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Phoenix

If age and experience build character, Phoenix is at a distinct disadvantage — or a moment of tremendous opportunity, depending on your point of view. The city, formally incorporated in 1881, is “still growing up,” says Jo Marie McDonald, vice president of the Phoenix Community Alliance, an organization of downtown business interests. And like any adolescent, the city is now experiencing an identity crisis: Who am I, where did I come from, and where am I going? These fundamental questions are currently being played out amid a campaign to revitalize the city’s downtown.

Phoenix, which spans 500 square miles, never really had an urban center. As Bruce W. Ferguson, an independent curator and director of Future Arts Research at Arizona State University (ASU), points out, the urbanization of downtown is “a retroactive act” — an attempt to create a center out of a sprawling grid.

City planners and community organizations can already point to some major successes in revitalizing downtown. First Fridays draw

thousands of people on the first Friday of every month to more than 100 free art venues. There’s a burgeoning restaurant scene and a new ASU campus. A new 20-mile stretch of light rail services the area, and according to McDonald, plans are in the works for community gardens. The neighborhood’s first supermarket — there hasn’t been one downtown for years — is slated to open next year. For these and other initiatives, including programming to advance and improve existing scientific research opportunities and higher education, the city earned the 2009 title of All-American City from the National Civic League.

The final touch, according to Ed Lebow, public art program manager, was a piece of public art. The city’s public art program has been around since 1987; it’s funded by taking a percentage from monies allotted to the city’s capital projects, such as the construction of wastewater or water lines, or the aforementioned light rail. Yet as we all know, even in more established urban centers, public art can cause a ruckus.

As a result of the development downtown, in 2007 Phoenix’s public-art fund had \$2.5 million to spend on a public-art project. The piece, the city’s “first large-scale, outdoor work that is truly a sculpture,” says Lebow, would be installed in downtown Phoenix’s new 2.7-acre Civic Space Park. A call for proposals garnered 178 submissions, and a citizen jury

selected the one put forth by Janet Echelman, a Boston-based sculptor whose public works have been installed throughout the world. Echelman proposed suspending a 30-foot-long net of nylon ropes some 100 feet above the park. The sculpture would be illuminated at night, and would change color throughout the seasons. “An ambitious and unusual piece,” says Ferguson — especially for Phoenix. In its crisis of identity, it seemed, Phoenix had come out definitively in favor of innovation.

Months later, in December 2007, members of the local government had a change of heart. Ed Zuercher, then a city administrator, said the complex construction necessary to raise Echelman’s sculpture would delay the opening of the Civic Space Park. By then the economy had started to collapse, and rumor spread that the \$2.5 million could be better spent. That sentiment was helped along by Mayor Phil Gordon, who said in *The Arizona Republic* there was “not a lot of return” provided by Echelman’s sculpture.

Several leaders of the art community, among them Bruce Ferguson, say Zuercher’s and Gordon’s arguments were entirely false. “The park was going to emerge more slowly than the piece itself,” he says. Ferguson also points out that the money “had already been sequestered” for public art, and “couldn’t be used for anything else.” The economic angle, he says, was just “a political foil” for choosing a more traditional piece of art.

Susan Copeland, who sat on the committee that selected the Echelman piece, agrees. “It’s the same old story,” she says. “People are afraid of art.” Although she acknowledges that the economy had made things in Phoenix “a little bit uncomfortable ... the bigger reason was they were afraid people wouldn’t like” the artwork.

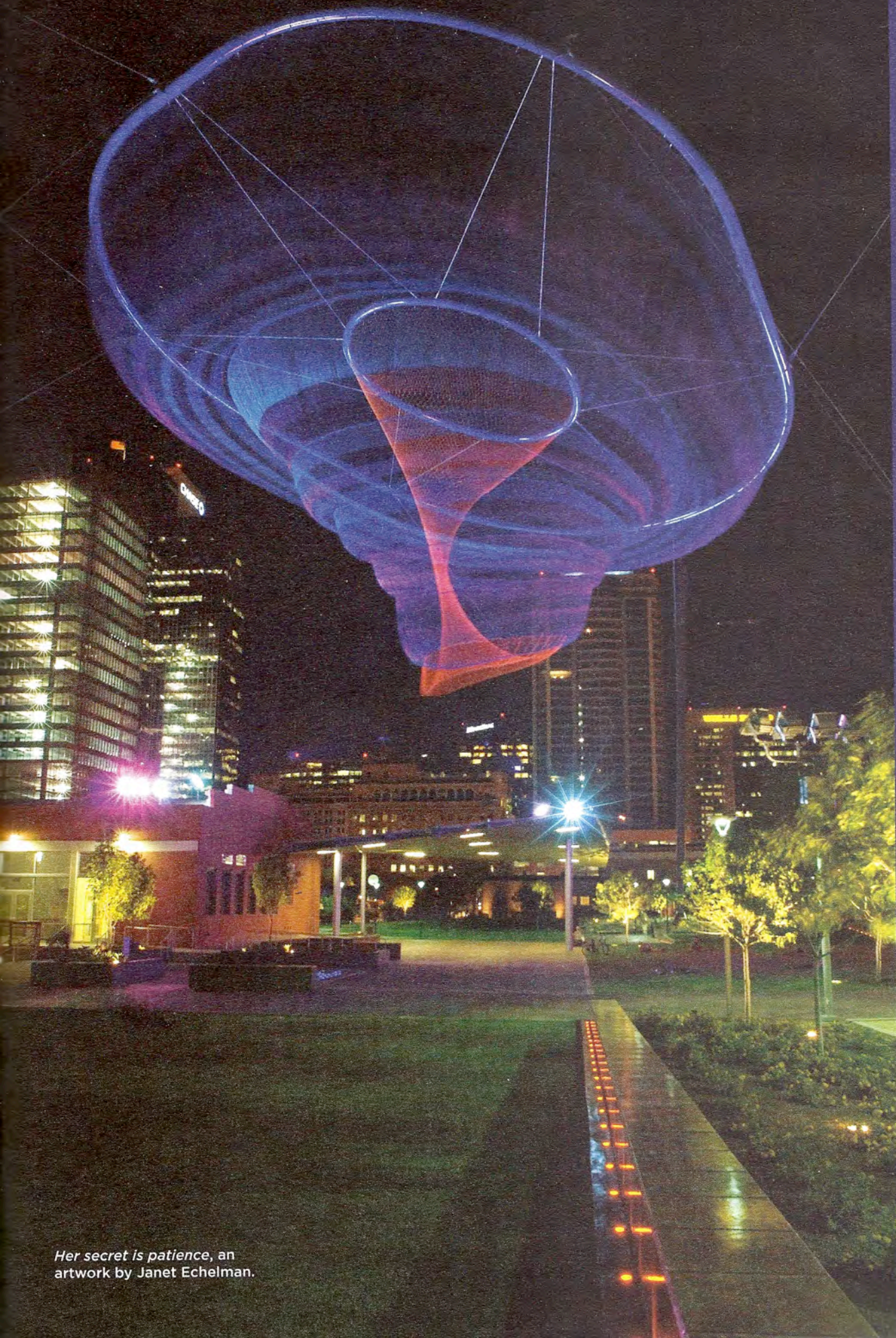
McDonald has a slightly different take. “Our city hasn’t been used to spending a lot of money on art,” she says. “To introduce a very expensive investment in art at this time ... people just raised their eyebrows.”

Deeply angered, the arts and downtown communities organized several rallies in support of Echelman’s piece. As a result, the city council put the project to a vote. They came out in favor of the piece, 5-3.

The sculpture, *Her secret is patience* — it takes its name from a Ralph Waldo Emerson quotation — was raised in mid-April, the same day as the opening of the park. The piece, meant to evoke a cactus flower, has also been compared to a jellyfish and a cow pie. But overall, responses have been positive, and although McDonald acknowledges that some people “just kind of smile, you don’t really get anything negative.” Lebow describes its “marvelous essence” while Ferguson praises the way its colors change dramatically at night but slightly in the day, and the organic way it moves with the wind. And writers in *Newsweek* and *The Arizona Republic* have compared the controversy to the construction of the Eiffel Tower, which, when erected in 1889, was excoriated by critics and Parisians alike — but is now the quintessential icon of Paris.

Meanwhile, in an email, Mayor Gordon praised the sculpture and the park as “a celebration of innovative thinking”; he also noted that the sculpture created 150 jobs in traditional trades, such as cement and steel work. Phoenix, it seems, has learned how to marry the old and the new.

— Rachel Somerstein



Her secret is patience, an artwork by Janet Echelman.