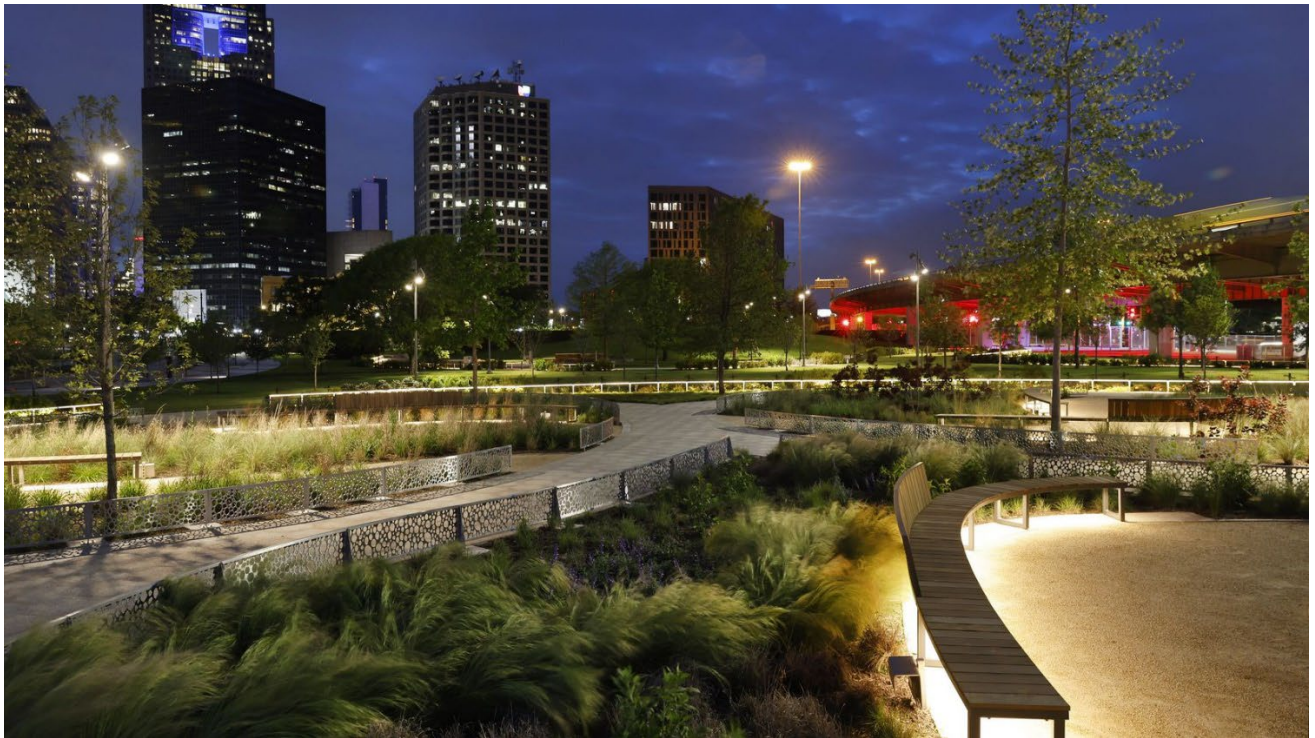


# The Dallas Morning News

ARTS ENTERTAINMENT > ARCHITECTURE

## Downtown Dallas has a glowing, \$20,1 million new park with a landmark work of sculpture

Architecture critic Mark Lamster writes about the rebirth of Carpenter Park and artist Robert Irwin's 'Portal Park Slice.'



Overhead spotlights, ones under benches and under low rails light up the newly constructed Carpenter Park in Dallas at dusk. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer )

By [Mark Lamster](#)

7:06 AM on Apr 28, 2022

It has been a difficult and imperfect project, and one that is far from complete, but downtown Dallas is gradually becoming a more hospitable and humane place. The latest sign of that progressive reinvention is the opening, on May 3, of Carpenter Park, 5.75 acres of deftly conceived and expertly realized landscape marked by an essential work of sculpture by Robert Irwin, one of America's most significant contemporary artists.

Both the park and the sculpture are transformed themselves. It would be more appropriate to say that the park has finally become a park. In 1981, when it was originally opened, it was named Carpenter Plaza, a bit of decorative junk-space cut into parts by an intersection of high-traffic roadways. Irwin's *Portal Park Piece (Slice)*, a 700-foot-long plane of Cor-Ten steel, was conceived as much to be seen from speeding cars, which passed through it, as by standing individuals.

That is no longer the case. The sculpture has been rotated 90 degrees clockwise and fully enclosed within the expanded park, cutting across it from east to west. (It has also been renamed; it is now *Portal Park Slice*.) The reorientation is a first for Irwin, who is now 94, as his "site-generated" works are conceived in response to their context, and thus cannot simply be moved. "His first instinct was to just tear it down," says Mary Margaret Jones, who led the park re-design for the New York-based landscape architects Hargreaves Jones Associates.



Portal slice sculpture on the North end of Carpenter Park in Dallas, Friday, April 15, 2022. (Brandon Wade / Special Contributor)

Irwin chose a more productive path, instead re-conceptualizing the piece, which knifes through the hilly site, a steel plane framing views of the park and the downtown skyline. Although it is shorter now, it is also more complex, with a section of leaf-like filigree apertures cut through the steel plate at its eastern edge. These abstract forms add a new dimension to the play of light and shadow that is essential to Irwin's work. According to his biographer, critic Lawrence Weschler, the exploration of "the sheer marvel of human perception" is the root of Irwin's artistic project.

*Portal Park Slice* makes for a compelling contrast with Robert Berks's mottled bronze statue of John W. Carpenter, which stands beckoning visitors into the park at the corner of Pearl and Live Oak streets. The park's namesake just might be the last man in Dallas with a cowboy hat.

The park design encourages a dialog between these two works, linking them along a meandering path of golden-hued, hexagonal tiles of Brazilian granite. “The idea is you get a variety of heights and textures,” Jones says of the foliage that lines the path. “The layering of spaces makes it look bigger, and makes it a walk of discovery.”

Among those discoveries is the view from the rectangular portal of *Portal Park Slice*. Standing within that threshold, and looking along the piece’s perpendicular axis, it practically disappears from view, becoming a sharp vertical line dividing one’s field of vision. With a step to either side, its length in elevation is dramatically revealed, a canny optical effect.

From that space, the path into the park winds on, leading past a small play area and to a central grove of flowering redbud trees from Texas, Oklahoma and Mexico, the varieties offering a range of hues from white to pink. “We were trying to recall an agricultural heritage but not be too rigid about it,” says Jones.



An aerial view looking straight down of Carpenter Park in Dallas, Friday, April 15, 2022. (Brandon Wade / Special Contributor)

Handsome benches with steel frames and slats of warm-toned ipe wood line the meandering path (they are lit from below in the evenings), as do low metal railings, cut with a woolly bubble pattern, that are designed to keep canines from the adjacent flowers. “Dogs are not friends of gardens,” says Jones.

The path terminates at a plaza at the southwestern corner of the site, where the hexagonal granite tiles turn from gold to gray-green. The signature element marking this entry to the park, at Pacific and Pearl streets, is a circular interactive fountain, with 112 jets spraying water in a knee-height, basket weave pattern (the architects call it a “bird’s nest”) such that one can navigate through the streams without getting wet. It is an usual (and no doubt, social media-friendly) experience to be surrounded by splashing water while remaining dry (so long as the wind doesn’t pick up). At the fountain’s center are five water cannons that shoot a geyser high into the air.



Small fountains surround a larger one on the south end of the newly constructed Carpenter Park. A basketball court, dog play area, interactive fountain, a children's environmental playscape, gardens and walking paths are included in the nearly 6-acre park, which opens on May 3, located below the I-345 overhead on the east end of Downtown Dallas. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer )

“It’s a beacon. You can see it as you come down the street,” says Robert Decherd, the founder of Parks for Downtown Dallas, the nonprofit foundation responsible for the park, which cost \$20.1 million. (Decherd is also chairman, president and chief executive officer of DallasNews Corporation.)

Carpenter Park is the third of four planned parks to be completed under the auspices of the foundation, following Pacific Plaza Park (2019, designed by SWA), and West End Square (2021, Field Operations). The fourth, Harwood Park, is scheduled to open in 2023, with design by Austin-based landscape architect Christine Ten Eyck. A fifth park, now known as Civic Garden (originally, Belo Garden) was opened in 2012 by a forerunner to the foundation, with design also by Hargreaves Jones.

Beyond its visual and tactile benefits, white noise from the fountain mitigates the thrumming traffic noise from Interstate 345, the elevated highway that runs over the eastern edge of the park, tracing its border with Deep Ellum.

That the park would be improved by the removal of the highway is self-evident (and there are expansion plans in place should that welcome event come to pass), but for the time being Hargreaves Jones has done a commendable job of ameliorating the road’s presence. Its squared concrete piers have been painted a light beige, offering some naturalistic relief to the underpass. In the evenings, that space is lit, with four warm tones, ranging from beige to purple, rotating in 19 minute intervals, with a one-minute transition between colors.

The park designers have also taken advantage of the shade given by the overpass in the placement of downtown’s first outdoor public basketball court. It is a long overdue addition to the city’s core, although



SOURCE: Hargreaves Jones

Staff Graphic

it would have been nice if more than a single bench was provided for players and spectators. A more inventively treated court surface (it is beige, with white lines) would also be a significant improvement.

Also sited under the highway is the park's maintenance and service pavilion, an oval structure wrapped in a randomized pattern of glossy and matte white subway tile, set vertically. The design is by the Dallas architect Dan Shipley, and its geometry and color form a sharp contrast with Irwin's arrow-straight, dark gray sculpture. (Keeping its white surface clean will be a challenge.)



A maintenance building for Carpenter Park sits under Central Expressway in Dallas, Friday, April 15, 2022. (Brandon Wade / Special Contributor)

On the park's opposite side, shade is provided by an allée of lace bark elms set along a promenade fronting Pearl Street.

“These edges are going to be so important,” says Decherd. For the moment, its southern boundary, along Pacific, is bordered by surface lots ripe for development. “They have no height restrictions, and they’re looking at the largest park downtown,” he says.

It is tempting to imagine this space in the future, with new buildings and a new population enclosing the park, and the highway that cuts across it eliminated. A park that is now a gateway would become one embedded in the civic core, a greenspace in the fabric of the city.

But for now Carpenter Park is a pleasure in and of itself, and at least one of the steel structures that slices through it is a rejuvenated civic marvel.



[Mark Lamster](#), Architecture Critic. Mark Lamster is the architectural critic of the Dallas Morning News, a professor in the architecture school at the University of Texas at Arlington, and a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. His acclaimed biography of the late architect Philip Johnson, *The Man in the Glass House*, was published in 2018 by Little, Brown.

✉ [mlamster@dallasnews.com](mailto:mlamster@dallasnews.com)   [f](#) /marklamster   [t](#) @marklamster   [i](#) @marklamster