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The circle of historic buildings at Sam Houston Park resembles nothing so much as an architectural petting zoo.

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Please Don't Feed the Buildings

In 1956 Gus Haycock, postwar director of the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, pulled out a red pencil and drew a circle in the middle of the Sam Houston Park plan. I wasn't there, but my father, Harvin C. Moore, was; as a founder of the Harris County Heritage Society two years earlier, and as chair of the AIA Historic Preservation committee, he was seeking direction to move two more old houses into the park. The Society had already restored the Kellum Noble House and rescued the Nichols Rice Cherry House; the San Felipe Cottage and Pillot House would be coming soon. So they were located around Haycock's circular sidewalk, and a three-quarter-scale reproduction of the original park bandstand soon arrived at the center, as a kind of punctuation.

It is not surprising that the Heritage Society's collection of important historic buildings has been referred to as an architectural petting zoo. They are arranged in a kind of abstract relationship to the site, like colored Easter eggs on a close-cropped lawn. The structures have been transformed into sculptural objects, without connection to the urban context of which they are a product.

In all probability, nothing would be changing in Sam Houston Park if not for the recent propensity of Buffalo Bayou to overflow its banks and inundate Old Place and the Pillot House (which has happened twice in the last four years). In 2002 then-Heritage Society director Jane Ellen Cable approached me with the proposition that Geoff Brune's and my fifth-year architecture students at the University of Houston undertake a new master plan of the park as a semester project. The student work was strong, and all of it reflected not only a desire to re-create the historic relationship between the buildings and the street but also to reintroduce all of the cisterns, woodsheds, outhouses, clotheslines, and fences that every site had—in other words, to turn the park into a living his-

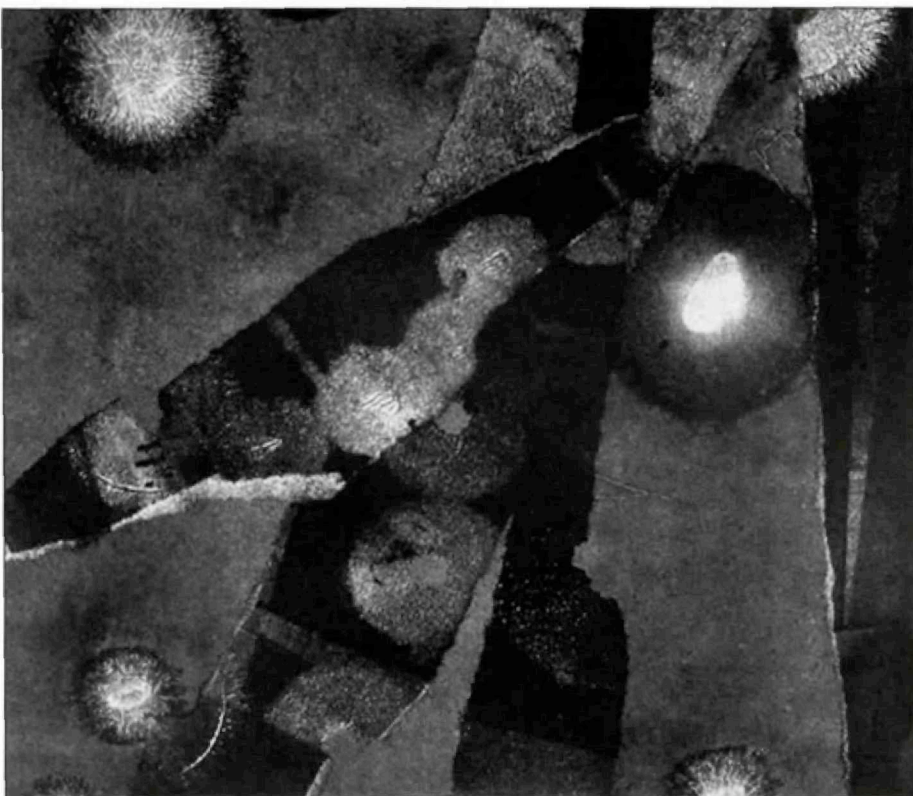
tory environment for a better interpretation of Houston's past.

Heritage Society Building Committee President Bill Hill then proceeded to work on a more practical plan with Gensler, incorporating much of the spirit of the student work. As of this writing, the only part of the plan that has been realized concerns the portion of Sam Houston Park south of the Lamar Street/Allen Parkway artery. All of the pre-Civil War structures are here, organized along the north-south sidewalk, terminating, across Dallas/Allen Parkway, at the Nichols Rice Cherry House, the only house on its original site. This arrangement will lend itself to the accumulation of outbuildings around Old Place, the Nichols Rice Cherry House, and the newly acquired Fourth Ward Cottage—perhaps the oldest house in Houston.

North of Lamar the obstacles to change proved too great. The existing naturalistic fountain with the little bronze foxes, the Bracewell Armillary Sphere, and a lot of semi-mature trees were all site elements that the Parks Department was reluctant to alter. That, and the rumor of a forgotten cemetery near Bagby at McKinney, ensured that nothing could be moved uphill to the eastern side of the park. Raising the Pillot became the default solution to escaping the floodplain.

Steve Lucchesi of Hall Barnum Lucchesi, Architects, devised the complicated plan of elevation. The house will be rolled aside, concrete foundations constructed, and dirt fill compacted; after that the house will be rolled onto its new substructure, a little more uphill and substantially higher than before. Once in its place, exterior restoration can begin. Early next year the Building Committee will be ready to begin interior restoration.

With the Pillot pretty much in the same place it has been for nearly 50 years, Gus Haycock's circle lives on, demonstrating the permanence that a simple plan can have. — Barry Moore



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