



## A Pleasant Promenade

A new pathway along the banks of Buffalo Bayou hopes to remind the city of its liquid assets



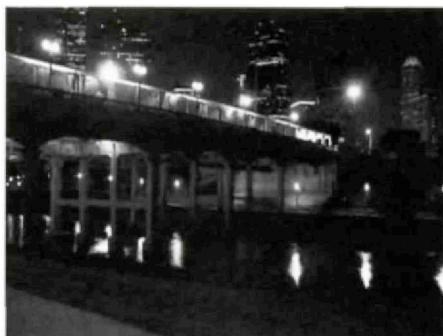
All photos courtesy the Buffalo Bayou Partnership

**Top:** Canoeists pass by a walkway and landscaping that is part of the recently completed Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade (SWA Group, 2006).

**Above:** A pedestrian takes in a section of the half-mile long promenade.

**Top right:** Stairways provide a new connection between surface streets and the banks of Buffalo Bayou.

**Right:** The lighting along the promenade was designed to be bright enough for security, but soft enough to provide a romantic touch.



Over the last half-century, while other Texas cities learned to treasure their waterways, Houston's bayous have been dumped in, trashed out, lined with concrete, and generally relegated to weed-lot status. Now, though, an important step has been made toward redressing that neglect. Under the guidance of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, a landscaped walking path has been developed along the banks of Buffalo Bayou downtown. Known as the Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade, its intent is to draw Houstonians down to the water's edge, and remind them of one of the city's too long ignored treasures.

Grand opening ceremonies for the new promenade will be held May 20, when the public will be invited to see just what the \$15 million project has to offer. Designed by the SWA Group, the promenade is part of the Partnership's Buffalo Bayou Master Plan, which envisions "a new urban core focused on Buffalo Bayou ... transform[ing] Houston's neglected waterfront into an active and vibrant center."

Begun in 2004, the Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade is more than a simple pathway. The Partnership has overseen a total makeover of the part of the bayou that winds northeast from the Sabine Street Bridge to just shy of the Wortham Center—widening it, sloping and reinforcing its banks, providing extensive native landscaping, and adding 12 access points, two of them handicapped (and bike and stroller) acces-

sible. Twenty-three acres of parkland have also been created, and ideas abound for programming the new amenity, from welcoming street performers to offering a wireless access arena.

Although barely more than half a mile in length, the promenade covers a crucial section of Buffalo Bayou, connecting a stretch along Memorial Drive/Allen Parkway known for hiking and biking and Sesquicentennial Park. Perhaps most important, the Partnership has not only worked to make the banks of the bayou an appealing place to spend time, they've also made them much easier to get to it.

"The element I'm most excited about is the stairways, because it gives this connection to the street that we hadn't had before," says Anne Olson, the Partnership's executive director. "This is going to allow people to access the bayou a lot easier, and help make downtown more pedestrian friendly."

The stairways that excite Olson descend from street level to the Promenade with streamlined, Art Deco-esque handrails. Four of the portals from street to water are marked by inverted stainless steel canoe "trellises" by Houston sculptor John Runnels, with quotes about water carved into their sides. Runnels' canoe sculptures interact with other nearby public art: Mel Chin's *Seven Wonders* flanking the Wortham Center, and Paul Kittelson's *Bayou Beacons*, the

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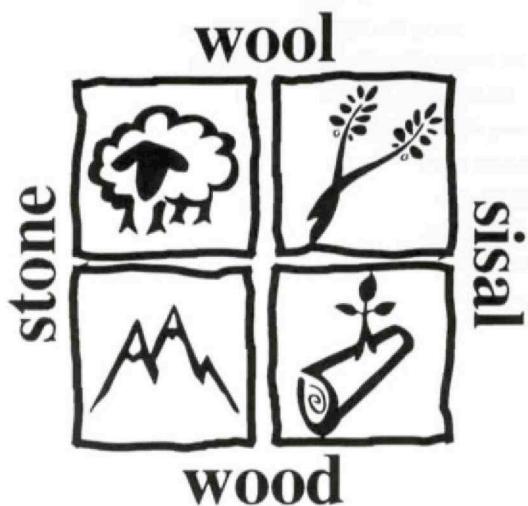
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stainless steel, fluted pillars attached to I-45 above. Runnels is a longtime bayou devotee, co-founder (along with Charlie Sartwelle) of the Buffalo Bayou Artpark, and a man whose public art has popped up bayou-side in the vicinity of the Sabine Street Bridge for more than 15 years.

Runnels calls Buffalo Bayou "Houston's mystery," and hidden as it is in plain sight, it does have a mysterious quality. In tracing the bayou's path, the Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade makes a study of this secreted atmosphere, winding along the rear of buildings and abutting feeder roads. The promenade plays with this urban aesthetic; in several places it passes abandoned waterworks or concrete armatures, now aged into sculptures by the patina of time.

Starting at the Sabine Street Bridge, the promenade ascends the gentle slope next to the Allen Parkway feeder road; passes the backside of the fenced-off Sam Houston Park; goes behind the City Hall Annex under a spaghetti bowl of freeways and causeways; and levels off behind the Hobby Center garage. The promenade project has added a pedestrian bridge to cross the bayou at this point—the first ever pedestrian bridge along the Buffalo Bayou Walk—allowing people to loop around back to the starting point past the Sabine Street Lofts.

The wooden plank bridge is 10-feet wide, its design a gentle curve of rust-textured corten steel trusses. Crossing behind the Hobby Center, the bridge provides a pedestrian and bike connection from downtown to the neighborhoods of Montrose, the Heights, and Midtown.

Past the bridge, the promenade parallels the backside of the vacant Bayou Place 2 complex. Just as it approaches the Wortham Center, the Promenade segues into the red brick and grassy expanses of Sesquicentennial Park.

The work that went into the promenade not only made Buffalo Bayou easier to access, it also made it possible driving past to see the water. The newly sloped banks reveal what before was hidden at the bottom of steep edges, drainage-ditch fashion. As the bayou's water flows towards downtown, the vividness of its olive-green color is surprising. "Everybody that sees this project can't believe it's Buffalo Bayou," says Olson. "I took somebody out there and they said, it's so much more like a river than it looked like before."

Probably the most attention-getting element in the promenade is its lighting. The promenade pathways are lined with light posts that provide an illumination strong enough for security purposes, yet have a softened glow, creating an atmosphere that's "a little romantic, like strolling in Europe," says project manager Ian Rosenberg. Designed by New York lighting designer Hervé Deschotes

L'Observatoire (with collaboration from artist Stephen Korns in Amherst), the lamps have flying-saucer-like caps. On top of these saucers are orbs that glow either white or deep blue, varying with the 29-day lunar cycle. When the moon is full, all the orbs strung along the path are white; as the moon starts to wane, the lights near the Sabine Street Bridge change to blue, and this blueness creeps farther up the bayou every night.

As a result, people passing overhead on the Pierce Elevated will see a string of lights dangling along the blackness of the bayou, part white, part deep blue, depending on the time of the month. In time, the Partnership hopes to extend the moon-tied lamppost line all the way from Shepherd Street to the Ship Channel Turning Basin, creating what they call an illuminated "spine of the city."

A light show can also be found on the undersides of the freeways, which are washed in the same rich blue, as though the water of the nighttime bayou was exhaling on the cars and trucks passing overhead.

But for all the creativity exhibited in the lighting, the creation of the pedestrian bridge, or the new access points, the most ambitious structural component of the promenade project is barely visible. This is a system of 5,500 gabions—wire baskets of concrete rubble—that has transformed Buffalo Bayou's steep, sludgy banks. Weighing two to three tons, the gabions are placed in a three-tiered staircase just below the water's edge, creating a more stable bank, a flood control buffer, and a gradual grade that allows for easier canoe access. In widening and grading the bayou, the project excavated more than 100,000 cubic feet of dirt, at places moving the bank back as much as 50 feet.

A City of Houston project, the Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade was managed by the Partnership and was a collaboration between the city, the Texas Department of Transportation, and the Harris County Flood Control District. Private partners included Houston Endowment, Inc., the Brown Foundation, and the Wortham Foundation.

As for the future, the Partnership recently hired New York art consultant Diane Shamash, director of the Minetta Brook non-profit, which has garnered admiration for its public art projects on the Hudson River, projects that emphasize the relationship between contemporary artists and communities.

Shamash is working with the Partnership to establish a similar public art program along a 10-mile stretch of Buffalo Bayou. In a pilot project for the initiative, they've begun exploring ideas for a "floating cinema" along the promenade, in which large projections of film and video would travel down the bayou by barge. — Ann Walton Sieber