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## Dallas Does Dallas



Peter Rad

The Northpark Center has it all: Neiman Marcus, Barneys, New York and world-class art like this sculpture by Mark di Suvero.

By MIMI SWARTZ  
Published: March 25, 2007

### Correction Appended

There is a statue in the [Nasher Sculpture Center](#) in downtown [Dallas](#) that seems particularly fitting for this particular city. Called "The Age of Bronze," it is by Rodin and happens to be the oldest piece in the collection, a life-size, perfectly formed male nude in a pose that is both pensive and slightly pained. It is supposed to depict, according to the director of the museum, Steven A. Nash, "the dawning of a new age of self-awareness, or self-consciousness." Distinguishing between the two has long been a psychic struggle here, though the unqualified success of the Nasher itself — a gift to Dallas from the [shopping](#)-mall magnate and local philanthropist Raymond D. Nasher, housed in a flawless, quietly self-confident building by [Renzo Piano](#) — suggests that Dallas might finally be getting there. The city seems willing to throw off its long-held infatuation with glitz and glamour, while remaining obsessed with maintaining a reputation for impeccable, indisputable good taste.

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As Mayor Laura Miller put it in "Dallas: Where Dreams Come True," a self-congratulatory brochure, "Dallas is, once again, in the midst of a new beginning — a magnificent renaissance." These days, you can't visit the city without someone buttonholing you to chant a mantra of big-time [architecture](#): a new opera center by [Norman Foster](#), a new theater by [Rem Koolhaas](#), a proposed bridge spanning the Trinity River by [Santiago Calatrava](#). These buildings will take their place alongside a Latino Cultural Center by Ricardo Legorreta, a symphony hall by I. M. Pei, [Philip Johnson's](#) Crescent complex and a new development by Ross Perot Jr., near the American Airlines basketball arena, which looks like something out of "Blade Runner" on a sunny day. And three of the city's biggest [art](#) patrons — the Hoffman, Rachofsky and Rose families — have donated their world-class contemporary collections to the once struggling [Dallas Museum of Art](#). "You can't believe you're in Dallas!" a friend of mine and longtime resident said.

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The Iconic City of Texas

and longtime resident said.

So what if, last year, The Dallas Morning News issued a bleak report on the state of crime, schools and growth? (Sample text: “Dallas calls itself ‘the city that works.’ Dallas is wrong.”) The city’s natural optimism dominates in the enormous cranes that bob and weave all over the city center, promising a new Ritz-Carlton, a new Mandarin Oriental and assorted high-rise luxury condos.

Only the new W hotel, with a 25-foot mobile of tiny toy cowboys, cowgirls, mustangs and cows, seems interested in honoring the past. Dallas these days wants to be seen as a sophisticated destination for art, culture and, of course, business.

Maybe, then, it wasn’t so shocking that a cadre of Southern Methodist University professors protested the location of the [George W. Bush](#) presidential library on campus. But few who’ve been around [Texas](#) for any length of time can’t help but be surprised that Dallas has learned to stop snubbing [Fort Worth](#), its more secure and deeply resented cousin, so that the two cities can join forces in creating one whopping destination for art and architecture fans. As the Morning News architecture critic David Dillon told me, “The city is really coming into its own.” Particularly when considered with Louis Kahn’s Kimbell and Tadao Ando’s Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth, Dallas is, in a way, he said, “a place you can’t not go.”

In other words, you really can’t associate Dallas with big, brassy blondes or J. R. Ewing anymore, much less with Lee Harvey Oswald and the Kennedy assassination. Nor can you equate it with the stuffy, post-oil-bust, shame-cycle city of the late 1980s and ’90s. Dallas hasn’t lost its passion for getting it right — this is still a city where a fashion stylist can be described in a news story, without irony, as an “avowed minimalist” — but the earnestness that can easily be mistaken for pretension has softened. “It’s learning to loosen up,” Dillon said, with just a hint of doubt in his voice.

I lived in Dallas from 1988 to 1991, on a street called Mercedes, which always struck me, and anyone else familiar with Dallas’s ambitions, as fitting. I was newly married to a busy husband, had a job that encouraged travel, and wasn’t terribly enthusiastic about settling in. Texans split hairs about the state’s major cities in a way outsiders do not. I am from [San Antonio](#) and had been living in [Austin](#) and, before that, [Houston](#). Dallas had always seemed to me too Midwestern, too conservative and far too orderly and uptight. Still, I fell in love with the tiny brick bungalow we bought in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood and taught myself to be patient with our 90-something neighbor, who told us she had ridden in covered wagons. My husband and I contented ourselves with eating square-shaped pizza in the dark, ’40s-era dining room at Campisi’s and the mealy corn dogs at the state fair; we inspected the assassination site and checked out Southfork. In other words, we struck a pose that we were in Dallas but not of Dallas, though on special occasions we made forays to the brooding opulence of the [Mansion on Turtle Creek](#) or the chic Routh Street Café (now closed), where the chefs Dean Fearing and Stephan Pyles created New Southwestern concoctions like lobster tacos with jicama salad or catfish mousse with crayfish sauce.

In my spare time, I shopped. I do not mean that every once in a while I ventured into the original Neiman Marcus downtown or made the monthly pilgrimage to the antiques sale at [Fair Park](#). I mean that Dallas unleashed in me a near constant mania to discover my best (looking) self. Even 20 years ago, the ways to do so in Dallas were myriad. I hate to count the days I wandered, in my flower-girl garb, from the downtown Neiman’s to the Stanley Korshak at the Crescent, trying on lipsticks, blush and designer clothes I couldn’t possibly afford, helped along by saleswomen who spoke to me kindly and treated me gently, like I was a hopeless refugee from the Planet of Terrible Taste. I bought a Perry Ellis gown on sale for what was then a breathtaking \$300 at NorthPark Center and exchanged a wink with [Calvin Klein](#) at the Highland Park Village shopping center when he appeared for a trunk show at his first free-standing eponymous store.

As they say, when in Rome. Yes, there were major cultural institutions in town, but I understood then as I understand now that the real works of art in Dallas are those created and inspired by the retailers, particularly Stanley Marcus, whose spirit remains as venerated in Dallas as the Buddha’s in [Tibet](#). At the heart of it all — this zeal for glamour and sophistication, a supreme faith in the transcendent power of surfaces — is a Texan’s pride and a Texan’s insecurity: you don’t leave the house without looking your best, because you never know whom you might see, and who might want to find you lacking. (It isn’t just the Cowboys who know that the best defense is a good offense.)

In other words, I made my peace with Dallas on Dallas’s terms. I know in retrospect that there were plenty of Dallas residents who left their houses without being properly turned out, who took their kids to Little League and soccer practice instead of shopping malls. But I wasn’t one of them. I had succumbed to the local fever, and it didn’t break the day my husband came home and asked how I’d feel about moving back to Houston. It was only months later, after I’d caught our new Houston neighbors snickering at my color-coordinated linens, my floral arrangement and my chicken salad with too many neo-Southwestern ingredients, that I was cured. I was way south of the Trinity again, and it was time to let go.

I hadn’t been to Dallas for any length of time when I visited recently, and my first indication that things had changed was when I spied the jewelry being raffled off at the Nasher Sculpture Center’s New Year’s Eve benefit. The stones on the white gold necklace were not small by any standard — the piece was billed in the party program as “a stunning 2 1/2-carat diamond necklace” valued at \$5,900 — but it didn’t look like something J. R. Ewing or, for that matter, H. L. Hunt would have given any self-respecting mistress. It was understated. (This was a town, after all, where a father hired a three-ring circus complete with elephants for his daughter’s debutante party, long before MTV’s “My Super Sweet 16.”) The inside of the Nasher party tent looked like something from the Snow Queen — all shimmering silver and snowy white. The dinner chairwoman Heidi Dillon wore big blond hair with her silver sequined gown, but her young son was also in attendance, in a tux and matching silver sneakers, which dialed the whole thing back a bit. Some of the male guests weren’t even in black tie, another sign that the city’s days of trying too hard were perhaps numbered.

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**Correction: April 1, 2007**

An article last Sunday in T: Travel, about the resurgence of Dallas, misidentified a street that is known for its mansions. It is Swiss Avenue, not Swift. The article also referred incorrectly to a retail, office and hotel complex designed by Philip Johnson. It is the Crescent, not the Crescent Court, which is a hotel.

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