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With Kaleidoscope Park, Frisco has a new front lawn — with cool art

Modeled on Klyde Warren Park in Dallas, the 5.7-acre park features a butterfly-themed installation by artist Janet Echelman.



By **Mark Lamster**
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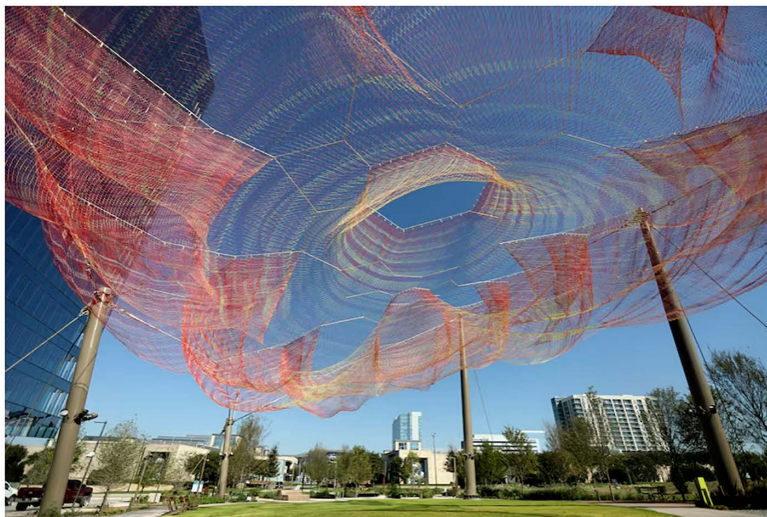
The pool deck of the Hall Park Hotel overlooks Kaleidoscope Park in Frisco. (Brandon Wade / Special Contributor)



Recently, while doing some research for this story, I ran a Google search for Frisco, and the first image that popped up was a dusky aerial view of the flyover interchange where the Sam Rayburn and Dallas North tollways meet. A technological feat? Sure. Visually dramatic? Perhaps. But it's still a highway interchange, and that this was the first representation of the city I found is illustrative of a continuing challenge facing recent American boomburbs, and Frisco in particular. To borrow a phrase from Gertrude Stein, *there is no there there*.

Kaleidoscope Park, which opened at the beginning of October, may change that perception, or at least that is the ambition of its makers. The 5.71-acre park, a narrow swathe of green slotted into Frisco's anodyne center, is explicitly modeled on Klyde Warren Park, which gave Dallas the kind of destination front lawn it never really had.

Frisco could use that kind of centrally located space. According to the Trust for Public Land, roughly 65 percent of Frisco residents live within a 10-minute walk of a public park, below average for a large American city. Just 5 percent of the city's land is used for parks, well below the national average of 15 percent.



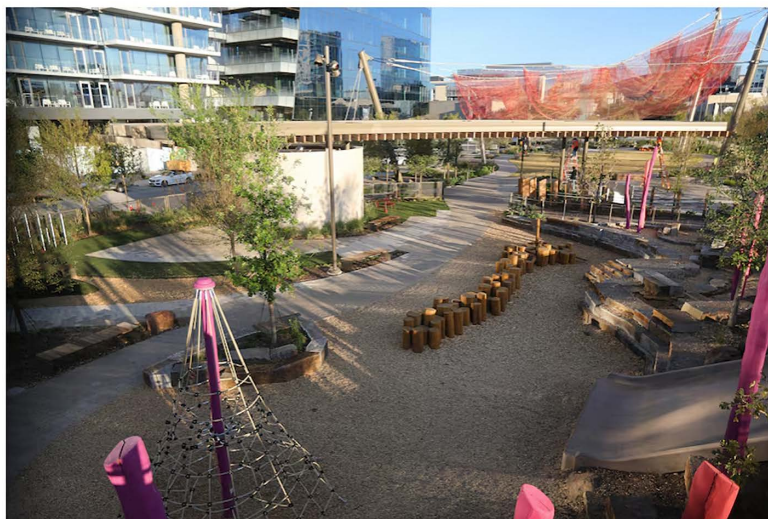
The netting sculpture at the new Kaleidoscope Park in Frisco. (Anja Schlein / Special Contributor)

The park is the brainchild of developer Craig Hall, and sits on land carved out of a 162-acre tract he bought in 1989, when it was still cow pasture. Beginning in the 1990s, Hall transformed that land into a fairly conventional office park. “At the time that we built the first building, it still was one dirt road to get out there. There was no tollway. For years people thought we were crazy,” he says. “The world has really changed.”

Frisco’s evolution has continued over the ensuing years, bringing new demands and expectations. As the strictly commercial, auto-centric office park has fallen out of fashion, a shift accelerated by the pandemic, Hall has looked to recast his Frisco development as a walkable and amenity-fueled destination with apartments, shopping and office space. Kaleidoscope Park is the centerpiece of that transformation.

In 2021, Hall entered an agreement with the city of Frisco to donate the land and put up half of the projected \$30 million cost for building the park. (The price tag rose to nearly \$40 million, with Hall picking up the extra cost.) Clearing the land for the park also meant tearing down two commercial buildings Hall had put up in the 2000s. “I had to pay off the mortgages to do that, which was not the easiest or most fun part of it,” he says.

The shared DNA between Kaleidoscope and Klyde Warren begins with the language of the public-private partnership that governs their respective operations. “We basically copied a lot of things,” says Hall of the relationship between the parks. That includes the selection of the Office of James Burnett (OJB) as landscape architect.



The play area at Kaleidoscope Park in Frisco. (Anja Schlein / Special Contributor)

“Klyde Warren really made a huge positive difference in both combining Uptown and Downtown in a way that was needed, but also in equalizing people of different ethnicity, race, financial situation,” says Hall. “And I really am attached to the idea that we have way too much divisiveness going on in our world today.”

It’s asking quite a lot to expect a park to ameliorate America’s divisive political climate, but those looking for a place to escape could do a lot worse than Kaleidoscope Park.

Like its Dallas forebear — and unlike more traditional, passive parks — Kaleidoscope Park is amenity rich and highly programmed. “People love to watch people, and if you can get them there throughout the day, you have great success,” says Chip Trageser, a partner at OJB. Toward that end, a 24,600-square-foot “performance lawn,” designed to accommodate some 5,000 people for concerts and other events, occupies the park’s southern end. A separate pavilion, formed of mass-timber ribs, is designed for smaller gatherings, and a pair of “technology terraces” with gazebos for shade provide free internet access. On its western side, there is an enclosed dog run and space for food trucks.

In the park’s center is one of the more inventive and elaborate playgrounds in the region, one that features “messy” play areas that allow children to explore all of their senses. A curving mass-timber structure serves as an armature around which a circuit of slides, tunnels and climbing features — boulders, logs, nets, water — are organized. The structure houses bathrooms and a rental event space, an amenity that will help defray the park’s operating costs, estimated at \$2.5 million annually. For security, both real and psychic, the play area has but a single point of entry. “Once you’re in it and your kids are starting to have fun, you don’t feel like you’re going to lose them, that they can just run off in any direction,” says Trageser.

The park’s most dramatic element is a whimsical, polychromatic installation by Boston-based artist Janet Echelman that flutters, waves, sways and otherwise hovers above the landscaped “Arts Plaza” at the northern end of the park. *Butterfly Rest Stop*, as it is called, is composed of some 89 miles of braided fiber netting held aloft by steel stanchions that suspend it, at its highest points, 65 feet above ground.

The piece celebrates the annual migration of monarch butterflies through Texas, its design of five floating petals in pastel colors being an abstracted interpretation of milkweed, the butterfly's favorite form of nourishment. According to Echelman, the aim is to "remind us of our interconnected destinies, and of the interconnected systems of the natural world of which we are a small part." It also gives the park its name, and not just because of its ever-shifting patterns of color and shape; like a murder of crows or a gaggle of geese, a kaleidoscope is a group of butterflies.

It is both visually arresting and a bravura work of structural design by engineers at Skidmore Owings & Merrill, capable of withstanding hurricane force winds while loaded down with 2 inches of ice. In addition to the fiber netting, the work includes plantings of milkweed, coneflower, Mexican bush sage and a variety of other species that attract and nurture butterflies and other pollinators. Those elements ring a central lawn of Bermuda grass where visitors can lay out on a blanket and look up at the undulating web above.



Artist Janet Echelman at her installation, Butterfly Rest Stop, at Kaleidoscope Park. Photo by Kim Leeson courtesy Kaleidoscope Park. (Kim Leeson / Kaleidoscope Park)

Other plantings around the park offer what Trageser calls a "rich North Texas botanical experience." Of note are the "rain gardens" along the park's southern boundary that capture and filter rainwater that is then stored underground. Cypress, elm and oak trees provide shade and line the park's winding paths; as they grow, they will dramatically enhance its character.



Kaleidoscope Park in Frisco. (Anja Schlein / Special Contributor)

The challenge for the park now is to become the genuine regional draw it aspires to be, and not simply an amenity for the rather vanilla mixed-use development Hall is putting up around it. Those buildings do the park no favors; it would be nice, as the lots around it are developed, if Hall would become as adventurous in his selection of architects as he is as a patron of art. More urgently, it is essential that some pedestrian link be made between the park and [the Cowboys' Star development](#), its neighbor directly across Warren Parkway. There is currently not even a crosswalk, an exceedingly dangerous situation.

Hall's stated ambition to build a democratic space would be more credible, or at least more effective, if there were plans for any affordable housing among the 2,000 apartments for which the development's zoning allows. "I'd love to figure out a way to have housing that met a variety of needs," he says, and blames community backlash (fair) and a paucity of land (dubious) for building only market-rate apartments.

It would be nice to see progress on these issues in the immediate future, and for a Google search of Frisco to bring up an image of people out enjoying the day in a park, and not cars whizzing on highways.

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