

The Dallas Morning News

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Sometimes we get it right: Pacific Plaza Park is a victory for downtown Dallas

How a forlorn parking lot was transformed into a sophisticated urban park.



One of the most unique elements in Pacific Plaza is The Pavilion (left), a floating 95-by-138-foot ovoid structure of stainless steel. Morse Code Signatures of every stop along the Texas and Pacific Railroad between El Paso and New Orleans are cut out of the steel ring. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

By Mark Lamster
6:13 AM on Nov 14, 2019



Of the scourges that plague downtown Dallas, the prevalence of surface parking lots may be the worst: deadening and ugly, they make pedestrian life an unpleasant grind.

Count it, then, as a major victory, if not some kind of civic miracle, that the city has replaced one of these dismal spaces with a park. Inverting Joni Mitchell's indelible lyric, not to mention decades of its own misguided development practice, Dallas has un-paved a parking lot to put in a paradise — 3.74 acres of it, if you want to be precise.

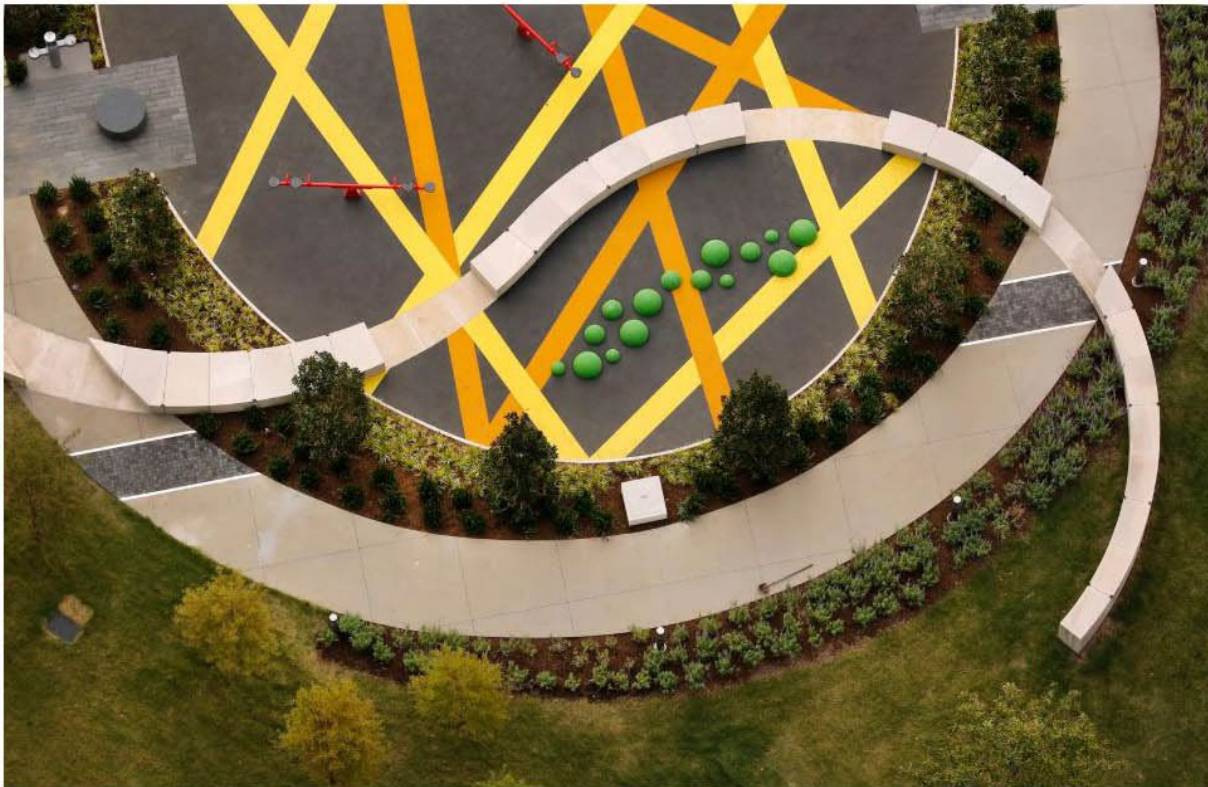
This little bit of urban nirvana is the \$15 million Pacific Plaza Park, a sophisticated work of landscape design conjured from a grim no man's land of downtown asphalt and a neglected grove of post oaks that functioned principally as a traffic island.

The two spaces, the square of the parking lot and the triangular grove — technically, Aston Park — were conjoined by the closure and incorporation of the stretch of Live Oak Street that separated them, forming the modest trapezoidal site of the new park.

That reformed space is now occupied by a diverse landscape that includes a central lawn, a generous play area, allées of trees and shaded paths, dog-walking zones, space for food trucks and an open-air pavilion.

These elements are united by “The Thread,” a 614-foot ribbon of Indiana limestone that winds through the park interior. It is, presumably, the city’s longest stone bench. It’s composed of 136 rectangular blocks, each roughly 7,000 pounds and 29 inches in height, making them ideal for seating.

“A thread is a thing that can tie disparate things together,” says Chuck McDaniel, who led the design team for the Dallas office of the landscape architecture firm SWA, of that signature element, though he might just as well be referring to the park’s greater role as a gathering point for the city. “It reaches out and says, ‘Welcome Dallas.’”



Part of the The Thread, a sinuous limestone seating wall over 600 feet long that traverses Pacific Plaza, intersecting a multigenerational play environment. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

That welcome is made most prominently by the pavilion, an elliptical doughnut that stands a few gentle steps above the park’s southeast corner, making it both a beacon for those looking toward the park and a viewing platform for those within. There is conventional seating beneath its canopy, and also a grass berm with ginkgo trees at its center. These spaces are animated by light that filters through the canopy, which is perforated by a pattern derived from the proprietary telegraph code that was used by the Pacific Railroad to identify stops between New Orleans to El Paso.

It is a clever interpretation of the site's pre-parking history as a nexus of rail service. The design is a credit to the experimental Line studio of Dallas-based architectural giant HKS; to be frank, it is the best thing the firm has done in the city for some time.

The park looks out at the city, but it is also inspired by it. The cool gray tones of the park's infrastructural elements are drawn from its skyscraping neighbors, in particular, the punched metal façade of the Republic Bank complex, just across St. Paul Street. The geometry of the paths that cross the park is extrapolated from the adjacent One Dallas Center, a diamond-shaped tower by the office of I. M. Pei. Those paths also visually reference, in their width and in their steel edging, the tracks that once occupied the park site.

Although the footprint of the park is relatively small, it is rich — though not overstuffed — with amenities. At its center is a 1-acre lawn suitable for picnicking or an impromptu game of touch football. The play space has been designed for kids of all ages, with a colorful soft surfacing and swings that hang from cartoonish bright orange stanchions that look like they were drawn by Dr. Seuss.



Pathways in Pacific Plaza are lined with various native, adapted, and waterwise plants. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

The previously forlorn Aston grove has been rejuvenated and is now a pleasant place for sitting and walking in the shade. It remains pleasant, rather than forbidding, after dark thanks to three very mod lighting masts (they look like white leafless trees) designed by the Italian designer Enzo Eusebi. Egg-shaped stone boulders, cut flat on their tops for seating, are an additional sense of whimsy.

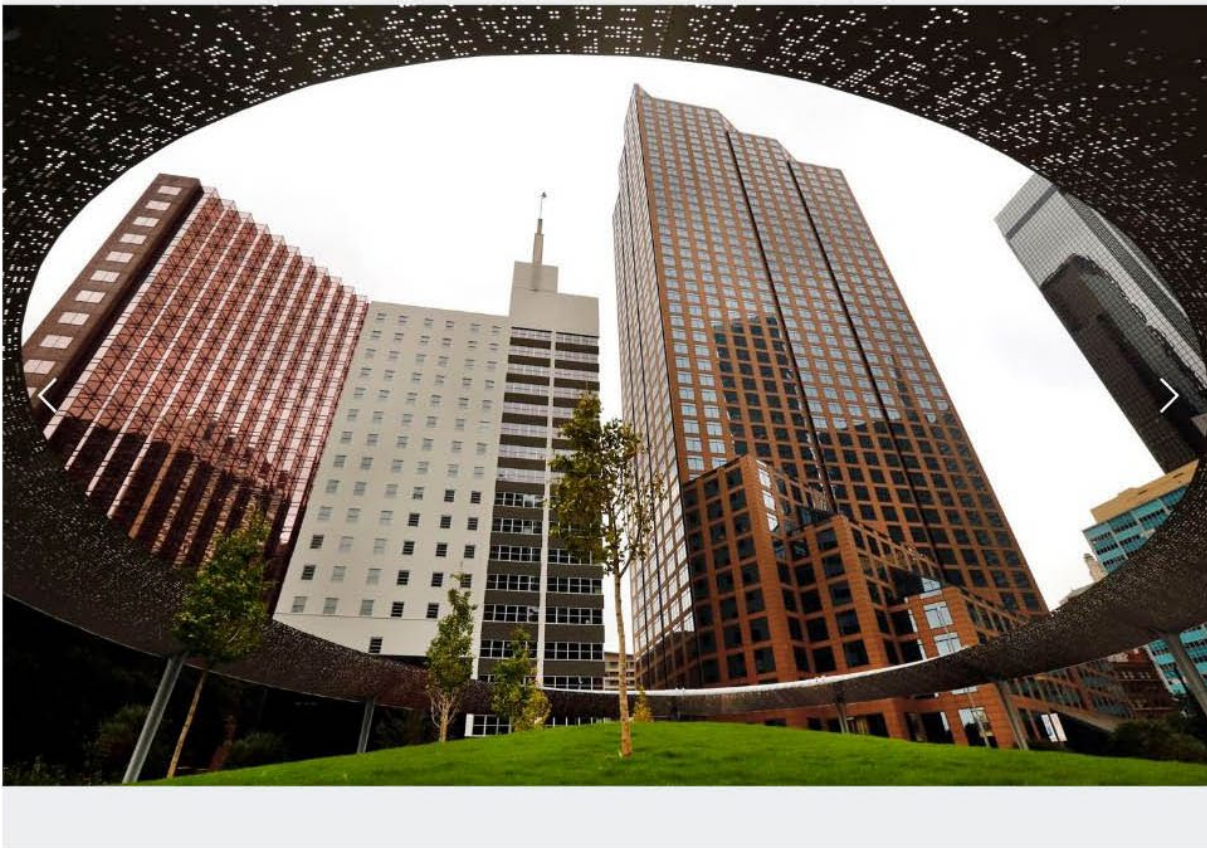
The park may be most successful at its liminal spaces, where it meets the city. Among its most

creative solutions is a series of “interception zones,” the largest along St. Paul, that protect the park’s spaces from the city’s four-legged residents. Rather than designated dog runs, the architects have strategically placed areas along the edges of the park with tough species and granite boulders that won’t stain when dogs relieve themselves. These areas have permeable surfaces and, below grade, a gutter system that flushes itself — the idea being to avoid the urine stench that is a problem at so many of downtown’s other parks.

Along Harwood Street, the park seamlessly integrates with the sidewalk, offering pedestrians a promenade shaded by a grid of lacebark elm trees spaced to accommodate walkers, parents with strollers and cyclists. The trees themselves are planted in structural boxes that absorb the weight of the surrounding pavement, allowing them to thrive.

What is most appealing about this aspect of the design is that, while helping to rectify one of the city’s core problems (the surfeit of parking lots), it both acknowledges and points to a solution for another, that being the dreadful condition of the streetscape that links place to place.

This was done with purpose, as that promenade points down Harwood toward another mostly barren site that will similarly be transformed into a park due in 2022 with design by Austin-based landscape architect Christine Ten Eyck.



1/8 One of the most unique elements in Pacific Plaza is The Pavilion, a floating 95-by-138-foot ovoid structure of stainless steel. Morse Code signatures of every stop along the Texas and Pacific Railroad between El Paso and New Orleans punctuate the steel ring. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

Both Pacific Plaza and the forthcoming Harwood Park are the product of a public-private partnership between the city and Parks for Downtown Dallas, the nonprofit foundation directed by Robert Decherd, former *Dallas Morning News* publisher and current chief executive of A.H. Belo, the paper's corporate parent. They are two of four parks the foundation plans to build in the coming years, including West End Square (scheduled for 2020, with a design by Field Operations) and the redesigned Carpenter Park (to reopen in 2021, with design by Hargreaves).

The foundation has financed the parks, and is in the process of raising a \$25 million endowment for their maintenance. The city will pay for daily upkeep and the nonprofit Downtown Dallas Inc. will handle programming and security.

The genesis of this program, like the Arts District, emerged from Boeing's 2001 rejection of Dallas as a suitable home for its headquarters. In response, then-mayor Laura Miller formed a committee to produce a master plan for downtown parks, with the goal of converting surface parking to green. Decherd was its chairman. Pacific Plaza, for decades a blank patch of asphalt, was one of the spaces identified for park building.

But the park was a long time coming. Funds to purchase the lot had to wait until the city's 2006 bond package. A series of developers offered to build the park for the city, but with unacceptable compromises: One called for placing the park on top of a garage that would have significantly impinged on its footprint. Another galling proposal included an enormous video board that would have spanned Pacific Avenue.

To the city's credit, it made no such compromises, and today it has a park, full stop.

It is a lesson the city would do well to follow at Klyde Warren Park, which proponents are hoping to expand with an **ill-conceived \$76-million proposal** that would add 1.2 acres to the park, much of it absorbed by a 20,000-square-foot multipurpose building. Its principal tenant would be the beleaguered VisitDallas civic booster.

The idea is that profit from the rental of the new building can be used to offset the costs of maintaining the park. Kelcy and Amy Warren, who purchased the rights to name the park for their son, have pledged \$20 million toward the expansion.

It's not a reasonable trade-off. If the city wants to expand Klyde Warren, it should expand Klyde Warren. The costs are not enormous, especially given the increase in revenue it has created by raising property values. It is, of course, sexier to pay for a building expansion than to establish a fund for long-term maintenance.

Everyone likes a shiny new object. Dallas is still learning how to keep them up, and connect them to each other. In that Pacific Plaza is a most welcome model.



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