

Dallas Reborn

How a city known for its glitz and glamour found its soul: by reclaiming neighborhoods in and around downtown



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The Heartbeat of the City

(Downtown, Deep Ellum and Lower Greenville) Scott Rohrman walks Main Street in Deep Ellum one afternoon in slacks and a button-down shirt. Hours later, many of the buildings he owns in the core of this once hardscrabble entertainment district will be filled with people who look quite different from him — many tattooed and bearded with tattered jeans.

The Deep Ellum cognoscenti were nervous when his company, 42 Real Estate, began buying buildings here in 2012 (29 as of this writing and 10 parking lots). Who was this outsider, and what was his vision for the neighborhood? What Rohrman brought was stability.

Deep Ellum has died and been resurrected more than once. In the late 1800s, it was among the first commercial districts for the city's black and European residents. The blues thrived here in the '20s via the guitar strings of artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly. In the '80s and '90s, it became home to the city's counter-culture, offering a place for the punk kids and others to feel comfortable. New

zoning laws, infrastructure concerns and a lack of coordinated leasing efforts zapped its energy and again put it into hibernation. It's awoken in the past three years.

Its buildings, for the most part, remain from past generations and are one of the largest group of 100+-year-old buildings in Dallas. Even in past down periods, Deep Ellum is one of the state's most easily recognizable neighborhoods.

Prior to Rohrman, the properties were split among about 25 different owners. Separate individuals owned the -parking lots and hiked prices when the neighborhood was busy, which drove the -populace away. And to attract quality tenants, Rohrman had to run off derelict tenants. He estimates his occupancy rate dipped to 30 percent after purchasing the buildings.

His strategy paid off: Deep Ellum's offerings are more diverse than they've ever been. Pecan Lodge, declared the world's second-best barbecue joint by Texas Monthly, passed on a seven-digit relocation offer from a Dallas suburb to open its brick-and-mortar spot in one of 42 Real Estate's buildings on Main Street. About a block away is the Akola Project, a nonprofit that sells jewelry made by women from Uganda and donates the proceeds back to them.

The neighborhood will also likely benefit from the city's (past-due) project to widen sidewalks on Elm Street. A similar plan transformed Lower Greenville into one of the city's premiere dining and drinking destinations. Much like Deep Ellum, Greenville endured a slump following neighborhood complaints about drunkenness and violence. The city redid its zoning laws to push out the nuisance tenants and set about widening the sidewalks and narrowing the street from four lanes to two, another example of a small effort to promote walkability. Three years later, two of the city's 10 best new restaurants as ranked by D Magazine (full disclosure: my employer) are on Greenville Avenue.

"A lot of times I'd say, because I mean it, that we're not doing real estate deals. We're community involvement," Rohrman says from the bar at Pecan Lodge, between sips of a beer at local brewery Four Corners Brewing Co., made specifically for the restaurant. "I give everybody a hug, I know most of the people in the kitchen. I know the guys in the smokehouse. It's about community. What we're trying to do is make everyone feel like their family is part of a neighborhood."

This is where Dallas is shining brightest these days, in the shadows of the lights downtown. Look past the sprawl and the chains and the malls and you'll find a city eager to redefine itself and set a new path for a future starkly different than its past.

"The city is just now getting into a -maturity, where it has a depth to these places," Ablon says. "Now, (tourists) could say, I was in Dallas and went to the Design District or XYZ neighborhood and I thought it was really special. Five years from now there will be 10 of these neighborhoods. And 50 years after that there will be 20 of these neighborhoods, and 50 years after that, there'll be New York."