



Dallas Arts District poised to rival Lincoln Center in art, architecture



03:09 PM CDT on Monday, April 6, 2009

By **LAWSON TAITTE / Theater Critic**

On May 14, 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower broke ground for New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, which would become the trendsetter for American arts facilities for the next half-century.

Oct. 12 will mark the grand opening of the Dallas Center for the Performing Arts, the crown jewel of the Dallas Arts District, the nation's most comprehensive planned arts development since Lincoln Center. The DCPA hasn't been shy about invoking the comparison.

Lincoln Center helped transform a large swath of Manhattan, gave the city's most revered arts groups new homes and attracted the attention of the world. Can Dallas realistically expect the same?

As places to see the arts and as architectural statements, Dallas' venues are poised to match, if not surpass, their Big Apple counterparts. Their influence on Dallas as urban environment and as an arts destination remains to be seen.

Consider the two centers as bookends bracketing an era. It's hard to imagine a city launching such an ambitious project today.

"I wouldn't presume to guess the future," says John Dayton, the Dallas Opera board's principal liaison in developing the DCPA's Winspear Opera House. "But I think it's the last I'll see built in my lifetime, because I've seen how very long it takes."

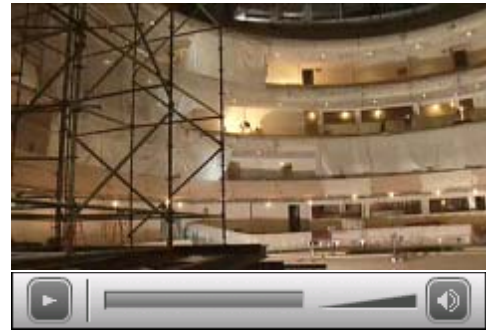
Urban renewal

Dayton puts his finger on one of the key differences between Lincoln Center and Dallas' Arts District. The enormous project that helped transform New York City's Upper West Side into the booming neighborhood it is today was a single huge effort completed in an amazingly short time.

Lincoln Center's stated original purpose was slum clearance, though many of New York's most prestigious arts organizations desperately needed more modern spaces. The organization incorporated in June 1956, and the main tenants moved into their new homes between September 1962 and September 1966.

The formerly rundown neighborhood has become the most expensive commercial real estate and residential property in New York, says Reynold Levy, Lincoln Center's president. The collective budgets of the Lincoln Center institutions are \$700 million annually, and the impact on the New York economy is \$1.4 billion.

Video



City Council members and staff get a quick tour of the Dallas Center for the Performing Arts, including the new Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House, which is due to open in October. (DMN - Video/editing: John F. Rhodes)

April 1st, 2009

[More featured video](#)

[View larger](#)

[E-mail Clip](#)

[More Video](#)

Featured Videos

[Finalists vie for title of 'Greatest Bartender in the World'](#)

[Waymond Bryant talks about the 1974 draft](#)

[Dallas Mavericks postgame report \(4/15\)](#)

Search video



In contrast, the sprawling assemblage of cultural palaces that anchors downtown Dallas' northeast corner has been growing piecemeal for more than 25 years. Carr-Lynch Associates put together a master plan for an arts district in 1977. Early in 1984, the Dallas Museum of Art opened. A couple of months later, the Dallas Theater Center started producing in its Arts District Theater, a "temporary" facility that lasted until 2006.

Impediments such as failed bond proposals delayed the district's other components. After years of controversy, the Meyerson Symphony Center opened to international acclaim in 1989. The Nasher Sculpture Center, not part of the original plan, wowed critics and the public in 2003.

"In some ways it was heartbreaking that the bond issue didn't pass in 1978, but it allowed the district to grow organically," says former Dallas City Council member Veletta Forsythe Lill.

Dallas boosters never tire of pointing out that the district's gradual growth has allowed the city to build adjoining structures by four architects who have won the profession's highest honor, the Pritzker Prize &mdash the only place in the world that can make that claim. The opening of the last two next fall will attract international attention.

In Dallas, much of the growth associated with the Arts District has already happened. The northeastern quadrant of downtown and the Uptown neighborhood across Woodall Rodgers Freeway have already changed greatly since the DMA opened 25 years ago.

Although there are no figures on economic impact, Lill expects a lot of future development between Ross Avenue, which runs alongside the DCPA, to the nearest DART rail stop, about three blocks away. Several high-rise office buildings in the immediate vicinity are in the planning stage.

The institutions

Of course, Lincoln Center and its constituent organizations &mdash including the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic and the New York City Ballet &mdash are world monuments in ways that Dallas arts institutions can only dream of becoming.

It is hard to recall the national frenzy of attention that greeted Lincoln Center at its birth. Leonard Bernstein conducted the inaugural concert in Philharmonic Hall (now Avery Fisher Hall) in prime time on network TV. The slick magazines had a field day comparing the rival interpretations of Cleopatra that launched the two opera houses: Beverly Sills became a superstar in Handel's *Julius Caesar* at New York City Opera, vanquishing the great Leontyne Price in the world premiere of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Met.

Lincoln Center owns the venues in which its 12 constituent companies perform. You can feel the energy of having so many artists and performances going on at the same time when you come anywhere near.

DCPA will operate the Winspear and the Wylie Theatre (the Dallas Theater Center's new home), but the other components are separate legal entities. Lill just became head of a new group, simply called the Dallas Arts District, intended to foster cooperation between the district's individual organizations and the public.

Photos



Tom Fox / DMN Photo Staff

The moon rises over the upper edge of the Dee and Charles Wylie Theatre, which is being clad in aluminum tubes made in Argentina. The design creates an undulating effect similar to a draped curtain.

1 2 3 4 5 8 7 8 9

[Next >](#)

[Buy this photo](#)

[View larger](#) [E-mail This](#) [More Galleries](#)

Dallas already has one of the world's finest orchestra halls in the Meyerson, the Winspear will lift the Dallas Opera's staging capabilities from primitive to state-of-the-art and, at the very least, the Wyly's uniquely versatile performance space will become a talking point in theater circles around the world. Putting them alongside three major museums could create a vibe of excitement similar to Lincoln Center's if the companies step up to the challenge — as the Dallas Symphony is already doing under its new maestro, Jaap van Zweden.

The architecture

As real estate and architectural accomplishment, Lincoln Center had mixed press. Although the architects included big names such as Eero Saarinen and Philip Johnson, the buildings looked dated as soon as they were built. The New York State Theater (home of the City Opera and Ballet) and especially Philharmonic Hall had acoustics and sightline issues and went through several remodelings.

Lincoln Center was designed as a temple of the arts, raised as if on a pedestal from street level, its spaces cut off from workaday traffic.

"It used more opulent or noble materials appropriate to the expression of traditional high culture," says Thomas Mellins, the architectural historian who is curating the exhibit celebrating Lincoln Center's 50th anniversary. "It set itself off from the surrounding city."

That elitist attitude toward culture and cultural venues no longer flies.

"There has been a change in how we as a community relate to the arts," says the DCPA's new president, Mark Nerenhausen.

The current buzzword for arts institutions is "transparency." You can see the concept embodied in the very buildings of the DCPA. The Winspear Opera House is built of glass that exposes all the areas outside the theater to public view. The Wyly Theatre's performance space is literally transparent.

As part of its 50th anniversary, Lincoln Center is going through a major redesign to make it more similar to its Dallas counterpart — replacing some travertine walls with glass, for instance.

A verdict on the Dallas architecture won't come until the buildings are up and running. When that happens, does the architectural historian think it will mark the end of an era?

"That's hard to predict," Mellins says. "Building appropriate homes for the arts has become ingrained in our collective agenda. That's unlikely to end. Whether they happen or not will depend on the economic situation. But something like this doesn't have any downside. It's always a positive contribution to the life of a city."

Lawson Taitte, who has covered Dallas theater, music and dance since 1974, watched Lincoln Center transform New York in the 1960s.