

TexasMonthly

Green Acres – How Houston Became A Model for Green Space with the Quality of Life Coalition

What if Houston were known for its parks instead of its stripmalls? Its bike trails instead of its freeways? The city has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into an extreme green makeover—and that vision is starting to bloom.

BY MIMI SWARTZ - OCTOBER 2015



ILLUSTRATION BY DAN COSGROVE

If you lived in Houston at a certain time—say, before the year 2000—you might remember the Mudhole. That was the nickname given to the reflection pool at Hermann Park, located about four miles south of downtown. The Mudhole was largely populated by hungry but diffident ducks, along with the occasional discarded tire, which inevitably drifted, gay and oblivious, toward the middle of the pool until some brave soul waded in and fished it out. Few people hung out at the Mudhole because, well, why would you? Your shoes would get all cakey and your kids would get all dirty, and there wasn't enough shade to provide even a hint of relief on a hot summer day.

The same was true of Hermann Park itself and its 445 parched, patchy acres. Given to the city by philanthropist George Hermann in 1914, it sits adjacent to the loveliest and most exclusive residential neighborhood in Houston: Shadyside, conceived of by Texaco founder Joseph Cullinan in 1916. Hermann also borders the plummy Hotel Zaza, the Museum of Natural Science, the Texas Medical Center, and the leafy Rice University campus. But prestige was not catching: for years, most Houstonians ignored the park proper, using it more as a cut-through to park venues like the zoo or the golf course or Miller Outdoor Theatre. Sometimes people used one of the many sun-bleached

parking lots to wash their cars. Mainly, drug addicts and indigent patients discharged from Ben Taub Hospital camped there.

Strolling through a park, spending an afternoon on a shady bench with a good book, or picnicking with a lover was something people did in Paris. Houstonians had backyards for those sorts of things. More important, to live in Houston back then meant that you accepted as a certain truth, or even harbored as a point of pride, that the city's unsightliness was a direct result of its success. It was growing too fast to care about its looks.

"Miles of aggressive concrete, uninhabited by any living green thing . . . glitter flags calling attention to displays of shiny new and used cars or to heaps of used construction equipment and remaindered industrial parts; motels and ammo shops, girlie joints and medical clinics—the Houston freeway landscape was an urban crust that resembled the ugly discolored tissue of a bad scar across clean skin" is the way landscape architect Kevin Shanley described the Houston of forty years ago, an account that echoes virtually every characterization of Houston from the fifties through the nineties. Dirty air, dirty water, a city ringed and bisected by nearly impassable highways—that was Houston, love it or leave it.

But if you've stuck around, you have probably noticed something strange. Houston doesn't look like Houston anymore. Maybe it doesn't resemble Portland or San Francisco or even Austin, but smog no longer provides those psychedelic sunsets. The "Reeking Regatta" down Buffalo Bayou no longer demands a gas mask. With completely straight faces, people are talking about preserving migratory flyways, expanding bike-share programs, and prettifying freeway exit ramps. They are quoting from the work of Texas A&M professor John Crompton, whose specialty is park financing and marketing. They worship the Harris County Flood Control District.

The Mudhole is no more. It's now the Mary Gibbs and Jesse H. Jones Reflection Pool, edged in stone and bordered with benches and vine-covered pergolas. Thanks to a \$119 million restoration that began back in the nineties, Hermann Park is now jammed with people basking in its glory, chattering in everything from English and Spanish to Farsi and Vietnamese. Visitors no longer rush through the park to get to other venues; they rent pedal boats on the beautified McGovern Lake or journey to the top of the thirty-foot mount to admire the rainbow of perennial beds blooming in the Centennial Gardens below.

Houston, for decades a contender in America's Ugliest City Sweepstakes, has become fanatically green. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent on this extreme makeover—Hermann Park is only one project—and "You can't believe you're in Houston" has replaced "It's not as bad as you think" as an unofficial motto.

Every major American city in the United States has one or more massive parks projects in the works. But Houston's come-from-behind reinvention is about more than reputation, it's about economic survival. Houston may be the nation's fourth-largest city, but civic leaders have begun to worry, very quietly, about who would want to live here when fossil fuels no longer drive the economy; short term, they have been fretting about what will happen if oil sits too long below \$50 a barrel.

"Houston is great at going from worst to first," one local booster told me with the optimism that has always been endemic to this city. If that requires besting Central Park and the High Line in Manhattan, so be it. Millennium Park in Chicago? Can do! But change does not come easy to a culture that's long been invested in exponential economic growth at all costs.



“We’re fixing quality of life,” Tom Bacon assured me one steamy summer morning. We had met for breakfast al fresco at a cafe in the Heights; I couldn’t help noticing that his crisp white shirt stood up magnificently to the heat.

Bacon is a youthful sixty years old, tall, athletically lean, and handsome in a craggy, Lincolnesque way. He has the supreme confidence of someone whose success in global real estate—he traveled the world for developer Gerald Hines and then founded Lionstone Investments—has propelled him to the top of the food chain. Not surprisingly, Bacon’s accomplishments as the chairman of the Houston Parks Board, with its mission to create, preserve, and advocate for parkland, have been downright impressive. So far 14,000 acres have been added. Belonging to the organization has even become a badge of honor; it might not sound very sexy, unless you think of it as another form of development, which it has become.

Bacon’s unbridled passion for turning Houston green was a little disorienting, because historically the city’s most famous projects have included an air-conditioned domed stadium, an air-conditioned luxury shopping mall with an ice-skating rink, and a whole bunch of air-conditioned signature skyscrapers connected by air-conditioned underground tunnels.

“What’s your picture of Houston?” Bacon asked me. I had to think for a minute, which spurred him to a little impatient prompting. Then I got it: “A map of the city with all the freeways,” I answered. Bacon rewarded me with a tolerant nod.

“But what if your picture of Houston was . . .” Bacon opened his laptop and with his long fingers went *tap tap tap*. Then he turned the screen toward me for the big reveal: “. . . *this?*” It took me a minute to recognize what I was seeing: a series of narrow rivers flowing into a larger body of water. I blinked. Twice.

“*That’s* Houston,” Bacon said, triumphant. The image was something you never see: Houston without roads. Instead, nine bayous joined hands, meeting up in either Lake Houston or Galveston Bay. This is the Parks Board’s moon shot: Bayou Greenways 2020, which will put parkland within a mile and a

half of six out of ten Houstonians by creating a network of trails along all the bayous. That way, backers say, Houstonians can pass a lovely Sunday without setting foot on a city street, or ride a bike for miles without facing down the homicidal impulses of local drivers. “We want to create green infrastructure instead of gray infrastructure,” Bacon insisted, the kind of notion that could have gotten a person committed here twenty years ago.

As Bacon sees it, America is in the midst of a second City Beautiful movement, the first being a late-nineteenth-century trend in major urban centers, supporting beautification as a force for social good. Today’s motives are not quite as pure: the benefits of green space have become necessities in attracting the kind of intellectual capital that sustains cities.

But Houston was slow to catch on. It has been a deeply held belief since the end of World War II that no one came here to commune with nature; they came to work hard and better themselves, whether they wound up in an apartment complex with a community laundry room or a mansion in River Oaks. Freeways mattered: they sped you to work. Public spaces did not. With each passing, ever more prosperous year, Houstonians, settled in sprawling suburbs, became ever more dependent on their cars and on being inside, protected from heat and rain.

Environmentalists like Terry Hershey and developer George Mitchell, who saved Buffalo Bayou from the concrete shellacking given to most other local bayous by the Army Corps of Engineers, were pesky tree huggers. When Mitchell started building The Woodlands north of town, in the seventies, preserving trees and building bike paths, his colleagues could not believe he was wasting so much valuable land. In Houston you built on every inch of available space.

This concept reached its apogee—or nadir—with a massive project begun around the same time called Houston Center. Located on the east side of downtown, it was to cover 74 acres and provide 23 million square feet of office space, along with parking for 40,000 cars. Best of all, thanks to skyways, Houston Center’s inhabitants would *never have to go outside*. At the time, that seemed like a much better idea than pedaling around The Woodlands in August. “As the saying goes, Houstonians lost their legs,” explains architect Guy Hagstette, who has devoted most of his career to creating and restoring local parks. In 1978, just as the price of oil and the population began their precipitous, serendipitous rise, a National Urban Recreation Study ranked Houston and Harris County 104th in the nation in park space. But, really, who cared? By then Houston was the global center of the energy business.

Alas, success didn’t keep the rest of the country from dumping on Houston. In 1999 *USA Today* ecstatically reported that Houston had surpassed Los Angeles as the city with the worst air quality in the nation. “Houston (cough) . . . we have a problem (cough)” was the headline. Undaunted, locals just labeled our problems growing pains. “You try growing this fast,” Bacon told me. Indeed, from 1950 to 1980 Houston’s population tripled, from less than 600,000 to nearly 1.6 million people. “We had to create jobs,” he said. “Okay, we did that. Now we’re getting ready for the twenty-first century, and we’re going to kick ass on it!”

Often in Houston, a multimillion-dollar enterprise starts with one impatient soul. By the late eighties, Marvin Taylor had served two stints in the Navy and had retired from the post office; he lived in the Third Ward, the mostly black neighborhood on the east side of Hermann Park. Taylor was an athlete, and compared with jogging on pocked city streets, Hermann was, he explained, “better than anyplace else I had to run.” Though he grew up in Longview, Taylor was a Houstonian at heart, meaning that when he saw that no one else was going to address a problem, he set about solving it himself.

He became a guardian of the park, hacking through overgrowth with a sickle and clearing old carriage trails. At the time, the city wasn’t maintaining Hermann, and Houstonians were afraid to go there.

Taylor tried lobbying the parks department for better conditions—more lights, for one thing—but the answer, he recalled, was always “We don’t have money for anything like that.” Eventually, he was able to shame the local electric company into lighting Hermann’s perimeter, but he had to raise private funds to light its interior. By 1990, though, Taylor had his own nonprofit and some jogging partners who knew their way around city hall and was eventually rewarded with crushed-granite trails courtesy of Houston’s taxpayers. Two other organizations were also trying to give Hermann some TLC. There was a small, lonely cadre called the Friends of Hermann Park. Then there was the equally lonesome Trees for Houston, which was led by Bill Coats, the city’s equivalent of Johnny Appleseed.

Around that time, O. Jack Mitchell, the dean of the architecture school at Rice, gave a young professor named Jay Baker a mission. “Fix Hermann Park,” Mitchell urged. Like Taylor, Mitchell actually tried to enjoy Hermann, and he was flummoxed by the city’s indifference. It was Mitchell’s untimely fatal heart attack that inspired Baker and others to have a competition in his honor to redo the core of the park, which included the Mudhole. As things tend to do here, this project evolved into something bigger, and in 1993 one of the country’s most prominent landscape architects, Laurie Olin, who had turned Manhattan’s Bryant Park from a drug den into a glorious destination for open-air lunches and Fashion Week tents, was selected to do a master plan for the whole park.

Olin’s renown was good for Houston’s global ambitions. Bearded and stylishly bespectacled, he was charming and urbane, always sketching ideas in a little notebook he stored in his breast pocket. He was also politic enough to respect the history of the park, taking inspiration from the original 1914 plan. People made win-win comparisons to the moment when architect Philip Johnson met Gerald Hines and the two made the downtown skyline famous the world over.

But hiring a fancy architect couldn’t solve all of Hermann’s problems. The first and largest was money. Yes, Houston’s major foundations—including Brown, Wortham, and the Houston Endowment—all chipped in, as did a few corporations, like Exxon. But Mayor Bob Lanier, who had an impressive rose garden in front of his River Oaks Boulevard mansion, didn’t want to spend a lot of money on parks. He had made a fortune as a real estate developer and was an infrastructure guy. As he told one park lobbyist, “Parks don’t vote.”

On the other hand, Lanier couldn’t deny that Hermann looked like hell. As a compromise, he offered \$10 million of city money if park supporters could raise \$15 million. “It was the first acknowledgment of the city that our parks had been allowed to deteriorate to the point where something had to happen,” said Sanford Criner, an early member of the Friends of Hermann Park. But Lanier had some conditions: first, he wanted Miller Outdoor Theatre and its famously deficient ladies’ restrooms redone. Oh, and he wanted his always-eager wife, Elyse, and her BFF, Barbara Hurwitz, wife of Maxxam Corporation chairman Charles, then a notable arch-enemy of environmentalists, overseeing the project. It was like trying to pair Bette Midler with Pete Seeger and the Weavers. Indeed, a schism would grow for some time over what groups would be welcome at the new Hermann Park, especially after a (blessedly) brief attempt to remove the golf course, a favorite spot for black residents.

And the money wasn’t exactly rolling in. “People had given up on Houston ever having anything special in the natural world,” explained Doreen Stoller, the current executive director of the Hermann Park Conservancy. It was only after a \$1.5 million *out-of-town* grant from the Lila Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund arrived, in 1996, that some wealthy Houstonians felt comfortable enough to open their checkbooks. One of the first was a local allergist—appropriate for pollen-saturated Houston. John McGovern and his wife, Kathrine, donated \$1 million to refurbish the lake in the middle of the park. “Getting a million dollars was a miracle,” said Stoller. “It took ten years to raise the next fifty million.”

The other problem was space. “For the entire history of Hermann Park, people had been trying to pick off pieces of it,” Stoller explained. By the forties Hermann had lost one third of its land. Laying tracing

paper over a park map one day, Olin colored in the land for the zoo, theater, golf course, and other attractions; only 56 of 445 acres of parkland remained. Change wasn't welcome in some quarters: the zoo board, for instance, rejected Olin's suggestion to move its parking lot underground and cover it with a meadow. ("The zoo didn't talk to us for years," one Hermann supporter confessed.) Then there was the Texas Medical Center, which saw the park in the same way Napoleon viewed unvanquished parts of Europe. The Friends of Hermann Park barely beat back attempts to build a doctors' parking lot on its southeast corner.

For all these reasons, park supporters realized they would have to build trust—and raise money—by making improvements in stages. "It takes people seeing something to believe it can really happen," said asset manager Chris Knapp, who, like others loyal to Hermann, spent many fund-raising visits hearing the word "no."

Mack Fowler is probably the most unlikely tree hugger you could ever meet. He hails from Odessa and made a fortune in the oil and gas business; he and his wife, Cece, now live in Broadacres, one of Houston's oldest and most refined neighborhoods. Fowler's face is weathered, and he talks with an accent that any West Texan could locate as Not From Midland. Fowler looks as though he starred in a western you can't quite place—maybe he played the guy who got kicked out of the saloon for starting too many fights.

In fact, Fowler has spent the better part of thirty years determined to make Houston do things it doesn't want to do. Maybe growing up in Odessa left him forever hungry for shade: as a founder of Trees for Houston, Fowler and an associate once planted a grove beside a freeway exit after the Texas Department of Transportation claimed that nothing could live there. (The grove survived, and trees now line many freeways inside Loop 610.) Trees for Houston also pushed a "tree and shrub ordinance" on a recalcitrant city council, ending developers' love affair with vast, barren parking lots. (Describing a battle during the construction of NRG Stadium in the early aughts, Fowler sounded as if he needed CPR. "It was just about asphalt and how many cars can I park. They weren't attuned to the visual.") Another victory resulted in an unsightly elevated freeway being buried below grade. But during the go-go years, many wondered why Fowler was wasting his time on work best left to ladies' garden clubs.

Eventually, he became part of a small but single-minded group of successful businesspeople who liked to ride their bikes around Houston. There was home builder and tort reform advocate Dick Weekley. There was Bill White, then an attorney, developer, and former deputy secretary of energy in the Clinton administration. There was Ed Wulfe, whose vast commercial real estate business was based entirely in Houston; Charles McMahan, the chairman of Compass Bank; and Ann Lents, a Vinson & Elkins attorney long active in environmental causes. This group was not always politically simpatico—the ideological distance between Weekley and Fowler is a lot greater than the geographical distance from Myanmar to Miami. But they all tended to be entrepreneurial in that intense, impatient Houston way.

They were particularly incensed that no one seemed to care about Houston's hostile surroundings. (A later member of this crowd rented a backhoe to finish a portion of a hike-and-bike trail the city hadn't managed to complete in over a decade.) **So they called themselves the Quality of Life Coalition and created an agenda: Plant more trees. Get more parks. Get rid of billboards and graffiti.**

Fowler, who re-reads *Babbitt* every few years, realized that to move forward, Trees for Houston had to do something heretofore unimaginable: join the Greater Houston Partnership. "We had to stop being just the outsiders bitching about this," Fowler told me. "There had been a tendency for the nonprofits

to look at the business community and developers as the enemy, and we were the monkey-wrench gang. That was fun, but it wasn't getting results."

At that time, the GHP was made up of all the important corporations in town—especially all the important oil and gas companies and all the important real estate developers—and it made all decisions accordingly. Ken Lay, the head of Enron and a former chairman of the GHP, was a progressive force, but he was focused on building gazillion-dollar stadiums to keep the local pro teams in town. Despite Houston's reputation, the GHP believed in moving slowly and carefully; jobs mattered, then sports, and then culture, which included things most of the leadership didn't want to go to, like opera and ballet.

But Fowler and his allies in the coalition, being businesspeople, could speak the GHP's language. So they wrote position papers, with calculations showing the economic benefits of going green. They worked up charts that showed that parks—at least well-maintained ones—increased the value of the surrounding real estate. Why, for instance, did so many people want to live around golf courses?

Coincidentally, the tech boom of the late nineties had also created a different sort of worker. That person tended to look for a nice place to live and *then* look for a job. Or his or her company was located someplace nice already, like San Jose or Portland, where people could ride their bikes to work and hang out with their dogs in a park. Many did not have driver's licenses. Many did not want big backyards. Rising gas prices were also making long commutes undesirable, and so spread-out, suburbanized cities started revisiting density. Besides, it was nice to walk down the block for a latte after Ashtanga class. In other words, everyone—even retirees—wanted to live in a version of Millennial Central: Brooklyn, New York. "We could get high-quality job applicants to land at Intercontinental Airport," said Fowler. "But on the way into town the wives would look over at their husbands and say, 'What are we doing here?'"

These unpleasant truths finally got through to the GHP when they studied data from Rice University professor Stephen Klineberg, long the oracle of Houston. The self-appointed city of the future was in danger of becoming the city of the past, with its urban sprawl, clogged freeways, and stinky bayous. The news was so horrifying that the GHP started listening to the Quality of Life Coalition. In fact, you could say that in a relatively short time, the coalition had a profound influence on the city, because in 2004 White, having campaigned on quality-of-life issues—but with a businessman's perspective—took office as the mayor of Houston. Instead of benzene, change was in the air.

The same year White took office, Rich Kinder received a real estate prospectus in the mail. This was not unusual, because Kinder was a very wealthy man. In 1996 he had resigned as president of Enron to start his own pipeline company with another former Enron colleague, William Morgan; eight years later, Enron was a distant, if unfortunate, memory, and Kinder Morgan was well on its way to being the largest pipeline company in the United States. Over the years Rich and his wife, Nancy, had become big-thinking, hands-on philanthropists in the mold of Houston's much-revered city father, Jesse Jones. Their foundation was dedicated solely to "transformative" projects—gifts that made a big difference, and fast. It's not surprising, then, that the mayor listened carefully when they called to talk about a deal.

The prospectus was offering about two blocks of land on the eastern edge of downtown—land that was to have become the Houston Center mega-development in the seventies, until the oil bust killed that plan. Instead, the parcel, across from the George R. Brown Convention Center, had sat for years as another Houston eyesore, two yawning parking lots and one sad strip of green space. The Kinders and White thought a public-private partnership to build a park would make a nice replacement. They included Maconda Brown O'Connor, the daughter of the industrialist for whom the convention center was named, on the team. Nancy wanted to stay involved, so White put her in charge of the whole

thing. Agreeing to build a sweet little park downtown might have seemed like a sop to some generous campaign donors, but only if you didn't know the Kinders.

The couple embodied the Houston Dream. As such, Nancy was not the kind of wealthy wife who spent her days visiting her Pilates instructor, nutritionist, personal shopper, and therapist. Like her husband, she was from a small town; he from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and she New Iberia, Louisiana. Both are flinty and self-made. Also like her husband, Nancy enjoyed running things, had a gimlet eye for the bottom line, and wasn't afraid to demand her way. She had served many years as Ken Lay's executive assistant at Enron and then, as her fortune changed with her 1997 marriage to Rich, applied her organizational skills as regional finance co-chair for George W. Bush's 2000 presidential campaign and as finance chair for the 2005 presidential inauguration. Even before Rich was ranked 126th on *Forbes's* list of the world's richest—in August 2015 his net worth was estimated at \$9.4 billion—crowds tended to part when the couple walked into a room. It was like the Emperor and Empress of H-Town had just arrived.

All of these factors were important because the notion of putting a park in a yucky part of downtown struck most locals as boneheaded. Unfazed, Nancy and her board embarked on a national homework tour of successful urban parks. Like Hermann's supporters, they were particularly impressed with the flexibility and diversity of Bryant Park. They decided they needed a dog park after seeing the one in Washington Square. They went for a high-profile landscape architect too: the San Francisco-based firm Hargreaves Associates, which had done a master plan for the parks in downtown Dallas. Nancy, with the help of architect Guy Hagstette, evaluated public art and food service, water features, building materials (only the best!), and boring stuff like energy efficiency. They made sure the city was on the hook for a maintenance plan—\$750,000 a year for fifty years—because what good was a gorgeous park that fell apart in a few years? But the main issue—though few would admit it—was how to attract more than the homeless, because virtually all attempts to bring life to Houston's central business district at night and on weekends had failed.

Part of the answer was marketing: a local PR firm, run by a woman named Susan Elmore, entered the picture. As she delicately explained, "You have to start early to get the public to change their perceptions." Soon enough, Elmore became the park's helicopter mom, making sure the public knew through various media partners about every stage of its growth. Sure, there was press for the groundbreaking and every accomplished fund-raising goal. But there was also a contest to name the park, which not coincidentally created a database of "stakeholders." You became a perpetual email pal after innocently suggesting that the place be named after Chuck Norris.

The park needed a programming director to keep it vital too. The board hired a Houstonian named Susanne Theis, who had brought inspired acts to an eccentric folk-art venue called the Orange Show. Soon, movie nights on the lawn started showing up on proposed calendars. So did community-embracing events for LGBT groups and African Americans. There would be rock concerts and flea markets. Tango lessons. Even an ice-skating rink at Christmastime! Forget the Galleria—who wanted to ice-skate inside in December anyway?

Between opening day, on April 13, 2008, and June 30, 2008, close to 250,000 people showed up at what came to be known as Discovery Green. Many of the grown-up visitors looked poleaxed. The crush of overeager children annihilated some of the playground equipment. The yelping of dogs was audible all the way to Pearland. "Houstonians had never had a decent park," one Discovery Green staff member said. "It was 'Wow—this is a *park!*'"

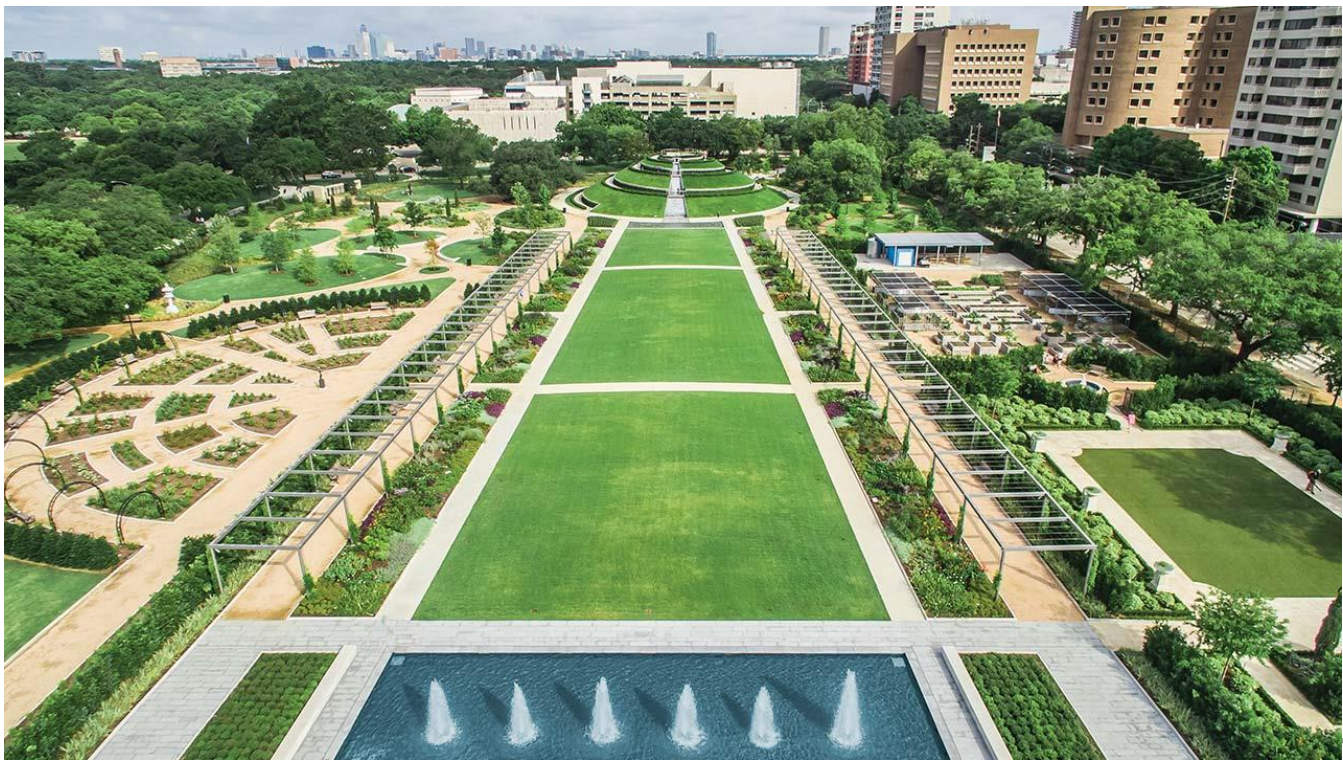
But the bigger story was the one swirling around Houston's real estate community. Pre-Discovery Green, the price of adjacent land was around \$100 per square foot. Three years later, it had tripled in value. By then, a luxury high-rise apartment building with park views was going up too.

Almost immediately, the Kinders began “looking for a second hit album,” as one member of the Houston Parks Board put it. They were drawn to a 2.3-mile stretch of Buffalo Bayou from downtown to Shepherd Drive along the Allen Parkway, which not coincidentally served as an extended driveway for River Oaks denizens heading to work downtown. A park was there, but it was shabby and overgrown, with weeds pushing through gaping cracks in the asphalt trails.

The Kinders quietly suggested they might like to help out. They met with the park’s leadership and looked over a pie-in-the-sky PowerPoint prepared in their honor. Rich was underwhelmed. “In business, my biggest mistake was not thinking big enough. So are you thinking big enough for this project?” he asked. It was like Santa Claus accusing you of skimping on your Christmas list.

Faster than you can say “thanks for the \$30 mil”—and \$28 million more from other sources—Buffalo Bayou Park’s 160 acres were on the way to being transformed. “The project was so visible that everyone wanted to be part of it,” said Anne Olson, the president of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership. “There was a sense in Houston that green space mattered.” By 2012, Houston’s internationally known SWA group had done a master plan, while the obligatory internationally known landscape architecture firm—Boston’s Reed Hilderbrand and Associates—got the job of designing perennial gardens and other spots. The city agreed once more to long-term maintenance. Pedestrian bridges started going in over previously uncrossable streets. So did world-class sculpture and 14,000 new trees and bushes. There were to be high trails and low trails, to keep the park accessible during Houston’s inevitable flooding. “Lost Lake” was to be restored and a magnificent two-acre dog park installed, complete with large and small dog ponds, washing stations, and shelters for shade.

Nothing in Williamsburg could touch it.



The renovated Centennial Gardens, at Hermann Park, which has undergone a \$100 million restoration.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM WIEHOFF/LIFTED UP AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Down the road at Hermann, things had been progressing. A second phase of fund-raising had begun, and, thanks to visible improvements—Narcissus would have loved the reflection pool—money was flowing in. This was especially true after Friends of Hermann Park members Susan and Sanford

Criner attended one of Manhattan's major social events in 2006: the annual luncheon of the Central Park Conservancy, the organization that had resuscitated that venue from an eyesore—deterioration, drugs, danger—to one that drew millions.

The Criners were not the Kinders. They lived well but not Kinder well. They had a certain style, though. They had run a popular music venue called Rockefeller's for years, and Susan's business booked acts for society weddings, corporate retreats, and deb parties. Sanford, born and raised in Houston, went to work for one of Houston's global commercial real estate firms, CBRE, where he became a top producer. In other words, he was a Houston developer, but in a 2.0 vein. He could discourse on Sicilian history or NOLA trumpet players along with square footage. Like their sometime-mentor Lynn Wyatt, the Criners knew intuitively how to make serious business—including philanthropy—seem like fun.

Susan came back from the Central Park Conservancy luncheon inspired. Soon enough, the Friends of Hermann Park was rebranded as . . . the Hermann Park Conservancy! Parties in the park suddenly seemed glamorous, especially with all that new planting. Even those without a lot of money could still play: if the black-tie Evening in the Park was too pricey, there was the Hats in the Park luncheon. One of Susan's co-chairs had the canny idea to import Philip Treacy—the royal family's hatmaker—to Neiman Marcus just before the first affair. Long before Kate and Will's wedding, Houston ladies had a place to wear a fascinator.

The opportunity for naming rights was also expanded. In 2013 oilman Jim Flores, who might once have achieved immortality by donating cash for a hospital wing, instead gave \$5 million to Hermann Park in honor of his wife, Cherie. (She got a pavilion designed by Apple Store architect Peter Bohlin.) This event came four years after the park was deemed a socially appropriate venue by Phoebe Tudor, a historic preservationist and park bestie who held a fiftieth birthday party for her investment banker husband, Bobby, on the shores of McGovern Lake. The event included food stations for every city in which the couple had lived (London! Nantucket! Pineville, Louisiana!) and a 24-foot bar made entirely of ice. Houston had a new, super-sophisticated ruling class, but when it came to having a good time, they stuck pretty closely to the traditions of their elders.

Not every park in Houston was faring as well. In 2011 the great Texas drought took a terrible toll on Memorial Park. At just under 1,465 acres, it is the city's largest green space, eclipsing even Central Park in size and occupying a vast corner of I-10 and Loop 610. Now it looked like a set for a postapocalyptic film, its emerald grass turned to dust, its once towering pines collapsing from thirst.

The land for Memorial was given to the city in 1924 by the Hogg family, with stewardship falling to the legendary Miss Ima. Over the years, the park's leadership had become increasingly paralyzed over *What She Would Have Wanted*—watering trees during the drought became the subject of anguished debate: should nature be allowed to run its course?

In a quiet coup, the chairman for the Memorial Park Conservancy brought in Chris Knapp, who had succeeded in raising cash for Hermann. Knapp, who was nothing if not polished—he was from an old Houston family—had worked for Brown Brothers Harriman. Through his Manhattan connections, he recommended that Thomas Woltz be hired to develop a new Memorial master plan. Woltz brought the number of world-class landscape architects who had been working in Houston to six, a fact that should have made the city proud. And Woltz, raised in North Carolina, was as handsome, well dressed, and well mannered as a pre-World War I British aristocrat. His historical research on the park would have put Edward Gibbon to shame. But it didn't matter. Soon he was public enemy number one.

If no one had initially cared about Hermann, everyone cared about Memorial. Park users from more than 130 Houston zip codes wanted to know what would happen to their soccer fields and jogging paths. Two pricey neighborhoods sat adjacent to the park, and its inhabitants didn't want more visitors spoiling their views and blocking their streets. Meanwhile, naturalists, wary of Woltz's motives, accused him of destroying Memorial's riparian forest. Finally, there were other park advocates who were put out with Mayor Annise Parker—long a parks fan—for funding Memorial by annexing it to the utterly opaque Uptown Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone. That meant that tax dollars that would have gone to parks across the city would stay at Memorial. Houston suddenly seemed more mired in the past than San Antonio.

Another massive public relations campaign was the answer. “I can't imagine any other landscape architect of the stature of Thomas Woltz who would pour his intensity, time, and generosity into conveying the importance of the master plan,” said Dancie Perugini Ware, the park's publicist and Woltz's occasional bodyguard. Woltz's listening tour included meetings with dozens of community groups and park users. He met with members of the city council and the *Chronicle* editorial board. He lobbied east-siders at the San Jacinto Ballroom. A team of local ecologists defended his position that the park had long ago ceased to be “natural”—in fact, it had been taken over by invasive species.

Finally, in April 2015, the city council unanimously and begrudgingly approved Woltz's stunning \$220 million overhaul. Councilman Oliver Pennington was still worried. “We don't want to make it too nice,” he warned.

“**Too nice**” was **not** a term Tom Bacon was ready to apply to Houston back in 2012, after serving a few years as chairman of the Parks Board. Sure, Houston was healthier and prettier, but as a developer who spent his life looking at the future of cities, he knew a few super parks weren't enough. Maybe his organization couldn't upgrade education or mobility—Houston's other major bugaboos—but it could make a bigger difference in its quality of life. “We needed a big idea,” he explained. He spoke frankly to his board about getting organized and getting serious: “When you think about green, we want you to think about money. Birds, bees—if you get money, the birds and the bees are gonna be fine.”

Then he thought of a fellow frustrated cyclist he knew, a former ship captain named Joe Hood. One day, Hood had done that Houston thing, putting some plywood across a dilapidated bridge over White Oak Bayou so he could cross in semi-safety where he wanted to. Bacon and other fearless riders had followed. And just like that Bayou Greenways 2020 was born: as Hood had connected several diverse neighborhoods by reviving (sort of) the bridge, so too could the Houston Parks Board establish a massive system of bridges and trails alongside Houston's bayous and create 150 miles of instant protected connectivity!

This was not exactly a new idea: a series of bayou-based linear parks had been suggested by a young landscape architect, Arthur Comey, in 1912. It had just taken Houston a hundred years to come around. With the help of yet another PR campaign, the city proved its readiness: in November 2012, 68 percent of the voters approved a \$166 million bond for parks, much of it going to Bayou Greenways. Of course, the sell wasn't all about getting out in the fresh (humid) air: according to Parks Board research, the project would bring in \$70 million in economic and health benefits a year—in an enhanced property-tax base, retiree and employee retention, and the like—recouping the \$100 million initial investment in just a few years! Doubters could talk to the Kinders, who donated \$50 million.

Still, there's more to do. The Parks Board has nine additional projects in the works. The Arboretum has \$40 million for its redo. There's a proposal to convert an elevated portion of I-45 east of downtown into a park. Even long-neglected parks in poorer neighborhoods are getting the green treatment. Emancipation Park, founded by freed slaves in 1872 and the oldest public park in Texas, is currently undergoing a \$33 million renovation. The once vital community center—it had a horse track

and croquet courts—will soon have a sea-size swimming pool, a performance space, a playground, and, thankfully, shaded porches. The mandatory out-of-town designer is Phil Freelon, of North Carolina, arguably the country's most prominent black architect.

None of this has escaped the eye of local developers, who have begun buying up surrounding land while it's still cheap. No one can say that Houston hasn't learned to love its parks.