

Who Owns Deep Ellum? Meet the Landlords Responsible for the Transformation of Dallas' Most Iconic Neighborhood



Scott Rohrman founded 42 Real Estate, one of three big property owners in Deep Ellum.

Mark Graham

Scott Rohrman's office is a perfect example of one of Deep Ellum's reconstituted old buildings — but it's not exactly in Deep Ellum. His 42 Real Estate is on the eastern edge of downtown in the building that once housed the Nash Motor dealership. The Nash logo is still visible on the old showroom floor,

and in back stands the elevator shaft that once lifted cars up to the service area. Upstairs 42's office has kept the exposed brick and hardwood floors and added floor-to-ceiling window panes to separate the offices.

"I'm a bit of a kook sometimes, but I walk by buildings and can just kind of sense [the history]," says Rohrman. "I fell in love with the architecture. There are a lot of very simple one-story buildings in Deep Ellum, but if you look closely they have little touches of architecture that make a square or rectangular building very, very fascinating."

"I'm not interested in trying to turn this into a country club or Uptown, but there's room for everybody." — Scott Rohrman

Rohrman, who spent 20 years as a commission broker before getting into development and eventually starting 42 in 2004, is a Deep Ellum interloper. He only started seriously exploring the neighborhood in 2011 and began buying property the year after that. "We kept saying no to Deep Ellum because we thought there were issues we didn't want to have to deal with," Rohrman says. "But we started researching Deep Ellum because we couldn't find what we wanted [elsewhere], and we found a lot of those issues had disappeared, like crime, access and so forth."

Five years later, 42 is one of the three big property owners in Deep Ellum. Their tenants include Twilite Lounge, Stonedeck Pizza and Pecan Lodge, as well as most of the newer developments along Main Street, like Braindead Brewing, Jade & Clover, Filament and High & Tight Barbershop. "Our investors wanted us to have a critical mass. They didn't want me to go in, spend their money and buy two properties, then a year later buy two properties, then a year later buy two properties," says Rohrman, who claims to have closed on most of his properties in one week.

Not that there was exactly a welcome party awaiting 42's arrival. Rohrman remembers going to see one particular bar owner who had been "bad mouthing" him, who in turn refused to talk. "I put my card on the bar, slid it across the bar and said, 'I just want you to always remember that I came to talk to you

face to face,”” Rohrman says. “I turned to walk out the door and when I got to the door, he goes, ‘I just think you’re an asshole.’ I turned around and said, ‘Well, at least we’re talking.’”

Rohrman admits that he doesn’t exactly fit the Deep Ellum mold. “I like to wear golf shirts and khaki pants,” he says. He admits that he doesn’t know a lot about music. “I asked [the bar owner] what he likes about Deep Ellum, and he said, ‘I can be me. I can do anything I want.’ And I said, ‘So you’re not going to let me be me?’ He thought about it for a second and realized, ‘I guess you’re right,’” says Rohrman. “I’m not interested in trying to turn this into a country club or Uptown, but there’s room for everybody.”

Still, Rohrman was very much a harbinger of change. His arrival “created a sense of urgency,” says Annino. “He started getting these buildings and fixing them up. He’d make them nice, and charge more rent, but you had better quality. Then Westdale stepped up because they’d been the lone ranger all these years.”

This may sound a lot like classic gentrification, which is anathema to a neighborhood that’s supposed to be a gritty home to artists and live music. But Annino says Deep Ellum had no choice but to adapt to the times. “There was less competition in the city [during the ’90s]. Now you have a lot of stuff in town and a lot of quality stuff, so if Deep Ellum didn’t step up it wouldn’t have made it,” he says. “Whatever Scott and Westdale did had to be done for it to even survive, because otherwise it would’ve just rotted.”

That development has had some casualties, some more alarming than others. Early last year, Lula B’s left its two-story retail space on Main Street, citing escalating rent and a lack of parking space as contributing factors. (They relocated to an even bigger space in Oak Cliff.) In the past couple months another retail shop, Elluments, and a restaurant, Luscher’s Red Hots, have suffered high-profile closures. But that’s not necessarily the sign of a bubble getting ready to burst.