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Rick Brettell

Dallas is a haven for private art spaces

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Art Critic

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In late 17th-century Paris, almost a century before the opening of the Louvre, a determined English visitor, Dr. Lister, was amazed at how easy it was to gain entry to the private art collections of the city's most prominent citizens. He wrote a guidebook to help others learn the ropes. Hint: You had to wear a sword, if you were a man, as it was a signifier of high social status.

Visitors to Dallas in the years before the 1908 opening of the Dallas Art Association's permanent gallery in Fair Park would have been able to visit the private art gallery of Col. and Mrs. William L. Crawford, completed in 1900 next to their Ross Avenue "Eastlake Cottage." The gallery was open to the public via its own door, allowing the Crawfords to go on about their lives in their vast cottage — all long gone.

Tempting as it might be to think that such galleries have gone the way of aristocrats' noblesse oblige, private art spaces have made a comeback. In Dallas we have so many of them, the city rivals New York, Miami and Los Angeles.

Unlike museums conceived as public institutions, private art spaces are available to art lovers only in limited ways; they are not usually governed by independent boards or housed in buildings owned or managed by foundations or government bodies.

Nor are they like commercial art galleries that exist to sell artworks. In most private art spaces, there are no price lists or indications that works are for sale — usually, they aren't.

This frees viewers to respond to work as they would in a museum.

Generally, these new anti-institutions and anti-galleries adapt spaces to their purpose. Their names reflect this, including the Warehouse, the Power Station and the Reading Room.

The Goss-Michael Foundation was on the cutting edge here. Its Uptown origins and ambition to expose what's called YBA — for young British artists — to a Dallas audience have broadened with its move to the Design District.

The foundation boasts a collection of more than 500 works, which are shown on a rotating basis. Unlike most private art spaces, the Goss-Michael Foundation has regular hours of operation, a public exhibition program and an artist residency program. It was founded in 2007 and its early openings were must-attend events, bringing the hype and glamour of the London scene to Dallas.

Adaptable venues

Two other ambitious spaces began to be considered by their owners.

The first to open formally was the Power Station, now nearly 5 years old, and operating in a former power station in Exposition Park. It's a neighbor of 500X Gallery, one of Texas' oldest artist cooperatives, and CentralTrak, the University of Texas at Dallas' artist residency.

The Power Station space embodies the high-octane vision and taste of Alden and Janelle Pinnell and their foundation, which funds the programs and does so in a way that is anything but self-promotional. The Pinnell space is not for a growing private collection of more than 200 works by a mixture of A-list and experimental artists. Instead, it is a noncommercial venue in which artists conceive of projects for Dallas in a modified two-story industrial space. The third story and roof house visiting artists, foundation offices and are used to host parties and meals.

The Pinnells' curatorial partner is New York art adviser Rob Teeters. They are committed both to highly experimental curation, much of it utterly noncommercial, and to a program of publication. The latter ensures that the Power Station has a permanent international record beyond the openings and programs organized in the space itself.

The largest and most ambitious private art space in Dallas, the Warehouse, came about more quickly. Its founders and major supporters, Cindy and Howard Rachofsky and Amy and Vernon Faulconer, realized that their respective collections were growing so rapidly, with the resulting large bills for storage and art handling, that they should combine to purchase a facility.

Contemporary art

After a search of a few months, they purchased a large warehouse near the Galleria Dallas in 2011. Its sheer scale made it possible for them to store their own collections, rent a good deal of space to a regional firm that stores and handles art, and also to create a contemporary museum-scale exhibition space. They hired a local architect, David Droese of Droese Raney Architecture, who designed a series of variously sized white, naturally lighted galleries that many visitors consider the single best space in North Texas to view contemporary art.

The gallery space itself is more than 18,000 square feet, larger by 4,000 than the largest temporary exhibition space in a Dallas museum. More than 8,000 square feet have been set aside for storage and an additional 3,500 square feet for offices, library, kitchen and meeting area. Unlike the Power Station, the Warehouse, which opened in 2012, is financed completely privately, without a foundation to act as a tax shelter for its owners.

This privacy creates the conditions for flexibility and autonomy. No one interferes. No one unwanted is admitted. No one complains about cost overruns or carps about the schedule. Like the Pinnells at the Power Station, the owners of the Warehouse consult regularly with a New York adviser, in this case, Allan Schwartzman.

The Warehouse draws the *crème de la crème* of the contemporary art scene. The day I spoke with Howard Rachofsky, a group of collectors from Germany had toured the space. The previous time I was there, Dallas collector Marguerite Hoffman had a London visitor in tow. More recently, the British sculptor Phyllida Barlow and her painter-writer husband, Fabian Peake, were given a private tour.

The only important private art space in Dallas that does not focus on contemporary art is the Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Museum of Samurai Art in Uptown. It's a dramatically installed gallery designed by the architectural team of Harwood International, the company owned by the Barbier-Muellers. It's fully staffed and open six days a week without an appointment. With no board of trustees or permanent advisers, this Samurai collection functions as the public extension of a family. Indeed, many of the elements of armor in the display were formerly shown in their home.

Smaller spaces

Some of the most interesting private spaces are small.

At the Reading Room, the highly intellectual art space conceived and curated by founder-director Karen Weiner, word-based art is exhibited and performed. Housed in a tiny one-room building on Parry Avenue across from the main entrance to Fair Park, it opened in 2010 and has nurtured a growing text-based art scene in Dallas with more than 60 curated

exhibitions, readings and performances.

Its newer neighbor, the Wilcox Space, is housed in the former home and studio of John Wilcox, one of the most distinguished abstract painters in Dallas. He died in 2012. Redesigned by Cunningham Architects, the space features regular curated exhibitions of his work and is owned and maintained by his younger brother, David. It is open by appointment only.

More to come

More private art spaces are on the way in the Dallas Design District.

One, the Karpidas Space, has recently completed renovation of a building. The London collector Pauline Karpidas and her Dallas-based son and daughter-in-law are behind it. The Karpidas Collection of Contemporary Art is so important globally that this opening is keenly anticipated.

Another, called Site131, is being built by the mother-son team of Joan and Seth Davidow in a restored warehouse on Payne Street. It's programming will pair local contemporary artists with national and international figures.

Dallas trendsetter Capera Ryan has purchased a warehouse at 171 Oak Lawn and is exploring many options for independently curated installations of art.

Ten years ago, none of these private art spaces existed, and with their extraordinary fluorescence, Dallas will soon rival Miami, where the private art spaces movement first took off in the United States.

With shorter planning cycles, greater freedom of expression and almost libertarian license to do what their owners want, these spaces seem as freewheeling as Texas itself. They have done as much as the local art museums to create the conditions for an informed, arts-oriented public.

Let's hope that this arena of the art world remains as vital as it has been in the last decade.

Rick Brettell is founding director of the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History at the University of Texas at Dallas. He is a former director of the Dallas Museum of Art.

Plan your life

Goss-Michael Foundation, 1405 Turtle Creek Blvd.

Hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays. 214-696-0555. g-mf.org.

The Power Station, 3816 Commerce St.

Hours: 1-5 p.m. Fridays and by appointment. 214-827-0163. powerstationdallas.com.

The Warehouse, 14105 Inwood Road. By appointment; see thewarehousedallas.org for details.

The Ann and Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Museum, the Samurai Collection, 2501 N. Harwood St. (St. Ann’s Restaurant in the old St. Ann’s School).

Hours: 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Tuesdays

11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays

11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays. 214-965-1032. samuraicollection.org.

The Reading Room, 3715 Parry Ave. By appointment. thereadingroom-dallas.blogspot.com.

The Wilcox Space, 824 Exposition Ave., No. 9.

By appointment. johnwilcoxart.com.

Karpidas Space, 1532 Hi Line Drive. Not yet open; no website.

Site131, 131 Payne St. Not yet open; no website.

171 Oak Lawn. Open only for events; no website.

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