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Robert Venturi's Park Regency • Regional Mobility Plan • Hermann Park

InCite

- 3 Citelines
 7 An Interview with Bruce Goff
 8 Diagrams of Ritual and Experience: Learning from The Park Regency
 14 Congestive Failure: A Regional Mobility Plan for Houston
 17 An Interview with Eleanor Tinsley
 18 Big Park, Little Plans: A History of Hermann Park
 22 Cite Seeing: Hermann Park Today
 24 From Less to Moore: New Proposals for Hermann Park
 28 Citations

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Publication of this issue of *Cite* is supported in part by a grant from the Texas Commission of the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Notes on Contributors

Howard Barnstone, Houston architect and professor of architecture at the University of Houston, is the author of *The Architecture of John F. Staub* and *The Galveston That Was*.

Lynn Benschel-Hewitt teaches architecture at Rice University. Before coming to Houston, she practiced architecture with Friday Architects in Philadelphia.

Carol J. Everingham is contributing arts editor to *Houston Arts* and the Houston correspondent for *Artspace*.

Paul Hester is a Houston photographer.

Mark Hewitt is an architect, historian and Assistant Professor of Architecture at Rice University. He and Allan Greenberg are collaborating on a book on the architect of Mott B. Schmidt.

John Kaliski is Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Houston.

Robert Morris is an architect practicing in Houston.

Jeffrey Karl Ochsner is a Houston architect and historian.

Lawrence W. Speck is an architect practicing in Austin and an Associate Professor of Architecture at The University of Texas at Austin.

William F. Stern is a principal in the firm of William F. Stern Associates. He is also Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Houston.

Anderson Todd is an architect and Wortham Professor of Architecture at Rice University.

Drexel Turner is assistant to the dean of the School of Architecture at Rice University and assistant professor of planning. He has been involved in efforts to improve Hermann Park since 1980.

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Typesetting by Professional Typographers

Cover Photo by Paul Hester

E D I T O R I A L



George H. Hermann Memorial, 1981. Lonnie Joe Edwards, sculptor.

Douglas Harvey

Reclaiming Hermann Park

Nearly 70 years have passed since Hermann Park was conveyed to the City of Houston through the philanthropy of George H. Hermann. Yet this park remains a conspicuously underdeveloped scenic and recreational resource. Recently the Zoological Society of Houston has embarked on a series of ambitious projects to create a zoo more in keeping with a city the size of Houston today. But no comparable attention has been focused on the rest of Hermann Park. Earlier this year, in a proposal prepared for the Municipal Art Commission, Charles W. Moore and Barton Phelps of the Urban Innovations Group offered a means of redressing this history of neglect. Their Olmstedian vision takes as its point of departure the distinguished, but only partially implemented, plan for the park prepared by George E. Kessler in 1916.

Initial response to this new proposal—which focuses on 50 acres of the park's main entrance and northwest quadrant—has been mixed. Ann Holmes, writing in the *Houston Chronicle*, discerned a "wit and style" in Moore's proposal that would provide a "felicitous accent" for the park which, she noted, was "large enough to accommodate many delights and surprises." Isabel Wilson, chairman of the Municipal Art Commission, predicted that the plan, if realized, "would add immeasurably to the quality of life in the inner city." But the *Houston Post*, while commending the reconstruction of Miller Theater (included in Moore's proposal), questioned other aspects of the plan. The *Post* characterized these as "imaginative," but it objected that they would result in the "packing" of a park already "too popular" (emphasis added). Instead of providing an "additional drawing card for Hermann Park to attract even more people from all corners of the city to one spot," the *Post* suggested that improvements such as a 20 acre lake might better be realized in a "big, new, outlying park." The *Post's* objections fairly represent one community of opinion about the Moore plan. But these are misplaced.

The Moore plan scarcely provides too many "drawing cards" for a park of 410 acres. By virtue of its size and accessibility Hermann Park serves as the central park of Houston, a common ground for the city's more than two million citizens. If it is to provide citizens with the scenic and recreational delight of which it is capable, it must be equipped to do so. Kessler's original plan, and Moore's after it, resemble in their array and disposition of landscape elements the mall and lake sequence of Manhattan's Central Park, which accommodates far more intensive use than Hermann Park is ever likely to know. Far from dominating Hermann Park, the lake, if expanded

in size from six and one-quarter to 20 acres, would provide a pleasant, and for the first time recreationally useful, water course. Kessler's original plan envisioned a significantly larger lake than was built; Moore's lake, if realized, would devote one acre in every 20 in Hermann Park to water. In Central Park, one acre in six is covered by water. Nearly three times the area proposed for the lake is already devoted to surface parking lots in Hermann Park.

If Hermann Park seems "already overcrowded," it is because relatively little of the park is available for general recreation at present, a condition which the Moore plan cannot itself change but which deserves careful attention as part of any long range plan to reclaim the park. Approximately 100 acres of the park are effectively severed from the main body by traffic arteries (Fannin, Outer Belt and North and South MacGregor Ways); another 125 acres are devoted to the 18 hole golf course. In addition the zoo occupies 45 acres, Miller Outdoor Theater 10 acres, the Museum of Natural Science 5 acres, and parking lots more than 30 acres, leaving less than one-quarter of the park—fewer than 100 acres—for general use of the sort that characterizes most of Central Park. Although the simplest way of correcting this imbalance might be to convert the golf course to general use (since it serves comparatively few patrons in relation to its size), such a conversion might also invite the proliferation of buildings, parking lots and dubious landscaping "features" of the sort that already afflict the rest of the main body of the park. In any event, the effect of Moore's proposals, if realized, would be to permit more efficient and appropriate use of that park space which is presently available for general use.

Doubts have been raised as to whether it would be prudent to devote \$10 million or more to the embellishment of Hermann Park when the city is in urgent need of expanding its park land. But the real problem with the city's park holdings is geographic maldistribution. In fact, Houston ranks fourth among the nation's 40 most populous cities in per capita park acreage when Cullen Park is included in the computation, and eleventh when it is not. In view of Hermann Park's accessibility and position as the keystone of the city's park system, the relatively high value of the real estate around it and its long history of neglect, the case for a major upgrading becomes all the more compelling. The public might well consider how readily other potential donors will be persuaded to make benefactions similar to that of George Hermann's if sites so offered must face a perpetuity of neglect.