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## Desert Rituals/Campus Rituals: Tempe, Arizona

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## Desert Rituals/Campus Rituals

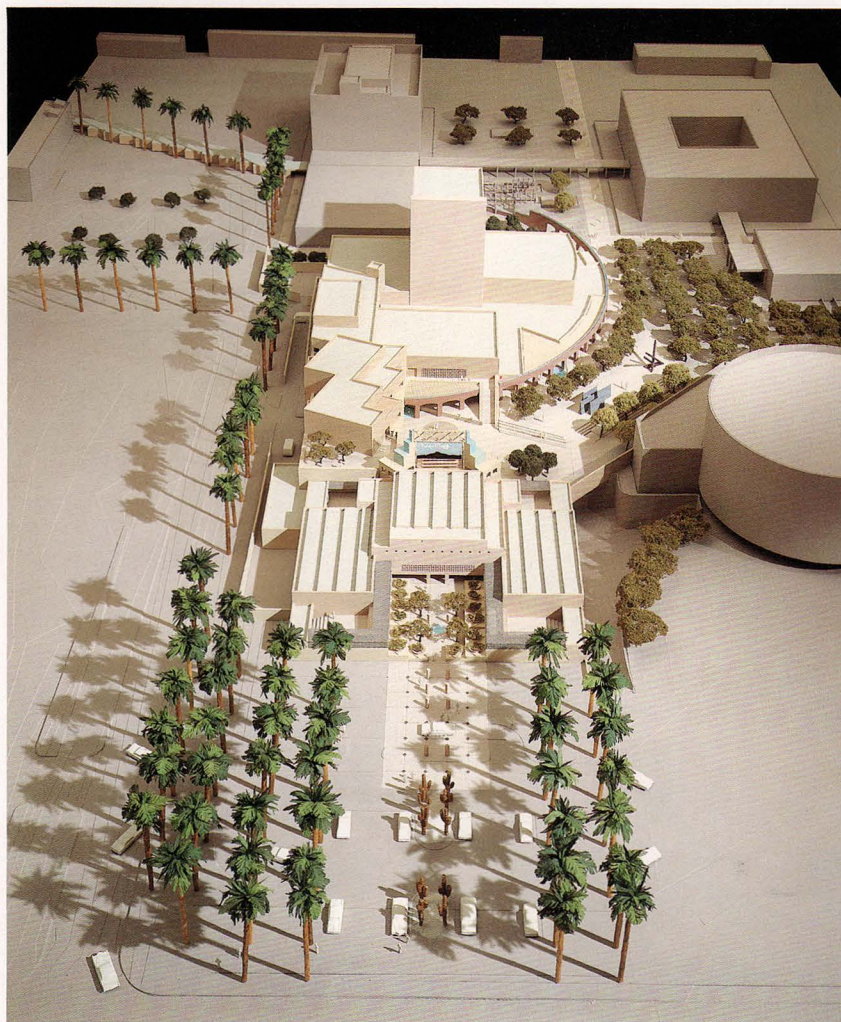
Tempe, Arizona

Antoine Predock

"From the flat red sea of sand rose great rock mesas generally Gothic in outline, resembling vast cathedrals. They were not crowded together in disorder, but placed in wide spaces, long vistas between. This plain might once have been an enormous city, all the smaller quarters destroyed by time, only the public buildings left, — piles of architecture that were like mountains." Willa Cather — *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Architecture in the Southwest may echo both the physical and human setting of its locus. In my work I attempt to merge an image of the powerful, surreal landscape of the American Southwest with an evocation of the region's cultural stratigraphy to produce an architecture that transcends both historicism and regionalism.

The landforms, the climate, and the light in the Southwest suggest certain architectural forms and patterns. Walled and dominantly horizontal, the buildings are often weighty, earthbound in color, and perhaps harsh in image. Violent seasonal and diurnal temperature extremes coupled with severe dust storms encourage protective, huddled settlements. The magical variable desert light alternately dramatizes and modulates these stark forms and is manipulated by the clusters to permit shady passages and patios for year-round use.



Main entrance to the complex.

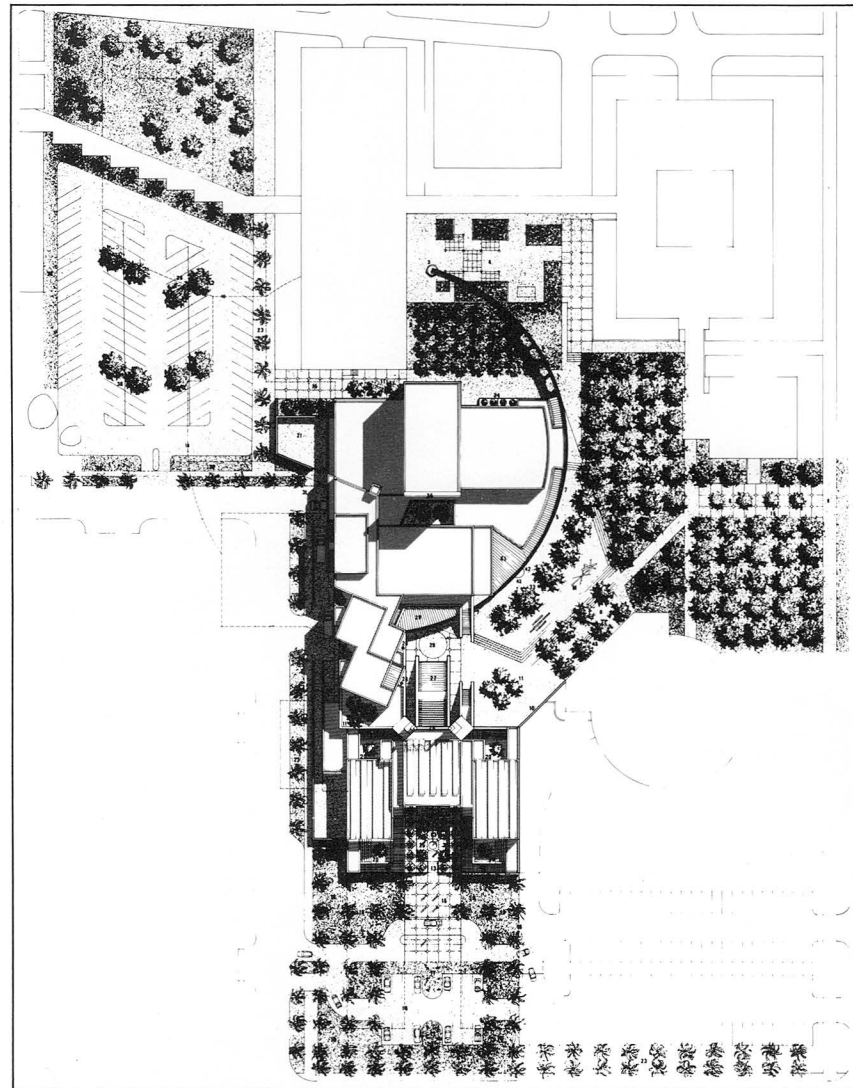
Underlying the physical aggregate of these formal and conceptual notions are the cultural memories engendered by the Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo occupations. These memories range from the profoundly moving echoes of the Anisazi and early Spanish

settlements to the ephemera of the contemporary strip. Popular images of the Southwest deriving from these traces and fragments incorporate both pre-Columbian austerity and the extravagance of cowboy-movie-Marlboro Country scenography.

The architectural diversity nascent in the imagery of specifically Southwestern settings may be further enhanced by inferences drawn from other, indirectly related, but richly symbolic, iconographies: the Moorish sense of deep passage and transition; de Chirico passages; the notion of a secondary architecture astride a primary base (the mosque upon the base of Luxor Temple); the Taliesin West breezeway; Mark Rothko's dissolving color edges. From just such a variety of site-specific and generally pertinent notions was conceived the new Fine Arts Complex for Arizona State University.

Arizona State University is an essentially pedestrian oasis amidst the turbulence of the surrounding "Wild West" American urbanization of the Phoenix area. The campus is self-contained with few reminders of the majesty of the nearby, high Sonoran desert.

Sited at the edge of campus on a major avenue, the new Fine Arts Complex is a "Low Rider" — a dominantly horizontal, massive huddle of museum, theatre, and related support spaces. The primary and symbolic entrance to the complex is through twin, stepped pinnacles forming a new, highly visible west gateway to the University and suggesting a desert "Temple of the Arts". Reaffirming the desert context, saguaro cacti stand aligned in a grid and then metamorphose into free-standing columns that link the palm courtyard to this campus and museum entrance.



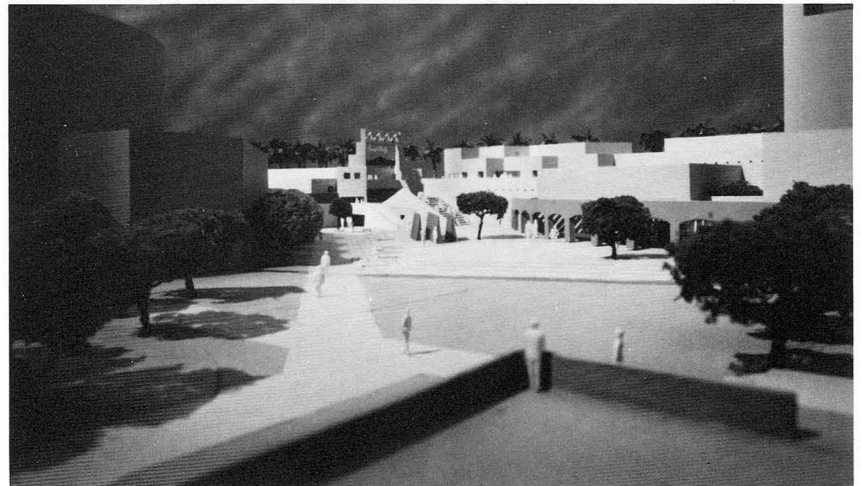
Fine Arts Complex, plan.

The museum with its abstract, Sphinx-like 'head' and 'paws' draws the arriving pedestrian from the palm courtyard into a shady water garden flanked by trellised sculpture terraces. Passing under the sheltering American Art Gallery one either continues at grade to the Arts Plaza and 'watering hole' theatre entrance or descends and follows a slot of water to the museum lobby.

This approach from the west establishes a sequence of linked, sheltered spaces that intimates an underlying water/shade/patio matrix. The cellular, 'soft' lining of this matrix contrasts with the low, massive, 'hard' building perimeter distinguished by the tower and stage house projections that appear

as abstractions of the surrounding mountains and buttes. From the east as well as the west the arrangement of the 'hard' and 'soft' components of the Fine Arts Complex enhances this processional sequence.

At the heart of the entire scheme is the Arts Plaza. Surrounded by the Dance Studio Theatre and the Theatre Instructional Units, the Plaza unites the arts in a single, outdoor performance and exhibit space with direct access to the Museum. The roles of spectator and participant in this arena are not restricted by the architecture — balconies adjacent to the acting studios and surrounding the Arts Plaza might be either viewing or performing platforms. Nor is the use



View of art gallery entrance.



View of projection screen.

of the other 'hard' components strictly defined — evening outdoor events might incorporate projections on the stage house wall. The drive-in movie screen thus symbolically joins the palm tree and the saguaro cactus as Hollywood icons of the American Southwest.

The prominent positions of the Dance Studio Theatre and the 500-seat Theatre anchor the performing arts on campus. Shared Lobby Lounges reinforce the unity of the performing arts identity. The quietly ceremonial approach to the Theatre, through a grid of trees or along a curved arcade, culminates in a subtly celebratory "watering hole" — a fountain and sidewalk — cafe environment at the louver-topped theatre entry patio.

The curved arcade/acqueduct links the Arts Plaza with the central campus both physically and visually. Its brick detailing and the soft desert colors of the adjacent walls suggest an amalgam of existing campus colors. This understated recollection of the context allows the distinctive addition to Arizona State University to declare the importance of its setting and, along with the other iconography and symbolism, to give due prominence to the fine arts.

PHOTOGRAPHY  
Robert Reck