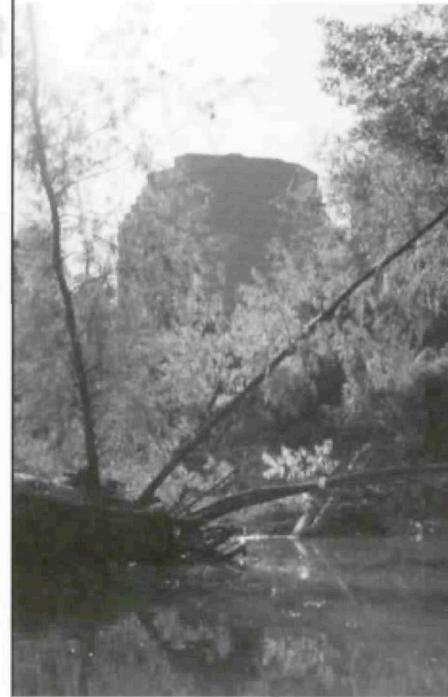
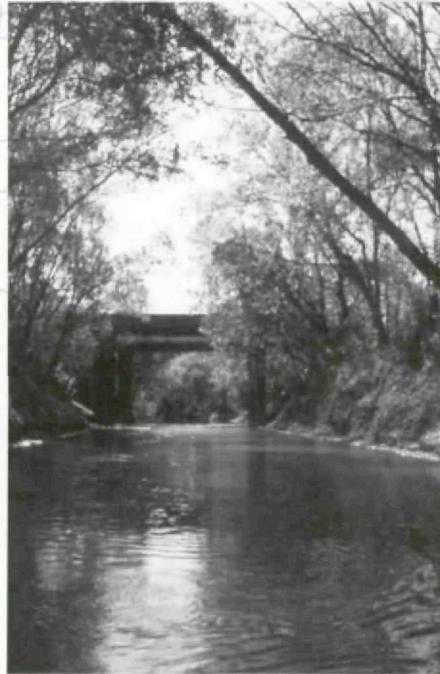




MUDDY WATERS



BY BRAD TYER

WE'VE BEEN TRYING TO figure out what to do with Buffalo Bayou ever since Augustus C. and John K. Allen, having failed to acquire Harrisburg, poled and pulleyed their canoes upstream to a point at which they could presumably take it no more and invented Houston instead. We advertised it to pioneers, via artists' renditions, as a tumbling clear stream spilling through green hillocks, with only about 200 miles of inaccuracy. We used it as a municipal water supply until it became so fetid with the dumped bodies of horses and crap (literal and figurative) that we effectively converted it to a sewer. We touted Allen's Landing as the birthplace of Houston and shadowed it with acres of thrumming elevated pavement. We dredged the ditch into a channel for ships and ran for the hills — the Heights, anyhow — to escape its yellow fever. We've littered it, dammed it, bridged it, straightened it, scraped it, paved much of its watershed, bulkheaded its banks, and strung a thin bead of bicycle trails and concrete benches and sculpture along brief stretches of shoreline.

All done piecemeal. Visionaries and quacks have drawn up master plans of varying ambition and consensus for the bayou at least since 1913, when an architect named Arthur Comey suggested setting aside all of Houston's 800-plus miles of indigenous bayou system as interlocking tendrils of open space. That probably

would have been nice, and Houston would be a different city now, but World War I diverted the attentions of whatever motivated citizenry existed at the time.

Tweaks and twiddles and massive restructurings have since come and sometimes gone, directed by the Army Corps of Engineers, the Harris County Flood Control District, the city Public Works department, adjacent private landowners, developers, municipal governments, urban planners, and well-intentioned nonprofit groups. And still we don't know what to do.

Now a group called the Buffalo Bayou Partnership is presenting another master plan, called "Buffalo Bayou and Beyond" (see sidebar, page 21) — some old ideas, some new ones, some minor, some drastic, none cheap. Like the famous old broadsheets luring speculators to town, lots of pretty drawings.

The bayou is almost perfectly emblematic of its city in that we desperately want it to be something other than what it is. In the case of the city, we want Houston to be "world-class," never mind that the unacclimated think of it as a paved swamp where the nation's fattest citizens wheeze their ways from air conditioner to air conditioner, inhaling in the meantime the country's foulest air. That image is not farfetched; our virtues lie elsewhere.

In the case of the bayou, we're still far from any agreement on what we wish it was, but if we think of it at all, we're certain that we'd prefer it to be something else. As we begin again to discuss what it might be, most of us aren't sure, even in an even vaguely holistic sense, what it is. To get our head around that, as Mark Twain must surely once have said, we'll have to get in a boat.

It's not easy to get a canoe into Buffalo Bayou. The true headwaters, always intermittent, once ranged far west into the Katy prairie, but now they're swamped out in the lowlands of Addicks and Barkers Reservoirs, dammed with earthen banks after the flood of 1935 (25 downtown blocks under water, seven dead). Highway 6 crosses the bayou a few hundred yards downstream from the Barker spillway, but access and parking are poor.

It's a slightly easier put-in at the county's Terry Hershey Park near Addicks-Fairbanks road, south of I-10, just off the eastbound feeder. There's a parking lot, a tall footbridge over a feeder creek, another over the bayou, and a steep dirt slope down to a dirt embankment where you can usually find a dirt ledge not too far above the waterline. Hershey Park, a seven-mile series of bayou-side greenways from Highway 6

Background here and on the following pages:
Map of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's master
plan, copyright Thompson Design Group, Inc.

WHAT SHOULD BUFFALO BAYOU BECOME?
AND WHAT IS IT RIGHT NOW?



About these photos: Nick Tannous, a graduate student in the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, made this photographic excursion down the Buffalo Bayou over two days in November 1999. The first day, Tannous and oarsman Jack Barron put in near San Felipe and Voss and made their way through the city's watery back alley to the site of the old Mercado del Sol. The next day, Tannous and Lotus Witt started where the previous trip had ended, and rowed to the Turning Basin at the head of the Ship Channel. There, encounters with a pair of barges and other larger, less maneuverable boats brought the trip to an end. Tannous documented the bayou systematically, taking photos at regular intervals in order to capture a sampling of conditions. The project began in a graduate course, "Seeking the City," taught by Professors Bruce Webb and Dwayne Bohuslav.

down and east to Wilcrest, was built in the early 1990s, the result of activism by an environmental philanthropist. It's nice.

The bayou in these upper reaches is narrow but more or less straight, channelized by the Corps in 1946, when flood control experts believed that straightening waterways would better control floods. Gray dirt banks retreat behind hanging nets of exposed tree roots. During floods, fallen trees hang up crosswise in the current and form logjams, upon which collect flotillas of Styrofoam and mulch and plastic and twigs. In low water you sidle the canoe up sideways against the key log, paddling aside detritus. You slide out of the boat and straddle the log, one person on either side, lug the canoe over lengthwise between you, and crawl back in on the other side. Or, when the approaching brush is too thick or the logjam too deep or the key log already occupied by a sunning water moccasin, you drag the boat out of the water entirely, up muddy slopes and around.

The natural creek inlets and the more common sewer-pipe inflows are scenic. The water trickling out of them looks clear, which is not to say clean. The Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission, which is hardly as green as it sounds, classifies several measures of the bayou's water quality as "non-supportive" or "not assessed." It would not be prudent to eat fish hooked in the

bayou. It would not be prudent to swim here. The biggest concerns are ammonia, nitrogen, phosphorus, E. coli, fecal coliform, and who knows what sorts of detergents and chemicals. Several trips, unavoidably wet, I have wondered whether I imagined a stinging sensation on exposed skin.

In this upper section, most sewer pipes are the round corrugated steel sort, old, sometimes big enough to stand in, rotting around the edges, dripping effluent unimpeded into the bayou. Further downstream, and where newer sewers have been installed, inflows tend to be of the square concrete culvert type and sometimes have stone or concrete rip-rap spillways designed to aerate the water on its way into the stream, to the benefit of water quality.

There is always a heron nearby, Great Blue or Louisiana most commonly, and usually a moccasin, or turtles. There is a dead television dumped in the stream, and bridges overhead, and surprisingly under most of the bridges are shallow sections of swift water, not quite rapids but fun in a small boat, spilling over rip-rap and sometimes over red clay hummocks visible just below the surface.

To river-right is a huge square concrete culvert splashing into the stream. Judging roughly from location and apparent vintage, probably the ass-end of Cinco Ranch. (Yes, "river-right." A

bayou is not in any strict sense distinct from a river or a creek or a stream. What people call bayous tend to be smaller and more sluggish between rainstorms, but when everything everywhere has a dam at its head, we can call it a river if we want to.)

A fish jumps. It looks like a mullet, but probably isn't this far up. Maybe a perch. Texas Parks and Wildlife will tell you there are perch in Buffalo Bayou, and bass, and buffalo fish, certainly catfish, but game fish are rare, and all you're likely to see in the upper stretches are the lazy rolls of needlenose and alligator gar, maybe carp, and these not commonly until the bayou starts to widen and deepen and turn below the Wilcrest crossing. The gar lie just under the surface, prehistorically aerating themselves, growing to near six feet long and 200 pounds. They sense a disturbance, twitch and roll yellowed-belly-up, then disappear.

The banks turn from dirt to clay, and PVC pipes hang under the surface pumping irrigation water into cylindrical tanks behind the trees. Here are the first ducks, and in the distance two small animals dart down a sandy bank and into the water before we can get a good look. Raccoon and opossum tracks are everywhere in the mud, but those animals don't dive. Could be nutria, or otters, or beaver. Or baby alligators. It's the season for baby alligators.

Slip under the Beltway 8 bridges and the freshwater mussel shells, open and empty in the shallows, become prevalent, as do the condominiums and townhomes backed up on high spots above the bayou. Occasional porches and decks and gazebos are piled right out over the water. The smart ones are built modestly, knowing they'll be washed away.

The bayou begins its twist through some of the primest real estate in Houston: Hunter's Creek Village, Memorial Drive Country Club, Houston Country Club, Tanglewood. The sound of leafblowers takes over, and you see no people behind the windows in the backs of houses, only yardmen tending the grounds.

As the sandbars become more common, so does the litter. Plastic grocery bags and Styrofoam are ubiquitous, and so are plastic and cardboard American flags. All those flags that people taped to their windows and tied to their antennae after September 11, they're down in the bayou now, wetted around stumps and tangled in branches at the level of the most recent high water. It's very patriotic down there.

People talk about erosion, but people who own estates backing up to the bayou walk the talk. If you're on the inside of a bend, you get a sandbar. If you're on the outside, you donate a sandbar. The erosion control is on the outside. They've tried steel-plate bulkheads, concrete rip-rap bulkheads. They've tried black plastic



sheeting to repel and smooth the water and they've driven steel posts to anchor heavy industrial netting and chain-link fence in hopes of retaining washout. They've pile-driven walls of heavy timber and engineered huge sloped expanses of glistening white rock framed with steel mesh. One of the prettiest stretches of the bayou begins just upstream from the Gessner bridge. The river has widened, and what houses may be are invisible from the water. The bed is all sandbars and red clay, the sky all blue-jays and orange trumpet-flower vines.

The San Felipe and Voss bridges are labeled on their sides, identifiable from the water, and downstream on river-right is a spot we call Shopping Cart Cove, a half acre of rip-rap and boulders above which a five-or six-foot spillway drips into a swimming-hole-sized pool. I've seen recent pictures of kids standing on top of this spillway in bathing suits. There's a whiffle ball, a baseball, a tennis ball, a jump rope, a golf bag, a pair of soggy pants, and dozens of wrecked shopping carts. The ass-end, perhaps, of a Kroger Flagship.

Next is the Farther Point Road bridge, which isn't on my map, then Chimney Rock, a nice series of rapids, some unexpected and enormous architecture on the estates, precarious earth-movers doing bank-work, and the remains of hundreds of needle-less

Christmas tree collecting sand on someone's back bank.

Finally the Woodway bridge comes into view, and the tall office and hotel buildings of Post Oak, another pretty stretch with willows tunneling the stream, and the mucky take-out, after almost nine hours, beneath the 610 overpass.

There has been much kudzu.

You can't canoe Buffalo Bayou without making lists, so, some other things we saw in the bayou that wouldn't fit in earlier sentences: a couch, a Frisbee with the logo of a Baptist church, a rabbit, a cowboy hat, a hardhat, a dead beaver, a plastic baby doll, a wagon wheel, several copperheads, hubcaps, and behind one parking garage, an extensive grove of what looks like but almost certainly isn't head-high marijuana.

If you really knew your birds, or your timber, or your botany, or your trash, the lists would be intolerably longer.

Ask the Buffalo Bayou Partnership why and they'll say, primarily, that Houston has to compete. It's the same thing the city says every time we build a new stadium for an entertainment company. It's what the Greater Houston Partnership says to convince you that the regional petrochemical industry is working hard to clean the air. What the city is competing for is bodies and minds. More specifically, for corporate

relocations and the "smart young knowledge workers" who come with them. Tax base, in other words. A professor named Richard Florida has produced an oft-quoted report on the things that attract such a tax base, and he has found that amenities like sports stadiums rank near the bottom of the list. Access to environmental recreation, especially water recreation, ranks near the top.

Armed with such studies, invoking the prospect of eco-tourism with a more or less straight face, and anxious about the brain drain attendant upon Enron's collapse and job cuts at Continental to Compaq, the Partnership has commissioned its latest master plan from the highly regarded Boston firm Thompson Design Group, Inc. Requiring roughly 30 years and even more roughly \$7 billion, about \$6 billion of which is very speculatively earmarked as private investment, the plan's sheer scale scares the hell out of people.

Environmental types fear it's just more development painted green, a smokescreen of parks and gardens to lay the groundwork for private profit. Tax-dollar watchdogs decry the easy flow of city and county money to the Partnership (which paid the Thompson Group \$1 million for the plan) and wonder why so much should go to out-of-town consultation fees when there's so much planning talent right here — and when, by

the example of history anyhow, all the expensive plans end up sitting on shelves while we continue, as the planners say, to turn our backs on the bayou. The same Buffalo Bayou Partnership, after all, was promoting many of the same ideas back in 1986.

Public accountability scolds wonder why the Partnership, a quasi-governmental nonprofit, seems to be easing into the realm of real estate development, acquiring land up and down the corridor.

Gentrification opponents wonder how all this development can occur without displacing the East End's current residents, traditionally minority and relatively poor.

And then there are the garden-variety skeptics, who look at sketches of pseudo-Parisian street scenes and just know that it could never be, who look at the idea of a downtown island and mock it, as *Texas Monthly* did when an identical diversion canal was first proposed 25 years ago. "Fantasy Island," the magazine called it.

The most accessible stretch of Buffalo Bayou, and the most obvious, begins at Loop 610. There are two more riffles in the river — one downstream of the 610 bridge, and one downstream from Shepherd — but nothing approaching the semi-regular semi-rapids behind you. The



tree growth and understory are heavy, similar to that upstream, but the bayou is deeper here, and slower, the sandbars larger. I've seen watermelons growing wild on the vine on these sandbars, but I never picked one, and no one believes me but the people who saw them too. There are more gar here, and they sometimes slap the bow, which is exceedingly unnerving.

Bank-to-bank logjams are rare here. The river is wider, more riverine than the Neches, for example, in east Texas, which nobody ever called a bayou. Much of this stretch defines the jagged southern border of Memorial Park, and it's common to hear mountain bikers pedaling the trails above the left bank. Above the right, between long stretches of apparent pristinety, are the backyards, often more like the back forties, of River Oaks. The fencing and the bulkheading are elaborate, fastidious, and only a little incongruent. At the right water level, there's a layered stone outcropping at river-left on which one can sit and smoke a cigarette and look upstream around a long fenced bend and watch someone's llama, or Shetland pony, or pot-bellied pig, or peacock, or all four, saunter across what must be the prettiest lawn in Houston.

The bayou flows into a tall backwards S-shaped curve, past a huge pump and under a high footbridge that connects Ima Hogg's Bayou Bend Collection

and Garden to its parking lot. Sometimes the footbridge has well-dressed old ladies on it who take your picture as you pass. From here the bayou mimics Memorial Drive to its north, where condo-plexes are thinning the forest. One new such, on the left bank, is named The Left Bank. Last time I went through there, we met a man in khaki shorts and his shirt tucked in. He stood on a sandbar behind The Left Bank, can of Bud Light in hand, while a pretty blond woman, apparently his wife, walked a golden retriever puppy on a leash along the waterline.

This is probably not far from the future the Buffalo Bayou Partnership would like to see. But the Partnership's plan won't affect anything from the reservoirs on down to here. The Partnership's plan begins at the Shepherd bridge, which used to be Shepherd's Dam Road. According to Louis Aulbach and Linda Gorski, authors of the forthcoming *Buffalo Bayou: An Echo of Houston's Wilderness Beginnings*, merchant banker B.A. Shepherd built a dam on the bayou in the 1870s to feed a mill. The mill never went into operation, but the dam backed up a small lake, a popular swimming hole until the 1920s.

The dam is long gone, but 400 yards upstream of where it stood is the taxonomic line that divides the bayou into its freshwater section (upstream), and its tidally-influenced section (from here on

out into the bay). At Shepherd the water begins its turn to brackish, and in the stretches along Allen Parkway the banks switch from privately owned to public. At Shepherd the bayou first emerges in a form that people who don't live on it can actually sense that it's down there.

There are precious few places to get out of the boat on this stretch. The sandbars are gone, and the banks are perpetually muddy and cluttered. The trash is terminal.

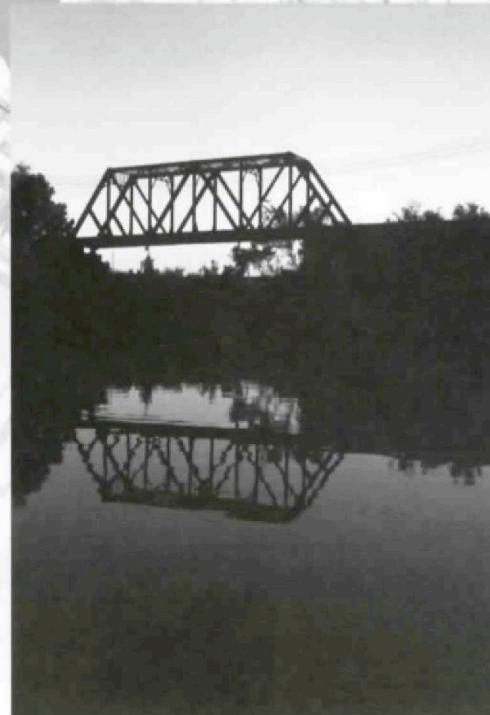
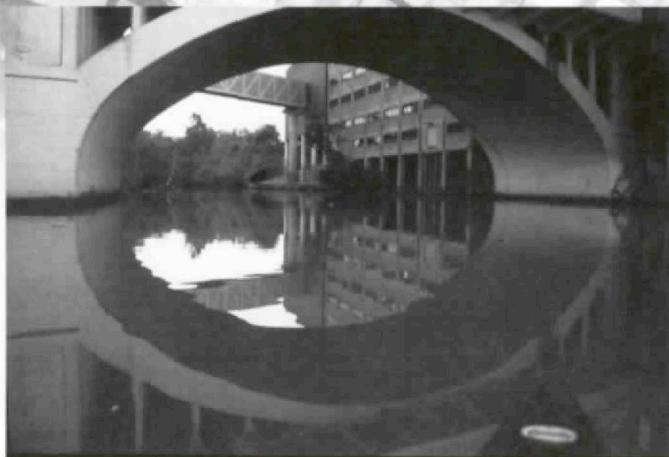
This is the section of bayou that could be most attractively improved. The Partnership's ideas include scraping the channel to remove the trees and undergrowth, sloping back the banks still further to facilitate pedestrian access to the water's edge, and adding more trails and lights and docks and park-like amenities. Wetlands could be created, ponds and oxbows along the shore, and landscaping.

People will inevitably complain about the scraping, but many of the trees there now are in no way original. They're willows and tallows and invasive species that moved in only recently to take advantage of the void left the last time this section was scraped. Prior to the 1950s, the Allen Parkway stretch of the bayou was as densely forested as the sections above Shepherd, but then the corridor was cleared for flood control. Citizens were invited to convert the

hardwoods to firewood, and what came to be called the Woodchopper's Ball brutalized the banks. The junk trees moved in. The best thing to do now, some people say, is to clear it out and replant it, as much as possible, the way it was in the first place.

Bridges cross the bayou more frequently. One smells like bat guano (you can hear a colony squeaking under the Waugh bridge), and another smells, consistently, of bum piss. Eleanor Tinsley Park hugs the right bank, and there's decent access for a boat, and the park is included within what used to be called, with fatal lack of flair, the Demonstration Area. It was here in the mid-1970s that architect Charles Tapley, working on a bicentennial master plan of his own, took a cross-section of the bayou, modified the banks to a gentle slope, laid a stabilizing mat beneath the soil to curb erosion and added a little boat dock. It was Tapley who suggested aerating culvert spillways with tumbled stone, and Tapley who first proposed the White Oak diversion canal. It was Tapley who canoed the *Texas Monthly* writer down the bayou, scared him with the sight of the eight-foot alligator that used to sun on the grounds of the University of Houston-Downtown, and got labeled the dreamer of Fantasy Island for his troubles.

There are graveyards near the bayou and out of sight on either side, and one



crypt, the Donnellan Grave Crypt, that Aulbach describes as “a large brick vault with a small door that is boarded up with timbers” under the Franklin Street bridge. The body has been long moved. Further down the river, towards Bute Park in old Frostown, an entire cemetery was planted on land that has disappeared into the bayou. More recent bodies bob as well. Probably only the San Jacinto River produces more brief newspaper items about unidentified bodies fished out of the water. The clips usually say that police are trying to identify the body. Sometimes they do. Sometimes the body had drowned. Sometimes it was dumped.

Several years ago a manatee was discovered wandering the bayou near downtown. It was way lost. There’s hearsay evidence of huge pleco, an aquarium sort of South American catfish that regularly outgrows aquariums and gets dumped.

Here in downtown you see much of the work that’s been done, the bits and pieces of prior master plans. There’s an art park on the left bank, and Sesquicentennial Park on the right. The bulkheads are attractive, and the steps tiered to allow access to the water at a multitude of water levels. After a rise, the lower tiers are covered with mud. What is not bulkheaded is ugly and scarred and inaccessible.

It is notable, in terms of the Partnership’s past influence, that Wortham Cen-

ter has its back turned to the bayou. Bayou Place has its back turned to the bayou. The new Hobby Center, over strenuous objections, turned its back too. This area, near the Sabine Street bridge, is regarded as a priority. Visitors to these attractions are increasingly expected to park their cars on the north side of the bayou and walk at night. The area is not presently an environment that will make most opera patrons feel safe.

Up on the left bank, encompassing the sites of defunct Fire Station #1 and the abandoned Central Waterworks plant, Landry’s is installing its Aquarium restaurant, including a shark tank. Some people fear the arrival signals a Kemah Boardwalk-ization of the bayou.

Beyond is the downtown post office. The Partnership says that the post office is willing to consider moving, under what circumstances no one quite knows, and the Partnership plan envisions the space as something new for the theater district, to extend downtown, finally, across the bayou.

Soon enough we’re passing UH-Downtown, and White Oak Bayou spills in on the left, visibly clearer than the Buffalo brown. There to the right is Allen’s Landing. The landing, through Partnership efforts, has been graded, planted, lighted, benched, art-ed, the concrete bulkhead restored, heavy chains and

iron tie-down cleats painted shiny black, but it’s not yet open to street access.

Which is just as well, since I don’t much like taking out there. On my first Buffalo Bayou canoe trip, we took out at Allen’s Landing at 12:45 on a Saturday. I read in the Sunday paper that an unidentified body had been fished out of the bayou at that location 15 minutes later.

We paddle up White Oak, past the abandoned Willow Street Pumping Station, whose brick smokestacks vented an incinerator that was once used to burn dogs and horses fished out of the bayou. It is being transformed into some sort of interpretive center under the auspices of the University of Houston.

The north canal, the biggest piece of the Partnership’s puzzle, would cut off around here, running through the present site of a Metro bus barn, which the Partnership says could move. The canal, according to Harris County Flood Control — which is so far, in theory, supportive — would be 30 to 40 feet deep, and could cut floodwater peaks by up to five feet in downtown. The agency isn’t able to say yet whether that five-foot reduction, or ten feet, or 15 feet for that matter, is cost-effective compared to basement flood-proofing.

The diversion canal “was probably a good idea 25 years ago, and it’s still a good idea,” Flood Control Director Mike

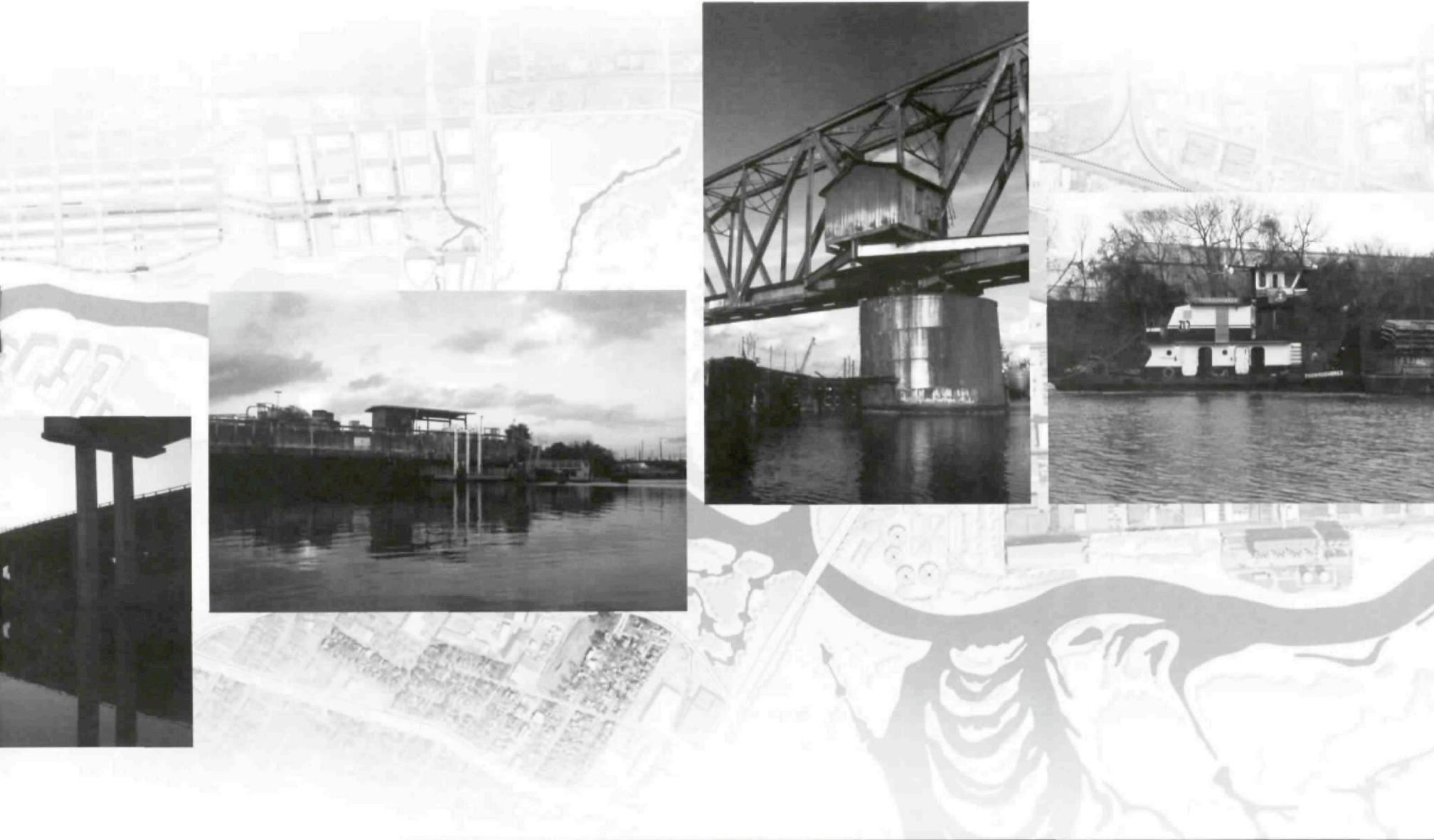
Talbot tells me. “That doesn’t mean it can happen.”

We take out on the concrete ledges of Championship Park.

Everyone wants to know, in the wake of so many unrealized visions: will it happen?

Some think now is the best opportunity since Comey for a massive bayou upgrade. It has finally started to sink in, these say, that Houston can’t compete without a major amenity, and it has finally started to sink in that the continuing reconstruction of downtown can have only limited success as long as a sewer runs through it. The first anniversary of tropical storm Allison is upon us, and flood *management* — the new term — is fresh in corporate and municipal minds. The private-public organizational structure of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, many planners agree, is exactly the sort necessary to maintain the kind of 30-year vision that city government, preoccupied with shorter-term goals like reelection, is unable to provide.

The Downtown Management District, which took in \$5 million in revenues from downtown property owners last year, supports bayou improvements. Central Houston, which “facilitated” the



creation of the Partnership and led the 1998 development of the \$22.5 million Sesquicentennial Park project, is for it. The Quality of Life Coalition, led by developer Richard Weekley, includes in its agenda a goal to “connect the bayou into a continuous, attractive, easily accessible space from Shepherd Drive to Jensen Drive, completed by Superbowl 2004.”

Others are less sure. The city and county underwrites the Partnership, as do private endowments, but when the Partnership’s Anne Olson and designer Jane Thompson introduced the plan to city council’s *Neighborhood Protection and Quality of Life Committee* in June, few of the council members present seemed sure what they were looking at or what they were expected to do. They finally passed a resolution. Roughly translated: *Okay, keep on planning, but don’t hold us to anything.*

Councilman Gabriel Vasquez, representing District H on the East End, is notably skeptical. Vasquez says the Partnership asked him for support only a month before the presentation. “When you talk to them, they say they have lots of support, but I don’t necessarily see it,” he says. “What I’m concerned about is that they’re leveraging support, going to the county saying, ‘Hey, the city supports it,’ and then going to the city and saying, ‘Hey, the county supports it.’”

Vasquez sent the Partnership away with homework: more public input from affected civic groups, letters of support in writing from the county and the flood control district. And Vasquez wants to see a more specific funding formula. This is, after all, the same city government that in May announced a crimped budget of higher fees and fewer services.

At the end of the hour-long presentation, Olson was visibly frustrated.

The east end of the bayou is the most historic, the most thoroughly denatured, and to a canoeist, the most frightening. It is also the stretch that has the most to gain and the most to lose — through gentrification and displacement — from redevelopment.

Put in at Championship Park on White Oak and slide down to Allen’s Landing beneath the old railroad trestle, which may someday be a footbridge connecting the Willow Street Pumping Station to the campus across the way. There’s a pleasure yacht moored at Allen’s Landing today, beneath the gutted building that once housed Love Street Light Circus, where the 13th Floor Elevators once played, and which has recently been acquired by the Partnership for refurbishment as its future office.

Further down on river-right is where Dry Gully used to drain into the bayou. The deep wash once cut down the path of present-day Caroline Street. The gully has long been filled, but during excavations for the new Harris County Criminal Justice building, diggers uncovered the remains of the home of former slave Sylvia Routh, whose house backed up to the gully two blocks from Buffalo Bayou. A small brick basement had been constructed beneath the house. Routh, widowed, had married a rich white man, and she apparently owned a fleet of ships docked in Houston. Aulbach relays the speculation that Routh smuggled runaway slaves from Texas to Mexico in the mid-1800s, hiding them in the brick room until nightfall, steering them down the ravine in the dark to the holds of her waiting ships.

The bayou is wide and placid, and the banks are choked with cardinals and kudzu or some vine like it that sends out velvety purplish-blue flowers in spring. A bend reveals the hulking brick backside of the abandoned electric works, serviced by an old rail line. The building could be converted to lofts, or yet another performance space.

Beyond the bend, both banks show evidence of semi-permanent homeless encampments: makeshift tents, clotheslines, plastic buckets, lawn chairs, and

fishing poles. The first time I paddled this section, coming upstream from York Street, a shirtless man walked out onto the bank above the bulkhead and hollered could I spare a quarter. I guess he wanted what I should throw it at him, but I didn’t have any change.

The pastel McKee Street Bridge passes above, and groves of castor bean trees line the water, and somewhere up on the right, on the site of the old German community of Frostown, is James Bute Park, developed by artist Kirk Ferris, who also painted the bridge.

The US 59 underpasses are trashed with rip-rap and construction leftovers, and then more overpasses in short order, five in all, including an old steel railroad bridge that was once raised on a counterweight to let ships pass. The concrete-block counterweight has been removed and placed far up on the bank like a sculpture, but the overpass hides it from any view but this one.

The next bend sweeps the backside of what used to be El Mercado del Sol, victim of too many rehabilitation efforts to count, which is even now being converted to expensive loft apartments by Trammell Crowe. In sight is the Jensen Street bridge, with a concrete platform at the water’s edge on the right, park above, and a baby carriage way up in the sky, tangled in a cable running beside the



bridge. Past Jensen, on river-right, another homeless camp, though perhaps one is not exactly homeless when one has a leaning plywood cabin snuggled between an abandoned warehouse and the waterfront.

The banks steepen as you approach the headquarters of the Halliburton Corporation on river-left, and bolted to the bulkheads are enormous steel tie-down cleats on unused docks. Across from Halliburton is the abandoned site of an old Portland Cement plant. Both locations are considered by the Partnership as prime plots for redevelopment.

The York bridge is next, with Tony Marron Park on the downstream side. The Partnership has purchased the upstream parcel for a park expansion that has not yet begun. The bridges from here on down are hung with navigational lights, red at the pilings and green over the open channel down the middle.

From York you can see ahead to a scrap metal yard where clawed cranes transfer clattering piles of scrap into barges, and dump trucks empty crashing loads to restock the piles. Metal dust blows up the bayou on the prevailing southerly wind.

Just shy of the Lockwood bridge a culvert outlet trickles into the bayou from the left bank. Paddle close and you can read the sign: "Warning: the discharge of effluent may occur at this point at an average frequency of 4 per year during or

immediately following large rain storms. Avoid any recreational use of the bayou during or immediately following rainstorms of any size. These conditions may be hazardous." The giant culverts are everywhere on the eastern stretch, but only this one has a sign. The ass-end of nothing good.

After Lockwood the bayou widens further, becomes more industrial. Smokestacks and barges and coal loaders and rolls of sheet steel and, perhaps, a yellow crowned night heron. Up on the left, someday, the decommissioned water treatment facility may be converted to wetlands with botanicals planted in the circular holding tanks. Eco-tourists and bird-watchers, perhaps, will visit.

Old spinning bridges ride huge steel gears atop their center pilings, and further down an active water treatment plant has posted signs of its own. "Warning: side stream aeration header, no swimming, high risk of drowning." And "Warning: wastewater effluent discharge structure, 24 ft wide extending 48 ft towards the center of the channel." The water above the structure bubbles. We steer wide.

Mullet leap three, four, and five times in a row, describing loose arcs in the bayou. If a fish ever actually jumps into the boat with you, it will be a mullet.

The bends are so wide now that they feel like small lakes, and they give the wind enough purchase to blow up waves.

Around one, we spot a man on the distant right-hand shore, apparently naked and bathing with bayou water from a bucket. It turns out, as we get closer, that he's wearing shorts.

Soon there's another spinning bridge — call 24 hours in advance if you want it swung out of the way, a peeling sign instructs — and then there is no more real shoreline, only bulkheads and warehouses and loading cranes. Lookout Point appears on the left, marking Constitution Bend, and the turning basin, where the Partnership's plan peters out into Ship Channel proper, edged with the spray-painted names and dates of visiting sailors in dozens of languages.

The Port Authority inspection boat Sam Houston is docked at Lookout Point, where there's a pavilion and a soda machine and a historical plaque, but no good canoe access from the water. Beyond this are ocean-going ships at moor and slinging barges and whitecaps driven by headwinds too strong for a small boat. We turn back a few hundred yards to Hidalgo Park on the southerly bank and haul the canoe up a steep trashy incline to the street. We have finally run out of bayou.

There is the bayou as it once was, pristine, which we might well wish it to be again, but fat chance. There is the bayou

as we have employed it, a drainage ditch. And there is the bayou as it could be, an asset, represented by drawings and good intentions, and in implementation, subject to politics, delusion and greed.

It does take vision, despite the bayou's periodic charm, to imagine Buffalo Bayou as an amenity, and visions vary. To my view, condos would enrich the bayou less than methodical litter control, and canal waterfronts less than effective water-quality enforcement. But these things require both more than a master plan, and less.

Will parts of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's plan be implemented? Probably. Will the resulting bayou look anything like the drawings in 30 years? Probably not. Could Buffalo Bayou, if we face it, be an amenity? Stranger things have happened.

But if we decide we'd like to walk around with our heads held high over the bayou, we'll have to do more than draw pretty pictures of what we wish it were. We'll have to stop treating it like what it has been so far, which is — no nice way to say it — the ass-end of town. ■