

MONOGRAPHS

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AN ELEPHANT IN YOUR LIVING ROOM, OR THE SQUAW PEAK POT CONTROVERSY

By Nina Dunbar, Public Art Program Consultant, and Deborah Whitehurst, Executive Director, Phoenix Arts Commission

"If the freeway was an elephant to those living near it, the Squaw Peak project quickly became the Phoenix Arts Commission's elephant."

"He remembered how it all got started—the Great Squaw Peak Pot War, a gory battle before the turn of the century that pitted the Giant Teapot Establishmentarians against the Paint-by-the-Numbers Commandos. Truth and virtue had emerged triumphant . . . some people actually liked the pots, but their right to express themselves was soon quashed . . . The controversial pots were removed and replaced with howling coyotes, giant bola ties and 100-foot saguaros made of plastic."

The future according to Sam Lowe, Phoenix Gazette, February 14, 1992.

The question we asked ourselves from the beginning of the Squaw Peak Mitigation Project was, "Can public art really help mitigate the impact of a new freeway on the neighborhoods around it?" We had good reasons to wonder. To the communities living in its path, the freeway was, as artist team member Lajos Heder characterized it, "as welcome as a two-ton elephant in your living room." The team's onerous task was to turn the unwanted pachyderm into a house pet. Within weeks of the project's installation, this analogy had new meaning. If the freeway was an elephant to those living near it, the Squaw Peak project quickly became the Phoenix Arts Commission's elephant. Inflammatory local and national headlines even encouraged some in the city to argue that the project and the entire Percent-for-Art Program had become the city's beast.

Looking back, it is easy to see why we took on this ambitious project and how our good intentions developed into what became known as the "pot controversy." When the Squaw Peak Parkway Public Art and Landscape Enhancement project was initiated in early 1990, the Phoenix Arts Commission's Percent-for-Art Program was three years old and had just begun to have a visual impact on the city. Substantially funded as a \$1 billion bond election in 1988, the Percent-for-Art Program was dedicated to involving artists in the design and construction of Phoenix's infrastructure. As a young, sprawling city building its infrastructure for the first time, Phoenix was uniquely suited for this. Years of unprecedented growth and scattered



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development had greatly enlarged the city's boundaries at the expense of its historical and cultural identity. By using its Percent-for-Art Program to promote more creative and humane solutions in the design of public works, the Arts Commission was joining a citywide movement to make Phoenix a more attractive place in which to live.

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Planning for the Squaw Peak Parkway mitigation project began just as the Phoenix Arts Commission was celebrating the completion of what was then its most visible and popular project, the Thomas Road Overpass. The Thomas Road project employed artist Marilyn Zwak on an engineering team to design a \$13 million overpass and exit ramp on the Squaw Peak Parkway. Zwak played an instrumental role in transforming an anonymous design for a concrete bridge into one that animated and provided a sentimental landmark for a community divided and dislocated by the new freeway. Completed on time and substantially under budget, the project contradicted the assumption that the involvement of artists only increases the cost and delays major construction projects. Marilyn Zwak's openness and sensitivity to the community, along with her willingness to involve citizens in the actual fabrication of the bridge, not only helped demystify the image of artists, it provided a constructive focus for those living near the freeway and encouraged them to rethink their relationship to urban infrastructure. We were hoping to achieve a similar success in mitigating the impact of the freeway itself.

Unlike the Thomas Road Overpass, the Squaw Peak project required the artist team—which also included urban planners, landscape architects and engineers—to retrofit the design of an existing structure; in other words, the team was to fix what were considered to be problems in the freeway's design. The hard edges, monumental scale, and increased traffic and noise were among the complaints levelled against the freeway, and contributed to the impression among neighbors adjacent to the freeway that the road was ruining the quality of their lives.

The concept of mitigating the effects of new freeways and streets was new for Phoenix and relatively novel for any city administration. In 1985 voters approved a half-cent sales tax increase to generate \$5.8 billion to build and improve 230 miles of roads in the Phoenix area within the next 20 years. In 1988, the city's Planning Department recommended, and voters approved, \$18 million in bonds to initiate

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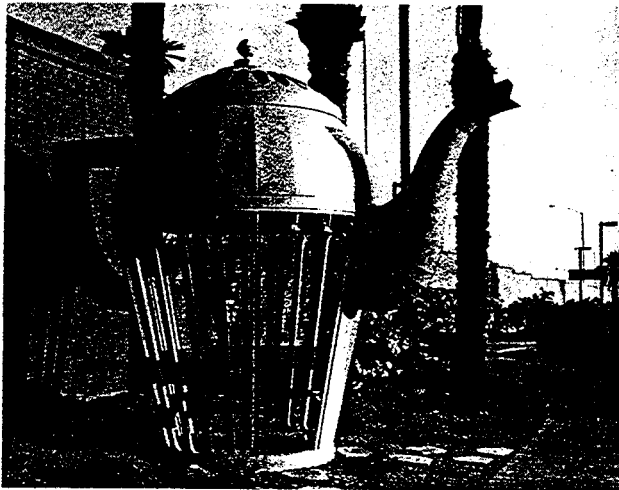
an ambitious freeway mitigation program. Of this amount, \$6 million was dedicated to the Squaw Peak Parkway. One-third went to purchasing property in the half-mile corridor on both sides of the freeway. The rest was allocated to neighborhood revitalization plans, changes in land use and traffic circulation, noise walls, bicycle and pedestrian routes, enhanced landscaping, and public art. The \$760,000 available for public art and landscaping was earmarked to create and implement a master plan for public art, landscaping and other community amenities. These improvements were to be located on public property in the neighborhoods adjacent to the freeway.

In July 1990, a contract for the Squaw Peak project was awarded to the team of Harries/Heder Collaborative, Inc., a design firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, led by artist Mags Harries and architect Lajos Heder, and The Planning Center, a local landscape design and urban planning firm. The project began with two days of community workshops which solicited the residents' views about their neighborhoods. The Arts Commission and the city's Planning Department mailed workshop invitations to 6,000 homes and businesses, advertised the meetings in newspapers, and telephoned residents who had expressed an interest in the Parkway projects. Fifteen residents attended. Undaunted by the poor turnout, the team members took to bicycles and canvassed neighborhoods, knocking on doors and making extensive photographs of the area. Six months later they presented a conceptual plan for artwork and landscape improvements to representatives of the Planning Department, the major funder of the project; the Street Transportation Department, the construction and technical supervisors for all street and freeway-related projects; and the Arts Commission, the contract administrators and liaison between the artists, the city, and the community.

After a two-month review, the concepts were presented at a community meeting attended by over 125 area residents. Chaired by members of the artist team, the Arts Commission and the Planning Department, the meeting featured a slide show depicting the evolution of the project, the proposed artwork, maps of the proposed landscape and public art sites, and painted maquettes of individual artworks. The response to the artworks was generally favorable. A few residents raised minor safety issues. Others requested that more "southwest" imagery appear in the individual works (the team addressed both concerns in its final proposal). As the

meeting evolved into a tense forum for the ongoing complaints about the noise of freeway traffic, crime rates, and problems with landscape maintenance, the proposed public art project seemed of little concern. Lost in the discussion were the few voices that said, don't give us artwork on the freeway, give us higher noise walls and better landscaping, or relocate our homes. The meeting attendees

received a follow-up letter answering many of their concerns about the artwork and the freeway. The artist team incorporated the community concerns about the art in the project's final design. The design was approved by city staff and a contract to fabricate their designs was developed.



Giant Teapot from "Wall Cycle to Ocotillo"
1992
by Harries/Heder Collaborative

Although community residents received notices alerting them to the two-month artwork installation, most of the commuters using the Squaw Peak Parkway learned about the project when they saw the giant urns and pots cruising down the parkway on a convoy of flat-bed trucks. Like a circus coming to town, the fifteen-foot high vessels presented a dazzling, if not bizarre, spectacle. Their brightly painted surfaces contained an eclectic range of designs, including Victorian-style sunflowers, surreal

underwater scenes, and bold Native American and African imagery. The "pots" quickly disappeared into the neighborhoods, where they were installed at the ends of quiet cul-de-sacs along the pedestrian trails adjoining the freeway noise wall. Alert drivers could see the handles and spouts of oversized tea pots emerging from the neighborhood side of the fourteen-foot high walls. The neighborhood view was considerably more dramatic.

Titled "Wall Cycle to Ocotillo," the project includes thirty-five individual sculptures at twenty different locations on or near the noise walls. Twenty-nine of these are located on the neighborhood sides of the two walls. The remaining six, including a steel ball, a glass vase, a stack of bowls, and a casserole, are arranged atop the walls. Using the vessel form as a theme throughout the project, the individual works range in height from two to fifteen feet and are made of polychromed concrete, painted steel, and glass. According to the artist team members, Mags Harries and Lajos Heder, the vessels were a vehicle for embellishing and personalizing the giant beige noise wall, to make the neighborhood side the "inside" rather

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than the "outside" of the wall.

Serving as neighborhood landmarks and stations along the pedestrian and bicycle trail, the vessels also function as planters, intimate seating niches, gazebos, and hummingbird gardens. All are lit by solar-powered batteries and some use water misters to cool pedestrians during Phoenix's long summers.

But all the misting systems in the world could not have cooled what happened next.

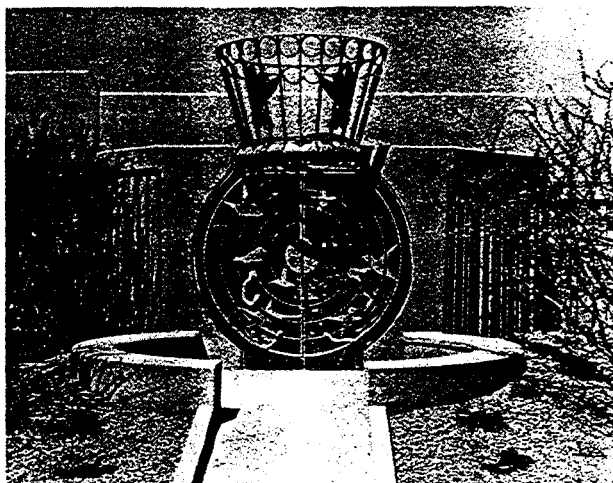
Controversy, like a virus, needs a host to thrive. The pot controversy had two hosts. The first was the press, which was happy to have a lively story in the slow period following the mayoral and city council elections. The second was the poor economy, which made many people question expenditures for public art when so many other needs could not be met.

The first volley, which came from residents of only one of the affected neighborhoods, was satirical. Posing beside a huge, brightly painted fishbowl, and led by a neighbor named Mrs. Fish, they cast poles and lines into the as yet unlandscaped dirt. They caught the attention of the local daily, which featured their antics on the front page, under the headline "Going to Pot." Within a week, a columnist attributed the placement of "cracked pots" on the freeway to alien beings, or a Japanese horror movie. Hitting a more serious note, he asked how the city could spend money for art when a local youngster was dying from lack of money for a bone-marrow transplant? It didn't matter that voters had not approved the bond money for transplants.

From the beginning of the controversy, it was clear that the residents who had spent years campaigning against the freeway now had another, more vulnerable target. After attending too many public meetings and voicing too many unheeded protests, they didn't want the freeway interpreted or decorated. They wanted it gone. Since that wasn't in the cards, perhaps eliminating the freeway art was.

The response of elected officials was just as swift. Shortly after the first headlines appeared, the mayor called the expenditure of city funds for the project "outrageous," and asked for sweeping changes to the Percent-for-Art Program. Other

involving artists in the design of the city, or how to develop urban transportation solutions that do not profoundly diminish the quality of neighborhood life. These issues—at the core of the project—were all but ignored in the effort to blame city officials or Arts Commissioners appointed by city officials for creating a public work that aroused excessive public interest.



"Hummingbird Garden" from "Wall Cycle to Ocotillo"
by Harries/Heder Collaborative

After several weeks of open public debate, the crisis went indoors when officers of the Arts Commission began to negotiate for the Percent-for-Art Program's future. Through dozens of meetings over months, they countered the drastic changes proposed by city management, finally agreeing to reasonable Percent-for-Art Program revisions. The 90 percent Arizona artist quota was dropped in favor of annual hiring goals; program cuts were dropped in favor of establishing a five-year budgetary plan; and the role of the Arts Commission as an advisory body to the city council was clearly framed. The agreement also eliminated the restrictions proposed earlier

defining where Percent-for-Art dollars could be spent, and directed the Arts Commission to use a portion of the Percent-for-Art funds to maintain its public artworks. The agency was moved into the city manager's office, to mend the lines of communication that had broken down during the controversy.

The results of the changes and the controversy are, in many respects, still unknown. Looking for some sort of useful lining in the cloud, we wonder more than ever who the public in public art are, and what is the best way to reach them? Are they the city as a whole, the people living closest to the art, drivers passing it on nearby roads, or all of the above? A larger question is whether we should even attempt to carry out projects in the semi-privacy of residential neighborhoods, or devote the percent for art program to the urban cores and more public spaces of the city? In the end, we wonder whether a five-mile segment of freeway is simply too large for art, or—the old question—whether it is possible to mitigate existing infrastructure?

We know that the varied demands of the public assure continued debate and even controversy about public art. But when controversy arises, what is the best response? There is no prescription for managing controversy; the circumstances of

each community vary too widely. At the Arts Commission, we chose at the beginning to take a business-as-usual approach. We concentrated on telling the press and the public how the design team was selected, how the community was invited to participate, and what the artistic intent of the work was. We repeated the story dozens of times, but it wasn't enough to communicate this complex project. Months after the controversy, we still are met with, "I didn't know that" when we explain the intent, process and scope of the project.



Cartoon from Arizona Republic, February 5, 1992.

And this business-as-usual approach resulted in city officials shifting public attention from the cause of the controversy—the artwork on the Parkway—to the source of the artwork—the Arts Commission. Policy changes resulted, many of them beneficial, and all leading to an enhanced sense of program ownership by the mayor and city council.

Nearly a year after "Wall Cycle to Ocotillo" went in, it remains on the Squaw Peak Parkway. Some of the works have been vandalized, but the controversy has for the most part played itself out. The project was recently voted the city's second-favorite work of public art by readers of the city's daily newspaper (Thomas Road Overpass remains the first). The Phoenix Arts Commission's Percent-for-Art Program is still in business, salvaged by flexibility, diplomacy and advocacy. The Arts Commission itself is evolving to meet the changing needs of a young city, and the tough demands of politics and public opinion in a tough economy. As for the elephant, it has simply confirmed that artists provide better insights at the beginning of projects than they do elephantine cover-ups at the end. ▼

We hope you've enjoyed this debut issue of *MONOGRAPHS*. Let us know if you have an idea for a future issue. We'd also love to hear your comments/suggestions on our debut.

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