

Big Park, Little Plans: A History of Hermann Park

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Hermann Park was one of the chief reasons that Houston became involved in efforts at city planning during the second decade of the 20th-century. Not only was the park itself a focus of civic improvement and beautification, but the properties surrounding it—largely undeveloped when the park was acquired—seemed to present an exceptional opportunity for those citizens concerned about Houston's future to achieve an example of integrated city planning, resulting in a civic environment that was rational, healthy and beautiful. The history of the park's development, however, indicates not only the problems involved in realizing such projects, but the equally difficult task of maintaining what already has been achieved.

In 1910, during the third term of Mayor H. Baldwin Rice, a progressive reformer, a Board of Park Commissioners was formed to advise the mayor and city commissioners on the acquisition, maintenance and development of park property.

Rice appointed three men to the Board of Park Commissioners: Edwin B. Parker, a partner in the law firm of Baker, Botts, Parker and Garwood; George H. Hermann, a real estate investor and industrialist; and William A. Wilson, a real estate developer. They in turn, in February 1912, retained Arthur Coleman Comey, a landscape architect from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to come to Houston to analyze local conditions and make recommendations for the sort of park and parkway system which ought to be developed.

Comey's report to the Board of Park Commissioners, published in 1913 as *Houston, Tentative Plans for Its Development*, was the first city planning document to be written about Houston. One of Comey's specific recommendations was that a major park be acquired within what he described as the inner park system, serving Houston and its area of immediately projected expansion. Called Pines Park in his report, this was indicated as a tract along Brays Bayou, across Main Street Road from the Rice Institute campus, laid out by the Boston architects Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson on a 277 acre site in 1910 and opened in 1912. The location of Pines Park probably was not accidental, for most of the property shown in Comey's diagram was owned by George H. Hermann.

In May 1914 Hermann announced publicly his intention of deeding to the City of Houston 285 acres of this property for a municipal park. The transfer was made in June; after Hermann's death in October 1914, several more acres were bequeathed to the City of Houston for the George H. Hermann Park. John W. Maxcey, the city engineer, produced the initial plan for developing this acreage, which extended from Almeda Road on the east to a line along the projected route of LaBranch Street on the west, between what are now Hermann Drive on the north and Holcombe Boulevard on the south. Maxcey, who in 1899 had laid out Sam Houston Park, the city's first public park, worked closely with Hermann on the proposed design for Hermann Park.

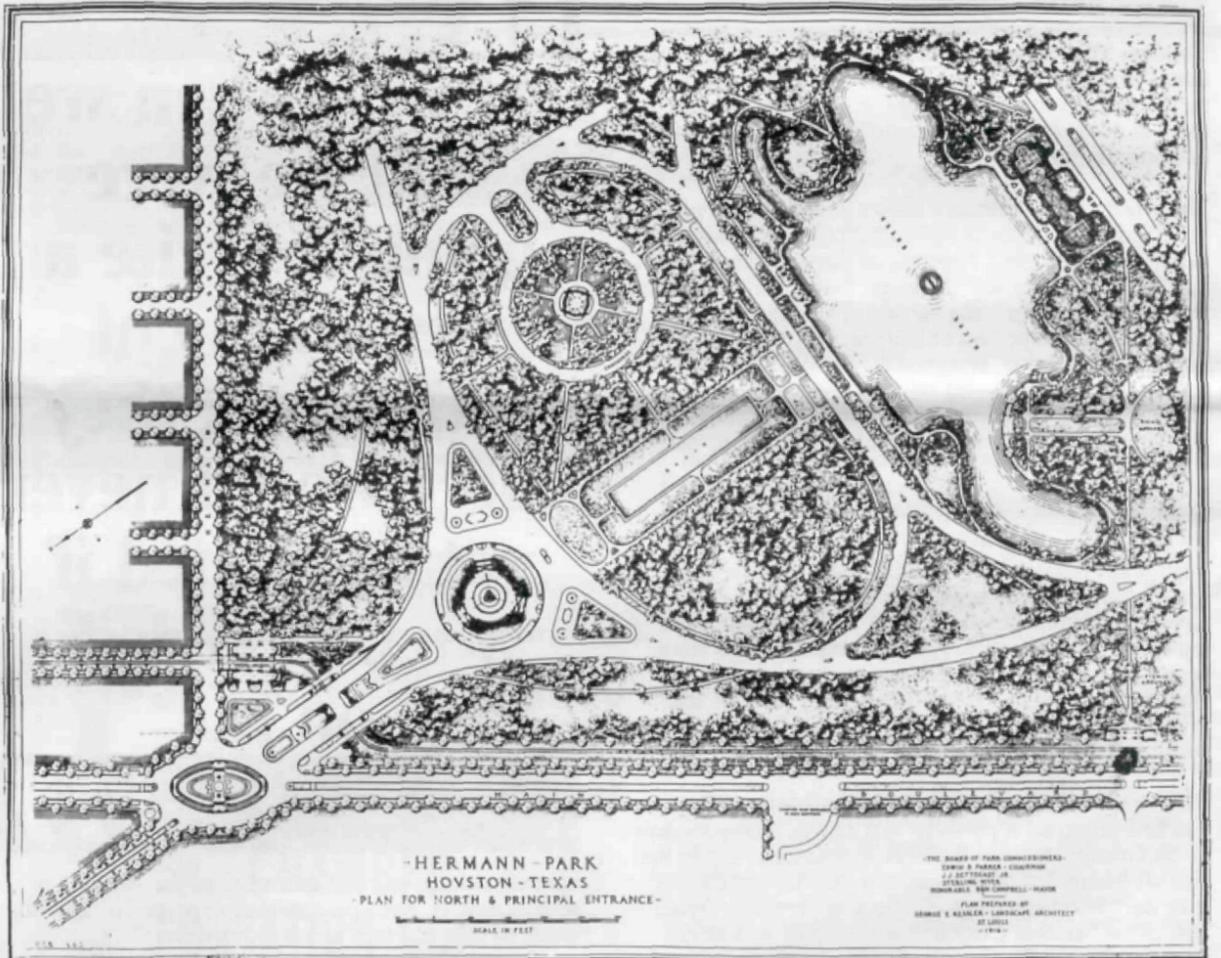
According to Maxcey's plan drawing, Brays Bayou was to be rechanneled extensively to create a series of wooded islands to either side of the existing channel. A curvilinear network of roads defined a series of oval-shaped meadows in the center of the park. Most of the open space was devoted to a golf course. The main entrance was to be on the west side of the park. A landscaped boulevard perpendicular to Main Street, opposite entrance two to the Rice campus, gave access to the park.

Maxcey's plan was never implemented. One reason was that, in 1915 with the encouragement of Rice's successor as mayor, Ben Campbell, also an enthusiastic supporter of the parks movement, the City of Houston purchased from the Hermann Estate an additional 122½ acres between LaBranch (which, of course, had not been cut through the park) and Main Street. This increased the area of the park to 409½ acres. From the five block deep strip of property that Hermann had owned between his donated park site and Main Street, the trustees of the Hermann Estate reserved only a 10-acre rectangular tract across from entrance three to the Rice campus. This was the site Hermann had selected for a charity hospital, which he endowed with his entire estate.

Rather than direct Maxcey to produce a revised plan, the Board of Park Commissioners retained their own consultant, the celebrated St. Louis landscape architect and planner, George E. Kessler. At the instigation of the oilman Joseph Stephen Cullinan, Kessler was appointed consulting landscape architect to the board in early 1915. His proposal for Hermann Park seems to have been presented the next year.



Aerial view of Hermann Park looking south, 1930. (Houston Chamber of Commerce)



Site Plan, Hermann Park, North and Principal Entrance, 1916, George E. Kessler, landscape architect. (Houston Metropolitan Research Center.)

In the plan he devised for Hermann Park, Kessler relied upon the diagonal geometry resulting from the intersection of the newly extended Montrose Boulevard with the newly widened and paved Main "Boulevard". He used this geometry to generate an infrastructure for the improvements to be imposed upon the flat, wooded site. Where the two boulevards crossed, a landscaped elliptical island, the Sunken Garden, was located. Continuing southward into the park, Montrose Boulevard provided the axis around which different features were organized. In Kessler's only surviving drawing, a plan for the entrance quadrant dated 1916, the roadway broke into a series of circular drives around a traffic circle inscribed with a monument. This circle occurred where the axis of Montrose Boulevard was intersected by a line of vision projected along the principal axis of the Rice Institute campus. The roadway divided around the circle to encompass a shallow, rectangular reflecting pool, flanked by walks and a music pavilion and its attendant seating area. Beyond these lay an irregularly configured lake called the Grand Basin, with pergolas, boat landings and a large, arcaded shelter house stationed along its shores.

A city map of 1917 diagrammatically shows what must have been Kessler's general scheme of development. A central, oval athletic field was bracketed by two other oval fields in a three lobe configuration. The western lobe contained playground and picnic facilities and the

eastern lobe contained a swimming pool and bath house. Southeast of this three-lobed group of open spaces, encompassed in an oval, were the golf links.

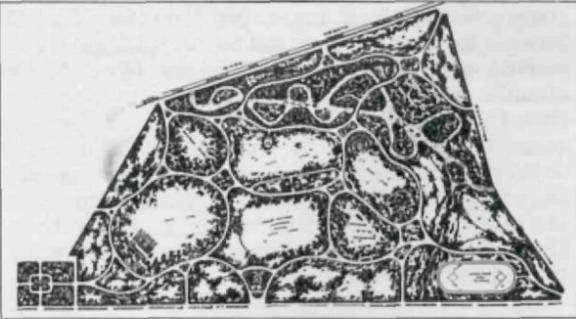
That Kessler's proposal was more sophisticated than Maxcey's is not surprising. Kessler demonstrated a pronounced facility for reconciling the requirements of ceremoniousness and informality in his design. The principal axis marked the ceremonial space of the park. Yet beyond the *allées* of trees flanking the reflecting basin, trees conformed to no fixed order in their location. The north and south embankments of the Grand Basin were part of the space of the axis. But the east and west shores (which were not) were eroded by canals and lagoons that broke down the sense of strict boundary and led to small scale, shaded dells.

The extent of the improvements which were actually undertaken during 1916 and 1917 is hard to ascertain, although the drives apparently were laid out, the rectangular reflecting basin was built and the Shelter House in the southwest quadrant of the park was constructed. Along Main Boulevard double rows of evergreen live oaks were planted. Instrumental in the realization of these features of the Kessler plan were two Houstonians: Clarence L. Brock, general superintendent of city parks since 1912, and Herbert A. Kipp, who had been appointed consulting engineer to the board of Park Commissioners in 1915.



George M. Hermann. (Illustrated City Book of Houston, 1915)

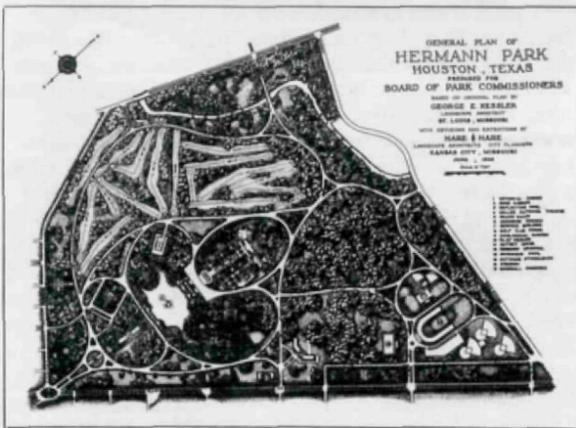
Aerial view of Hermann Park looking north, 1928. (Houston Public Library)



Project: Plan for George H. Hermann Park, 1914, J. W. Maxcey, City Engineer. (Illustrated City Book of Houston, 1915)



Site plan of Hermann Park, 1917. (Houston Public Library)



General Plan of Hermann Park, 1930, Hare and Hare, landscape architects. (Houston Metropolitan Research Center)

Several other projects contributed to the transformation of the Hermann Park-Rice Institute area. One was the development of a residential enclave called Shadyside by J. S. Cullinan. In February 1916 Cullinan purchased from the Hermann Estate nearly 37 acres along Main Street, north of the campus and west of the park, and with the aid of Kessler and Kipp proceeded to turn it into a residential neighborhood of small estates.

At the time George Hermann died, he had promised representatives of the Houston Art League to donate property for a museum that the league hoped to build. In August 1916 the league acquired the triangular-shaped, three-acre lot between Main and Montrose, opposite the Sunken Garden, a joint gift of the Hermann Estate and Mr. and Mrs. J. S. Cullinan.

The eruption of war in April 1917 and the exhaustion by August 1917 of a bond issue voted in 1914 brought all park acquisition and improvement projects in Houston to a halt. Following the Armistice, the Progressive spirit of civic action that had been so active during the 1910's seemed to falter. It was not until 1922, after the election of a new mayor, Oscar F. Holcombe, that park improvements and other civic planning programs obtained renewed public support. Holcombe recognized the political value of promoting measures aimed at achieving orderly urban growth and a more amenable urban environment. Consequently, he appointed the first City

Planning Commission in 1922 and renewed the activity of the Board of Park Commissioners. Unfortunately, this coincided with George Kessler's death in 1923. To replace Kessler the Board of Park Commissioners, in 1923, and the City Planning Commission, in 1924, retained as their professional consultant the Kansas City landscape architects Hare and Hare.

S. Herbert Hare, the firm's junior partner, was in charge of the Houston work. Under Hare and Hare's guidance, Hermann Park and the rest of the Houston park system as envisioned by Comey, Kessler and committed Houstonians, took shape. Between 1923 and 1933 Hermann Park gradually acquired not only the improvements called for in the Kessler plan of 1916 (which was preserved carefully by Hare and Hare) but a number of unforeseen additions. Chiefly these were the inclusion of a zoo, the addition of a 133½ acre strip along the lower west side of the park and the donation of the MacGregor Parkway to the east of Hermann Park.

In 1930 Hare and Hare produced a general plan drawing for the Board of Park Commissioners depicting the extent of their park planning during the 1920's. The Houston Zoological Garden, opened in 1924, was located in what had been the central athletic oval on the south shore of the Grand Basin. Its layout was a miniature version of the park's, with a central axial pedestrian concourse flanked by open air exhibits all set in a more informal network of curvilinear paths. Small buildings, finished with stucco and tile roofs, were built at intervals between 1924 and 1931 along the central concourse to provide enclosed exhibition space as well as quarters for the Museum of Natural History. An 18 hole golf course was constructed on the site allotted by Kessler in 1922, following a design by the Houston stockbroker and golfing enthusiast, George V. Rotan, and the engineer David M. Duller. On the site that Kessler had designated for a concert pavilion, the Miller Memorial Theater, an austere Doric proscenium flanked by peristyles, was built between 1921 and 1922 to the designs of William Ward Watkin. To provide for better automobile circulation, the theater grounds were linked by a short, curved drive to Caroline Street and Hermann Drive along the north boundary of the park. Another "improvement," also involving automobiles, was of short duration. This was the tourist-oriented Automobile Camp, opened early in 1922 and laid out by Clarence Brock to accommodate 150 vehicles. By the time Hare and Hare made their general plan drawing, it no longer existed.

Excavation of the Grand Basin began in 1925, but only the central six and three-quarters acres of the 13 acre waterway called for in the Kessler plan were constructed initially. The basin was picturesquely configured. Between 1927 and 1931 the Parks Department repeatedly announced that excavation of the remaining six and one-quarter acres would be undertaken, but this was not accomplished. The monument circle on the Montrose axis was filled by a bronze equestrian statue of Sam Houston. Modeled by Enrico F. Cerracchio after a painting by Seymour Thomas, the Sam Houston Monument, like the Miller Memorial Theater, was the result of private beneficence. Funds for the erection of the monument, which was completed in 1925, were raised by the Sam Houston Memorial Association. Incremental improvements included the construction of a comfort station and of the Hermann Park Clubhouse of 1933, a handsome Spanish colonial revival building adjacent to the golf course designed by Arthur E. Nutter. In 1927 improvement of the botanical garden, lying along Hermann Drive to the east of the main entrance, began according to plans by Hare and Hare.

Both the improvements that were financed publicly as well as those that resulted from the munificence of individuals or organizations, consolidated the provisions of the plan of 1916. In addition to these improvements there were two major property acquisitions. In 1923 Will C. Hogg, the son of a former Texas governor who adopted civic planning as his foremost cause, purchased the 133½ acre Parker tract south of the Hermann Hospital site, and sold it to the City of Houston at cost and on generous terms in January 1924. This brought the park's area to 545 acres. Hogg had already underwritten the War Mothers' planting of 200 oak trees along Outer Belt Drive as memorials to Harris County men who died during the world war.

Similarly in April 1926 Peggy Stevens MacGregor, the widow of Henry F. MacGregor, a real estate developer, donated 108 acres of wooded land on Brays Bayou, two and one-half miles east of Hermann Park, to the city as a memorial to her husband along with \$150,000 to finance acquisition of all the property on both banks of the bayou between the two parks. During the early 1930's the two

bayou-side drives, called North and South MacGregor Ways, were built to join Hermann and MacGregor Parks. Although not all the property on both sides of the bayou could be acquired, a sufficient amount was obtained to insure that the parkway was implemented.

Houston's expansion during the 1920's decade was phenomenal. It also caused problems, not the least with transportation. Automobile ownership increased year by year at a staggering rate. One result was that the drives in Hermann Park were paved, as well as the streets surrounding the park: Bellaire, Almeda and eight blocks of Hermann Drive. The difference between 1916 and 1926 however was that Kessler could still envision the park as the scene of leisurely "pleasure" drives in continuation of a well developed 19th-century social custom. Ten years later, speeding and careless driving had effectively terminated this social ritual. When the location of the Sam Houston Monument was under consideration in 1925, the Board of Park Commissioners resolved that it should not be placed in the Sunken Garden, as this might at some point in the near future require removal to accommodate increased traffic. For this reason the esplanades on Main Boulevard north of the Sunken Garden, which Hare and Hare had landscaped in 1924 and 1925, were pulled up in 1928. In 1928 also the Houston Electric Company substituted buses for the South End car line trams. Thus the track which had been built through the future site of the park in 1910 to serve the Rice Institute was taken up.

The Great Depression marked the end of the second epoch in Hermann Park's development. During the 1930's most improvements were incremental additions carried out under the supervision of Clarence L. Brock and Hare and Hare. In 1936 monuments commemorating the centennial of Texas independence and the founding of Houston were dedicated in Hermann Park. One was a 50-foot high granite obelisk, the Pioneer Memorial Shaft, donated by the San Jacinto Memorial Association; the second was a log-built community center, the Memorial Log House, erected by the San Jacinto Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas. The Pioneer Memorial Shaft was located at the south end of the reflecting basin, between it and the Grand Basin. The Memorial Log House was situated on Outer Belt Drive behind the Zoological Garden. Another belated improvement was proposed in 1937 by the Central Lions Club of Houston, a standing bronze figure of George H. Hermann. A maquette was prepared by Julian Muench, and the landscape architects Fleming and Sheppard were retained to choose a site for the statue. Their choice was a location on axis with entrance two of the Rice Institute, at the western tip of the Grand Basin, once it was extended to its full size. The Lions Club must have been unable to secure the \$15,000 to erect the statue, for it was never realized.

The correspondence of J. Robert Neal, a Houston banker who, from 1938 until his death in 1940, was chairman of the Houston Board of Park Commissioners, indicates that by the late 1930's the Houston park system, not excluding Hermann Park, was suffering from the effects of poor maintenance. A series of confidential reports on the condition of city parks prepared by one of Neal's associates in February and March 1938 stated that despite a capable administrator (Brock) and an excellent planning consultant (Hare), the park system was inadequate. Miller Memorial Theater was described as being in "deplorable" condition and vandalism had become so serious that repairs to park buildings and to the landscaping were inadvisable unless future protection could be guaranteed. Neal led the park board in a dramatic confrontation with the city council in the summer of 1938. The council was unable to increase the Parks Department's appropriation and unwilling to assign fees charged for the use of the golf courses in Hermann and Memorial parks to the Parks Department rather than to the general revenue fund. Consequently, the Board of Park Commissioners recommended that the Zoological Garden be closed and all the animals sold to decrease expenses. The city council assigned the golf fees to the Parks Department.

During Neal's tenure a number of requests were made for dedication of park property to non-park related uses. In 1938 a second golf course was proposed for the Hogg tract (a project which Hogg had opposed in 1925), the Houston Conservatory of Music asked for a three or four acre site along Main Boulevard and the Houston Independent School District requested 50 acres for a public school stadium along Almeda Road. Following Hare's advice, all of these proposals were rejected. The last project to be implemented before the war was the construction of the Houston Garden Center, a one-story pavilion containing a meeting and exhibition hall. Designed by William Ward Watkin in 1938, the Garden

Center was not constructed until 1941. It was located on Hermann Drive, on axis with LaBranch Street, at the east end of the Botanical Garden. In front of the south elevation Hare and Hare laid out the Rose Garden.

During 1940, Oscar Holcombe, who was once again Mayor of Houston, established the City Planning Commission on a permanent basis and created a Department of City Planning with Ralph Ellifrit, a member of the firm of Hare and Hare, as director. Ellifrit and Hare and Hare prepared two major city planning reports—a street and thoroughfare plan and a parks plan—released in 1942 and 1943 respectively. For Hermann Park the report recommended development of a recreation center and athletic fields and proposed that between 20 and 40 acres be acquired along Brays Bayou for this purpose. Acquisition of this property was to compensate for the loss of the Hogg tract.

This unexpected event occurred in 1943. The previous year the trustees of the M. D. Anderson Foundation, a charitable trust established in 1936 by Monroe D. Anderson, a founding partner in the cotton exporting firm of Anderson, Clayton and Company, convinced the regents of the University of Texas to establish a cancer research institute and a dental school in Houston. They then persuaded the trustees of the Baylor University College of Medicine to transfer that institution from Dallas to Houston. In return, the foundation was to provide funds for construction of new buildings as well as building sites. The trustees of the M. D. Anderson Foundation, W. B. Bates, John H. Freeman and H. M. Wilkins, considered the Hogg tract an ideal location. It was adjacent to Hermann Hospital (which was built on Hermann's ten acre tract between 1923 and 1925) and the Rice Institute and provided plenty of room for expansion. Despite the opposition of Ralph Ellifrit, the city council, under the successive administrations of mayors C. A. Pickett (1941–1943) and Otis Massey (1943–1947), supported this proposal and in December 1943 a referendum in which 951 votes were cast confirmed the council's agreement to sell these 133½ acres to the M. D. Anderson Foundation for \$400,000. Between 1945 and 1955 six new hospitals and two medical schools were built on the Hogg tract following a general plan devised between 1944 and 1945 by H. A. Kipp.

The development of the Hogg tract for the Texas Medical Center (as it was known following its dedication in 1946), was to accelerate the tempo of change around Hermann Park in the years following World War II. Other factors however were the deterioration of the residential neighborhoods north of the park during the 1950's and a more gradual but no less surprising decline of the neighborhoods along the MacGregor Parkway during the 1960's. Yet at the same time the Medical Center stimulated real estate development along Main Street and Bellaire Boulevard, in what came to be called "uptown" Houston. Despite the institutional and commercial development occurring around Hermann Park, improvements within the park progressed at a slower pace. During the first term of Mayor Otis Massey, a city manager form of municipal government was adopted. Proceeding from this, the City Parks and Recreation Department was formed by consolidating two separate departments and the landscape architect C. C. "Pat" Fleming was appointed to replace Clarence Brock as director of the new department in 1943. Through these changes, however, Hare and Hare remained as consult-

ing landscape architects.

As early as 1943 priorities for post-war improvements to Hermann Park were formulated. Chief among these were an expansion of the zoo and provision of an adequately sized and equipped building for the Museum of Natural History. During 1945 and 1946 the Parks and Recreation Association, a group of citizens formed in 1919 to promote and support municipal recreation programs, additionally proposed the construction of a planetarium, an aquarium and a new Miller Theater. Schematic plans for a number of these improvements were prepared: a large Museum of Natural History building was to be sited on the south shore of the Grand Basin, on axis with the entrance to the zoo. This would be flanked by the planetarium and aquarium. The Grand Basin was to be expanded to from 18 to 20 acres, and the excavated soil was to be used to construct a ramped lawn where 10,000 people could be seated in front of the new Miller Theater. As early as 1940 Hare and Hare had made plans for enlarging the seating lawn at Miller Theater, as well as the parking. The "formal" north and south embankments of the Grand Basin were to be built.

Although a bond issue had been voted in 1944, it was not until Oscar Holcombe was re-elected in 1947 that Hare and Hare were commissioned to prepare plans for the expansion of the zoo. S. Herbert Hare recommended keeping the zoo in Hermann Park, expanding its area and building habitats for animal exhibits rather than cages. In 1949 Hare and Hare were authorized to proceed with plans for the \$800,000 expansion program. The loop drive bounding the southwest side of the zoo's oval site was moved farther to the southwest to increase the total area of the zoo. The axial arrangement of 1924 was preserved, but it was developed much more carefully, with a sunken reflecting basin flanked sequentially by walkways, planting strips and continuous, canopied passageways. A new Primate House terminated this formal concourse on the south. Beyond the central promenade, in the expanded southwestern and southeastern portions of the zoo, a freer network of curvilinear paths was developed, superseding those of the 1924 plan. The "new" zoo opened in 1950. Incremental additions were made in conformance with the Hare and Hare general plan of 1949 until the middle 1970's. In connection with the zoo expansion, the Grand Basin was reshaped, although it was not expanded in area.

During 1948 and 1949 Fannin Street was cut through Hermann Park between the westernmost drive and Main Boulevard. This was to provide a direct connection between downtown Houston and the Texas Medical Center and to relieve traffic congestion on Main (which lost all but a narrow strip of the remaining center medians in 1940). Subsequently, a connection was made between the Fannin Street extension and San Jacinto Street to ease traffic circulation further. An unfortunate effect of this traffic engineering was that the parkland between Fannin and Main—now known as the Esplanade—became a residual corridor of greenery, and Fannin was established as Hermann Park's effective west boundary. This was confirmed in 1967 when the Houston Feder-



Site plan of Hermann Park showing existing and proposed development, 1943. (Houston Public Library)



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ation of Garden Clubs adopted as a civic project the construction of a high, landscaped berm along Fannin, between the main entrance and Sunset Boulevard. Its purpose was to shield the park from the sight and sound of traffic along Fannin. Street improvements also included an extension of Hermann Drive east of Jackson to connect with Almeda Road. In order that this intersection occur at a right angle, Hermann Drive curved away from the park boundary at its northeast corner. The resulting triangle of land became the site of the Jewish Community Center, which was built between 1949 and 1950.

Hare and Hare proposed, at the time the Fannin extension was being designed, that a museum center be built in Shadyside on the estate of former governor William P. Hobby and his wife, Oveta Culp Hobby. This would incorporate a new Museum of Natural History, axially aligned with the Sunken Garden and Hermann Drive. At the same time they proposed that a large fountain be constructed in the Sunken Garden. Because of its depressed, bowl-like configuration, the Sunken Garden had proved to be something of a traffic hazard, a problem that could be rectified by building above the curb line. None of these proposals was carried through, although the city did acquire an additional nine acres along Brays Bayou to compensate for the loss of the Hogg tract.

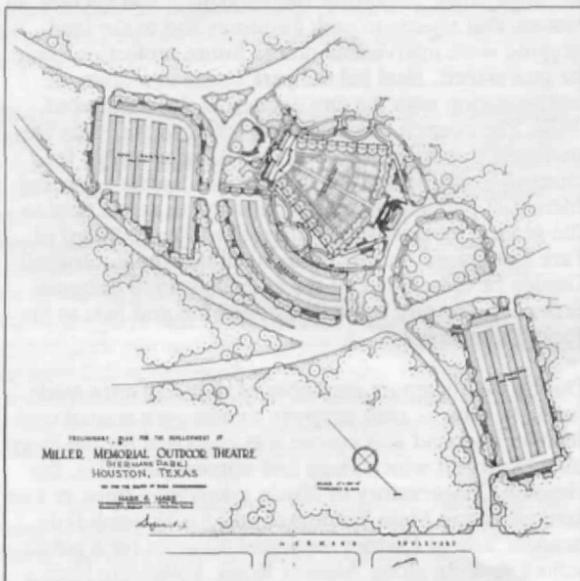
Other than the zoo improvements, no major work was done in Hermann Park during the 1950's except by the Harris County Flood District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. A serious flood had occurred on Brays Bayou in 1949 which caused property owners in the South End of Houston to demand more effective flood control measures. In 1953 it was announced that a \$5 million program would be undertaken to correct this problem on Brays Bayou; between 1956 and 1959 the channel was straightened and lined with concrete and the banks were stripped of all vegetation, completely denuding the MacGregor Parkway.

Throughout the 1950's the Museum of Natural History struggled to secure a new museum building. In 1959 a four acre site on Hermann Loop Drive was leased by the City of Houston to the Museum of Natural History; a three year fund drive culminated in the construction of the first phase of the museum's new building between 1963 and 1964, incorporating the Burke Baker Planetarium. A second phase, built between 1967 and 1969, resulted in the addition of 8,000 square feet of exhibition and administrative space. Between 1967 and 1969 a new Miller Outdoor Theater, designed by Eugene Werlin and Associates, was constructed on the site of the old Doric proscenium. A high, bermed lawn provided amphitheater-type seating in front of the new stage and orchestra. The columns of the old theater were salvaged and grouped around a circular pool to form the Mecom-Rockwell Colonnade in 1968. Four years earlier, the donors of this fountain, Mr. and Mrs. John W. Mecom, had constructed the Mecom Fountain in the Sunken Garden, sixteen years after Hare and Hare advanced their fountain design.

The protracted realization of facilities that had been required in Hermann Park since the 1940's underscored the lack of recognition and official support which the park, like so many other public properties in Houston, elicited. Even though many of the major improvements continued to be the result of private benefaction, it was



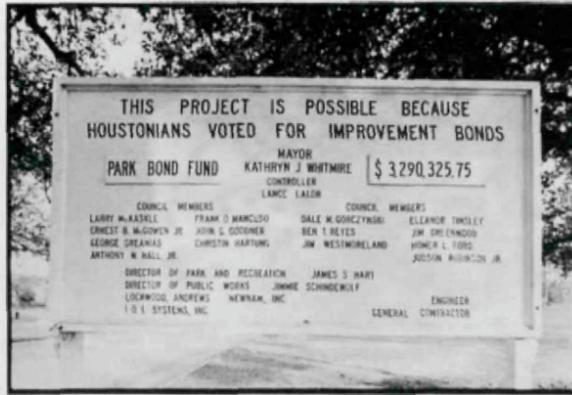
Hermann Park Master Plan showing revision of auto circulation, 1972, Lockwood, Andrews and Newnam, Inc. and James A. Cummins, Inc.



Project: Plan for Redevelopment of Miller Memorial Theater grounds, 1940, Hare and Hare, landscape architects. (Houston Metropolitan Research Center)



Paul Hester



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View of northwest section of Hermann Park looking north, showing rectification of lake and construction of parking lots, December 1982.

View of northwest section of Hermann Park looking south, February 1983.



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clear by the 1950's that the Civic Art movement of the 1910's and 1920's was spent. And while a reversal of this negligent attitude occurred during the 1960's, it often seemed to substitute good intention for a lack of judgement and discrimination. This was evident in the Hermann Park Master Plan, prepared for the City of Houston during 1971 and 1972 by two engineering firms, Lockwood, Andrews and Newnam and James Cummins, Inc., and adopted in 1973 as the basis for subsequent park improvements. The 1972 master plan departed considerably from the Kessler and Hare and Hare general plans in an attempt to accommodate the numbers of people using the park and its facilities, the numbers of automobiles within the park and another expansion of the zoo. To accommodate through traffic, South MacGregor Way was cut through the park in 1981, alongside the existing, two-lane North MacGregor Way. As with the Fannin extension, this effectively created a new boundary line separating the park from what became a linear greenway and bayou trail. Within the park, the historic infrastructure has begun to be eliminated in a piecemeal fashion to discourage through traffic. Thus Hermann Lake Drive and Zoo Circle became residual stretches of service alleys, leaving only Golf Course Drive to provide access to a 1,434 car parking lot between the zoo and the golf course. Hermann Park Clubhouse, the most architecturally distinguished older building within the park, is marked in the master plan for demolition as is the Jewish Community Center, which was acquired by the City of Houston and presently is used as the Hermann Regional Recreation Center.



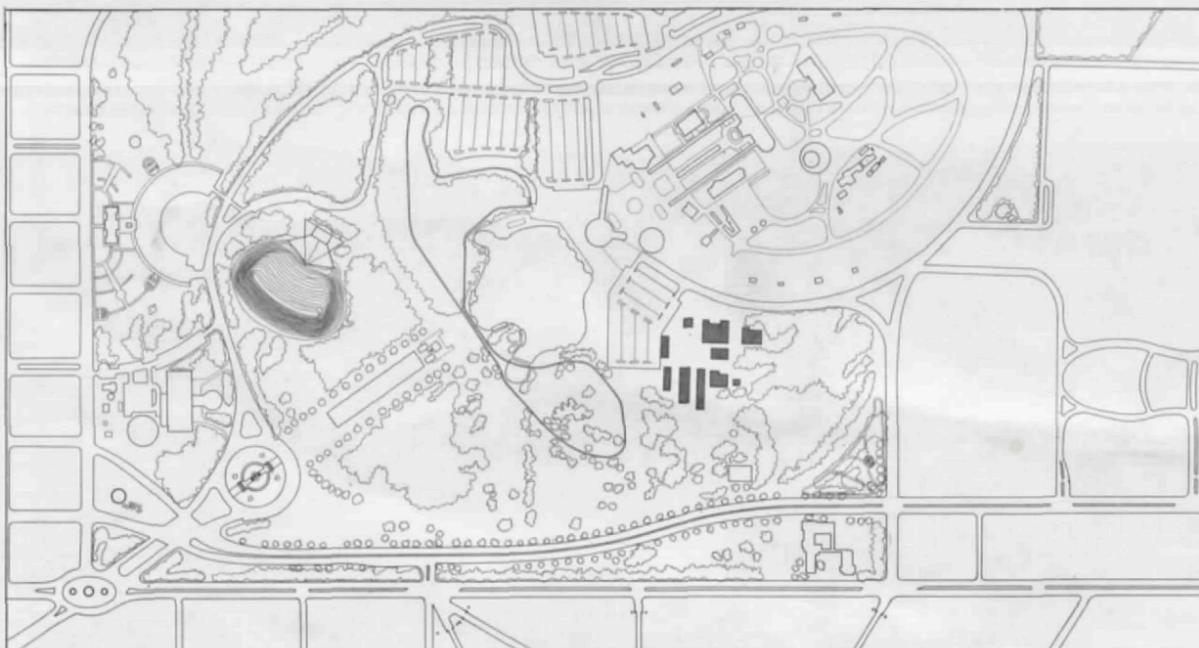
Paul Hester



Zoo service buildings have spilled outside the enlarged oval of 1949 and the front gates have been demolished and replaced by the intrusive Kipp Aquarium, built in 1980-1982 with a bequest from Herbert A. Kipp. The Kipp Aquarium sits astride the main axis on the south shore of the Grand Basin, which was reshaped between 1981 and 1982. The master plan proposes that the Reflecting Basin be filled and that the formal promenade between the Sam Houston Monument and the Pioneer Memorial Shaft become an irregularly bounded, picturesque ramble. Parking and service facilities are spotted about the perimeter of the park forming yet another barrier between it and the surrounding city.

Since 1973 additions and alterations not contemplated in the master plan have occurred. The Chinese Teahouse and Garden were constructed along Hermann Drive at the south end of Crawford Street. In 1980 the Cravens Walkway—a network of paths intertwined between berms, raised planting beds and seating areas—was constructed in the Esplanade south of Sunset Boulevard to the designs of Joel Brand and Associates. Between 1980 and 1981 the Hermann Hospital Estate sponsored the construction of a memorial to George H. Hermann at the corner of Fannin Street and Outer Belt Drive, which consisted of Lonnie Joe Edward's standing bronze figure of Hermann set in a fountain display surrounded by a granite-paved court.

Hermann Park's history has been one of high hopes frustrated by a lack of popular understanding and support. It has received more attentive care than any other park in Houston and it is one of the most intensively used parks in the city. Yet even so, Hermann Park has never compelled the sort of civic loyalty with which New Yorkers, for instance, regard Central Park. It has failed to attain the symbolic importance of the Texas Medical Center or Rice University as a representative Houston place, although in terms of actual use it is perhaps more deserving of such recognition than either of its neighbors. It has been treated more like a natural resource than an artifact and has been subject to the sorts of abusive exploitation which Americans seem to reserve for natural resources. Since the 1940's Hermann Park has decreased in acreage, either through deaccessioning of property or on account of the routing of major thoroughfares which produce isolating barriers. This diminished acreage has been expected to accommodate expanding activities and increasing use. However, the issue of how far various activities can expand without disrupting other activities or the general park setting has yet to be raised. The issues of appropriate usage, conservation and preservation are only now beginning to crystallize. With the proposed formation of an ad-hoc committee for Hermann Park under the sponsorship of the South Main Center Association, the opportunity exists to create a forum where such issues can be addressed and resolved. Hermann Park can no longer continue to be whittled away thoughtlessly, especially as its resources become more and more valuable to Houston.



Plan of the west half of Hermann Park, February 1983, showing siting of zoo commissary and service complex (shaded) scheduled for construction in 1983.

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