



NEW BAYOU

Sculling! Eco-tourists!

And other startling highlights of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's big plan

nership believes could become, variously, "the green heart of Houston," "a significant destination to attract tourism to Houston," and "a Waterview District that draws people to the bayou" — that is, a place full of shopping and restaurants and apartments with a view. "Green fingers" would stretch into nearby neighborhoods.

In the plan, the Heights/Memorial interchange would be transmogrified from a cloverleaf exit into a park full of oxbow lakes. On the laid-back slopes of Allen Parkway, manufactured wetlands and oxbow lakes would retain and filter water. Near downtown would be two major flood-control diversion channels, one of which would divert the inflow of White Oak Bayou into the wider eastern Buffalo near Jensen, creating an island of the county jail facility. Bridges over the cramped downtown area of the watercourse would be rebuilt and re-routed, lighting installed, and guidelines promulgated to encourage developers to incorporate the bayou into their planning. In the eastern stretches, a botanical garden would sprout on the site of the defunct wastewater treatment plant near Lockwood; abandoned industrial sites would be reclaimed as parks and housing; and incentives would entice "clean" industries to colonize the neglected Superfund sites left by the old dirty ones.

The drawings are enticing, and many of the ideas seem well worth pursuing. But others — for instance, the attempts to duplicate the riverside waterfronts of cities such as Paris or London — seem strangely out of touch with Houston.

Perhaps it helps to understand where the plan began. The consultant team is led by Jane Thompson of Boston's Thompson Design Group, which specializes in turning run-down waterfronts into tourist-friendly shopping destinations. In the mid-'70s, Thompson, along with her late husband Ben, conceived and designed Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, perhaps the world's first "festival marketplace" — three restored 19th-century buildings and an open-air *agora* that felt as safe as a suburban mall, but with a dash of waterside history and cobblestoned uniqueness. With developer James Rouse's backing, the Thompsons searched Boston for the right mix of oddball retailers, and on Faneuil Hall's opening day, the couple even manned their own pushcart, selling produce from their garden. From that day on, tourists and suburbanites thronged the place.

At the time America's beleaguered cities were desperate to lure people back to downtowns, and they rushed to duplicate Faneuil Hall's success. But from Toledo to Tampa, most of those other festival marketplaces flopped. In retrospect, many of the proposals seem doomed from the outset — shallow or wrong-headed theme-park versions of the very cities they were supposed to revitalize. (One unbuilt Rouse plan

for Dallas involved a mock San Antonio Riverwalk, complete with riverboats and strolling musicians.)

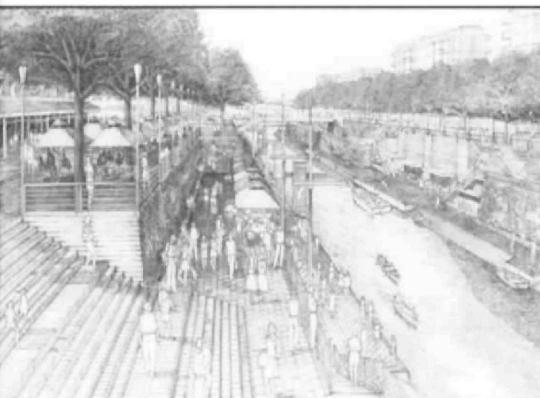
The most notable successes (Harborplace in Baltimore; Bayside Marketplace in Miami; and Riverwalk in New Orleans) took root in cities that already attracted hordes of tourists. The idea didn't work as well in, say, Richmond, Virginia. And even in the places where the concept flourished, the marketplaces gradually lost their oddball specialty retailers and became something not much different from any other regional mall, full of GapKids and Disney Stores and Sharper Images. Among urban planners, the phrase "festival marketplace" has become a joke — a punch line that signals a city's desperation for a quick fix.

Naturally, the phrase "festival marketplace" doesn't appear in the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's preview of its master plan. But the downtown Waterview District retains a whiff of the old concept: There's a "Festival Place" across the bayou from Sesquicentennial Park, and "Festival Streets" are supposed to link the various downtown parks. The Waterview District itself looks like a set of parks interlaced with shopping and waterfront restaurants, plus condos and theaters — less a festival marketplace than an entire festival city. The plan says that Buffalo Bayou's new attractions (among them, an ecology park at Turkey Bend) will draw tourists to Houston. But that hopeful projection sounds as much a long shot as the idea that a festival marketplace could draw tourists to Toledo. Can anyone really believe the briefing document's assertion that out-of-towners would journey to a Houston "Regional Wilderness Reserve" to gain a better "understanding of hydrology and habitat"? Seventh-graders on a field trip, maybe. But tourists?

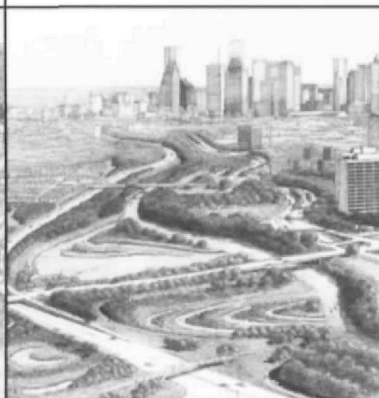
Other ideas seem equally odd. Along the newly created canal waterfronts, the Thompson plan proposes a boathouse, docks, and piers, and a sculling course. The last bit — sculling! — seems a charming bit of regionalism: Boston regionalism.

Perhaps the Boston worldview also explains "Symphony Island," which would be created with a diversion canal on the East End. An outdoor amphitheater on the island would serve as an orchestra's summer home. The plan seems to mistake Houston for the Berkshires, a place where string quartets draw a crowd, and an August night might require a sweater. It's fun trying to imagine a city from which Houston could lure its musicians; perhaps Phoenix is more miserable in summer? (Well, no: It doesn't have our cello-warping humidity.) It's even more fun to imagine Houston's classical-music fans perspiring to Paganini as they squeeze their puddled Brie from its plastic wrap. The West Nile Symphony has a nice ring to it, don't you think?

—Lisa Gray and Brad Tyer



Paris, Texas: The Thompson Group proposes that downtown, the bayou's sides could be stepped like the Seine's.



Wetlands at Vaughn and Memorial: The cloverleaf intersection would be replaced with oxbow lakes.

BUFFALO BAYOU AND BEYOND, the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's master plan for a ten-mile stretch of the bayou, began with several basic ideas: Houston needs more parks and flood control; we ought to pay more attention to the bayou; and we ought to spiff up some of the shabbier parts of town. It's hard to argue with any of those civic-minded assertions. (Can anyone possibly object to such a cheerful word as "revitalization"?) But how, we wondered, would the plan pursue its worthy goals? Could it get us where we want to go?

The final plan was released after *Cite's* deadline, but Aaron Tuley, the partnership's director of planning, offered a preview to anyone interested. His presentation involved newsletters and a briefing document (you can read it at www.buffalobayou.org/masterplan.html), and sometimes it involved a PowerPoint presentation from Tuley and Anne Olson, the group's president. The very pleasant, very serious Tuley has given the presentation dozens of times to hundreds of "stakeholders" — neighborhood groups, business groups, environmental groups, you name it. Because of them, he said, the plan has become "wet and wild." (He's talking about greenery and wildlife, of course — not the water park or topless bar that a Houstonian might expect.)

Funded in part by the City of Houston and Harris County, the million-dollar plan aims big: It addresses the bayou from Shepherd Drive to the Turning Basin — as well as 6,400 acres of land alongside the muddy brown water, which the part-