



CALL FOR A SCHOOL OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE IN HOUSTON

by Ernesto Alfaro

Fierce and independent, shunning conventions of zoning and traditional urban planning, Houston has blazed its own path through its history of ever expanding, nonstop urbanization. In spite of this rampant growth and relentless rate of development, the Bayou City has eked out a modest green infrastructure of parks and open spaces over the past 180 years, largely due to the concerted efforts of a few visionary benefactors. Our green spaces may have been modest, but they were full of potential, and their evolution has now become evident through the appearance in recent years of truly remarkable park spaces. Continuously reinventing itself, Houston in its latest incarnation as a green city has taken quite the PR turn, with our bayou system following a trajectory from polluted liability in the 1980s to signature icon of the city today, with Buffalo Bayou Park lately featured in the *New York Times*.

The greening of our city must continue and keep pace with other advances to attract and retain the educated workforce needed to sustain the population growth and economic development that defines Houston. The millennial demographic, especially the college-educated cohort, has unprecedented mobility and the choice to live in any number of leading American cities. Houston has to give them cause for consideration, and quality of life is going to be a significant differentiator. These same advances must be made for all Houstonians—designing landscape is critical to a more equitable city, one where all residents have access to real opportunities to an improved quality of life. To this end, we must prepare our city. Recreational, residential, and infrastructural spaces alike need to be of a high aesthetic and performative caliber. In order to achieve this, we must nurture a cadre of homegrown professionals, attuned to the specific needs and history of our city.

None of the major Houston universities currently offer a professional landscape architecture degree program. The leading role in city making has shifted from engineers to landscape architects with the rise of sub-specialties such as landscape urbanism. Landscape architects are uniquely educated to shape the fabric of the city, where the (urban) landscape has been redefined as the exchange between people, buildings, machines, and natural systems. Landscape architects are the professionals whose work connects the city, which allows this work to unfold into myriad public programs and to shape the public interface with private buildings.

By establishing a School of Landscape Architecture, we can draw from the local and regional talent pool, utilizing the abundance of physical resources available to our city. Imagine the unique design language, informed by our context, that we could create. Even more, a landscape architecture school would allow for the development of additional subdisciplines and specialties, including urban design, urban and land planning, healing gardens, and habitat restoration—all to Houston's benefit. A professional class of Houston-educated landscape architects would create a new voice in the profession, teaching other cities what lessons Houston has to offer and enabling our city to continue our forceful drive to build and grow. But as we build for the future, we must remain dedicated to building for Houstonians of all income levels, so that we not repeat the mistakes of the past. Development has often taken advantage of historically disinvested areas, whose residents welcomed improvement with open arms after being ignored for so long. But the rise in property values that accompanies development—indeed, the very goal of development—inevitably forces these same residents out. We all know this story and it needs to end. Cities thrive when a diverse socio-economic mix is enabled to coexist. The urban landscape, created for the benefit of and engagement by all citizens, is where the future will play itself out. Landscape architecture does not have the magic answer to these complex problems, but it can offer new points of departure, something different from what we've had in the past. We need Houston-grown landscape architects to help us get there. 

