



LEFT
The winning concept for Las Vegas's downtown civic center includes a plaza that will draw from the desert landscape.

FORWARD TO SQUARE ONE

A DESERT-INSPIRED CIVIC CENTER AND PLAZA SIGNAL A MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY ATTUNED FUTURE FOR LAS VEGAS.

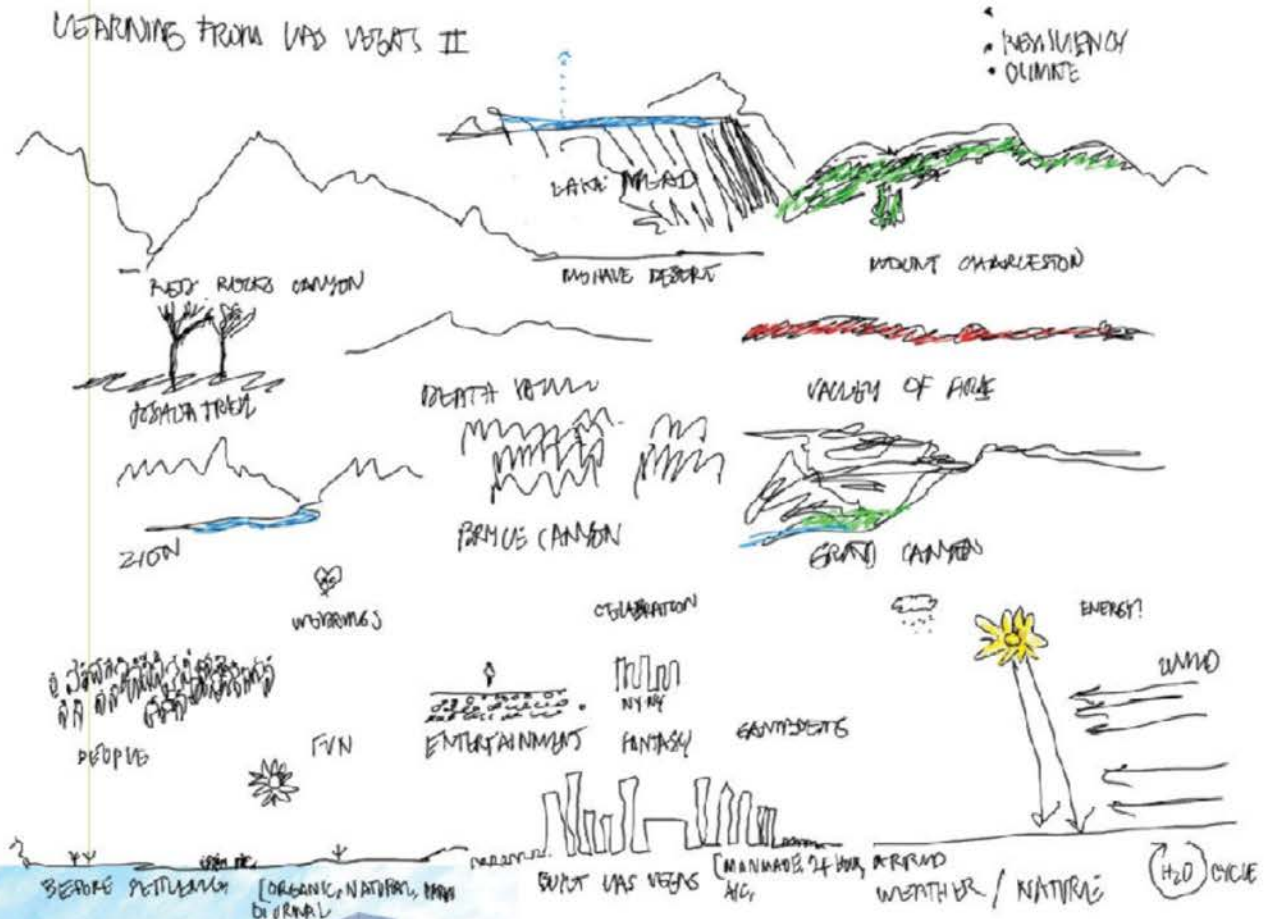
BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

In its submission to the City of Las Vegas's Downtown Civic Center and Plaza design competition, the winning team of OJB, BNIM, and LGA Architecture included a slide of napkin sketches, not of the proposed building but of the desert surrounding Las Vegas. There was evaporating Lake Mead, the craggy slopes of Mount Charleston, the Mojave Desert—all of it dwarfing the Las Vegas skyline. At the top, in the same black ink, was scrawled “Learning from Las Vegas II.”

The riff on Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi's classic work was likely intended as a bit of cheek, but it's illustrative of a shift in how the city is perceived and how it will need to transform for it and other desert cities to have a future. If American designers had something to learn from Las Vegas now, the designers seem to be saying, the city needed to learn from its landscape.

“Las Vegas is at the [center] of the conversation around global warming,” says Jereck Boss, FASLA, a partner at OJB. Temperatures are rising. Water supplies are dwindling. “We were imagining, what are the best things that we could pull from the desert, and how do we celebrate those things?” Boss says.

The new downtown civic center and plaza will be located on what is currently a city-owned parking lot across the street from Las Vegas City Hall, completed by Elkus Manfredi Architects and SWA in 2012. With oversized roof canopies and cantilevers to provide shade, the building will consolidate staff from various city departments, while the plaza, organized around a series of desert-inspired garden rooms, is intended to be Las Vegas's first true civic gathering space, a town square for a city that never had one.



RIGHT
The design team drew equally from the landscape of southern Nevada and the history and culture of Las Vegas.

BELOW
A need for shade and human-scaled outdoor spaces drove the concept for the plaza.



Compared to the other finalists, the scheme by the OJB team has none of the spectacle that one associates with Las Vegas, not even the technoutopianism on display at City Hall (the glass building's most noticeable feature is its angular "photovoltaic forest"). "When you think of Las Vegas, you first think of the Las Vegas Strip," Boss says. "And while that's a big part of Las Vegas, it's also a community in a beautiful desert." The Mojave

offers a "rich botanical experience, in terms of textures and colors and plant materials," he says. "We wanted to be true to the city and its surroundings."

OJB's plan for the plaza follows contemporary trends in that it is meant to be something of an everything space, offering what Tara Green, OJB's principal of program development, calls "abundant optionality," with shaded pavilions under which city employees

can work, but also open space for farmers' markets and festivals. It also is in line with the city's 2050 master plan, which was adopted in June 2021 and which, among other things, sets targets for water use reductions, expanded tree canopy coverage, and the number of housing units within walking distance of a public green space.

"With the drought and what the Southwest is enduring, especially Las Vegas and Lake Mead, it's getting harder and harder to be outside in the summer," says Lance Kirk, a principal at LGA, adding that a need for shade and non-heat-absorbent materials drove the design.

Green commends the city for embracing a vision that challenges accepted notions of outdoor space in Las Vegas and for "leaning into our vision of landscape and building together and celebrating the desert." •