When Suburbia Awakens
Lars Lerup

The Phoenix Public Art Department has agreed to curate an “urban art gallery” using these panels. This will change every six to twelve months, providing display space for local artists, school art programs, and local cultural groups.

Additional vertical panels are deployed as vine screens to soften the hard urban context. The panels are grouped with other architectural elements to block the south and west sun and form transportation hubs (bus stops) and/or create pedestrian “cultural rooms of retreat” from the harsh desert climate.

Canopies. The other major architectural element, the LampShade, is constructed from a single 8-inch diameter vertical rusted pole that supports a 9x18-foot light box. A standard urban unit, the parking space, provided the basis for the lateral dimensions of the Lampshade, while its height (12 feet clear to grade) was based on the need for a garbage truck to pass beneath. In the chaotic environment of the strip, the Lampshade's standard vertical dimensions will establish an important new design datum.

By being able to combine covered parking, pedestrian lighting, and signage into one flexible unit the Lampshade does in one move what typically requires three. During the day it can provide shade for a multitude of activities, while at night it can provide illumination for pedestrian safety and evening events. In the demonstration project, the vertical faces of the Lampshade are adorned with an enlarged image of an Evergreen Elm branch—the species planted nearby. But merchants will also be able to replace the Lampshade to replace less effective signage (as well as provide shaded parking).

Single LampShades can be adapted to accommodate photovoltaic cells and battery storage for off-grid use. They can also be multiplied in a variety of configurations, depending on the conditions of a site. Bus stops, parking areas, commercial display, and outdoor eating are among the uses they could complement. In 2004, the Phoenix Department of Street Transportation established the LampShade as one of its standard details.

Trees. Tree planting provided the final layer of inter-vention on the demonstration site. As mentioned, when Seventh Avenue was widened in mid-1960s it largely eliminated the possibility for landscape improvements in the right-of-way. Thus only the cross-street right-of-ways provided any area for tree planting. The trees chosen (a drought-resistant species called Evergreen Elm) work well with the rusted concrete bands. They create a shaded gateway to surrounding neighborhoods, an effect augmented by rusted tree grates and up-lighting.

Final Touches
In addition to the new amenity infrastructures, other tactics were employed to help the merchants along 7th Avenue. A consultant was employed to establish a common color palette they can refer to when repainting their buildings. Graphic designers created a new letterform and logo for the district—now called “Melrose on Seventh Avenue” after the surrounding Melrose Neighborhood. Others collaborated on signage and graphic elements for the LampShades.

Such identity-creating measures—now reproduced on letterhead, banners, business cards, and T-shirts—are helping the Merchants Association create a new vitality for their district within the Phoenix metro area.

Notes
2. This section of 7th Avenue lies within the 85013 zip code. The 2000 U.S. Census found this to contain 20,842 people, with a median age of 36 and a median household income of $36,150 (median family income of $46,047). The median value of a single-family, owner-occupied home was $109,100.
3. The design of these prototypes is the result of a unique partnership among Arizona State University’s School of Architecture, the 7th Avenue Merchants Association, the Melrose Neighborhood, and the Departments of Streets and Transportation, Neighborhood Services, Public Art, Planning, Community and Economic Development, and Development Services of the City of Phoenix.
5. Subsequently, an additional $75,000 was granted for Phase 2 of the project, which will be completed in August 2005.
6. In his book Points + Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City, Stan Allan gives an appropriate definition of infrastructure. He states that the primary modes of operation for infrastructure are the division, allocation and construction of surfaces; the provision of services to support future programs, and the establishment of networks for movement, communication and exchange. In the 7th Avenue context, these sub-urban infrastructures could be considered any public or private modification to existing right-of-ways, alleys, utility easements, setbacks, and retention areas perpendicular to the street that help create a connective tissue of experience.
7. The following collaborators and consultants were hired to provide specific expertise for the project. Janet Washo, Landscape Architect, of Washo and Associates, collaborated on the landscape design. Celia Connover, of Connover Design, provided the color palette. Prof. Jennifer Brungart collaborated on the graphic design for the canopies. Prof. Andy Wood collaborated on the graphic design for the Melrose on Seventh Avenue identity package. Prof. Matthew Innes collaborated on the structural design for the LampShades. The evaluation of this project is indebted to Lisa Hablend, Neighborhood Speaker, City of Phoenix; Tim Simple, Councilman Dorrort; 4, and Phil Gordon, Mayor of the City of Phoenix.

The ancient urbanism best portrayed by etched maps is past. The new metropolitan urbanism has been liberated from those petrified inscriptions. But we have also left cinematic urbanism behind, where trains once left crowded platforms in billowing smoke; The new metropolitan mode is handheld video urbanism, where a clip can stop, turn left, fade, begin again, grow dim, and be erased.

But all three are inadequate for the future: the first is too static, the second is too predictable—too noir; and the third is too erratic and self-indulgent. The peculiar suburban potential amalgamation of Nature and culture—of lawn and house—with renewed environmental insistence holds the secret to a new metropolitan urbanism. Rolled out, its horizontal coherence is weak but persistent, gentle and laconic; it is, when it can be, just there. Never fully complete, undramatic, always struggling against more powerful forces, it still holds its promise. It is this meta-bolic intelligence that points the way.

The new metropolitan urbanism is the fuzzy union of the built, the planted, and the natural (in the case of Houston the ancient moist prairie). It is an architecture both visible and invisible. Here Jeffersonian husbandry, now frozen in suburban landscaping replete with leaf-blowers and pesticides, can find new life by seeing the natural as the motor of a new urbanism.

In this return to the natural lies embedded the rejection of our total dependency on fossil fuels and the utopian dream that one day grow our houses. Solar air-conditioning! Twin-fuel cars! The image of the new metropolis that emerges from this new field-room is a lateral domain with a quiet but scintillating intelligence—the electronic forest. Here metropolitans will swarm, or swim, in a new liquidity, suspended between the invisible and visible. Here Jeffersonian husbandry, now from those petrified inscriptions. But we have also left cinematic urbanism behind, where trains once left crowded platforms in billowing smoke; The new metropolitan mode is handheld video urbanism, where a clip can stop, turn left, fade, begin again, grow dim, and be erased.

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