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

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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.

