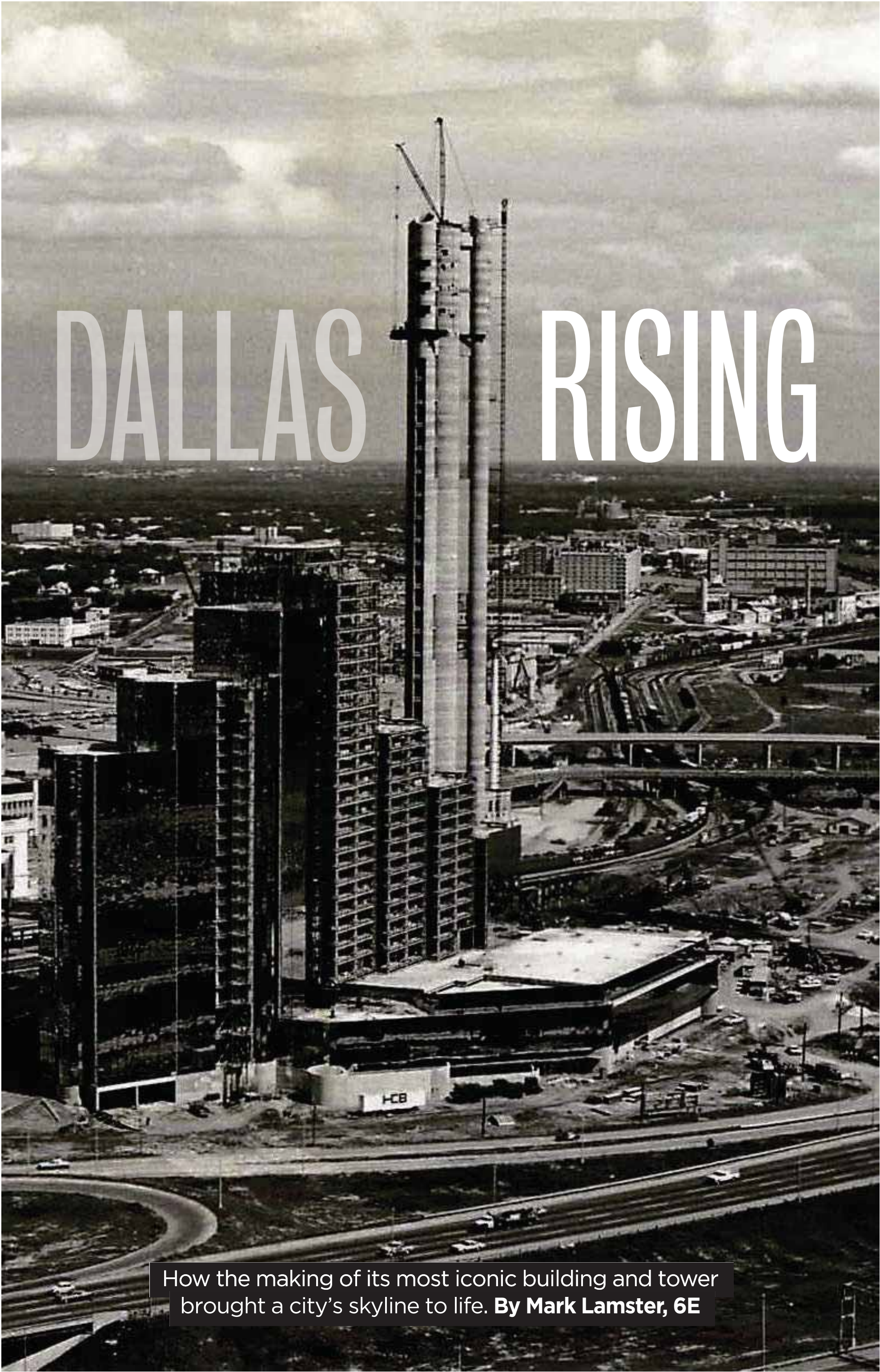


ARTS & LIFE

SECTION E SUNDAY JUNE 4, 2023



How the making of its most iconic building and tower brought a city’s skyline to life. **By Mark Lamster, 6E**

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THE MOST DALLAS CREATION EVER

The audacious rise of the Hyatt Regency and Reunion Tower made city’s skyline pop

Editor’s note: This is the fifth installment in a series of essays by architecture critic Mark Lamster that tells the history of Dallas through the buildings that define the city. They will be collected in a volume to be produced by the nonprofit publishing house Deep Vellum. Read earlier installments on Millermore Mansion, the Adolphus Hotel, NorthPark Center and Dallas City Hall at dallasnews.com/buildingsthath-madedallas.

In the spring of 1978, two iconic buildings opened in Dallas, and they could hardly have been more different. The first was City Hall, a tilted bunker in tawny concrete designed by I.M. Pei. It was followed, barely a month later, by a building that might well have been its polar opposite: the Hyatt Regency, a slick jumble of forms wrapped in gleaming reflective glass.

While it was the former that was explicitly built to represent and chart a new course for the post-assassination city, it is the latter, with its lollipop tower appendage, that has come to truly stand for Dallas, both at home and to the world at large. Reunion Tower gave a previously nondescript skyline an unmistakable identity. The complex was then and remains today an embodiment of the city as it wishes to see itself: glamorous, optimistic, rushing headlong into the future and utterly unconcerned with the past.

“To the driver on the freeway and the passenger in an airplane, the Hyatt epitomizes what Dallas is all about,” *Dallas Morning News* architecture critic David Dillon wrote in a column marking its 10th anniversary, in 1988.

An instant landmark

It was a national icon even before the ribbon was cut. On April 2, 1978, the pilot episode of a prime-time soap tracking the ups and downs of the oil-rich Ewing clan debuted nationally on CBS. There it was right at the beginning: a swooping helicopter shot of the Hyatt’s shimmering façade backed by that now indelible score: *Da da, da da, da da dadadada*. You could hardly dream up a better ad campaign.

The official opening came two weeks later, on the morning of April 15. The ceremony was fairly unremarkable — marching band, balloons, dignitaries — until that evening, when a light show and fireworks display distracted drivers, causing, according to *The News*, 13 separate traffic accidents and prompting alarmed residents to overload the city’s 911 system.

The Hyatt exemplifies one Dallas characteristic above all others: audacity. In its very conception, the project verged on the alchemical: Take some 53 acres of junk land caught between railroad tracks, highways and access roads and turn that swampy parcel into a destination drawing more than a million visitors a year.

The scale of the endeavor was prodigious in every way. The 820,000-square-foot hotel would have 1,000 rooms, 48 of them suites. That meant 3,700 pillows and, for the various dining facilities, 95,000 pieces of Oneida flatware.

The building made famous by fictional oil tycoons was built by a real one, Ray L. Hunt, scion of legendary Texas oilman H.L. Hunt. The Hunt empire encompassed far more than oil, including large swathes of Dallas property. To manage and exploit it, Ray Hunt formed Woodbine Development, named for one of his father’s earliest and most profitable East Texas oil plays. To run it, he turned to John Scovell, by any measure an unorthodox choice. A former star quarterback for Texas Tech, Scovell was an accountant with zero experience in real estate, and still in his 20s.

The unlikely location — quite literally off the city grid — drew more than a few raised eyebrows. “We had plenty of self-appointed experts that thought we were crazy,” Scovell says. “What are you doing building way down there?” But in auto-centric Dallas, choosing a location so easily accessible to the highway proved a wise strategy.

The venture was audacious but also well-subsidized by the public, with the city kicking in \$30 million from its 1975 bond package to pay for access roads and infrastructure improvements. There were other perks, as well, including land swaps and tax abatements. Depending on one’s perspective, those can be seen as an illustration of the city bureaucracy’s farsighted willingness to provide taxpayer support to spur development or the city bureaucracy’s insipid fealty to its wealthy-



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From its opening in April 1978 to present day, the Hyatt Regency and Reunion Tower have taken their places as signature elements in Dallas’ skyline. The reflective, gridded facade of the Hyatt is made up of 14 acres of foil-backed mirror glass. Inside, the hotel’s atrium rises some 200 feet and is enclosed by floors of open balconies and terminated by enormous angled skylights.

downtown’s Sheraton Dallas Hotel, a 28-story, 600-room tower that was a part of the \$25 million Southland Center. It opened in 1959 and was distinguished by its pastel-colored exterior panels (painted over in a dull gray in 1997, when the building changed hands).

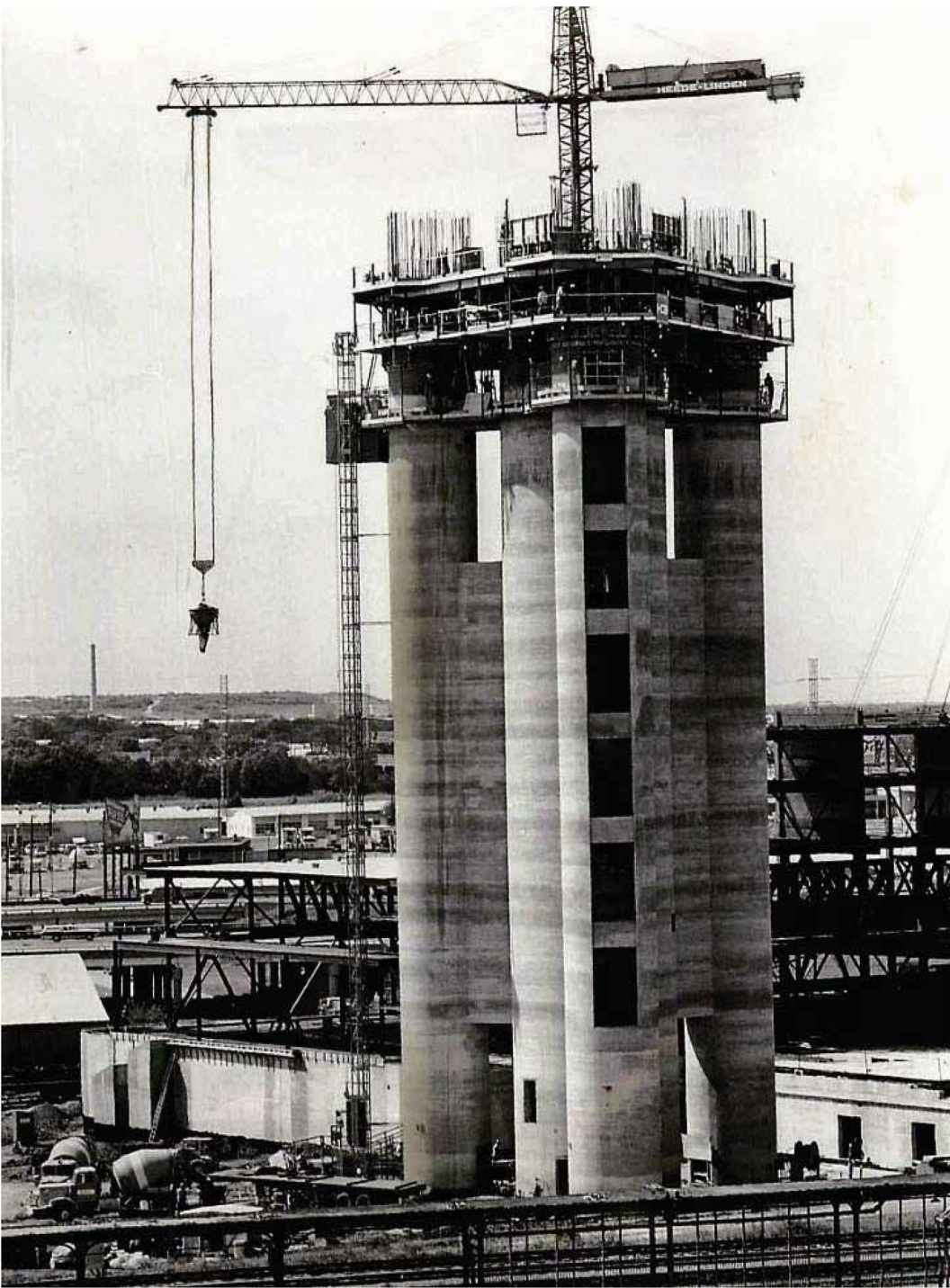
Welton Becket was not so much a him as a them. Although the firm retained his name, Becket had died in 1969, years before the Dallas Hyatt project was even on the boards. Though the firm name suggested he was still present, and that the firm was run like an old-fashioned architectural atelier, it was in fact one of the largest practices in the world, and a model of corporate organization.

When he was still alive, Becket developed a philosophy he called “total design,” in which the firm would control every aspect of a project, from conception down to the smallest detail of furnishing. To carry out this expansive program, the firm built a complex bureaucratic org chart, with a host of departments and layers of presidents and vice presidents. Corporate clients, naturally, felt comfortable with a firm that had a structure that mirrored their own.

That philosophy made assignment of design authorship a virtual impossibility. “No one can say, ‘I built this building,’” Albert Peterson, one of the firm’s project directors, told *The Dallas Morning News* while the hotel was still under construction. “It was a design team.”

In search of distinction

The iconic profile of the complex was something of an accident. The Hyatt brand stipulated a



File Photo/Staff

In this file photo, Reunion Tower takes shape as construction workers push toward what would be its completed height — 560 feet. Composed of a central mechanical shaft with three additional elevator shafts triangulated around it, the structure would feature a revolving restaurant on top and an observation deck.



Mark Lamster/Staff

rotating bar and restaurant at the top of the hotel, and this was typically perched in ungainly fashion on the building roof. For Woodbine, that was unacceptable. “We just didn’t like the looks of a hotel with this bonnet on top of it,” Scovell says. “The original thought wasn’t that, OK, this is going to be a landmark of the Dallas skyline. It was like, ‘Hey, this is just a good idea to do the restaurant on the side because of all these other logistical components.’”

Welton Becket’s solution was an independent tower with an observation deck at the top. What exactly would that look like? In search of inspiration, the Woodbine team scouted the Space Needle in Seattle, the CN Tower in Toronto and the Tower of the Americas in San Antonio — all spiky forms with disc-shaped revolving decks. The design went through various permutations in search of distinction, including an iteration shaped like the Washington Monument and a kitschy version with a giant Texas longhorn on top. (Imagine Oak Cliff’s Charco Broiler bull, but on a civic scale.)

The final, lollipop form came when Welton Becket architect Victor Chu found a book on the work of Buckminster Fuller, and put one of his geodesic domes around a ball-shaped restaurant and cocktail lounge, linked internally by a spiral staircase. A lighting system, designed by the New York firm Fischbach and Moore, placed bulbs at the hubs of the dome’s metal struts. Instant skyline.

The tower itself is composed of a central mechanical shaft with three additional elevator shafts triangulated around it. Before it was built, a 100-foot-tall model was tested on the ranch of contractor Henry Beck. Its “slip-form” construction system was borrowed from West Texas grain silos, with concrete poured into a box that is progressively hoisted as the structure rises. When completed, it was 560 feet tall, with an admission price of \$150. (Today, an adult ticket starts at \$19.)

Unfulfilled promises

The design evolution of the project was not restricted to Reunion Tower. Early plans for the de-

velopment showed a pinwheel-shaped hotel set in a lushly planted landscape, with Reunion Tower placed at the head of a long reflecting pool and a circular arena at its foot. Six office buildings, shaped like bars with sliced ends, were scattered throughout the site.

The hyper-modern complex was also to incorporate the historic Union Station of 1916 (since renamed for Eddie Bernice Johnson), which had been shuttered since 1969 and purchased by the city in 1973. Initial plans called for a promenade lined with shops to extend from the station’s second floor and bridge the tracks to the Reunion complex. That plan was eventually scrapped for the tunnel that now links the station to the hotel.

Reunion Arena came and went, constructed in 1980 and then demolished in 2009, replaced by the American Airlines Center in Victory Park. The office buildings planned for the site also disappeared, as did the reflecting pool and the park that was to surround it.

The failure to build out the site became a point of contention in the late 1990s, when additional subsidies from the city were sought to support a \$50 million expansion of the hotel. Journalist-turned-politician Laura Miller, first in articles for the *Dallas Observer* and then as a member of the City Council, assailed Ray Hunt for not fulfilling the obligations of the earlier deal and argued against the new giveaways. “There are many, many questions about whether the taxpayers should continue to subsidize his development,” she told *The News*.

Hunt responded in a rare 1998 appearance before the City Council. “For us to be criticized for not entering the boom and bust of the 1980s is unfair,” he said. “Reunion has been a success for both the public and private sectors.”

As light as a balloon

Like everything else with the project, the design of the hotel changed significantly over time. Plans initially called for it to be sheathed in stucco. Another iteration had balconies. The original pinwheel arrangement, with three arms projecting

from a triangular central atrium, evolved into a more linear plan, a pinched Y-shape with the atrium set between its squared-off short arms. From the outside, it formed a skyline unto itself, a glass-sheathed Oz, its seven staggered vertical volumes arranged in a shallow wedge, as if a series of skyscrapers were conjoined at birth. A principal of modernism is the idea that a building should express its structure, but the Hyatt flouts that imperative, offering just reflection, a gossamer coat that reveals nothing but itself, and barely even that.

And oh, that mirror glass. There is 14 acres of it, foil-backed, 92% reflective, and set in a dizzying grid of squares that envelopes the building. Depending on the time of day, weather conditions and angle of approach, it assumes a tonal range that extends from dark mercury to an almost imperceptibly pale Carolina blue.

At the time, architectural mirror glass was still a relatively new phenomenon. Its first significant application as a façade cladding had come in the late 1950s, when architect Kevin Roche, then working in the office of Eero Saarinen, was inspired by a pair of reflective sunglasses on a magazine cover, and used the material on the firm’s Bell Laboratories project in New Jersey. (That building has taken a recent star turn as the setting of the dystopian drama *Severance*.)

Almost immediately, it took off as the go-to material for late-modern commercial building. Inexpensive, sleek and opaque, it provided an ideal visual language for a corporate America that prized economy, conformity and the security of anonymity.

No city adopted the material with more vigor and variety than Dallas. From the blue-green of Fountain Place to the icy blue of the Bank of America tower to the lustrous gold of the Campbell Centre, it defines the city’s shimmery architecture. It is who we are: superficial, status-driven and self-obsessed but also bright, stylish and modern.

Nowhere is mirror glass deployed with more effectiveness than at the Hyatt, where it turns the building into a show of architectural magic. The material’s very immateriality disguises the building’s mass, somehow making the immense, mountainous structure appear as light as a balloon, an extraordinary feat. The endless grid also eliminates any sense of architectural scale, an effect amplified by the lack of neighboring context that might provide visual clues to its true size. How tall is the building? Ten stories? Twenty? Fifty? It is impossible to tell. (The answer: 30.)

An exhilarating journey

What is inscrutable from without becomes legible within, and especially from the soaring atrium, which rises some 200 feet, enclosed by floors of open balconies and terminated by enormous angled skylights. The materials are shiny and opulent: chrome, copper, mirror and a patterned marble floor. It is a pleasingly bright space, with a sense of nature amplified by what was originally a lush program of landscaping that included tall trees and plantings at plaza level and ivy hanging from the enclosing balcony ledges.

The towering space is best experienced, at least for those without vertigo, in a trip up one of its three glassed-in elevators, an exhilarating journey that rises to the full height of the atrium, and then explodes out above it into the sky, with dramatic views of Reunion Tower and the city beyond. (Doors open onto the enclosed upper hotel floors, on the opposite side.)

“Our goal was to achieve an atrium that hadn’t been done before,” said Peterson, the Welton Becket architect. “There is more natural light in this atrium than any of the others.” In its opacity, the building contrasts sharply with Portman’s atrium hotels, which tend to be inward looking with spaces complex to the point of disorientation.

Just a month after the Hyatt opened, Dallas hosted an awards ceremony for the American Institute of Architects. Among the honorees: John Portman. When asked for his opinion on the hotel’s design, he coyly noted how widely his atrium model had been copied: “If one is good, I feel good about it, and if it’s a caricature, then I feel bad. Don’t ask me how I feel about specific projects because I won’t answer.”

Portman’s opinions notwithstanding, Dallasites can be pleased with their iteration, however derivative it might be. And perhaps that makes it even *more* Dallas; the city does, after all, have the provincial’s penchant for appropriating what it perceives to be ascendant in an effort to become “world class.”

In the years since, there have been a series of alterations, most prominently the 1998 expansion, which included the addition of some 200 rooms, a garage and the integration of Reunion Tower into the hotel base. The tower’s geodesic dome now has a fancy animated lighting system (I prefer the old version), and its restaurant and observation deck have been redesigned in recent years, the latter being saddled with a corny name, the “Geo-Deck.” None of these changes has significantly degraded the integrity of the whole.

The Hyatt remains a shimmery linchpin of the Dallas skyline, an architectural gateway to downtown. Its futurism, however, is now a thing of the past, a reminder of an optimistic moment when the city was blossoming into what it is today. It is impossible to imagine the city — Big D — without it.

Mark Lamster is the architecture critic of *The Dallas Morning News* and a visiting faculty member of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where he is also a Loeb Fellow. His 2018 biography of the late architect Philip Johnson, *The Man in the Glass House*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography.

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