

DESIGN



R. Clayton McKee/Contributor

The Uptown District street sign rings that have hung in the Galleria area for nearly 30 years are being replaced — by new rings with LED lights.

BEAUTIFICATION

Uptown District's crowning glory comes in form of new street sign rings

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The 40-foot gleaming directional rings that help establish the elegant nature of the Uptown District will soon return to their aerial homes at key intersections.

Not only will the signs — part of the jewelry-like hardscape of the tony shopping/dining/working area — do their job of letting motorists know which street they're on or are turning onto, they will also signal that years of construction work on Post Oak Boulevard are over.

"This is a culmination of things we've been working on for 30 years," said John Breeding, president and CEO of Uptown Houston District and administrator of the Uptown Development Authority. "From when the rings originally went up, more than 30 years ago, we have done a lot of things: Sidewalks throughout, trees throughout. Lighting and streets with medians, trees and flowers. We have gone from a time when there were broken sidewalks to where you can walk around fairly easily, and you can do it under the shade of a tree."

Work began to rebuild the street, create bus lanes, widen sidewalks and continue beautification efforts in 2016. Nearly seven years and about \$185 million later, the Post Oak Boulevard project is done. The return of the rings — in a new, more high-tech form — are the sign of a new era. The first 40-foot ring at Post Oak and Westheimer will go up this week, with the remaining three rings following during the next year.

Country becomes city

In 1960, the area that is now Uptown and the Galleria still had open fields, where farmers grew vegetables and cattle grazed openly. Construction of the 610 Loop and U.S. 69 both put Uptown area growth on the fast track. Both Sakowitz and Joske's department stores had opened there, and Gerald Hines soon began acquiring land and planning for the Galleria mall that opened with Neiman Marcus in early 1969, followed by the rest of the original mall in 1970; several expansions have followed.

Towering office buildings, residential high-rises and hotels sprang from the ground, too, including Philip Johnson's



Kevin Thomas Photography

An artist rendering shows the new directional street sign rings that are set to be installed along Post Oak Boulevard.



Kevin Thomas Photography

The new street sign rings consist of two tubes connected by stainless-steel fins.

Transco Tower (now Williams Tower), Cesar Pell's Four Leaf Towers and I.M. Pei's Warwick Post Oak (now the Hilton Houston Post Oak). Hines led the way in connecting top architects to building projects, and other developers quickly embraced the idea.

In six decades, what is now the Uptown District went from far-flung, prairie-like fields to one of the most chic places in

Houston.

The idea for the polished-steel street markers was sparked by state's many oil fields.

When Breeding was named head of the Uptown group, they were looking to add some marketing polish and reached out to the Communication Arts firm in Colorado, where Henry Beer was principal in charge. Beer was driving between Midland

and Odessa and, except for an armadillo or two, he saw nothing but pipes coming out of the ground, running for a few miles and then plunging into the ground again.

"I thought about how all of the wealth of Texas, whether it's minerals or real estate or oil, comes out of the ground and goes back into the system. What a great metaphor that was," said Beer. (The firm was acquired in 2016 by Canadian firm Stantec Consulting.)

Beer and senior designer Michael Doyle put together ideas for highly polished, custom-made arches, street lights, trash bins and even bus shelter benches and the rings that have hovered like halos over the intersections. Part art and part architecture, they add an intangible quality to the mix that is Uptown: retail, dining, office buildings and beautiful surroundings.

Beer recalled giving a presentation to Breeding and his board, which at the time included Raymond Brochstein, Bill Miller, Louis Sklar, Giorgio Borlenghi.

"I told our designers that this is a real long shot, but these are the right ideas. The presentation was one and a half hours of answering questions, and when I finished, there was a long silence," Beer recalled. "Finally, Louis Sklar, who was the smartest guy in the room, he looks around and says something to the effect of, 'this is the damndest thing I've ever seen, but I believe we ought to do it.' And that was it. When Louis spoke, everyone nodded."

The long-shot plan included the series of 40-foot, highly polished stainless-steel rings that have hung at six intersections. They were drawn from the notion that Houston is an oil and gas town, and those substances run through pipes. Take those pipes, shine them up and give them a new task, and Beer and Doyle believed they could become iconic symbols for both the Uptown District and Houston as a whole.

Four of the six rings, originally hung in 1995, were removed from Post Oak Boulevard in 2016 and road construction began after Houston hosted the Super Bowl in 2017. Two of the rings — at the Sage/Westheimer and Sage/Richmond intersections — remained in place.

"Taking an everyday material like pipe and turning it into

jewelry, polished stainless steel, was an unusual way to create elegance out of the every day," Beer said. "All of the light poles along the boulevard are the same mirror-polished stainless. It created an ensemble of urban jewelry, for lack of a better term."

The new replacement rings will be the same size, 40 feet in diameter, but they are dramatically different in other ways. Instead of a single solid tube, they consist of two tube rings — an 8-inch ring on top and 3-inch ring on the bottom, connected by stainless-steel fins, all the way around, making them look a bit more like crowns than halos. They're embedded with LED lights, technology that didn't exist when the original rings were made.

While the original rings weighed 9,000 pounds each, the new ones weigh just 6,000 pounds and are better able to withstand heavy winds.

International attention

Beer, Doyle and the Uptown board took a gamble that the rings, arches and other polished stainless touches would be a hit.

Longtime Yale School of Architecture professor Alexander Garvin included Houston's Uptown District in his 2016 book, "What Makes a Great City."

His international perspective evaluated places as diverse as Barcelona, Amsterdam, Paris, Stockholm and Rome, plus U.S. cities such as Chicago, Denver, Portland, New York City and Houston.

Zeroing in on the Uptown District, he called the shiny arches, ring signs, bus shelters and street lights "unique street furniture" that contributed to the district's brand. Comparing Uptown to the Place de la Republique in Paris and Brooklyn Bridge Park, it was an example of "how a city can transform the public realm with minimal disruption and maximum benefit to urban life."

For Breeding, this unique furniture is one more element that blends into the beauty of the whole.

"Context is so important. We've always said about our transit project, a huge remake of the area, that we didn't want people to walk out of a restaurant and say, 'What a beautiful transit project.' We want them to say, 'What a beautiful boulevard.' We don't want people to notice the lights, but just that the lighting is good," Breeding said.



Kevin Thomas Photography/

At night, the street names will be lit up and LED lights will illuminate the frame of the rings.