



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL BAUM Justin Ginsberg (left) and Jeff Gibbons transformed empty Deep Ellum buildings into innovative art shows.

In Deep Ellum, Dallas' Hottest Art Scene

How a developer embraced the avant-garde as part of a real-estate play.

BY PETER SIMEK | PUBLISHED IN D MAGAZINE JULY 2013

For much of the spring, the block of Main Street in Deep Ellum between Good-Latimer Expressway and North Crowds Street, the part of the neighborhood some might call the heart of Deep Ellum, sat as it has

... for much of the past few decades: mostly empty and abandoned, save for a hydroponics supply, a head shop, a tattoo parlor, and a little store selling antique bric-a-brac. And yet, on several weekends from February through May, if you drove down the 2000 block of Main Street, you might have seen Deep Ellum suddenly looking the part of the knockabout center of Dallas' avant-garde. College-age students and bearded twentysomethings, girls with thick-rimmed glasses, others clutching cans of beer or poking cigarettes into their mouths, spilled out of the normally empty storefronts. Inside, the walls and floors were adorned with a variety of curious objects.

In one space, hundreds of tiny, golf ball-size plaster houses sat on the floor in spiraling geometric patterns. In another space, walls were hung with photographs of crusted oil paint squares and bright pink rectangles draped with pink vellum. A video projector shot bright white light onto a blanched wall of a former office, white on white except for a smudge of a fingerprint on the lens that registered blue when projected. In a darkened storefront, a wall was cluttered with a quilt of projected GIFs, looping animated fragments only seconds long, with images ranging from flailing professional wrestlers and dancing Japanese girls to bawdy cartoons and colorful abstracts.

In nearly all these cases, by the next morning, the art—and the people—had vanished. The installations were part of an ephemeral series of pop-up art shows called Deep Ellum Windows. And despite what you might assume about artistic bohemia and the transgressing avant-garde, the entire thing was the

product of a shrewd real estate play.

Over the past few years, much of the real estate in Deep Ellum has been gobbled up by a developer, Scott Rohrman, who believes Deep Ellum is ready for one of its perennially promised renaissances. Rohrman and his company, Deep Ellum 42, had purchased 30 properties in the area by late last year, and he continues to add to the portfolio. The vision is what all Dallas developers seem to dream of now, something akin to the Bishop Arts District: contiguous historic storefronts populated with upscale boutiques and popular restaurants. And while the vision of local developers has evolved from the reliable land-scape, strip-center model of the 1980s, so has their strategy for stirring on profitable development.

In December 2012, the artist Justin Ginsberg was speaking to a group from TREC Associate Leadership Council, an organization that grooms young professionals in the real estate industry for leadership roles. Ginsberg is a clean-cut 31-year-old with short brown hair, a stubble beard, and a cheeky smile. Out of the studio, he cleans up well, and it isn't hard to imagine him losing the t-shirts and hoodie for a polo shirt and khakis. In other words, he is an artist who looks like the kind of guy a businessman can trust. After his talk, Ginsberg was approached by Joe Berry, a real estate broker working for Rohrman's investment team. Berry told Ginsberg that they wanted to bring artists into Deep Ellum ahead of any leasing or development to help create life in the abandoned area.

It has become something of an established economic development fact that creative people drive investment in undervalued neighborhoods. Beginning with New York's SoHo in the 1970s and continuing through London's Hoxton in the 1990s, developers' bedtime dreams read like a blur of paint-smearred studio space and white-walled condominiums. Deep Ellum 42 saw an opportunity with all its new brick-faced space. Let the artists come in, and their activity and enthusiasm will rebrand the neighborhood as hip and funky, instead of the loud, tattooed rocker vibe that flourishes a few blocks away on Elm Street.

But merely handing over the keys to someone who identifies himself as an artist won't generate compelling creative activity. Deep Ellum 42 got lucky. For the past couple of years, the Dallas art scene has evolved rapidly. Younger artists and curators, tired of the consumer orientation of the more established galleries, have begun to stage their own shows in earnest, showing local artists whose work is either noncommercial, uncommodifiable, or in progress. Spaces like the tiny, ramshackle Oliver Francis Gallery regularly show work by Dallas artists, as well as artists from New York, Berlin, and elsewhere. When Joe Berry approached Justin Ginsberg, he happened to tap someone who was tied into this activity. Ginsberg reached out to his friend Jeff Gibbons, who shows with Oliver Francis Gallery, and the two hatched an exhibition strategy.

There was no thematic coherence or organizing structure to what happened in Deep Ellum this spring, just a ring of associated artists and curators

given license to the space they hungered for. As a result, Deep Ellum flashed momentarily as a kind of creative laboratory, gathering together work from around the globe, sometimes exploring the very themes implicit in the Deep Ellum project: ephemerality, commerce, and production. Taken together, there was an oddly utopian subtext that ran through the exhibitions. For once, Dallas' ballyhooed business community and its ostracized artistic community had found common ground. Artists had space; the developers had new life in their investment properties.

But was the exchange a fair one? The free space was a gesture that showed new appreciation for an economic value associated with artistic activity, but the shows were still all funded by the artists and curators who staged them. Were artists providing an investor with a service of greater value than what they got in return, a few hours of access to an empty space? Perhaps it's too early to press the point. Dallas' business leaders are still riding the learning curve, and Ginsberg says Deep Ellum 42's willingness to let in the artists without worrying about programming content, insurance, or other practicalities was a welcome change of pace.

"I'm a bit of a space junkie, so anytime I see buildings that have been vacant for a while, I reach out to the landowners," Ginsberg says. "There's usually no call back. I've gotten laughs, been ignored, or been told flat out no. But there's definitely a growing interest that artists can deal with any scenario—dirty, clean, no electricity. I think it works really well in this circumstance. I think, for them, they gain quite a bit.

For us, we're always making, working, and thinking.”

Maybe the biggest gain for Dallas artists would be other developers taking note of the strategy.

“There are plenty of people with vacant buildings,” Ginsberg says.



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