

ART

Phoenix design competition takes flight as art and politics

Politics and art. For some, the twain will never meet; for others, the concepts are inseparable.

With all the local debate over land use and growth in recent weeks, we saw more discussion of quantity than of quality, more

concern with management and control than with creating a comfortable or challenging or symbolically suitable environment.

Currently at UCLA's Wight Art Gallery is an exhibition that addresses these very issues. "Architecture and Democracy: The Phoenix Municipal Government Center Design Competition" is no ordinary art show. It is an exhaustive, demanding study replete with videotapes of public meetings, extensive wall texts, and models and drawings of buildings — some of which will never be built, others that are only planned.

Few public-design projects have engaged their communities as directly as the 1985 Phoenix, Ariz., competition to select an architect for a new complex of city buildings. Fewer still have resulted in such a happy outcome.

In 1984 the citizens of Phoenix approved a bond issue to finance construction of a \$24.4 million fire, criminal justice and municipal center. They had also recently elected a new mayor, Terry Goddard, with an appreciation of good design and a strong commitment to open government.

Goddard saw the new center not as an isolated construction project, but as an opportunity to redesign the entire 12-block area surrounding the project site and in the process to develop a "Phoenix Style" of architecture. He also saw that an international competition, open to public scrutiny and comment from the first, would ensure consideration of a broad range of design ideas while remaining true to the political ideal of free and open debate.

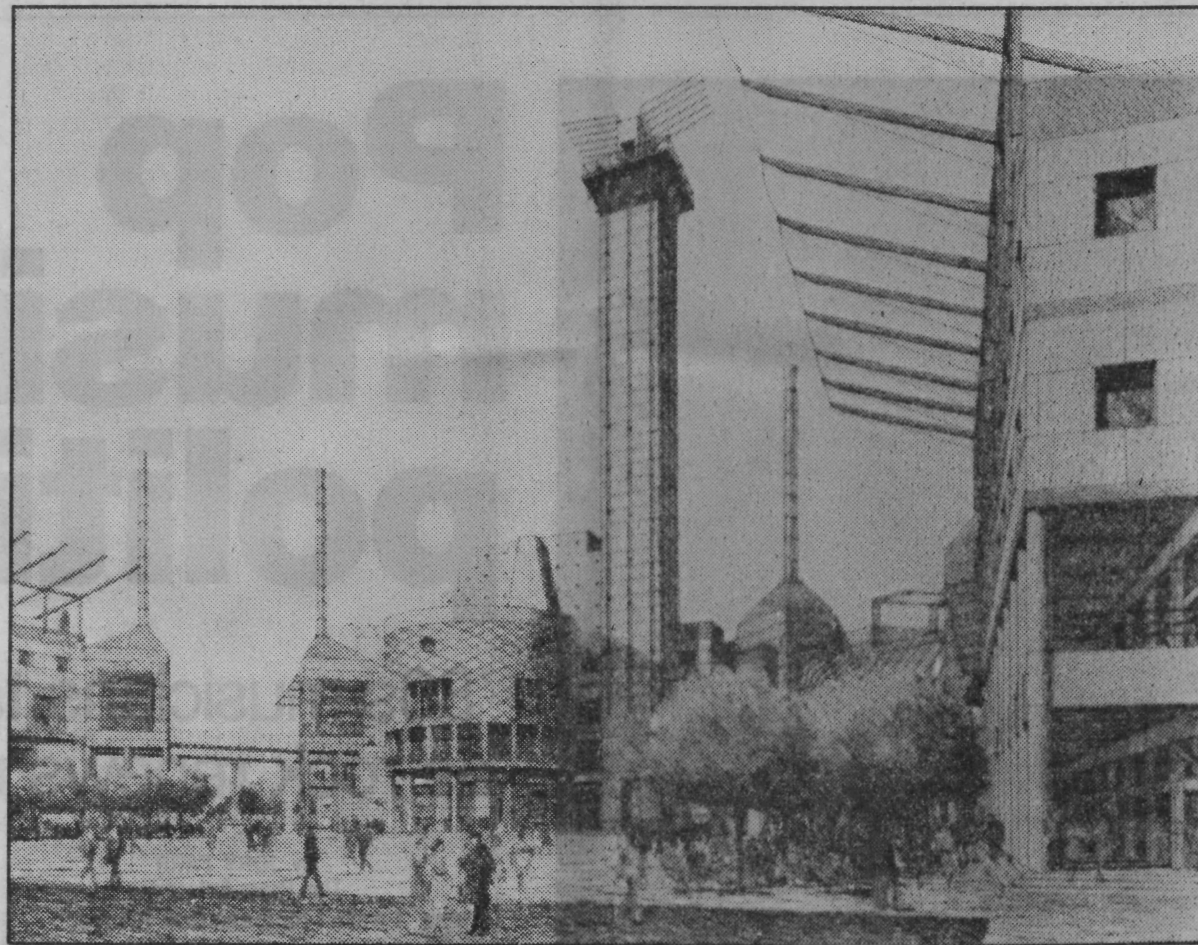
The UCLA exhibition documents the competition process. From exactly 100 applications, an eight-person jury selected 10 semifinalists — all top-ranking contemporary architects.

What emerges from this exhibition is that the jury and the public most wanted an architecture

On Art



Charles Desmarais



Wight Art Gallery

Architectural drawing by Barton Myers from "Architecture and Democracy: The Phoenix Municipal Government Center Design Competition" at Wight Art Gallery, UCLA.

of symbols, an architecture that would respond, in the words of the competition guidelines, "to the unique historical, cultural, environmental, economic and political conditions that define Phoenix today." At the same time they wanted their city center, until now ridiculed by the design world as fragmented and sprawling, to become a must-visit attraction.

The submissions of the semifinalists responded to these desires in innovative and exciting ways, drawing on such Southwest themes as Indian designs, Pueblo and Spanish architecture, desert colors and the symbolic use of water. They also looked back to ancient traditions of civic buildings and city plans.

Four finalists, Michael Graves, Arata Isozaki,

Ricardo Legorreta and Barton Myers, were selected. Their models and plans, along with videotapes of their public presentations, are displayed.

● The most startling ideas are those of Isozaki, the Japanese who last year bowled over the U.S. art and architecture press with his first American building, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

He envisioned sleek, perfectly proportioned buildings clad in a brilliant red sandstone. He arranged them around a huge "City Room" — a plaza of some three city blocks in size, decorated only with rocks, pools of water and arid plants. Though long colonnades around the perimeter provided for shade, the idea of so much flat

expanse in one of the nation's hottest cities killed his concept in the end.

● Mexico's Legorreta developed his own kind of minimalist Mediterranean vocabulary using recessed windows and doors, huge walls of stucco and generous pools and fountains. As stunningly clear and simple as his work may be in smaller contexts, so grand a project as this would have ended up looking stark.

● Graves, less than 10 years ago the most important new talent in American architecture, parodied his own philosophy of historical reference and readily identifiable symbol. At the center of his civic square, Graves proposed a Mexican-style pyramid — the City Council Chamber — topped by a four-story column, on which perches a huge phoenix bird. Elsewhere, great urns and Egyptian columns, Phoenician sails and a perfect grid of palm trees signal Mideastern references.

● The modern Phoenicians decided they liked their symbolism a little less stiff, and so they selected Myers of Toronto and Los Angeles to create their new civic center.

Myers' scheme is more Italian than Hispanic or Arabic. His symmetrical square at the center of the project, tightly enclosed by midrise, substantial office buildings, gives a sense of security and stability. Grandeur and a locus of civic pride are provided in a 250-foot tower (interestingly, also topped with a phoenix, though it is stylized and not as silly as that proposed by Graves). The City Council Chambers, the Great Hall of Justice and a grand Mayor's Court provide interior architectural events. And an aqueduct — nearly a third of a mile long — ties together old and new parts of the city center, irrigates a public garden and feeds several pools and fountains.

Was Mayor Goddard's dream of a distinctive "Phoenix Style" of architecture realized by Myers? Certainly not yet. The first buildings of the Myers plan have yet to be started, though the architect says they're still on track. Once the buildings are in place, it remains to be seen whether other downtown builders will follow the lead. But the Phoenix style of assuring design quality by devoting money, time and attention to the process is an example for all high-growth cities.

The exhibition continues through Dec. 13. The Wight Gallery is in the Dickson Art Center at UCLA. Gallery admission is free; parking at UCLA is \$3. To reach the campus, take Interstate 10 west to Highway 405 north, exit at Wilshire Boulevard and go east to Westwood Boulevard, turn left and go straight to campus gate. For information, call (213) 825-9345.