

# From Less to Moore: New Proposals for Hermann Park

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Hermann Park is frequently described as Houston's equivalent of Central Park, an analogy which, while not entirely wishful, nevertheless requires qualification. Hermann Park is approximately half the size (410 acres) of Central Park (843 acres). It begins not at the edge of, but several miles south of, the city's central business district. It is square in shape rather than long and narrow. Only two of its edges adjoin what might be considered a pedestrian-scaled urban fabric. Central Park was acquired and initially developed between 1853 and 1876 according to designs begun in 1858 by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. It is perhaps the most remarkable civic work of 19th-century America—an elaborate array of greens, lakes, rambles and scenic invention which accommodates an intensity of uses extraordinary even for a large city. Hermann Park, acquired in 1914-15, was originally developed from plans prepared in 1916 by George E. Kessler. Unlike Olmsted, Kessler was led to contemplate a more modest program of improvements from the outset and even this was only partially realized.

Today Hermann Park remains an underdeveloped scenic and recreational resource. The northwest quadrant, which forms its main entrance and window to the city, is at once the most urban and accessible, yet neglected, precinct of the park. Paradoxically, it was the first section of the park for which Kessler prepared plans and the first to be developed to any extent. Kessler's plan, which recalled various aspects of Olmsted's entrance to Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York (1866) and the mall and lake sequence of Central Park, proposed a generously scaled series of spaces for what was intended to be Houston's most civic park. The half-mile long axis which served as the main entrance and chief organizing feature of Kessler's plan is today the city's most impressive Beaux-Arts public space, a product of the brief ascendancy of City Beautiful planning in Houston during the 1910's and 1920's.

Kessler's grand axis enters the park at its northwest corner, just across from The Museum of Fine Arts, and extends to the south shore of the Grand Basin, an artificial lake sited near the center of the park. The axis itself is a projection of the route of Montrose Boulevard into the park commencing with a traffic ellipse and fountain at the intersection of Montrose and Main. Montrose continues only a short distance into the park as a road before terminating at a smaller traffic rotary. The center of this rotary is marked by an arched pedestal bearing an equestrian statue of Sam Houston. Montrose veers left around the rotary to become Hermann Loop Drive while the axis continues into the park as a mall, the edges of which are defined by single rows of live oak trees. A long, narrow reflecting pool occupies the center of the mall, flanked by wide, grass-covered banks which form a promenade. The Pioneer Memorial Shaft, a 50-foot high pink granite obelisk, rises at the south end of the reflecting pool. The axis then traverses the lake before its progress is interrupted on the south shore by a low, circular aquarium building which occupies what was, until several years ago, the entrance plaza to the Houston Zoological Garden. On the other side of the aquarium, the axis resumes as a central pedestrian concourse about which the 45-acre zoo grounds are arranged.

Although the northwest quadrant of the park today is not entirely as Kessler had planned it, the shape of his scheme is still discernible. The rotary which Kessler had intended as the setting for a statue of George Hermann instead bears a monument to Sam Houston, although the arch which supports the statue is too small either to serve as a convincing gateway to the park or to project the presence of the equestrian statue down the axis as far south as the lake or as far north as The Museum of Fine Arts side of the traffic ellipse. To the east of the mall, where Kessler had called for a circular music pavilion, is the second Miller Outdoor Theater, an angular steel pavilion facing into an artificial hill which accommodates 12,000 spectators for concerts and theatrical performances. To the west of the mall are stands of pine trees and small expanses of lawn which no longer extend all the way to Main Street as depicted in Kessler's plan. They now stop several hundred feet sooner at Fannin Street, a parallel six-lane thoroughfare built in 1949, which forms the present west boundary of the park. The strip of trees left between Fannin and Main is now isolated from the park and little used. A west entrance to the park from Main Street opposite gate number two to the Rice University campus was shown in Kessler's plan but never built.

Only half of the 13-acre lake projected in Kessler's plan was actually realized. That part of the lake which was built, however, respected the disposition of Kessler's original design, but the character of its edges has re-

cently been altered by a harshly aligned series of concrete retaining walls and metal guard rails. The large formal pavilion which Kessler had intended to terminate the main axis at the south shore of the lake failed to materialize altogether. Also omitted were the pergolas indicated for the north shore to either side of the mall and the boat landing indicated near the inlet at the west end of the lake. The two oval roadways which framed the mall and lake in Kessler's scheme have recently been removed except for the eastern-most arc which leads to a new 1,434-car parking lot near the east shore of the lake. A happier addition to Kessler's vision is the miniature railroad, opened in 1958, which criss-crosses the lake and environs. Although it suffers from chronic undercapitalization, the railroad is a much used but unobtrusive source of delight to parkgoers. The same cannot be said for the full-sized locomotive and tender recently sited on the east shore of the lake, a dissonant innovation Kessler could scarcely have anticipated.

The continuous north edge of meadows and trees which Kessler envisioned along Hermann "Boulevard" has given way to a congeries of unrelated structures and residual spaces. The western-most segment of this band, between Main and San Jacinto streets, has been sliced into unusable slivers by arteries feeding into Fannin Street from the gridiron north of Hermann Drive. The next block of parkland to the east, between San Jacinto and Caroline streets, is occupied by a water storage facility, pumping station and electrical power station which form a barrier between Hermann Drive and the Museum of Natural Science, built within the park on a site facing south onto Hermann Loop Drive. Further east, between Caroline and LaBranch streets, is the Houston Garden Center, a domestically-scaled structure with meeting rooms and offices served by 250-car horseshoe-shaped parking lot. Two unexceptional fan-shaped gardens adjoin the center to the west and east. East of LaBranch is a small Chinese pavilion, donated by the city of Taipei in 1978, which has occasioned the preparation of plans for an extensive Chinese garden to surround it. At no point along Hermann Drive does the park acknowledge the adjoining neighborhood, an attitude reinforced by the presence of a high chain-link fence extending from San Jacinto eastward. Sidewalks are provided only intermittently, a slight improvement from the Fannin Street edge of the park which has none at all.

Yet for all the park's present disarray, it is still possible to retrieve, in spirit if not always in detail, those features of Kessler's plan which remain relevant and appropriate. It is also possible to proceed beyond the plan, to elaborate and embellish the park with a level of art and invention which earlier resources did not allow so that the result more nearly corresponds to the resources and needs of a city the size of Houston today. To this end the Municipal Art Commission in 1981 engaged Charles Moore and Barton Phelps of the Urban Innovations Group—the non-profit professional practice arm of the School of Architecture and Planning of the University of California at Los Angeles—to prepare proposals for further development of the northwest quadrant of Hermann park. The proposals were prepared in cooperation with the Department of Parks and Recreation of the City of Houston and with the assistance of the School of Architecture, Rice University. Throughout they retain Kessler's plan of 1916 as the cardinal point of departure and focus on measures to (1) strengthen the scenic impact and cohesion of Kessler's central axis, (2) enlarge the ornamental water several fold to permit boating and related activities, (3) upgrade the visual, acoustical and functional characteristics of Miller Outdoor Theater and (4) enrich the incidental recreational amenity of the park with a variety of subsidiary elements from pergolas to concession areas and scenic overlooks.

In the case of the central axis, Moore and Phelps have attempted to make its processional elements richer and more readily perceived beginning with the Sam Houston Memorial at the entrance to the park. They propose to replace the 18-foot high arched pedestal which presently supports the 15-foot high equestrian statue of Sam Houston with a triple arched structure 42 feet high to create a more emphatic gateway to the park and to permit the mounted figure to command the full prospect of the axis for 1000 feet in either direction. In composition the new arch bears a distant kinship to Sir Edwin L. Lutyens's design for the Memorial to the Missing of the Somme at Thiepval, France (1927-32). In height it is much smaller than either the Lutyens arch (130 feet) or the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch by John H. Duncan of 1892 (80 feet) which marks the entrance to Prospect Park.

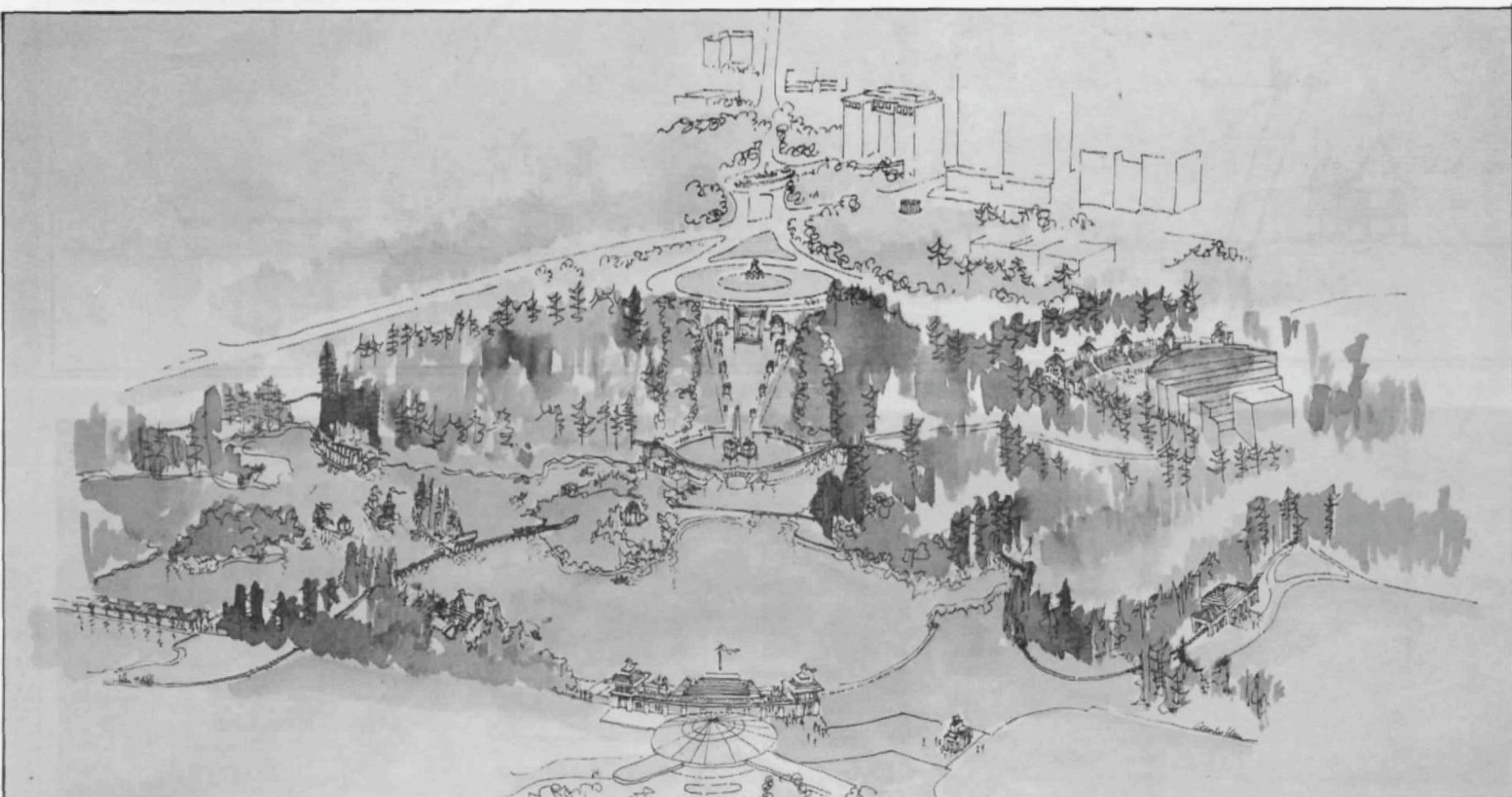
The woods to either side of the present mall are filled in and reshaped with pleached evergreen trees—perhaps

magnolias—to create a forced perspective converging on the Pioneer Memorial Shaft. The sides of the trees are studded with small lights which illuminate the mall at night. The reflecting pool also takes on the trapezoidal shape of the walls of pleached trees while five howdah-capped gazebos, progressively diminishing in size, line either edge of the pool to strengthen the perspectival effect. The reflecting pool flows into a circular basin surrounding the site of the Pioneer Memorial Shaft. The obelisk itself is lifted 30 feet into the air atop the back of a stylized Art Déco elephant, which allows the shaft to attain a more emphatic visual connection with both the north end of the mall and the south shore of the lake. The elephant upholding the obelisk is flanked by two smaller elephants canted slightly in plan. The three elephants become fountains, with water dripping from their howdahs and spouting from their trunks and tusks.

The design of the elephants is derived in part from the Elephant Towers at the Golden Gate International Exposition of 1939 in San Francisco (Bakewell and Weihe, architects; Donald Macky, sculptor) which Moore and the Urban Innovations Group adapted for the "Buildings for Best Products" exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1979. The addition of the Pioneer Memorial Shaft to the central elephant recalls Gianlorenzo Bernini's Elephant and Obelisk monument in the Piazza della S. Maria sopra Minerva in Rome (1667), thus continuing the play of Baroque allusions along the mall. The elephants were in fact the elements responsible for Charles Moore's initial involvement with the park. In 1980 Moore was asked by members of the Municipal Art Commission if it would be possible to adapt his Best Products exhibition entry for use as a gateway to the Houston Zoo. That undertaking was preempted by the construction of the Kipp Aquarium, Zoo Administration Building and Entrance Pavilion on the site which had previously served as the entrance plaza to the zoo. The chairman of the commission, Isabel Wilson, and the director of the Parks and Recreation Department, James Hart, subsequently invited Moore to incorporate the elephants into a more extensive proposal for developing the northwest quadrant of the park. And so the elephants eventually came to be stationed on the north shore of the lake in company with the Pioneer Memorial Shaft.

The elephants not only herald the approach to the zoo but also the intersection of the mall with the cross axis described by the projection of Sunset Boulevard into the park, an intersection which determined the siting of the Pioneer Memorial Shaft in 1936. Moore and Phelps have rendered the cross axis from Sunset Boulevard to the Elephant Fountain as an *allée* leading through the trees. The *allée* permits the elephants and obelisk to be seen at a distance from Sunset, Fannin and Main, and also provides a new pedestrian entry to the park. The beginning of this entryway at Sunset and Fannin is marked by two pylons which further frame the view of elephants and obelisk. The pylons correspond in scale to those of the main gate of Rice University, just to the west of the new Sunset entrance to the park.

A bridge, bowed in section and plan, connects the circular basin of the elephant fountain with the lake beyond. The twice-bowed bridge recalls the swelling oval apertures of Calvert Vaux's cast-iron Gothic bridges along the bridle path in Central Park and punctuates the progress of the axis from the mall to the lake. The prospect of the axis is closed on the south shore of the lake by a long, narrow pavilion situated in approximately the spot prescribed by the Kessler plan. It consists of a crescent-shaped arcade which supports a second, terrace, level, parts of which are shaded by lath canopies. The raised terrace provides a vantage point from which to survey the vista back across the lake to the elephants and obelisk, down the mall and to the gateway arch and statue of Sam Houston. The arcade beneath the terrace is actually an extension of an intermittently pergola-covered walkway which originates on Fannin Street opposite entrance two to the Rice campus, where a west entrance to the park is established in accord with Kessler's plan. The entrance is served by an off-street bus stop. It is marked by two howdah-capped gazebos which flank the walkway and act both as bus shelters and gateposts. The walkway crosses the lake by means of a pergola-covered causeway resembling in its disposition the ford-bridge across Lullwater in Prospect Park. Once again western interpretations of Asian motifs are brought into play. The pergola-covered causeway acquires Chinese Chippendale railings, like those abutting the mall of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia at Charlottesville (1826). The arcade is derived from the south belvedere of the Viceroy's House in New Delhi by Lutyens (1912-31) while the *chattri*-shapes of the canopies which shade the terrace above



Aerial perspective looking north, proposed improvements to Hermann Park, Charles Moore and John Echlin, delineators, 1983.

recall similar devices employed by Lutyens for the Indian capital and by Olmsted and Vaux for pavilions in Central and Prospect parks.

The attention which Moore and Phelps have given to the main and subsidiary axes of the park as formal elements is counter-balanced by the augmentation and picturesque treatment proposed for the ornamental lake, which would be expanded from its present 6½ acre size to slightly more than 20 acres. The resulting watercourse would accommodate boating—an activity Kessler had envisioned in his proposal for a 13 acre Grand Basin—and would be comparable in size to Olmsted's similarly situated lake of 22 acres in Central Park but considerably smaller than the 60-acre lake which serves Prospect Park's 526 acre expanse. The enlarged lake is organized in much the same way as Kessler's original scheme—a lozenge-shaped body of water parallel to the cross axis from Sunset Boulevard with a loop extending south along Fannin Street. However Moore and Phelps have adjusted the diagram to save trees where the east section of Kessler's lake would have fallen and have exaggerated the southwest ear of Kessler's lake to provide a stronger link with the southwest quadrant of the park.

Miller Outdoor Theater is another focal point of the proposals by Moore and Phelps. Completed in its present form in 1969, it is rivaled only by the Houston Zoological Garden as an activity generator in the park. As a topographical feature, the 20-foot rise of its artificial hill is exceptional in comparison to the flatness of the rest of the park and the rest of Houston. Successful though it is, Miller Theater nevertheless requires substantial modifications to improve its qualities as a performance facility, both physically and economically. Sightlines and acoustics need to be altered. Stage support areas require expansion as do concession and restroom facilities. At present there is no way to limit the size of audiences to appropriate numbers or to permit income-producing bookings for which admission might be charged as a means of subsidizing and upgrading the theater's schedule of free performances. On a more prosaic level, the self-oxidizing steel roof and superstructure which cover the 1,700 seats nearest the stage have deteriorated to the point where they must be replaced, as is also the case with the stagehouse roof.

In response to this agenda, Moore and Phelps have attempted to provide Miller Theater with a level of amenity and operational efficiency comparable to such exemplary outdoor performance facilities as Wolf Trap and the Hollywood Bowl. They have also endeavored to keep its outward profile relatively subdued, as it is today, concealing it with artificial topography while enriching the scenographic qualities of the space within. The model chosen for the inside is that of the "atmospheric" movie palaces of the 1920's, which attempted to create the illusion that the audience was seated in an open-air courtyard. To heighten the effect ceilings were depicted as sky—a conceit often abetted by twinkling light fixtures and even cloud machines.

Miller Theater is reinterpreted as an *al fresco* atmospheric theater using the same Art Déco-Moghul vocabulary devised for the Elephant Fountain. The shelter covering the fixed seating is replaced by a new proscenium structure, with a series of raised box seats lining its sides. The structure accommodates 2,500 fixed seats and can be closed off by means of articulated pocket doors to permit shows to be lighted during the day and to allow a limited winter season if desired. Beyond the shelter are a series of grassed terraces accommodating an additional 10,000 spectators and, at the

crest of the hill, a steeply raked loggia of grandstand seats for another 2,500 patrons. The loggia encloses the theater from the rear, with concessions and restrooms tucked underneath. The sides of the grassed terrace are enveloped by a low-rise "townscape" of howdah-like elements which, like the loggia, contain concessions and restrooms. The regrading of the hillside seating area would be accomplished with fill from excavation of the new sections of the lake, at a savings to both projects. The increased height of the hill, achieved through regrading and the addition of the loggia at its crest, would be sufficient to contain sound which now escapes over the crest of the hill into surrounding neighborhoods. The back side of the hill would remain much as it is today except for the introduction of a zig-zag ramp to provide visual interest and a gentler means of reaching the crest.

Finally, the architects have attempted to enrich and enliven the park's rather meager repertoire of ancillary diversions and thus its ability to entertain the steady stream of citizens it receives on weekends or holidays. Row boat and paddle boat concessions, like those in Central Park and the Boston Public Garden, are envisioned for the lake which in its expanded state could easily accommodate such activity. A small flotilla of stationary boat pavilions form destination points for rowers and passengers on the other marine craft plying the lake. Such pavilions might also serve as bandstands, picnic spots or even as stages for small performances. The pergola-covered causeway and the howdah-like structures lining the mall would also accommodate picnicking as well as sitting, reading and table games.

Just as Olmsted's plan for Central Park included a small restaurant, the Casino (which flourished on the Fifth Avenue side of the mall from 1864 until it was demolished in 1934), Moore and Phelps have provided a modest café, most of it out-of-doors and all of it catered to avoid the necessity of large kitchen and service areas. The café faces onto the Elephant Fountain and sits atop a large, arced terrace spanning the transverse canal which extends from Miller Theater to the new section of the lake along the alignment of the recently vacated Hermann Lake Drive—an arrangement suggested by the Belvedere Castle in Central Park which spans a depressed traffic artery, 79th Street. The span connects to an island promontory. A Hindu-like tempietto sits atop the promontory overlooking the lake like the tower of the Belvedere Castle. At night, row boats and paddle boats would be nested on the water beneath the terrace. The miniature railroad which skirts the shore of the present lake would be more than doubled in length while still maintaining its figure-eight configuration, knotted at just the point it crosses the axis of the mall. The route would include a new tunnel passing through the island promontory adjoining the Elephant Fountain terrace, a variety of trestle bridges criss-crossing the waterways, and at least one, perhaps several, new stations. Rolling stock for the Lilliputian railroad line would eventually be upgraded, perhaps replaced with railroad cars originally designed by Ray and Charles Eames for a now defunct miniature railroad in Griffin Park in Los Angeles.

Similar care will be devoted to more pervasive details of the landscape, which will incorporate reproduction Lutyens benches and lamp standards modeled after those originally used on the grounds of Rice University. Infill plantings of trees will augment existing wooded areas. The ragged single file of widely-spaced live oaks shielding the park from heavy traffic along Fannin Street will be thickened with a staggered double row of trees planted in files, just as Kessler did on Main Street along what was then the west edge of Hermann Park.

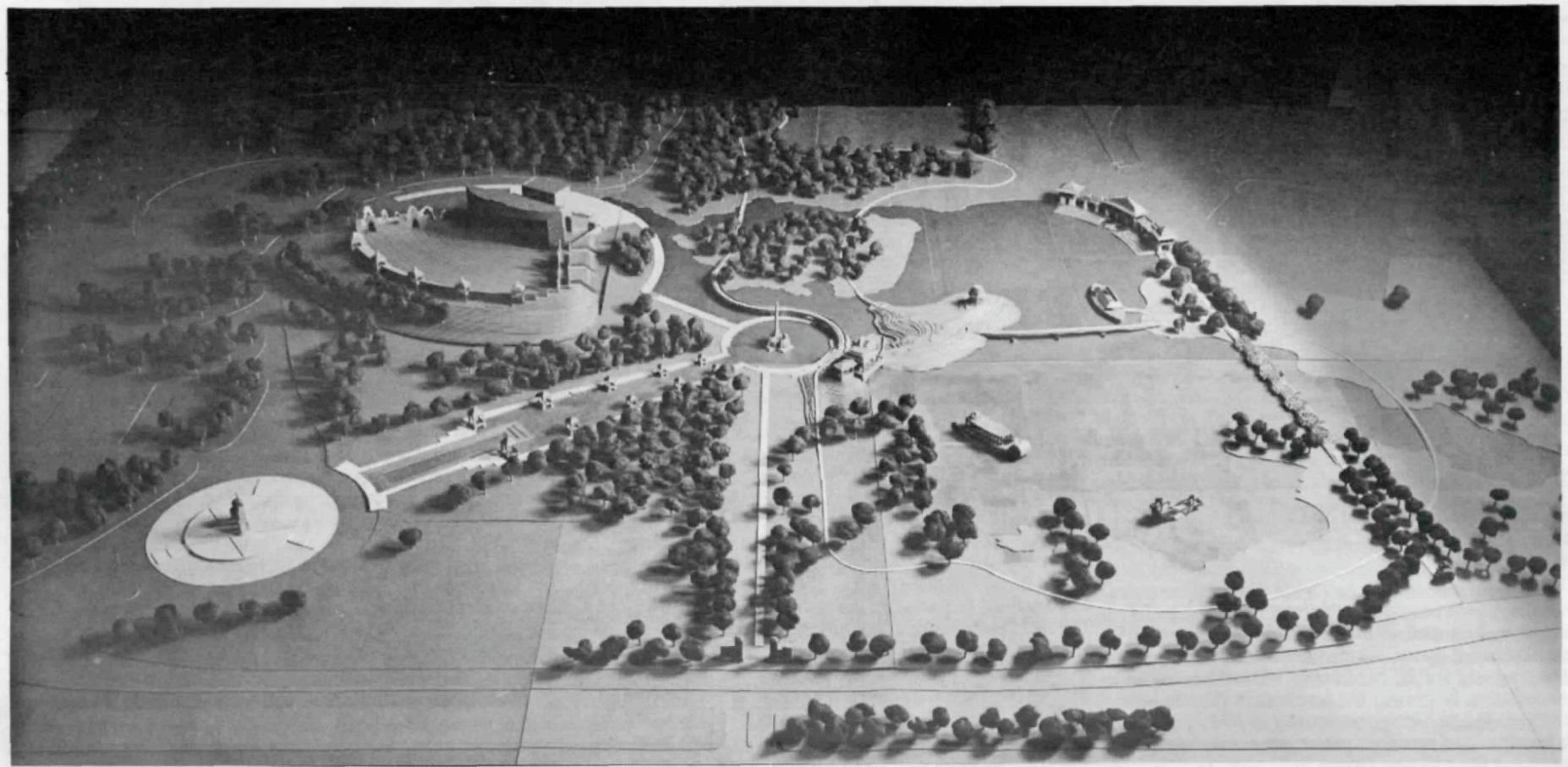
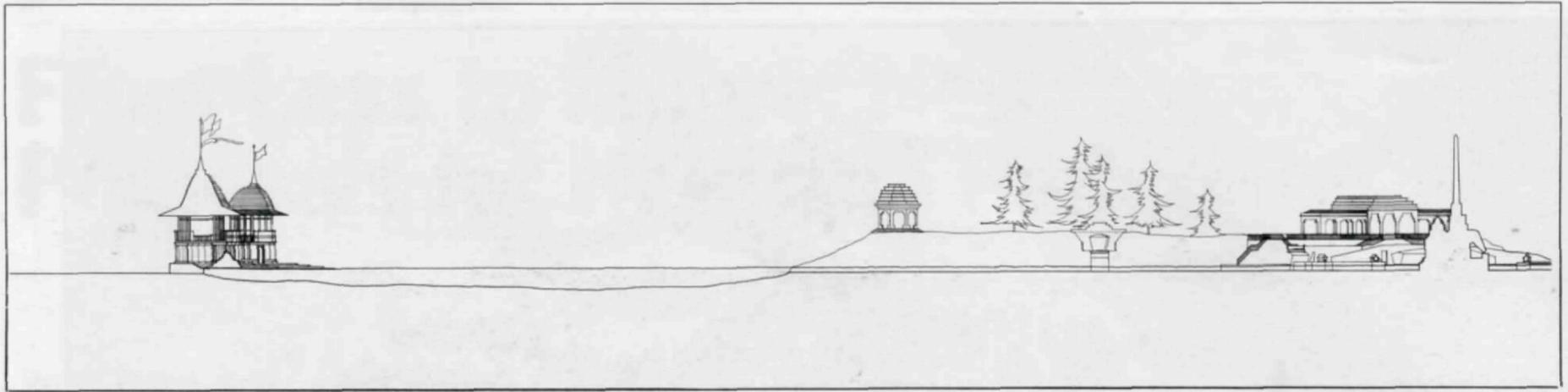
Moore and Phelps have purposely deferred consideration

of the north edge of the park along Hermann Drive. It too stands in need of remedial attention. It is slivered by north-south feeder streets; separated from the neighborhood adjoining the park by chain-link fencing; and cluttered with low-order public utility installations, a sprawling, minimally developed garden center and several large parking lots, one of which also contains a full-size locomotive and tender like that stationed on the east shore of the lake. But for the time-being, resources allocated to the northwest quadrant are intended to resurrect and embellish the heart of Kessler's plan, leaving the margins until later.

Although the proposals contemplated in the plan by Moore and Phelps are still schematic in nature, they are sufficiently developed to permit preliminary estimates of cost. The construction (but not the outfitting) of the basic improvements envisioned—with the exception of Miller Outdoor Theater—would probably require at least \$6 million and could be accomplished in several phases. The improvements to Miller Theater would cost at least \$4 million exclusive of fixtures and equipment. Neither seems an unreasonable sum in light of Hermann Park's position as the principal park of the Houston municipal system, its age and its history of underdevelopment and neglect. The cost of new parking lots, roads and walkways, conversion of former roadways to parkland and lake rectification completed since 1978 amounts to \$7.8 million for two phases. A third phase will soon be under contract. As a private benefaction, the Hermann Hospital Estate provided \$864,000 for a new entrance plaza at the southwest corner of the park completed in 1981. Recent improvements to the Houston Zoo have required similar outlays—\$3.2 million for the Kipp Aquarium, Zoo Administration Building and Entrance Pavilion, completed in 1981, and \$5.4 million for the large cat display facility now under construction. Astroworld, a profit-making venture, has recently invested \$10 million in the construction of a 15-acre aquatic recreation "environment" which will accommodate swimming as well as boat rides. Considering that land adjoining the north and west edges of Hermann Park is now valued in excess of \$100 per square foot, an investment on the order of \$5 per square foot, as envisioned in Moore's plan for 50 acres of the northwest quadrant of the park, seems slight.

Implementation of the plan by Charles Moore and Barton Phelps of the Urban Innovations Group must await review and acceptance by the newly appointed Director of the Department of Parks and Recreation, Donald Olson. Should the new director so recommend, complete or partial funding of the first phase of improvements could be included in the bond proposition which the city administration plans to submit for voter approval in early 1984. Were the issue approved, construction might begin in early 1985.

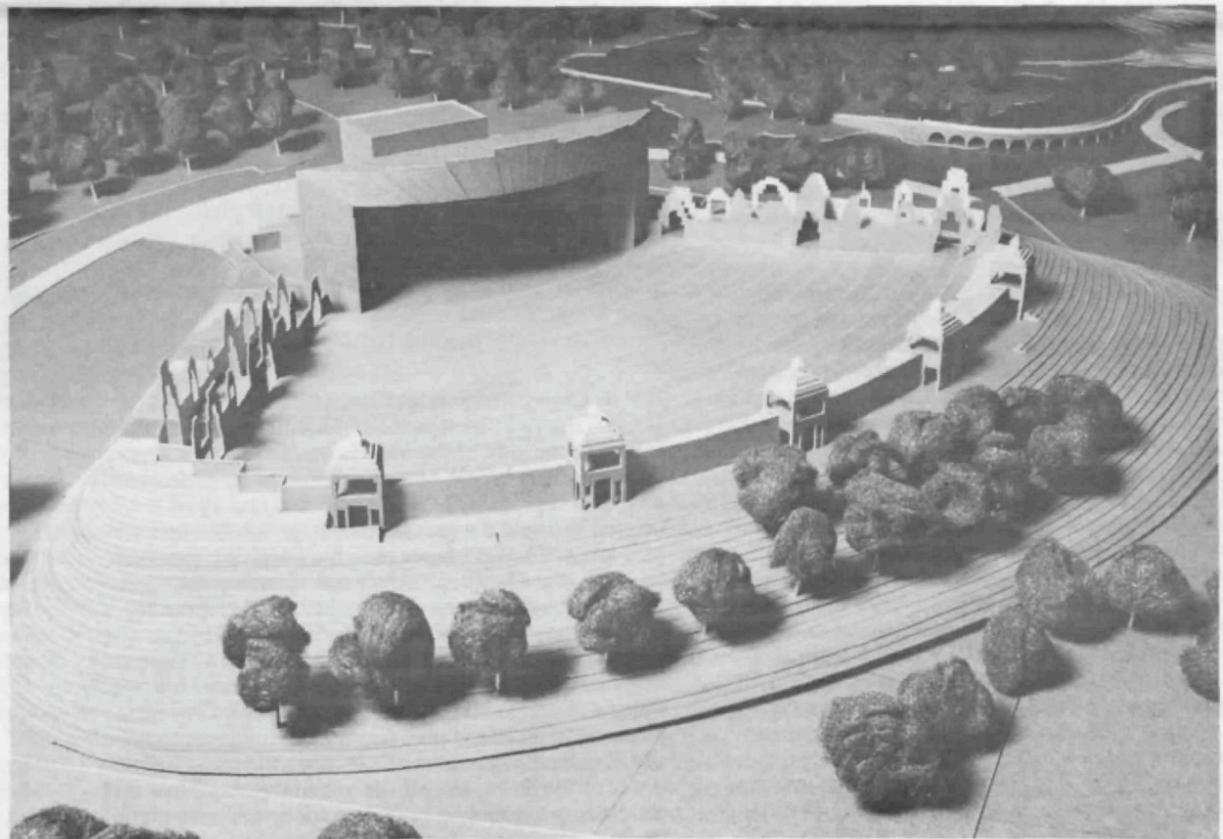
Hermann Park and its environs typify in microcosm the condition of civic art in Houston today: public squalor in the midst of private affluence, to use John Kenneth Galbraith's phrase. But it also provides, with the vision offered by Moore and Phelps, the opportunity to create an exception to this rule; for the city to extend to its citizens the sort of civic amenity New Yorkers take for granted in Central Park. To abet this process the South Main Center Association is investigating the feasibility of a special conservancy for Hermann Park to stimulate enlightened public and private investment in the reclamation and improvement of the park, modeled after the already very effective Central Park conservancy founded in 1980 in New York. By taking the initiative in commissioning the plan prepared by Charles Moore and Barton Phelps, the Municipal Art Commission has provided an immediate and deserving focus for such a conservancy.



Kiyoshi Tsuchiya

**Proposals for Hermann Park prepared by Charles Moore and Barton Phelps of the Urban Innovations Group for the Municipal Art Commission in cooperation with the Department of Parks and Recreation of the City of Houston, 1982-83.**

Above—section through main axis from south (left) to north showing pavilion and arcade on south shore of lake; promontory overlook; miniature railroad tunnel; oval bridge; terrace cafe and boathouse; circular basin with elephant fountain and obelisk; reflecting pool and bench shelters; gateway arch and statue of Sam Houston. Immediately above—view of model looking south-east. Right—model of Miller Theater. Below—section through Miller Theater from south (left) to north. Opposite page: Above—(left) Plan of Proposed Improvements to Hermann Park, Northwest, 1983 Charles Moore, Barton Phelps and the Urban Innovations Group; (upper right) George E. Kessler, Plan for North and Principal Entrance to Hermann Park, 1916; (lower right) Central Park, New York, 1858-78 Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, detail of map of the park as it appeared in 1873 Middle—(left to right) model of elephant fountain, obelisk and oval bridge; Elephant and Obelisk, Piazza della Minerva, Rome, 1667 Gianlorenzo Bernini; side elevation (expanded) of elephant fountain and obelisk; front elevation of zoo gate arch; front elevation of gateway arch and statue of Sam Houston. Bottom—(upper left) north (lake) elevation of pavilion and arcade; (middle left) west elevation of terrace cafe and boathouse, south elevation of promontory overlook; (lower left) south elevation of oval bridge, elevation of miniature railroad tunnel entrance; (upper right) side and rear elevations of "galley" island; (middle right) front, side and rear elevations of "galleon;" (lower right) side elevations of "ark" and "steamboat."



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