



In bad times, big-ticket amenities in Dallas are booming

By DAVID FLICK

Staff Writer

dflick@dallasnews.com

Published 30 July 2011 11:25 PM

In the teeth of the worst recession in eight decades, Dallas is undergoing a building boom.

Not in real estate, heaven knows, or in construction of high-rise office buildings, but in an area in which the city has always been judged weak — in projects devoted to the quality of life.

The opening of the AT&T Performing Arts Center in 2009 brought international attention, but it was only one of more than a dozen high-profile, big-ticket amenities that have opened in the past few years — or will come on line in a few years hence.

The projects include four downtown parks, a presidential library, a natural history museum, a nature center along the Trinity River and major expansions at existing institutions such as the Dallas Zoo and the Dallas Arboretum. The total cost of the list, which is only a partial one, comes to well over \$1 billion.

Transportation projects, ordinarily the most mundane of civic projects, have been enlisted in the movement to improve urban life here. Millions in private funds were raised to turn the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge from what would have been a utilitarian structure into a city landmark. Meanwhile, the McKinney Avenue trolley will be expanded, and the Santa Fe Trail, a bicycle and pedestrian path, has opened in East Dallas.

The list does not include recent expansion of the DART rail, which some urban experts consider the most crucial amenity of all.

Darwin Payne, author of *Big D*, the best known of the city's histories, said Dallas has experienced two similar periods — the decades near the turn of the century when cultural institutions such as the city library and art museum were founded, and the era of the Centennial Exposition in the mid-1930s.

But, in sheer variety and scale, the accomplishments of those eras pale compared with the current boom.

"If you total up everything that's being done now, I don't think I can come up with a period in Dallas history that has had anything like that," Payne said.

No grand plan

What is striking is that the amenities boom was not the result of any grand blueprint.

While the performing arts center had its origin in urban renewal plans that originated 30 years ago, most of the projects were conceived and developed independently of one another. Indeed, the Trinity River Project, perhaps the most ambitious local example of grand planning, still largely sits on the launching pad.

Furthermore, the projects have progressed when the economic downturn has dampened construction of almost everything else.

In part, this is because nearly all were approved and funded before the downturn struck. They also draw from sources — such as bond issues, donations from wealthy individuals and tax increment funds — that are less sensitive to the downturn than are commercial real estate projects funded by the private sector.

"The things under construction now were started in better economic times," said Veletta Forsythe Lill, director of the Arts District. "The feeling of the city fathers and mothers has been that the show must go on."

There is no doubt the struggling economy has had an effect.

Although bad economic times may actually increase demand for free amenities such as the parks or the trolley, the effect on more expensive forms of entertainment has been significant.

The Dallas Symphony Orchestra and the Dallas Opera have announced cutbacks recently. Indeed, opera officials noted that the move from Fair Park to the Winspear Opera House raised their costs by \$4 million per season.

'Growing up'

Some urban experts and civic leaders said they thought local interest in quality-of-life projects increased after 2001, when Boeing officials cited a lack of amenities in Dallas when they chose Chicago as their new headquarters.

Bill Lively, who was raising funds for the planned Performing Arts Center at the time, finds that explanation overstated.

"People say Boeing was a catalyst. I don't think it was," Lively said. "But I do think it was remembered by a lot of thoughtful people who were looking at ways

to raise the culture of the city to a level equal to those of other great cities.”

In many ways, he said, the dramatic activity is a reflection of the city's current place in its history.

“I think Dallas is growing up, and now we are maturing culturally,” Lively said.

That explanation was echoed by other commentators, among them Aaron Renn, an urban analyst based in Chicago.

“I think that's the history of most big cities. First, you want to become rich, then you want to become classy,” he said. “I think of Chicago; it was a filthy, gritty town for a long time. But once it got rich, businessmen started building amenities.”

On the other hand, cities such as New York had a long head start, Renn notes. Eastern cities, especially, have an urban density that will be hard for Sun Belt cities such as Dallas to re-create.

“Dallas is never going to be competitive for the kind of people who want that kind of environment,” he said. “It's not Manhattan; it's just not.”

Nature hasn't been particularly helpful either — North Texas has no large natural bodies of water or nearby mountains.

“You have to make up for not having a waterfront by building parks,” advised Andy Kunz, director of New Urbanism, an Alexandria, Va., nonprofit that seeks to encourage livable downtowns.

Overcoming criticism

The most frequent criticism of the recent cultural building frenzy is that it reflects an erroneous belief that Dallas can simply spend its way into vibrancy.

Earlier this year, Blair Kamin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic of the [Chicago Tribune](#), walked around the AT&T Performing Arts Center and found its street life disappointing.

“Despite the architectural firepower, the Dallas Arts District can be an exceedingly dull place,” he wrote in his review. In a particularly stinging aside, he said some of its designers referred to it as “an architectural petting zoo.”

Although Kamin conceded later in the critique that people-friendly amenities such as the Woodall Rodgers deck park might change the equation, even Dallas supporters don't completely deny his point. But they plead that a vibrant city does not happen overnight.

Karl Zavitkovsky, the economic development director for the city of Dallas, argues that the incremental nature of reurbanization of downtown often hides its progress. The announcement of a new museum gets lots of attention; the opening of a restaurant, much less so.

“There's a lot of stuff going on right now under the radar, particularly with the adaptive reuse of old office buildings,” he said.

Defenders are surprisingly muted about justifying big-ticket amenities as a direct spur to future development. Invited to make that argument, Zavitkovsky went no further than to cite quality of life as “one of the issues that makes a location attractive to a business thinking of coming in.”

“Do big amenities alone assure you of success? No. But if you have the opportunity to do some significant things, then all that reinforces the basics needed for urban development,” he said.

Kunz said a city's walkability has become a crucial factor in determining its quality of life, especially among young professionals. As a result, the construction of the DART system may be the most important element in the city's future, Kunz said.

“Unfortunately the recession has put a lot of things on hold, but when it ends, you can bet that the developers will be coming in to be near the rail system,” he said.

[Terry Nichols](#) Clark, a professor of sociology at the [University of Chicago](#), said that emerging cities worldwide, particularly in Asia, are pondering the same quality-of-life issues.

He recalled an incident in which Japanese businessmen were being courted by officials of [Seoul](#), South Korea.

“The Seoul people asked, ‘How can we attract your businesses?’ And the reply they received was, ‘Make life pleasant for our wives.’”