

Local Competition

Students and professionals collaborate to find the best plan for Mandell Park



Photo by Michael J. Shields

Above: Mandell Park in its current incarnation, looking west toward Lucky Burger.
Top Background: Keiji Asakura began planning for a new Mandell Park by having his student collaborators draw loose schematics to get a feel for the different aspects of the space.
Opposite Page, Top: Asakura Robinson's winning plan for Mandell Park.
Opposite Page, Bottom: A view of the proposed park from the southwest corner.

It's not that unusual for a large public project to take advantage of charrettes or competitions to pit ideas against each other in search of the one that works best. But for small projects—say, a 1.22-acre pocket park tucked away in the Museum District—such things are rare. The complexity of setting up a competition, not to mention the cost, tend to be considered too much work for a relatively tiny enterprise.

Thanks, however, to a group of interested residents, a half dozen Houston architectural firms, and architecture students from the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, Mandell Park, a modest swath of green space at the corner of Richmond and Mandell, received a level of attention that similar spaces can only dream about. A

one-day charrette, weeks of collaboration between professional and aspiring architects, a competitive exhibition at a neighborhood art gallery, and a final vote to select the preferred plan resulted in a proposal that, if built, could give the city a memorable new gathering spot. More important, though, it could provide similar spaces across Houston with a model to follow, one that could potentially result in more interesting approaches to urban design.

Actually, to call the current Mandell Park a "park" might be to stretch the term a bit. It's closer to a blank slate waiting for something to be written. The space was originally purchased in the late 1980s as a potential site for a branch public library. When, instead, the branch ended up in a renovated church on Montrose near Richmond, the land at Richmond and Mandell was allowed to lie fallow, devolving into a place for weeds to grow and trash to be dumped.

It wasn't until 1992, when a group of concerned neighborhood residents took on the daunting task of clearing the property and keeping it clean, that the potential of the area started to become apparent. On the southern part of the property an organic community garden known as Meredith Gardens was established; and then, in 2003, the northern part was cleared of concrete and debris by the city when the Library Department transferred ownership over to the Parks and Recreation Department.

That transfer was marked by the land officially being designated Mandell Park, and over the next couple of years the neighbors who had unofficially been keeping the place presentable morphed

into an official non-profit known as Friends of Mandell Park and began thinking about its future.

A vision statement was drafted that called for the park becoming a place of "respite where people can come to relax and enjoy the quiet solitude of nature and art." In order to figure out how to make that happen, some of the Friends started talking to the Parks Department and architects who lived or worked in the neighborhood, among others. The suggestion they got was to hold a charrette.

"To be honest, we had no idea what a charrette was," says Skip Almony, president of Friends of Mandell Park. But then he was put in touch with Rafael Longoria, whose architecture firm, Longoria/Peters, has its office not far from the park. Longoria, an architecture professor at the University of Houston, proposed having a modified competition that would include a charrette. To help bring local architects on board, he suggested pairing the professionals with his fourth year students.

The idea was intriguing enough to get six firms—five landscape architecture firms and one architecture firm—to sign onto the project. Included were Clark Condon & Associates, White Oak Studio, Environments & Company, The Office of James Burnett, Brave/Architecture, and eventual winners Asakura Robinson. In a one day gathering at the University of Houston last fall, professionals and students met with member of Friends of Mandell Park and others to get a sense of what area residents wanted, then broke off into groups to come up with preliminary plans, which were later displayed for more comments. What followed was

