

## **Introduction**

*The following is an assessment of Victory Park, Dallas, Texas from a planning perspective. This year marks ten years for the development from American Airlines Center's opening. Management of Victory Park is now headed by the firm of Cousins Properties for Estein & Associates, an Orlando, Florida-based firm and affiliate of U.S. Truehand,<sup>1</sup> a German investment firm that became an equity partner with Hillwood and Hicks Holdings, LLP partnership in 2006 to provide equity financing for the nine projects that were underway at that time<sup>2</sup>. Hillwood relinquished their equity interest in Victory Park in 2009 but still maintain separate interests and/or control of property in or near the development through majority interests, as in American Airlines Center, or through agreements with the land owners.<sup>3</sup>*

*The assessment takes two forms: the first uses AIA's Ten Principles for Livable Communities listed in a previous post while the second consists of evaluation based on general planning principles, with some overlap in each review. Some suggestions are made for improvement but these are limited in order to maintain a focus on what has been built instead of what might have been built or planned differently from its inception. For the record, the author has not participated in any of the planning or development at Victory Park nor does he have firsthand knowledge of what was done early on and in intervening years. This assessment is informed based upon what is in place and information gathered from the public realm.*

*Victory Park has received much criticism from the public and media. For a partial read on this see the references provided at the end of the article. Any critique of the development in this document as well as the ideas, views and opinions expressed herein are the author's unless noted.*

## **Background**

**Victory Park** is an urban development located just north of downtown Dallas, Texas. An extension of the downtown, it was conceived as a mixed-use media, sports and entertainment complex with American Airlines Center as its principal attraction. Over the last five years, the development has grown significantly, adding a major commercial venture in the W Hotel and Residences, four residential buildings, one Class A commercial office building, eight extant restaurants and cigar-bar, a designer-label clothing store and an art gallery, all within the south and east side of the site. More development was underway but placed on hold due to economic considerations, leaving vestiges of building at key areas of the site, what was intended to complete a community framework for the south half of the development.

What has been built is impressive in bold, streamlined towers rising from block-long bases claiming the street. Victory Park took a turn from the historicist architecture of its centerpiece into modern expression of form as it built its way up, this change in direction being the developers' intention in creating a high value development, one that would compete with others planned for the area to the east and downtown. What has been built is part of a much larger vision extending west and north, over existing arena parking and other vacant land and to the east, including land occupied by the new Perot Nature & Science Museum. In total, Victory Park was planned to encompass 75 acres with 12 million square feet of office, entertainment, retail, restaurant, hotel and residential space, including approximately 4,000 luxury residences.<sup>4</sup>



### **American Airlines Center**

Built in 2001 to replace an aging Reunion Arena, American Airlines Center houses the Dallas Mavericks basketball and Stars hockey teams and is also a venue for concerts and other events. The first new building in the development, it set the style for what the developers originally intended for Victory Park. The arena can accommodate 18,532 people (hockey) and 21,041 people (basketball) and also offers 144 luxury suites and 1,600 club seats.<sup>5</sup>



### **Victory Plaza**

Adjacent to American Airlines Center and framing its south entrance are media and entertainment office buildings Victory Plaza East and West, home to WFAA-TV and Cumulus Media. Together these buildings comprise 165,000 square feet of office space and 65,000 square feet of retail space.<sup>6</sup> The buildings align perpendicular from the Center's south entrance. A plaza occupies space between the buildings, serving as a gathering area for major outdoor events. Large media screens operate continuously, providing entertainment in the plaza. When Victory Plaza first opened, fountains were included in the center of the plaza, adding a whimsical touch and visual, if not actual, relief during summer. The fountain jets emerged in varied heights from stone stars inlaid into the plaza deck and were accented by color lights at night.



### **Cirque**

A residential tower across North Houston Street from Victory Plaza East office building is Cirque, located at the corner of Olive and North Houston streets, with the main entry on North Houston. This 28-story building<sup>7</sup> was completed in 2008 and houses 252 apartments with retail at the first level and a 25,000 square foot roof garden at the sixth level of the adjacent attached parking garage.<sup>8</sup>



### **W Hotel & Residences**

W Hotel and Residences and Cirque anchor the north end of an arc of hospitality and residential use along North Houston Street, the bulk of residential development with Cirque located directly across N. Houston to the northeast. The other buildings comprising this arc include The Vista Apartments, The Terrace and The House, the latter condominium buildings with The House framing the skyline in a high-rise to complement the hotel and Cirque to the north.

The W Hotel is a 252-room luxury hotel, first of the W hotels in Texas. The hotel comprises the lower half of the building with 83 residences occupying the floors above. A smaller south tower was built at the south end of the base building to accommodate additional demand for the residences, comprising 63 units for a total of 146 condominiums in this 33-story building. Within the hotel are a restaurant (Craft) and (Ghost) bar open to the public, a spa and a pool located approximately halfway up the north tower. This complex, along with The House at the other end of the development, provides highest-end living for this entertainment and business district. The main entrance to W Residences is to the south and just away from hotel forecourt entrance along Victory Park Lane. The parking garage entrance for both is on North Houston Street.



### **Vista Apartments**

The center block adjacent to the W Hotel is a section of mid-rise apartments offering an alternative to high-rise apartment living in the Cirque building. The seven-story Vista Apartments offer 129 residential units, a fitness center and 50,000 square feet of retail space at the first floor. The main entrance to The Vista is on North Houston and includes an oval drive adjacent to the main building entrance. The parking structure entrance is also accessed from North Houston.



### **Terrace Condominiums**

Across High Market Way from the Vista Apartments is its complement in The Terrace Condominiums. This eight to nine story mid-rise building is comprised of 89 one and two-bedroom residences and retail at the first floor, with Neo, Medina and Luna de Noche restaurants operating here since 2008. The building's residents and visitors enter the building from North Houston.



### **The House Condominiums**

Anchoring the southwest corner of the development, The House condominiums is a 28-story building housing 148 residential units. Completed in 2009, the building includes a 130-foot long pool at the fifth floor terrace above the parking structure. The House is Victory Park's more exclusive high-rise residence along with the W residences.



### **One Victory Park**

One Victory Park is the first of planned development office space intended to flank the rail and highway corridor bordering the development's west side. It provides enclosure of the one-acre park above Victory Avenue between the park and this building. Built in 2008 at 20 stories with 455,000 square feet of space<sup>9</sup> including 9,500 square feet of retail,<sup>10</sup> One Victory Park soars from its base to rival The House, albeit with greater bulk. Together they anchor the southern corner of the development. One Victory Park is notable for its attainment of LEED Silver certification from the USGBC, the first pre-certified multiple tenant office building in Dallas, according to the developers.

### **Assessment: AIA Ten Principles for Livable Communities<sup>11</sup>**

*The following principals are defined in a previous post.*

- 1. Design on a Human Scale**
- 2. Provide Choices**
- 3. Encourage Mixed-Use Development**
- 4. Preserve Urban Centers**
- 5. Vary Transportation Options**
- 6. Build Vibrant Public Spaces**
- 7. Create a Neighborhood Identity / A Sense of Place**
- 8. Protect Environmental Resources**

## **9. Conserve Landscapes**

### **10. Design Matters**

#### **Recent Development: Design on a Human Scale**

Planning for the south end clearly demarcates the front of the development. The planners chose N. Houston Street as the rear of a line of buildings running north to south along the street, providing a Main Street, Victory Park Lane, along the front of the buildings where the majority of activity will take place. Victory Park Lane begins at Victory Plaza and ends at Victory Park, a one-acre green space fronting the Terrace and House residences. In one sense, the lane ends for traffic but continues on as a pedestrian space. In order to achieve this, the planners set the front doors of the Vista and Terrace residences on N. Houston, creating a dichotomy between what is front and back for this side of the site. Designating N. Houston as the rear of the development created issues of scale along the street for the larger W Hotel and Residences that weren't resolved even though attempts were made by the hotel's designers to do so. By including a main street, the developers did succeed in creating a human scale at the street level for this part of Victory Park. Future development across from the W Hotel and all residential buildings along the lane will enclose this space and provide the wherewithal for more robust street activity, particularly entertainment, retail, housing and other community activities, provided some accommodation is possible for incorporating the existing parking structure across from the W Hotel.

#### **A Mix of Uses and Choices**

In implementing their vision, the developers built a variety of housing within primarily one type, that of a mid or high-rise apartment or condominium, all to accommodate a more affluent resident. In retrospect, the developers have noted that they would have added more modestly priced homes in order to include a broader mix of residents, and this may still be an option when they are able to build more residences.<sup>12</sup> In programming a variety of activities, American Airlines Center attracts many people to major league games and concerts. Additional opportunities are provided at the south end of site, most notably The House of Blues, attracting a different mix of people depending on the entertainment. Dining out is covered by any one of the eight restaurants, including Craft at the W Hotel. Getting to and from Victory Park is possible by car, bus and train. Getting to and from the venues within the park is possible by walking, although the streets were designed for efficient flow of traffic and more could be done to accommodate pedestrians. In terms of encouraging mixed-use, the developers have completed a significant amount of space that offers a variety of different uses. This space is slowly being leased out, more the office space in this market. Eventually the retail space will be occupied, providing choices over all categories that are crucial to creating livable communities. Victory Park has made a valid start in this first phase of development; however, with the exception of transportation, the range of options is limited within each category and serves to limit a sense of neighborhood within the development.

#### **Urban Infill & Preserving Urban Centers**

Even though Victory Park is a new development requiring all new infrastructure, it does fit the definition of urban infill, particularly when reclamation of the site is taken into consideration, revitalizing an area that was overlooked for many years. Any infill downtown is welcome as it creates options that help reduce commuting long distances, making the city-center more sustainable and desirable to live, work and play. And though it competes with the downtown it is a part of the city and, as such, contributes to creating a larger urban core, keeping businesses in the city center instead of relocating to areas outside the core, thereby preserving the urban center that is downtown.

## Transportation Options



13

Victory Park benefits from rail access at the west side of the site where both DART and TRE stations are located. DART operates regularly scheduled service via their green line and peak a.m./p.m. service with the Orange line. Special event service is provided via DART's Red and Blue lines, extending the system's reach, serving a greater region of the city's suburbs. Along with Trinity Rail Express (TRE), all stop at Victory Station along their respective routes when a major event is being held, allowing visitors to park outside the city and ride the trains to the Center.

DART also serves Victory Park with three bus routes throughout the day. The major route 49 runs through the development along N. Houston and Victory Avenue and routes 52 and 57 have stops at Lamar and Houston at the south end of the development. In terms of providing transportation options, the development has this covered, although Victory Park Station remains far enough from the built environment to be marginal in serving visitors and residents even though it is a relatively short walk. It now serves primarily American Airlines Center events and employees of the hotel but will become central to future development over time.

### Public Space

Victory Park offers one public space in AT&T Plaza. Programmed as an extension of the center and for outdoor events such as films shown on large high-definition video screens and gatherings such as New Year's Eve celebrations, the space remains vacant for most of the year. Victory Park, a small green space at the south end of the development, is meant to be a gathering place as well but remains largely unused as people stroll around it or sit on the steps in front of it. With One Victory Park office building looming across the street, the space has less a sense of invitation than ornamentation, something to be admired from a distance. More parkland is needed, from the existing park at the south extending all the way north through the site, offering walks and other plazas in order to contribute to vibrant public spaces in this urban environment.

### Environmental Stewardship – Protecting the Environment

Victory Park was built on a brownfield site making it a case-study in environmental reclamation and qualifying the development for high marks in protecting the environment. The developers also planted over a thousand trees on the property, which are now filling out and providing shade on most sidewalks. The Cirque has a 25,000 square foot roof garden and there is a small green space at the south end of the development. One Victory Park office building, completed in October, 2008 was designed to LEED Silver standard and earned an Energy Star rating, both designated in 2010, all contributing to environmentally responsive planning and design. However, there is an abundance of hardscape, making this more urban than one would think even these urban developers would have planned, especially given the City's recent moves to incorporate as much green space in the downtown core as possible and other cities' green initiatives.

### **The Southeast Quadrant – Design Matters**

The developers' move toward a more modern design statement began with Victory Plaza East and West office buildings, possibly to associate contemporary design with high-technology entertainment and media, but reported to be a reassessment of the development's design standards after the events of 2001 and shift from more traditional retail planning<sup>14</sup>. Whatever the reason, this design shift has had an impact on the development, one that could be argued has not provided Victory Park with all it was expected to deliver. As much as buildings from Cirque to The House provide a stunning addition to the skyline at night, they can be all but overwhelmed by recent construction to the east in the Uptown area, which sits at a higher elevation than Victory Park. Addition of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel complex, at 43 stories far surpassing the W Hotel & Residences, would have balanced this out and likely become a beacon for the development. Without it, Victory Park's design statement isn't strong enough to overcome the bulk of contemporary signature structures, most notably the new Nature & Science Museum to the east, but also those in Uptown.

Design does matter here in that people want to live in beautiful buildings and the towers are stunning in their execution. When coupled with planning issues at street level; however, this development will need to do better while doing more with considerably less in the interim, not a simple task.

Regarding Victory Plaza East and West office buildings it seems unusual, in retrospect, that the City did not require greater building separation and preservation of sightlines to American Airlines Center, their civic structure. Placing the two office buildings immediately adjacent to the arena may have seemed appropriate given current event and retail planning including similar sports developments around the country but, as an overall civic plaza, it has not worked well. The developers missed an opportunity to greatly enhance AT&T plaza by providing a park to either side for major events as well as extending parkland from south to north through the development. This would also have made a transition from historicist reference to contemporary design easier, as well as allowed the fountains at the plaza to remain fully functional, contributing to the overall appeal of the space.

Regarding the design of Victory Plaza's office buildings, as professionals we are trained to understand a designer's intent within a framework of the client's program, budget and design direction in making any assessment of a building's design and, as architects, we develop our own design sensibilities. Our reaction to a design upon first viewing, first experiencing the building and space without and within and the overall context into which a building is created serve to inform our assessment of the building, often in spite of understanding program and constraints within which designers worked. Design sensibilities may take priority in these assessments. Such is the case here.

On the whole, the buildings appear to be a response and an interpretation of what is to take place within the building, a high-tech structure for high-technology and media processing, which are then presented at the plaza via the large video screens. While this may be an appropriate gesture, its execution comes off as heavy-handed primarily for the steel structure supporting the video screens. If the designers' intent was to provide a demarcation from historicist precedent to future contemporary reference, they have succeeded in doing so. It would be difficult to argue that the buildings complement American Airlines Center or act as context; rather the opposite, that the designers and developers so wanted to break from what they had in the existing arena they created a massive and overbearing stage set befitting a hip sports media culture or, as may be the case, an overhyped sports media culture.

The remainder of the buildings' façades reveal themselves to be more suburban office building architecture and lack any relationship to the street. The buildings appear to be sealed from the outside world; any indication of their purpose is missing. They serve mainly as backdrop to the plaza, turning their backs on their facing streets and offering little in the way of engaging the development or people who use it. A video screen over the south façade of the arena is misplaced since it is removed from the content generator and further reduces cohesion of the plaza; i.e., the plaza works to focus on American Airlines Center but this effort is usurped by another video screen. The grandeur of American Airlines Center, an ability to see activities inside and anticipate soon joining in them is lost because of this commercial screen covering the building.

Design of the more recent additions to Victory Park fare much better, presenting a more cohesive and lighter design statement along with a vision for urban living and working that is more aligned with what is happening within the city center and Uptown district.

Overall, Victory Park meets many of the AIA's guidelines for livable communities, providing a measurable level of compliance with many livability principles. This doesn't mean that the development functions particularly well or achieves a high level of compliance to the principles. There remain many obstacles to the success of this development even though the developers, planners and designers have taken steps to mitigate negative effects of what has been built on Victory Park's aspirations to become a whole community. The City of Dallas has also taken an active role in recommending where and in what capacity the developers should focus future development.<sup>15</sup> For now, the developers have indicated they will focus on leasing more office space and try to refocus and reignite the shopping center or main street retail.<sup>16</sup> There is more to be done and yet to come.

## **General Planning Assessment & Commentary**

### **Victory Park**

Victory Park is located northwest of downtown Dallas, just beyond the West End of downtown across Woodall Rogers Freeway. The development was envisioned as a mixed-use entertainment district, to include sports and other entertainment venues, building on the city's sports events and vibrant nightlife as well as providing another destination for the convention trade. That the developers intended this site to become a primary destination for travelers was evident by plans for two major hotels to be developed at the site, of which only one has been built. That they intended Victory Park to become a high-end travel destination, living and business environment was apparent by the hotels, the first W and Mandarin Oriental hotels to be built in the state along with more expensive fashion retail outlets, restaurants, residences and office space. What the Victory Park vision has become may have been clouded by the economy, but there are some indications that even in a strong economy some planning decisions would eventually serve to hinder its success.

Victory Park's developers and the City recognized the area as an extension of the downtown in the same way other areas such as McKinney Avenue, North Pearl, Cedar Springs and McKinnon Street had become and were planned to expand in the mid-part of the first decade. There was a strong market for office space and new luxury high-rise hotels and residences just across from Dallas' Arts District extending into Oak Lawn. A downtown vista once commanded by the Crescent office building would soon diminish in the shadow of new high-rise buildings. With an eye toward establishing a high-end development for a growing market of young and old with high discretionary income, empty nesters and visitors looking for entertainment and value, the developers of Victory Park set about building their vision.

### **Live Work Play Vision**

With American Airlines Center built as the centerpiece of the development, all looked promising. The land had been reclaimed, a tax-incremental finance district had been successfully established to assist in development of the site, and the developers were well known as having the financial capability and experience to create a new city-center, one based on a major sports arena, hotel and entertainment.

The developers intended American Airlines Center to be the locus for the development with all other activities derived from or in support of this activity. In looking at what has been built, it appears the Center would become one of many activities, an amenity like any other offered in mixed-use developments that, with sufficient development, living and working in Victory Park would become multi-faceted and not limited to sports or related activities. It would have to in order to be successful. It may also be the case that the developers missed an interim step that led to their current difficulties, that of creating sufficient corollary entertainment and retail venues to attract and keep people in and around the arena when no major events were scheduled. Given the arena's demographic, this step would have meant building an encircling development that might have been a lower density than the developers could afford, given their investment in land and infrastructure. It may also just have been what they thought their investment should return or would be capable of sustaining given the magnitude and vision of the ultimate development. It would likely have extended the development timeline beyond what was originally anticipated by instituting an interim step in the process.

At the time there was no reason to believe that a development of the scale and cost envisioned for Victory Park would not be successful. Dallas was well on its way to realizing its destiny as a city to rival other great cities in the country. Renovation of large downtown buildings into apartment and condominium residences were many, major hotels and residential high-rises were planned for north of the city and parcels of land that had been vacant for years were being developed into offices next to Woodall Rogers Freeway. The Arts District had added a new sculpture museum and more major arts venues were planned. Everywhere one looked was visible proof that the city was expanding and that people with means were moving uptown and downtown.

Victory Park was ambitious from its inception and remains so even in the face of its present challenges. Whether the developers are willing to adapt and adopt a different approach may determine how long this period will be. With the Mandarin Oriental Hotel project abandoned by its namesake company, leaving a higher hurdle in its place, with fewer residents at their signature condominium tower to the south than expected and with the residential portion of the southern end of the development mostly built-out, Victory Park will require a rethinking of its basic development model in order to create a successful community. The development's present managers have indicated that this process is already well underway. The City has also taken steps to adopt development goals that are expected to improve the development's chances, directly and indirectly, through a commitment to focus on transit and entertainment development along Lamar.<sup>17</sup> While the latter won't have an immediate impact, it is unusual for a city to take these actions but exhibits an acknowledgement of its role in nurturing and protecting its initial and long-term investment in the site and commitment to rebuilding the downtown.

### **Present Challenges**

Victory Park will continue to grow as the economy improves. Without a steady stream of visitors to the site it will be difficult to attract retail businesses to the area. Without retail businesses it will be difficult to attract visitors to the site. It has already been established that people attending events aren't likely to shop before or after the event.<sup>18</sup> More and affordable residential units will

bring more people to the community, but this development must be located in close proximity to existing housing in order to build up the living portion of the mixed use equation, which may not fit the developers' original plans for the site. Since the east side arc of residential has created one dimension of housing, it would logically follow that the west side of Victory Park Lane, including the former Mandarin Oriental hotel site, could be developed primarily as residential with street level retail and with an extension of the existing park running north to south through the entire site, pushing much of the office space to the perimeter along the highway. Additional office space and workers will help provide a base for retail and restaurants during the day, but this development is still one in which people will get into their cars and leave to take advantage of the many venues available in the area so more options will be required to draw others to the site as well as increasing residential options to provide more residents who will use these venues at night.

Victory Park is a distinctively urban development. The sense one has is that the living takes place well above the street, and indeed, this is how the developers showcase their buildings: in aerial perspective photographs highlighting nighttime's color and lights, and in vignettes of the upper level rooftop pools and gardens offering an oasis from the city below. Whether one agrees with the premise as fitting more recent models or definitions of urban design, the developers have a right to claim that theirs is an urban environment and that a traditional relationship to the street is acceptable. Whether one would purposefully plan and design a development that overlooks the potential to redefine urban space might be considered unusual today. Whether the design response was appropriate, under the circumstances, is being debated and will continue long after the site is built-out to its perimeters. Victory Park strives to be many different things and, in doing so, may have become less than the sum of its separate, disparate parts. The challenge is to pull these into a cohesive whole with a unique identity and place.

### **Site**

The site is comprised of two north-south arterials with multiple east-west secondary streets that cross the site at intervals and define each building, separate islands bounded by roadways. There is also a main street, Victory Park Lane, upon which the hotel and retail front, running north-south from Victory Plaza to the park in between and parallel to the major arterials, North Houston Street and Victory Avenue. Because the latter roadways are one-way, access from the east and south is directed along North Houston Street while access from the north is via Victory Avenue. There is no vehicle access from the west as the site is bounded by railway tracks and highway beyond. A streetcar connection under the highway to the Design District is in early planning stages but this line appears to be further out in the future as of this writing.<sup>19</sup>

In order to provide access to the stadium, the site planners created sufficiently wide streets that allow automobile traffic to move very quickly through the site to the stadium parking. This also allows for relatively quick exiting from the site after an event has concluded.

A grand entrance from the east along Payne Street provides a broad vista of the center and new development to the south. A second east entrance to Victory Park from Olive Street is also four lanes wide, two of which are directed to a right turn onto Houston Street. The same number of lanes are provided in the opposite direction to exit the site. Access from the north is provided from the interstate and locally along Hi Line Road and North Houston Street via Harry Hines Boulevard. Continental Avenue occupies the south boundary east to west, parallel to North Lamar Street.

Victory Avenue runs north to south along the west side of the development, serving as the second major thoroughfare within the development. Olive, Museum Way, High Market and North Lamar Streets cross the site east to west between North Houston and Victory Avenue.

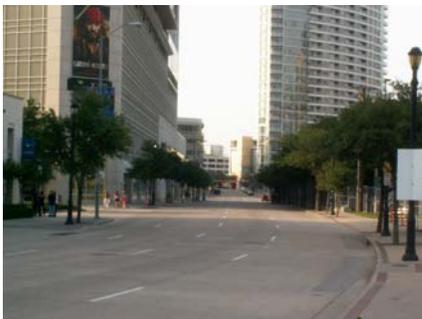
### **Traffic: Vehicles & Pedestrians**

#### **Vehicles**

Because the development's roads were designed to quickly move cars from one point to another in and out of the site, many opportunities to accommodate pedestrian needs were overlooked. While sufficient and efficient vehicle access may have been appropriate for the stadium, it has proven a bane for the development at this point in its growth. The major roadways through the site are four lane, one-way thoroughfares for the most part, even though metered parking is allowed along the street except when an arena event is held. One-way traffic includes North Lamar and Continental Avenue, which cross the south end of the site en route to and from the Interstate and Riverfront Boulevard beyond, forming the south boundary of the site. While traffic is generally light along Houston Street during the day and drivers observe posted limits, traffic along North Lamar tends to travel through the intersection with Houston Street at higher speeds, with buses commonly seen keeping up with the flow. In driving the route, one becomes aware of how easy it is to do this, but it occurs at the main pedestrian entry and gathering point for the site from the West End. While similar challenges confront pedestrians crossing McKinney Avenue at Lamar in the West End, the effect of higher speeds is more pronounced here as traffic along Lamar is not entirely visible until it reaches the intersection nor are pedestrians immediately visible to people driving cars as they approach the intersection. This is unfortunate since this intersection is the nexus of three entertainment venues, The House of Blues, Hard Rock Cafe and Dick's Last Resort, and a restaurant just beyond at the corner of Continental and Lamar.



North Lamar wasn't built to accommodate three lanes of traffic from McKinney Avenue past the White Swan and White Swan Coffee Roaster buildings. It was adapted to fit by removing a lane of parking. People walking on the sidewalk alongside the House of Blues have only a few feet to do so, putting them uncomfortably close to cars heading north.



North Houston street serves as an arterial allowing for direct access from North Lamar and Continental Avenue to Olive Street, the W Hotel and Cirque, then American Airlines Center, running along the rear of buildings fronting Victory Park Lane. The distance covered between these points can be walked as well with the sidewalk along the west side of the street being wide and landscaped. However, walking along this street leaves few opportunities other than High Market and Museum Way to access amenities on Victory Park Lane and no access to outlets along North Houston.

At some point in time the developers and City may want to consider creating two way traffic flow on North Houston and Victory Avenue. It will allow a second chance to turn into the development at North Lamar and Victory Avenue for people heading west on North Lamar as well as create a more dynamic flow along the two major arterials. With retail and metered parking along the west side of North Houston Street and development at the corner of Museum Way together with a planned streetcar running from Museum Way to Olive, this street will become a more vibrant part of the development. With two way flow on Victory Avenue, traffic will slow down to accommodate the comings and goings of people and vehicles from the many buildings along this street through reducing drivers' sense of right-of-way and increasing their accommodation of other vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians along this avenue, making it safer and thereby giving it a greater sense of shared community.

The same would be the case for North Houston Street as drivers are given more options to access their destinations within the development, thereby reducing the need to drive faster and providing opportunities to recover if they miss their destinations instead of having to take the long way around.

### **Pedestrians**

Victory Park can be a challenge for pedestrians because there is no protection at major intersections, including median islands that provide a sanctuary for those whose pace isn't up to making the crossing in one go. A more comprehensive pedestrian focus and accommodation is possible without greatly impacting traffic flow during major events and should be a part of any scheme moving forward.



An obvious traffic and pedestrian challenge is at the intersection of Olive and North Houston streets. Pedestrians have to cross eight lanes of traffic on Olive without a median for protection. Olive narrows to six lanes across North Houston at the W Hotel and Victory Plaza, but is still without a protective median. The City should take the lead on this issue and build at a minimum a landscaped median in the section from Field Street to North Houston Street, even if it means losing a lane in the process. Pedestrians have to be accommodated wherever possible in order to bring this development more in alignment with current practice and to give it a chance to become a safer community. As a collateral benefit, a

landscaped median would go far to improving this major entrance to the site and W Hotel in particular.

Victory Plaza opens out onto the street, not a crosswalk or protected plaza even though the sidewalk along Olive here is wider than most in the park and pedestrians must proceed to the intersection in order to cross to the W Hotel. Pedestrians are warned in signs not to cross Olive unless they see the light indicating it is safe to do so, meaning that there will be sufficient time to cross before the light changes. Barriers are placed along Olive perpendicular to the plaza in order to prevent pedestrians from walking or being forced into the street by people exiting the Center during an event. A more permanent placement may be appropriate, one that allows for people to access vehicles at the curb and that begins to impede on the street in order to reduce traffic speeds along this walkway.

### **Coherent Streets**

The W Hotel's vehicle entrance could have been built along North Houston Street, allowing for a pedestrian access and smaller vehicle curbside entrance along Victory Park Lane, thereby creating a coherent street along the east side of Victory Park Lane, one in compliance with building setbacks and sidewalk standards along the street. This would also have maintained all major building entrances from The Terrace to Cirque along North Houston, increasing the street's prominence while acknowledging its natural flow from the West End. By placing the W Hotel forecourt along the lane and blurring demarcations for automobiles and pedestrians, coherence is lost until the adjacent Ghost Bar entrance, the beginning of a standard building setback, sidewalk and street relationship. The W Hotel forecourt is an example of automobile primacy over pedestrians as the sidewalk all but disappears into this entrance, leaving pedestrians to fend for themselves as they approach the entrance or try to cross the entry plaza on their way to the shops from the street.

The W could also have better defined the street by creating another island aligned with the building setback and with landscaping to protect pedestrians through extending the sidewalk and then limiting valet staging to the small space immediately behind this island. Parking cars perpendicular to the W barricade blocks the sidewalk and forces pedestrians to walk around these cars. This may have been a case of not having planned sufficient space for the forecourt in the first place, thereby creating a space with limited opportunity for landscaping or resolving the many uses normally required at the entrance. Perhaps this is too harsh a criticism as this is, after all, an urban hotel, and we know of much smaller entrances at city hotels that rely on the street to stage and double park guest vehicles and taxis. The entry on the main street makes this less an urban forecourt than what we see downtown. What is provided here qualifies as neither urban, as at the Adolphus, nor Uptown, as at the recently opened Ritz Carlton on McKinney Avenue, particularly for a high-end property. With private hire vehicle staging and valet parking across the street and not in the building's parking structure, efforts to build on the west side of Victory Park Lane will have to resolve this requirement or incorporate it into any new structure.

The W Hotel and Cirque forecourts don't demarcate where the sidewalks are located, leaving it up to pedestrians to make their way across the drives. This was apparently intentional because the surface material and color are one type for each in the forecourts. As a result, in the normal course of providing valet service or waiting on someone, the vehicles block the sidewalk, putting pedestrians at risk. There is a perimeter sidewalk leading up to the front door of the Cirque and it could be argued that this is the route pedestrians should take, but it is out of the way and indirect. If this model is to be followed for future buildings, it may be prudent to study this in order to better accommodate and protect pedestrians.

## Structured Parking



An argument has been made by one of the developers against providing structured parking for retail at the southeast quadrant of this site on the basis of cost.<sup>20</sup> However, there are only 75 acres and an economic limit in building height for this development. While it may be prudent to forego this additional cost now, options for incorporating it in future will be high. Another reason to provide integral retail structured parking in lieu of open structure at this area is highlighted in a recent criticism of another city's urban apartment building efforts in which a point was made regarding parking structures' deleterious effect on urban life at the street. The area has been made less attractive by residential towers atop parking structures that offer nothing in terms of urban use or design at the street, making the block lifeless and without anything to recommend it.<sup>21</sup> It is apparent what the parking structure above the Hard Rock Café does to an overall sense of neighborhood at Continental Avenue and North Houston Street. This is the first view many people see of Victory Park as they enter the site from North Houston. While the facade along Continental faces the highway and the transition is from the West End, a warehouse district, this façade and the one along North Houston is just a standard open parking structure with a few planting screens placed over the openings. Even with the Hard Rock Café at street level the street is lifeless and this must be avoided at the heart of the retail area along Victory Park Lane. With the structure for the former Mandarin Oriental hotel in place, the façades along the streets remain those of a parking structure. There appears to be space for retail at Victory Park Lane but it will take a very inventive design to pull it off, given the structure's overhang along the lane. It must be done, though, in order to complete the urban profile that is in place along the east side of Victory Park Lane.

Going underground is a viable option, given future demand, at the parcel immediately south of the former hotel site bounded by Museum Way, Victory Avenue and High Market Way. The entire site should be built out with underground parking and retail, housing and a connector park built over it. The area underneath the park can serve as retail and visitor parking for this part of the development, given that of the existing (Mandarin Oriental) garage will be used for whatever is built atop it.

## Human Scale at the Street North Houston Street



The entrances to The Terraces condominiums and Vista apartments have been designed to engage the street with the Vista's entry stepping down from a higher elevation to create a projection from the main building and with a canopy over the doors. The Terrace has a canopy to signify entry, a more urban approach and one that is used extensively along Victory Park Lane.



Another example of this is at the northeast corner of Victory Plaza East where a small restaurant and bar called Victory Tavern-City Grille resides. Its entry is unpretentious and the owners have added a sidewalk café on one side of their restaurant which, with the canopy, brings the building more to scale, one of just a few places in the development to do so.

## Victory Park Lane



It is along Victory Park Lane that the scale where the buildings meet the street has been given the most attention and care. Intended to be the development's retail street, the storefront entrances are articulated with canopies at their entrances. In an effort to extend their businesses, a few of the restaurants have created sidewalk cafés either in front or along the sides of their buildings. It is here that one gets a sense of the developer's intent and potential of the site when it is built out.

This lane will become a small enclave of stores and restaurants that will cater primarily to those living and working here along with visitors to the site. Opportunities to develop other outlets and venues to cater to visitors will also be possible closer to the new museum and Victory Station, assuming these are developed along the lines of transit-oriented development, and at the area adjacent to the Cirque apartment tower.



### **American Airlines Center**

As a major sports venue, American Airlines Center functions well. Its design is evocative of older, established stadiums. The architects were cognizant of the building's large mass and made an effective bid to marry its facades to the street while creating an impressive grandeur through stepped colonnades, art deco towers and great arches emphasizing its entries, some with marquees further defining entry and bringing the scale down to the street. Even where marquees are not present, the building's scale at street level is not overwhelming. Rather, it meets the street by enveloping pedestrians within a smaller mass of repetitive brick, stone and glass colonnades. One doesn't have a sense that the building is quite tall nor does it loom large as it may have done from even a block away. The architects set the cornice at a fixed height for the façade, and then stepped the arched roof back away from it, further reducing the building's height adjacent to the street, where the building is only five stories tall. For this civic building the architects understood their program, how the building would serve the public and how it would be perceived as a public venue, even though the franchises are private concerns. The building provides the City a monument for which all can be proud.

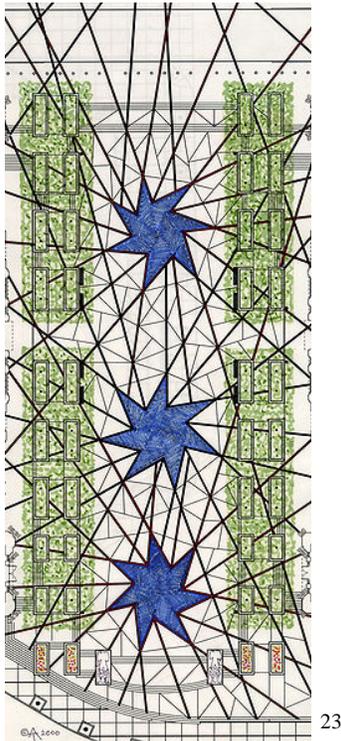
### **Public Space**



22



## AT&T Plaza



23

AT&T Plaza was designed by Athena Tacha as a part of the American Airlines Center development. Victory Plaza East and West office buildings were developed after the plaza was built. The plaza sits atop an underground parking structure extending under the adjacent buildings.

Ms. Tacha's design was inspired by the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome, Italy, designed by Michelangelo, circa 1544.<sup>24</sup> Michelangelo's premise was one central star with lines emanating from its twelve points and intersecting as they fan out to recreate the star in a more organic form within an encircling ellipse. Ms. Tacha's design incorporates three irregular shaped stars with lines extending out from each, crisscrossing throughout the plaza and beyond. The image represents a force within a stellar fabric that is energetic and interwoven. Each ray of the stars contains six to seven water jets, 45 per star for a total of 135 in all, shooting water to varied height arcs across the plaza to reinforce the arches of the Center. The whole is lit from the pavement as well, giving the water an ephemeral effect at night. The plaza was designed to be fully accessible, with the water draining back to the center of each star. With the slight slope of the plaza, the stars create an undulating effect across it.

The plaza is a public work of art, commissioned by the City of Dallas Public Art Committee. The planters were modified when the office buildings were added to either side of the plaza. Unfortunately, the fountains are not operated today. In Ms. Tacha's oeuvre it ranks high. In light of what she is capable of doing with landscaping, it is not fully representative of her array of talents, yet it is a very elegant response to what was a challenging task and her historical reference was well chosen to inform her work, setting her apart from others in this field. What became of the lions remains a mystery, but we do have tablets proclaiming the plaza as AT&T in their stead.

In spite of Ms. Tacha's elegant design, the plaza does not function well as a public space, public space being one in a sense that outside of being available to all, it generates activity by its location, plan, design and landscaping, and this activity is a function of the amenities the space offers. Victory Plaza serves American Airlines Center activities, providing a place for people to gather during an event, otherwise the space is empty most of the time. The building's designers apparently intended the space at the plaza perimeter to become a piazza-type space where people would gather and walk from one building to the other as their activities are all related, but the office building's designers cordoned off the proposed seating areas with barricades, giving them a sense of separation rather than inclusion in the plaza. There are no other seating areas anywhere on the plaza with the exception of one venue's furnishings at Victory Plaza East building. And, although the buildings' entries face the plaza, no one can be seen going in or out of them or walking across this public space.

The importance of public space at Victory Park cannot be overstated. While the development remains largely private, it houses a major public arena and is meant to be an extension of the downtown. This latter point is important in that as the downtown moves to increase its public space, so, too, must Victory Park. And it needs to happen throughout the development, providing people with much needed activity and landscaped areas, parks, water and public art close to where they reside and work, areas where they can meet, congregate, relax and play so they truly feel they are in a new urban environment.

#### **Future Transit-Oriented Development**

Under DART's D2 program, a new capacity enhancement program route through downtown, all options for light rail transit show a station at the new museum and the line continuing on along Museum Way through Victory Park to Victory Station. This will turn Museum Way into a transit way for trains only, similar to Pacific Avenue. The program lacks funding to do other than planning and engineering for the new route through downtown until at least 2030.<sup>25</sup> The new station at Museum Way offers opportunities to build for this transit development just the same in anticipation of incorporating this service into the Victory Park neighborhood.

The City of Dallas is also planning a streetcar line to run west along Museum Way to North Houston, turning north on North Houston and then left on Olive to Victory Station and the Design District across the highway.<sup>26</sup> The schedule for this service is unknown as of this writing.

The City of Dallas has incorporated new initiatives in the recently adopted Downtown Dallas 360 Plan that address N. Houston Street, setting priorities for new development around Victory Station and along N. Houston at Museum Way as well as renewed emphasis for streetcar transit and entertainment development along Lamar Street.<sup>27</sup> This is an important step in supporting what the City believes this development needs and a critical statement of priorities for the next phase of development.

### **Future Development**

Victory Park has just begun to form and will require more building in order to realize its potential as an urban community even with the number of major buildings completed in the last three years. With the addition of the Perot Museum of Nature and Science will come a renewed interest in the area at a time when the developers are rethinking their plans for Victory Park. The east side contains three blocks adjacent and east of the Cirque; the entire north end of the park, now serving as parking for the arena; and the length of the west side; all remain to be developed as well as pocket sites immediately around and adjacent to the park. With a potential for 12 million square feet of office and retail space in the area and 4,000 residential units, there will be sufficient people living and working in the area to make it not only viable but vibrant.

Victory Park will require more talent, vision, design, planning expertise and invention to make it work, given its present challenges. There are many different avenues the developers can take; the most prudent may be what has been proposed and served as a model for Las Colinas, that of a long-term master plan development, one spanning a twenty-five year period.<sup>28</sup> With ten years of development in place, fifteen years may be just right as the City's needs evolve and development to the south and west catch up. Victory Park remains a work in progress and one whose potential may ultimately be greater than what is finally delivered. It holds the promise to become more than what was initially envisioned. The answer will ultimately depend upon what the developers want it to become, a mixed-use entertainment and media center with all this entails or just another collection of urban buildings. Its developers don't have to look very far to see where the city is headed and there remain many opportunities in allowing this to develop fully before committing to a course.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> “Cousins Properties Will Manage Dallas’ Victory Park, by Steve Brown, *The Dallas Morning News*, December 2, 2010. The article notes Hillwood’s transfer of ownership in Victory Park’s buildings in April, 2009 to German real estate fund U.S. Truehand, represented by its affiliate Estein & Associates USA, Ltd. of Orlando, Florida.
- <sup>2</sup> UST XVI Victory Park, Ltd., an affiliate of Estein & Associates, Hillwood press release, January 20, 2006. The nine projects included were: *The W Hotel & Residences; The Terrace Condominiums; The Vista Apartments; The House by Starck & Yoo Condominiums; Victory Plaza 1 & 2 Retail & Office Buildings; Victory Tower Hotel, Condominiums & Office Building; One Victory Park Retail & Office Building; and The Cirque Apartments.* Work on Victory Tower was halted after the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group decided not to participate in the project..
- <sup>3</sup> Based on DCAD records, Hillwood-Hicks are not listed as the owners of this property.
- <sup>4</sup> “Victory Park,” *Development Summary, Victory Park, Hillwood*
- <sup>5</sup> *Ballparks, Paul Munsey & Cory Suppes, and MediaVentures, Inc., July, 2011.*
- <sup>6</sup> “V for Victory, Development Transforms Industrial Wasteland,” by David S. Jones and Harold D. Hunt, *Tierra Grande, Development, October, 2008, Publication No. 1877, The Real Estate Center, Mays Business School, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 77843-2115.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Texas Construction, McGraw-Hill Construction, October, 2007*
- <sup>8</sup> *Publications: TASARIM – No. 191, 2009; “Splendid as a Circus,” by Serzan Gok. TASARIM (Turkey) 191, Spring, 2009 [Cirque]; Page Southerland Page Architects*
- <sup>9</sup> *One Victory Park Property Sheet 1868, Gerald D. Hines Development, Houston, Texas*  
Note: Cousins Property Fact Sheet lists the NRSF at: 436,049.
- <sup>10</sup> “V for Victory, Development Transforms Industrial Wasteland”, by David S. Jones and Harold D. Hunt, *Tierra Grande, Development, October, 2008, Publication No. 1877, The Real Estate Center, Mays Business School, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 77843-2115.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ten Principles for Livable Communities, American Institute of Architects Communities By Design*
- <sup>12</sup> “V for Victory, Development Transforms Industrial Wasteland,” by David S. Jones and Harold D. Hunt, *Tierra Grande, Development, October, 2008, Publication No. 1877, The Real Estate Center, Mays Business School, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 77843-2115.*
- <sup>13</sup> *Dallas Area Rapid Transit photo, all rights reserved.*
- <sup>14</sup> “Dallas’ Victory Park Too Ambitious?” Cary Darling, *Fort Worth Star Telegram, April 22, 2007*
- <sup>15</sup> *City of Dallas 360 Plan, Adopted by City Council April, 2011*
- <sup>16</sup> “Cousins Properties Will Manage Dallas’ Victory Park, by Steve Brown, *The Dallas Morning News*, December 2, 2010.
- <sup>17</sup> *City of Dallas 360 Plan, Adopted by City Council April, 2011*
- <sup>18</sup> “Why Victory Park Was a Bust,” by Mitchell Schnurman, *D CEO Magazine, Jan/Feb, 2010*
- <sup>19</sup> “Status of the Downtown Dallas Transit Study (D2); [www.dart.org/about/expansion/downtowndallas.asp](http://www.dart.org/about/expansion/downtowndallas.asp)
- <sup>20</sup> “Dallas’ Victory Park Too Ambitious?”, Cary Darling, *Fort Worth Star Telegram, April 22, 2007*
- <sup>21</sup> “City Undergoes Apartment-Building Boomlet: as Recession Eases, Developers Aim for both the Boring and the Bright,” *Cityscapes, Blair Kamin, The Chicago Tribune, June 17, 2011;*  
<http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/thekyline/2011/06/city-undergoes-apartment-building-boomlet-as-recession-eases-developers-aim-for-both-the-boring-and-.html#tp>  
“With two chunky high-rises plopped onto a parking garage base, the plan is River North Redux, reprising the discredited development model that turned streets north of the Chicago River’s main branch into charmless concrete canyons.” - B. Kamin
- <sup>22</sup> “Fountains at Victory Plaza, American Airlines Center, Dallas, Texas, courtesy of drumguy8800, January 22, 2005, GNU Free Documentation License, V1.2, Free Software Foundation.
- <sup>23</sup> “Ground-plan for Athena Tacha’s Victory Plaza at the American Airlines Center, Dallas, Texas, A.T. Spear, Author License, 2000; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Airlines\\_Center](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Airlines_Center)
- <sup>24</sup> “Victory Plaza, for the American Airlines Center, Dallas, 2000-2001,” Athena Tacha, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio; [www.oberlin.edu/faculty/atacha/victoryplaza.html](http://www.oberlin.edu/faculty/atacha/victoryplaza.html)
- <sup>25</sup> *Status of the Downtown Dallas Transit Study (D2); www.dart.org/about/expansion/downtowndallas.asp*
- <sup>26</sup> “Downtown Dallas 360, A Pathway to the Future,” *Transit Route Plan, p. 42; MIG, Inc., The City of Dallas and Downtown Dallas, Inc.; adopted April 13, 2011, The City of Dallas.*

---

<sup>27</sup> “Downtown Dallas 360, A Pathway to the Future,” *Supporting Districts*, p. 33; MIG, Inc. *The City of Dallas and Downtown Dallas, Inc.*; adopted April 13, 2011, *The City of Dallas.*, as follows:

- Support transit investment by orienting future developments to the Victory DART station and the potential streetcar line that would connect to the Dallas Design District and West End Historic District.
- Activate the Houston Street frontage with restaurants and entertainment venues that could attract future streetcar riders and open up façades that currently turn their backs to Uptown.
- Focus new tenant infill near the Museum Way and Houston intersection to strengthen connections to the Perot Museum of Nature and Science.

<sup>28</sup> “Why Victory Park Was a Bust,” by Mitchell Schnurman, *D CEO Magazine*, Jan/Feb, 2010

All photographs by Mark E. Sorenson, A.I.A. unless noted.

Posted: July 29, 2011 <http://msorenson.wordpress.com/>