

rdAGENTS TAKES ON WILLOW WATERHOLE

Designers Embolden a Community

WILLOW WATERHOLE DEMONSTRATES THE

extraordinary potential of using Harris County’s flood planning to create parks. Yet, many residents within a mile of the 280-acre site do not know about it. Try looking for the site (take the Post Oak exit from Loop 610, then pray), and you may well drive through without realizing.

The Harris County Flood Control District pieced together the land and excavated it in collaboration with the Army Corps of Engineers to hold 600 million gallons of water.

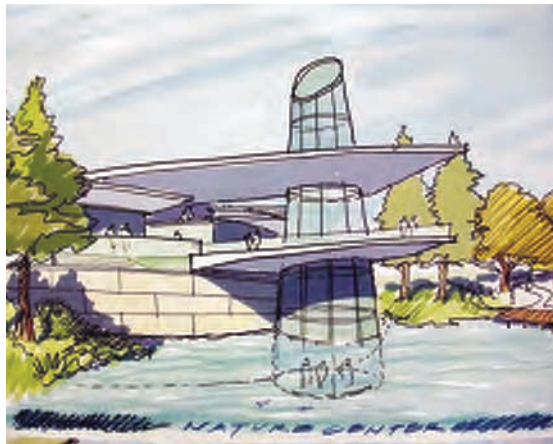
In the old days, flood control meant lining straightened bayous with concrete in an effort to rush water through quickly. The waterhole is a component in a newer model that collects waters and runs them through slow, grassy, more natural-looking bayous. The hydrology can be complex, but the secondary effects—parks—are easy to appreciate.

Here is the problem. Flood Control is not mandated to create bike trails, pavilions, duck ponds, or other amenities. Fortunately, in the case of Willow Waterhole, other groups have picked up the baton.

A nonprofit, the Willow Waterhole Greenspace Conservancy, partnered with Harris County Flood Control, City Parks, the state, and the Audubon Society to get some paths and landscaping in place. SWA Group created a basic master plan. Though the landscaping is incomplete, 30 species of birds have already been spotted there: tricolored herons, mottled ducks, laughing gulls. In 2009 when the waterhole opened, *Houston Chronicle* columnist Lisa Gray described her visit as an ecstatic, exclamation-marked meeting with roseate spoonbills (aka Cajun flamingos, birds rarely seen in the city).

The site still feels raw though. The absence of wayfinding is compounded by the discontinuity of the land and the lack of connections with the surrounding neighborhoods. Many adjacent buildings are in a state of decay, including the remains of Westbury Square.

The conservancy hopes to do much more. President Howard Sacks and other board members eagerly worked with the newly-named young professional wing of RDA—rdAgents—



FROM TOP: “Best Architecture” went to Genevieve Buentello, Antonio Flamenco, Mike Garcia, Camilo Parra, and David Robinson for elements like a viewing tower partly submerged in water; Clark Condon Associates’ “Best Master Plan” unifies the six disparate parts of the park; TBG Partners won “Best Overall” for proposing strong connectivity to neighborhoods and schools. Visit ricedesignalliance.org to see all the presentations.

to hold a charrette on August 7, 2010, at the Rice School of Architecture.

Twelve teams chose between a Master Plan Track, which considered the park as a whole, an Architecture Track, and a Graphic Design Track. Participants were charged with taking the mostly vacant greenspace and designing measures to promote nature, unify the six detention sites of the park, increase public outreach and awareness, create opportunity for revenue, and showcase creativity and ingenuity.

The entries were blindly judged by Howard Sacks, President of Willow Waterhole Greenspace Conservancy; Art Storey, Executive Director of the Harris County Public Infrastructure Department; Ben Crawford, Senior Associate, Senior Project Designer HOK; Matt Baumgarten, Associate with SWA; and Roksan Okan-Vick, Executive Director of the Houston Parks Board.

Twenty years ago Hermann Park was in a state of neglect. The 1992 RDA-sponsored Heart of the Park competition did not yield immediate results, but the entries helped boosters articulate their vision, raise funds to hire Laurie Olin to create a master plan for the park, and make Hermann Park the beloved place it is now. By 2030, may Willow Waterhole become a well-used sanctuary for wildlife and humanity.

– Raj Mankad

Join Willow Waterhole Greenspace Conservancy at Westbury High School, October 19 at 7 p.m., for a presentation and discussion, including designs from rdAgents’ 2010 charrette.