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Dallas' Klyde Warren Park seeks to bridge more than Woodall Rodgers Freeway

Kye R. Lee/Staff Photographer

A view looking west, and south toward downtown, from Klyde Warren Park over Woodall Rodgers Freeway in Dallas.

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Dallas businessmen of the 1960s fervently lobbied for construction of Woodall Rodgers Freeway, promising that it would connect downtown to the rest of the city.

Now comes Klyde Warren Park, whose purpose is to bury a section of that same freeway under a pedestrian-friendly field of green. Doing so, its supporters argue, will connect downtown to the rest of the city.

“There was a recognition that Woodall Rodgers had become a psychological barrier that had a negative impact on the city core,” said Linda Owen, a former president of the Dallas Real Estate Council who was among the park’s earliest supporters.

“This is about knitting the city together again,” she said.

When Klyde Warren Park opens Saturday, it will represent 10 years of planning, $110 million in funding and a fundamental shift in the way people think about urban life.

When 50 years ago, Dallas businessmen argued that the freeway would serve as a “connector,” they meant it would link North Central Expressway and Interstate 35. Downtown streets would become less congested. At the end of the workday, business district employees could drive out of the city core in no time.

During the push to develop the 5.2-acre Klyde Warren Park, its supporters used the same term — “connector.”

But the context had changed. The park would serve as a bridge between downtown and Uptown, and would draw suburban residents to a newly vibrant urban core.

Alex Garvin, an urban planner at Yale School of Architecture, has watched municipal policy evolve nationwide from the belief that a spoke-and-hub freeway system would increase the value of downtown by making it easier for employees and customers to drive from the suburbs.

The systems successfully connected the suburbs with downtowns, but once employees left for the day, they didn’t drive back for shopping or dining. Downtowns suffered as a result.

Now city leaders are trying to lure people back.

“It’s not just a matter of philosophy. Times change,” Garvin said. “Dallas is not the city it was 50 years ago. What once needed to be connected no longer needs connection.”

Dallas is not the only city dealing with that issue, and it is not the first to come up with the idea of building a park over a freeway.

Peter Harnik, author of *Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities*, counts at least 25 deck parks in the United States — three alone in Duluth, Minn.

Part of the reason is environmental, he said. Urban planners are trying to cut pollution and noise in the center city. But however much the green movement might applaud the symbolism of burying sections of freeway beneath an urban oasis, Harnik notes, there is also a practical reason for the phenomenon.

“In most cities, new downtown parks are under way, but it’s difficult to build them because it’s very expensive to acquire enough land,” he said.

Where are there acres of unused open space near the urban core?

Over the freeways.

“Technically, the land is free, if you can work it out with the state,” Harnik said. “It’s expensive to build over a highway, but you’re saving the cost of tearing down existing infrastructure.”

Programming

Building a deck park is one thing. Filling it with people is another.

A key moment in the history of Klyde Warren Park came in 2006, when Dallas supporters toured Chicago’s Millennium Park and New York’s Bryant Park. Both are considered major urban success stories.

Millennium Park, about five times larger than Klyde Warren Park, was built over railroad yards, and it has served to link Chicago’s Loop to Lake Michigan. Bryant Park, at about 10 acres, was once a refuge for drug dealers until an intense redevelopment effort beginning in the 1980s turned it into one of New York City’s most popular venues.

The key to success in both cities, the Dallas visitors were told, was programming — providing activities, scheduling concerts and hosting events almost nonstop.

Moreover, Bryant Park activities generate enough money to sustain an $8 million annual budget.

Since then, “programming” has become the mantra for Klyde Warren Park.

“When people in Texas think of parks, they think of a playground or a place to play softball. This is not that kind of park,” said Jody Grant, the Texas Capital Bank founder who led fundraising for the deck park. “We have to provide a reason for people to be here.”

The opening weekend alone will include chess tournaments; mah-jongg, knitting, and tai chi lessons; dog training; a movie screening; concerts and fireworks. It is a pace that organizers promise will slow only slightly as things settle into a daily routine.

Some programming will be cut back during the winter months, but — except during the worst weather — will never cease throughout the year.

Restaurant at site

A restaurant opening on the premises next year is expected to be a major source of revenue. The Woodall Rodgers Park Foundation will receive both leasing fees and a cut of the restaurant receipts.

Dan Biederman, who redeveloped Bryant Park and served as a consultant for Klyde Warren Park, thinks Dallas supporters have learned their lessons well.

“It’s one of the most exciting parks in the country,” he said of Klyde Warren Park. “Programming is one of the most important pieces, and you’re next to two great neighborhoods — Uptown and the [AT&T] Performing Arts Center” in the Dallas Arts District.

Weather and walking

Biederman sees two challenges for Klyde Warren Park. One is weather, which he believes will be less troublesome than Dallas residents fear.

“People I talked to down there said, ‘Don’t expect us to have wonderful summers,’” he said. “Well, New York doesn’t have wonderful winters. I would estimate that there are about 100 good days in New York City, and about 250 in Dallas.”

But Dallas has one clear disadvantage.

“You do not live in a walking city,” he said. “The distance people in Dallas are willing to walk seems to me to be about 600 feet. In New York, San Francisco and Boston, it’s more like 1,400 feet.”

Garvin said that one factor that makes Bryant Park such a success is that so many people live nearby. Without that, he said, programming can do only so much.

“At the moment, programming is the big thing, it’s what people talk about,” he said. “But you need great design, too. Central Park doesn’t have great programming, but it has great design, and it’s one of the most successful parks in the world.”

Willis Winters, deputy director of the Dallas Park and Recreation Department, said the deck park designers tried to guard against over-programming.

“There is such a thing as filling every space in the park just to be filling,” he said. “You have to try not to make it a circus. A children’s carousel would have been over-programming. Something like that becomes intrusive.”

Beyond programming and design, there is the city itself, said Harnik, who is director of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for City Park Excellence.

“You need more than trees. You need retail, you need other people, you need a fun place that people will be able to walk through,” he said.

Currently, Klyde Warren Park sits near some of the most expensive office space in the central business district and near a scattering of restaurants and high-rise residences.

There is hard evidence that parks do indeed spur development.

Because of the revitalization of Bryant Park, surrounding buildings now have a vacancy rate a third of that for the rest of midtown Manhattan. Rents are 19 percent higher, according to a report this month in *The New York Times*.

The catch is that the transformation did not happen overnight. It has been 20 years since a revitalized Bryant Park opened to the public.

“You won’t know everything after opening weekend,” Garvin said. “It’s how Dallas will look 15 years from now that will determine if it’s a success.”