

# On the Bayou

by Guy Hagstette, FAIA

**U**rban design involves big ideas that take time to be realized. In 1912, Houstonians approved park bonds to implement a plan for parks and parkways along Houston's bayous that was created by city planner Arthur C. Comey. Thousands of acres were acquired, and miles of parkways were built over a period of several decades. Floods, wars, an economic depression, and the automobile turned attention elsewhere, and for much of the 20th century Houstonians viewed their bayous as little more than drainage ditches. Buffalo Bayou, which was the focus of the 1912 plan — and which, incidentally, is the stream along whose banks Houston was born and Texas won its independence — became a civic embarrassment.

The Buffalo Bayou Partnership (BBP) began its efforts to restore the bayou a quarter century ago. Taking a cue from the 1912 initiative, the nonprofit organization commissioned a visionary plan by Thompson Design Group in 2002, "Buffalo Bayou and Beyond." It is an ambitious agenda for linear green space, compatible urban development, flood control, and multi-modal access along 10 miles of the bayou. It calls for an urban waterfront in downtown Houston, new linear parks in a revitalized East End-Fifth Ward, and a pastoral "West Sector" upstream from downtown. BBP then committed itself to excellence in implementing the plan. Two projects are now showing how that commitment is achieving transformative results.

## Allen's Landing

Houston's Plymouth Rock, Allen's Landing is the spot where the city and its port were founded, but by the late 20th century, its small public park was little more than a parking lot, homeless encampment, and some derelict buildings. Using private and public funds, BBP first transformed the park and then, in a bold move, purchased a decaying, century-old industrial structure that abutted the park and was a piece of the port's history.

The Sunset Coffee Building was not an easy project to take on. Fund-raising for a derelict building is hard work, especially for one known as the "UGB" (ugly green building) or the Love Street Light Circus, as it was called in its 1960s psychedelic heyday. The first floor of the small, three-story building had been inundated during major floods, and to complicate matters further, the building was a contributing structure in a National Historic District, making it subject to design review if federal funds were used to renovate it. Despite these challenges, BBP remained committed to design excellence and engaged Lake/Flato and BNIM to transform the structure into a focal point for downtown's urban waterfront.

"True to BBP's mission, the design goals focused on responsible stewardship of the site and structure," said Steve McDowell, FAIA, of BNIM. "The vegetated rooftop terrace provides a new vantage point from which to enjoy



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the banks of the bayou at the urban edge.” The site’s history is captured by the simple building shell, which reads through new awnings that shade windows to save energy. The building’s simple form will be balanced with a new cistern that will supply irrigation water. Assisting in the effort to restore the site, the Texas Historical Commission focused on the two facades that had faced the port, allowing more interventions on the street frontages that were originally obscured by other buildings. An adjacent below-grade foundation slab will become a lower-level, community-oriented plaza accessed from the

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building’s first floor and the park. An entry bridge will pass over the plaza to the building’s second floor and then cantilever out to the bayou.

The building’s first floor will be a bike and watercraft hub funded with federal transportation dollars. The second floor will be BBP’s offices, but eventually could become a café or museum. The third floor and rooftop will be an event venue. The building will be managed by Houston First, the city’s convention and entertainment corporation. This mix of activities and “eyes on the park” also will help activate the adjacent green space.

#### **The West Sector**

In partnership with the City of Houston and Houston Parks Board, BBP has also begun a multi-million dollar waterfront connection from Allen’s

Landing upstream to Sesquicentennial Park (1998) and then along BBP's Sabine Promenade (2007) to 160 acres of parkland, all acquired with the 1912 park bonds. This 2.3-mile green space had been given over to flood control channelization work after Houston's catastrophic 1929 and 1935 floods, and only in recent decades have incremental improvements begun to realize the area's potential as parkland. With its pastoral character and adjacency to revitalizing neighborhoods, it is the "West Sector" of BBP's plan, now known as Buffalo Bayou Park.

The Buffalo Bayou Park project was born when the Kinder Foundation, which played a leadership role in the creation of Houston's Discovery Green, recognized BBP's success in implementing its plan in partnership with the City of Houston and Harris County Flood Control District (HCFCD) and pledged an unprecedented \$30 million to the West Sector. The grant was conditional on the project's completion in five years, public-private collaboration, adoption of an enforceable park master plan, and a funded maintenance plan. The conditions were welcomed by BBP and by its public partners. BBP also committed to raise an additional \$23 million of private funds. All told, BBP, the City of Houston, and HCFCD were poised to invest more than \$70 million in the newly-named Buffalo Bayou Park.

Presented with this unparalleled opportunity, BBP turned to SWA Group, which had already delivered several of its award-winning projects. The SWA team looked first to the bayou. "Buffalo Bayou is a living, breathing urban river, with waters that can rise 35 feet in 12 hours during a tropical downpour," said SWA principal Kevin Shanley. "It wants to continue to support a vibrant and indigenous ecology, while providing the open space desperately needed by a rapidly growing and increasingly dense urban population." As a consequence of these concerns, the resulting plan focuses on restoring the natural landscape that was lost when the bayou was channelized in the 1950s in response to the earlier floods. Wilderness areas will be created along two old bayou meanders, and a series of perennial gardens co-designed with Reed Hilderbrand are planned.

The project focuses on passive recreation and includes a riverside footpath plus additional trail connections to augment the city's new hike and bike trail. Two already-completed iconic pedestrian bridges join two others recently built by the city to improve connectivity across the bayou. Finally, 500 custom-designed trail lights will allow use of the park into the evening hours. They also will be the backbone for an extension of BBP's signature "Lunar Cycle Lighting," created by artist Stephen Korns and *L'Observatoire International*. This environmental artwork will turn blue lights on and off sequentially with the phases of the moon, with the progression beginning and ending at Allen's Landing.

Special destinations will activate key areas of the pastoral park — a dog park, a civic event venue, monumental art, and a large bat colony at the Waugh Bridge. Two new entry points at either end of the park will have visitor information, restrooms, bike and kayak rentals, a nature playground, and food service. One is Lost Lake, where an old pond is being restored and new gardens added. The other is the Water Works, home to the City's historic cistern, an underground concrete cathedral 1.5 times the size of a football field.

SWA teamed with Page (formerly PageSoutherlandPage) to design the project's two buildings and two major pavilions. Page principal Larry Speck, FAIA, drew on his experience integrating architecture into park landscapes. "The architecture occurs in the park in places where there is intensification of activity," said Speck. "The buildings needed to be strong enough to be landmarks, open enough to invite you in, and shady enough



**Opening spread** *The "Buffalo Bayou and Beyond" plan by Thompson Design Group shows the downtown sector of the park. BBP plans to engage Thompson Design Group for signature downtown waterfront spaces.*

**Opposite page top to bottom** *The renderings by Lake |Flato and BNIM show the proposed rehabilitation of the Sunset Coffee Building. It is shown prior to work beginning.*

**Above** *SWA completed the Hobby Center Bridge and the Sabine Promenade in 2007.*

**Below** *"Lunar Cycle Lighting" animates the Sabine Promenade.*



*Above SWA's site plan shows the 2.3-mile long, 160-acre Buffalo Bayou Park.*

*Right Lost Lake has a pavilion designed by Page.*

*Opposite page top The park provides a green front lawn for downtown's skyline.*

*Bottom Aerial view of the pavilion and lawn at Water Works.*





to keep people comfortable. It was also important that they feel like a natural extension of the landscape design and that they be completely consistent with the larger framework of the park.”

Broad eaves shade the structures from the sun and grills at their outer perimeters mitigate the harsh contrast between bright sun and deep shade. Large board-formed concrete piers establish a civic presence for the modest structures, and their thermal mass will help cool the ambient temperatures within. There also is design consistency among the structures that creates a sense of continuity and calm in support of the overall goals for the park. This synergistic relationship between architecture and landscape and

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between activity and nature will create a new destination for Houston that will require better connections to the vibrant city that surrounds it.

Two quasi-freeways, 1912 parkways on 1950s traffic engineering steroids, still cut the park off from surrounding neighborhoods. Recent city projects have improved access across Memorial Drive, but Allen Parkway remains a dangerous-to-cross barrier. BBP has proposed restoring Allen Parkway closer to the original 1912 plan by the 2015 completion of the park. It is working with city officials as public pressure mounts for safe passage into what will be one of Houston’s premier parks and a major milestone in implementing the “Buffalo Bayou and Beyond” plan.

**Plans have true power**, even if they take more than a century to be realized. With a historical symmetry any architect would love, Houstonians took note of what is happening on their bayous and went back to the polls in 2012 to approve a \$205 million proposal by the Houston Parks Board to resurrect the 1912 plan — this time, as a 150-mile system of trails and bayou greenways serving a city of over 600 square miles and more than two million people.

Guy Hagstette, FAIA, is project manager for the Buffalo Bayou Park project.