

# A PUBLIC AFFAIR

Challenges and methods to designing and building public projects around Arizona

By Echo Surina



DFD CORNOY- PROPOSED DOWNTOWN CONVENTION HOTEL

The design and building of public projects is a beast (hopefully an attractive one at that) with teeth and the potential to do some damage to whomever takes it on. Because clients are cities, counties, states and the federal government, the amount of red tape can be cumbersome. Here, unique challenges and factors influencing the design of public projects are explored, from schools to entertainment venues.

Working within a rigid budget is a preeminent variable affecting the success of a public project. "Construction costs have escalated so quickly, it's been tough for some public entities to keep up with that," says Brett Hobza, a principal of DLR Group, whose company has done projects like Desert Vista High School in Tempe and Sandra Day O'Connor High School.



RNL MESA TRANSIT MAINTENANCE & OPERATIONS FACILITY

He cites an example of a school bond issued three years ago. "The school tries to determine a dollar amount for their needs, puts it on the ballot, an election happens and it's approved," he says. "But the design process can take seven months to a year, then construction could be another year or more."

The time lapse between funding allocation and a ribbon-cutting ceremony helps explain why the amount requested and approved by voters sometimes isn't enough in the end. Once the budget is approved and set, it doesn't change.

As a result of budget changes, the design scope is pared down, creating an additional problem. "They make promises to the voters as far as what these bonds will fund," says Hobza, "then reality sets in, and sometimes they can't deliver everything they hoped, at no fault of their own." What starts out as a strong, bold design can



DLR GROUP SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR HIGH SCHOOL

devolve into a mediocre version when its integrity is compromised for the bottom line.

A 15 percent hike per year in construction costs makes it difficult to stay within budget, says Dave Boehm, a principal at DLR Group who focuses on criminal justice projects. Some of the company's other projects include the Phoenix Art Museum, Maricopa County Lower Buckeye Jail and a renovation of US Airways Center (formerly called America West Arena). "That's been the hardest thing in the last few years," he says, "and that's across the board for various types of public projects." Completion dates get pushed back and large public projects can take years to finish, meanwhile, construction costs keep climbing in a volatile market.

Also, not all clients play by the same rules. "You have a patchwork quilt of design guidelines and zoning regimes," says Feliciano Vera, development services manager with DFD Cornoyer Hedrick in Phoenix. There are 23 municipalities in Maricopa County alone, all with their own codes, building guidelines and preferences.

Stakeholders involved on a municipality project can include the client, engineers, architects, elected officials, general obligation

bonds committee, management, citizens and others. "They have to obtain a consensus before [the project] proceeds," says Vera. "That inefficiency affects the time a project takes, cost and the subsequent design."

Phoenix's DMJM Design is a global architecture and interior design firm that does new construction, expansions and renovations, including Arizona's first LEED-certified building, the Department of Environmental Quality in Phoenix.

Brett Oaks, DMJM's director of design, says, "Typically there are a lot more meetings and concerns about achieving consensus among the development group and those they have to answer to," which directly contributes to the length of a project. But with so many involved, a design can get "diluted" he says, if it aims to please everyone, including the public.

"I look at managing public input as another design problem," says Oaks. "Sometimes they just need to be shown the benefits of good design. Showing examples can raise their aspirations of what a project might become, but architects aren't always trained in diplomacy. That can make it a challenge."

A proposed public project will either be reviewed by the city or county, depending on its location. The primary role of cities in the building process is to ensure the safety of a structure, whereas an engineering and architecture firm, for example, is concerned with meeting building codes.

When architects and general contractors brainstorm economical and aesthetic solutions together, the final structure is more likely to fall within budget and have a pleasing design than if the parties worked independently, says Craig Randock, principal of RNL, a Phoenix design and architecture firm. "Sustainable design is important. Architects and engineers are doing it because it's the right thing to do," even when the client doesn't dictate it, he says.

"Committed clients are key to superior public design, those who want elevating design," says Oaks. "Those who allow for design integrity are allowing for positive transformation in the built environment."

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