

Sunday, March 13, 1983

A CITY FROM SCRATCH

Is it Disneyland? Venice? The Canal Walk in the Urban Center at Las Colinas offers a little of both places — and much more

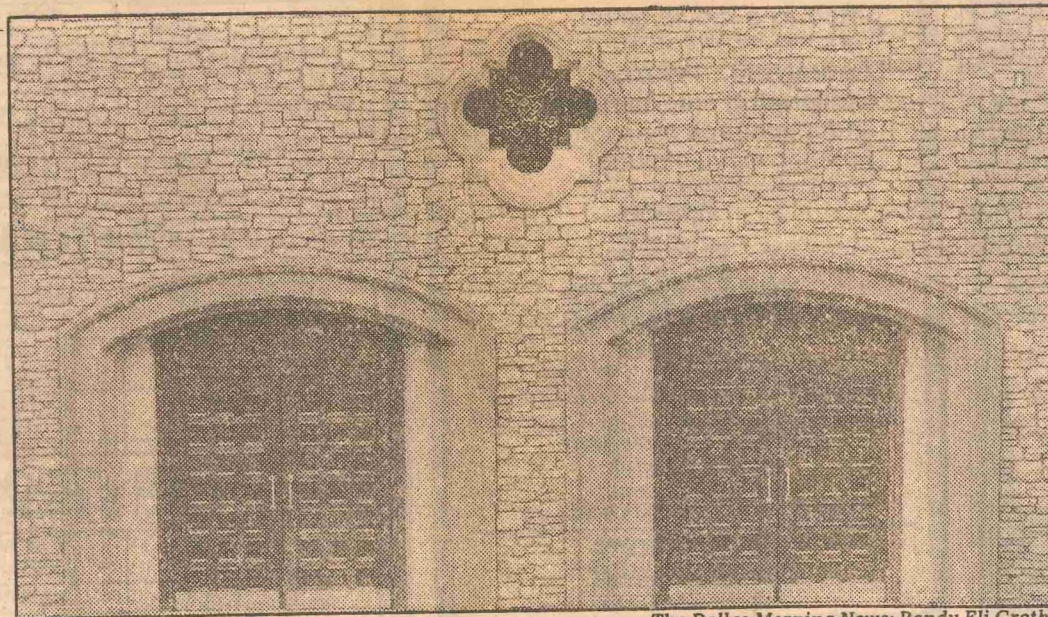
By David Dillon
Architecture Critic of The News

IRVING — All good cities contain elements of theater, but few have elements as self-consciously theatrical as the Canal Walk in the Urban Center at Las Colinas.

Developer Ben Carpenter describes his collage of bell towers, balconies and intricate cobblestone sidewalks as "a continuation of our Spanish and early Texas cattle-raising heritage." Others would argue that his juxtaposition of quasi-Mediterranean and South of the Border details with monorails and slick modern office towers is merely a corporate Disneyland, the world of Snow White and Mickey Mouse adapted for regional vice presidents.

Both are right. The Canal Walk is a mixture of shrewdness, show biz and entrepreneurial *chutzpah*. An inspired but decidedly eccentric vision of urban life, it was carried out with a singleness of purpose that no design committee could ever muster.

BEN CARPENTER owned El Ranchito de Las Colinas, on which the 960-acre Urban Center sits, and he built his new town to please himself as much as his prospective clients. Yet the project works surprisingly well, almost in direct



The Dallas Morning News: Randy Eli Grothe

Stone walls and arches add nostalgia to Las Colinas.

ARCHITECTURE

proportion to its defiance of conventional architectural and urban design wisdom. As architect Robert Venturi once said about the American Main Street, it is almost all right.

The Canal Walk is the showpiece of a 12,000-acre mixed-use development that eventually will contain 50,000 residents, 100,000 workers, and have a density identical to that of Downtown Dallas. Las Colinas is a meticulously planned community in the middle of a state that despises planning.

Its first elements, however, were not streets and buildings, but a 125-acre lake and canal — "Ben Carpenter's ditch," to quote its detractors. Carpenter began digging his ditch in 1974, in the depths of a recession, in order to solve a chronic flooding problem on the site. In the process, he also created a focal point on an otherwise sprawling, featureless stretch of Texas prairie.

THE FIRST BUILDINGS on the canal were a pair of matter-of-fact office towers, headquarters for IBM and Bozell & Jacobs, completed in 1978 by Welton Becket of Los Angeles.

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The Canal Walk in the Urban Center at Las Colinas is a world within a world.

Special to The News: Geoffrey R. Watson

Canal Walk: Disneyland, Venice and much more

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They look nothing alike, which is precisely the look that Ben Carpenter wanted.

"I wanted a real diversity of styles," he says, "not just a lot of cold, modern, commercial stuff. This isn't supposed to be Brasilia. I wanted to create a change of pace, so that when people leave their offices to come to the canal, they think they are in a different world."

The canal walk was designed to be invisible from the highway and the parking lots. We happen upon it, like Alice falling down the rabbit hole, and this surprise increases our pleasure, if not necessarily our comprehension.

The most conspicuous elements are the bell and clock towers, one faced in rustic stone and capped with green tiles, the other finished in tan stucco with chunky, vaguely Romanesque cornerstones, and capped with red tiles. Connecting them is a rusticated stone bridge with a Mexican tile roof, Irving's answer to the Ponte Vecchio.

The canal walk is an idealized small-town street, a town anywhere between San Antonio and Venice. It is a cozy setting, complete with lanterns, fountains, large planters and a series of elaborately detailed arches and facades that camouflages the large parking garages that serve adjoining office buildings.

IT'S EASY TO find fault with much of this. Constructing two towers in such radically different styles and materials is hard to justify, even with Carpenter's tacit diversity ordinance. The facades of the shops and garages, though expertly detailed, are neither authentic copies of originals ("I'm not interested in authenticity," Carpenter

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— Ben Carpenter

reportedly told his architects) nor witty and fanciful hybrids. They are merely rough approximations done in the spirit of nostalgia.

The canal bends and twists sufficiently to create a series of interesting vistas, but the pedestrian character of the walk would be enhanced if some of the buildings sat closer to the water, creating the zig-zags that are among the delights of a good street. To enhance the atmosphere, Carpenter insisted that the lobbies of several office towers along the canal be placed below street level — in the basement, as it were. Whatever this does for the Canal Walk, it bewilders visitors and defies all the logic of office building construction.

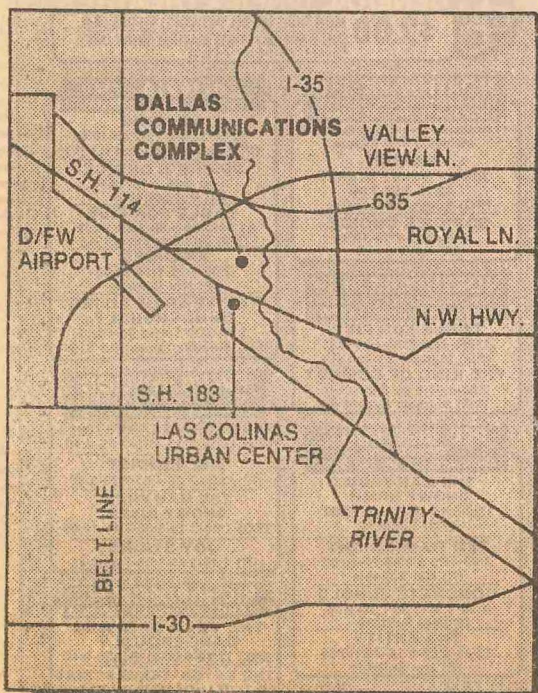
But having said all this, it must be noted that Carpenter and his architects, Sinclair Hui and Paul Terrill of HKS Architects in Dallas, have achieved many things in the Canal Walk that planners and urban designers dream about but rarely get the chance to try.

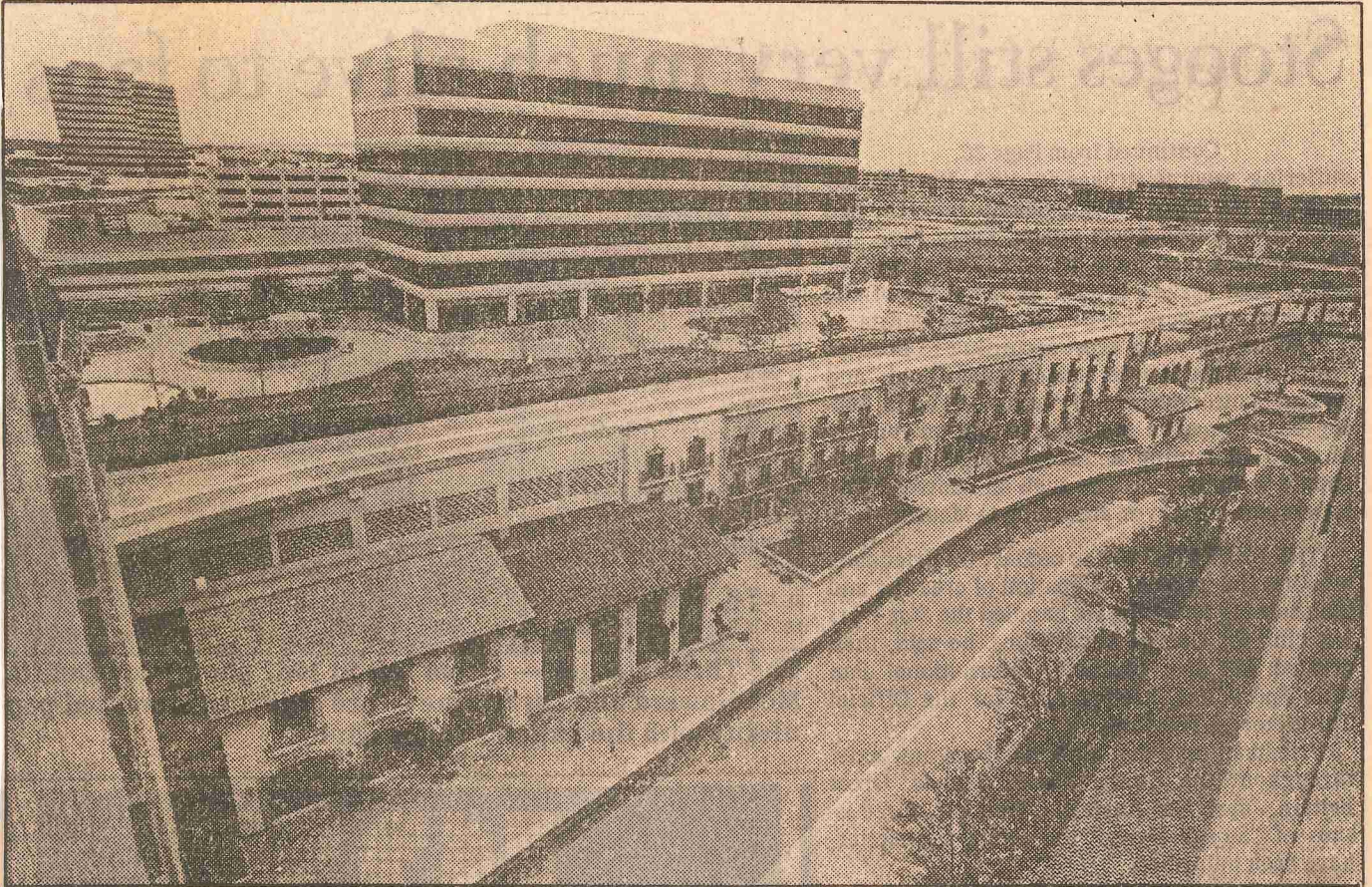
PARKING GARAGES, among the harshest and most intrusive elements in the urban landscape, have been hidden by period fronts and softened by the addition of shops and restaurants at ground level. Dallas developers have barely begun to deal with this issue downtown, by including a few shops here and there along the street. If Carpenter's solution is a bit fanciful, his basic idea is sound and commendable.

There has also been a serious attempt in the Canal Walk to fill the spaces between office buildings with something besides parking lots and vast, wind-swept plazas. The space between Becket's two towers, which is also the roof of a parking garage, has been turned into a stepped plaza with flowers, fountains and sculpture. The Canal Walk, for all its quirkiness, is an intimate, pedestrian environment in the midst of a soaring, potentially overpowering office world.

Walt Disney understood better than anyone the psychological importance of scale and proportion, and made many of the buildings in his fantasy environments only five-eighths actual size. They are toylike, and as we walk among them we feel that the world is more manageable than it really is.

CARPENTER HAS NOT fiddled the scale of





The Dallas Morning News: Randy Eli Grothe

Canal Walk overview shows combination of nostalgic and futuristic architecture at Las Colinas.

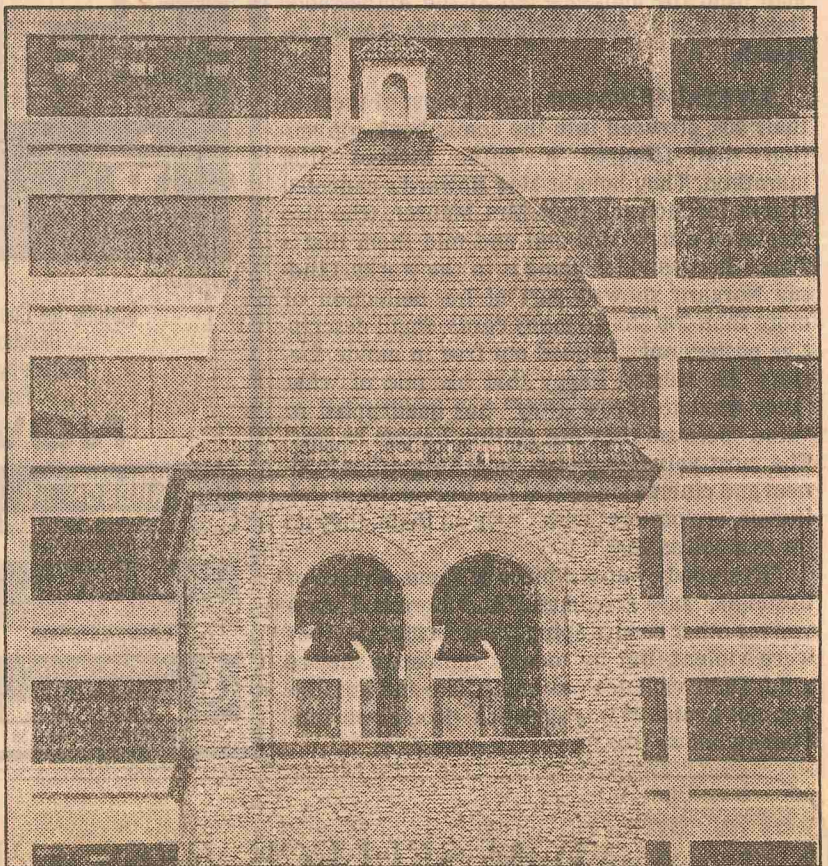
buildings along the Canal Walk, but he has created similar effects by juxtaposing ornate, 2-story buildings with smooth-skinned office towers. In a quarter-mile stretch, we experience half-a-dozen locales and periods of history.

He has also planted mature oak trees instead of scraggly adolescents, and built planters that are just the right height for sitting and sunning. Visitors and residents have the option of getting around the Urban Center on foot, by water taxi (slicked-up versions of Venice's famous Vaporettos) or, starting in 1985, by monorail.

But the spirit of the Canal Walk may best be summarized by a segment that was never constructed. At one time, Carpenter wanted to build a solitary peasant cottage into the base of its largest parking garage. It was to have a courtyard and fountains, and be surrounded by crumbling walls, like a ruin from an earlier civilization.

It's an astonishing idea: Not only was Carpenter creating a city from scratch in the middle of nowhere; he contemplated manufacturing a past for it as well. That the proposal was seriously considered underscores the fanciful, theatrical spirit in which the Canal Walk was conceived.

Carpenter, however, has a less academic point of view. "Architects want to win awards by doing something new and different," he says, "but there's nothing wrong with copying what's been done before. I didn't intend for the Canal Walk to be a great architectural achievement. It's just a change of pace, to warm things up a bit for the people in the office buildings."



The Dallas Morning News: Randy Eli Grothe

Stone bell tower is a marked contrast to modern structure in background.