

CENTENNIAL GARDENS

Houston has a mound, if not a mountain. Hermann Park Conservancy, under the leadership of Executive Director Doreen Stoller, embarked on a fundraising campaign in early 2009 to rebuild and restore parts of the park in celebration of its centennial. The delay brought about by the Great Recession allowed Hoerr Schaudt's plans for the 15-acre McGovern Centennial Gardens to evolve from a subdued set of tree-lined paths to a highly formal garden framed by the Cherie Flores Garden Pavilion, designed by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, and punctuated by a 30-foot-tall hill. The park opened in late 2014 and was immediately animated by people of all ages winding their way up and down the mound to experience a rare change of elevation. The park is the final chapter in the park's turnaround guided by the 1995 Hanna/Olin master plan, spurred, in part, by the 1992 Rice Design Alliance "Heart of the Park" competition. Initial proposals from a new master plan by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates include elevated knolls over the surface parking at the center of the park and new plantings along the edges of the park, including Brays Bayou.

—R. M.





SMITHER PARK

On a half-acre strip between the Gulf Freeway and Brays Bayou, nearly 300 people worked over six years to create a folk art park. Inch by inch they covered an amphitheater, memory wall, sculptures, and panels with mosaics of recycled and found materials. The park itself, designed by Ed Eubanks and built by Tellepsen, is a canvas. Artistic director Dan Phillips calls it “a testament to the vibrancy of humanity, especially the humanity in Houston.” He estimates that about half of the participants had no background in “art.” The outrageousness and quirkiness of so much individual expression stand out all the more against the backdrop of huge piles of shipping pallets—the anonymous vertebrae of global supply chains—at the neighboring industrial site for a supplier called Pallet-Ops. The hyper-local, do-it-yourself aesthetic of Smither Park is a wonderful reminder that Houston’s culture and quality of life have been sustained for decades by a deep reservoir of “ordinary” visionaries. The park is named in memory of John Smither, who was a proponent and collector of folk art, and made possible by a gift from his wife, Stephanie Smither, to the Orange Show.

—R.M.



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