



# RETROSPECT

## A SHOWCASE FOR DALLAS ARCHITECTURE



**AIA Dallas' Retrospect is an exhibit in a shopping center.**

Yet ... look again. It's so much more.

Retrospect is the most public, unified and impactful way that AIA Dallas brings awareness of architecture to North Texans. In its near 20-year history, it has been viewed by hundreds of thousands of people visiting NorthPark Center.

The premise for this event is simple. Invite architects and their firms to provide interesting and visually engaging displays that educate the public about architecture in general and about how good design improves and even inspires all of our lives in particular. Forty to 60 firms participate each year. Some years, architecture students also mount an exhibit or two.

The same enthusiasm that spawned the show two decades ago is still evident today. “I always enjoy going to see the variety of approaches,” said Tom Cox, a teacher of architecture at Skyline High School, Dallas. “There are some exhibits that are very traditional, some that are real cutting-edge, and some that try to front materials and presentation techniques. It’s fun to see all that.”

Retrospect 2012  
April 5-15  
NorthPark Center

### Re-Purpose

Retrospect is very much a public service that compels Dallas architects to do it again each year, according to Barry Hand, AIA, of RTKL Associates, a past chair of Retrospect. “It builds awareness as to the projects the architects are involved in and it says ‘This is how architects add value to the community.’”

Think of how architecture has evolved over the past 20 years and you are likely to describe the evolution of Retrospect over the years as well. Some say that’s because the exhibit demands that its exhibitors find that balance between relevance and permanence. Along the way, Retrospect achieves a few other things, too. Through the years, it has been the place to see trends in model building and in the art of presentation. It also says something about business performance in the marketplace.

“There is a very healthy competition with it,” said Hand, explaining that firms desire to know what other firms are doing and where they are going in the practice—and the marketing—of architecture. Having a presence in Retrospect helps achieve this.

Still, the focus is on explaining various aspects of architecture to the average person who happens to be strolling through NorthPark. In this, Retrospect excels. To tell their stories, firms create individual objects, often three-dimensional, that represent their work and that are accompanied by photos, drawings, CAD images and the tangible stuff of which buildings are made—wood, metal, steel, plaster, resin and even concrete. Retrospect requires that architects and their firms explain what they do in a fresh, thought-provoking and sometimes playful way. Exhibits range from virtual to tangible, from factual to fanciful, and some take a complementary look at architecture by focusing on construction, interior design, or other allied professions.

### Revising Retrospect

How did Retrospect begin? The particulars are uncertain from the professionals we interviewed. In the late 1980s or early 1990s, a group of firms joined forces to create the first set of ex-

hibits. At some point prior to being called “Retrospect,” the exhibit was called, perhaps informally, “Who We Are and What We Do.” The event was first held at the Trammell Crow Center.

From the start, the exhibit occurred during Architecture month in the spring. The springtime effort coincided in some years with National Architecture Week. It initially lasted up to four weeks, even though today’s Retrospect is able to be viewed for 10 days.

## Take the Retrospect Challenge

Test your knowledge of Retrospect trivia by visiting *Columns* online at <http://tiny.cc/RETROSPECT>.

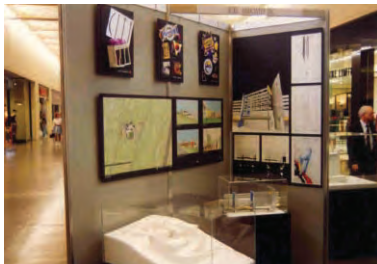


Submit your own trivia questions about Retrospect, too!

In the early years, AIA Dallas’ Retrospect Committee—made up of AIA Dallas members—ensured that display panels were built and available for participating firms. Wooden boards measuring 42 inches by 7 feet were covered in felt so that photos, drawings and maps could easily be attached with Velcro®. The panels were then placed together to form 90-degree spaces with one firm assigned to each space. Producing enough panels for what became a list of some 40 firms participating each year was an investment that took AIA Dallas a few years to recoup. The do-it-yourself nature made Retrospect more casual and organic than its polished and professional image today. For example, Hand recalls that “Gary Cunningham would show up with some images on cardboard.”

The busiest time has always been the week prior to the start of each year’s show. General set-up and meeting the specific accommodations for exhibiting firms took time. “We worked like elves in the night,” said Mark Hopper, AIA, of Forrest Perkins, who served as committee chair for 10 years.

A reception was added to the exhibit opening and, just like the entire exhibit, the reception became a work in progress.





Initially, the event lacked a celebratory spirit, but then music, food, drink and even an occasional raffle were added. One memorable reception was held in NorthPark's stately and beautiful interior park.

Initially, the committee created artwork for posters and other print material to both encourage firm participation and invite the public to visit the exhibit. Eventually, a poster



contest was developed that especially appealed to architectural students and interns.

### A New Home: The Address Advantage

Just as the specifics surrounding the start of Retrospect are uncertain, so are details of its early move to NorthPark Center, where the show now returns each year. Planners originally considered moving Retrospect to a Dallas museum or even to nearby Fort Worth, TX, but then NorthPark became available.

A unique blend of art, architecture and retail commerce, NorthPark became home to Retrospect perhaps due to the late Raymond Nasher himself. A developer and art enthusiast, Nasher created and then fashioned NorthPark into a shopping destination like no other. Often called a museum as a mall, today's NorthPark measures 2 million square feet and is occupied by 235 top retailers and restaurants, all connected by spaces adorned with 20th century art and sculpture—from

Nasher's very own collection—and all illuminated by the center's abundance of natural light. Originally designed by Harrell and Hamilton (now Omniplan), NorthPark has been recognized by AIA, receiving the "Design of the Decade – 1960s" award and the 25-Year Award for Design Excellence. This year, the center received a special tribute from Preservation Dallas as part of its 12th Annual Preservation Achievement Awards. It was cited as a timeless retail and dining environment that has served as a showcase for art and the community for nearly 50 years.

In the early years of Retrospect, Nasher would be seen walking around, looking at the displays. He even spoke at some of the opening receptions, according to Cliff Welch, AIA, with Welch Architecture. "I can't picture having Retrospect without the NorthPark connection," Welch said. "Being in partnership with NorthPark really elevated it."

In its new home, Retrospect began to capitalize on a certain synergy. NorthPark's management developed standards to improve the quality of all the exhibits in its shopping corridors throughout the year. At about the same time, more and more firms wanted to enhance their displays with customized visuals and materials and improved lighting. The advent of computer-aided technology meant they wanted to show off their digital capabilities, too. Many firms included Retrospect in larger plans to represent their firms at various trade shows and expos throughout the year. RTKL, for one, helped set a new benchmark in display design by calling on its own new in-house graphic arts team. To accommodate these changes, AIA worked with NorthPark to provide more electronic capabilities even while giving exhibitors both the standards and the freedom to create the exhibits they desired.

Retrospect was said to be in its "glory years" in the mid- to late-1990s, according to many past committee members. Gone

were the repetitive cubicle configurations. Firms were assigned space—and some paid for extra space—to creatively fashion their presence in Retrospect. Creative individual displays became celebrations of style, due in part to the three-dimensional vantage points they were provided and in part to the surrounding stunning elegance of NorthPark and its own display of world-class sculpture.

“The introduction of three-dimensional visualization made architecture a lot more understandable and hands-on for the general public,” said Craig Beneke, AIA, AF Architecture and Fabrication. The exhibits were compelling, informative and highly creative ... and Dallasites loved it.

### Object Lessons and Taking Chances

Exhibitors have taken any number of approaches to explain what they do and how new projects spurred their creativity. Over the years, such unlikely materials as concrete and steel were carted in and incorporated in displays, but the list of props is perhaps more surprising. Retrospect exhibits have included a Volkswagen Bug, ping pong balls, 1970s-era living room furniture, a plethora of blueprints, laser etchings on plexiglass of key Dallas residential towers, LEGOS®, and numerous sponge cut-outs of Le Corbusier’s iconic Modulor Man that children invariably carried throughout the shopping center.



One of the more popular exhibits was the display by architectural firm HKS spotlighting plans for the new Dallas Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, TX. It featured a model of the \$1.1 billion stadium as it would look when completed and offered plenty of visual information about what went into the design and construction of the sports venue.

“It was important because, seriously, when are you going to see something like that in three-dimension?” said Beneke. “Most people were looking at newspapers and they saw articles saying

Jerry Jones [Dallas Cowboys’ owner] was to build the new stadium. What exactly did that mean? But when you see a three-dimensional model, then you can definitely understand it.”

Not all exhibits over the years were unquestioned contributions. Some ideas made it—with a little adjustment—and some simply did not. Organizers vetoed the idea one firm had to roll in a large bomb casing to represent the renovation for business use of the so-called Bomb Factory in West Dallas, which dated back to World War II. Another year, the committee banned audio for exhibitors altogether after some store tenants complained that one firm’s video—which loudly called for a type of architectural “revolution” —broke NorthPark’s own new stipulation about the volume of recorded music.

And then there was the dead fish episode. According to Hand, one firm set up some two dozen fishbowls and placed in them photos of completed projects. The water magnified the images, and the fish swimming around them added to the whimsy. Controversy ensued, however, when the public started complaining to NorthPark management of the sight of dead fish in the bowls, perhaps due to chemicals from the prints.

### A Gift to Dallas

Occasional criticisms and unfortunate missteps have occurred, too, like the time that several display panels fell because of swelling crowds during a public appearance in NorthPark by pop singer Ricky Martin. Yet random problems have not detracted from Retrospect’s ongoing success. Retrospect’s ability to change and adapt has always been one of its strengths, and one reason for its longevity, explained Hopper. As technology became a daily reality in a firm’s project work, so too was it boldly represented in the show. As sustainability principles took hold, so too did “green” get plenty of attention. Trends in materials, design, international work and building performance were just as much a part of Retrospect as they were a part of firms’ delivery of quality architecture services.

“What’s evolved is not only the sophistication of displays, but also the broad spectrum of work you can see in the architectural community,” said Chuck Armstrong, AIA, of Corgan Associates, a longtime exhibitor. “It’s really quite impressive.”

While Retrospect has definitely changed from its humble beginnings, it has stayed true to a central theme: It says something important about architecture, it says it to the general public, and it says it in the form of a gift from AIA Dallas to the greater North Texas community. ■

**Steve Freeman is a professional writer who specializes in architectural article development for publications nationwide.**