

Dallas' Historic Purse Building and its Ghost Signage Being Restored by Woman Developer With a Downtown Plan

Tanya Ragan is a Pioneer on a Mission

BY MEGAN ZIOTS // 10.10.19



The Purse Building is being brought back to life in the West End.

An old furniture wholesaler store in the West End had been sitting vacant and boarded up for 30 years before commercial developer Tanya Ragan decided to bring it back to life. Dubbed The Purse Building for its ghost signage on the exterior that states “Purse & Co.,” the six-story historic building will be back up and running as office and retail spaces at 601 Elm Street this spring. “It’s been fun to see the level of interest from urbanites and historians,” [Wildcat Management](#)

(<http://www.pursebuildingdallas.com/>) president Tanya Ragan tells *PaperCity*. Although once easily passed by, as it was pitch black and inaccessible, she says there have been people stopping in all the time asking what the building is becoming. One factor that has been grabbing passerby’s attention is the giant mural of iconic urbanist Jane Jacobs seen through the window. Neon lighting reads: “New ideas need old buildings.”

Ragan says that the Purse family even came to visit, which was the first time they’d been on site since it had been occupied by the county. They told a story of when President John F. Kennedy was shot in Dealey Plaza in 1963, the FBI came into the Purse building and used it as their operations center.

There’s actually tons of history that Ragan dug up after purchasing the building. Dallas pioneer Sarah Horton had owned a lot of the West End area in the 1800s. She acquired it after her husband was killed in a gambling debt in 1858. But since women weren’t allowed to own property at that time, the deeds had to go in her sons’ names. One of the buildings Horton owned was Liberty State Bank, which Ragan acquired and moved to the Dallas Farmers Market in 2014.



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Coincidentally, Ragan is the first female to own the Purse Building.

“What makes me different is my community involvement,” she says in comparison to her peers. Also, the fact that Ragan is a female in a male-dominated industry definitely makes her stand out. According to CREW Network’s 2015 Benchmark Study Report, only 32 percent of developers in the United States are women.

“I’ve gone from activist to pioneer to doer,” Ragan says. When she first started working on saving the Dallas Farmers Market from being demolished, Ragan says she got a lot of pushback. She heard things like “Who does she think she is?” and “Wannabe Jane Jacobs.” But she took those negative comments and used them as fuel to do more.

“I want to encourage more women,” Ragan says. “If there’s more of a support system, we can encourage.” CREW, the Commercial Real Estate Women’s group, is the largest group for women’s commercial real estate in Dallas, but Ragan says that there’s still a lot more that can be done for females in the industry.

As for her community involvement, Ragan has an interesting role of “mediator” between the developers and the community. “Nobody else is in this role,” she says. “I understand both sides.” Although not a glamorous position to be in the middle all of the time, Ragan is very passionate about downtown Dallas.

“I put in my own personal resources and time,” she says. “I always felt like I don’t really fit in, being female and younger, and I lived downtown when it wasn’t great, but I am entrenched.” Ragan still lives downtown, which is what she thinks makes her different from other developers.

“I have a different perspective than my peers because I actually walk the streets. I hop on the scooters. Go to the local coffee shops. It’s a 24/7 environment for me,” she notes.

“I’m inspired by projects that have a level of impact. This building is the entry to the West End.”

The Historic District is also a Smart Cities Living Lab (<http://www.dallasinnovationalliance.com/livinglabvision>), a technological pilot project that only nine cities in the U.S. are a part of. With the addition of an upcoming green space and the relighting of the arches under Woodall Rodgers, Ragan believes the West End is the next burgeoning neighborhood in Dallas.

“Downtown is on its way,” Ragan says. With the new building, she hopes to continue to attract more young professionals moving to downtown with the same ideas of innovation while preserving. “New ideas need old buildings,” she says.

The Purse Building will be complete within the next seven months. Wildcat Management is actively leasing for the 65,000 square foot space.