



Gateway to a basketball arena: The proposed Root Memorial Square (above); and the park as it is now.

AS THE ROCKETS GET A REWORKED FRONT YARD,
A MIDTOWN PROPOSAL LOOKS TO CARS TO PAY FOR GREEN SPACE

ARENAS, PARKS, AND PARKING



Alexander Porter Root, the land has been owned by the city since 1922, and by the 1930s boasted ball fields, a playground, and a band shell. In 1987 the park was reworked under the direction of architect Burdette Keeland, becoming less a recreational area than an urban oasis marked by an overarching canopy of live oaks. Unfortunately, the change did little to keep the park from sliding into urban decay along with the area surrounding it. Over the last decade or so Root Memorial Square and its environs have suffered serious neglect, with the park's pathways allowed to buckle and its center becoming a haven for the homeless.

It took the placing of the downtown basketball arena next door to regenerate interest in the square. Two years ago, ownership of the land shifted from the parks department to the convention and entertainment facilities department, a less-than-auspicious sign that might have been taken to mean the square was about to be paved. Instead, however, Kirksey Architects was hired to rethink Root Memorial Square one more time, and a few months back unveiled a design that in a way combined the area's two previous incarnations by retaining much of the tree cover, but adding a basketball court on one side, a gazebo on another, and a kiosk that could be used to distribute bas-

ketballs. The center of the square would be opened up and landscaped, and a semi-circular walk would lead people around the park's edges.

The basketball court is an obvious nod to neighboring Toyota Center (as the basketball arena was recently dubbed), and was included at the suggestion of the Houston Rockets, who have indicated they might use it for pre-game events. How it would be used at other times is uncertain. Though there is a small apartment complex across the street, and the larger Houston House complex is within shouting distance, city officials admit the court is unlikely to become a neighborhood amenity, and indeed that it was not added with that in mind. Plans call for the basketball goals to be removable, though that would still leave a hard-surfaced court taking up a considerable amount of the square's area. Such planned vacancy raises the specter that Root Memorial Square could become like too many other downtown squares, among them Market Square, Jones Plaza, and Tranquillity Park — places pretty to look at, perhaps, but all too often bereft of people.

Still, a revamped Root Memorial Square seems a certainty. The anticipated cost is relatively small at \$2.6 million, and the idea has received a nod of approval from City Council. Work on the

AS TWO MAJOR CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS (the new basketball arena downtown and the light-rail line along Main Street) draw closer to completion, plans have emerged to add an extra touch of green to each of them. A pair of urban parks, one reworked and modest and the other new and grandiose, have been proposed by different groups, and as might be expected, the modest idea is the one most likely to be realized. At the core of the grandiose scheme, however, is a financial notion that, if it works, could help open the way for additional public green space in a city that sorely lacks it.

The modest idea is being pursued by the city's convention and entertainment facilities department, and involves reshaping Root Memorial Square, a lush but somewhat seedy expanse of trees, grass, and walkways bounded by Clay, LaBranch, Bell, and Austin streets. Once the homesite of early Houston banker



Can parking fees pay for a park? A plan and rendering of the proposed McGowen Green.

square was expected to be finished by late November or early December, to coincide with the opening of not just the Toyota Center but also the expanded George R. Brown Convention Center and the new convention center hotel.

Much less certain is the grander scheme named McGowen Green, which proposes to turn four vacant and nearly empty blocks of Midtown between Anita, McGowen, Main, and Travis into a lushly landscaped area fed by a meandering stream that empties into a miniature lake. Anchored at one edge by a light-rail stop, and sited in a rapidly growing residential district, McGowen Green is unlikely to lack users. Given an estimated price tag in excess of \$75 million, it's more likely to lack money.

That's why the notion floated by Ian Rosenberg has proven so interesting. Rosenberg, a board member of the Midtown Management District and an independent consultant in planning, design, and development, was at the meeting of the Midtown Management District's Urban Planning Committee in August 2002 when David Crossley of the Gulf Coast Institute presented the first nascent plans for McGowen Green. Crossley, a Smart Growth advocate, had been thinking about the acreage between McGowen and Anita for a while. The Main Street master plan described it as a potential plaza or a place for commercial construction. There had also been talk that Camden Property Trust, which owns part of the land, might erect an eight-story apartment project there.

None of those plans appealed to Crossley. Then one weekend, as he was floating in an inner tube on the Comal River near New Braunfels, inspiration struck. Why not, he thought, transplant this stretch of river to Houston's Midtown? When he returned home, he downloaded a satellite image of the Comal and found that the stretch he'd traversed fit very nicely into the area bounded by McGowen, Anita, Main, and Travis. A few days later he was at the regular meeting of the Midtown Urban Planning Committee with his doctored photo and a proposal for a 5.5-acre chunk of semi-wilderness in Houston's urban core. Rosenberg liked what he heard, and made a friendly suggestion: Why not build the entire thing on top of an underground parking garage?

That idea, Crossley recalls, suddenly gave his pie-in-the-sky notion a chance of

success. A garage would go a long way toward making the setting aside of four blocks of prime real estate more palatable to area developers, who could lease some of the parking instead of building their own garages or lots; and the projected revenue from a 3,700-space parking garage could be used to back the sale of bonds for construction. Too, the garage could be used as a park-and-ride to attract more riders to METRO's new light-rail system. And the whole project would significantly raise the value of property on the surrounding blocks. In the rosiest of scenarios, McGowen Green's garage could use Houston's love affair with the car to make the area a more walkable community. Still, while the parking-garage idea has many admirers, Rosenberg cautions it has also been a magnet for criticism, in particular because the garage would add some \$59 million to what otherwise would be an approximately \$16 million park project.

In part because of the daunting cost, even the most ardent proponents of McGowen Green admit that it will take a lot of work to transform the park from a plan that many people are willing to admire to a project that they're willing to support. "The most immediate thing to overcome is the momentum toward something else," Crossley notes. "But I do think that this idea has given some people pause." Councilman Carroll Robinson has signed on as a supporter of the park plan, and Midtown Management District planning committee member Daniel Barnum, of Hall Barnum Lucchesi Architects, agrees that it's something that can actually be done — assuming, that is, that certain scenarios work out properly. Already a looming financial deadline by the Midtown Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone has been pushed back to next year, and none of the owners of the property that would become McGowen Green have rejected the idea outright.

It's clear that neither a McGowen Green nor a revamped Root Memorial Square will solve the green space problems of a city whose urban core is as bereft of public parks as Houston's. Still, given Houston's less-than-admirable record of creating useable and enticing small urban oases, it's nice to note that at least a few planners are thinking seriously about the issue. They may not have the answer yet, but at least they're asking the right questions. — *Mitchell J. Shields*

MICHAEL GOOD PROPERTIES



1 Waverly Court

\$1.4 million

Waverly Court-Museum District

Award-winning contemporary house designed by Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects located in one of Houston's most vibrant neighborhoods. A signature house for the Museum District.

[Direct link to photo gallery and virtual tour www.har.com/5423916.](http://www.har.com/5423916)

[Detailed brochure at the site.](#)

713-524-5241 Fax 713-524-5276

FINE FRAMING
DISPLAY ALTERNATIVES
ART SERVICES

LOOK
COMING SOON!
NEW LOCATION

S A R A H
B A L I N S K A S

"MAINTAINING THE QUALITY, VALUE AND
INTEGRITY OF ART WORK AND COLLECTIONS
WITH APPROPRIATE FRAME DESIGNS,
SPECIALIZED DISPLAY SOLUTIONS AND
CONSERVATION CONSCIOUS ART CARE."