

A SHORT HISTORY OF AIA DALLAS URBAN DESIGN AND CIVIC INITIATIVES

The Dallas Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and its members have a strong record of active involvement on architectural and urban design issues of importance to Dallas. Issues have included relatively simple and benign matters, while others have been of great contention within the city's political landscape. There have been great successes and notable failures, and the level of AIA involvement has varied over the years.

Regardless of the issue, or the climate surrounding it, a few key words come to mind that describe many of the AIA's activities - courage, risk, challenge, community.

This history was assembled through interviews, personal recollections, and other conversations. It is by no means complete, detailed, or guaranteed 100% accurate, but it does provide an overview of past AIA's activities that should serve us all as background and encouragement as the AIA Dallas of today addresses the new challenges Dallas faces today, including the Trinity River Corridor.

the 1950s

In 1956 and 1957, one of the earliest AIA Dallas initiatives involved the architect selection and project management processes by the Dallas Independent School District. The DISD process was highly restrictive in both design and process; Arch Swank and others took the issue on directly, opening up the selection process, and removing burdensome restrictions on the design and delivery processes.

Shortly thereafter, in 1957 and 1958, Hal Box and James Pratt, two upstart Dallas architects, led the development of a Master Plan for downtown Dallas, in conjunction with the Dallas Museum of Art, Greater Dallas Planning Council, and the Texas Architecture Foundation. AIA Dallas funded a presentation of the CBD urban design plan which was widely distributed. Ultimately, this effort led to the creation of the Central Dallas Association, an effective advocate for downtown interests that still exists today.

In 1959 and 1960, Arch Swank was back, leading (as President) AIA opposition to a proposed widening of Turtle Creek Boulevard, which would have devastated the one intact piece of the Kessler vision for Dallas. Ultimately, their success saved the Turtle Creek greenbelt that we enjoy today, and our descendants will enjoy tomorrow. Unfortunately, Arch took a lot of personal hits due to this courageous, far-sighted stand, and lost a lot of clients as a result.

the 1960s

In 1960 or thereabouts, AIA Dallas went to Austin, backing an alternative view of the expansion plan for the State Capitol developed by Hal Box and James Pratt. AIA Dallas funded a slide presentation of the plan that was presented to the legislature in the old Paramount Theater.

From the late 60s, and on into the 70s, the AIA led the creation of a board of professionals, including landscape architects and planners, to advise the city on urban design issues. This group evolved into the Urban Design Advisory Group of today, and was responsible, at least in part, for the coming of Wei Ming Lu, the influential urban planner, to Dallas.

In the late 60s, ten firms, as a part of the Designs for Dallas program, created visionary designs for various parts of Dallas. One of those parts was the Trinity River, and included what was perhaps the first contemporary vision of a Town Lake. Following up on this, AIA Dallas supported the ultimately unsuccessful referendum to create a Town Lake.

the 1970s

In 1975 AIA Dallas supported the creation of the first Preservation Ordinance in Dallas as championed by Wei Ming Lu, as well as the first Historic Districts. 25 years later, AIA Dallas was a vocal proponent for the strengthening of that ordinance, as well as extending the city's highly successful Preservation Tax Incentives program.

the 1980s

In the mid-80s AIA Dallas, along with other public and private entities, provided funding for the Visions for Dallas project by James Pratt, which was recognized with a Progressive Architecture award for Urban Design.

AIA Dallas, always an advocate of mass transit, supported the unsuccessful referendum to create the Lone Star Transit Authority in the early 80s. A few years later, AIA Dallas again came out for mass transit, supporting the creation of the highly successful Dallas Area Rapid Transit system.

the 1990s to the present

More recently, AIA Dallas and its members have been influential in numerous issues in Dallas, including establishing reasonable and clear Minority Business Participation guidelines. Similar efforts have included advocating clarity and equity in consultant selection processes, as outlined in City Directive 4-5. As a result of this last effort, AIA Dallas is ably represented by Bill Dickson on the committee responsible for reviewing that directive.

The AIA Dallas Urban Design Committee has been actively working with the city, residents, and other non-profits to develop new visions for the troubled Vickery Meadows neighborhood.

In 1998, under the leadership of Mike Wells, AIA Dallas spoke out about the flawed competition process for the Arena project to Mayor Kirk, the City Council, and the press. AIA Dallas encouraged future competitions to be run on a more transparent and equitable basis, based on widely understood rules, following AIA's prescribed competition parameters. Since then, the City has been blessed with at least one competition of much higher quality - that of the Arts Magnet High School - in which AIA Dallas played a key advisory role.

For the past three years, AIA Dallas has played an ongoing and active role in the Trinity River Corridor Master Plan process, including support for the original bond program in 1998, a 1999 paper calling for several key changes to the process (all supported by the Dallas Morning News), participation in Dallas Plan workshops, and hosting of a seminar in August of 2001 that provided an in-depth multifaceted overview of all aspects of the Trinity River Corridor.

the future

AIA Dallas will remain immersed in issues involving the built form of our community. Future activities include continuing advocacy for the Trinity River Corridor to reach its full potential as an economic and recreation amenity, participation in development of a Lower White Rock Creek trail system, continued support for preservation and urban revitalization initiatives, and other issues only now appearing on the community's horizon. In addition, AIA Dallas members will serve individually as well in key leadership positions, in other organizations ranging from city councils to non-profit boards, from planning and zoning commissions to historic preservation task forces.

Courage, risk, challenge, community - these are watchwords from the past, but also for the future of AIA Dallas.