Evelyn Merz speaks with the kind of unassuming voice you would not expect of someone who successfully took on the Army Corps of Engineers. No Anne Richards-style quips in a brash Texas twang, she comes across as clear and balanced.

When Merz moved to Houston in the early 1970s, she bought a home in Garden Villas near the banks of Sims Bayou, which, at the time, was narrow with vegetation spilling over its steep banks, much like Buffalo Bayou within Memorial Park. In 1991, she heard about flood control plans to straighten the bayou. She obtained a copy of the environmental impact statement and was alarmed by what she found. “This part of town was already struggling,” she says, “and turning Sims into a concrete ditch would be a death knell not only for wildlife but for the neighborhoods.”

Sims Bayou runs through the south side of town through predominantly African American and Latino neighborhoods much of the way. Wealthier, mostly Anglo neighborhoods downstream near the Glenwood golf course and the Ship Channel are what real estate agents dub “hidden gems.” Of all the bayous, this out-of-the-way one became the flashpoint and impetus for a paradigm shift in Flood Control practices.

Terry Hershey, George H. W. Bush, and George Mitchell stopped the Army Corps from ruining Buffalo Bayou in the 1960s. That case, however, can be understood as an anomaly, as Buffalo Bayou in the 1960s. That case, however, can be understood as an anomaly, as Bayou in the 1960s. That case, however, can be understood as an anomaly, as

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Swa Group proposed using more right-of-way to create a meandering form. Instead of a 1 to 3 ratio of height to width, the banks would have a 1 to 4 and 1 to 5 ratio. Furthermore, instead of using a concrete surface, the banks would be stabilized with buried concrete blocks that fit together like a mat. In 1992, the Swa Group alternative proposal was found to handle water better than the original plan and did not require reauthorization by Congress.

On my visit to the new Sims Bayou, the broad, curving form was pleasing. On closer examination, though, the human sculpting of the bayou becomes obvious. The banks are often too even to have been shaped by erosion and deposits. The trees are, in most places, too sparse. The grass resembles a lawn not the undergrowth of an intact riparian environment.

Merz remains optimistic about the vegetation. “The geotextile mat allows root penetration,” she says. If the management of the planting regime changes, and the drought ends, the ecology of the Sims banks will improve with time. “We are never going to have really big overhanging trees, but we could improve the habitat,” Merz explains.

A series of seven parks along Sims is connected by a 14-mile trail that could grow as the final stages of the $350 million Flood Control project are finished this year. The integration of the bayou with parks and surrounding neighborhoods ranges from remarkable to unfortunate. At Sims Bayou Park, the widening of the bayou swallowed up all but a sliver of the park, which stinks from an adjacent water treatment plant. Just downstream is Reveille Park. The cover of South Park Mexican’s rap album Reveille Park shows tough, tattooed kids stamped with a Parental Advisory. What I saw was altogether different, an idyllic multicultural scene of children playing and adults strolling. The park connects a neighborhood of modest, well-kept single-family homes with the sweeping bayou.

Merz gives credit for the success of Reveille Park to dialogue between Flood Control and residents. The Coalition held a barbecue for the engineers at the park, which was one event among many that walked the whole bayou segment by segment, partnering engineers with neighborhood activists and naturalists, marking trees and habitats for preservation.

When pressed about the outcome after twenty years of activism, Merz says, “You have mixed feelings. We know that we had a very hard fight. We made progress. We made it much better than it would have been. It is greener, more neighborhood friendly, more aesthetically pleasing. The habitat is better than it would have been but not as good as could be. There’s still room for improvement. If we were starting from scratch today, we could have had detention basins as the primary solution.”

Detention basins that double as parks are now central to Flood Control’s current strategy. The combined area of all the new detention basins in Harris County is 5,000 acres, the equivalent of 14 Reliant/Astrodome Stadium complexes. The $1.5 billion of work by the Army Corps and Flood Control on Sims, Brays, White Oak, and other bayous in the last ten years has been profoundly better for the city’s neighborhoods and wildlife than the concrete trapezoidal ditch model. The Bayou Greenways Initiative, a $500 million proposal, to connect bicycle trails along all the bayous rightly seeks to take advantage of the unprecedented amount of land acquired for flood control.

The hard truth, however, is that the $1.5 billion spent on flood control is a bailout of Houston’s sprawl. If Houston were denser and had low-impact development standards in place, perhaps we would be celebrating Sims Bayou as a riparian environment rather than a sculpted landscape that sort of looks natural. We still have relatively intact waterways—Bear Creek, Cypress Creek, Greens Bayou, Brazos River, and Trinity River—at the far edge of city that are threatened by the planned expansion of the $4.8 billion Grand Parkway toll road.

Merz reminds us “it is the role of the citizens to put their elected officials where they have to do the right thing. Expecting an elected or non-elected person to stick their neck out is difficult. They have to be seen as responding to demand. It is the citizen’s responsibility to make that demand felt.”

By Raj Mankad

Photo Jack Thompson
IS THE RE-SCULPTING OF SIMS BAYOU A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION?

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photo Jack Thompson

Evelyn Merz on the drought-stricken, geotextile-lined banks of Sims Bayou.