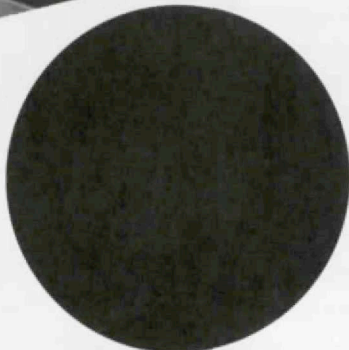


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Tanking Up Hermann Park

HERMANN PARK is home to a zoo, a golf course, statues of famous men, an outdoor theater, and, as of early last year, a brand-new, somewhat camouflaged, two-million-gallon water tank. The tank, part of the city's South End Pumping Station, sits on a prominent site between the Warwick Towers and the Museum of Natural Science. The site is so prominent, in fact, that the museum has long considered it a logical spot for expansion. So, you might inquire, what is a woolly-mammoth-size water tank doing in Hermann Park? We wondered too.

Peter Dobrolski, manager of the water production division of the city's public utilities department, is something of an expert on the history of the South End Pumping Station. According to Dobrolski, the giant 30-foot-high tank was completed in early 1991 as the latest replacement for a series of tanks dating to 1939. The South End tank is certainly not the largest in Houston — that honor goes to a 15-million-gallon underground tank at public utilities department headquarters — but, sitting next to the Museum of Natural History, it is still a big gulp for the eyes to swallow.

The South End Pumping Station is itself a historic landmark and thus deserves its prominent site, Dobrolski argues. The pump house, a tan brick structure with a green terra-cotta tile roof, was built in 1916, shortly after George H. Hermann donated the land to the city for use as a public park. The station pumps water from four wells located throughout the park into the adjacent tank, which is an emergency water source for the Texas Medical Center. While historical preservationists' arguments have not been persuasive enough to save many downtown buildings, Dobrolski hopes they will prevail in any decision about the South End Pumping Station. But couldn't they have rebuilt the decidedly ahistoric water tank somewhere else, instead of leaving it at the head of the park? Well, no, says Dobrolski: "The tank being near the Medical Center and so on, we didn't want to relocate it. And you just can't relocate a well; they cost about a million dollars to drill."

Architect Norman Hoover, whose firm, Hoover & Furr, has been involved in the expansion of the museum since 1987 (see *Cite*, Fall 1990), has few kind words for the ill-placed two million gallons of water. "I was surprised when they took the old tank down and rebuilt it, as was everybody at the museum," he says. The architects had previously discussed a number of alternatives with the public utilities department, including placing the tank under-

ground and covering it with a parking garage. For one reason or another, however, the city said no to all of the firm's schemes.

What the city tried instead was a little camouflage. The walls of the tank were painted a warm beige to match the stone on the museum. The roof was painted a dark green, so that it would resemble a patch of grass to upper-floor residents of the nearby Warwick Towers — or at least to those with bad eyesight. A wooden fence replaced an earlier chain-link enclosure, and token bits of shrubbery appeared around the tank's base. Dobrolski is proud of the unusual lengths to which the city went to beautify the site: "It's very expensive to do that kind of work; but it's such a high-profile site for the city and for us, it was important for us to look good."

Still, the tank's critics have a different view. "It's sort of like hiding the elephant in the strawberry patch," says Hoover. Charlie Brookshire, a project manager at Hoover & Furr, wishes that the firm "could have had some design input on the beautification effort, but no one asked us." And when all is said and done, there is still a two-million-gallon water tank sitting on prime park real estate. But the museum is not giving up. Hoover hopes eventually to envelop the water tank with buildings. His firm is in the final design stages of a parking garage to be built on the north side, and future museum expansion is planned for the west and south sides of the tank.

Following the credo "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade," the museum might consider employing the tank as an educational tool. The garage plan is already developing along those lines. According to Hoover, "In the garage, there is a central cooling plant that has some ice storage, and we've put a window in it where you can look into the space as a teaching exhibit." Are there any plans to turn the tank into a lesson in water supply? "Not that I know of," says Hoover. "Frankly, we'd prefer to convert it into a nonentity." Meanwhile, the museum might want to consider flood insurance.

Michael J. Kuchta



Find the water tank in this picture.



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