

ForeCite

In Pursuit Of the White Buffalo

As Phillip Lopate observed in the Winter 1984 issue of *Cite*, "Houston for a city its size has an almost sensational lack of convivial public space." Lopate's reflections, which appeared under the title, "Pursuing the Unicorn: Public Space in Houston," ended hoping that "with some goodwill, raised urban-design consciousness, and a lot of money, Houston can catch up with other cities in this respect...even in the present economy." The competition for, and impending development of, Houston's Sesquicentennial Park on Buffalo Bayou downtown, may mark the beginning of such a change, as John Pastier's account of the competition that appears opposite concludes.

The idea of a competition for such a public project, the first ever held in Houston, was conceived by Raymond D. Brochstein, president of the Rice Design Alliance. The competition was conducted jointly with Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc., a non-profit association of downtown interests, which identified the 10-acre park site and secured the support of the Sesquicentennial Committee of Houston and Harris County and the Mayor's Buffalo Bayou Task Force. The winning entry offers a vision of what the bayou front can become, taking as its point of departure an Indian legend of the white buffalo that is said to have given the bayou its name. If, as Pastier notes, the progress of the competition was not altogether smooth and the site not in all ways ideal, the result stands as a considerable collective achievement, perhaps the most concerted example of public and private initiative bearing on the stewardship of Buffalo Bayou since the City Beautiful movement of the 1910s and '20s, when first George E. Kessler and later Hare and Hare devised plans, only partially executed, for the Buffalo Bayou Parkway.

The merits of the winning scheme already have been described by other observers. Mark A. Hewitt, writing in the July-August 1986 issue of *Texas Architect*, ventured that "The Houston Sesquicentennial Park will have the same 'cutting edge,' up-to-date quality that graced so many of the city's skyscrapers during the building boom. It will also certainly have many pleasant spaces for people to congregate and play in, and it will draw Buffalo Bayou and the Wortham Theater into the life of downtown Houston." Ann Holmes, in the 15 April 1986 edition of the *Houston Chronicle*, observed that the "design pleasingly makes much use of nature, lets the presence of the bayou dominate, and



Illustration from the cover of *Civics For Houston*, vol. 1, no. 1, January, 1928

imposes a minimum of architectural structures. What architecture they've provided is interesting and provocative without being gimmicky." Peter C. Papademetriou, commenting in the July 1986 issue of *Progressive Architecture*, felt that the winning "scheme reflected the successful integration of many given elements, and a modest strategy for landscape as a unifying element."

The Sesquicentennial Park also can be viewed as an opportunity to help redress the city's lack of monuments in general — a realm of conspicuous underconsumption surveyed in Stephen Fox's essay, "Remember Houston," and amplified by Paul Hester's photographs. The last ceremonial occasion to make amends, the Texas Centennial, had little effect on Houston. For while statues and markers were scattered wholesale throughout the state in the midst of the Great Depression, such pursuits were preempted in Houston by the construction of the San Jacinto Monument — an act of giantism oblivious to the tradition of measured, resonant commemoration of battle sites in America from Concord to Gettysburg. Although the city still lacks a spirited, generously distributed apparatus for recall, it remains attainable, as Fox suggests, although the means at our disposal may have changed.

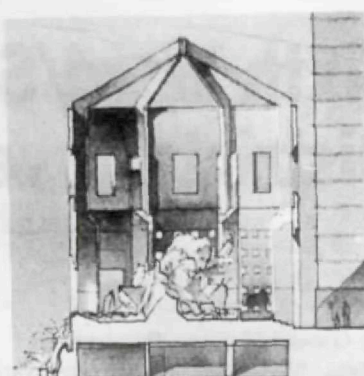
Another civil gift and example of public and private collaboration is the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, reviewed here by Andrew Bartle. It is the work of the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, retained at the suggestion of Alice Pratt Brown during the tenure of William C. Agee as director of the museum. The garden occupies a one-acre site across from the museum, acquired for that purpose by the Brown Foundation and conveyed at cost to the City of Houston as park land. It was constructed with funds provided by the Cullen Foundation and other donors. Although only one-tenth as large as Sesquicentennial Park, the cost of its improvements (excluding sculpture) represents nearly a quarter of the comparable expenditure projected for the Sesquicentennial Park and constitutes a distinctly different kind of public space — more intensive, introspective, and intimate — "actually an enlarged

sculpture by Noguchi" in the words of Peter Marzio, the museum's director. Bartle finds it an appealing, romantic counter-landscape with surrealist and primitivist overtones, a palimpsest of tendencies refined in Noguchi's sculptural and landscape sensibility over a period of more than half-a-century.

Finally, John B. Jackson, an eminent essayist and cultural geographer who was the Craig Francis Cullinan Visiting Professor at Rice University last spring, speculates on a more democratic aspect of the development and use of public spaces in America in the 19th and 20th centuries — the influence of sports and other mass leisure pursuits. In doing so, he calls attention to the variety of settings that constitutes public space for recreation today, and commends a less exclusive vision for the future, quoting the prescription of Michael Laurie who advocates including "open spaces which contribute to some defined purpose... air quality, festivals, social interaction, sports, wildlife conservation, food production, whatever...[may be]...concerned with new directions in urban life."

The theme of monuments and public places that comprises this issue derives from recent developments in the community at large, abetted in the case of the Sesquicentennial Park Design Competition by the Rice Design Alliance itself. While it may be premature to suppose that this activity signals a more general effort to invest Houston with civic appurtenances that other cities its size take for granted, it deserves attention at a time when the city can pursue such embellishments with maturity and discernment.

Drexel Turner



Buffalo Monument

Late in 1836 the Texas Congress ended its first session by resolving to meet next in a new capital, "Houston on Buffalo Bayou." The full name helped locate a town not yet in existence, and foretold the stream's importance in the urban scheme to come. Houston began at Allen's Landing, where Main Street met its south bank, and for many years the bayou was the city's link to the world, its avenue of commerce, and, after its dredging in 1914, the impetus for its industrial development and consequent 20th-century growth.

Houston was casual in repaying those favors. Upstream, the bayou is protected by parkways and the ample yards of River Oaks and Memorial. But its lower reaches are lined with heavy industry, and its central portion suffers from generations of neglect. Downtown has turned its back on the bayou, treating it as a storm drain that lacks the manners to align with the street grid, rather than as an opportunity for place-making and the creation of urban amenity.

Of course there have been visions, including *The Bayou Strategy*, a study published by the Rice Design Alliance in 1977 proposing a waterside promenade, an artificial island, and a controlled water level allowing full-time access to the bayou edge. But until lately, aside from plans, no one had taken action to join the bayou with downtown. The first move came in 1984, when Mayor Kathryn J. Whitmire created a Buffalo Bayou Task Force to make recommendations on redeveloping the bayou. In 1985, it called for creation of a Sesquicentennial Park as the first part of a seven-mile linear park from downtown to the Houston Ship Channel. The task force envisioned a riverfront as exciting as San Antonio's River Walk, and stated that while "some public funding may be made available... primary fundraising efforts will be directed toward the private sector..." (Now, however, half the money is slated to come from local government.)

Two decisions were crucial to what followed. One was to hold an open, national, two-stage design competition for the park under the aegis of several organizations, led by Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. (a group made up of downtown business interests) and the Rice Design Alliance. It was an informed and even brave choice within the context of normal procedure in Houston, for despite the frequency of such events around the country, this was the first design competition for a public project in the city. Raymond D. Brochstein, president of the Rice Design Alliance and originator of the idea, felt