



Will Margaret Hunt Hill bridge be an icon for Dallas or little noticed?

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Some Dallas leaders hope that when the new Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge is completed late next year, it will instantly become a symbol of the city. Phillip Jones sees no reason to wait. Jones, president and CEO of the Dallas Convention and Visitors Bureau, said he has spoken with city officials about lighting up the bridge - or at least the central arch - during February's [Super Bowl](#). Workers aren't scheduled to string the cables until later that month.

"You'll have all this media in town. With all these cameras broadcasting to the rest of the country, you look for something dramatic as a symbol of the city," he said.

He thinks the bridge, designed by star architect Santiago Calatrava, could be that symbol.

"It will change the picture postcard view of Dallas looking south to north," he said. "I think, architecturally, it's just stunning."

It has been obvious since completion of the 40-story arch this summer that the bridge, which spans the Trinity River on the west side of downtown, is going to be a prominent part of the city's skyline. Could it be more?

Last year's opening of the [AT&T Performing Arts Center](#) may eventually be looked back upon as an important event in the city's history, but the Winspear Opera House hasn't become a local landmark the way Reunion Tower did from the moment of its completion in 1978.

Suzanne Stephens, deputy editor of *Architectural Record* magazine, said the necessary ingredients for iconic status include location, visibility and the uniqueness of the structure itself.

She isn't a fan of the bridge's design - "It looks like a skinny McDonald's arch," she said - but added that what the critics think usually doesn't matter.

[Lewis Mumford](#), the most influential architecture critic of the 20th century, called the [Chrysler Building](#) "uninspired" and denounced the Empire State Building as "a businessman's toy." Both, Stephens notes, have become internationally recognized symbols of New York City.

In terms of location and visibility, the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge has much to recommend it.

Set in the Trinity River basin apart from downtown, the bridge has nothing nearby to upstage it. From some venues - including the Dallas North Tollway - it can be seen from miles away, rising dramatically against the horizon.

Willis Winters, a Dallas Park and Recreation official who has catalogued Dallas architecture, believes the bridge may replace - or at least rival - Reunion Tower as an icon of the city.

He disagrees with Stephens' assessment of its architectural worth.

"Elegant' is a perfect word for it. The single arch is an utterly simple gesture, perfectly proportioned," said Winters, the park department's assistant director for planning, design and construction.

The new bridge is the first in Dallas since the Houston Street Viaduct - whose construction began 100 years ago last month - in which serious attention was paid to design.

"The two bridges reflect their eras in the history of the city," Winters said. "In 1911, Dallas was a flat prairie city and the Houston Street Viaduct reflected that. A hundred years later, Dallas is a vertical city. The Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge represents a different set of aspirations."

Using the "postcard test" - whether you could put something on a postcard and the recipient would immediately think "Dallas" - Reunion Tower only partially works, Winters notes. Its distinctive ball-on-a-stick profile plays a key but, ultimately, supporting role in identifying downtown.

"In our case, it's not one building that identifies the postcard as Dallas, it's the entire skyline," Winters said.

Winters said - and Stephens agreed - that another necessary element to becoming a symbol of the city is that a structure must evoke a particular event or era.

Dallas has had different symbols through its existence, Winters said. Each says something about the time in which it was built.

The Houston Street Viaduct, which conquered the Trinity River floods, represented the city's attempt to master its destiny. Before the viaduct was built, the city's most notable building was probably the Old Red Courthouse, which brought solidity and law to a chaotic railroad town.

Successor icons have included Dallas' first skyscraper, the Praetorian Building, which reflected the city's emergence as a business center. It was replaced in the popular imagination by the Magnolia Building, especially the winged Pegasus sign, which came to symbolize the city's affiliation with the Texas oil boom. Finally came Reunion Tower, with its post-modern glitz and flash.

But Robert V. Kemper, an urban anthropologist at Southern Methodist University, argues that a man-made object, if it is to achieve iconic status, has to reflect more than just a city's aspirations.

"It takes cultural experience, it takes history," he said. "Why is the Statue of Liberty important? It represents the nation's history of immigration."

Using that standard, he doubts that the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge has what it takes.

For one thing, hes doesn't like the arch.

"To me, it looks like it's made of PVC pipe," he said.

More important, there is no grand venue waiting on the West Dallas side.

There are hopes that the bridge will be an economic boon to Singleton Boulevard. But, at the moment, the area remains one of the city's most economically depressed neighborhoods.

"It doesn't seem to be a bridge to anything except land speculation," he said.

What all critics agree on is that an icon can't simply be willed into existence.

"Some people are trying to claim the bridge is an icon before it is even built. I don't think they can do that," Kemper said. "Critics can chime in, but a building or a bridge becomes iconic that same way a movie like [Star Wars](#) does - because the public decides it is."

And formation of public opinion usually takes time, Stephens said.

"When the [Eiffel Tower](#) went up, people thought it was so ugly there was a petition to tear it down," she said. "When the Transamerica Building was first built, people in San Francisco hated it, but it came to be identified with the city.

"New eyes come along, and after a while, people start getting attached to it."