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by roger brooks
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To learn a foreign language, experts suggest immersing yourself in the culture. It's the only way to pick up the subtle nuances that make the language a flowing, living thing. Knowing those little subtleties marks the difference between someone who can only communicate and someone who can express all the language has to offer.

Understanding the levels of Deep Ellum is no different, and no one knows that more than Jeff Swaney. Intimacy, debauchery, vitality—Jeff has embraced Deep Ellum's many faces and made the

district his business, his passion and his home.

"I get inspired by the people here," Jeff says as he looks down at the neighborhood from his second-story loft in the heart of Deep Ellum. "This place has soul and history; it's one of the most under-appreciated neighborhoods in Dallas."

While he had been coming to the area for years, organizing parties, collecting art from local artists and establishing the popular Club Clearview, it was only six years ago that Jeff made a two-story property located on

Commerce Street his home.

The little brick building was built in 1930 and originally housed a grocery store on the first floor, while the owners lived above. Over the years it has housed a number of businesses, including an assembly factory for the world's first golf carts.

"I was looking for a space where I could live in an upper floor with my office below," recalls Jeff. But it was not that easy. When he bought the building in 1997 he had to deal with extensive termite damage and asbestos tiling. He painstakingly

removed the layers of flooring, sheetrock and drywall to reveal the original brick walls and beautiful maple hardwood floors. The ceiling's timber beams are now exposed, gracefully giving the space a soft, aged texture that blends perfectly with the rough brick walls.

The remodeling now complete, the building houses Jeff's 2,500-square-foot home upstairs. Downstairs houses his real estate business—an 1,800-square-foot garage—an additional office and a roof deck complete with a bar and cabana.

As with almost any loft, Jeff's place is all about space. He uses every foot of his home to keep it as open as possible. It makes for a great escape from the busy, crowded streets of Deep Ellum.

"I think the trend, even in suburban homes, is to have more space," he says. "As the population increases, we get more crowded. So I think space has become a sacred thing."

That's certainly the case for Jeff. The living area features large windows that open onto the bustling comings and goings of the neighborhood. From them,

you can look to the kitchen and all the way through to the back of the building. The same holds true on the other side of the stairs that lead into the loft. From the study, which overlooks Commerce Street, you can look through Jeff's bedroom toward the back stairs that lead to the deck above.

But it's not all about living space—Jeff's home is also about displaying his treasures. He loves to point out the antique cigarette machine he rescued from a warehouse, the simple bookcase filled with mementos from his childhood, an extravagant pool

Above: The West side of the building includes Swaney's living area. While the colorful content might be an eyesore in some works well with Swaney's style of artwork.

Left: The East side of the dining/conference table, a built-in shelving area for relaxing, and a space for a more industrial, reminiscent of the golf cart.



ation, the loft's original
multiple floors were
many layers of flooring

table featuring blue felt and his dining area. The custom table and chairs are accented by a beautiful chandelier that Jeff adores.

With an idea of what he wanted, Jeff enlisted the help of a designer-friend to help him make his lighting concept a reality. "My friend just said, 'give me some wires and go away,' and he came up with this amazing piece," laughs Jeff. The finished product consists of about 10 hanging lamps that cascade down from the exposed timbers to offer a soft glow on the table below.

Jeff may love his unusual

accent pieces, but everyone needs a place to escape to. The 1,000-square-foot deck, perched on the building's roof, is truly Jeff's oasis. A variety of plants and flowers are scattered around the area offering a tranquil setting. It's fully equipped for music and even features a television mounted in the cabana behind the bar for party guests to enjoy as they take in some breathtaking views of the downtown area.

"The deck really allows you to breathe," Jeff says with a content smile. "I love the outdoors, so I'm always out here. We barbecue and

have dinner out here. It's just a really nice hangout." Jeff has even inflated a small above ground pool at times for extra party fun.

But if you talk to Jeff long enough, you'll soon find out that his loft and his neighborhood are more than just a hangout for him. He's very active in the community of Deep Ellum, a fact that's impossible to miss the minute you walk up the stairs to his living space. Stunning art in every shape and size, all from local artists, decorate the brick walls throughout the loft. It's clear that his minimalist approach to the



loft is the perfect setting to let the art do the talking.

"I stripped the building down to its bare walls and let it breathe. I keep it simple so the art can make the statement," Jeff explains. "The art is the key concept. The simplicity of the space is the perfect backdrop for the art."

Jeff's collection—20 years in the making—encompasses almost 30 local artists and more than 40 pieces. Amazing works from Christian Schumann, Bill Haveron, Andrew Bennett, Dan Rizzie, Chris Lattanzio and Brent

Johnson are all displayed with pride.

For Jeff, the art is not an investment—he cautions friends to never buy a piece hoping it will increase in value—it's a way to connect with the people and culture of Deep Ellum.

"The pieces really inspire or confuse people who come in here," he chuckles. "If someone sees [the art] and likes it, we'll get along. If they don't, they're probably great people with whom I would never have dinner with."

Ask him to pick a favorite piece and you'll quickly see him



blush and shake his head. He loves them all, but, if prodded, will confess to having a special place in his heart for his collection of Big Tex artwork. In 1989, Jeff helped set up an exhibition in which local artists rendered their impressions of the State Fair icon.

As a result, his dining area is peppered with some of the most colorful and amusing interpretations of the character that greets fairgoers every year. From abstract to lifelike studies to a painting of a giant toothpick, the collection explores every emotion Big Tex evokes. It's as

The kitchen, made of steel, built by an artist friend of Jeff's, is perfect for a quick bite or a drink. The surface also adds to the industrial feel of the loft.



to separate the bedroom from the back door that leads to the rooftop deck. This area is more of a relaxing retreat, filled with more personal mementos from Swaney's travels.



perfect for entertaining large crowds, overlooks an awe-inspiring view of

playful as it is a sentimental nod to the Texas way of life.

Not every offering is as innocent as the Big Tex collection. In the living room hangs "Morning, Noon and Night," by Chris Lattanzio. This stunning piece demands attention as soon as you enter the area. Consisting of three panels, each depicting a 3-D rendering of a nude woman, the work is captivating. Three spotlights in different colors highlight each panel, altering how the piece is viewed, depending on the time of day.

Just a few feet away is a chaotic piece in the form of a chair that counters the simplicity of Lattanzio's piece, forcing your eyes to move back and forth between the two in enjoyable confusion.

The chair is a frantic tribute to the history of music in Deep Ellum.

"I was not going to buy it," Jeff laughs when describing the piece, "but the guy—Arthur James—really wanted it to be in the collection. It's a testament to the whole music scene that developed here. You could get lost looking at the details of it for hours."



Various artist renderings of Dallas icon Big Tex line the walls of the dining area, from colorful abstract paintings to mixed media representations and original flyers.



The exposed brick walls offer a subtle backdrop for Swaney's collection of local artwork.

Through it all—the controversy, the chaos, the beauty—Jeff maintains the art is always the focal point, no matter how the pieces make you feel. A painting by Brent Johnson was so disturbing to his business partner that he had it removed from one of their functions. While Jeff admits the work, which features a vicious scene of nudity and animalism, is difficult to look at, he insists it's an important part of the local landscape.

And for Jeff, immersing himself in the local history and culture is the key. The loft, his

business, his art collection—all work in concert to reflect the melting pot of Deep Ellum's personality. It's what makes his loft a glimpse into the richness of Dallas' most eclectic neighborhood. So remember, if you want to learn the language, you've got to know the locals. ■

An eclectic art chair by Arthur James is a testament to the evolution of the Deep Ellum music scene and the predominance of the blues.

