

Back in the Saddle

Venturi, Scott Brown's Austin Museum of Art

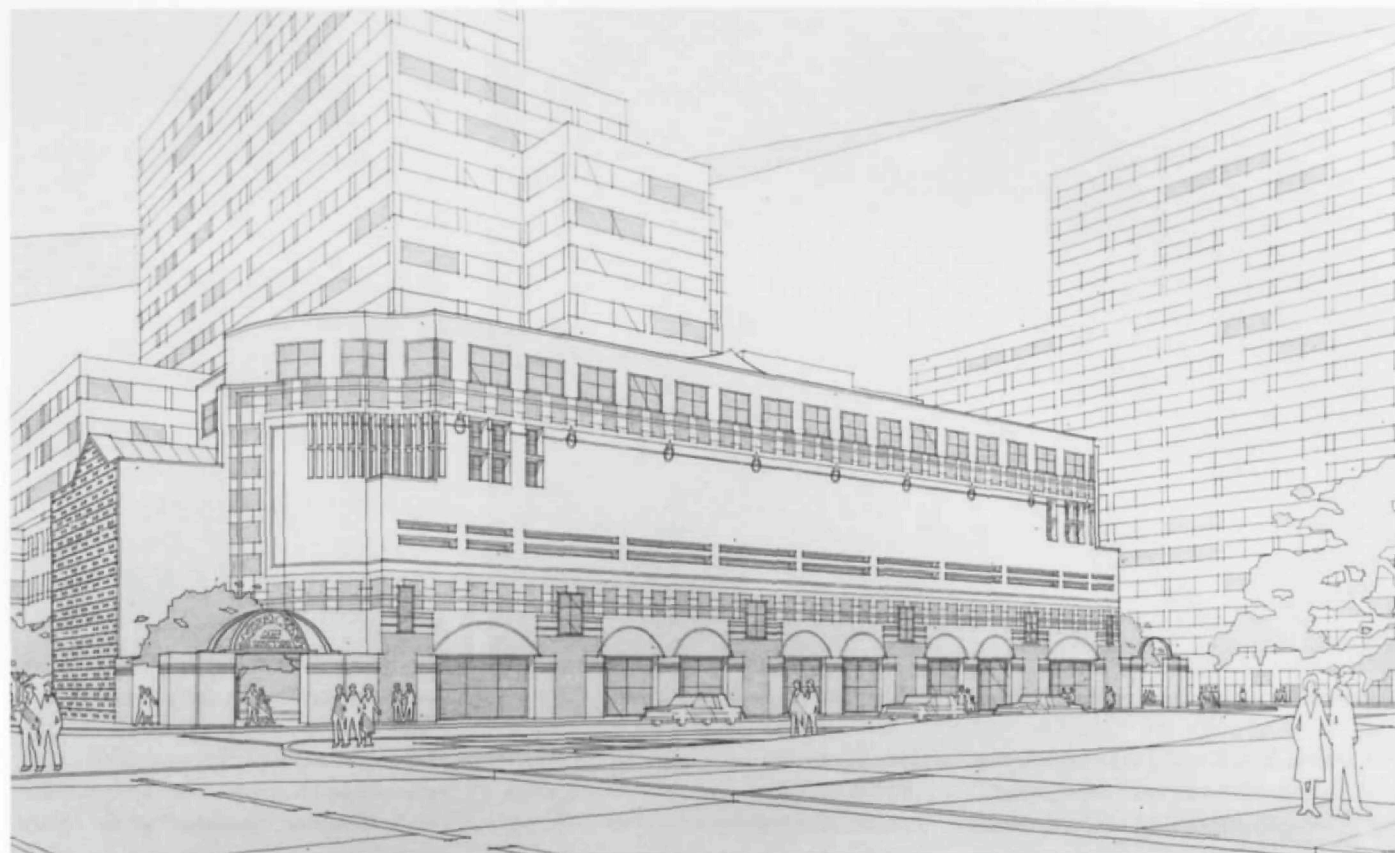
The Laguna Gloria museum's future is still ahead of it, after all. Austin is booming: building permits and population growth are approaching the levels of the early 1980s. And reborn along with the city's economic vitality is a previous proposal to build an art museum downtown (*Cite*, Summer 1985).

The design for the museum – admired by critics from Dallas to Zurich – was completed in 1986 by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates of Philadelphia. The bonds to pay for its construction have been authorized by voters and partially sold. The political tradeoffs needed to secure its day-to-day operations have been largely worked out. All that is still needed is enough money to pay off the debt on a downtown site.

Originally conceived in 1983, the museum project was to have been built with city funds on land donated by Watson-Casey, a development company that planned a large mixed-use development in the warehouse district at the southern edge of downtown. The Laguna Gloria Art Museum, a private museum founded in 1946 and housed in a West Austin mansion, would operate the new museum. The building Venturi, Scott Brown designed was to comprise three stories and 25,000 square feet in an arrangement of lineal galleries and circulation spaces. A rambla walkway system, also devised by Venturi, Scott Brown, was to introduce public spaces into the new zone of development.

Everything looked promising: voters passed a \$14.7 million bond issue in 1985 to fund design and construction, and the city began selling some of the bonds in 1986. But the real estate market went sour and Watson-Casey folded. The bank left holding the property refused to drop a clause in the contract stating that if the city stopped operating the museum, the land would revert to the bank. At the same time, other local arts groups feared that the Laguna Gloria project would consume all the available arts funding in the city and, with a no-growth vengeance virulent in Travis County, actively opposed the museum. In 1990, the city council voted to kill the project.

Other ideas were put forward for spending the money from the 1985 bonds, including the possibility of a new museum on the nearby University of Texas campus. The bond issue had specified a down-



Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, Laguna Gloria Art Museum, 1983–87, perspective view of Fourth Street front.

town museum on donated land, however, so the money stayed put. In 1992, Laguna Gloria hired Lake/Flato Architects of San Antonio to create a master plan for the museum's West Austin campus, with a new, smaller gallery addition as part of the program – apparently giving up on the downtown museum and the bond issue.

But Laguna Gloria's backers, led by Albert King, chairman of the museum board, worked behind the scenes to keep it alive. Ironically, the failure in 1992 of a bond package that would have funded facilities for two minority-community arts groups probably did more than any other event to resuscitate the Laguna Gloria project. Working through a group called the Austin Comprehensive Arts Plan Committee, representatives from Laguna Gloria joined with people from the Mexican American Cultural Center and the George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center to develop a long-range plan for adoption by the city council that emphasized cooperative planning for all the groups. "We had to work with the council to help them understand that funding for the arts is not an expense but an investment," says King.

One of the first recommendations from the arts plan: build the downtown museum, reconstituted as the Austin Museum

of Art, which would be run by Laguna Gloria under a board made up of representatives of all three groups, with space to be shared among them.

A new site, owned by the Union Pacific Railroad, was found at Third and Guadalupe streets, one block away from the original Watson-Casey site. The Meadows Foundation of Dallas donated \$250,000 toward the purchase price of the land, and the city issued a note, to be repaid by the Austin Museum of Art, for a portion of the rest of the purchase price. Venturi, Scott Brown's plans were taken out of the drawer at the city's public works office, and the city announced its intention to proceed with construction as soon as the land was taken care of.

According to Daniel Stetson, Laguna Gloria's director since 1991, the design for the museum is to be virtually identical to that of 1986, when Venturi, Scott Brown last changed the building's façade. However, the foundation needs to be restudied for the new site, and the building will be set back on its more generous half-block site, rather than abut the sidewalk as it would have on the sliverlike first site. "The drawings have appreciated," says Stetson. "This would have been Venturi, Scott Brown's first major public building. Now, after the Salisbury Wing,

after the Seattle Art Museum, after the Pritzker Prize, the plans for the Austin Downtown Museum are worth a lot more than they were ten years ago."

In town to talk to the press in early 1993, when the project was reannounced, Robert Venturi said that he was "pleased and surprised, coming back after ten years, to find that the design stands up." But daunting financial problems remain for the new museum. Stetson says that projected operating expenses should be about \$2.5 million per year – about ten times as much as Laguna Gloria currently nets from its annual fundraising efforts. And museum membership is currently only about half what it was before the downtown museum idea was killed four years ago. Nevertheless, with growth in the population and the local economy, and with a new sense of cooperation from city government and other arts organizations, King and Stetson say they are confident they will be able to fund the museum and perhaps break ground as early as spring of next year.

Joel Warren Barna