

## Citesurvey

## The Texas Commerce Tower

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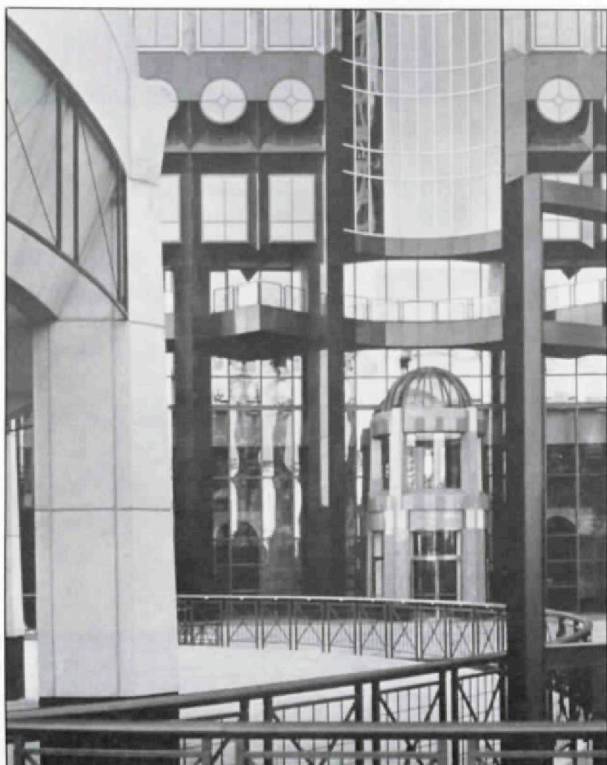
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Aperture at top

The Texas Commerce Tower at 2200 Ross Avenue in Dallas is a 55-story, 1.2 million square-foot tower designed by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill of Houston and built by the Trammell Crow Company. Begun in 1984 and officially opened in September 1987 (a few weeks after Cadillac Fairview's big, bland Momentum Place, designed by John Burgee Architects with Philip Johnson), it probably will be the last major building to go up in a Texas downtown for some time. All the better, because Texas Commerce Tower, while not entirely on target from top to bottom, is a remarkable building.

Start at the top: its sculpted glass-clad curves and its racy 74-by-27-foot keyhole. None of the classical or neo-Gothic references employed by other postmodernists here – SOM went straight for a more viscerally entertaining effect, somewhere between sci-fi fantasy (like its unsuccessful entry in the Southwest Tower Competition in 1982) and the Japanese Metabolist school of the 1960s. It is a riskier, but more successful, top than the pyramid of glass adorning the nearby LTV Centre, designed by SOM for the same clients and completed in 1984. One wonders, though: Who is supposed to look through the void at the top? And at what?

The middle stretch of tower, between the top and the six-story, mahogany-colored granite base, finished precisely and soberly in rose-gray Salamandra granite and pinkish glass, is perhaps a trifle broad and boxy in front elevation, although the side elevations are pleasingly slim. The base and mid-tower section, with their SOM-signature precision, work well in balancing the vaudeville of the roof. And they incorporate a number of references to the context of the building that make it a little less idiosyncratic looking. These include columns set at a 45-degree angle to the surface of the base, which, like the angled vertical stripe of glass rising from base to top on the front and side elevations, recall the prismatic skin of the LTV Centre; a concave glass façade element above the entrance and rondels echoing features of The Crescent, facing



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Detail of entrance

Texas Commerce Tower across the southern edge of downtown; and window proportions that harmonize with the adjacent St. Paul Tower. At ground level, there are even chunky concrete flag-pole pylons that recall those at Dallas's City Hall, at the opposite end of downtown.

Along with these flag poles, the best and most problematic features of the building are at ground level. In a 1.5-acre plaza between Ross Avenue and the tower base, topiary gardens (with what will one day be 12-foot-tall hedges) are carved by paths and seating areas, and a grass lawn slopes toward an 11-foot-high, 50-foot-long water wall. At the southwestern corner is a 17,000-square-foot domed rotunda, planned for a restaurant. The building's connections to other buildings, through skyways and underground tunnels, are dramatized by curved exterior stair ramps, to attract and stimulate foot traffic (a basement-level subway station also has been contemplated). This landscaping forms an important link in the chain of public spaces along Ross Avenue, including the sculpture garden of the Dallas Museum of Art, with its powerful fountain wall; the welcoming oak grove at

Southwest Life Insurance, dating from 1964; the slightly too-imposing sculpture garden at the LTV Centre; the 1986 Lincoln Plaza, with its grove of oaks; and the water gardens at Allied Bank Tower at Fountain Place. Together these features make Ross Avenue, which forms one edge of the emerging Dallas Arts District, the most humane downtown street in the state.

But the ground-level features of the Texas Commerce Tower, on a recent rainy Monday, with the plaza and building all but unoccupied, seemed raw and strangely proportioned, the concrete elements grossly overscaled, and the metal elements a blunt paint-can blue-green. Habitation and use should change that: it's a site with a carnival atmosphere, and needs some activity to work.

A prediction: in 10 years Texas Commerce Tower will look dated, but then so does everything a half-generation away. People used to chuckle at the excesses of the Neils Esperson Building and Philip Johnson's University of St. Thomas campus. In 20 years, however, people will point to Texas Commerce Tower and say, "That was Dallas in the good old days." ■



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Texas Commerce Tower, Dallas, 1987, Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, architects