



A PARK TO REMEMBER *From top:* The treasures of the Hall of State emerge from decades of neglect, including a mural depicting the process of photography. Craig Holcomb, executive director of the Friends of Fair Park, with the iconic Texas Star, North America's largest Ferris wheel, in the background.

Vanity Fair

Beloved, beleaguered Fair Park is ready for its reveal after an ambitious restoration. Can the storied Art Deco treasure regain its luster? | *By Mark Stuertz | Photography by Nick Prendergast* |

It's an urban set piece gilded in historic significance, a stage for sultry nudes and mythic creatures of dynamic perversion. It's a Rorschach test that teases Dallas' fetish for fashionable veneers even as it confronts it with fits of irony: Fair Park, built as a temporary exposition backdrop, is preserved in its original trim by a city not known for protecting its historic buildings. It's a national landmark whose rebirth narrative crescendos in early September with six-pack abs, big hair, and a pool.

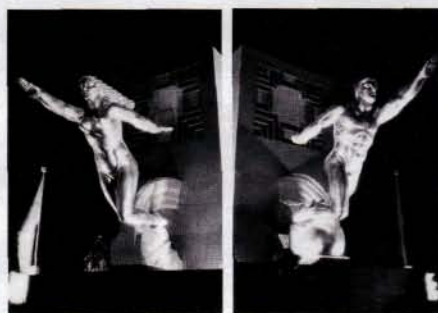
What is this place? Born over a sprawling cotton field in 1936 as the Great Depression deepened, Fair Park was unveiled for the Texas Centennial "as a new city, a great city, a city of a thousand sights and a thousand wonders" in the words of an adrenalized newsreel narrator. Against formidable odds, Dallas beat out cities such as Houston and San Antonio to host the Centennial and somehow mustered \$25 million to design and build in just nine months what was essentially a fantasy city. "We were sort of the laughing stock among these other Texas cities," says Katherine Seale, director of Preservation Dallas. "Dallas didn't even exist in 1836."

Yet city leaders defied mockery and finagled a deal before its urban competitors got their footing. Fair Park architect George L. Dahl embraced this temperament,

creating a brash contemporary metropolis with more than two-dozen art deco structures shouldering expansive walls, vivid murals and friezes rich in bold color, and massive sculpture. He called his muscular style "Texanic" and with it composed a visual account of the state's history, its artistic and industrial achievements, and most emphatically, its yearnings for a future alloyed with prosperity, pioneering enterprise and unity.

Reanimation of this saga—advancing in painful increments since it was designated a national landmark in 1986—is fully realized this month. On Sept. 11 and 12, the Esplanade Fountain will illuminate and erupt Vegas-like into its 700-foot-long pool (after lying dormant for most of the last seven decades), the butterfly house opens in Discovery Gardens, and Contralto and Tenor—two 9-foot male and female nudes, he with rippled muscles, she with big hair—return to their pedestals in front of the Hall of State after disappearing just a few years after they were installed in 1936.

Then on Sept. 14, the Fair Park DART Light Rail station opens at the original Centennial gate entrance, replete with the art deco cues that made the 1936 Centennial State Fair so notable and marked Fair Park as one of the most significant art deco collections in the United States. In addition, officials CONTINUED...



OUR FAIR LADY

Clockwise from left: The restored USA statue and Art Deco miners' mural at the Hall of State. Restoration architect Nancy Quimby. Artist David Newton with restored Tenor sculpture in progress. Historic photos of Tenor and Contralto.

...CONTINUED from the State Fair of Texas announced this spring they plan to convert the midway into Summer Place Park, a \$20 million amusement park, financed primarily through State Fair profits, with projected opening in 2012.

Yet it wasn't always this way.

Just a decade and a half ago, Fair Park was little more than a farcical symbol of Texas' never-say-die spirit. This "great city" was coming apart at the seams. Murals that once covered the porticos behind the statues in the Hall of State and the Automobile Building were hidden under layers of beige paint. Statues at the park's grand entrance were stained and caked with bird dung. The glass brick backdrop to the esplanade fountain was in ruins. The soaring spire in the Tower Building teetered toward collapse (The tower was eventually demolished and rebuilt to its original configuration). In 1995, the National Preservation Trust ranked Fair Park among the nation's 11 most endangered historic places.

After 14 years and an infusion of \$190 million, Fair Park is back. Only better, revitalized with more durable materials. When originally constructed, Fair Park was built to survive just five years. Examples: The Spirit of Centennial, a nude Venus

rising out of a cactus that was cast to symbolize the celebration 73 years ago, was made out of chicken wire, wood and plaster; the scooped form lighting elements in the Esplanade Fountain were composed of plywood and plaster. Preservation architect Nancy McCoy, who has also done restoration work on the Hall of State, the Cotton Bowl, and the Automobile and Centennial buildings, used original drawings and color slides to assist in the \$12 million fountain restoration.

Artist David Newton used photographs to extrapolate the size and contours of Contralto and Tenor for his replicas. "It's a mystery as to what the original materials were," he says. "A lot of the sculptures were plaster covered with a silver or gold leaf." Newton, who reconstituted in bronze the 14-foot Woofus sculpture, a fantasy creature depicting the genetic collision of six domesticated animals, will likewise employ bronze for these mythic nudes. "This is definitely for the long haul," he says.

Michael Jenkins, president of Dallas Summer Musicals, is bullish on the refurbished Dallas landmark. The organization just inked a 40-year lease on the Music Hall, and just completed a \$750,000 upgrade to the Music Hall

sound system. Next year marks the 70th anniversary of the popular musicals. "There have always been naysayers when it comes to Fair Park," he says. "But our audiences want to stay here."

And so, it seems, do people "who get Fair Park," says Seale of Preservation Dallas. Sadly, she says, the majority of visitors see it only as window dressing for the State Fair, held this year from Sept. 25-Oct. 18.

Challenges remain. Murals still await restoration. Budget cuts proposed to plug Dallas' \$190 million deficit pose a threat to the Esplanade Fountain: there may not be enough money to keep it lit and splashing. Neighborhoods around the park—though slowly reviving with showcase projects, such as architect Ron Wommack's award-winning PowerStation condominium project—are plagued with urban blight. This past January, the Cotton Bowl Classic bid farewell to Fair Park and the Cotton Bowl Stadium after 73 years. Yet these hindrances simply embolden the Fair Park metaphor. "It captures Dallas ethos," concludes Seale. "From the beginning Dallas has always been a can-do city, where we just overlook obstacles and figure out how to get what we want. Fair Park embodies that. And we're bringing it back." ■