Title
Conceiving a Courtyard

Journal
Places, 6(3)

ISSN
0731-0455

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Publication Date
1990-04-01

Peer reviewed

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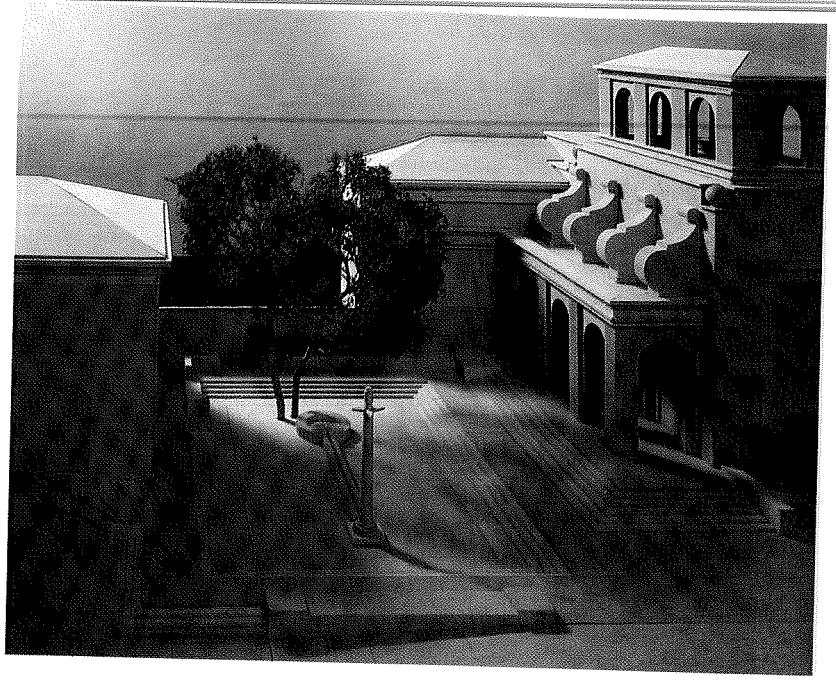

Photo courtesy of Campbell and Campbell.

The City's aspirations for the project —the creation of a place expressive of certain community and civic values, a place that reveals and repairs relationships with its surroundings—attracted our attention first.

Our work has been concerned primarily with such public expressions of place. Further, we viewed the elements explicitly required to be included in the project—a tree, a fountain and a gated wall—as powerful entities that could be made to speak compellingly as collective expressions of renewed connections with the natural world.

Often in such a project the teams are chosen by the sponsor. But in this case we were asked to seek out an artist, so we were able to reflect on the dimensions the collaboration might take. Obviously, there was a potential for a strong narrative line and content. At the same time, the right response seemed to require a kind of direct, "artless" straightforwardness.

We approached Robert Irwin with this in mind. While we had a general familiarity and enthusiasm for the subtlety and directness of his work, it was our initial conversation and agreement that led us to work together.

It was very satisfying that our different points of departure led to the same basic conclusions about the framework of the piece. The courtyard volume needed to be defined by a simple powerful, yet welcoming presence: a great tree set in a simple, serene landscape. We worked on this idea in the manner of successive waves of colonists rebuilding on ancient foundations, layering our individual concepts one atop the other, adding or subtracting, adjusting or altering ideas and elements to produce an ever more carefully attuned and refined work, which still was based on the primitive, viscerally inspired original. We ourselves have had very different visualizations of things, but it seems to come back to these basic agreements about what the place is.

Our work is primarily concerned with connecting people and the natural world through the design of specific public places. Thus, we began with thoughts of the natural landscapes of Pasadena. There are essentially two: the broad, relatively flat mesa, which supports drifts of oak woodlands and which gradually slopes from the dramatic San Gabriel Mountains to the Los Angeles basin and eventually to the Pacific Ocean; and the water-carved canyons of the Arroyo Seco, whose curving path is lined with an abundance of fragrant vegetation.

Since water is so symbolically and sensually beneficial, especially in this dry climate, we felt that this sheltered, sheltering courtyard should evoke the Arroyo Seco while the more public setback surroundings should be designed as an abstraction of the more open, dry mesa. The grand tree became, of course, a huge California sycamore. Throughout coastal California's semi-arid landscape, this plant signals the presence of fresh water. This twisted, multi-stemmed species is naturally dramatic, with white bark, mottled gray and brown; it provides a deciduous canopy that seasonally changes from bright green to tawny gold and issues a pungent, watery fragrance.

In the manner of the Arroyo the courtyard is set apart from its adjacent surroundings by a drop in grade level. Wide, concrete stairs and gently sloped walks provide easy access for all from the sidewalk and Police and Hale buildings. (To avoid the "cattle chute" effect of handrails, gradually sloping walks are provided instead of access ramps.) In order to describe an appropriately proportioned and aligned spatial volume and to provide a gracious entry along its public edge, the courtyard moves forward into the setback along Garfield Avenue. Wide low walls provide casual seating.

A lapping fountain of cut sandstone and Arroyo granite springs from the roots of the sycamore. From a welling source, water glides in shimmering waves down a narrow channel to slide over the black granite base of the

Sentinel and disappear into a gravel border. Drifts of rich green streamside plants gather at the fountain edges.

The Sentinel, a column rising to an eagle head capital carrying a blue light, recognizes the role of the police department as guardians of the City. The back wall of the court is painted with a mottled green wainscot rising and blending to layered violet and capped with a red band.

Massed plantings in the flanking setback along Garfield Avenue recall the mesa: Engelmann oak (native to only a narrow band of southern California mesas), lemonade berry, live-for-ever, coffeeberry, toyon and others. Oaks are planted in straight rows to respond formally and symbolically to the original Beaux Arts Civic Center master plan and to add its collection of significant California trees.

—Douglas Campbell
Regula Campbell

Generally, I find the rush to collaboration not too wisely thought out. The difficulty of making such a marriage is not recognized. In the prospectuses of these kinds of proposals hardly any time is given for the process of getting two separate personalities together, especially if the people are operating with two different aesthetics or in two different disciplines. Most project sponsors hardly leave enough time for a creative process. They take six months to a year to put the prospectus together and then want the collaborative-creative process to take two weeks. It's bass-ackwards; in the end everyone is shortchanged.

For a collaboration to work, three basic things are necessary. First, the project must be of sufficient scope and of equal interest that separate parties need and want to collaborate in it. If I wanted to go to the moon and you wanted to go to the moon, we would have the first basic tenet for collaboration: shared desire.

Second, the project must be of sufficient scale that there is room for both people to work. That way, I know I need other people's expertise: I can't do it alone. When I find someone, we already have a clear reason why we are getting together and know what our roles are. Mutual need is the second tenet for successful collaboration. If you don't have mutual need, the experience can be similar to that of being thrown into a snake pit: one or two people could do the project themselves and are used to working by themselves.

Finally, must have respect for each other. If I know a person is the best at what they do and I have respect for that person, that is the best of all possible worlds.

Collaboration worked reasonably well for us on the Pasadena project. We're not finished and there are some difficulties. But we agreed on one thing up front, that the courtyard needed a large tree, and it was on this ground we decided we probably could work together. We were able to take a basically simple idea and refine it, elaborate on it by bouncing it back and forth between us. Up to a point that has improved it.

The proposal looks more like a landscape project than an art project. If an artist and a landscape architect create a public space together, it often ends up looking more like the landscape architect did it. That could be because the landscape architect dominated the process, or because the only appropriate solution was a landscape solution, or because the artist abdicated. In this case a landscape approach really was best; the project simply did not call for an elaborate art solution.

The first thing you must have in a case such as this is an artist who believes that is an appropriate approach. If I had been determined to produce an art object, then the collaboration would not have worked.

Still, most everyone connected with the project wants to identify me with the column at the front of the courtyard ("sculpture") and the wall at the rear, which we intend to stain bright colors ("painting"). I don't see it that way. It's the whole to which these are parts that may be art.

There are few artists who would agree that art is something other than sculpture or painting. But I take that position comfortably. It's an aspect or an extension of a dialogue about modern art that I am personally pursuing and to which I am trying to give some legitimacy.

Robert Irwin was interviewed by Todd W. Bressi.