

JOHN EAGLE
DEALERSHIPS
Dallas Houston Austin Panama City, FL



FrontRow



[Architecture](#)

Will 2012 Deliver Promised New Frontiers? The Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge

Author:

By [Peter Simek](#)

Post date:

January 4th, 2012 10:10am

The New York Times this week [takes a look at a new exhibition](#) at the Museum of the City of New York that celebrates that city's 200-year-old street grid plan. A product of big government and bold thinking, the piece remarks, the street grid serves as a role model for how we can approach the daunting problems of the 21st century with the grit and vision of another era.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the glimpses of the museum exhibition offered by the *Times* article are the photographs from the mid- to late-19th century of a number of Manhattan vistas. In one, there's a little two-story white flat-board house on 94th Street, surrounded by a fenced-in lot which looks like it could be sitting on a forlorn and forgotten piece of American prairie but for the distinctive divided boulevard, Park Avenue, that stretches along its quieted confines. Scattered about on the new streets are three- or four-story apartment buildings that look out of place and lost, though they mark a city decidedly on the march.

Dallas is a city that has also decided to march in a new direction, westward, across the brand new Margaret

Hunt Hill Bridge, which will open this March. Part sculptural “eye candy,” as former Mayor Laura Miller infamously put it, part real estate development play for West Dallas, the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge is a piece of architecture weighted with expectations and symbolic connotations. It is a symbolic link between the historically divided northern and southern parts of Dallas, a “bridging” promised by the languishing Trinity River Corridor Project. The bridge offers promise of a new vision for West Dallas, a shamefully neglected, under-invested, and impoverished corner of the city that still looks very much like the muddy no man’s land that gave birth to Bonnie and Clyde.

The bridge has also been called a boondoggle, architecturally indistinctive (there’s [an identical Calatrava-designed bridge](#) in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy), and a shameless ploy to pave over the established ethnic neighborhoods of West Dallas with an Uptown carbon copy. One only needs to look at the massive flying highways that have been constructed (in the mundane, concrete style of the High Five) just to connect cars to the spectacularly designed new bridge to get a taste of the seeming absurdity of such a lavish bridge project in land-locked Dallas.

What will the Calatrava Bridge mean for Dallas? Will its legacy mark a shift in civic thinking, leading to new models of development and forward-thinking urban practice? Or will it serve as yet another symbol of Dallas’ bloated ego, its propensity to invest in the loud and the most expensive as part of the perpetual pageantry of gregarious societal theatrics?

Despite the fanfare that will surround the opening of the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge this March, the answer to these questions will not come from the bridge’s completion, but rather from the fate of the neighborhood it promises to “open up.” And there are reasons to have hope for the future of West Dallas. Considerable brainpower, notably from the privately-funded, city hall-housed CityDesign Studio, has been invested in reimagining its landscape in a way that is sustainable, equitable, and profitable to current landowners, both large and small. Public infrastructure surrounding the new bridge is designed to be sustainable and walkable, including Dallas’ first “green street.” A handful of large landowners in West Dallas have also shown a desire to engage with the neighborhood, notably opening the doors to their vacant industrial holdings for events like temporary art exhibitions.

But it is at this point that it serves to take a second look at the qualities that gave rise to New York’s effective and humane urban planning. Yes, New York in the 19th century had three crucial benefits which we lack: no cars, geographic limitations, and a massive population expansion. But the key lesson to pull from the example of New York is that the grid plan was a product of both bold civic vision and strong city government, and to get West Dallas right, it will require both vision and power from City Hall.

Unfortunately, these are two qualities that our local government so often lacks. In fact, some would argue that the lack of vision warns against prescribing a greater leveraging of Marilla Street’s power. But the millions of dollars that have been invested in the bridge will wind up funding a colossal joke if Dallas proves unable to withstand the pressure from developers to compromise anything but a progressive vision for West Dallas. For example, if the hem and hawing over parking and design that turned the Sylvan Thirty project into a dressed-up strip center continues to define the development process in West Dallas, then it will all be a waste.

West Dallas doesn’t have to be Uptown part two, but the economic and development habits will undoubtedly trend towards the development of a compromised urban space. Preserving the distinctiveness and the equanimity of the neighborhood will require a strong planning and development backbone, the likes of which Dallas rarely — if ever — sees. New development must allow for efficient transportation solutions that truly promote walkability. Parking requirements should restrict the number of garages, forbid lots, force street congestion, suggest on-street parking, and inhibit owners from over-promising tenants spaces. Housing

developments need to be designed (and subsidized) for mixed income residency in the new neighborhood as well as a diversity of generations and ethnicities, singles and families.

West Dallas needs the structure of New York's "grid," though that "grid" should not necessarily take the form of a street plan. Rather, the grid must be a rigid model for development in the neighborhood that restricts the usual development habits. Developers will of course cry foul and claim that such restrictions will compromise the feasibility of new developments in the first place. But if we want something new, they must be ignored, just as New Yorkers ignored the landowners who objected to the gridded street plan that threatened to subdivide their estates. We have built a bridge that is a marvel of engineering strength and grace. Let's hope those qualities define West Dallas' future.



9 comments

1. Full confession: I have always been fascinated with the High Five. Yep, it is truly "mundane and concrete", but I've always enjoyed looking at it for some reason. Maybe it is the overarching (pun intended) functionality of it all- a true people mover, that has attracted me or maybe it's the visual of the beast, or maybe I'm just nuts. I'm as anxious as anyone to see if the Calatrava bridge opens up a somewhat quiet community but I just had to take a moment to voice my support for an oft-criticized piece of our civil grid. Sorry, now let's carry on with the wait-and-see.

Michael Durkin @ 8:44 pm on January 4, 2012

2. Peter – I wish you would have posted your article about Oak Cliff's trolley and this one side-by-side. You say the Oak Cliff Trolley system is a \$50 million capitulation to hipsters, but the crickets chirp as I scan for the costs of this stupid bridge and it's Pollyanna goals in this post.

The double standard is especially disappointing because you raised some good questions about the feasibility of trolleys, but the same level of scrutiny is mentioned here only in passing.

Cynical me thinks the trolley article is Wick's brush back toward the rising political fortunes of our up-and-coming friends in the OC. I guess you gotta throw the core a few bones, eh?

Potsie @ 10:37 pm on January 4, 2012

3. @Potsie: I like you're style, but there is consistency here somewhere.

Was the bridge a waste of money? That's not really the point now that the bridge is built (unlike the trolley). In fact, my point is precisely to move beyond the flapping about whether or not it was worth building the bridge and to deal with the hard work of actually trying to make the bridge be the catalyst it was envisioned to be. If the bridge wasn't there, would I argue that we need to build a bridge to help develop West Dallas? I don't know. I'd probably say the same thing I said about the streetcar: Yeah, it's a decent idea, but is it the best idea and can the money be spend on a better idea?

And for the record, I don't say that the trolley is a \$50 million capitulation to hipsters. I think the