In the last year, Houston has received national acclaim from design critics for the reinvention of its parks: “the city to watch,” says Alexandra Lange; “a paradise under the expressway,” says Karrie Jacobs; and “a bit of nirvana,” says Mark Lamster. Echoing this praise, the Cultural Landscape Foundation held a national conference in Houston in March 2016 celebrating our “big green transformation.” But that conference closed with a sobering panel on equity. Has Houston’s green makeover only reached some neighborhoods? What about those parts of Houston that have been left behind? In East Houston, open and vacant spaces abound, but communities are isolated and cut off from all types of resources, including high-quality parks. And to the southwest, especially in Gulfton and Sharpstown, too many families are packed into 1970s apartment complexes with little to no park access in walking distance.

But with the Bayou Greenways 2020, which promises to enhance access in East Houston, and with an expansion of the SPARK School Park Program, which will create new park places in the Sharpstown neighborhoods to the southwest, we may see a more inclusive transformation.

“Jay looks out across the bayou before him. It is little more than a narrow, muddy strip of water flowing some thirty feet below street level .... There are thick, unkempt weeds choked up on the banks of the water, crawling up the cement pilings that hold Main Street overhead, and save for a dim yellow bulb at the foot of a small wooden pier, Allen's Landing is complete blackness.”

A seedy Buffalo Bayou, circa 1980s, captured in Houston native Attica Locke’s crime novel Black Water Rising (HarperCollins, 2009), is thankfully a distant memory. Yet in exploring stretches of Halls and Greens Bayous in East Houston for this article, I encountered areas that recall Locke’s description, places that manage to be both lush and bleak. Just steps away from parking at a Halls Bayou access point, I came upon a well-traveled wooden footbridge to a school, and the sound of water flowing below beckoned me toward the coolness of a low-hanging tree canopy. But the promise of natural beauty and wildlife slowly dissipated as I continued on a path that became encumbered with tree branches, the flotsam and jetsam of a nearby dump, and the stench of rotting garbage that became so overpowering I had to turn around and return to my car.

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noted that the way people generally use parks has evolved over time. More stationary park uses, such as picnics and ballgames, have given way to walking, jogging, and rollerblading along park peripheries. For those without big backyards or country club memberships, a park still conjures images of manicured lawns dotted with shade trees and picnic tables alongside grills, while others envision open green fields set up for soccer or baseball games, and facilities with outdoor swimming pools. How can the bayou greenways be inclusive of all these different versions of a park?

When the Bayou Greenways team and city officials discuss the greenways, they focus on them as places of mobility: 1) as a looping trail primarily for recreation and exercise, and 2) as a means to access specific destinations, from schools and transit stations, to job centers and even grocery stores. The experientially rich connectivity offered by the greenways will certainly attract higher-income millennials to Houston. A Parks Department survey showed that Houstonians most desired “connectivity” in their public green spaces, but the results of the survey were challenged when it was revealed that 70 percent of the respondents were white residents with incomes over $70,000 per year living in some of the greenest sectors of Houston. Supported and funded by the Parks Department, a follow-up survey targeting African-American and Hispanic communities was conducted by Rice University and showed a very different hierarchy of desires for public parks. Minority respondents were more pragmatic in their concerns: upgrade of existing facilities, better bathrooms, park safety and maintenance, more programs, and better parking were top concerns. Connectivity was at the bottom of the list, with just 0.6 percent of the respondents listing it as a desire. The Rice researchers concluded by underscoring “the need to be inclusive of voices typically under-represented in planning processes, namely those of racial minorities and low-income populations. In Houston, particular effort must be made to better existing parks infrastructure in these communities.”

As the greenways dramatically increase the city’s park acreage, questions emerge. Will they also mediate the effects of Houston’s sprawl on low-income residents like those in East Houston, where distance limits their access to opportunity?
East Houston

THE RIBBON IN THE WOODS

The landscape architecture firm Clark Condon Associates was awarded the design of Greens and Halls Bayous on the northeast side. Along the mostly riparian Halls Bayou in North Houston, the Parks Board purchased land to fill in the "gaps" from Brock Park to Jensen Drive, creating a continuous greenway linking the Eastex/Jenson, East Little York/Homestead, and East Houston neighborhoods.

East Houston (not to be mistaken for EaDo or East End) is a predominantly African-American and Hispanic community in Houston’s northeast quadrangle between the Loop and Beltway 8. With only 19,000 residents over 11 square miles, East Houston is sparsely populated and heavily treed—so much so that the Parks Board dubbed Halls Bayou “the ribbon in the woods.” Located on the outer periphery of Houston, the neighborhood is further isolated by railroad, utility, and highway infrastructure that enclose it on three sides. Although a Kinder Institute report shows that the neighborhood has among the fewest number of cars per household in Houston, the community was designed with car use in mind: it consists mostly of single-family homes in discrete suburban tract subdivisions clustered on the western side of the neighborhood. To the south is a large industrial park and to the northwest is Brock Park, a municipal golf course. In addition, East Houston has six public parks and three SPARK parks. The greenways will add 439 acres of publicly accessible greenspace to the East Houston Super Neighborhood. Though METRO bus routes are limited in the neighborhood, buses do run north-south along Mesa Drive, the main commercial corridor, and east-west along Tidwell.

How much public green space will the greenways deliver to a densely populated and heavily developed Sharpstown area in Houston’s southwest?

Answers to such questions require recognizing each bayou and its adjacent neighborhoods as unique, interconnected systems. Accordingly, the Parks Board has commissioned a different landscape architecture team to address the specific opportunities and challenges of each bayou-and-neighborhood nexus. In areas beyond the paved trails of the greenways, only signage and furnishings will be uniformly developed throughout the network.

Another consideration is the fact that the greenways may read as linear elements on a map, but they are actually fairly wide—50 feet wide in more urban areas and up to 100 feet wide in suburban communities. They have the potential to widen in places to become pull-out parks that could tie into existing public amenities like YMCAs or smaller public parks. Others could be used as event spaces or sites for art installations. There are as many versions of the pull-out park as there are neighborhoods. The Parks Board sees them as evolving organically over time as they are designed and funded by the communities themselves.
In this fairly isolated community, 30 percent of the population lives under the poverty level. A large Fiesta grocery at the Mesa/Tidwell intersection provides access to fresh produce, and several meat markets dotted along Mesa serve the neighborhood. Nevertheless, like residents of many lower-income neighborhoods, East Houstonians suffer from diabetes and heart disease in slightly higher percentages than the average Houstonian—illnesses that can be better controlled with active lifestyles. The residents already have access to multiple public parks—a 2014 Parks Department report showed that the residents had adequate access to green space—but those park facilities needed upgrades and maintenance. This finding correlates with the Rice report.

While connectivity was at the bottom of the list of desires in the Rice report on its survey of minorities regarding parks, the Parks Board counters that the importance of connectivity in the lower income neighborhoods adjacent to Halls and Greens Bayous should not be discounted. They make a good point. Located on the outskirts of the city, East Houston is isolated from major job centers and higher education institutions. Because the community is sparsely populated and ridership is low, already limited Metro bus lines were cut further in last year’s reimagining of the Houston transit system. Unlike the city’s older minority neighborhoods like the Fifth Ward, which are well connected and walkable, lower-income neighborhoods on the city’s periphery, as noted earlier, were developed with car travel in mind, and city data shows that the vast majority of residents in East Houston commute to work by car. The long-term Houston Bike Plan shows a north-south bike lane through the neighborhood along North Wayside, but it ends at the railroad tracks just outside of the Loop. There it intersects with the railroad tracks just outside of the 610 Loop. Traffic whizzes by at high speeds and, understandably, it no longer meets the Bike Plan’s standard for either safety or comfort.

Located on the outer periphery of Houston, the neighborhood is further isolated by railroad, utility, and highway infrastructure that enclose it on three sides.
Public greenspace works out to just 60 square feet per resident—far below the standard of 109 square feet per resident.
are multiple shopping districts, including Chinatown, the Mahatma Gandhi District, and PlazAmericas, now occupied by small, locally owned shops and vendors. Like East Houston, the median income of Sharpstown residents is about 69 percent that of Houstonians at large, but unlike that northeast community, the Sharpstown area is well connected to the greater Houston area through METRO bus lines—and also well served by several large grocery store chains and multiple local ethnic groceries. The rate of diabetes and heart disease in Sharpstown is actually slightly lower than in the larger Houston area.

Sharpstown, however, fares less well in terms of public green space. Excluding the fee-for-use Sharpstown Golf Course, the neighborhood has nine public parks with 139 acres of green space for almost 80,000 people. This works out to be about 78 square feet of public greenspace per resident—far below the Parks Department standard of 109 square feet per resident. The addition of the greenway along the five and a half miles of Brays Bayou would add 26 acres of greenspace and bring the ratio of public parkland per resident to about 93 square feet, still short of the Parks goal. The density and development that makes Sharpstown such a vibrant neighborhood means there is not much available vacant land for park space.

The most viable option to increase public greenspace, therefore, is the SPARK School Park Program, which partners with schools to create joint-use parks. In exchange for financial investments to build on or upgrade their grounds, the schools agree to allow public access to the resulting parks after school hours and on weekends for neighborhood residents.

There are eight charter/private schools in Sharpstown and 11 public schools—four of which already have SPARK parks. If the remaining seven public schools alone joined the program, the square footage of green space accessible to residents would rise to 50. Bush Elementary, located on the north side of Bellaire where Sharpstown’s multifamily housing is most concentrated and where poverty rates are higher, is slated to become part of the SPARK School Park Program next year. This Bush Elementary SPARK park will add about 11.5 acres of green space to the community. (Public greenspace calculations for the SPARK park programs are based on the entire school property square footage—not just the playground area.) A grant from Houston Endowment in 2014 funded a study by the Trust for Public Land that identified Houston’s park deserts and where new parks would benefit the most people. The SPARK School Park Program is using that map and a $2.5 million grant from Houston Endowment (matched by another $2.5 million by the Kinder Foundation) to expand their program to the schools that would serve areas with the greatest need.
The new greenways and SPARK parks are powerful tools to retrofit the city with a more equitable distribution of greenspace, but the fair distribution of any limited public resource is always fraught with complex issues, particularly in a city as sprawling and diverse as Houston. While both the greenways and the SPARK park program provide strong models for inclusiveness and diversity in public parks, there are limits to what they alone can accomplish for those who suffer from environmental injustices and disinvestment.

We don’t need to look far to see the marked disparity in the everyday access to greenspace. The city’s most basic linkages—its neighborhood streets—are woefully imbalanced in terms of landscaping and liveability. Neighborhood streets are the public spaces that create the most meaningful backdrop to our day-to-day activities. Streets are potent opportunities to create community identity, social engagement, active lifestyles, and to make the difference in entire communities’ attractiveness and liveability. To appreciate the impact of the streetscape, we have only to walk along the streets of Houston’s older neighborhoods, which were designed well before the car became so critical to moving around the city, where residents experience some of the city’s liveable streets, like Kane Street in Houston’s Sixth Ward.

In most cities, planning decisions play a large part in the distribution of greenspace between lower and higher income areas. In Houston these decisions have been largely left to market-driven forces, which have also helped to shape it as one of the most income-segregated cities in the country. The perception of Houston as a heavily paved, car-centric city will not be challenged by the development of the greenways or additional SPARK parks, but will require planners and policy makers to understand the important role of the most basic of public realms beyond that as connectors for car access, and the political will to transform them for all Houstonians.

There are limits to what the Bayou Greenways alone can accomplish for those who suffer from environmental injustices and disinvestment.

AN INCOMPLETE AGENDA