



An aerial view of the planned renovation of Thanks-Giving Square envisions the square as a pedestrian-oriented downtown center.

Artist's renderings/CallisonRTKL

LET US BE GRATEFUL



Plan would bring new life to a bigger, more inviting park at downtown’s Thanks-Giving Square



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It is accepted wisdom in the field of landscape architecture that the urban park is a space of healing, but few such spaces embrace that convention quite as literally as Thanks-Giving Square. From the outset — it opened in 1977, but was envisioned long before — it was to be a space of quirky altruism, dedicated to the spirit of the Thanksgiving holiday.

That it is weird is part of its charm, and in this city of conformist thinking, for that reason should be prized all the more. If you teach geometry, it’s a dream. In point of fact, it is not a square at all, but an isosceles triangle, and it is defined by a cylinder, a corkscrewing white-washed chapel, which is modeled — and this is truly unlikely — on a thousand-year-old Iraqi minaret.

The park realized its promise of civic communion in August 2016, when it was thronged by a massive and diverse crowd for a candlelight vigil in the wake of the ambush killing of five Dallas police officers. For a moment, it seemed like the city might be at a turning point. “I’m hoping we’re on the precipice of change,” Bishop T.D. Jakes told the assembled.

Alas, that turned out to be false hope, both for the city (and country) and for the perennially underperforming park itself, which has been immune to any number of well-intentioned attempts to activate it over the last four decades.

Even as the downtown population has soared around it, the square has seemed impervious to human habitation, but in a persistent battle with our four-legged friends, who use its lawns for relief from hydration.

A new plan, put forward by the Thanks-Giving Square Foundation and designed by the architects CallisonRTKL (who have their office across the street from the park, in the Republic Center), might just be the cure the square has long needed.

The problems at Thanks-Giving Square stem from the flawed conception of its architect, Philip Johnson. He seemed like a logical choice to design it, when he was commissioned: A professional star fresh off the success of his Fort Worth Water Gardens and having already established himself in downtown Dallas with his concrete cube memorial to John F. Kennedy.

Johnson’s initial designs were, like that memorial, too square.

“The first chapel designs he showed us were awful,” recalled Peter Stewart, the philanthropist who conceived the park. Inspired by a conversation with a Benedictine monk, Stewart suggested an ascending spiral, on the theory that gratitude is a gift that “always returns to the giver on a higher plane.”

Opinions on the design of the finished chapel varied. The critic of the *Boston Globe* scoffed that it looked like it was designed to “commemorate Liberace’s ascension into heaven.”

But the real issue wasn’t so much the chapel, but the square itself, which Johnson enclosed behind heavy concrete walls and defensive bronze gates. “A great place needs to be hard to get to,” Johnson said.

It was one thing to be a secluded oasis, and another to be a hermetic fortress.

“Thanks-Giving Square’s high walls back people off instead of inviting them in, the way a roadblock diverts cars,” future *Dallas Morning News* critic David Dillon wrote in 1980.

The new plan would solve this problem with a bit of quite literal outside of the box — or rather, outside of the triangle — thinking. The idea is to expand the footprint of the park beyond its concrete walls, reclaiming the perimeter space surrounding the square and transforming it into greenspace and promenades. On Pacific Avenue, the park would claw back a drop-off lane and a median strip, and on Ervay Street an underutilized lane that sits outside the flow of traffic.

Bringing new life to the spaces directly abutting the square would reduce the barrier effect of Johnson’s walls. The result would be a park within a park, nesting dolls style, that would maintain Johnson’s vision of a calm oasis within while creating a more active park experience in the surrounding area.

A connection between the two would be made along Ervay Street, where the wall over Johnson’s gently cascading waterfall would be opened up to create a kind of viewing platform or loggia, looking over the legacy spaces within.

“We’re inviting people to explore their curiosity about the square,” says Kyle Ogden, the president and chief executive officer of the Thanks-Giving Square Foundation. “Outside the walls we have the liberty to be joyful. We want to be inviting and connected. ... Inside, we have a monument, a destination.”

Neither a final price tag nor timeline has been set, but Ogden estimates a cost in the \$12 million-\$18 million range over a five-year horizon.

Aside from some more friendly native plantings, the geometry of Johnson’s park would be largely retained. The most significant alteration would be the rebuilding of the elevated catwalk leading to the chapel. As it is, that ramped passage is not compatible with the Americans With Disabilities Act. The new design would reduce the slope, but the steel-plate side-walls would be replaced with glass, creating a more vertiginous experience. This is in keeping with Johnson’s intention of creating what he called “safe danger”; that is, experiences that give the frisson of peril while actually remaining harmless.

A glassed-in elevator would link the depressed level of the park with the elevated access point of the ramp. “We want the mobility-challenged visitor to have the same experience as all the rest of the visitors,” says Michael Friebele, a senior associate with CallisonRTKL.

The plan would place a new triangular pavilion at the western tip of the park, with space for a cafe and outdoor seating — a much needed addition. It would also provide a link to the tunnel system below the park, where additional facilities (kitchen, meeting space) for the park could be added.

The design reaches out across the DART tracks and Bryan Street, remaking the barren, corporate no-man’s land in front of Energy Plaza into a genuine urban space, with a pergola structure providing shade for what would become a planted outdoor room. The DART stop at Akard would likewise be re-branded as the Thanks-Giving Square-Akard Street stop.

Ogden’s goal is to make the square the centerpiece for an entire Thanks-Giving District in the heart of downtown, linking the Arts District, the West End, Uptown and the central business district.

That is ambitious, perhaps unnecessarily so. The remaking of the square alone would be a significant step in downtown’s continuing transformation into a humane and pedestrian-oriented place. For that, we could all give thanks.

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Above: A 1976 photo of the construction of Thanks-Giving Square. The urban park was designed by Philip Johnson, who also designed the John F. Kennedy Memorial and the Fort Worth Water Gardens.

The Dallas Morning News Collection at the Dallas Public Library

Below: A pavilion is proposed for the western tip of Thanks-Giving Square. The pavilion would house a small cafe.

