



SQUARE DANCE

**A NEW CENTRAL PLAZA
IN FORT WORTH REVEALS
THE ADVANTAGES OF—
AND ANXIETIES ABOUT—
PRIVATELY DEVELOPED
PUBLIC PLACES.**

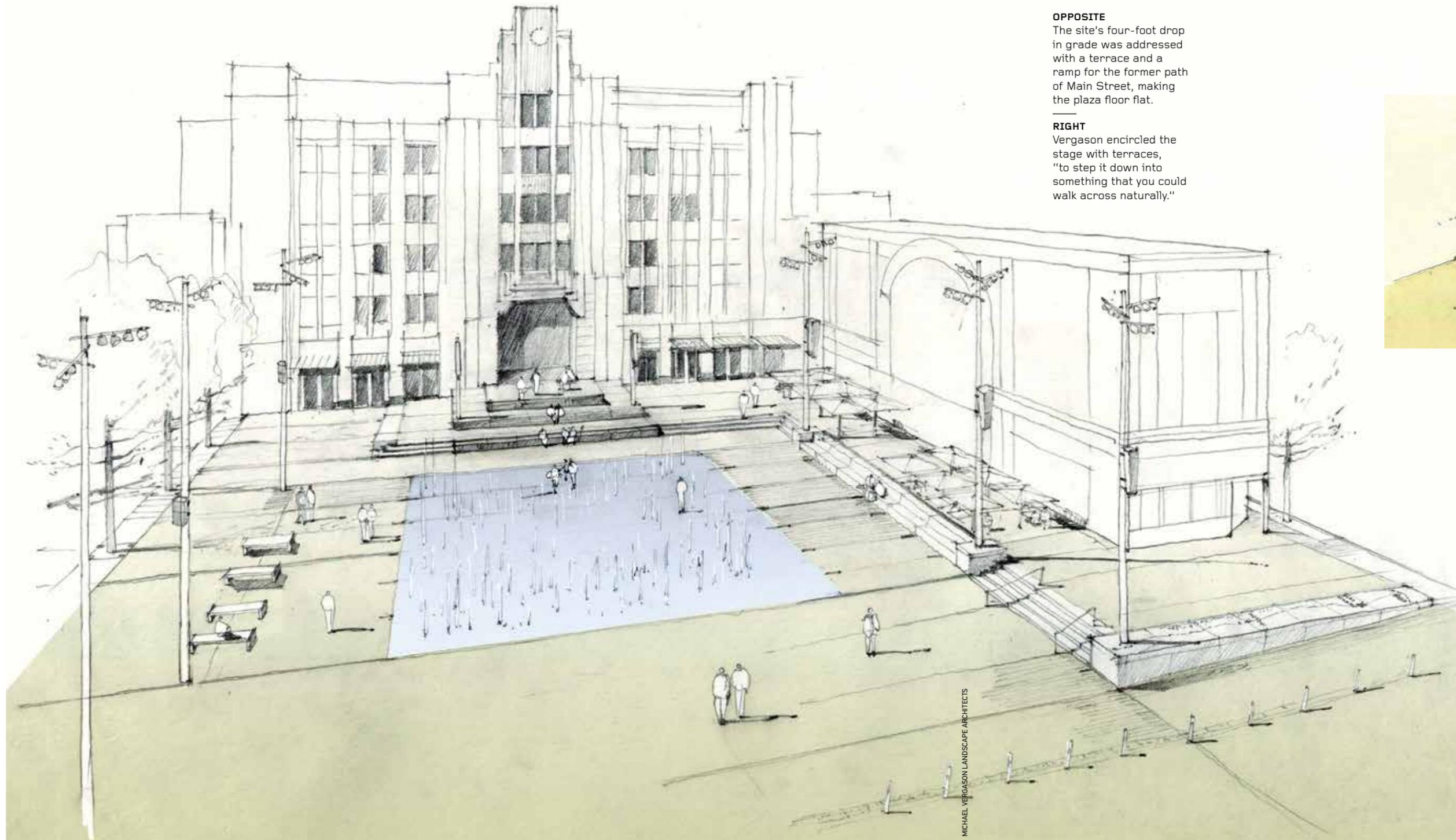
BY JONATHAN LERNER

Start with the bones. Fort Worth has such good ones.

The downtown grid, established in the mid-19th century, has blocks a modest 200 feet square. So pedestrian scale has been in place from the start. The young Texas city prospered as a meatpacking hub from the 1870s when the railroad arrived, and later as a center of the oil industry, through to the Great Depression. The buildings that went up in those boom decades tended to be unrestrained in both architectural expression and stylistic range. Classical, Romanesque, Renaissance, Mission, Moderne—there was patterned brickwork, carved granite, molded terra-cotta, the odd Gothic turret and mansard roof and deco spire. Exuberance and ornament were the norm.

Fort Worth's downtown flourished into World War II, but suffered the postwar hollowing out typical of American cities. Still, a critical mass of the early buildings remains standing. A great many have been renovated, and infill construction

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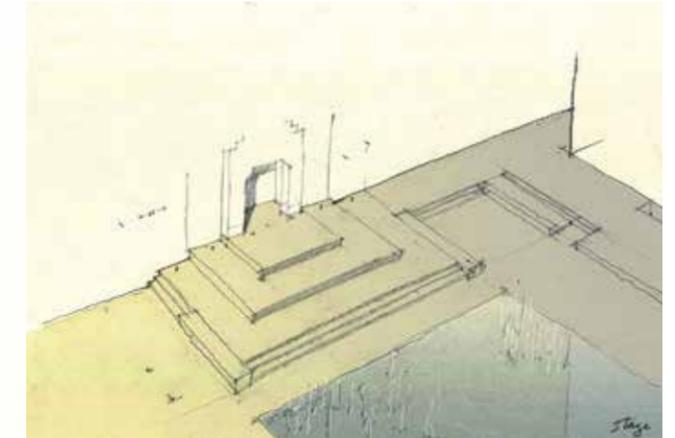


OPPOSITE

The site's four-foot drop in grade was addressed with a terrace and a ramp for the former path of Main Street, making the plaza floor flat.

RIGHT

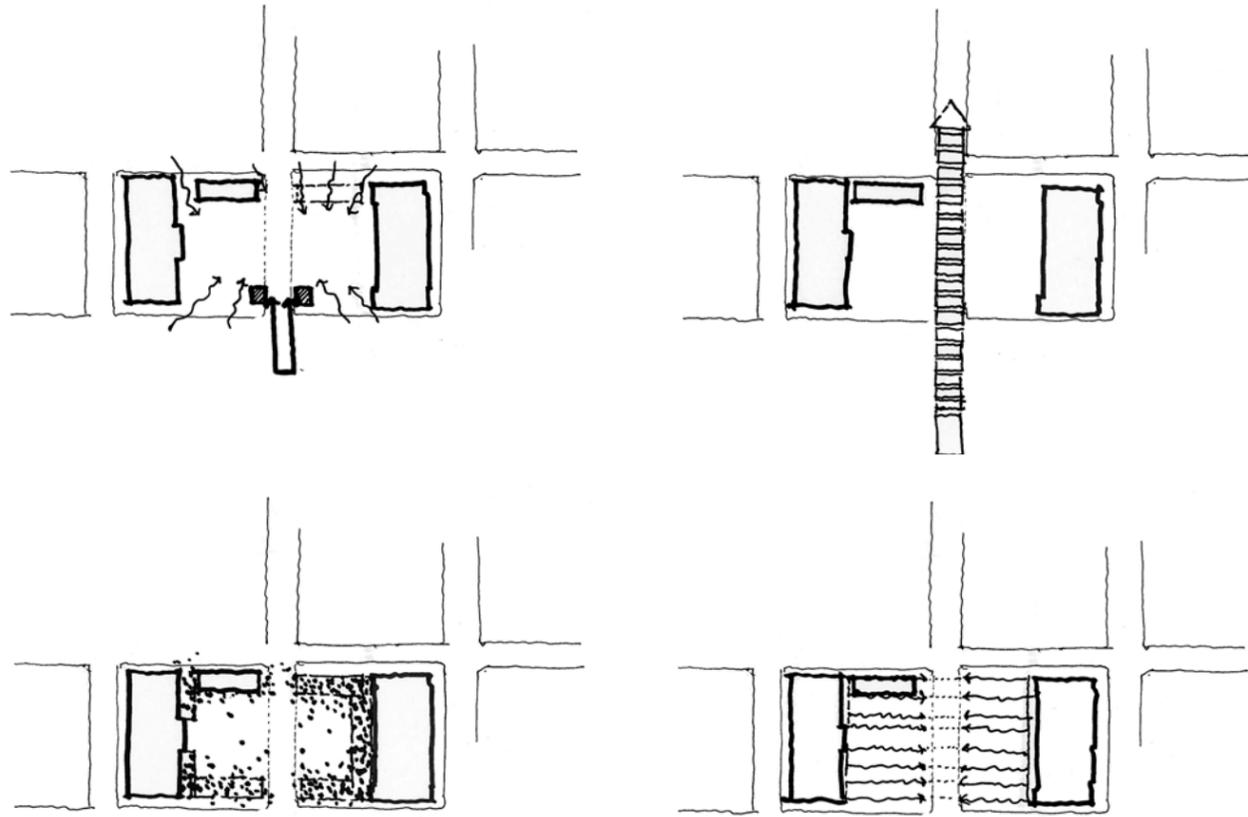
Vergason encircled the stage with terraces, "to step it down into something that you could walk across naturally."



has been fairly complementary to what survived. The periphery of downtown remains scarred by swaths of surface parking. But there is a reactivated, walkable core that feels intact and has the intricate and varied traditional look the public generally finds attractive. Now, at the heart of this district, Fort Worth has finally received one urban amenity it always lacked: a central plaza.

The firm of Michael Vergason, FASLA, designed Sundance Square Plaza. (The name can be confusing, because Sundance Square Plaza—a rectangle, actually—is surrounded by a redevelopment district called Sundance Square, and both are projects of a company also named Sundance Square.) Vergason is known as a modernist, so this was perhaps a counterintuitive choice, given the context. But the crowds now enjoying his plaza probably don't register any aesthetic shift. Like most of the buildings around it, and in some ways directly responding to them, the plaza has its own crisp symmetries. Its design could be considered minimalist, but that helps make it inviting and flexibly usable; it is small enough to have been

MICHAEL VERGASON LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS



easily overwrought, with less than an acre and a half of open space. (For comparison, New York's Washington Square Park is close to 10 acres, the Piazza San Marco in Venice about three.) The standout elements of Vergason's design are certainly not traditional—an enormous fountain and a wave wall, both with randomly choreographed flows, and four monumentally scaled umbrellas that create an airy and astonishingly lovely room. But they're easy to like.

There aren't many very tall towers in Fort Worth. But, as if they had been sited in advance to help create a sense of place for the future square, high towers stand like masts at the corners of an imaginary perimeter drawn a couple of blocks out. Nearer buildings vary in height but seem to step down as they come closer. The plaza itself is flanked by a glassy new one-story pavilion, several historic structures of two and three stories, and a couple of new-looks-old buildings of five and six stories. Architecturally, the towers at the corners of that imaginary perimeter range from forget-

table to regrettable. But from the plaza you don't take in their design so much as their subliminal, and accidental, function as markers of space. Meanwhile, the closer buildings are all richly detailed, so attention naturally focuses on them, and on the features of the plaza itself. "When you scan around, they all become containers for this place," Vergason says.

The plaza occupies the interior of two adjacent city blocks; the section of Main Street that once separated them was closed to traffic and incorporated into the plaza. The flanking buildings insulate the plaza from the street completely on the east and west sides and, with a few openings, on the north. On the south there is screening from two short allées of cedar elm (*Ulmus crassifolia*) plus a line of Shumard's oak (*Quercus shumardii*) along the street edge. So from within the plaza, you scarcely hear or see any cars. Still, the space remains visually—and subliminally—enmeshed with its context. Vergason also redesigned the streetscapes of about 10 surrounding blocks,

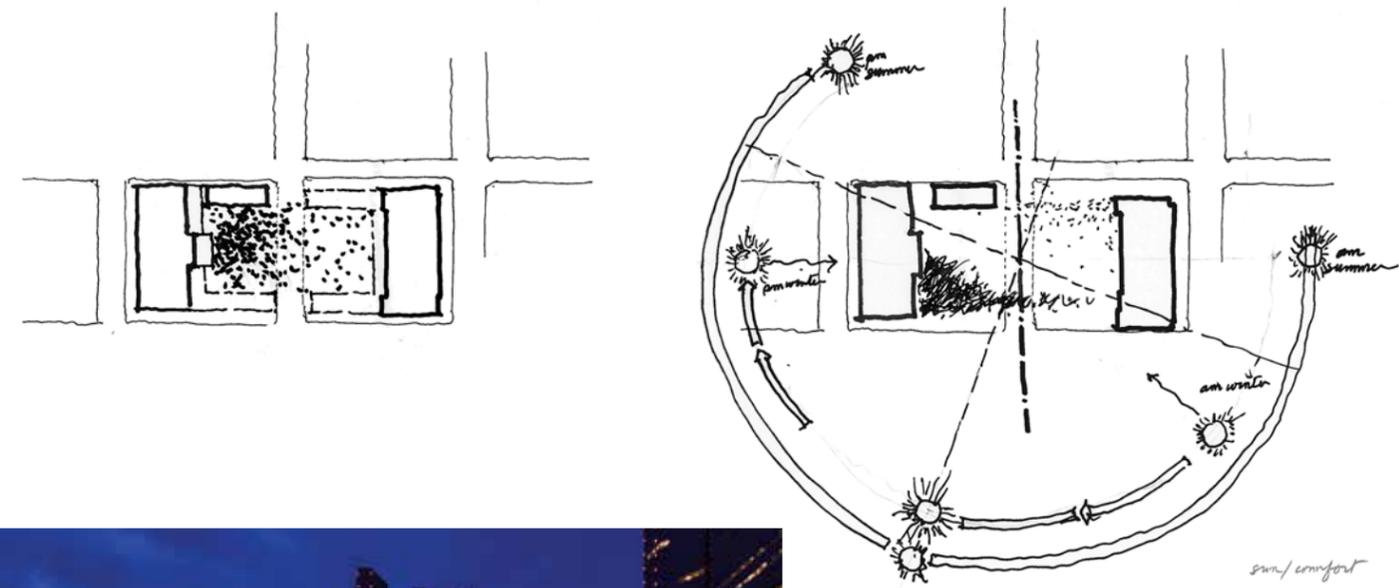
ABOVE AND OPPOSITE
Early circulation and solar angle studies informed the site's design. The two large buildings at either end of the plaza were already under construction.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
The view up Main Street focuses on the ornate Tarrant County Courthouse.

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MICHAEL VERGASON LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, TOP;
STEVE HALL © HEDRICH BLESSING, BOTTOM



consistent with the detailing of the plaza; these streets were narrowed with curb bump outs to discourage through traffic and contribute to the encircling atmosphere of calm. The path of the closed stretch of Main Street bisecting the plaza remains indicated by borders of inset granite. It is paved in the same shade of brick as the extant brick surface of the rest of Main Street, which was laid down early in the 20th century and is a different red from the brick that paves most of the plaza. If you stand in the middle of the plaza on the former path of Main Street, and look along it in either direction, the consistent brick and the sidewalks and tree plantings of Vergason's streetscape scheme suggest allées extending

seamlessly into the city. To the north is a view focused three blocks away upon the Tarrant County Courthouse, a wild Victorian confection in pink-speckled granite. To the south, the vista is truncated five blocks away by the silvery, circa 1960s flying saucer of the Fort Worth Convention Center Arena. On each half of the plaza that the vestige of Main Street demarks, there is one dominant feature. Both of these are large and square. On the western side, it is a fountain pad, flush with the ground plane, measuring 60 feet on a side. On the east, it is the four umbrellas which, when opened out from their central stalks, form a translucent canopy 80 feet square and 32 feet high. The activation of the fountain draws attention in, toward itself; the shelter of the umbrellas exerts a positive attraction, too. Both reinforce the plaza's sense of enclosure. Sundance Square Plaza seems both to reach out and to enfold.

The consistency and comprehensiveness of downtown Fort Worth's renaissance might be



the envy of any American city whose center was drained of life by suburban development. But chances are slim that many can emulate it, because it has been the work of a single entity, the company called Sundance Square that now owns about 35 city blocks and 42 operating buildings, with plans to expand and the resources to do so. Sundance Square is a company, it must be said, that has a genuine commitment to Fort Worth and to historic preservation, and a nuanced understanding of the principles of good urban design as they are generally understood these days, as well as an interest in and evident success at turning a profit. But it is impossible to ignore a sanitized, synthetic quality in what it has created. There is none of the messy creativity that enriches urban places when they evolve organically with multiple players and eccentricities. It is as if a festival marketplace and a greenfield New Urbanist subdivision had produced a love child, circa 1990, who grew up and moved downtown—as so many of that generation now do—but without the slightest

impulse to rebel against the insular conformism of its family heritage.

On a 97-degree day last summer, Michael Vergason was sitting under the plaza's umbrellas. The space is furnished with lightweight metal tables and chairs. These were arranged in a neat grid. "They like things orderly," he lamented of

ABOVE LEFT
Aside from a few small historic structures, the site had been surface parking.

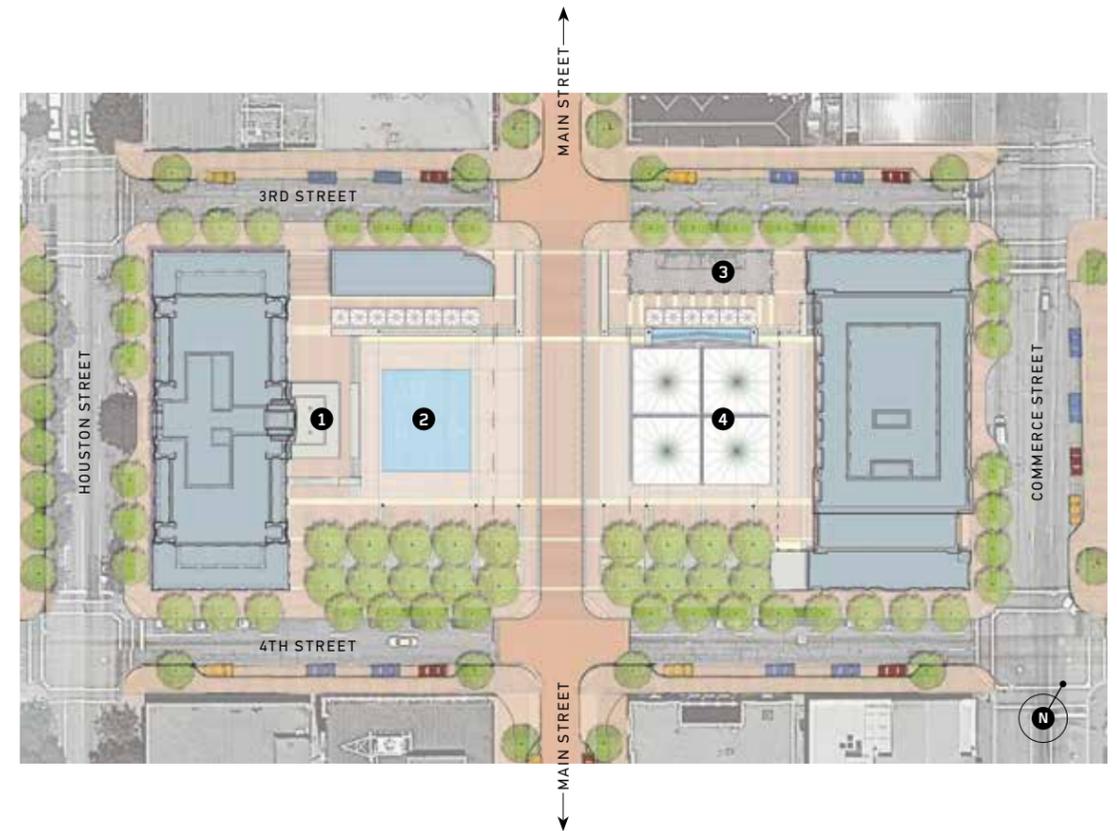
ABOVE RIGHT
The plaza is heavily programmed. An annual arts festival extends up and down Main Street.

BRIAN LUENSER PHOTOGRAPHY, LEFT, SUNDANCE SQUARE, RIGHT

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PLAN

- 1 STAGE
- 2 WATER FEATURE
- 3 PAVILION
- 4 UMBRELLAS



the Sundance Square management. Pointing to the nearby allées, he said, "We intended to have furniture under there, and we've moved it there ourselves, but they move it back. So those have become ancillary rather than active. But that's precious space under natural, dappled shade." He labeled "one of the biggest arguments" during the plaza's planning as "whether those jets [in the fountain] ought to be ordered up on a square grid. What we did was intentionally random, not only in its organization, but the distance between them and the degree to which they go up and down, all intended to provide a counterpoint to an otherwise highly ordered, organized place." It is the kind of fountain, without any barrier to entry, that shouts an invitation to kids to get wet. But there are posted hours when that is permitted and prohibited. There are frequent events in the plaza, including music and other performances. But a busker setting up to play spontaneously—or anybody daring, say, to pass out leaflets—would probably be ushered away by the ever-visible security staff. Anyway, out-

side of scheduled performance times, canned elevator music plays throughout the plaza. In the surrounding Sundance Square district, some restaurants and stores are local and unique, typically having a western theme. But many others have counterparts in a mall near you. There's the Cheesecake Factory, Del Frisco's Grille, Jos. A. Bank Clothiers, White House Black Market, and a four-story "flagship" H&M. There's ample free parking for visitors to the shops and the plaza, as at a mall. "The general public drives in from the suburbs," observes Kevin Buchanan, who writes a column on urban design called "Fort Worthology" for the local alt-culture publication *Fort Worth Weekly*. "It feels cool, this cool downtown they get to go to, and then drive home." People who promote city living have long been made uneasy by the shopping mall's tightly controlled simulacrum of the public square in places with no actual centers. Fort Worth now has a tightly controlled square in a real downtown that—aside from the authentically historic architecture and street grid—closely resembles the "Main Street"



retail-entertainment developments that in many locales are rendering the enclosed mall obsolete.

This is at least mildly unsettling. It would be more so if the design and execution were less refined—if, to cite one small detail, the plaza’s public restrooms did not have floors of inlaid granite; or if the plaza displayed branding messages for the Sundance Square district’s merchants, which it does not. Anyway, a downtown renaissance governed by a single private entity may never become the norm. Vergason suggests it is “a reflection of the way Texas works, and Fort Worth in particular.” The elements of Sundance Square—the majority of buildings making up the downtown core, the company that manages them, and the plaza that is their new focus—are all owned by Bass Brothers Enterprises. The brothers, inheritors of an oil fortune, are Fort Worth power players. One, Ed Bass, studied architecture at Yale in the era when Yale educated many prominent current practitioners of neotraditional design, including David Schwarz, who could be considered the

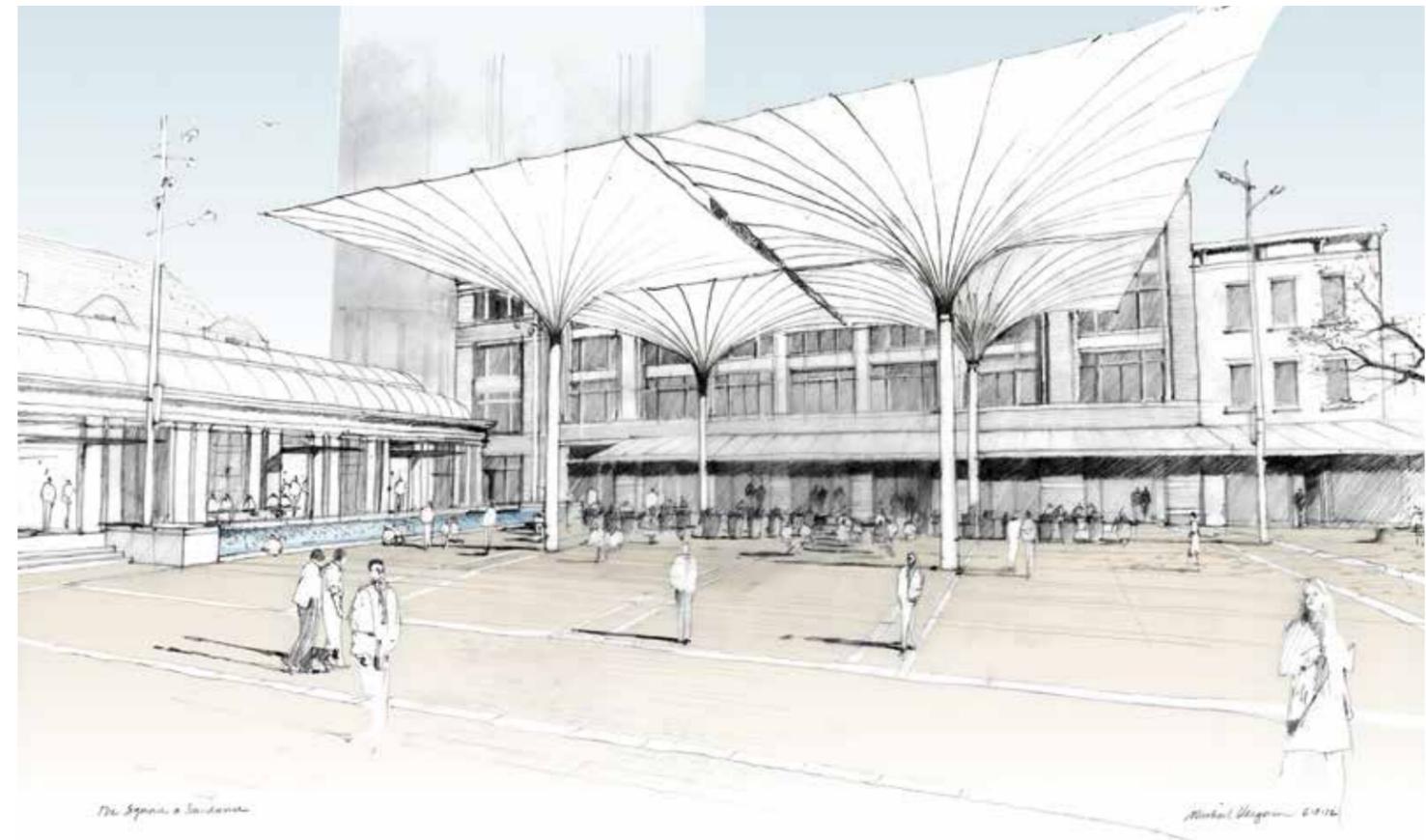
Sundance Square house architect, and of New Urbanism. It was Ed Bass, specifically, who first engaged his family in resurrecting downtown Fort Worth in 1987, and he remains the family member most directly involved. In the course of projects, though he is actually one of the owners, he tells people: “I’m the owner’s representative.” “He is interested in getting into depth about every aspect of the project. He is knowledgeable about all of it. I can’t keep up with him,” Vergason says. “He is honing in on every issue with every consultant and probing, pushing. He is a great client.”

If an engaged client with extensive holdings and influence can exert unusual control, he can also facilitate unusual maneuvers like the Sundance Square company’s purchase from the city of the Main Street right-of-way through the plaza, or the extension of the plaza’s aesthetic, by the company’s designer, into the surrounding streets. He can also work fast. A plaza had been envisioned for years; these two blocks were often used, even while they were still mostly surface parking lots, for festivals

ABOVE
The furniture beneath the umbrellas is lightweight and movable, but Sundance Square management keeps it in an orderly grid.

OPPOSITE
The four umbrellas introduce an organic form to the plaza’s crisp geometry.

BRIAN LUENSER PHOTOGRAPHY



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and concerts, until the decision to transform them was finally made. Then, the plaza zoomed into construction. The new flanking buildings, by Schwarz, were already going up when Vergason began designing the plaza in December 2011. It was completed and opened in November 2013.

Such a client can also commission a plaza designed to serve other business interests. Vergason says, “Our fundamental pro forma was to maximize the flexibility of this place for the broadest range of events imaginable. We had to bring in the criteria of also making it comfortable and enjoyable in non-event time for a few people, as well as a crowd.” That meant addressing the four-foot drop in grade from the northwest to the southeast corner. This was achieved by creating a low terrace across the north side, broken by the Main Street path that became a shallow ramp. Vergason calls this “the single simple move we made that enabled a lot of other stuff,” but “a gesture you wouldn’t necessarily recognize because there is not a lot of grade involved.” On the west side of the plaza, facing the fountain, the

terrace wall forms a long banquette. On the east, the terrace wall is the wave wall. The plaza below these terraces is perfectly flat. Aside from the four umbrella poles and a small stage surrounded by a low podium that projects from one of the flanking buildings, there are no fixed elements or obstructions within the space. Even the fountain, which has a perimeter slot drain, can be turned off to serve as a plaza floor for big gatherings.

With a multitude of free concerts and yoga classes and an annual art festival that spreads up and down Main Street, most people probably don’t realize that “the programming we do a little differently than a public park,” as Sundance Square’s president and CEO Johnny Campbell puts it. On another hot evening last summer, nearly 4,000 people turned out in the plaza to watch *The Lego Movie*. Campbell, who spent two decades managing Rouse Company developments, says, “All of our programming is designed to drive sales and the economy of the retail and restaurants around. So this movie night, it’s no coincidence. It gets



SUNDANCE SQUARE

BRIAN LUISER PHOTOGRAPHY

OPPOSITE
Having been immediately embraced by the public, the plaza is thronged even on a cool winter evening.

RIGHT
Water emanates from both sides of the wave wall in different, random rhythms.



dark at 9:00 p.m. Those people will stake out their claim with their blankets and chairs, go to dinner, and come back for the movie." Kevin Buchanan says, "The Basses are like benevolent dictators." He thinks that the plaza is beautifully designed, built, and maintained, and agrees it has been a hit. Still, "I don't think most people even consider this. But there's always this tickling in the back of my head. They could just take this away one day." It's the existential anxiety of the citizen-urbanist in the age of the privately owned public space.

Any other motives aside, Ed Bass's passion for central Fort Worth is surely genuine. "When I was a kid in the 1950s," he says, "we came downtown for everything. It was vital, vital, urban." Bass deserves great credit for the district's preservation and renewal, and more for assembling and leading the team that created this instantly and widely loved plaza where there had never been a planned central gathering space. Its success in terms both of programmability and public acceptance derives from the fact that it is an uncomplicated

space. "What we did here is not extraordinary or innovative," Vergason allows. But he singles out the umbrellas as the exceptional gesture. His initial presentation of the idea to the project team began with a slide of a pristine calla lily flanked by video clips of tornadoes—"gutsy," he grins, for a locale often visited by destructive storms, but "both have this beautiful funnel shape" like that of the umbrellas. He first encountered versions of the umbrellas in European squares; these were fabricated by the German firm SL-Rasch. Collapsed and furled tightly around their standards, they resemble rockets. When open, they capture rainwater and channel it down through the poles. They are subtly tinted the sandy-orange hue of the region's dust, for practical purposes, and underlit at night in a range of soft colors. They establish a space that's both awesome and ephemeral. "We looked at a lot of different ways to provide shade," Vergason says. "Nothing was as complete, as elegant and flexible as this. This allowed us to do other things that were quiet, careful, fine textured—that were *enough*, because these carry

RIGHT

The buildings of downtown Fort Worth step down toward the square, contributing to its sense of enclosure.

the place in terms of its identity, and wonder, and what you would remember.” ●

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Project Credits

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