The CHANGING LANDSCAPE of Free Speech in Houston.

[Where’s the] REVOLUTION
IN 1984, Cite published an essay by Phillip Lopate entitled “Pursuing the Unicorn: Public Space in Houston.” Lopate lamented: “For a city its size, Houston has an almost sensational lack of convivial public space. I mean places where people congregate on their own for the sheer pleasure of being part of a mass, such as watching the parade of humanity, celebrating festivals, cruising for love, showing off new clothing, meeting appointments ‘under the old clock,’ bumping into acquaintances, discussing the latest political scandals, and experiencing pride as city dwellers.”

Twenty-seven years later, the lament can end. After the opening of Discovery Green, the Lee and Joe Jamail Skatepark, and the Lake Plaza at Hermann Park, the city seems an altogether different place. The skyline itself feels warmer and more humane when foregrounded by throngs of laughing children of all stripes. The strenuous civic activity of countless boosters and officials to make these fabulous public spaces is to be praised.

The Houston Chronicle published a celebratory editorial invoking Charles Moore’s essay “You Have to Pay for Public Life.” The paper’s editorial board, which now includes former Cite managing editor Lisa Gray, called on Houstonians to raise money for more of the public-private partnerships that made possible these recent parks, which today are so “ buzzy, clean, [and] people-filled.”

But have we really achieved public life? The test of whether the city offers a truly healthy, fully functioning range of public spaces is political protest. Let’s talk megaphones and marches. No other use of public space is so complex, or as deeply embedded in the nation’s psyche and its founding documents.

On the morning of February 15, 2003, a torrential storm swept through Houston. A lusty, full-throttle Gulf Coast downpour drummed rooftops and filled bayous. Caravans of tanks, fuel trucks, and soldiers were passing through the waterlogged streets. It was the dawn of a global day of opposition. In London between 75,000 and two million were already protesting. For Rome, the estimates ranged from 650,000 to three million. Between 300,000 and a million people were gathering in New York City, and 50,000 people would descend upon Los Angeles later in the day.

Just after noon, when the protest in Houston was scheduled to begin outside the federal building at Rusk and Smith, the storm cleared, and a stunning blue sky opened over a crowd of thousands, perhaps 10,000 in all. The people spilled over the sidewalk, wrapping around the federal building and filling a depressed plaza on its west side with a swirling jumble, fueled by a drum ensemble that seemed to take their cue from the frenetic rhythm of the earlier rain. There was a wondrous feeling, one that architectural historian Max Page described as finding “oneself in a space that is expressly out of scale with the individual, and to find that thousands together have filled it.”

Without a parade permit, the march was confined to the sidewalks along the route, which passed the Hobby Center, cut through Sam Houston Park with its statue honoring the Spirit of the Confederacy, and finally moved under I-45 along the bayou. The limitation of sticking to the sidewalk forced the crowd into a narrow, serpentine line. With the help of megaphones, organizers tried to maintain the energy with chants that sound absurd out of context.
Where is there a place to seek redress for our grievances and expect that public outcry might help turn the levers of government?

“Tell me what democracy looks like!”

“This is what democracy looks like!”

The thunderous highway overhead ultimately drowned out the megaphones, forcing people into a meditative silence before they poured into the muddy bowl at Eleanor Tinsley Park. Buffalo Bayou’s banks have long served as a place of collective action—the Battle of San Jacinto, the running of the cotton clads, and the Camp Logan “riots,” to name a few. But the bayou proved to be a dispiriting rallying point, its banks as serene and isolating as Glenwood Cemetery. The site is a favorite place to photograph the city, and a backdrop of high-rises seems to emerge directly out of the trees, as if there is no history to the city. By the time the end of the super-elongated march arrived, the rally had dissipated, and the speakers were left to look out from the stage at a few scattered individuals trying to kick the mud off their shoes.

Moore asked in his essay, where would one go in Los Angeles to have an effective revolution? “If one took over some public square, some urban open space in Los Angeles, who would know?” We might ask the same of Houston. Where is there a place to seek redress for our grievances and expect that public outcry might help turn the levers of government?

The Discovery Green crowds on weekdays and weekends are promising. The stages, event lawns, electrical supplies, public transportation, abundant parking, and symbolic proximities are enough to make any activist salivate. A public-private partnership made this $122 million miracle possible, and it is managed by a non-profit conservancy. Among the first to test access to Discovery Green was a group of Republicans gathered outside the Texas Republican Convention at the George R. Brown Convention Center on June 11, 2008. Soon thereafter, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) protested in the park to call attention to the practices of Aramark, which provides food and beverages at the convention center. The Harris County Democratic Party and Obama for America held a rally at the Discovery Green Anheuser-Busch Stage on October 19, 2008. In an interview, Guy Hagstette, president of the Discovery Green Conservancy, explained, “The basics are that this is a public park—a dedicated public park under state law—but not a city park. It ultimately is controlled by the city, but a subsidiary public corporation, Houston Downtown Park Corporation, owns it. The Houston Parks Department has no official role here at all.” The model was Bryant Park in Midtown Manhattan. Hagstette emphasized that “first and foremost [Discovery Green] is a public park,” and that “we have to abide by any law that governs how parks are managed,” including the First Amendment.

In practice, however, Discovery Green lacks a special permitting process for free speech public gatherings. Organizers of a July 3 “Tea Party” paid a substantial “venue license rental” in order to reserve the amphitheater. In contrast, city parks issue permits to free speech public gatherings for a processing fee in the $20 range. A Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender (GLBT) kiss-in, however, was held August 15 at Discovery Green without any payment for a permit or venue rental. Presumably the organizers took that risk because kissing can be carried out in any number of places within the park and does not require a reserved stage with electrical hookups for microphones. According to Hagstette, no protest organizers to date have demanded a free speech permit to gather at Discovery Green at city park rates.

That protesters have only tentatively used Discovery Green, often as “event hosts,” indicates a larger failure of Houstonians to grasp the opportunities already available; they seem unable to identify the exercise of free speech as a constitutional right and priority. The history of protest in Houston is largely untold. The sole figure holding a sign over a highway, the modest marches, the absurdist street theater, the earnest seller of alternative newspapers—they seem to emerge and disappear. We are left in a city without a memory. Worse, we are a people afraid of open and democratic space. For instance, Hermann Square, with its shady lawn stretching out from the stage created by the City Hall steps, can easily host rallies in the 2,000 to 10,000 range, but few conceive of it as such a gathering place. Instead each new wave of dissent repeats the mistakes of its predecessors.
Similarly, no one has dared to treat Hermann Park and the reflection pool like the National Mall it resembles. That highly visible space near the zoo and the Miller Outdoor Theater could gather tens of thousands.

The creation of an activated space is not necessarily the result of a policy nor simply the product of bricks and mortar. For instance, Houstonians have excelled at the appropriation of spaces along the edges of Houston’s car-oriented infrastructure. “Freeway blogging” on the Hazard, Woodhead, Dunlavy, Mandell, Graustark, and Montrose bridges over the Southwest Freeway, when timed with rush hour, has been used to communicate various political messages to thousands of commuters. In the past, Mecom Fountain was frequently employed to similar effect for antiwar vigils.

Great cities shape regional, national, and international debates. Houston’s streets and parks have the potential to transform discourse in a way that is uniquely Houstonian, that draws from the experiences and knowledge of the people here. But the unicorn remains an ephemeral goal on the horizon. If Houston is to achieve public life, so much has to evolve simultaneously—the material landscape, the myths and tales that define the city’s identity, the cultures of dissent, and the institutions that govern open space.

Still, evidence of change is discernible. One of the most memorable moments in Houston’s recent history came on April 10, 2006. A huge crowd—somewhere from 20,000 to 50,000 people—marched against an immigration bill in Congress. They went from Guadalupe Plaza to Allen’s Landing, legally taking the street, but still forced into a mazelike path by highway overpasses and the light rail line. At its midpoint, the march curved around an I-59 ramp before it disappeared into one of those anti-pedestrian no-man’s-lands between neighborhoods. The mass of white-shirted, flag-waving bodies made a marked contrast to the monumental highway. The ramp itself was endowed with unexpected grace when the crowd became exuberant at the slightly elevated turn, which showed the march appearing to stretch infinitely in both directions. At that moment a landscape that is otherwise, as is so often the case in Houston, profoundly alienating and dangerous for pedestrians became a space of empowerment.

On March 20, 2004, anti-war organizers responded to previous fractured experiences by bringing together several political causes through “feeder marches” originating from symbolic points downtown and converging on a single march route to the steps of City Hall.