

Zoned to Sell

Learning From Dallas

DAVID DILLON



The vagaries of Dallas zoning are summed up by Cityplace, the semidefunct colossus on Central Expressway, just north of downtown. The model un-

veiled in 1983 showed a pair of red granite towers surrounded by a hotel, shopping mall, public plazas, and 6,000 apartments and condominiums in assorted configurations. The project was to be Dallas's new "uptown downtown," and the city blessed it with planned unit development (PUD) zoning that included major height and parking variances and approval to close

Left: For Southland Corporation's Cityplace, Dallas planners rearranged the zoning rules to allow an expansive office, hotel, shopping, and housing complex on Central Expressway. The real estate bust of the late 1980s crippled the development, leaving a lone office tower (Araldo Cossutta, architect) surrounded by emptiness.

half a dozen public streets. In return, Southland Corporation agreed to build a subway station, fund extensive street and utilities improvements, provide housing for displaced residents, and even contribute \$1 million for new landing equipment at nearby Love Field.

On paper it looked like a model agreement that would encourage good design, protect the public interest, and keep a major corporation from defecting to the suburbs. "It will be the Rockefeller Center of Dallas," boasted architect Araldo Cossutta at the announcement party.

Then came the real estate bust, followed in 1987 by Southland's disastrous leveraged buyout of its own stock. The first killed new office construction, while the second forced the corporation to sell off most of Cityplace to cover the interest payments on its junk bonds. Dallas's new "uptown downtown" turned out to be one half-empty office tower, a couple of windswept plazas, a six-lane boulevard going from nowhere to nowhere, 225 housing units (Southland had demolished 600), and 100 acres of vacant lots where a shopping mall and condominiums were supposed to be.

Cityplace is a cautionary tale about the seductive power of grand designs and the folly of allowing public benefits to be deferred in anticipation of a utopia to come. An existing neighborhood was leveled even though there were no firm plans for redevelopment. New housing and public spaces were tied not to the opening of the first office tower but to later phases. Ultimately, the effect of all the zoning incentives was to increase the resale value of Southland's land.

"Nobody could conceive of something happening to Southland," said former city planning director Dennis Wilson. "There were no contingency plans at all."

Throughout the 1980s the PUD was the strategy of choice for circumventing Dallas's byzantine cumulative zoning ordinance, which included some 35 separate categories ranging from single-family residential to heavy industrial. The ordinance was a vestige of the 1960s, when in order to stem commercial flight to the suburbs the city aggressively promoted mixed development within its boundaries.

Higher or more inclusive zoning categories automatically included all uses allowed under lesser ones. Thus general retail (GR) also allowed offices, apartments, and single-family residences. Shopping center (SC) permitted 20-story office buildings and dense apartment blocks. And industrial (I-2) embraced virtually everything.

But with flexibility came chaos. In the 1960 and 1970s thousands of acres were routinely rezoned without concern for the effect on traffic and city services. The Galleria area in North Dallas was rezoned from single-family to industrial, meaning that any type and density of development was allowed. Consequently, the area ended up with ten times the amount of traffic originally projected, and the city was unable to plan for streets, sewers, and other essential services. In other places, streets and sewers were severely overbuilt in anticipation of a boom that never came. Either way, uncertainty about the ultimate disposition of a parcel of land made long-range planning a nightmare.

Historic designation protected some neighborhoods from unchecked development. Between 1973 and 1990 the city established 11 municipal historic districts, mostly residential but including the flourishing West End warehouse district downtown. Historic designation gave property owners a means of controlling inappropriate uses as well as economic incentives for renovating their buildings.

In the early 1980s special zoning districts were created for larger areas such as Oak Lawn, a mixed neighborhood similar to Houston's Montrose. Here a coalition of residents, developers, and city planners created a plan for sustaining a mix of restaurants, offices, and housing that was unique in Dallas. Existing zoning was used as the basis for future development; no upzoning was allowed without corresponding downzoning. A dozen streets were downgraded to prevent Oak Lawn from becoming merely a funnel for crosstown traffic, and mass transit was encouraged. The plan also recommended increasing the separation between office buildings and residences, putting parking underground, and landscaping the edges of all new projects.



Courtesy of the West End Association, Dallas

The West End warehouse district (above and right) in downtown Dallas was one of eight historic districts designated between 1973 and 1990, encouraging both redevelopment and preservation.



Courtesy of the West End Association, Dallas

In Deep Ellum, a gritty industrial district east of downtown, the city and property owners collaborated on an urban design plan to redevelop existing warehouses and factories into theaters, restaurants, and apartments. The goal was an urban neighborhood in which streets would be narrow, buildings relatively low, and existing businesses protected. In return for down-zoning and a height limit of 120 feet, the city provided incentives for housing and poured over \$3 million into new streets and utilities.

The adoption of both plans in 1984 demonstrated that the much-maligned city planning department could be a catalyst for responsible change at a local level. And both plans continue to have ripple effects. The Oak Lawn landscape ordinance served as the prototype for a citywide ordinance adopted several years later. Deep Ellum has become the incubator of new theater and music groups that have no home in the official downtown arts district.

But comprehensive planning has never enjoyed similar success in Dallas. It's still considered the burr under the saddle of progress. Since 1910 Dallas has commissioned six master plans and officially

adopted none. Those that were not scuttled outright were selectively implemented, with roads, utilities, and other development-enhancing elements taking precedence over housing, transportation, and the environment.

Attempts to control runaway development were consistently frustrated. In 1980, planning director Jack Schoop undertook a detailed land-use and transportation study of far North Dallas, the "golden corridor" that stretches to Richardson and Plano. He concluded that if present development trends continued, water, sewers, and fire and police protection would be hopelessly inadequate, and the area's much-touted quality of life would be only a memory. He challenged the city to take a hard look at the consequences of unchecked growth; for his pains he was branded a control-crazed planner and run out of city hall.

Eventually, however, the boom of the mid-1980s forced the city to rethink its planning policies. In 1987 an official Growth Policy Plan appeared. It was neither a plan nor a map, but rather a conceptual framework for guiding future planning and zoning decisions. It identified stable residential neighborhoods, redevelopment areas, and growth centers, and recommended that dense development be directed away from neighborhoods toward freeways and future transit stops.

It was accompanied by a sweeping revision of the city's zoning ordinance. The goal of this revision was to end cumulative zoning by reducing the number of zoning categories and winnowing the uses permitted within each. But the transition was bumpy. Homeowners lobbied for reform on the grounds that an orderly, well-planned city offered better investment opportunities than one fueled by dicey real estate deals on used-up cotton farms. Developers countered that cumulative zoning was what had made Dallas great, and that ending it would raise taxes, bankrupt them, and make Dallas unattractive to outside investors.

The new ordinance was adopted in 1989 and quickly corrected some of the worst abuses. Office towers can no longer loom over neighborhoods, and apartments can no longer be constructed on land zoned for shopping centers. Industrial land has been returned to industrial uses, period; and the range of uses within each category has been more crisply defined.

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At the same time the number of categories has ballooned to approximately 37, while rezoning cases have increased steadily. Spot zoning continues up and down Central Expressway and around proposed growth centers. NorthPark shopping center is currently embroiled in a bitter rezoning battle with neighborhood groups over proposed expansion. It will probably take ten years and another building boom to determine what difference the revised ordinance will make.

To many people, Dallas with its history of zoning and Houston with its historic hostility to zoning are fundamentally alike. Both were shaped by huge land packages assembled by freewheeling entrepreneurs who saw subdivisions and office parks instead of a vision of the city beautiful.

From the air the cities look remarkably alike, freeways looping around islands of office towers and shopping malls that have been moated with parking lots. But at street level the picture changes dramatically. Dallas has more predictability and greater visual continuity than Houston, which to some observers means only that it is more monotonous. Yet the violent juxtapositions found, for instance, along Houston's Richmond Avenue — body shops sidling up to art galleries and townhouses — are comparatively rare in Dallas. Lemmon Avenue may be a tacky strip, but its tackiness is more or less uniform and consistent.

Zoning has generally kept Dallas's neighborhoods from being infiltrated by cantinas and junkyards, while historic district designation has sparked the revitalization of the West End, something to which Houston's warehouse district still aspires. Overall, Dallas has preserved more old buildings than Houston, though from the perspective of Boston or Chicago the distinction may seem purely semantic.

Houston's proposed zoning ordinance is intended to protect neighborhoods and make long-range planning possible. These goals are similar to Dallas's. The similarities end there. "Houston-style zoning" will probably mean four or five categories instead of 37, including residential, industrial, and something called the O zone, into which all Houston's undeveloped or underdeveloped land will fall.

Buffer zones will separate residential areas from the O zones and will be tightly controlled.

And unlike Dallas, performance standards will be substituted for the typical list of categorical thou shalt nots. Restaurants and bars may still be allowed in residential areas, so long as they meet strict new criteria for signage, noise, landscaping, and other matters. This is far looser than even the revised Dallas ordinance, in which everything is spelled out.

A key issue for Houston is whether this new enthusiasm for zoning will translate into support for long-range comprehensive planning, at which Houston has even a worse record than Dallas. "The politics of this city are so messed up that we'll get an ordinance but no comprehensive plan," insists Burdette Keeland, a member of the new planning and zoning commission.

But Councilman Jim Greenwood, the political guru of the new ordinance, believes that one kind of success will generate another. "Zoning isn't going to solve all problems right away," he concedes. "For Houston to have the quality of life it wants, we'll have to plan other things, such as green space and transportation. I think the neighborhoods will stay involved for that."

The connections between Dallas's revised zoning ordinance and comprehensive planning are nearly as inscrutable. Some planners feel that the recent revisions have been largely cosmetic and will have no lasting effect on land-use patterns. "We have roughly the same thing on the ground now as before," says one zoning consultant. "Zoning follows the market rather than policy plans, so I don't refer to that document very much in my work."

But assistant city manager Jim Reid, who played a key role in transition zoning, thinks otherwise. "Under the old system there were too many things and the intensity was too great," he explains. "So we changed that. In the short term the impact may be imperceptible, but in the long run we have a better set of rules for the future."

No matter what happens to the economy, Dallas and Houston are not going the way of Seattle or San Francisco. Both live by Daniel Burnham's injunction, "Make no little plans." Both are still cowboy cities that deep down believe that sprawl is okay and nothing terrible ever happens from growth. Even after the oil bust and the real estate bust and the savings and loan debacle, when the chips are down both cities trust the wisdom of the marketplace and the intuitions of the freewheeling entrepreneur more than plans and ordinances. ■



Deep Ellum, east of downtown Dallas, represents a joint effort by urban planners and property owners to convert an industrial zone to a mixed-use commercial and residential neighborhood.