



Ruins of Houston

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Photography by Paul Hester

Revisited

A decade ago in *Cite 87*, I wrote about my favorite walking path, which stretches between Tony Marron Park and Guadalupe Plaza in the East End. This unnamed trail hugs the south side of Buffalo Bayou where the waterway begins to look more like a river than a canal. I undertook that walk, which I had done many times before and have done many times since, with the idea of describing the walk as it was then, in all its unruly fascination, but also to speculate on how the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's Buffalo Bayou East Master Plan was going to transform the area and soften the trail's rough edges. The latter didn't sound like an improvement. This was the only path in town—that I used, at least—that retained a modest taste of adventure. The route's highlight was *the ruins of Houston*, as I called them; namely, the brick chimneys that survive at the old city incineration site and the noble quartet of old gravel silos that once brooded over a then-underdeveloped section of bayou. The silos are flanked by a thick, buttressed wall. When I posted pictures on Facebook, a friend quipped, “I didn't know that Houston was ever a walled city.”



This walk provided the illusion of a romantic, somewhat enchanted zone. Not something you see every day in Houston. Wishywashy as I am, in the text for *Cite 87* I both celebrated the coming of the new, Chicago-rivalling Houston that the improvements promised and dreaded the loss of these overgrown spaces.

Ten years later in 2021, the trail and its surrounding environment have taken significant hits. But for me, it's still the most fascinating walk in town. I've returned several times recently, notebook in hand, once accompanied by photographer Paul Hester, to observe the beginnings of the biggest change of all—the development of a 150-acre East River site on the opposite side of the bayou. I'd had many concerns in 2011, but a nine-hole, par 3 golf course was not one of them.

On a recent walk, the vast, scraped, bayou-hugging tract, complete with hard-at-work bulldozers manipulating dirt into the dunes that will mark the various holes, now foregrounds the “heroic skyline” (in Hester’s words) that towers straight ahead when you pass under the bridge where York Street becomes Hirsch Road. East River flanks most of this walk, with a trace of mockery. How long till I’m hit by a stray golf ball?

Changing demographics have already forced me to share the path. In my previous article, I described an intense *fútbol* match underway between uniformed rivals. A boy had banged away at a complete drum kit as I walked by, and a few bristling roosters stalked their cages, ready for a fight. Recently, that same field was occupied by a mostly white ultimate frisbee competition, which looked like fun. On another field, a Black man watched over his uniformed son as he went through some mesmerizing foot-to-ball drills.

Now bicyclers often whiz by, though the fact that the trail is not entirely paved limits their numbers. Recently a man zipped by me, whistling loudly. Another cyclist followed at speed, closely trailing a pair of racing Dobermans. Or so I think—they went by so fast!

The trail took a beating from Hurricane Harvey. The place where the dirt path descended ten feet or so and let you walk out over the bayou was massively eroded. For a time I thought the walk was ruined. But before long, walkers cleared a path at the top of the rise, just where the bank meets the chain-link fence with its concertina

wire that protects what seems to be an abandoned warehouse. In 2011, I noted how long and featureless the warehouse wall was. Now it's covered in street art, including a couple of exquisite faces.

The line of scrubby trees on the bank's edge has gotten thicker, so I often hear the pile drivers hammering in East River's new bulkheads but catch only flashes of them through the green.

The biggest physical changes lie just off the trail. Before, the chimneys were easily approachable if you didn't mind pushing through some bushes and branches, but now the slope has washed away, and you'd have to navigate a deep ditch to reach them.

The fate of the silos is much worse. They are hemmed in by an encroaching army of townhouses. At the time of this writing, the nearest is only about eighty-five steps away. It's a painful sight, and I wanted to say that the silos were diminished. But when I look again, I see that they're visually strong enough to hold their own. They seem to exist in a different reality than the townhouses. And, lately, their reality isn't big enough.

Still, the walk remains fascinating. It's more rewarding than other bayou walks. This is mostly because of the marginalized people, nearly all men, who occupy the hidden areas. I recently saw a devoted young man pushing an older man in a wheelchair through the woods over rough ground.

And at the end of our walk, Paul and I met Kenneth Stewart and Michael Anderson, two men who were staying under the Velasco Street Bridge. Working as a pair, they take turns guarding their bedding, small grill, and other necessities. After we showed some interest, they invited us into their space. Michael volunteers at Martha's Kitchen across the street and is working on a book about living while unhoused. Kenneth was wielding a broom that he used to sweep the dirt around their corner. That may seem an enigmatic task, but he explained that keeping their space cleared keeps the rats away. They also had a warning system set up in case someone tried to creep up on them.

They're hoping to get their hands on a tent, to keep the mosquitoes out. “You can spray yourself with oil,” Kenneth says. “But I can't sleep with that smell.”









