Pig room? Debate room? See what makes Old Parkland, home to Dallas’ first hospital, a unique redo

Once it was home to Dallas’ first public hospital. Now Old Parkland is the address of choice for many of the city’s most elite members of the quiet-money world of finance and investment.
Two years ago, Kneeland Youngblood, founder of a successful private-equity firm in Dallas, called his longtime friend Harlan Crow and told him that he wanted to integrate Old Parkland.

The 62-year-old chairman of Pharos Capital Group and the first black member of the Dallas Country Club was being lighthearted but also serious.

Old Parkland was once the home of Dallas' first public hospital. Now it’s joined The Crescent as an address of choice for power players in Big D’s quiet-money world of finance and private investments.

“This is where the action is,” Youngblood says in his suite of offices. “It’s important to be in the room, to have a voice and a presence.”

Youngblood had never stepped foot on the property when he made his call to Crow.
All he knew was that many business people at The Crescent — where he’d had his offices for 15 years — had moved into the repurposed medical complex at Maple and Oak Lawn avenues.

Old Parkland was fully leased, but Crow immediately moved Youngblood to the top of his waiting list.

“Kneeland’s a terrific guy,” says the 67-year-old chairman of Crow Holdings. “So when he said he was interested in coming here, I was thrilled.”

A few months later, Youngblood was happily ensconced in a prime office suite that had become available when the previous tenant died before he could occupy it.

Youngblood didn’t ask what the rent would be.
“I frankly didn’t care,” he says. “I knew I had to be here. I considered it an investment that would pay dividends. And it has.”

If you drive along the Dallas North Tollway, you’ve undoubtedly noticed the Jeffersonesque red-brick, columned buildings — one with a huge copper dome — going up one after another.

The landmark complex currently consists of two converted historic medical buildings and seven office buildings built since 2011. The 10th and final building is under construction and is nearly fully leased.

More than 135 companies — financial, real estate and investment firms, family offices, foundations and corporate headquarters — are located in this luxe project where money seems to be no object.

Cathy Golden, general manager of Old Parkland operations, won’t give rental specifics but says it’s safe to say that Old Parkland’s leases are among the priciest in town, and more than double Dallas’ average rate of $27 a square foot.
Just how much the complex is worth is mostly conjecture. Crow Holdings places its value “in excess of $250 million,” which seems like a bit of a lowball.

**When pigs fly**

This is an American fantasyland created by Crow as an homage to the American Experiment.

Towering bronze statues of founding fathers George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin stand as sentinels at three buildings.

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A hallway lit with lanterns and decorated with gold-leaf framed oil portraits leads to a fireplace in the Pecan Room inside the old nurses quarters building at Old Parkland in Dallas. The original hospital and nurses quarters were converted to office space, and several new buildings have been added to the complex. (Ashley Landis / Staff Photographer)
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“The idea was to celebrate the ideas of the American founding using specific founders, but also their intellectual antecedents from the Enlightenment,” says Crow, who’s more than just a history buff. “So there’s a lot of John Locke and Adam Smith and guys from the Enlightenment who never came to America but who greatly influenced the founders.”

More than two dozen sculptures by Auguste Rodin, Antoine Bourdelle and Aristide Maillol grace the 9.5-acre grounds, half of which is communal green space.

Old Parkland is not open to the public. Round-the-clock security discourages the uninvited. “But we refer to them as courtesy officers more than security,” says Golden. “They spend more time
directing people to the correct office they’re visiting than turning people away at the gate.”

The Pig Room at Old Parkland is a whimsical meeting room with a pig theme outside the very serious Debate Room. (Ashley Landis / Staff Photographer)

Amenities abound: a fitness center with locker rooms, sauna, squash and basketball courts, a jogging trail, a barbershop, a laundry, a restaurant, a private tavern and concierge services.

The Nurses Quarters, a converted dormitory for nurses who used to come from around Texas to work at the hospital, features the Pecan Room, a manor-like hall with pecan wood paneling, two huge fireplaces, commissioned art and historical artifacts.

But there are also touches of whimsy.

“Everything is so serious, we decided to do something lighthearted,” says Crow. “We made a conference room that we call the Pig Room.”

It features large wooden pig sculptures flanking a large glass panel of a pig with wings — as in when pigs fly.

'Goofy' becomes brilliant

Crow has played a hand in every inch of Old Parkland.

But the most surprising thing about Old Parkland is that he never had a master plan.

“I wish I could claim that there was a vision, but there wasn’t,” he says. “This place evolved organically.”
The fact that it even exists is a bit of a fluke.

The hospital building had been sitting fallow for years when Dallas County put it up for bid in 2005. One of Crow’s executives, Dodge Carter, suggested that Crow take a look at it for the company’s new headquarters.

“I said, ‘OK, that’s a goofy idea,’ ” Crow recalls. “But I decided to look at it. It had a beautiful shell, and the location was very good. So I said, ‘We could save the building and make it work, and that’s kinda cool.’ Then I fell in love with it.”

Crow Holdings and Alliance Residential placed the winning bid of $16.5 million, and the deal closed in late 2006. But instead of adding apartments, as the partnership originally planned, Crow became smitten with the idea of restoring the property and saving the grounds and quickly bought out Alliance.

The location was greatly enhanced by serendipity when Oak Lawn exit ramps were added to the Dallas North Tollway in 2008.
“It was funny,” says Crow. “People said, ‘Gosh, Harlan, you’re so smart.’ I had nothing to do with it. It was the Scottish Rite people who’d been working on getting the ramps for years.”

The architecture melds American Classicism, Palladian and Jeffersonian.

“I spent a lot of time looking at other projects, particularly the University of Virginia. I’m on the board of Monticello, so I know it pretty well,” says Crow.

Not everyone is a fan of this adaptation.

Three years ago, Mark Lamster, The News' architecture critic, panned Old Parkland. "Grossly out of proportion, inward looking and driven by no ideal greater than mammon, it is a perversion of Jefferson's academical village at the University of Virginia, on which it is modeled."

Crow shrugs off the biting review.

“Mark Lamster might not care for it. That’s fine. There’s different strokes for different folks,” Crow says in his office. “It’s a nice little complex of buildings, if you like that sort of thing, which I do.”

As for it being inward-looking, that’s entirely by Crow’s design. He wants a sense of community.

“Each building has its own personality. It’s a like dorm complex at a college,” he says, flipping through an album of photos showing teams competing in volleyball and putting tournaments. There are also photos of families at an Easter egg hunt and holiday parties.

That esprit de corps is one of the things that Kathleen Gibson, CEO of Southwestern Medical Foundation, likes most about Old Parkland.
“My favorite feature is the campus tenants and the quality of conversation,” says Gibson. “There is a tremendous amount to learn from the ‘American Experiment’ inspiration on campus, but it would be hard to beat the quality of conversation with leaders who are capable of taking our city forward in exceptional ways.”

Creating civil discourse

Earlier this month, Crow hosted a small dinner party for Clarence Thomas.

The Supreme Court justice’s political leanings more closely mirror Crow’s than Youngblood’s, but both men describe the dinner conversation as cordial, respectful and spirited.

“We had a very seasoned discussion on issues, including the current administration,” says Youngblood. “We all agreed that what was said at the dinner stayed at the dinner.”

Crow calls it civil discourse, and it’s at the core of Old Parkland.

“For me, the whole thing is interaction among people,” says Crow. “I get the most satisfaction out of civil discourse. It’s what we as a society needs.”

But he wants it to be cordial and thoughtful.
“Kneeland and I don’t see eye to eye politically, but we’re great friends,” says Crow. “We’re on different sides of the fence. When Kneeland brought President Clinton here, I sat in the front row.”

Youngblood makes more use of Old Parkland’s meeting areas than any other tenant.

He hosted a welcoming party last year for three top executives new to Dallas: the new CEO of J.C. Penney, the global general counsel for Toyota and a new senior executive at UT Southwestern Medical Center. They were bowled over, he says.

“I enjoy sharing the campus experience with people who don’t know that it exists — being able to introduce it to people not only from within Dallas but outside of Dallas, outside of Texas, outside of the U.S.,” Youngblood says. “It never fails to impress.”

And when he told Crow that he wanted to integrate Old Parkland, he meant more than being its first black tenant.
Youngblood has held a series of fireside chats with philanthropist Mike Milken for his prostate cancer foundation and to raise awareness among black men, who develop the disease at disproportionately high rates. Most of his guests at these events have been young professional black men and women who might otherwise never see this inner sanctum.

He’s planning a welcoming reception for Dallas’ new police chief, Renee Hall. He gave her predecessor, David Brown, an office in his suite.

The pièce de résistance of Old Parkland is its Debate Chamber below ground level in the Pavilion building. The walnut-paneled oval enclave has a spectacular domed ceiling and sculptures that harken to Roman and Greek influences on the American Experiment. It has 75 fixed seats but can accommodate more than 200 people with additional chairs.

In addition to an annual international high school debate tournament, the Debate Chamber routinely holds high-brow face-offs over important current issues. One in December featured civil liberties lawyer Alan Dershowitz and Harvard professor Cornel West discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Some of the debates are open to the public, but most are for tenants and invited guests.

“Speakers, book tours, events, seminars or conferences had been going on in facilities that we had,” says Crow. “But I felt that it might be a good idea to have a place that was put together in such a way that it created a more structured, high-level discourse. Brains doing things that involve brains — whether it’s political or other kinds of things that involve interesting and important ideas. We have that now. And that excites me.”

**AT A GLANCE: Old Parkland**

**Established:** 2008.

**Location:** Bounded by Maple and Oak Lawn avenues and the Dallas North Tollway.

**Market value:** Over $350 million.
**Buildings:** Two historic, plus seven office buildings and one under construction.

**Square feet of offices:** 521,400, with 90,000 under construction.

**Tenants:** 135 financial, real estate and investment firms, family offices, foundations and corporate headquarters.

SOURCE: Crow Holdings

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