

Market Square Park



Market Square Park during the Republican National Convention. Collaborative design by SWA Group and artists Doug Hollis, Richard Turner, Paul Hester, Malou Flato, and James Surls, 1992.

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AFTER three years of work and nearly \$785,000 in private donations and grants, the Market Square Park Project, a renovation of Houston's historic Market Square, was completed and dedicated this summer. The park is the product of an unprecedented collaboration between the Houston Parks and Recreation Department and two private sponsors, DiverseWorks and the Downtown Houston Association. It was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and received financial support from several major local foundations and hundreds of public and private organizations and individuals. Design and project management services were donated by the SWA Group, Law Engineering, and Hines Interests Limited Partnership.

The project benefited from measured but high-minded goals: to educate the public about Market Square's "unique history," to revive Market Square as a "public gathering place [and] as a part of an arts and entertainment corridor," and to "demonstrate the role artists can play in solving urban problems." The restrained and felicitous design that has resulted replaces one that was incommensurate and frequently dangerous.

In view of such carefully planned, inclusive, and well-executed work, criticism sounds merely crabbed. Yet in spite of (or perhaps because of) the park's gentility, one wonders whether there might have been greater collaboration among the five artists commissioned to produce individual works for the park and the landscape architects, the SWA Group.

The design sets each artist's work at a distance from the others within a simple framework of diagonal walkways through a green field. James Surls's 30-foot-high wood and steel sculpture rises from a small, square plaza set into the gently sloping grade at the center of the park. Set into the backs of benches lining the plaza are Paul Hester's 80 enameled tiles etched with photographs of Market Square and its environs, past and present. Malou Flato's semicircular benches featuring hand-painted tiles with scenes of an open-air market are located at mid-block on each side of the park. Finally, Doug Hollis and Richard Turner have set fragments of tile and stone from various razed Houston buildings into concrete trays placed at intervals in the park's walkways.

The "rotated" plan of the walkways was designed by Hollis and Turner in response to the centrifugal force of the limbs radiating from Surls's sculpture at the center of the park. The plan provides an easy dynamism for the site by making one simultaneously aware of the park's site plan and the rigid, orthogonal plan of the street grid into which it fits. The diagonal walkways widen from the narrow opening along the central square to splayed, brick-paved areas inviting entry at each corner. The SWA Group's simple, straightforward planning and landscaping judiciously correct the seemingly endless and impenetrably amorphous expanse of grassy mounds formerly found here. The park is now easily traversed; design elements establish a scale sympathetic to the two- and three-story buildings surrounding the park. Against this restrained background, each artist has made his or her contribution independently.

James Surls's characteristically powerful and lyrical work is similar to his other outdoor pieces, which combine steel and treated lumber to create organic forms suggestive of flowers or trees. Rising from the center of the pinwheel plan of the walkways, the sculpture stands like an *axis mundi*, embodying civic myths of growth and abundance. The historical significance of Market Square as the heart of the city's financial and political life for decades is expressed by the work's distinctive, raw, and oracular vision.

In contrast to Surls's personal vision, photographer Paul Hester depends on the alert, watchful gaze of the observer and archivist. Drawing on what Susan Sontag described as the photograph's "inexhaustible invitation to deduction, speculation, and fantasy," Hester's enameled tiles, etched with historical and contemporary photographs of Houston, suggest an open-air gallery that evokes the evanescence of a historical and architectural legacy. Perhaps the central irony of Hester's work is that the spirit of civic expansion that created that legacy has also allowed it to vanish.

A similar chord is struck in Doug Hollis and Richard Turner's contribution. Inspired by the colorful detritus of demolished buildings around Market Square, Hollis and Turner selected and carefully composed architectural fragments in trays filled with concrete and placed them in the park's walkways. It is disappointing, however, that removed from their ruined sites the fragments lose much of their allusiveness. Likewise, the fragments in each tray lie in studied

juxtapositions of color and form that are far less interesting than the incidental collisions of old and new in the places from which they were drawn. Hollis and Turner's work is linked to Hester's by the irresistible appeal of a *memento mori* of a vanishing city history, a reckless destruction of the past that has decimated the stock of historic buildings on the square and elsewhere in downtown Houston.

Malou Flato's benches present a contrasting vision of a Market Square yet to come. They are beautifully made of painted tiles, the murals reflecting a disarmingly optimistic and direct vision of the park brought to life. Unfortunately, their siting is the weakest aspect of the park's design. Placed at the middle of each block and away from the park's entrances, the benches are poorly located to receive the use they deserve.

Although it may be an overstatement to say that the Market Square Park Project demonstrates the artist's role in "solving urban problems," the project certainly shows the potential of using public art inventively to create a significant urban space. Perhaps as a product of such an approach, the new park provides an alternative to both the familiar pattern of civic honorifics and the estranging conceits of works that fail to capture public interest. ■