

PASADENA POLICE BUILDING PUBLIC ART PROJECT

Pasadena, California 1989

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Set apart from its surroundings by sets of descending steps, the courtyard is dominated by a huge California sycamore, providing a deciduous canopy that seasonally changes from bright green to tawny gold and issuing a pungent, watery fragrance. A lapping fountain of cut sandstone and Arroyo granite springs from the roots of the sycamore. From an upwelling source, water glides in shimmering waves down a narrow channel to slide over the black granite base of the Sentinel's blue lantern and disappear into a gravel border. Drifts of rich green streamside plants gather at the fountain edges. The back wall of the courtyard is painted with a mottled green wainscot rising and blending to layered violet and capped with a red band.

This project was the winning entry in an international competition organized in 1989 by the City of Pasadena Arts commission for a public arts project involving the design of a courtyard for the new police headquarters in the city's historic civic center. The courtyard, facing Garfield Avenue, and flanked by the George Ellery Hale Building and new police building by architect Robert Stern, was meant to address civic center design issues and make an "artistic statement".



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 and values. 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 the artist- a painter 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 evermore carefully attuned and refined work, which was still based on the primitive, viscerally inspired original. We ourselves had very different visualizations of things, but it seemed 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 in this dry climate, we felt that this sheltered and sheltering courtyard should evoke the Arroyo Seco, while the more public setback surrounding surrounding 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 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 sloping walks provide easy access for all from the sidewalks 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 ample 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: Englemann 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 to its collection of significant California trees.



A new direction in artmaking has emerged over the past decade. It seeks to replace the art object set in a plaza or a garden – each the work of separate individuals – with an integrated environmental expression created by a team of landscape architects, architects and visual artists. This new approach to public art, not only to the work itself but also to the creative process as a collaborative effort, has raised questions regarding both the importance of public art as a means of expressing community in addition to individual values, and related to the disciplines of landscape architecture and architecture as mediums of artistic expression.

Public art collaborations are meant to bring together the perspectives of different artistic disciplines within a single project and are often intended to be site specific. Pasadena wanted more – a piece expressive of the special values of this community and its Police Department and one which would enhance the relationship between the two.

We believe the work is successful as an expression of a collaboration not only among a team of artists but also with a community.

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