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Arch of Triumph

Santiago Calatrava's striking bridge over the Trinity River is being hailed as the sleek new emblem of twenty-first-century Dallas. But the real symbol of the future is the ramshackle neighborhood at its western end.

by Michael Ennis

It rises four hundred feet above the grassy channel of the Trinity River: a single, dramatically sculptural white arch, the six-lane roadway far beneath it suspended by a delicate-looking spiderweb of massive steel cables. Designed by renowned Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge bears the name of a historic Texas fortune—Hill's father was oilman H.L. Hunt—and spans the river less than a mile from the original Trinity crossing, now on the west end of downtown, where Dallas began. Envisioned as the “signature” of the twenty-first-century city, the elegant arch is a letterhead-ready icon of soaring aspirations. Already as you drive by the futuristic, shimmering fractal construction (the oft-delayed project won't be completed until next year), it's hard to escape the metaphor of Dallas's ascent, in little more than a century and a half, from a lone log cabin on the Trinity to a metropolis intent on becoming one of the world's great places.

On the other side of the river, however, the \$117 million metaphor plunges abruptly to earth. The bridge ends in what is often seen as the graveyard of Dallas's ambitions, a low-rise landscape of block-long rusting warehouses, abandoned factories, and storefront auto garages. Bound by the looping river on the north and east and an interstate highway on the south, this is West Dallas, where the glittering city on the opposite bank has historically dumped its most needy citizens and most toxic industries. Once home to the notorious West Dallas public housing project, the area's air, soil, and children were poisoned for half a century by a lead smelter that was finally closed in 1985, leaving as its legacy one of the nation's largest Superfund environmental cleanup sites.

Nevertheless, it is this forsaken neighborhood—more than Calatrava's gleaming arch—that could realistically become the symbol of twenty-first-century Dallas. In March the city council unanimously

adopted a one-hundred-page urban design manifesto drily titled “West Dallas Urban Structure and Guidelines.” Crammed with “new urbanist” ideas about encouraging bicyclists and pedestrians to take to the streets and urging the reuse rather than the razing of discarded buildings, the guidelines are something of a Whole Earth Catalog for the city of the future—which would look less like the sci-fi metropolis evoked by the bridge and more like a late-nineteenth-century Main Street. A renewal of West Dallas, in other words, wouldn’t begin with bulldozers, cranes, or deep-pocketed developers but rather with neighborhood associations, mom-and-pop retailers, and cottage-industry entrepreneurs. And as heretical as it sounds for glitzy, growth-worshipping Dallas, these guidelines are being widely received as a prophecy of the city’s resurrection.

After a decade in which Dallas’s population increase lagged far behind Texas’s other major cities’, some municipal soul-searching might be expected. But Dallas—which plans obsessively yet builds with don’t-fence-me-in abandon—has experienced similar flowerings of civic idealism before, only to see them wilt in the next boom cycle. Even the profound shocks of the Kennedy assassination and the eighties real estate bust, which led to interludes of introspection, hardly deflated Big D’s blustering egoism; few except hoary elders remember the sixties’ “Goals for Dallas” or even the nineties’ “Dallas Plan.” So will the guidelines join the dozens of past and present comprehensive city plans, land use plans, environmental study plans, and neighborhood revitalization plans eventually tossed into the dustbin of civic indifference? Or is it just possible that a city whose official slogan is “Live Large. Think Big” is on the verge of fundamentally rethinking itself?

The answer to that question lies so deep in Dallas’s collective psyche that you have to go back a hundred years to excavate it. The city’s first professional plan was completed in 1912 by George Kessler, a German immigrant who grew up in Dallas before going on to change the face of places as far-flung as Shanghai and Kansas City. Kessler clearly understood his client’s insecurity-driven ambitions, challenging Dallas to “lead her competitors” in a no-holds-barred contest for metropolitan excellence. His game plan had two components, the “city beautiful,” which would feature leisurely boulevards beside green-swathed, meandering creeks, and the “city practical,” which would consolidate railroad lines and contain the flood-prone Trinity with levees. However, this two-pronged approach gave the rapidly growing city a choice Kessler never intended. The city beautiful was soon kicked to the curb in favor of the city practical, and even that took long enough; the levees weren’t finished until the thirties. But what might be called Kessler’s Choice became a haunting dilemma that wouldn’t go away.

For a generation, Dallas occasionally attempted to draw up plans to fully implement Kessler’s original plan; instead, the pedestrian-friendly greenbelt parkways he had envisioned came to life as unadorned freeways that sliced the city into inchoate chunks and eventually hemorrhaged its vitality into the suburbs. But the city practical grew and prospered: In the sixties legendary mayor Erik Jonsson, a brilliant engineer who had co-founded Texas Instruments, urged Dallas to “dream no small dreams” and promptly collaborated with Fort Worth’s mayor to build the Mid-Cities DFW Airport. By the late seventies, Dallas was a booming international gateway.

A city that now aspired to be “world-class” suddenly found itself critically deficient in the requisite cultural life and institutions, the long-forgotten city beautiful stuff that had seemed nothing but a distraction from growth and profit. Dallas addressed this shortcoming with blunt-force pragmatism, placing designer buildings here and there amid depopulated deserts of concrete and asphalt, just like all the rapidly proliferating, reflective-glass office towers and big-box retailers that lined its freeways—buildings that looked, as architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable complained, as if they had been dropped by helicopter. Dallas could fill its spaces with auto-friendly infrastructure like no city in the world, but it had never learned

how to preserve or create the distinctive, people-friendly places that make a city great—or competitive, as it soon discovered when relocating corporations became increasingly attuned to quality-of-life issues.

As time went on, the legacy of Kessler's Choice became only more onerous. During the nineties the city approved hundreds of millions in bonds to turn the Trinity River channel into a steroid-enhanced version of a Kessler parkway, featuring "the world's largest urban park," sailing and kayaking, and a trio of Calatrava bridges (the Margaret Hunt Hill is the only one to have been built; a second may be scaled down). But by 2007 the centerpiece of the Trinity plan was a billion-dollar high-speed tollway that would roar right through the length of the city's new "front yard." In 2009 the downtown Arts District, touted as "the largest in the nation" (though for decades much of it was an expanse of parking lots), was filled in with a new theater and opera house, both by Pritzker Prize-winning architects. Yet despite generally satisfying critics and wowing patrons, the new "starchitecture" couldn't overcome Dallas's beached-whale effect, where even transparent, beckoning public buildings remain stranded amid lifeless streets.

But just when the city practical and the city beautiful seemed utterly irreconcilable, an unexpected intellectual convergence took place. Oak Cliff, just south of West Dallas—which already boasted a successful new-urbanist enclave in the quirky, pedestrian-teeming Bishop Arts District—had become a hotbed for young activists who were pushing city hall for bike lanes, walkable streets, and trolley links to downtown. Meanwhile, on the other side of the river, Dallas's donor class, which for more than a decade had been mulling over urban planning ideas in tony circles like the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture and the Dallas Architecture Forum, had been getting an earful on state-of-the-art practices from innovators like Larry Beasley, whose much-imitated "Vancouver Model," begun in the mid-nineties, had dressed up one of the world's densest downtowns while also making it a remarkably livable and socially interactive place.

The salon and the street essentially came together in October 2009, when Dallas city manager Mary Suhm (the real boss of a city with a weak mayor and fourteen city council fiefdoms) and Gail Thomas, the president of the privately funded Trinity Trust and a founder of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, announced the creation of CityDesign Studio, a three-person urban-design think tank located within city hall and funded by a \$2 million grant from prominent local art collectors Deedie and Rusty Rose. Beasley was named special adviser to CityDesign, and local activist Brent Brown, a Dallas architect with boots-on-the-ground experience renovating low-income housing in the city's chronically neglected black neighborhoods, became CityDesign's director.

After a year of unprecedented collaborative meetings with city staff, developers, and community groups (usually developers write the plans and everyone else complains later, to little effect), CityDesign rolled out the "West Dallas Urban Structure and Guidelines." The densely worded tome is addressed in large part to the city practical, the goal being to get people (think: customers) back on the streets. The plan's key features are literally down to earth: grids of compact blocks offering transportation "choice" (meaning bicycle lanes, broad sidewalks, and mass transit); on-street parking that shields strollers from traffic; mixed-use development and rezoning that permits retailers to live just above or behind their businesses; and transparent, inviting shop fronts and sidewalk dining. Better still, the plan champions an entrepreneurial, let's-get-started pragmatism. Unlike the Trinity plan, which required hundreds of millions in bonds at startup, the transformation of West Dallas can begin with simple tweaks to local ordinances, like passing a zoning "overlay" to protect existing neighborhoods from developers and relaxing regulations that prevent the temporary "adaptive reuse" of abandoned buildings by galleries, artists, and small, transient restaurants. The guidelines even offer advice on details like awnings and street furniture, steps that can be taken storefront by storefront and block by block.

For all its practical virtues, the West Dallas plan also addresses the city beautiful in a similarly iconoclastic way. Dallas has always taken a trickle-down approach to culture, dropping the arts in big, pretty boxes from the sky while doing little to encourage the artists struggling in its midst. That ignores the example of, say, New York, which became the cultural capital of the world not by building a Lincoln Center in the thirties but by housing artists like Robert Rauschenberg, from places like Port Arthur, who flocked to its cheap, crummy downtown lofts in the forties and fifties; New York's SoHo wouldn't be seeing today's sky-high real estate values if artists hadn't started moving into its abandoned factories in the sixties and seventies. The guidelines take this same trickle-up approach, designating artist's studios and artisan's shops as important economic incubators.

But the real beauty of the West Dallas plan is that it bridges a gulf far greater than Kessler's unintended dichotomy. The proposed first action item is the preservation of La Bajada, a hundred-year-old Latino residential oasis just north of Singleton Boulevard, West Dallas's postapocalyptic main drag. A several-blocks-wide neighborhood of crowded-together clapboard houses no bigger than the typical North Dallas garage, La Bajada is lovingly and creatively maintained, the fences enlivened with decorative stone and ironwork, the tiny yards landscaped with cactus, lilies, and crape myrtles. For a city that has systematically bulldozed its distinctive Latino and black neighborhoods and now desperately needs a sense of place, La Bajada is an irreplaceable asset, its culture and character worth far more than the bounty that speculators would reap from buying it up and tearing it down. The plan deftly spares La Bajada by drawing development away from it, along a side street that will extend south of Singleton, to create a much more densely populated, mixed-use spine parallel to the river. Later, the high-rise, upscale apartments and condos envisioned in so many previous Trinity River plans can be sited along the riverfront, with Vancouver-style setbacks to make sure a view of the water isn't an amenity reserved for the investor class.

Yes, all this may prove too gauzy for Dallas's hard-edged sensibilities, in which case Calatrava's bridge will become an arch of failure. That's because La Bajada represents the demographic realities of a city where Latinos are more than 40 percent of the population and Anglos are little more than 30 percent. Long before Kessler drew up his plan, Dallas was a cultural hybrid: Downtown's diagonal layout is credited to a surveyor who borrowed a typically Mexican urban plan. Today's majority-minority city simply doesn't have a future unless its plans and prosperity are similarly multicultural.

But if Dallas does follow its new urban template, a city that has always strained mightily to leap ahead of its competitors will instead outpace them with modest, measured steps. As our state and nation only become more urban (already nine out of ten Texans live in metro areas) and more diverse (nine out of ten new Texans in the past decade were non-Anglo), then Dallas could well win a race to the future that few other American cities even realize they've entered.

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