

The Greening of Allen Parkway Village: A Modest Proposal

Drexel Turner

Over the past several years, the Housing Authority of the City of Houston has begun to take steps to dispose of Allen Parkway Village (APV). The housing authority anticipates that all or part of the 37-acre site would be sold or leased for redevelopment as offices or condominium housing - commodities that for the moment Houston enjoys in superabundance. Leaving aside the merits of retaining and rehabilitating APV in its present form as public housing, if the site is converted to other uses it should take the form of a more commendable public good than the accommodation of such staples as offices and upper- and upper-middle-income housing.

One such public good would be a sizable near-town park to serve as an anchor point for Buffalo Bayou Parkway and as a recreational and scenic amenity for downtown and inner-city Houston. Not only is Houston park poor in the aggregate, it lacks park land in strategic locations. Philip Johnson, whose experience with Houston extends back to the early 1950s, noted in a talk to the Rice Design Alliance in February 1981 that Houston is so lacking in civic space that even 15 acres downtown would do much to remedy the situation. Allen Parkway Village is the last large site remaining in the public domain near downtown where it is possible to begin to make a substantial park. Such a park, linked to the bayou, would provide a front lawn for the city not unlike Central Park in Manhattan, the lakefront parks in Chicago or the Common and the Public Garden in Boston.

A park so situated could act as a focal point for the city's collective life, serving both as a public common and fair-weather rialto. It could be developed with a variety of outdoor performing spaces as the site of the Houston Festival. This aspect of the park might be further abetted by pavilions for dining and amusement, not unlike the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen or the Vauxhall Gardens of 18th-century London. The park could combine generous promenades and lawns with water and botanical

features of considerable invention - cascades, conservatories, orangeries - and an assortment of playing fields and courts.

Although the 37 acres of Allen Parkway Village would comprise an auspicious beginning for such a park, the site could be almost doubled in size by acquisition of the 13-acre site of Jefferson Davis Hospital adjoining APV to the west (which the Harris County Hospital District intends to offer for sale) and by the addition of nearly 15 acres of adjoining property which the city already owns (most of it occupied by a public-works vehicle-maintenance facility). Another 15 acres of privately-held properties situated along Taft and West Dallas streets account for what remaining land might logically be annexed to the park. Even at a prospective size of 65 to 80 acres, the park would still be much smaller than Hermann Park (405 acres) or Central Park (843 acres), but properly developed in concert with Buffalo Bayou Parkway it could achieve a comparable effect.

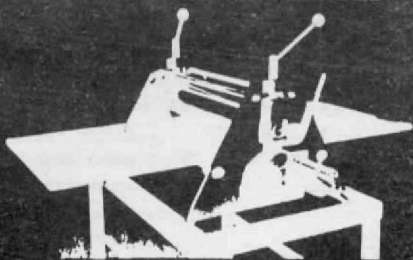
The investment required to assemble the largest part of such a park is less than half of the cost of a major high-rise building downtown and close to the projected cost of the Wortham Theater Center (\$70 million) assuming that the 50 acres of Allen Parkway Village and Jefferson Davis Hospital would be acquired together for a price between \$20-\$40 per square foot (\$41.5 million-\$83 million). Dallas has embarked on a similarly ambitious parks project with the development of a \$50 million arboretum and botanical garden on a 66-acre site adjoining White Rock Lake and is planning a town lake at the edge of its central business district which will cost in excess of \$100 million. But since the entire City of Houston general obligation bond fund allocation for parks approved in September amounted to only \$67 million for a period of at least several years, such a park would require a special financing arrangement of its own. Houston is capable of undertaking civic projects of this scale as demonstrated by the construction of the Wortham Theater Center with funds

raised entirely from private sources.

One approach to funding might be to establish a tax-increment financing district so that the expense of the land assembly could be partly or wholly self-liquidating by capturing the value added to the surrounding area by the replacement of APV and Jefferson Davis Hospital with the park. Another might be for a consortium of foundations to pledge a certain annual contribution for a fixed period - perhaps four pledging \$1 million each for 20 years - against which the housing authority could sell revenue bonds. The city might arrange to acquire the project in phases and further amortize the cost of acquisition with income produced by temporary parking leases; it might also consider developing permanent income-producing improvements such as parking garages underneath part of the park using civic center bonds. The city might trade the housing authority land it already owns which would be suitable for replacement-housing sites. It might also trade hospital district surplus property (perhaps the isolated and disfunctional, for park purposes, remnant of Hermann Park adjoining Ben Taub Hospital on the south side of Outer Belt Drive) for the site of Jefferson Davis Hospital or even convert the main buildings of the hospital as an interim measure to augment its current inventory of office space (the city will pay nearly \$1 million to rent additional office space this year).

Although acquisition and development of the park described above would constitute an ambitious civic undertaking, it would nevertheless be modest in comparison with the investment in office and commercial building which the central business district has experienced in recent years. Like the Wortham Theater Center, it would contribute to the spirit of the city in an enduring and dramatic fashion. A near-town park would make an extraordinary sesquicentennial present from the city to itself. ■

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