

# Phoenix Comes Alive

*Downtown revitalization creates urban and cultural identity*

by Cynthia Scanlon

photography by Keith Perry



"All of these projects tie into the grand concept of the revitalization of downtown and the contribution that corporations have made to see it happen," says Art Jordan, assistant vice president for First Interstate Bank, about recent renovations in downtown Phoenix.

Through a partnership of government leadership, corporate financing and architectural vision, downtown Phoenix is undergoing a revitalization effort expected to bring the area into the 21st century.

"Downtown Phoenix has gained a sense of vitality, a merger of people and place," says Art Jordan, assistant vice president for First Interstate Bank. "The plan has been carefully choreographed by city officials and corporations to turn downtown around.

And we're starting to see dividends."



Perhaps the most positive result of the unbridled growth during the '80s is the solid foundation created for the cultural and urban projects now underway. In contrast to the single-minded approach of building bland, homogeneous structures, however, these new projects aspire to create a unique, singular identity for Phoenix.

Some of the recent downtown projects include the Phoenix Civic Plaza, the new Arizona Museum of Science and Technology, the Phoenix Museum of History, the Orpheum Theatre, the AT&T/US WEST Communications building, First Interstate Bank, the Phoenix Newspapers building, Phoenix City Hall, and the Adams/Monroe Street Improvement project.

"All of these projects tie into the grand concept of the revitalization of downtown and the contribution that corporations have made to see it happen," Jordan says.

One of the most notable renovations is the \$30 million Phoenix Civic Plaza project. Officials at the Plaza hope that the new look will draw attention, and thus, more visitors and tourists to the downtown area. They're looking to boost convention bookings as well.

"We are doing this to bring the Civic Plaza into the present century," says Jan Denton, public relations manager for the Phoenix Civic Plaza. "Our building is a little old and tired. The last expansion of the building was done in 1985, and at that time, we changed the carpet. We are not state-of-the-art, and this will help us remain competitive in our market."

She adds, "The majority of convention centers across the country are either renovating, expanding or building new centers. In order to stay up with the competition, we need to do this."

The architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls/Southwest, Inc. (SH&G) designed the Civic Plaza project. The first phase of the renovation is scheduled in early 1995 before the National Basketball Association All-Star game is to be played at America West Arena. The project is expected to be finished by October 1995 just before the scheduled Super Bowl in January 1996.

"The design started in a master planning effort that was undertaken by the city," says William Craig, project manager for SH&G. "They gave us the general idea of what they wanted and we interpreted specific architecture into the current design."

The renovations include a sundial with giant rays surrounding the redesigned peacock fountain at Symphony Hall, shaded walkways, improved lighting on

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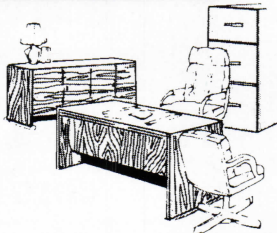


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the Symphony Hall Plaza Deck, four groups of palm trees that will rise out of the Symphony Hall garage, new water features and landscaping, and new entrance columns to the North and South Plazas.

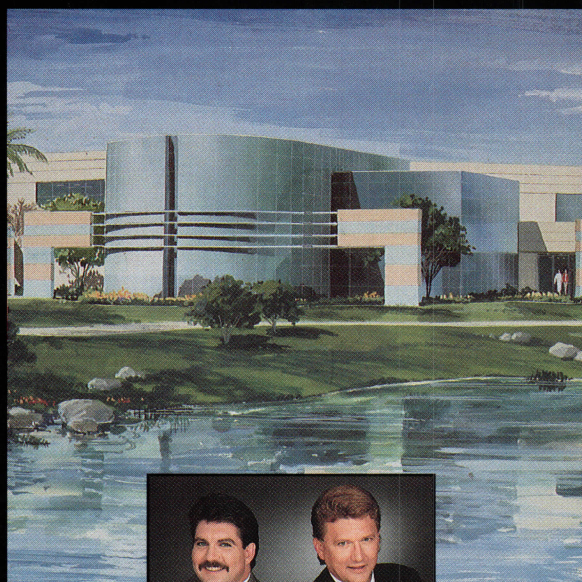
According to Craig, the Civic Plaza had few access points, and those access points weren't readily discernible. So the main architectural motive centered on opening up the corners for circulation, allowing people to come from the Arizona Center and immediately gain access to the Plaza's upper level.

"The idea was to open the site up to the public," Craig says. "The overall desire is to create a memorable civic area that conventioners will come to and note

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as an image of a new and prospering downtown area."

The architects handling many of these projects echoed the priority of designing their buildings and surrounding areas with open spaces that are comfortable and accessible to the public. This theme has been the thrust of many of the projects completed or now underway.

SH&G is also working on the renovation of the AT&T/US WEST Communications building near the Orpheum Theatre. Part of the renovation plans include improving the pedestrian level by opening spaces to accommodate activities that will attract people into the building. These spaces are planned to complement the Orpheum's vernacular as display cases in the AT&T building will



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▲ “There has always been an active interest in providing Phoenix with a vital downtown,” says Robert Shill, one of the principal architects on the Phoenix Newspapers project with the architectural firm DMJM.

match the proportions found in the theater.

The landscaping surrounding the building will also complement the pedestrian mall outside the theater and the Phoenix City Hall, creating a connection with the building’s neighbors and a continuity for people walking in the area.

First Interstate Bank has embarked on a \$30 million renovation of its 27-story tower, the Main Office Branch, and the block-long breezeways and walkways around the building.

The First Interstate Bank Plaza was first constructed in 1971. It’s the site of an older landmark, the headquarters of the Phoenix National Bank, which opened 20 years before Arizona became a state in 1892.

The plaza occupies an entire city block, bounded by First and Second Avenues, and Washington Avenue and Adams Street. It’s comprised of a 27-story, 356-foot tall tower, a three-story extension that houses the main office branch, a seven-story, above-ground parking garage, a block-long ▶





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breezeway and ground-level Conference Center.

Each floor of the tower is being remodeled and upgraded. A significant structural glass system, manufactured in England, encloses the west, north and south sides of the main office. The bank plaza combines granite benches and walk surfaces, drought-tolerant desert landscaping and upscale lighting.

Ben Barcon, a principal with the interior and architectural firm of ADM Group/IA<sup>2</sup>, believes the First Interstate Bank renovation is the crowning glory of the downtown redevelopment. His firm was responsible for the renovation and interiors of the building's first, second and third floors.

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**The revitalization efforts of downtown have been going on since 1969 in a "very meticulous, well-planned effort."**

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"Our firm has been involved in downtown redevelopment since 1985 and have witnessed a number of projects," says Barcon. "First Interstate went to great pains to work the building in with other projects in the area and the level of sophistication definitely makes it one of the premier projects downtown."

Jordan proudly agrees. "We feel we have created destination architecture. It's common to see people walking around downtown with cameras enjoying our public spaces architecture. This is the gift we have given the city," he says.

Phoenix Newspapers, Inc. recently broke ground on its 10-story, \$32 million building, which is located at the northeast corner of Van Buren and Second Streets. Designed by the architectural firm Daniel, Mann, Johnson, & Mendenhall (DMJM), the 250,000 square-foot office building will feature



55,350 square feet of blue exterior glass trimmed with a muted purple concrete and stone aggregate. When finished, the building will house the business and newsroom functions of *The Arizona Republic*, *The Phoenix Gazette*, and the *Arizona Business Gazette*.

"There has always been an active interest in providing Phoenix with a vital downtown," says Robert Shill, one of the principal architects on the Phoenix Newspapers project. "Sometimes plans are deferred and delayed by economic conditions, but now that there is life back in the economy, you're going to see many projects come to life and become part of a very viable and very beautiful downtown."

The Phoenix Newspaper building will also feature an interactive media wall that will give visitors a glimpse of the news gathering and editing processes. Monitors on the media wall also give an indication of the vast amount of information that pours into Phoenix Newspapers Inc. each day.

Phoenix City Hall has also undergone a renovation, which has just been completed. The architectural firm of Langdon Wilson Architects brought the project in on time and within budget.

"We successfully united a 20-story building with a two story historic theater in a real positive, urban setting, and that was one of the most challenging elements of the project," said Michael Schroeder, architect for Langdon-Wilson, which built the new City Hall.

He continues, "This was one of the major accomplishments we sought to achieve and it was the first time this had been done. I can think of no precedent where a building of that scale and that use has been joined to something of historic significance in a totally different use and scale. They now share common ground gracefully."

The brick and concrete wall of the Orpheum Theatre was kept intact as part of the new structure and serves as a constant reminder of the accomplishments of the architects who came before.

While the new City Hall building is a modern design, the exterior's ornamental design was preserved, borrowing elements from historic City Hall and the Orpheum Theatre. The outside glass is settled back from the structure and stainless steel fins protect the interior from the bright sun, saving \$200,000 a year in energy costs.

Schroeder's firm is also responsible for other projects in the downtown area, such as the Phoenix Museum of History

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and the Phoenix Plaza, at Central Avenue and Thomas Road.

According to Margaret Mullins, president of Downtown Phoenix Partnership, the revitalization efforts of downtown have been going on since 1969 in what she describes as a "very meticulous, well-planned effort."

Downtown Phoenix Partnership is a non-profit management district responsible for providing enhanced municipal services to a 90-square-block core of downtown Phoenix. The organization is overseeing the Adams/Monroe Street Improvement project, an \$8.8 million project designed to convert Adams and Monroe

Streets into a more pedestrian-friendly area.

Adams and Monroe Streets will be converted to two-way with angled parking to one side for more convenience. The project will also connect the north and south Arizona Center to the the America West Arena.

"The project connects City Hall and the Orpheum complex to the Civic Plaza and Heritage Square," Mullins says. "The streets will be lined with shade tree, benches, informational kiosks and pedestrian lighting."

Mullins echoes the view that a viable downtown must be a people-friendly place to be. "Downtown revitalization only works when you can make it an 18- to 24-hour-

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a-day venue," she says. "So we need a strong office environment during the day, and we need the arts and entertainment venues at night. And that's what we've done with Arizona Center, the Herberger [Theater], America West Arena, Symphony Hall, and, hopefully, the baseball stadium."

Other cultural projects underway include the Phoenix Art Museum/Phoenix Little Theater expansion and the Phoenix Public Library. A new Federal Court House, the warehouse district efforts and a possible major league baseball stadium will also have a dramatic impact on the city.

The far-reaching effects of Phoenix's newest projects will shape not only the skyline, but also the perceived and real identity of the city. Phoenix is poised to

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position itself as the major cultural and urban center of the southwest.

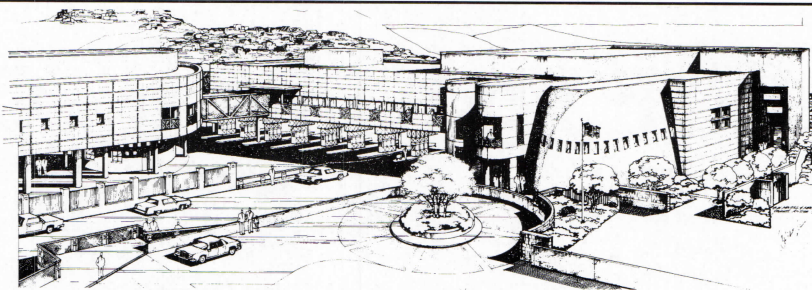
"The revitalization is working. Downtown Phoenix has outperformed the rest of the city in sales tax and business growth," emphasizes Mullins. "At the same time, we've had a dramatic reduction in crime and we want to continue that trend."

First Interstate's Jordan is quick to remind that few of these projects would have come to pass had it not been for the true partnership of architectural vision, city leadership and corporate financing.

"It's been teamwork," he emphasizes. "All of this has happened through the cooperative efforts of everyone. And we must not forget what the corporate commitment has meant to downtown."

**AB**

*Cynthia Scanlon is a Tempe-based freelance writer.*



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