

# The Philadelphia

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## Dallas still lives uneasily with the

By Dan Meyers  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

DALLAS — The jumble of dirt and pipe in front of the city convention center soon will become a vast piece of public art, a cattle drive featuring 70 jumbo bronze steers and three cowpokes meandering eternally toward downtown Dallas.

Supporters of the project, Pioneer Plaza, envision happy tourists and world renown flowing like the artificial stream the cattle will cross.

But others see something unsettling — a city still struggling to escape the discomfort-

ing shadows of its troubled past, of the horror of 30 years ago.

The day President John F. Kennedy was shot.

"We tried to deny the fact of the assassination in our city," said Gail Thomas, head of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, which studies the city. "It seems Dallas felt we had to erase the memory of this great tragedy. Even more than erase, perhaps totally deny."

"But it did mark Dallas. It marked us for-

**A new park recalls a mythic West, and evades a later, darker period.**

ever."

Every year around Nov. 22, especially at five-year intervals, most of the nation revisits the memories and grief surrounding Kennedy's murder.

Nowhere does the anguish cling more tenaciously than here.

Kennedy died. Gov. John Connally was wounded and recovered. Dallas is still trying to get over it.

"Dallas had a terrible problem," said Greg Elam, vice president for communications

# Inquirer

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## Kennedy assassination

with the Dallas Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Wouldn't you if someone was murdered in your house?"

Dallas has difficulty addressing its past, facing itself in the mirror. The park, unintentionally, is a monument to that.

The statues will be installed not because Dallas has a rich Western history — truth is, it wasn't much of a cowtown — but because misguided tourists arrive seeking the mythical West and the city, panting for approval, has concocted a way to give it to them.

"It's our costume," said Mary Vernon, head of the Art Department at Southern Methodist

University. "We are dressing ourselves constantly to be a thing people want to see."

The pretense of the park, she said, shows that Dallas still is trying to discover "how ashamed and destroyed were we by the Kennedy assassination and when are we going to recover."

Not until 1989 did Dallas open a museum on the assassination. The Sixth Floor, named for its location in the Texas Book Depository  
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**Thirty years later, conspiracy theories continue to flow. E1.**

**DALLAS** from A1  
building from which Oswald fired, is a huge tourist draw. Many older Dallasites won't visit the former warehouse; they preferred to have it torn down.

The contempt that was heaped upon Dallas — "the city of hate," it was called — still stings.

Mayor Steve Bartlett recalled how, just minutes after the murder, people from all over the country called his father's saddle company to cancel orders. Exasperated, his father yanked the plug on the switchboard.

"The assassination hurts every time we think about it," Bartlett said. "It's a powerful memory that's still a part of our lives."

"It isn't easy to be despised."

"I think people still are wrestling with it," said Bob Porter, head of public programs for The Sixth Floor. "It's an unimaginable trauma the city went through. The condemnation of the world fell on the city. It was Dallas' fault. When you traveled you were afraid to say you were from Dallas. You killed Kennedy."

Dallas, of course, didn't kill Kennedy. True, it abided a surly, right-wing element that hated the new president. This concerned Kennedy aides preparing his Texas campaign swing.

But whatever else Lee Harvey Oswald was — pro-Castro avenger, mob stooge or just a lone loon — he wasn't Dallas. A self-declared Marxist in a bastion of capitalism, a newcomer who had lived longest in New Orleans, New York and the Soviet Union, he was as alien to the city as cattle drives.

Despite the fears, Kennedy basked in a warm Dallas welcome. Among the last sounds he heard were cheers from the crowd and these words from Nellie Connally, the governor's wife: "Mr. President," she said at 12:29 p.m., "you can't say Dallas doesn't love you."

A minute later, the bullets struck. The forces the assassination unleashed helped shape the modern city. "Many in the rest of the country decided to make Dallas out to be a villain," said Mayor Bartlett. "That caused the city to band together and rebuild."

The business and political barons who ran Dallas decreed a building spree, including a new City Hall, central library and airport. School integration began.

The city kept busy. Beneath the surface, however, there were problems.

"The assassination had a profound impact on Dallas," said James W. Pennebaker, a psychology professor at SMU.

His research showed that in the

years after the murder, heart disease, suicide and homicide increased in Dallas at far greater rates than the rest of the country.

With the building boom, Pennebaker said, Dallas tried to become "a city of the future, a city without a past."

"There was a collective sense of uneasiness and people doing whatever they could to distance themselves from the event," he said. "You'd be hard-pressed to find a community that is more image conscious. The Kennedy assassination fed into that insecurity tremendously."

It shows in many ways. Dallasites buy 143 percent more makeup, use 55 percent more hair coloring and gulp 50 percent more diet pills than average Americans, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Time, football and television helped some. The success of the Dallas Cowboys and of the show *Dallas* offered new, if unflattering or inaccurate, impressions of the city. Who shot J.R. may have supplanted the enigma of who killed Kennedy.

But the fight over putting a museum in the book depository, which took 10 years, showed the scars hadn't healed.

"It was controversial," said Porter, the museum official. "Some people thought it should be bulldozed. Out of sight, out of mind."

Into this mix came Pioneer Park. Some people deplored the artistic merit of a cattle drive. "Frankensteiner," they called it.

Others bashed it as bad history. There had been some cattle drives along the Shawnee Trail, which passed by the park site, but the bovine action quickly shifted to the Chisolm Trail through Fort Worth. A marquee in Fort Worth when Kennedy visited early on Nov. 22 read, "Where the west begins."

"Dallas was Neiman-Marcus as opposed to country stores," said Elam, with the city visitors bureau, which supports Pioneer Park. "So you don't see a lot of cowboy hats and you don't see a lot of pickup trucks here."

"But Texas is Western in the eyes of everyone else. People are disappointed there are not cowpies littering the streets. There is no question that we sell Western when we sell Dallas."

Expansion of the Dallas convention center forced a decision on the fate of a parking lot marring the entrance.

Trammell Crow, a rich real estate developer and big Dallas booster, wanted a Western theme, a cattle drive. He donated \$500,000 of the \$4.2 million cost. A cattle drive is what he got.

Handled through the

Dallas Parks Foundation, a private group Crow chairs, the deal was done before vari-

ous city watchdog commissions had time to react.

Let in late, they could do little but complain that the city still wouldn't face its history squarely — and insist that the steer horns be blunted and aimed upward so overly curious visitors would not be gored.

"It will be one of the great monuments of the world," Crow declared in an interview in which he noted that the Eiffel Tower also had opposition at first.

The park should be open and the first six longhorns installed in March. Already, admiring tourists gather around prototypes of a steer and cowboy at the park site, situated about a mile from the assassination spot.

There are signs that the park fight will be the last serious blast of Kennedy-tinged angst for Dallas.

Thirty years is a long time.

Nearly half the city's residents weren't even born when Kennedy died. Perhaps another quarter of the one million population moved here since 1963. New leaders, more racially diverse, less tied to the monied types who made Dallas march in lock step, are coming in.

Parking lot attendant Asefaw Tewelde is part of this emerging Dallas. He said he's worried about paying the bills and improving race relations, not a horrible incident he had nothing to do with.

"I like Dallas great," said Tewelde, who immigrated 11 years ago, from Eritrea. "People are friendly. It is cheap to live. I have good opportunities to work. I don't have any problems with it."

Outsiders seem to have forgiven or forgotten.

"I can remember a lot of things being expressed at the time about Texas and Dallas," said Carlin Brooks, a salesman from Lebanon, Tenn., who recently visited The Sixth Floor. "I also have a sense of people in Dallas regretting what happened."

Maybe the very fact of the raucous fight over Pioneer Park is the best harbinger of an end to the years of painful self-consciousness.

"I think this is a statement of Dallas maturing," said Paula Peters, executive director of the parks foundation. "It's a healthy thing. People who like it, like it. Those who don't get to complain. Maybe it will help Dallas come to terms with its past."



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**Artist Robert Summer** and his Horse and Rider sculpture were at unveiling ceremonies at Dallas' Pioneer Plaza in September.