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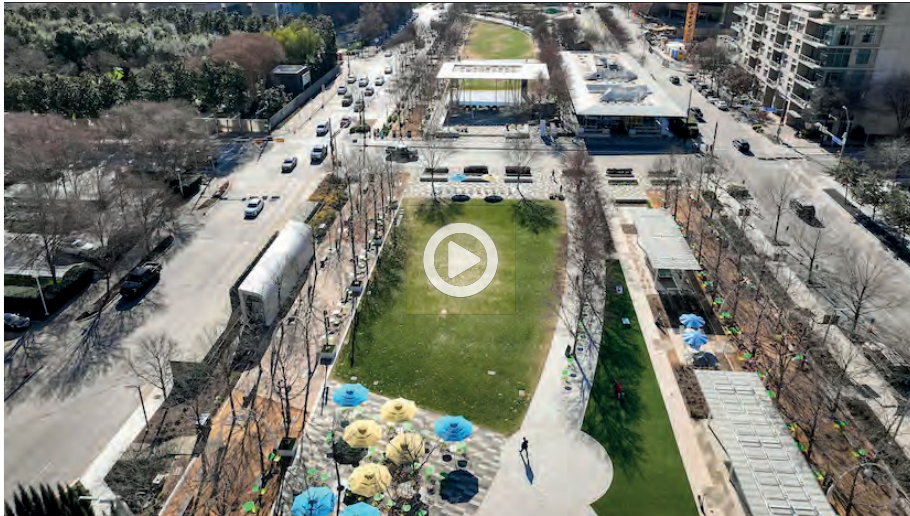
## How Klyde Warren Park brought Dallas together

The inside story of how Dallas got its game-changing deck park.



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Aerial view of Klyde Warren Park on Jan. 22, 2025, in Dallas.



*Editor's note: This is the ninth installment in a series of essays by architecture critic Mark Lamster that tells the history of Dallas through the buildings and places that define the city.*

Can you imagine downtown Dallas without Klyde Warren Park? It's hard, and that's saying something, as the 5.4-acre park suspended over the Woodall Rodgers Freeway is just over a decade old. But since its opening in 2012, it has become an essential part of the city's DNA, the front lawn Dallas never had.

It has, moreover, sparked a genuine (if slow-moving) renaissance of urban life in [downtown Dallas](#), reversing a half-century of decline. It is no exaggeration to call it the most significant building project in Dallas since the city put [the Trinity River](#) between levees nearly a century ago.

To list the park's achievements is to understand the scale of its impact. To begin, there's the bridging of the freeway chasm between downtown and Uptown, bringing a long-lost connectivity to the area; it has spurred a wave of development and boosted the value of adjacent real estate; it has delivered (at least some) vitality to [the neighboring Arts District](#); it has brought Dallas together, giving the city a central and inviting place open to all; and, most unlikely, it has made Dallas — *Dallas!* — a national model of progressive urban design.

Indeed, Klyde Warren Park has been so successful that the city is building two additional deck parks, and is putting [Interstate 345](#) into a trench so that it can eventually be decked as well.

That the park exists at all is something close to a miracle, the product of an unlikely combination of visionary leadership, compelling design and immense fortune.



Aerial view of Klyde Warren Park on Jan. 22, 2025, in Dallas. (Smiley N. Pool / Staff Photographer)

## A bold new plan

The idea of decking Woodall Rodgers can be traced to the road's controversial planning in the late 1960s. At that time, there was considerable debate as to whether the highway would be elevated or depressed into a trench. The state wanted the less expensive, elevated option, but the city, backed by a report by urban planner Vincent Ponte — the man who gave Dallas its underground pedestrian network — insisted on the trench plan, with the idea that it would create less of a barrier between neighborhoods and could be capped in the future.

Following the road's completion, in 1983, [Dallas Morning News](#) architecture critic [David Dillon](#) reintroduced the decking concept, pointing to the 5.4-acre Freeway Park in Seattle, designed by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin and opened in 1976, as a potential model. A decade later, the landscape architect Kevin Sloan floated a plan to create an "esplanade" across the highway gulch, but it didn't go anywhere either.



Path of the Woodall Rodgers Freeway before construction in 1976. (TOM DILLARD/Staff Photographer / Dallas Morning News)

The decking idea resurfaced in the early 2000s, driven by executives at Crescent Real Estate Equities, which owned property on either side of the freeway trench. It was then included in plans developed by the Inside the Loop Committee, formed in 2002 by Dallas Mayor Laura Miller to bring life to the city's languishing downtown. "You could fire a cannon on Main Street and no one would hear it," Miller recalls.

Independently, Crescent moved forward on the project, commissioning landscape architect [James Burnett](#), who was already working with the company, to sketch out a plan for a park over the highway. "Being a young architect wanting to please a client, I was like, OK, let's do some drawings," says Burnett, a Louisiana native whose firm, the Office of James Burnett, was founded in Houston but based outside of San Diego.

As Burnett was developing the park plan, the Real Estate Council of Dallas (TREC), held its own competition for an idea that might help revitalize the city. The prize: \$1 million in grant funding. Crescent submitted Burnett's scheme, and in 2004 it beat out 34 other entries. "They liked the boldness of it," the council's president, Linda Owen, told *The News* of the jury's decision.

By that time, the decking plan had found another champion, the man who would come to be the face of the project: Jody Grant, a banker with a Ph.D. in economics, boundless energy and a Rolodex filled with Dallas power players. Texas Capital Bank, which he founded in 1998, had its offices in Uptown, just a block from the freeway canyon.

Grant was uniquely qualified to lead the decking campaign because he had a history of successfully rethinking highway infrastructure. In the late 1970s, Grant was president of Fort Worth National Bank when that city was planning to expand Interstate 30, then a four-lane elevated highway running through downtown, to a whopping 10 lanes. Grant responded with an op-ed in *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram* offering a counterproposal that shifted the road outside the downtown core to the more southern location it now occupies.



Jody Grant above the Woodall Rodgers Freeway before the construction of Klyde Warren Park. (Rex C. Curry - Special Contributor)

Grant's piece sparked an opposition movement in Fort Worth. "The little old ladies with their umbrellas came out of the woodwork in favor of it," says Grant. The well-connected banker recruited local heavyweight Robert Bass to his cause, and together they formed an advocacy group, I-CARE (Citizen Advocates for Responsible Expansion), that sued to block the project, and eventually won the case in federal court.

Grant got wind of the Woodall Rodgers decking plan in the fall of 2004 during a meeting with Robert Decherd, then chief executive officer of *The Dallas Morning News* and chair of the Inside the Loop Committee. Given Grant's history of reforming highway infrastructure, the idea appealed to him, and soon he was meeting with representatives from Crescent and TREC director Linda Owen.

Together, the group formed the nonprofit Woodall Rodgers Park Foundation, and on Feb. 24, 2005, went public with its intentions. "It will be the great gateway to downtown, one that we need in the worst way," Grant told this paper. Grant and his wife, Sheila, donated \$1 million to the organization, as did Texas Capital Bank. With that money, \$500,000 pledged from Crescent and the \$1 million seed funding from TREC, the foundation could begin making the decades-long dream a reality. Where the rest of the money to cover the park's projected \$60 million cost would come from remained an open question.



An initial plan for a deck park over Woodall Rodgers Freeway by James Burnett. (OJB Landscape Architecture / OJB Landscape Architecture)

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## Pie in the sky

In the effort to raise capital, the foundation had a key ally in Laura Miller, the Dallas mayor. If the park foundation could come up with \$10 million in private funding commitments, Miller promised to match it with \$20 million in the coming 2006 bond program. She also imposed a deadline — May 1, 2006 — for the foundation to produce that money.

That date came and went, leaving the park's political fate uncertain, but on May 10 Grant delivered a letter promising the full amount — largely from the real estate interests who owned property that would abut the park. That was good enough to get the park included in the city's \$1.26 billion bond program. Lobbying in Austin scored \$20 million from the state. In a matter of months, the park that was a mere dream had a \$50 million bankroll. "This is one piece of pie in the sky that may just fall to earth," wrote *The News'* editorial board.

Funding was in place, but existential questions remained. A park can be many things — a place for leisure, a playground for children, a space for sporting events or a site for communal gathering and performance, to name just a few. Which of these would be prioritized in the park's limited footprint? Would its landscape be formal with gridded paths and plantings, as at Versailles, or more naturalistic, like New York's Central Park?

Here the park foundation's board adopted a standard Dallas strategy: hop on a plane to look at what was considered "world class," and then copy it, or at least use it for inspiration. In Chicago, the group visited Millennium Park, where the members were especially impressed with Frank Gehry's stainless steel bandshell. "We were just blown away by the architecture," recalls Grant. They also visited Burnett's recently completed Lakeshore East Park, a jewel of lawns and curving paths inside the Chicago loop.

In Houston, their tour took them to the Discovery Green and to the campus of Rice University to look at the Brochstein Pavilion, a pristine modern cafeteria designed by architect Thomas Phifer.

Perhaps most influential of the places visited was Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan, which had been transformed in the early 1990s from a grim and dangerous place into a vibrant destination. But it was not so much the design of the park that attracted the visitors from Dallas as the park's management, with its emphasis on security and year-round programming. "We saw the heart and soul of what we thought was the way a park ought to be run," says Grant.

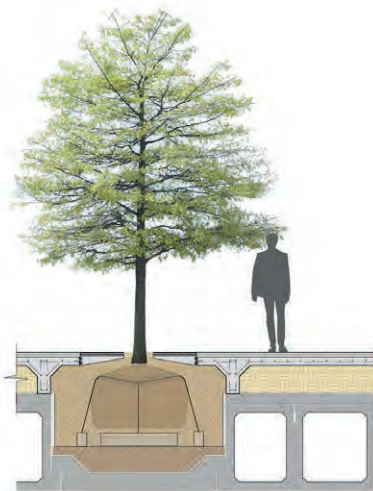
The man responsible for Bryant Park's transformation was Dan Biederman, a protege of the urban planner William "Holly" White with an MBA from Harvard. Beyond any single design element, it was Biederman that the Dallas contingent took from Bryant Park, hiring his firm, Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, as a consultant.

The inevitable result of the site visits was a park that would have a little of everything, with pieces borrowed from everywhere. There would be a striking steel performance pavilion, like the one at Millennium Park; a stand-alone restaurant designed by Thomas Phifer, like the one at Rice; and an outdoor library with Parisian-style cafe furniture, like the one at Bryant Park. "We wanted it to feel like a park where you could grab a chair, move it around, get something to eat from a food truck, listen to a performance or just read a book," says Burnett.

That sense of informality extended to the park landscape. What was originally a rather rigid, gridded design evolved into something more free-flowing, with native plantings and a series of what Burnett called "outdoor rooms." A curving promenade — "the wiggle" — ran the park's length.

## Impediments

The curving promenade remained in the final design, but several of Burnett's more inventive elements did not. One dropped idea was to have a section of the deck made of heavy-strength glass, so you could look down onto the highway below, aquarium style. The prospect of keeping it clean, given the pollution coming up from the road, was prohibitive. Also unbuilt was a proposed assembly of colored translucent panels that would have been suspended over the highway at the ends of the park. Sunshine would have projected the colors from the panels onto the road. "As you went under the park, you would have got this idea that you're going somewhere special," says Burnett. Cost and safety concerns killed that as well.



Sectional diagram showing the placement of trees between concrete box beams at Klyde Warren Park. (OJB Landscape Architecture / OJB Landscape Architecture)

The greatest challenge facing the design team was not aesthetic but technical. Burnett was adamant that the park not be elevated or shielded from the neighboring streets. "We wanted to make sure that as you drove around the park, you could see into the park," he says. Open sight-lines were necessary both for security — a serious crime early in the park's history would have been devastating — and to encourage passersby to visit. The problem was that necessary clearance between the Woodall Rodgers roadbed and the bottom of the park's deck meant the deck had to be extremely thin, leaving little room to place park infrastructure — in particular, tree roots — below ground level.

The solution came from park engineers Carter & Burgess (acquired by Jacobs, during planning), who developed a system of parallel concrete box beams that would straddle the highway. Between the beams, shallow troughs could be filled with high-density foam and soil for the park's trees.



Concrete box beams being laid over Woodall Rodgers Freeway to support the deck of Klyde Warren Park in 2011. (File photo / 2011) (Vernon Bryant/Staff Photographer / dallas morning news)

Another impediment was political. Burnett's design called for the closure of Harwood Street to traffic, so cars and trucks wouldn't run through the heart of the park. This met with vehement opposition from the neighboring Dallas Museum of Art, which feared the change would inconvenience visitors. The museum's trustees went so far as to bring in a consultant, the Harvard urban planning professor Alex Krieger, to lobby on the museum's behalf.

The compromise solution, agreed to in May 2007, was to place curb cuts and demountable bollards where Harwood met the park, allowing traffic to cross when the museum had special events. Those accommodations, in addition to the required reinforcement of the roadbed, cost the foundation some \$3 million. But after all that was done, state and city traffic planners decided the crossing would be a safety hazard and insisted the road be closed permanently.

The original plan to start construction in 2007 with an opening anticipated in 2010 was already delayed when the global financial crisis hit. The foundation was still far short of the financing it would need for the park, which would end up costing just under \$100 million. "Nobody wanted to see us. All of the philanthropies shut down and private donations disappeared," recalls Grant.

Then came a stroke of luck, albeit luck manufactured with considerable backroom politicking. In March 2009, the park received \$16.7 million in federal stimulus money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. "That put us over the finish line so we could start the park," says Grant.

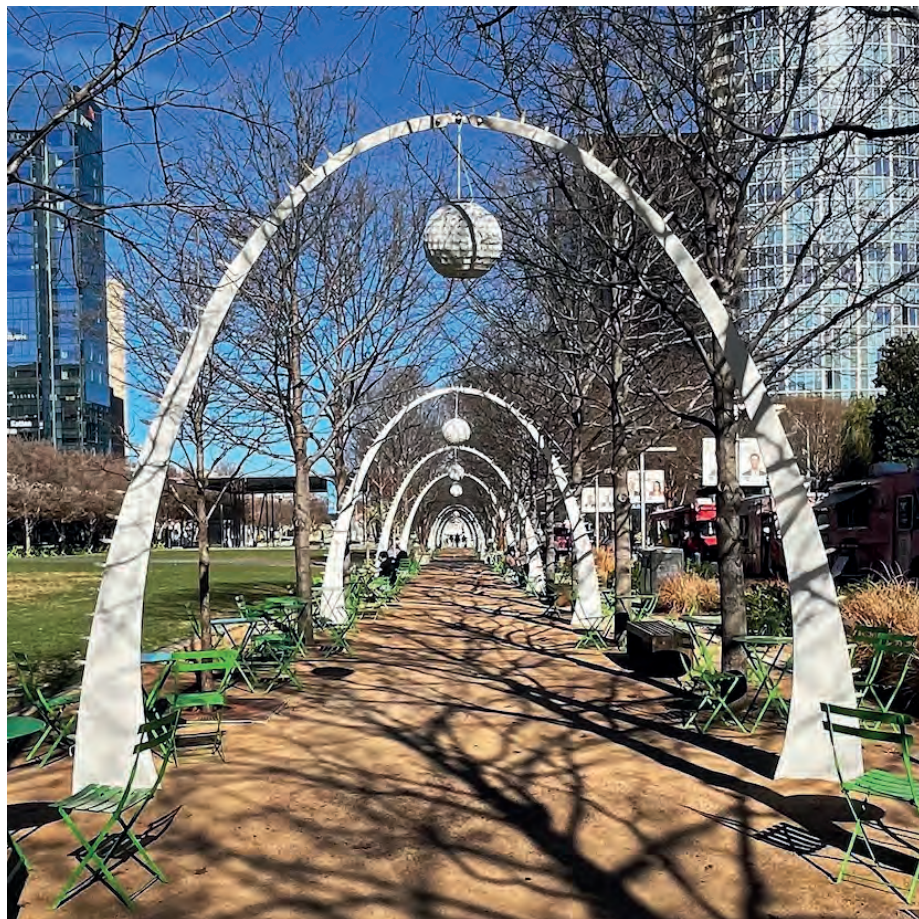
Work finally began in October that year, with the rebuilding of the retaining walls along the highway trench, and the construction of a new center wall between the east- and west-bound lanes. In December 2011, 25 river birch trees were planted, the first of what would be more than 300 trees. Among the features Burnett would be most proud of was a botanical garden of native species at the western end of the park. "Rejoice!" wrote [Mariana Greene](#), *The News'* then-gardening columnist, upon the park's opening in October 2012. "Dallas has joined the rarefied company of American urban spaces that have adopted the forward thinking motto, 'Right plant, right place.'"

## Being watched

One thing the park did not have, for a long time, was a name. That changed in February 2012, when it was announced Dallas billionaire Kelcy Warren had bought the naming rights for an undisclosed sum, later revealed to be \$10 million. Grant had recruited the gas pipeline tycoon at an investors club gathering at Warren's private island off the coast of Honduras. Warren selected his 9-year-old son, Klyde, as the park's namesake. "I did a lot of soul-searching before I decided to do this," Warren said at the time. "I want my son to know, 'You're being watched. You can't blend into the upholstery like your dad has done all his life.'"

It was, to say the least, an unconventional choice, one that did not follow city guidelines that encouraged donors to select names reflecting natural features, historic events or prominent figures. The park foundation, however, had been exempted from those rules, given the amount of private funding the park required.

There was something quintessentially Dallas about naming a public park for a child with no qualification that might recommend him for that honor. It was especially confounding given that the park did nothing to indicate it was built over land that had been part of the Latino community known as Little Mexico and adjacent to Freedman's Town, a community founded by formerly enslaved people. "If the park is to be a vital connection for Dallas, it needs to connect the present with this history," the activist Bill Betzen wrote in a letter to The News before the park opened.



The arches of Klyde Warren Park. (Mark Lamster / Mark Lamster)

## Too much is never enough

However valid, that criticism did little to dampen enthusiasm for the park, which finally opened to the public at 9 a.m. Oct. 27, 2012. At the morning's ribbon cutting, Mayor Mike Rawlings promised the park would "be a hub of activity for this and future generations."

Crowds were slow to arrive — there was a downtown half-marathon that Saturday morning, causing traffic problems — but by afternoon the park was packed with visitors from the city and the suburbs alike who came to enjoy the park atmosphere and programming that included chess, mah-jongg, dog training, yoga, pétanque, knitting lessons and art and science programs for kids. The day culminated with a pop concert by local favorite Polyphonic Spree and a display of fireworks.

That philosophy of programmatic excess defines the park and makes it, aesthetically, something of an upended toy box, with its diverse goodies strewn about. There is little relationship, for example, between the park's allée of mini-arches with Japanese-style lanterns and the cool minimalism of Phifer's performance and restaurant pavilions. The park surely subscribes to the mantra of architect Morris Lapidus, champion of Miami Beach modernism: "Too much is never enough."

The park's benefactors have been testing the boundaries of that proposition ever since.

In 2018, [the park foundation announced plans for an awkward, spiraling structure](#) — part parking garage, part event space — to be located on a new, 1.7-acre deck on the western end of the park. Construction has yet to begin, but the city has committed \$16.5 million to the \$160 million venture.



Renderings of the planned expansion of Klyde Warren Park. (M2 Studio/Klyde Warren Park)

Announcement of that project was followed two years later, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the unveiling of plans for a [Vegas-style fountain](#) that would shoot jets of water 100 feet into the air. The \$10 million price tag — paid for by Nancy and Randy Best — came just a few months after the city had furloughed 235 employees from the Park and Recreation department.

Burnett was opposed to the project, especially because it meant eliminating plantings at the eastern end of the park, but it went forward, [opening in 2022](#). Today, Burnett is diplomatic. “I’m not glad they did it, but it does work for some people and I think it serves a need,” he says.

These alterations, whatever one thinks of them, are markers of the park’s inarguable success. More than 1 million people visit the park every year, and it has vastly boosted the value of neighboring real estate, generating — according to the park’s foundation — more than \$1 billion in development. The institutions of the Arts District have benefited enormously from the added traffic to the area, and none more than the Dallas Museum of Art, once an adversary. Park visitors using the museum’s garage have become a significant revenue stream for the museum, [which is planning an expansion](#) that would reorient its entry toward the park.

“The park has been so enormously successful, that the institutions that abut it are looking to be more porous on the sides where they were fortress-like,” says Charles Birnbaum, founding director of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. “Klyde Warren Park has really become a poster child for the benefit of capping freeways.” Cities including Austin and Peoria, Pittsburgh and San Diego have all looked to Dallas for inspiration.

For Dallas, the park has been nothing short of transformative, suturing a broken urban core while giving the city and the region beyond a generous space to gather and play.

*The essays in this series will be collected in a volume to be produced by the nonprofit publishing house Deep Vellum. Read earlier installments on [Millermore Mansion](#), the [Adolphus Hotel](#), [NorthPark Center](#), the [Hyatt Regency and Reunion Tower](#), [Fountain Place](#), [City Hall](#), the [Nasher Sculpture Center](#) and the [Republic Tower](#).*

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By **Mark Lamster**

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