



A Place to Come To



Top: Most recent scheme for a civic park to be located on a site in front of the George R. Brown Convention Center, pictured above. Architects Hargreaves Associates.

Could a 12-acre park succeed in doing what a pair of sports arenas and a convention hotel have so far failed to accomplish—bring the spark of residential life to the east side of downtown?

That's the promise, or more properly the hope, being offered up by the planners behind the still-unnamed park that will sit in front of the George R. Brown Convention Center. As plans for the space, bounded by Avenida de las Americas to the east, La Branch to the west, Lamar to the south, and McKinney to the north, were being unveiled in October and November, one point became clear: if it were to achieve all the goals set for it, then it would require a large number of nearby neighbors, not just visitors traveling in from the suburbs.

Not surprisingly then, preliminary renderings of the park and its environs include a number of flanking residential towers rather than the sea of car-covered asphalt that currently fills much of the real estate. These drawings are not just a designer's fancy, insists Mary Margaret Jones, president of Hargreaves Associates,

the San Francisco-based landscape architecture, planning, and urban design firm selected to be project lead for the park. While admitting that "the biggest problem the site has is that it surrounded by surface parking lots," she adds that her experience with similar undertakings in Louisville, Kentucky, and San Jose, California, have convinced her that a park, more than most other urban developments, spurs residential construction. "What we have found in our other projects is that often the park comes first," she says. "It is the park that helps be a catalyst, because suddenly there's an address for residential development. And then you have the perfect mix—people working, living, playing around the park."

It was in part the success of Hargreaves's work in Louisville and San Jose that led to the firm being selected to oversee the Houston project. Hargreaves, along with team partners PageSoutherlandPage and Lauren Griffith Associates, was one of four finalists interviewed, the others being the Office of James Burnett with SOM, West 8 with Clark Condon, and Gustafson Guthrie Nichol Ltd. with McDugald-Steele and Rey de la Reza. According to Guy Hagstette, a special advisor to the mayor for downtown urban development who will, in January, become full-time director of the new park, what helped set Hargreaves apart from the rest was not simply its history with other urban parks, but also its analysis of the climate and micro-climates of Houston's park site and of the environment around the park, both as it is today and how it will change as development occurs. That last, Hagstette notes, is of particular importance to the Houston Park Conservancy, the private non-profit that will manage the park for the city.

A schematic design of the new park is scheduled for completion by the end of 2005, with final design to be done by mid-summer 2006, and construction started in late summer. The park's opening is set for October 2007. Meanwhile, the Park Conservancy has been gathering suggestions from the public about what should be included in the park, suggestions that have led to a preliminary map of the space that Hagstette describes as a "starting point" for the design process. Included on the map are such neighborhood amenities as a dog run and jogging paths along with an area for a farmers market, a white-table restaurant and a snack bar, a pond for sailing model boats, gardens, a "great lawn," and an avenue for kiosks that can be adapted for use by ethnic, art, and other temporary festivals.

How much of that will remain in the final design, and what will give way to other amenities, is uncertain at this point, but according to Hagstette what will not change is the desire to create a mix of ele-

ments that will make the park appealing both to people living next door to it, and to those who will have to travel to reach it. To keep the park active, he says, will require more than simply good design, as important as that might be. It will also require active management. "The missing ingredient in Houston is that public spaces like this park need to be programmed and managed just like a cultural venue would be, and we haven't had that," says Hagstette. "Our desired list of activities for this park is quite long. It may even be unrealistic. But the whole idea is to have a rich layering of different activities, so much so that when you go there you see something you could experience everywhere you turn."

Hargreaves's Mary Margaret Jones agrees. One point her firm emphasizes in its downtown projects, she says, is the need for a full time manager. A park that has only occasional events, and is left fallow the rest of the time, is unlikely to be a success, she says. Louisville is just one city where the active management model has proven its worth, Jones notes. The park Hargreaves developed there was built next to parking lots and post-industrial land on the edge of downtown. From the moment it opened it was programmed almost daily with festivals, fireworks, and other events, Jones says, and as a result it quickly filled with people. In the beginning they had to come to the park by car, she says, but they came. And now the park is surrounded by high-rise residential, offices, and even a minor league baseball stadium. "Phase one of the park was built about eight years ago," she says, "and now a second phase is under construction because it was so successful."

Whether that success can be replicated in Houston, where downtown parks have tended to be empty of people more often than not, remains to be seen. But Hagstette is convinced that the park fronting the George R. Brown will be different, and perhaps even set a pattern that other downtown parks can learn from. Already, he notes, some downtown developers have shown faith in the park's prospects. One nearby block has been purchased for use as high-rise residential, and two other nearby blocks are under option for residential use. In each case, the park was cited as a reason for the development.

Of course, there's no guarantee that the towers will be built. Five years ago, similar residential high-rises were announced in the wake of Minute Maid Park's completion. Those complexes never got off the ground, and the same thing could happen again. Still, Hagstette, Jones, and the others involved with the development of downtown's new park think they've got the right lure this time, something that will bring people into central Houston not just to visit, but to stay.

— Mitchell J. Shields