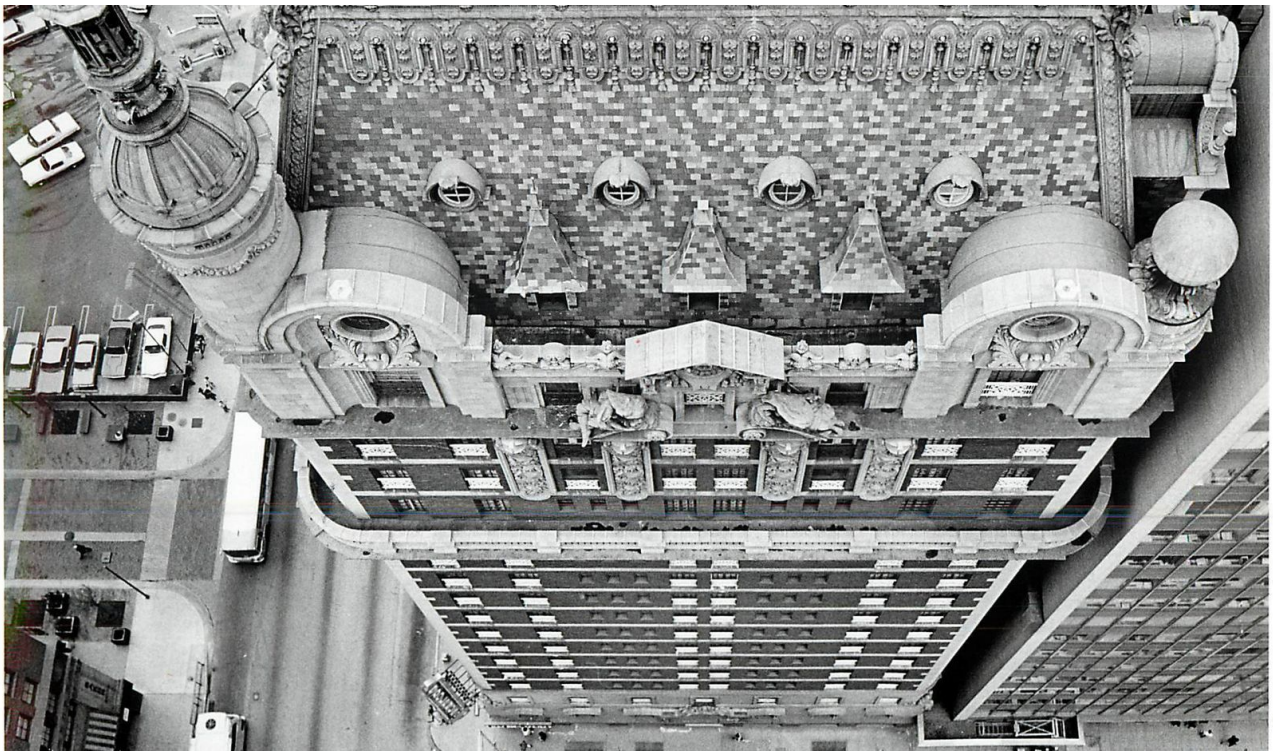
ARTS ENTERTAINMENT › ARCHITECTURE

Ambition, excess, racism and reinvention: Adolphus Hotel's history is the story of Dallas

The second installment in a series by architecture critic Mark Lamster on the buildings that made Dallas.



View looking down to Commerce Street of the Adophus Hotel, in 1975.

By Mark Lamster
6:00 AM on May 24, 2022

I like to think of the Adolphus Hotel as a tall mug of beer on a hot day: a visceral delight, sparkling and woozy with a whole bunch of froth on top. That reading may be overly literal, but you'll have to forgive me, because the association with a glass of lager comes naturally. The hotel was financed and named for the great St. Louis beer baron Adolphus Busch. Dallas was the nexus of his brewery network in the southwest, and his entrée into Texas, where beer-loving emigrants from Germany and central Europe found their thirsts in dire need of quenching in the hot prairie sun.

The rise of the Adolphus was a mark of the city's growth as a commercial hub, and a testament to the city's resolve in the wake of the catastrophic 1908 flood that pushed the crest of the Trinity to more than 52 feet. A rush of water was no match for what Henry Exall, one of the city's leading champions, called "the pushing, nervy, far-seeing patriotic businessmen of Dallas." The Oriental Hotel, then the premier hostelry in the city, was not large enough to satisfy their grandiose civic ambitions. The Adolphus would replace it and out-opulent it in every respect, which was saying something, because the Oriental was so over-the-top lavish that when it opened in 1893, developer Thomas Field (namesake of Field Street) required a financial bailout. "Field's Folly," as it was known, was rescued by a consortium led by none other than Adolphus Busch.

The Adolphus Hotel is seen through trees from the AT&T Discovery District. (Jeffrey McWhorter / Special Contributor)

Not enough beds

Accommodating visitors had been a long-term problem for ambitious Dallas capitalists, and the Oriental didn't solve it. Just two years after it opened, when a boxing title fight was arranged between Bob Fitzsimmons and heavyweight champ "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, the city had nowhere to put the arriving hordes. The railroads who would be transporting the visiting spectators were forced to plan a makeshift village of Pullman sleeping cars. It was for naught, though. The prospect of a prizefight incensed the city's religious leadership, who appealed to the governor to stop the bout in the name of Christianity, which he did. For Dallas, which had countenanced slavery, lynchings and the other predations of Reconstruction, boxing was too brutal and unseemly.

By 1910, the city's boosters had concluded that a larger hotel was required, and a group of emissaries led by Mayor S.J. Hay was dispatched to St. Louis to convince Busch that he should be the one to build it. On May 26, the front page of *The Morning News* announced that the mission was a success, as Busch would put up the bulk of the financing for a $1 million, 20-story hotel. What's more, they had a location picked out: right across the street from the Oriental, on the corner of Commerce and Akard.

The only problem, and it was barely a hurdle, was that this site was occupied — by city hall. That building was four stories of florid quirkiness, a jumble of Romanesque and Renaissance elements designed by the St. Louis architects Bristol & Clark. In 1889, its modest size seemed appropriate, but two decades later it was too small for a metropolis on the make. The solution: Build a suitably grand new municipal building (it would open in 1914, on Harwood) and, in a tradition that would come to define Dallas, demolish the older building to make way for the future.

By the time the hotel's polished red granite cornerstone was laid, on the morning of Dec. 28, 1911, the projected cost of the hotel had ballooned 300 percent, and the hyperbole surrounding the venture had

and luxurious appointment, safeguarded against every accident," Exall declared at the luncheon celebrating the cornerstone setting.

The Adolphus Hotel during construction in 1910. When it was finished, it was the tallest building in Texas at 20 stories.

That event took place at the Oriental, and it was quite a celebration, with a menu of oysters, cold boiled lobster, fried chicken on toast, and tutti-frutti ice cream, all washed down with Roman punch. It was paid for by Busch, who chose not to be there for the festivities. Instead, there was a telegram from his son-in-law, Edward Faust, who would be overseeing the hotel's design and construction. The Adolphus, he promised, would be "a monument of beauty and pride" and equally "return satisfactory investment."

Faust answered his father-in-law's injunction that "no expense be spared" by traveling the United States with architect Tom P. Barnett to investigate the latest developments in hotel design and amenities. What

An explosion of ornament

In Chicago, where the skyscraper was born, a new American style of commercial architecture was coming into its own, driven by new technologies — steel frames, the elevator, electric lighting — that allowed for ever taller construction. Early towers of the Chicago School defaulted to a pattern derived from the form of a column, with a base at the bottom, a shaft of floor plates, and a decorative cap at the top. "Form follows function," was a mantra of that era, credited to the architect Louis Sullivan, which was not so much a rejection of ornamental decoration, but an argument for its expression through a building's structural system.

Faust had no interest in that kind of architectural restraint, and neither did Dallas. It was a new city, unashamed of its hubris, and ready to make a claim for the nation's attention. The idea was to let it all hang out, and the Adolphus would give physical expression to that impulse. And so there would not be sensitive, integrated detailing, but an explosion of ornament of all kinds, an unmistakable declaration of fabulousness and arrival.

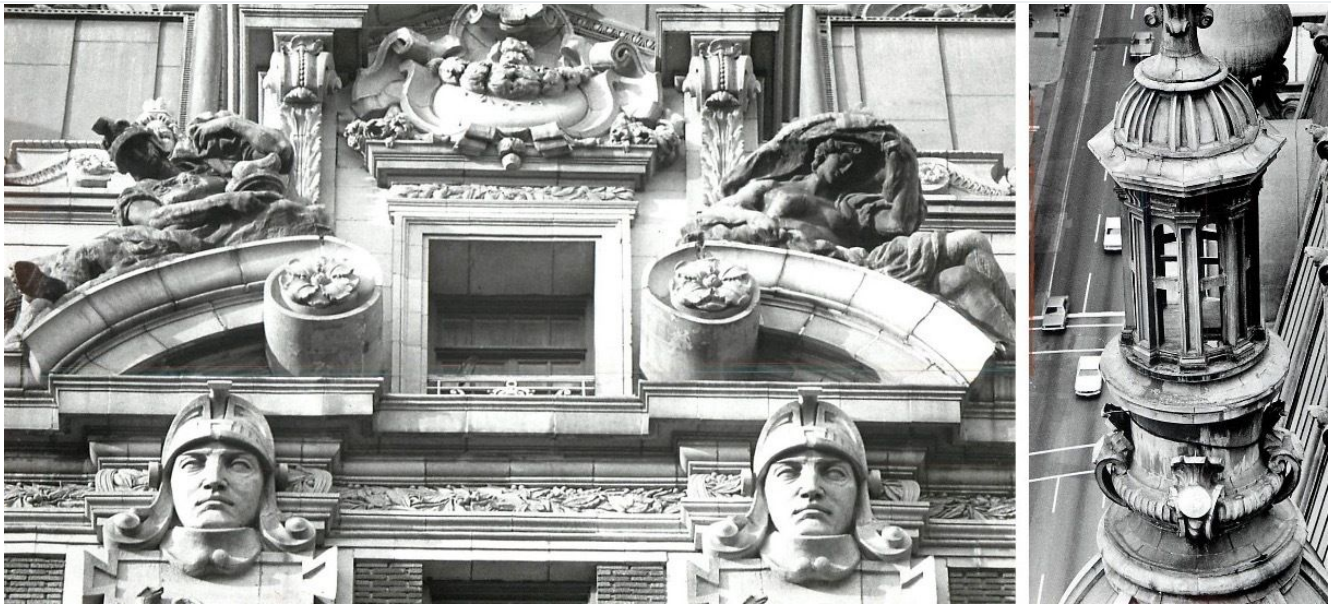
explosively extravagant in history: the architecture of Louis XIV. The Sun King built Versailles. They would give Dallas the Adolphus. As *The Morning News* declared on the day of its debut, "the exterior of the building is designed in the style of Louis XIV, and is carried out with a conscientious fidelity to detail and a strict adherence to the character and atmosphere of the Louis XIV period."

That was pushing it, and considerably. There were, of course, no skyscrapers in 17th-century France, so the idea of "conscientious fidelity" to that period was an impossibility, and even then, what they created would hardly have seemed familiar to the French king. Like the early Chicago towers, the Adolphus had a tripartite design, with a three-story granite base surmounted by a 14-story shaft of red tapestry brick, capped by a slate mansard roof. This armature was virtually encrusted with decorative ornament, sculpture and architectural flourish.

At the base, there were tall, arched windows illuminating public rooms on the second and third floors. Decorative granite belt courses outlined the residential floors above this up to the fourteenth story, which was marked by a projecting balustrade. Three stories above that was another balustrade fronting a row of elaborate, arched windows. At the center there was a miniature temple-front with a pair of figurative sculptures (representing night and morning, respectively). On one side of the composition, a turret poked up at the sky. Noting its cylindrical form and the building's patrimony, Dallasites cheerfully dubbed it the "Beer Bottle." At the other end, a decorative pillar supported a bronze globe. The whole thing was topped by a green-bronze filigree crest running along the very top of the mansard roof: a final dollop of whipped cream on a sugary, frosted cake.

The Morning News was duly impressed with this resplendent confection. "The view of this building coming down Commerce Street," it wrote, "makes one think back to the golden age of art in France, and we are transported for the moment from Dallas to Paris."

The interior answered the exterior in its extravagance. The main entry on Commerce was lined with yellow Tennessee marble. Up a flight of stairs was the formal dining room, now known as the French Room, then as now an exquisite double-height room with a vaulted ceiling and extensive sculptural relief work, a mural with the theme of an Italian moonlit garden, and a fountain with a marble fawn. Balconies looked down onto the dining room from the ladies' parlor and café on the third floor. (The delicate flowers of Dallas also had their own entrance, on Akard Street, where they could avoid their brutish husbands.)

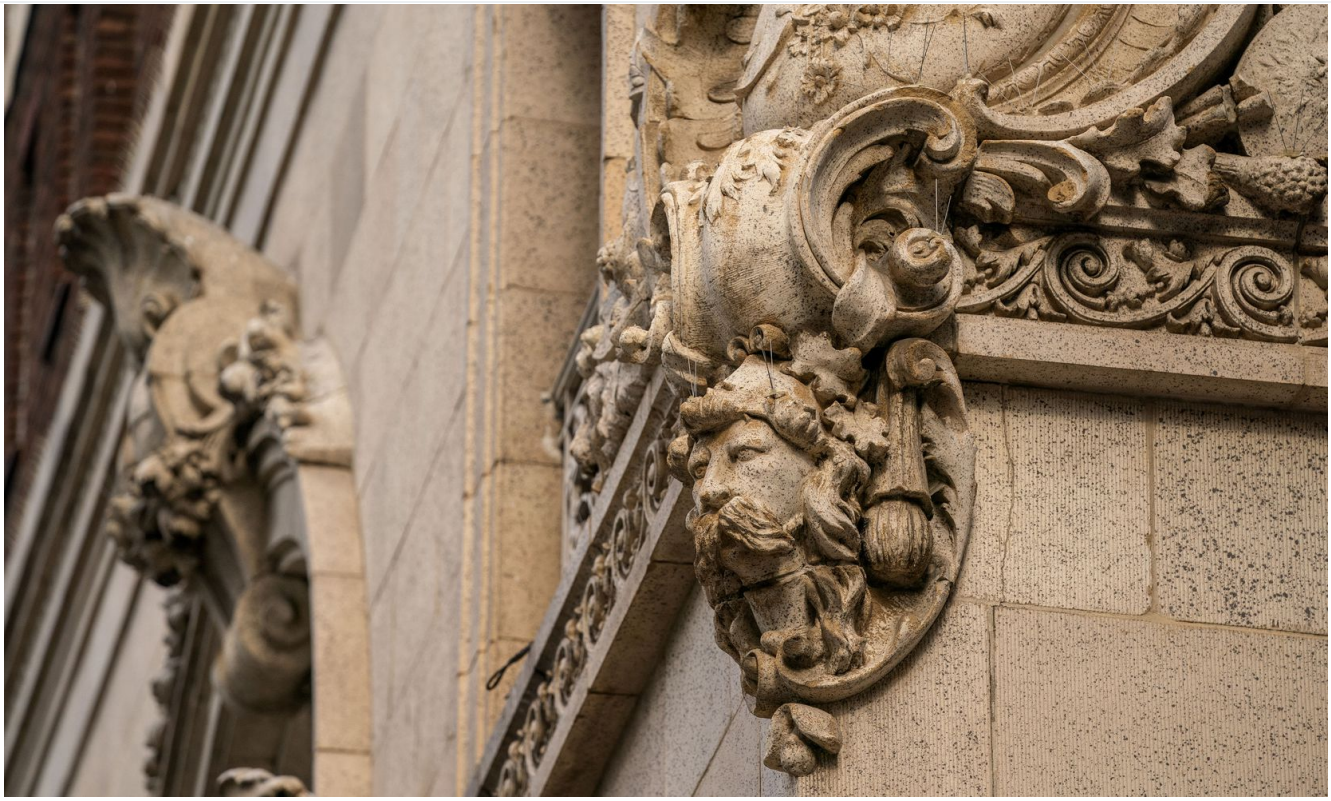


Tempieto detail and "Beer Bottle" spire ornamenting the Commerce Street facade of the Adolphus Hotel.

As for those men, their clubroom was on the opposite side of the main rotunda. The ladies' effeminate Rococo was countered there with more masculine trappings: floor-to-ceiling oak wainscoting and a mural of a bear hunt. The balance of the lower floors were given over to dining rooms, banquet halls and various other amenities, each one in its own historic style: Tudor, Elizabethan, Colonial, Renaissance. (Today, a drive through the Park Cities provides a similar parade of eclectic grandeur.) The grand ballroom was up on the eighteenth floor, with a vaulted ceiling, bandstand and dance floor. When the giant dormer windows were opened, the room felt almost like it was outdoors. From there, a grand staircase carried you to an actual roof garden, with views across the city.

An ugly standard

While backers of the Adolphus proclaimed it as a new standard for hotel architecture, they also proudly boasted that it set a high-water mark in a different tradition: racism. "An innovation in Dallas hotel management was found in the fact that all the attendants of the Adolphus are white," *The Morning News* wrote in 1912, with "chefs, waiters and other attendants being specially recruited after years of service in some of the most notable hotels of the land." The culture of segregation was so pervasive in Dallas at the time, that it even extended to a hotel kitchen.



Architectural details adorn the facade of the Adolphus Hotel. (Jeffrey McWhorter/Special Contributor) (Jeffrey McWhorter / Special Contributor)

That ugliness put no break on the city's growth. In 1910, the Dallas population was under 100,000. A decade later, it had grown by more than 50 percent. By the time the Depression hit, it was more than a quarter million. The Adolphus was a response to this growth, but the Busch interests didn't stop with the hotel. Behind it, the beer baron financed a 17-story speculative office tower, also designed by Barnett.

The Busch Building, as it was then known (it is now the Kirby), faced Main Street on Akard, and was linked to the Adolphus by an underground tunnel, so it could share maintenance costs. If the Adolphus was French Renaissance in style (or some transmogrified version thereof), the Busch would be Gothic Revival, like the contemporaneous Woolworth Tower, then rising in lower Manhattan. The lower five floors were occupied by the department store A. Harris & Co., a retail establishment of such magnificent abundance that it threatened the very health of the delicate female flowers of Texas. To protect them from themselves, the fourth floor was equipped with calming spaces, including a "silence room" with sofas "where tired or nervous women" could recover from the exertions attendant with such a consumer paradise.

Adolphus Hotel lobby ca. 1929.

The first expansion

Things in Dallas were quite literally going up. "Dallas Has Become City of Skyscrapers," *The Morning News* declared in 1913, and the Adolphus was just the tallest. But only three years after the fanfare attendant with its grand opening, the Adolphus itself was too small for Dallas, and plans were developed to expand it, the first in a series of additions and alterations that would come in waves over the ensuing years, more than quintupling its capacity.

The first addition, known as the Annex, opened in 1918, designed by the Dallas architects Lang & Witchell, whose well-considered buildings (among them, the Cotton Exchange, the Southland Life Building and the Sanger Brothers department store) were already a familiar presence downtown. Like Barnett before them, they traveled the nation investigating the latest in hotel design, and then invited managers from those hotels to inspect a mockup of an entire floor erected in Dallas.

Lang & Witchell's 1918 addition to the Adolphus, built around two infill buildings on Commerce Street.

The 11-story building was restrained in its neoclassicism, the architects wisely choosing not to compete visually with its taller predecessor. It was built of red brick with limestone and terra-cotta detailing, its most notable feature being a terrace balcony projecting out over Commerce Street from the second floor, supported by iron columns. (It was later removed as a fire hazard.) Above, it was a U-shaped block. What was most curious about it, perhaps, was the fact that the hotel company was unable to secure all the property fronting Commerce Street, which left a pair of small infill buildings between the two Adolphus towers, which had to be connected by a 50-foot covered passage in the rear.

The coming Jazz Age brought even more commercial growth to Dallas, enough to prompt a hotel arms race. In 1924, the Busch company sold the Oriental for $785,000 to San Antonio hotelier T.B. Baker, who followed what was becoming Dallas tradition by demolishing the quirky old civic icon, only to replace it with something far larger, and named for himself. The Baker Hotel was a brownstone leviathan of more than 600 rooms, and it opened — insult to injury — on the night of Oct. 25, 1925, thirty years to the day after the Oriental had welcomed its first visitors.

The Adolphus answered right back. In 1926, the hotel's third expansion was completed, adding a 22-story tower set back behind the flamboyant original building. The architect was Alfred Bossom, designer of the neighboring Magnolia Building, which opened in 1922 to much acclaim. His Adolphus addition aped the

acquire the two small buildings that remained between the first and second towers, allowing Bossom to create a three-story formal entry to the complex that linked all three buildings.

The postwar era brought further expansion for Dallas and its signature hotel. The Busch interests sold the patriarch's namesake in 1949 to Dallas developer Leo F. Corrigan, who immediately began work on a fourth tower. The result was a 20-story slab of a building, with its narrow side facing Main Street. You could hardly see it from Commerce, meaning it made no disruption to the hotel's now historic trio of buildings. It struck a far different aesthetic tone than that bunch. Designed by Fort Worth architect Wyatt C. Hedrick, it was Moderne in style, its broad facades were practically unadorned, the most eye-catching element being enormous neon signs (facing east and west) with the hotel name in stylized lettering on the roof. What the new wing did have was more than 500 rooms with air conditioning, that most critical of modern conveniences.

Wyatt C. Hedrick's moderne addition to the Adolphus, with its distinctive neon roof signage.

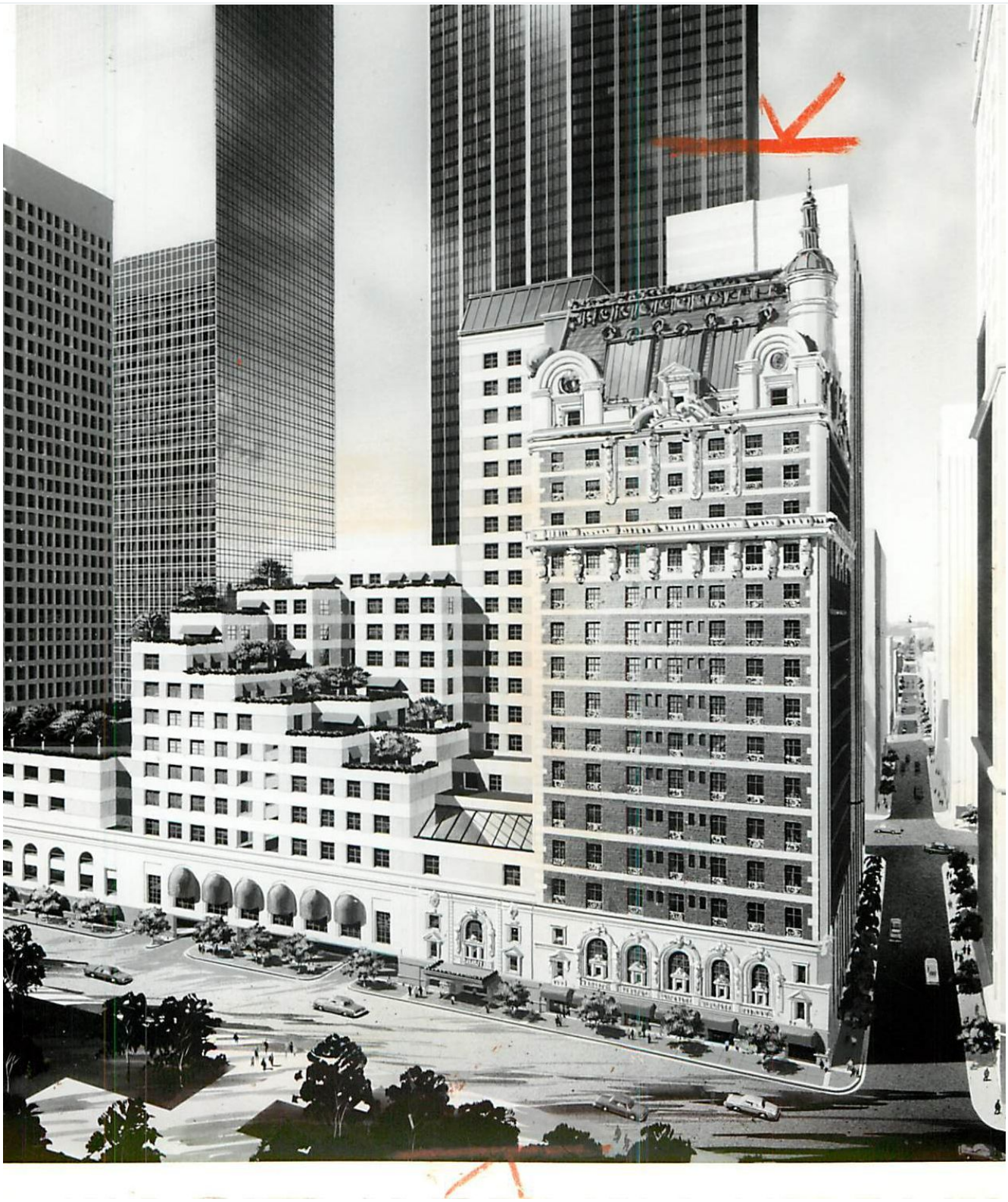
A successor rises

Adolphus' thunder with in-room televisions, a helicopter pad and glamorous Hollywood patrons. With its curious curtain-wall of blue panels, it represented the new in a city obsessed with being *au courant*. The Adolphus was growing old, the dowager queen of the Dallas skyline.

The Adolphus' defining, or at least most notorious, moment came in November 1960, in the run-up to the presidential election pitting John F. Kennedy against Richard M. Nixon. On a final campaign swing through Texas, vice-presidential candidate Lyndon B. Johnson was scheduled to appear at the Baker and then cross Commerce Street on foot for an event at the Adolphus. The episode turned into a national drama. Instead of a welcome party, Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson were greeted with a virulent protest led by the far-right congressman Bruce Alger.

Police warned Johnson about the danger of the short trip across the street to the Adolphus, but he refused to take a back exit to skirt the angry crowd. "If it has come to the point in America where a citizen cannot walk a public street with his lady without being accosted, then I want to know it," he is said to have said.

When he and Lady Bird left the Baker, they were jostled, spit upon and pelted with insults: "Commie!" Pinko!" "Traitor!" Alger confronted the pair carrying a sign that read "LBJ Sold Out to Yankee Socialists." The brazenness shocked the country, in no small measure because the majority of the protesters were women, affluent white housewives from Highland Park and North Dallas. The so-called Mink Coat Mob proved a public relations liability for Nixon, suggesting that the optimistic, "I Like Ike," conservatism of the Republican party had given way to paranoid, belligerent radicalism. (Sound familiar?) Three years later, Kennedy's limousine would glide past the hotel on its fateful journey toward catastrophe.



The terraced facade of the Adolphus after its 1980s restoration by the Jerde Parternship and Beran & Shelmire.

In 1980, the Corrigan company sold the hotel to the Los Angeles developer Westgroup. By then, the Adolphus was a shadow of its former self — a "garbled mess" according to a Westgroup executive — and obsolete, with closet-size rooms. Yet another renovation, this time by the Los Angeles-based Jerde

The new design watchwords were "subdued elegance." The biggest architectural move was to cut into the 1918 annex building to create a descending series of step-back terraces running west-to-east along Commerce Street. Jerde was known for its development of malls, and its transformations of the Adolphus were distinctly mall-like. Much of the exterior was stuccoed over, and the interior got mall-style escalators.

The hotel was sold again in 2012, to an Ohio-based investment group, and five years after that given yet another renovation, this time by the local design firm Swoon, who have given it a retro-chic upgrade (indebted to the Ace Hotel chain) that embraces the past without succumbing to kitsch — boutique style in a traditional package.

Those internal alterations have been answered by a dramatic change to the hotel's immediate environs, with the 2021 opening of the AT&T Discovery District, a landscaped plaza directly across Commerce Street. What had been a dreary street is now a lively urban space, with the Adolphus terminating its central axis, proudly lording over it in all of its spectacular glory, a statement of its own grandeur, and a symbol of both the city's unending ambition and its tradition of perpetual reinvention.

This is the second installment in a series on the buildings that define Dallas, produced in collaboration with nonprofit publishing house Deep Vellum, which will release a compilation of these stories in the coming year. You can read the first installment, on Millermore mansion, here.

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