

EAST SIDE RUINS

Delighting in Unscripted Spaces Along Buffalo Bayou



WHEN I FIRST MOVED TO THE EAST END (EASTWOOD, SPECIFICALLY) FROM the Heights in 1999, it almost felt like I was becoming the citizen of a new city. That is, the East End felt new, or at least different, because, unlike most of Houston, it's obviously old. At first I did double takes at the signs denoting businesses that had been up and running since the 1910s and 20s. Suhm Spring Works, at 2710 McKinney, was founded in 1885.

Eastwood Park, two blocks from my house, was established in 1914, when the area was very diverse. The few times I've felt like an Anglo interloper in the barrio, I've reminded myself that today's Canal Street used to be named German Street. And strictly speaking, I'm German.

I found a still older layer of Houston when my young son Gabriel and I began exploring Buffalo Bayou, walking or biking the paved paths that line sections of its banks. That "antique Houston" is marked by what I like to call the Ruins of Houston—the mostly abandoned sites of the manufacturers who built along the bayou to have pre-Ship Channel access to water-borne shipping.

My favorite way to visit these intriguing remains is to park at Tony Marron Park, on North York between Navigation and Clinton, and then walk under the freeway overpass and down to a stretch of pavement on the south side of one of the bayou's bends. In the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's visionary master plan of 2002, this is the spot designated as the Boat Landing, with the dreamed of Symphony Island just steps away. Will there ever be a man-made island here, as the master plan envisions, serving as an outdoor summer home to the Houston Symphony and other musicians? Probably not.

In any case, if you start walking or biking toward downtown from this spot, you can follow the path all the way to Guadalupe Plaza and Talento Bilingüe, on the edge of downtown. There's one easily navigable break in the pavement. I've never timed it, but a power walker could probably make it in 30 or 40 minutes.

Gabriel and I made the short hike last Thanksgiving. But first we found an unusually elaborate soccer match going on at the Tony Marron pitch. The teams wore almost professional looking uniforms; an African-American man was apparently playing on one of the teams (I heard him speak, and he wasn't Latino), as he sported the same regalia and shin guards.

Near one goal a full drum kit was set up, and a boy of fourteen or so, seated on a drummer's stool, periodically thumped the bass drum with his foot pedal. A substantial crowd had gathered, and in general it was a festive scene.

But not where we lingered. We were in somebody else's cultural world, whose citizens happily ignored us as we walked past them and under the overpass to what feels, in a congenial way, like a no-man's-land. That is, the bayou below North York feels foreign, exotic, generally forgotten and therefore open to all. Though it's not quite as forgotten as it was a few years ago, because now the pavement bears a gang tag. And the old Tiphook shipping container, which has been resting on the bank during the ten or so years I've been making this walk, is now covered in gang hieroglyphics.

You can see why the Buffalo Bayou Partnership envisioned this bend as a boat launching area (and perhaps even a small marina), because that's what the section of bank used to be. There's a small, abandoned dock here, evidenced mostly by a line of rusting cleats. What kind of small vessel would've tied up in this unprepossessing spot? What cargo would they have carried?

The day was warm for late November, but a cool breeze made rippling patterns across the bayou's surface. So we set off.

Past the old dock the pavement ends and the still clearly marked dirt path starts to rise; the bayou bank towers a good one hundred feet above the water; the rise is mostly filled with leafless, scrubby looking trees of one invasive species or other. Trash trees, I've heard them called. A long, featureless concrete wall looms above the bank, its base obscured by the brown tangle of

BY DAVID THEIS

branches. What will archeologists of the future think about a civilization that threw up such utterly featureless walls? I like to think we'll seem inscrutable.

A few industrial plants, some abandoned, some in service, still line both banks of the bayou. On the north side, an old plant or warehouse has recently been demolished, clearing the view toward downtown. Through this new opening I saw the ruins I most wanted to inspect today, the twin brick chimneys of what I believe used to be a glass factory. The factory itself is long gone, and the chimneys are choked by trees and brush.

To reach them Gabriel and I had to cross a small bridge that runs across one of the bayou's tiny tributaries. For a bicyclist, this would be an insanely dangerous spot, because the bridge was never finished. The pavement ends at the west end of the bridge, and on its east end the bridge was never properly connected to the unpaved section of the path that runs on to the old dock—there's an unannounced drop-off of a good foot and a half. A speeding bicyclist would go down face first.

The path continues to climb as it follows a bend in the stream, and soon the brick chimneys poke up out of the vegetation. People come and go here; no doubt there are homeless encampments, and the city has business back here as well. A break in the scrubby trees that leads near the chimneys. A large tractor had been through at some point, leaving clearly etched tracks in the hard clay.

You have to push through the branches to get from this path down to the chimneys. I hadn't been to their base in several years, and getting there was more of an effort than I remembered. And when we made it I was a little disappointed. I'd expected to find more old glass than we did. I remembered seeing some fairly antique medicine bottles (I've read somewhere that old bottles marked "cocaine" have been found there, from when the drug was legal), which now I wished that I'd collected, but today the historic pickings are slim.

Still it's satisfying to stand at the connected chimneys' base and look up; they're maybe 50 feet tall, and their weathered red brick looks aged and significant, even though one chimney is now marked with a rather oversized hand-drawn yellow phallus. Given the dimensions and shape of the chimneys, the illustration seems redundant.

There was an odd sight at the base: a large pile of what I took to be gray feathers. I imagined this to be some sort of Santeria site, and told Gabriel not to stand on it. Then I looked closer and saw that the gray pile was made of hair. Less evocative perhaps than feathers, but quite a bit more mysterious. It looked like a gathering of old homeless men had hacked off their beards right there.

Gabriel saw some piles of gravel he wanted to climb, so we pushed through the growth into an open space crossed by a train track. He ran off to play and I followed. I saw signs of floods, going back who knew how far in time. That is, tree trunks were crammed here and there into the overgrowth; some trunks rested on top of other trees. Seashells peeked out of the dirt.

Following the train track I soon came to an open space with a clear view of downtown. In the view's foreground stood a thoroughly tagged wall, and beyond it a Second Ward neighborhood. To the right I saw the real highlight of the ruins tour (one that is much easier to get to than the chimneys), a line of four mysterious looking silos. And in the background stood the skyline. It was perhaps the most textured view I'd ever had of downtown. To finish the scene off, the bass drum from the soccer pitch began thumping away.

Then some contraption in a nearby factory began giving off the same piercing sound that the giant ants made in the 1950s sci-fi classic *Them*, so I pulled Gabriel off a pile of abandoned railroad ties and we pushed our way back down to the silence of the paved path.

By now Gabriel was ready to head home, but I assured him that we were close to his favorite spot on the bayou, and perhaps in Houston: the silos.

The Houston landscape and cityscape are not particularly differentiated; vast stretches of Houston look pretty much like other vast stretches. But the silos and adjoining spaces are truly unique. The silos themselves are unmarked, and look much more mysterious than they probably are. (Ships must have taken on rice here.) But, in their very blankness (except for the vine that is growing on one of them, almost from top to bottom, that looks like a trompe l'oeil painting), they look like Houston's pyramids, as did the now-demolished silos that once towered over Buffalo Bayou at Waugh. (I want to call those silos lamented but in truth I can't remember their name. I do lament the apartments that were built in their place.)

And the silos are only part of a "ruin complex." A few steps away lies the slab of some old building. The slab is maybe 80 by 40 yards, and is still partially walled on two sides, so it's not just a blank slate.

And between the slab and the silos stands a big rock—a boulder, really—that doesn't seem to belong in Houston. Maybe it's a meteor. Whatever it is, Gabriel loves to climb it. He and a friend came down here last summer with Gabriel's seldom-used video camera. This is one of the few spots in Houston that moves him to break it out. He and the friend filmed a chase scene, one of them in hot pursuit of the other, across the slab, then up over the rock, and toward the silo.

The Buffalo Bayou Partnership has made some effort to reclaim the silos and the adjoining grounds. A video artist projected images on their blank walls last summer. St. Arnold's Brewery "adopted" the site. But now the St. Arnold's marker is tagged beyond recognition. Homeless people sleep in some of the silos' hiding places.

Still, there aren't many spaces in Houston where you say, somebody should shoot a movie here; this is one of them.

If you walk just another five minutes or so, you find yourself on the northeastern bend of downtown. At the Teatro Bilingüe complex, that is, and the hulking Alexan Lofts. That brick pile nearly became a ruin itself, after the city-sponsored Mercado del Sol that it once housed flopped so catastrophically in the late eighties.

Now the massive building has been reclaimed and made into apartments. Will the rest of the bayou be successfully reclaimed as well, and brought back into daily use? I'd be a hypocrite to say that it shouldn't be. I was thrilled by the Bayou Plan's vision, and used to daydream about living in the simultaneously green and urban space that the plan lays out. I believed that the city should make implementing the plan its number one priority, and build the new waterside neighborhoods, and carve out the downtown island that it calls for; then we'd have a real city on our hands, one that would make New York and Chicago take notice.

But I have to admit I would miss the vaguely haunted walks that today's mostly forgotten landscape provides. I'm not sure the planned developments will inspire my son to take out his camera. **c**

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