

Commercial landlords explore their artistic side

Developers say public displays make their real estate holdings more attractive and valuable to employees, customers

By Erin Mulvaney | January 6, 2016 | Updated: January 7, 2016 12:44pm



Photo: Kinzelman Art Consulting

The continuous loop of bright red bronze ribbon by Mexican artist Yvonne Domenge called "Wind Waves" is displayed in the Woodlands. It previously was installed at Hermann Park. The art is one of several new installations by The Woodlands Development Co.

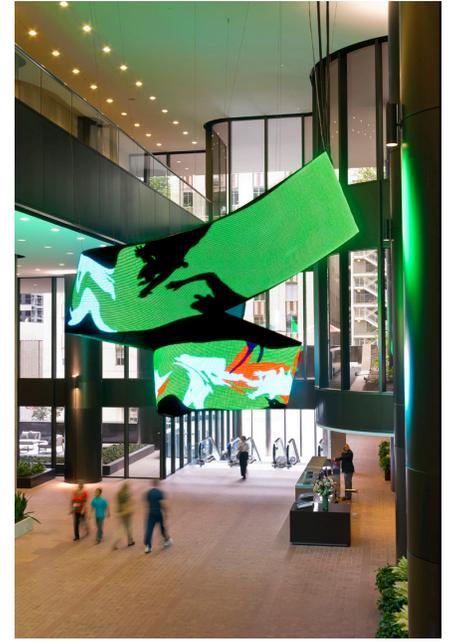


Photo: Kinzelman Art Consulting

Stainless steel boulders across from the California Pizza Kitchen add a touch of abstract beauty to a suburban office park in The Woodlands.

A downtown lobby gets a modernist makeover with the help of a pulsating LED display in the lobby.

Across the Houston area, real estate developers and brokers often turn to public art displays to make their holdings more attractive to their employees and customers. On Wednesday, the intersection of art and commerce was a prime topic at a monthly forum for Houston commercial real estate professionals where experts said it could pay off to invest in art.

"On a micro level, building owners and tenants want their space to be a great expression of what their company is," Ray Simpson, owner of Simpson Galleries, told the gathering of CREW Houston Wednesday. "It makes them enjoy the space better and adds more value on that piece of property. It can translate to value in property as well."

Major companies in the region, including The Woodlands Development Co, Exxon Mobil Corp., Vinson & Elkins and ConocoPhillips, have invested major time and money to acquire art to enhance their commercial properties.

Local art consultant Julie Kinzelman said art for commercial spaces can manifest itself in many forms.

"We work collectively to display art for the purposes of telling a story about the industry itself," Kinzelman said. "It's art that shows itself in a unique, purposely spaced fashion in the context of the space."

When the real estate firm CBRE wanted to update 2 Houston Center, the property managers commissioned a swirling LED sculptural work by Spanish artist Daniel Canogar. His creation, "Waves," is suspended from the ceiling on cables. It weighs 3,200 pounds and includes 350,000 LEDs in 606 specially designed flexible tiles affixed to metal with magnets.

The artwork was a key way the new managers decided to update the 1970s skyscraper.

"It's not just about having art on the walls. It's about creating an active environment that is always changing, and people are interacting with it as well," Kinzelman said. "An emphasis on art can actually affect the design of the architecture. It provides a dialogue for art and architects within the context of their space."

To bring art to Exxon Mobil's new campus near Spring and The Woodlands, Kinzelman canvassed the 7,000 pieces of art the company has worldwide and worked to curate exactly what would make sense in the sprawling area.

"Every single piece of art provides a different experience," she said. "You are really enriching the environment and the tenants' employees with art."

Developers of The Woodlands have been doing that for years. The 100 or so pieces of public art scattered throughout the community were paid for through an art fund established in 1985 by The Woodlands Development Co. founder George Mitchell and his wife, Cynthia Mitchell. The fund is supported by commercial land sales and a percentage of the value of commercial buildings.

Over time, private business such as St. Luke's, Memorial Hermann and Anadarko Corp. have added their own artwork to the public sphere.

Robert Heineman, vice president of planning for The Woodlands, said the multimillion-dollar investment in such landmarks is worth it to executives.

"Our belief is that art enhances the overall environment and experience in The Woodlands," Heineman said. "It adds to the built environment, the buildings, the landscaping and the streetscapes."

One of the first pieces installed was a sculpture of George Mitchell and his family at the entrance to the community. The latest are more abstract. The newest sculpture, "Fire Fly" by New York minimalist artist John Clement, is a 14-foot-tall sculpture of pipe shaped like a spring.

Others include a sculpture that looks like a continuous loop of bright red ribbons in the shape of a sphere by Mexican artist Yvonne Domenge called "Wind Waves."

Groupings of large stainless steel boulders in a garden are by Washington artist Julie Speidel.

"We definitely believe it adds value to not only the commercial buildings but to the overall community," Heineman said. "We have already spent several million dollars, and there will be several million more spent over the years."

For businesses looking at such art projects as more traditional investments, Simpson stressed the importance of appraising and keeping records of existing art in commercial spaces. He cited the case of one particular piece of art in a Houston downtown office that was inherited during an acquisition.

The art could be worth between \$500,000 and \$700,000. But the new owners did not keep records, and the art failed to sell.



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