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A New House for Sam Houston Park

Sam Houston Park, with its groves of trees and grassy slopes that roll towards Buffalo Bayou, is the only large green space in downtown Houston. Since 1954, when the Harris County Heritage Society was established, it also has been a repository for the city's oldest buildings. However, the historic houses, which the Heritage Society acquired incrementally, do not conform to any master plan, and they do not outline a perceivable volume of space. Presently, the park seems to be an interstitial zone between an elevated interstate highway structure to the west and the wall of downtown skyscrapers to the east.

Within six months, however, Sam Houston Park will become a more memorable place to visit. A new master plan by the SWA Group will create a "village green" to unite the presently scattered houses around a coherent outdoor space. Visitors to the park will encounter a much broader range of history than the earliest years of Houston, for they will find a house built in Westmoreland Place in 1905 as well as a new building that contains an exhibition spanning the entire history of Texas.

The Staiti House, a 20th-century complement to the 19th-century houses presently in the park, will be moved this fall from Westmoreland Avenue. It was built by Henry Thomas Staiti, a petroleum geologist and businessman. The son of an Italian immigrant, Staiti was involved in Spindletop and other oil fields in the early years of the petroleum industry; as a member of Houston's affluent middle class, he settled in Westmoreland Place, the first private-place type neighborhood to be developed in Houston.



Staiti House, 1905, attributed to Olle J. Lorehn, architect (Photo courtesy of the Harris County Heritage Society)

The Staiti House was probably designed by Olle J. Lorehn, but was remodelled by Alfred C. Finn, one of Houston's most prolific architects, following the Storm of 1915. Over the subsequent 65 years members of the Staiti family lived there. Because they barely changed Finn's design, it will be fairly simple for Barry Moore Architects to reconstruct and restore the house in the park.

Fortunately, the Heritage Society has an exceptional collection of photographs and measured drawings of the Staiti House, which had been deposited in the society's archives. These provide excellent documentation of Houston family life during the early years of the 20th century. This year, the Staiti heirs donated the house to the society, and the Robert W. Knox, Sr. and Pearl Wallis Knox Foundation provided the funds for its dismantling, moving, and reconstruction. Once it is relocated in Sam Houston Park, the Staiti House will serve as the interim administrative office of the Heritage Society. In a few years, the inside will be fully restored and open for tours. The exterior will be restored immediately to its appearance shortly after Finn's remodelling.

The Staiti House will occupy a site in Sam Houston Park that replicates the solar

orientation it had on Westmoreland. It also will be surrounded by a representative sample of the extensive gardens designed in 1917 by Edward Dewson, one of Houston's first known professional landscape architects. The Staiti House, together with five other Heritage Society houses, will mark the perimeter of a circular brick walkway, shaded by a ring of trees. The SWA Group's plan of contiguous paths and trees will create a space which will provide a datum for the historic houses, and visitors will perceive Sam Houston Park as a village, rather than a series of randomly distributed buildings.

On 22 March 1986, the 150th anniversary of Texas's independence, the Heritage Society will open a new museum building on the corner of Bagby and Lamar, adjacent to the Long Row. The exhibit inside will survey four centuries of Texas history. The society envisions this building as intermediary, for within a few years it plans to build a large, permanent museum on another site in the park. The Mayor's Committee on the Sesquicentennial has endorsed the project and a capital funds drive is well underway.

Philip Arcidi

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Buffalo Bayou And City Planning

In August, 1984, Mayor Kathryn Whitmire created the Buffalo Bayou Task Force. The mayor asked the task force to devise a plan for redeveloping Buffalo Bayou in order to make it a civic and commercial asset to the city. On 18 April 1985, the task force released its preliminary report, which focuses on three major issues - flood control, water quality, and park development. In each of these areas, the study suggests specific, practical improvements. The improvements are good examples of effective city planning: they are long-term, flexible solutions to problems that affect large and varied parts of the city.

The proposals offered for flood control include the building of detention ponds in the upper parts of the Buffalo and White Oak basins to protect against downstream flooding. The ponds will collect and store floodwaters, allowing releases only when there is capacity in downstream sections of the bayou. In addition, flooding in these streams is seen as both a problem of upstream runoff and downstream limits in stream capacity. The task force tried to deal with both problems by suggesting not only the detention ponds in the upper watershed but also de-snagging and anti-erosion work in the downstream sections of the stream. Furthermore, by requiring detention ponds as part of new developments, the city should be able to protect against future flooding.

The task force also suggests an enduring solution to the problems of water quality in Buffalo and White Oak bayous. The group endorses the new instream water-quality standards for Buffalo Bayou, and urged consideration of similar standards for White Oak. By specifying water-quality standards for these receiving streams, the authorities recognize that a stream can only dilute and degrade a certain amount of waste before the stream's water quality begins to fall. By setting a water-quality standard for the bayous, a cap is put on the total amount of waste that can enter the stream.

The task force report also offers water-quality recommendations that could affect widespread parts of the city. The report recommends regionalization of sewage-treatment plants in the upper watershed and correction of pump-station overflows and treatment-plant bypasses in the lower watershed. The two-pronged suggestion makes sense. In the upper watershed of Buffalo Bayou, the principal problem was the construction of many small, "package" sewage-treatment plants. The package plants suffered from little or no supervision and from inadequate design. By a policy of regionalization, the city and developers can build large, cost-efficient, sophisticated, well-supervised sewage-treatment plants that should have much better effluent than the package plants. On the other hand, the problem and the solution in the lower part of the watershed are different. There, the pump

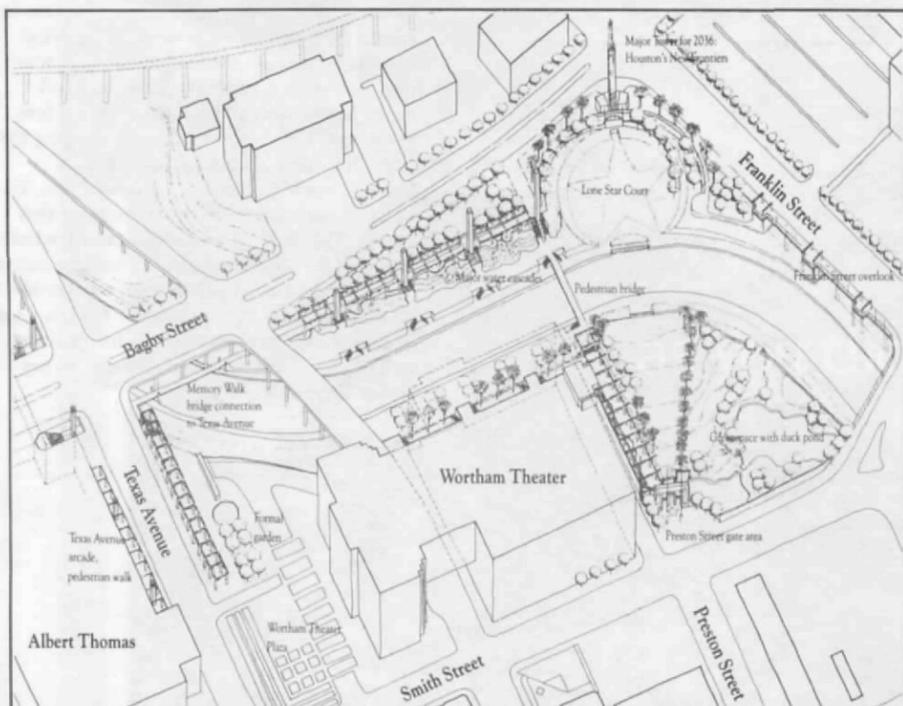
stations and treatment plants are old and over-capacity. The facilities need to be repaired, modernized, and expanded. The pairing of different solutions for separate areas of the city should improve the water quality of the bayou throughout Houston.

The study offers far-sighted recommendations for parks along Buffalo Bayou, emphasizing development along the west sector (Shepherd to Sabine), the downtown sector (Sabine to Allen's Landing), and the east sector (Allen's Landing to the Turning Basin). In the west sector, the report suggests improved access, lighting, and paths. On the east side, parks at McKee Street, Clayton Homes, and El Mercado del Sol are recommended. While the report is focused on the immediate development of a Sesquicentennial Park adjoining Wortham Theater in the downtown sector, it also suggests that plans be pursued for redevelopment of areas at Allen's Landing, Commerce Street, the University of Houston Plaza, Holcombe Square, the Public Works Yard, and Sam Houston Park. By mentioning these other areas as potential projects, the task force has set up the machinery for the long process of developing specific plans and raising adequate funds.

The task force report offers schemes that might be used in a variety of areas along the bayou. For example, the bayou might be protected from further construction along its banks and other forms of encroachment by a "bayou easement." Also, roads along the bayou, such as Bagby, Franklin, and Navigation, might be given "scenic right-of-way" and improved with plantings and billboard controls. With green spaces and parkways strung along the bayou, it could become a public place that would be used by people from all parts of the city.

The Buffalo Bayou Task Force has produced a good report. Their recommendations fit in with existing government policies. For example, inclusion of detention ponds is already a requirement for plat approval in the White Oak watershed, while regionalization of sewage-treatment plants is already underway at the Turkey Creek facility. Also, the recommendations use laws that are already on the books. Water-quality standards have already been issued for Buffalo Bayou by the state. The idea of a scenic right-of-way is supported by Section 4610 of the Houston Building Code. Finally, they use existing funding mechanisms and, at the same time, attract new donors. Regionalization and construction of detention ponds are on-going programs supported by joint-venture agreements between the city and private developers. The proposal for a Sesquicentennial Park has appealed to several private donors, and has already enlisted the support of Tenneco. In conclusion, the task force should be congratulated. They have provided good ideas that should be workable solutions. The task force itself has offered private support and guidance to city policies and finances. Together, the task force and its study have made a significant contribution to planning for Houston's growth and for improving its quality of life.

David Todd



Conceptual plan of the Sesquicentennial Park



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A Survey Of Dallas Street Life

In November 1984, William H. Whyte, widely respected urban analyst and author of *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, spoke to the Downtown Houston Association on how to make our urban centers more vital, active, and livable places. In March 1985, Whyte conducted a survey of downtown street life in Dallas, followed by a two-day seminar there. As we thought the survey might offer lessons for Houston, we requested this special report from David Dillon. (JKO)

Dallasites may talk a lot about street crime and street people, but many of them believe that downtown streets are safe. And despite the city's reputation as a stuffy, puritanical burg, there is a hearty appetite for vendors, outdoor cafes, street performers, and other heretical Mediterranean pleasures. These are two of the more tantalizing conclusions to be drawn from William H. Whyte's survey of downtown street life in Dallas, which garnered nearly 700 responses and was the subject of two lively public seminars at the Central Dallas Library. "There was great enthusiasm for what I'd call grace notes," Whyte said. "The results confirmed my feeling that these things will go in Dallas if given half a chance."

Whyte has been making regular visits to Dallas since the late 1970s, usually in conjunction with seminars sponsored by the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. In 1984 the city commissioned him to study its barren City Hall Plaza in hopes of making it something other than a grand setting for a piece of architectural sculpture. Whyte made a number of his familiar recommendations: moveable tables and chairs, food kiosks, windbreaks, and more and larger trees. His report was lukewarmly received by local architects, who thought his proposals would compromise the integrity of I.M. Pei's design, but city officials were sufficiently impressed to hire him to conduct a survey of downtown street life.

Whyte's questionnaire, published in the daily newspapers, was intended to measure habits ("Do you use buses regularly?") as well as impressions and assumptions ("Where is the center of Dallas?"). On the latter issue, 178 people said that the center is the central business district, with Thanks-Giving Square the hub of choice; 52 people thought the center is the intersection of the LBJ Freeway and Dallas Parkway at the Galleria; 44 people said Dallas has no center; and 6 were convinced it is somewhere in the NorthPark shopping center. One person wrote testily, "I don't identify with downtown Dallas at all. Very few do. Why don't you pay attention to where 90 percent of the rest of us live?"

DART (Dallas Area Rapid Transit) got good grades for service from those who use the buses regularly (about 20 percent), and the downtown Hop-A-Buses are a smash. But the city's bus shelters were almost universally condemned as poorly located and badly maintained. Some people wrote that the shelters, especially the lack of them, was the main reason they don't ride the bus. On a related issue, 62 percent believed that the underground concourses should be extended, while 58 percent felt similarly about the skyways. Whyte noted, however, that those who were opposed to extending the systems were strongly so ("lots of exclamation points in the margins") while those in favor believed that since the city had already spent some \$12 million on the systems it might as well go the rest of the way. Many people felt that downtown parking is inadequate, despite the presence of 66,000 spaces. "That has to be a record," Whyte gasped. Many people also mentioned housing as an essential ingredient of a lively downtown, though few said that they would actually move downtown themselves.

On more architectural matters, Plaza of the Americas was chosen as the friendliest office building, followed by LTV Center and Lincoln Plaza. Thanks-Giving Tower was named the least friendly, with Inter-First II and ARCO Tower closing fast. Thanks-Giving Square was the most popular public space by a wide margin. There were also numerous mentions of the new tables and chairs on City Hall Plaza, accompanied by pleas for more of everything.

The most significant missing grace note in downtown Dallas, according to the survey, is shopping. People wrote comments such as "Few interesting stores. Downtown looks beat." It was the main reason given for the low pedestrian count on downtown streets. "That was the one thing that came through in all the questions," Whyte said. "People in Dallas feel very strongly about it, which of course delights me." This may explain the anointing of Plaza of the Americas as downtown Dallas's friendliest building. From the outside it is a chilling monolith, first cousin to Renaissance Center in Detroit and Bonaventure Center in Los Angeles. It makes every critic's hit list, Whyte's included. Yet it has shopping - 100,000 square feet of it, much of it expensive and all wrapped around an ice skating rink.

Whyte said that he was far less interested in the statistical validity of the survey than in what people said and how they said it. For this reason he did all the tabulations himself, sifting through stacks of forms in search of a penetrating aside or a revealing squiggle. His general conclusion was that downtown Dallas is a livelier and more interesting place than it was a few years ago, when he first began visiting the city. "If I were a member of the City Council with an interest in downtown, I'd be very encouraged by the results of this survey," he said. "It wouldn't take a whole hell of a lot to change things for the better . . . There is an energy there, a drive to be number one, that you don't find in a lot of cities. I've recently spent a lot of time in Topeka, Kansas. What is there to say about Topeka?"

David Dillon

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Rebirth for Root Square Park

Root Square Park may soon symbolize hope for an expanded vital and humane central Houston. The 1.42-acre park covers one full city block, bounded by Austin, Clay, LaBranch, and Bell streets. After it was donated to the city in 1925 by A.P. and Laura Root, it enjoyed a heyday as "one of the thrilling sights of the city, with its lighted play areas and its modernistic white brick building with blue trim, where daily large crowds of children and adults meet for all types of sports and recreation." However, by the 1960s the demography of the city center had changed and park programs failed to attract enough participation to justify upkeep on the recreation center with its two handball courts and restrooms. In 1972, the badly deteriorated facilities were demolished, leaving only the large live oak and pecan trees that line Bell and Austin streets.

When attention again was focused on Root Square Park in the 1980s, Burdette Keeland, chairman of the board of the Park People, dreamed of a limited international competition for its redesign. Four architects - Michael Graves, Arata Isozaki, James Stirling, and Ricardo Legorreta - would be paid for a scheme, and the three designs not used for the park would be held for future full-block city parks. Though the architects showed interest, the idea was dropped as too expensive, and a very localized competition was held in a fifth-year architecture studio at the University of Houston in 1983.

City Parks Director Don Olson and Burdette Keeland taught the design studio, stressing the need to design for the area's future. Their 50-year vision included not only the convention center now under construction, but a forest of skyscrapers. The students were told to design an urban park that would be for



City Council member Eleanor Tinsley and City Planning Commission Chairman Burdette Keeland view model of Root Square Park, Richard Profitt, designer, and Vernon Henry and Associates, landscape architects

office workers both a respite from the hot city streets and interesting to view from above. The existing trees had to be protected, redwood "California issue" benches avoided, and the idea of a place, not an expanse to walk across, was emphasized.

First place was awarded to UH student Richard Profitt's design. The new "strolling" park will have a soft greenbelt around a hard center. The entrance comes diagonally from the northwest corner of the block, responding to a perceived axis from the future convention center. The pavement is gridded accordingly, loosely forming a rotated square within a square. Five-foot walls around the park, proposed by the winning designer, were seen as too restrictive a way of creating a "space" and replaced by gentle berms that can be crossed on foot. Yet the park is presented as a cul-de-sac. So why should the park - bounded by streets, not sandwiched in between buildings as is Paley Park in New York City - be so emphatically directional? Is it impossible to have a "place" that also permits passage? One hopes that the dated berm approach to directing people, so unsuccessful at Market Square, will be a minor gesture.

The heart of the square should be worth discovering. The grid sinks in colored-tile steps to form hard-edged pools with deepening hues of magenta to light purple, marking slight increases in depth. While wading is not officially sanctioned, the pools will not be cordoned off, and will be tempting. The grid also will be raised randomly to form seating. Beds of azaleas are planned and crepe myrtles will further delineate the space and add seasonal color.

The rebirth of Root Square Park as an urban amenity is being coordinated by the Park People and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. This exemplary collaboration of the public and private sectors is spearheaded on the private side by Texas Eastern Corporation's Gloria Pierpont who is working to raise the \$750,000 needed to rebuild the park - \$200,000 has already been donated by Texas Eastern, and another \$50,000 has been pledged since the fund-raising effort began last May.

Jan O'Brien



New The Critical Edge

Controversy in Recent American Architecture edited by Tod A. Marder

The Critical Edge identifies and presents case histories of the 12 most talked about buildings of our times. No other buildings of this era have so aroused the public, so divided the profession, and so stimulated the press as those that are discussed here. Introductory essays are by Tod A. Marder, Robert Bruegmann, and Martin Filler. Copublished with The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum of Rutgers University. 9 x 12 200 pp. 140 illus.,

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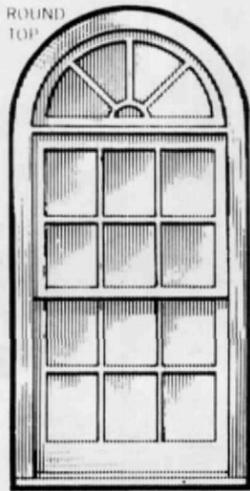


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Arquitectonica At Blaffer



Taggart Townhouses, 1984, *Arquitectonica*, architect (Photo by Paul Hester)

The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston will present "Arquitectonica - Yesterday Today Tomorrow," an exhibition documenting the work of the Miami architectural firm, *Arquitectonica*, between 10 November and 15 December 1985. Forty-nine projects that the firm produced between 1977 and 1984 will be displayed in drawings, models, and photographs. Included are buildings and designs in Houston, Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi, as well as in Florida, California, New York, Peru, and Ecuador. The exhibition was organized by Jan van der Marck for the Center for the Fine Arts in Miami. A catalogue by Frederick Koepper will be available at the gallery. In conjunction with the exhibition, the Blaffer Gallery will sponsor a tour of *Arquitectonica's* Houston buildings and a talk by Laurinda Spear and Bernardo Fort-Brescia. The Blaffer Gallery is open Monday through Friday from 10 AM to 5 PM and on Sunday from 1 PM to 5 PM. It is located on the central campus of the University of Houston. For more information, telephone the gallery at 713/749-1329.

Young Architects Forum Takes Off

Although organized only last spring, the Young Architects Forum, a task force of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, has already planned a full season of diversified activities.

Soirées will continue to be held at the Driscoll Street Cafe (1834 Westheimer), where drawings shows will rotate on a six-week cycle. According to Natalye Appel, one of the 12 members of the forum's steering committee, the evening events have attracted between 75 and 100 young architects and other design professionals and artists.

Beginning on Tuesday, 1 October, the forum will launch a four-part lecture series called "Emerging Architects: Architecture in Houston." Appearing will be Val Glitsch (1 October), Chelsea Architects (15 October), Compendium (29 October), and Makover-Levy (12 November). All lectures will be held at the Houston Design Center beginning at 8 PM. A spring series is planned also; it will highlight new architectural talent from other Texas cities. For more information on the lectures, telephone John Rogers at 713/520-5082.

Long-range plans being formulated by the steering committee include a possible super-studio, composed of students from area architecture schools, focused on a Houston urban design problem to be worked out with the Houston Chapter AIA Urban Design Committee.

Participation in the Young Architects Forum is open to all interested individuals. For more information, telephone steering committee chairman Matt Starr at 713/524-2155.

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