



LEADING WITH LANDSCAPE II: THE HOUSTON TRANSFORMATION CONFERENCE

MARCH 11, 2016: MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON BROWN AUDITORIUM HOUSTON, TEXAS

PRESENTED BY: **THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE FOUNDATION**

WITH SUPPORT FROM: **BARTLETT TREE EXPERTS, DESIGN WORKSHOP, HOUSTON PARKS BOARD, SWA GROUP, UPTOWN HOUSTON, AND VICTOR STANLEY**

Abstracts

Setting the Stage

Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR, *President & CEO*, The Cultural Landscape Foundation
What's the Big Idea?

Over the past fifteen years, TCLF has organized numerous conferences that examine urban planning and landscape architecture. Two recent conferences, [*Second Wave of Modernism III: Leading with Landscape*](#) (Toronto) and [*Bridging the Nature-Culture Divide III: Saving Nature in a Humanized World*](#) (San Francisco), have taken multi-disciplinary approaches to understanding the balance that exists between the stewardship of natural and cultural resources and the evolving identities of urban areas. This conference in Houston will examine how landscape architecture is transforming the nation's fourth largest city at a scale not seen in the U.S. in a century.

Houston's highly urbanized landscape, encircled and traversed by ribbons of highways, comprising parks, university campuses, suburbs, and public open spaces. The Picturesque, Beaux-Arts, and Modernist styles can all be found amidst the city's dense residential, commercial, and industrial enclaves. Massachusetts-based landscape architect Arthur Comey developed the city's first comprehensive plan in 1913. Comey's early planning efforts are generally viewed as an important first step, but they were interrupted by a change in political leadership, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the primacy of oil.

Today, a little more than a century since Comey's plan, it would appear that the time is right for Houston. The new parks we'll hear about benefit from the public-private partnerships that have advanced Houston's ambitious plans--groups such as the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, Central Houston Civic Improvement, Discovery Green Conservancy, Hermann Park Conservancy, and Memorial Park Conservancy; and bold vision and leadership from former mayor Annise Parker and other municipal officials. The implications of this planning and development strategy, including innovative design and stewardship models and the resourceful use of urban fabric, will affect how we use landscape as an engine to shape 21st-century cities.

Chapter One: The Foundations

Moderator:

Stephen Fox, *Fellow* of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas, *Lecturer in architecture* at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, University of Houston, and School of Architecture, Rice University

Houston seems to act as though it were an economic invention rather than a place affected by terrain, climate, and ecology. Recent major public landscape initiatives challenge this presumption by



constructing (or re-constructing) public spaces that seek to engage Houstonians in more intense interactions with natural life and invite them to interact with one other. Participants in this panel will discuss their reaction to designing public space in Houston.

Jane Anderson Curtis, ASLA, draws on her experiences as a designer, curator, chair of the Hermann Park Conservancy, and director of Hermann Park's Centennial Gardens, to reflect on the nature of public landscape in Houston, using Hermann Park as what she calls "a template for public space in Houston." Kinder Baumgartner, ASLA, and Scott McCready, ASLA, of the Houston studio of SWA Group discuss the challenges of reshaping Buffalo Bayou Park, an existing linear park, to make it more accessible and broaden its user base while coping with such natural circumstances as flooding. Mary Margaret Jones, FASLA, FAAR, addresses the issues of transforming a series of parking lots into the twelve-acre Discovery Green, a green urban landscape of activities that attracts a broad and diverse public to downtown Houston. Matthew Urbanski, ASLA, will discuss the local cultural circumstances he has encountered representing Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates as landscape architect for the Menil Collection's master plan and now as master planner for Hermann Park.

Panelists:

Kinder Baumgardner, RLA, ASLA, Managing Principal, SWA Group

Scott McCready, RLA, ASLA, Principal, SWA Group

Buffalo Bayou Park: Marking a return of the 'Bayou City'

The dream of Houston, a city of economic opportunity, was born on waters of Buffalo Bayou. Fueled by unrestricted growth and a diverse economy, Houston has blossomed into one of the country's most socially and economically diverse urban regions. Like many cities, however, decades of sprawling development and automobile-centric infrastructure have severed Houston's connection with its waterfront. Once proudly referred to as the "Bayou City," Houstonians relationship and understanding of their most dynamic ecological and cultural resource has been reduced to an afterthought. Buffalo Bayou Park represents a confluence of issues facing Houston today; neighborhoods with limited access to open space, pressures of development on fragile urban ecologies and the negative impacts of storm water management on the massive bayou network which defines the city.

Spearheaded by the non-profit Buffalo Bayou Partnership, the redevelopment of Buffalo Bayou Park represents a collective effort by the city to establish a path forward in re-thinking the city's connection to its waterfront. Along its 2.5 mile length, the park both reconnects neighborhoods to the bayou and enhances ecological vitality within the core of the city. Through diversification of programming and enhanced pedestrian connectivity, SWA's design for the park seeks to broaden access to a larger cross section of Houstonians while building-in the ecological and storm water resiliency required for long-term success. In the process the park serves to educate the public to the importance of preserving its most important ecological and cultural asset and re-establish Houston's identity as "The Bayou City."

Jane Anderson Curtis, ASLA, Director of Horticulture, Hermann Park Conservancy

Hermann Park, Houston, Texas

The establishment of the Houston's first Parks Commission and the gift of parkland by George Hermann happened concurrently; it was the first and key piece in what was hoped to be an interconnected series of parks and parkways following the city's bayou system. George Kessler's 1916 vision for Hermann Park – a wooded enclave in the city, permeated by narrow carriage drives and vistas through the mature pine groves - was sketched in skeletal form but repeatedly slowed by war, the Depression, and a climate of anxious and impatient urban growth. The 455-acre flagship park was surrounded and affected by demands of competing institutions, fragmented by roadways and Brays



Bayou, and inundated annually by millions of visitors and cars. By the early 1990's, there was more parking and fenced enclaves than usable park, and it took an enormous community-driven effort to address decades of neglect. The 1995 Master Plan by Hanna/Olin, Ltd., steered by landscape architect Laurie Olin, provided the visionary framework for the restoration, and the growth of the Hermann Park Conservancy and its public-private partnership with the City of Houston's Parks and Recreation Department has been the engine driving park improvements from 1993 to the present. Project by project, the improvements have not only transformed Hermann Park, they also have had ramifications all over the city as a catalyst for a remarkable series of public landscape projects – new parks, park restorations, and the final realization of the hundred-year old plans for an interconnected bayou park system.

**Mary Margaret Jones, FASLA, FAAR, Senior Principal & President, Hargreaves Associates
*Discovery Green, Houston, Texas***

Discovery Green transformed twelve acres in downtown Houston from empty parking lots to a vibrant park, which is both a green oasis and a dynamic destination that attracts a million visitors each year to a once moribund part of the city. The design of the park creates a series of outdoor rooms that provide scale and complexity within a strong, simple framework. Responding to the urban context and environmental conditions the two axes of the park provide contrasting spines – one as an armature for activities and structures, including a café and restaurant, and the other a shady green corridor that creates connections and spawns the striated patterns that are reflected in the park's gardens, walks and piers. The desired programming for the park was accommodated within this design strategy so that the overall effect is the “green” desired by the client and appropriate for Houston's climate. Partly on structure - a 600 car parking garage lies beneath the Great Lawn and pond - the tectonics of the park respond to that of the entrance ramp, which forms a sloped performance lawn. The interactive water feature is a prominent beacon at night and a destination that draws children of all ages. The park is LEED Silver, with innovative storm water management systems and green building technologies, and supports active programming year round. It has been a catalyst for economic and social change for downtown, with a billion dollars of new mixed use development now forming its edges, and has become a beloved icon for the city.

**Matthew Urbanski, Principal, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc.
Jack Ohly, Senior Project Manager, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc.
*New Landscape Plans for The Menil Collection and Hermann Park***

Our talk will be about the evolution of Houston's public realm as seen through the lens of two recent MVVA projects in Houston: a new Master Plan for Hermann Park, which is in its early stages and a Landscape Plan for the Menil Collection, which is in the process of being executed. The panelists will discuss the way that Houston's evolving landscape ambitions have laid the groundwork for existing public spaces to move into an exciting new expression of landscape materiality and program. In the case of the Menil Collection, that ambition can be characterized as an effort to bring the quality of design and spirit of exploration at the heart of institution out into to a landscape that has evolved primarily through erasure and preservation of a neighborhood. A respect for found qualities and unexpected juxtapositions informs both revisions to the existing campus as well as the new landscape of the Menil's expansion to the south. Hermann Park is one of Houston's flagship public parks, an oasis of green that has been artfully curated to frame civic life. In a new master plan for the park that is currently under development, MVVA is drawing inspiration from Hermann Park's history and Houston's unique environment and ecology to help infuse the formal frame of the park with a diversified landscape experience.



Chapter Two: Looking Forward

Moderator:

Frederick Steiner, FASLA, FAAR, Dean, School of Architecture at The University of Texas at Austin
Oil & Water

According to the Regional Plan Association, most of the nation's future population and economic growth is expected to occur in eleven megaregions, that is, large networks of metropolitan regions. Houston is the only city to fall into two megaregions—the Texas Triangle and the Gulf Coast—and with an abundance of oil and water in both, the city faces considerable opportunities and significant challenges ahead.

While the presence of oil typically brings wealth and economic strength to a region, the detrimental impacts of the environmental costs associated with extracting it from the ground and the boom and bust cycles caused by its ever-fluctuating prices can be equally taxing. Water, too, poses its own problems—overabundances cause flooding while shortages leave large areas drought-stricken for long periods of time. Poor land-use and design decisions only serve to further exacerbate these issues.

It is imperative, therefore, that we view the challenges Houston will undoubtedly face in the future through the lens of the landscape with particular attention and analysis given to every scale from the site to the megaregion. This forward-thinking and advantageous approach is exemplified by two projects—the Sustainable Sites Initiative and the Hill Country Studio—briefly examined during this presentation.

Panelists:

James D. Burnett, FASLA, President, The Office of James Burnett

Chip Trageser, FASLA, Principal, The Office of James Burnett

Levy Park: Re-inventing The Upper Kirby District's Green Space; A Public / Private Partnership

As more cities become aware of the benefits associated with the creation of well-programmed public open spaces, what improvements are being established for those in the less densely populated areas? How does the formation of a park become the center of a neighborhood and give validation to the mix of uses in areas between the urban core and suburbia?

Located in the Upper Kirby District of Houston, Texas, Levy Park was a veiled, underutilized green space within a medium density neighborhood along the Richmond office corridor, with a freeway edge and multi-family rentals at the perimeter. Through the formation of a public/ private partnership, the transformation of a forgotten 11-acre site into the centerpiece of a district began to take form.

Formulating such an alteration to an unrecognized space requires a conscious effort to attune with the site's existing conditions and potential as well as the adjacent community members' aspirations for the area. An ensemble of considerations concerning culture, connectivity, and stewardship was orchestrated to produce a successful park plan that not only improves a neighborhood, but also invigorates it.

Jamie Maslyn Larson, RLA, ASLA, Partner, West 8 New York

Houston Botanic Garden Master Plan: Setting the Course for the Next 30 Years

For many cities, botanic gardens have long been features of the urban landscape, serving as major markers of cultural landscape movements and as important civic commitments to nature and education.



For Houston, the creation of an entirely new botanic garden offers a unique opportunity to acknowledge this traditional role, but redefine it for the 21st century city and contribute to Houston's emergence as a landscape-led, world-class place.

Within this context West 8's Master Plan for the Houston Botanic Garden aims to transform an existing 120-acre golf course just eight miles from downtown into a center for scientific research and a cultural destination for Houstonians and visitors alike. When the golf course was built in the 1920's, its setting was a rural suburb to an urbanizing Houston that was experiencing accelerated growth. A natural bayou snaked its way through the course, until the 1980's when the Army Corps of Engineers constructed a wide and straight drainage channel that bifurcated the course. The design, reflective of the Garden's core mission, embraces the natural assets and challenges of the site context and calls for successional strategies that transform the golf-course fairways and bunkers to showcase Houston's native ecology. The two bayous serve as organizing devices for an intuitive and memorable arrival. The *hortus conclusus* archetype of the collection gardens dramatizes the experience and sensations of the sinuous native plant biotopes.

Among the chief design challenges is delivering a world-class experience from opening day, while acknowledging that the landscape and its collections will need time to mature. Equally important is addressing how the Master Plan can serve the advancement of the Garden's core scientific and education mission over time. How might the Garden become leaders in regional environmental and botanical research? Can the Garden spark interest in a new generation of 'green' leadership and industry? The Houston Botanic Garden could have a unique role in the changing and maturing Houston landscape.

Douglas Reed, FASLA, RAAR, Partner, Reed Hilderbrand LLC
Steven Spears, FASLA, PLA, AICP, Partner, Design Workshop
Devastation to Resilience: The Houston Arboretum & Nature Center

The succession of extreme droughts and floods affecting Houston over the past decade are evidence of the region's changing climate. The Houston Arboretum and Nature Center, a 155-acre refuge for native plants and animals and a hub for environmental education, has suffered brutally during this period: 48 percent mortality of the tree canopy, rampant exotic plant growth, and erosion have all drastically altered the character and health of the land.

This session summarizes the story of renewal, adaptation, and program expansion as core ingredients of a master plan and site design by the team of Design Workshop and Reed Hilderbrand Landscape Architecture, with Lake Flato Architects for expanded building facilities.

The project reconciles a community's desire to restore what they've lost with the reality of ecological systems in flux. The plan is predicated on exhaustive research: the site's natural and cultural heritage; diagnosis of the impacts of climate change; and stakeholder engagement to identify the institution's values and vision. The resultant strategy embodies the community's endorsement of a new trajectory for this landscape—resilient ecologies endemic to this area of Texas, changing over time through careful management. The plan also provides expanded interpretive programs about the resetting and renewal of a damaged landscape. The first two phases are underway and focus on the northern third of the property, which incorporates a new visitor center and pavilions, trails, drives and parking, establishment of prairie, savanna, woodland and riparian ecologies, children's discovery gardens and a ravine garden. Construction will commence in the summer of 2016.



Thomas L. Woltz, FASLA, CLARB, *Principal and Owner*, Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects
Memorial Park Master Plan: Building a Resilient Future on the Foundations of the Past

Houston's Memorial Park is a landscape rich in ecological and cultural history that has been invisible, untended and at times forgotten over the past century. At nearly twice the size of New York's Central Park, Memorial Park offers a remarkable opportunity to reset the distinct ecosystems of the park disrupted by transit infrastructure, invasive plants and six years of drought and flood. Since 2013 Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects has been developing a Master Plan for the park that balances ecological restoration with new features that reveal and celebrate the many cultural landscapes that have shaped the Park.

These new amenities and destinations are based on the firm's archeological, cultural, ecological and historical research. These include an interpretation of the 1920 Hare and Hare Master Plan; Camp Logan - the military history of the site as a training camp for WWI soldiers; and the Southern Arc, a mile long boardwalk providing access to the diverse ravine ecology of the southern portion of the park and the riparian forest along the Buffalo Bayou.

The plan also includes passive recreation opportunities, mountain bike and equestrian trails, renovated sport fields, and hundreds of miles of running and walking trails. Memorial Park is a successful example of a thriving public private partnership supporting a design that reveals the cultural and ecological history of Houston in a public landscape accessible to all.