



Bank of Buffalo Bayou

LANDSCAPE
CITY
ARE

AND
BUILDING

INSEPARABLE.

That may seem obvious, but we like to think of “nature” as something outside of humanity and specifically outside the city. Every street, every park, every building, every feral vacant lot, every bend in the bayous is a choice we make. We choose to shape. We choose to leave be. If we aren't thinking deeply about our goals—diversity, equity, resilience, democracy—about what is right, then we risk deluding ourselves. We often get caught in rhetorical traps when talking nature in Houston. Design approaches that seem noble, like restoring native species, can be wishful thinking at best and alibis for perpetuating injustices at worst unless we keep our highest objectives in mind.

BY ANDREW ALBERS
KEIJI ASAKURA
RAJ MANKAD

How are we doing when it comes to those highest objectives? We have several completed projects to consider: Brochstein Pavilion (Office of James Burnett, 2008), Discovery Green (Hargreaves Associates, 2008), Hermann Park McGovern Centennial Gardens (Hoerr Schaudt, White Oak Studio, 2015), Buffalo Bayou Park (SWA Group, 2015), and Buffalo Bend (SWA Group, 2015). Several more are underway or planned: Levy Park (Office of James Burnett), Emancipation Park (Philip Freelon, M2L Associates), Houston Arboretum (Design Workshop, Reed Hilderbrand), Memorial Park (Nelson Byrd Wolz), and Houston Botanic Garden (West 8). The largest scale of all these projects, Bayou Greenways 2020, is making steady progress with design by several firms. And there are many smaller projects we have not listed.

The articles in this special issue of *Cite* on landscape architecture are not organized around single projects for the most part but around different themes. They all contend with the same basic question about the city: How can we construct a forward-looking city in a “synthetic” way?

In “*Synthetic Nature*,” Allyn West explores how four parks along Buffalo Bayou have taken different approaches to reconstructing the landscape along its banks. One approach is a new wetland that incorporates abandoned industrial pipes. Another involves weeding out old trees to create a mix of prairie and woodlands that resemble what existed before European settlement. Debating the merits of these projects cannot hinge on the word “natural.” Sarah Whiting, Dean of the Rice School of Architecture (RSA), is quoted in the article and she notes, “The city is always constructed. Nature is controlled, even when it’s left in a ‘wild state.’ The way it’s left wild is controlled. And that’s not a bad thing. Making strategic decisions about how land is used is how we advance the world and make it a better place for everyone.”

This issue builds on the Spring 2016 RSA/RDA lecture series called “Projective Infrastructures,” curated by Christopher Hight, which examined the transformation of all types of aging urban infrastructures, including highways, and how renewing them presents design opportunities to address environmental, economic, and social issues. The Cultural Landscape Foundation also held a conference here in March 2016 called “The Houston Transformation” and the question of equity was raised again

and again. How can we celebrate major accomplishments like Buffalo Bayou Park and grand plans for Memorial Park when so many children lack access to a basic neighborhood park that they can walk to?

Sheryl Tucker de Vazquez takes on the equity question head on in her article for this issue. She asks, “*Will Houston’s Green Renaissance reach the park deserts?*” Our parks department is strapped for cash. It struggles to carry basic maintenance. Major investments have come through public-private partnerships. Houston’s philanthropic community has, to date, funded projects that strike a happy medium. Discovery Green shared their user surveys with *Cite* and the diversity of park visitors is remarkable. If the kaleidoscope of Houston comes together at any one place, if we have a commons, it is the splash pad at Discovery Green, even though the park is privately managed.

Can the public-private park magic be scaled up and spread to all corners of Houston? The Bayou Greenways has matched \$100 million of public bonds with private funds. The campaign for the bond funding promised greater access to parks for Houstonians of all backgrounds and classes. An analysis of park deserts by the Trust for Public Land has informed a new round of SPARK parks as well. Tucker de Vazquez argues that the paths and parks are worthwhile but can only go so far. We must bring the bold investments we have made in parks to the entire public realm—to the streets. That will require a new coalition and consensus around the use of public dollars. Though contested, we have already voted in new drainage taxes to reduce flooding in a program called ReBuild Houston. The balance in those accounts is growing but will we get streets that work for all types of users?

In “*Designed to Flood*,” Eric Leshinsky gives a comprehensive analysis of flood management from the epic scale of dams to the design of street-level rain gardens. Water almost forces us to think synthetically about landscape and city building. However, in the immediate aftermath of catastrophic floods, the one-dimensional “gray” infrastructure approach seems to dominate. Houstonians who are angry about losing their homes demand change. For example, in a May 2016 broadcast of Houston Matters, Cynthia Neely of Residents Against Flooding said, “We need drainage

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improved and detention basins built that have been promised for years and years, and never have been done. We don't need bike trails ... as much as we need our homes and city to be protected." Hike-and-bike paths and flood management are not mutually exclusive, as we now have ample proof of. A well-designed project can, as Leshinsky points out again and again, serve multiple goals—"the ambition not only for flood resiliency but urban resiliency as well."

We are back at the basic question of landscape and city building. How can we design flood management projects so they support not just bike paths but also access to affordable housing, good schools, libraries, parks, beauty, wildlife, fresh food, transit, jobs—what Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner calls "complete communities."

This call for synthetic, strategic, and comprehensive thinking about our landscape and urban design runs through this issue, and through the 34-year history of *Cite* and the 44-year history of its publisher, the Rice Design Alliance (RDA). The first major event held by RDA, on November 22, 1973, was a civic forum about bayous as more than drainage ditches. RDA's Sesquicentennial Park (1989) and Heart of the Park (1992) competitions helped launch new approaches to Buffalo Bayou and Hermann Park as well. Please see page 67 for a new park design competition that has received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. Past issues of *Cite* and OffCite.org posts are packed with proposals for what Susan Rogers calls "thick infrastructure." This issue expands on that tradition.

The shared spaces that great landscape design produce are more important than ever. The articles and layout came together during the 2016 presidential campaign and vote, widely considered the most divisive U.S. election in modern times. The inclusive, welcoming ethos of Houston is threatened. Now is the time to articulate and visualize landscapes that embrace diversity and the cultures it brings to the city. Now is the time to study our past as a way to manage change, address injustices, and look to the future.

We are in a process of resegregation, as the speakers and panelists at the Preserving Communities of Color conference made clear in November 2016. Great cities can accommodate different communities and put them into meaningful dialogue. If we create impenetrable bastions and enclaves, where we only hear the voices that resonate with our own thoughts, we will

all lose out. A shared public realm is extra important when we get our news filtered through mirror-like Facebook algorithms.

How are we to make sense of all these approaches to the landscape?

An interview of Peter Walker, the legendary landscape architect and historian, gives us a chance to think about the future of landscape design broadly and the work of James Burnett, who began his firm in Houston, in particular. (Andrew Albers, co-author of this introduction, is Vice President at the Office of James Burnett.) Walker was at the forefront of creating modern landscapes with strong forms that break free of nostalgia and romanticized nature. Think back to eighteenth-century landscape architect Capability Brown. Though there are long traditions in Eastern, Western, and Native American cultures of manipulating nature, Brown was among the first professional landscape architects to create man-made landscapes that look like nature. He made nature more perfect. In contrast, Haussmann in Paris and L'Enfant in Washington D.C. use landscape as frameworks and building blocks for city making. Later, the City Beautiful movement, including Hare and Hare's designs for Hermann Park here in Houston, again turned to landscape at a time when there was a drive to relieve what was seen at the time as unhealthy congestion and density in cities.

Architects, landscape architects, planners, urbanists, historians, writers, and myriad others have proposed design solutions to address the current ills of the city. Must we think of the city as a sickness? Edward Glaeser, in his book *Triumph of the City*, turns this framing around, calling cities our "greatest invention."

Many proposals, while visionary in some ways, are nostalgic in regards to the landscape, and much of this nostalgia centers on imagined remembrances of simpler times with less density.

In the big and small projects discussed in this issue, there are a multitude of attitudes. They invoke the landscapes of the Karankawa Indians, Medieval cloisters, and post-war Modernism. A diversity of approaches is probably a good thing, but Houston's version of urbanism and landscape seems unsettled and under-defined. We need a coherent vision of what Houston wants to be, objectives that will bring our different landscapes together as an urban whole.

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Bering Ditch

CITY MAKING IS NOTHING SHORT OF OUR GREATEST ENDEAVOR. THE DESIGNED LANDSCAPE WILL HELP US LIVE HEALTHIER, LONGER LIVES. IT COULD HELP US LESSEN **CLIMATE CHANGE** AND MITIGATE ITS EFFECTS. IT HAS ALLOWED HUMANITY TO CREATE REMARKABLY INCLUSIVE PLACES.

Consider the Houstonians who use Bering Ditch as a means to traverse the city and a place to relax. Are we free enough from Romantic and nostalgic ideas of nature to recognize the need to do more with that landscape? Or do we only see it as a trashy, concrete trapezoid? Do we have the commitment to an ideal in which everyone has access to beauty, not to mention jobs and schools? Does our multitude of approaches include a way to tie in this place and these people—day laborers, refugees, Muslims, Mexicans, Salvadorans—into the “green transformation”?

We hope this issue opens up ways of thinking that honor the past while resisting nostalgia for a mythological past. We hope this issue provides a grounding for the visionary design we so urgently need. 