gutting of the Arts Commission, the departure of its visionary and energetic director, and the drastic reduction of the percent-for-art budget that supported it.

In short, the plan was too good for itself. Public awareness was raised just enough to cast a wary eye toward public art. No new cognitive map was unfolded. And most of the installations now exist as so many of the other positive human contributions to this desert city: isolated, disconnected incidents in a vast web of streets, canals and mountains which remain the true compass points for most residents.

Yet all is not lost. Recently, the unenlightened art history major who currently occupies the governor's office in Phoenix decided, in his signature shortsighted fashion, that for budgetary reasons, landscaping and aesthetic improvements would be suspended on all new freeway construction. The public response was immediate and overwhelmingly negative. People had come

to realize that infrastructure can and should be more than only purpose-driven.

I am optimistic. No master plan can anticipate the spasms of public sentiment. At the same time Phoenix took a swipe at the Arts Commission, it was spending hundreds of millions of dollars for cultural infrastructure of the more traditionally concentrated variety. So we have a new world-class library, art museum expansion and science center, with more projects coming. The Arts Commission remains and will overcome its setbacks, slowly. There is no question that the public art plan has contributed to this exciting new climate.

Perhaps, as the modern Phoenix canal system is built, in part, over a thousand-year-old predecessor, and since the city takes its name and current form from the constant process of remaking itself, a coherent vision for public art will rise out of these tentative starts and help deliver Phoenix to the front ranks of American urbanism. What a city it could be.

