The state of Hermann Park today follows decades of development - a history that continues to inform its present and its future.

Formed in 1990 as the Neighbors of Hermann Park, Friends of Hermann Park was formed in 1992 in the same year it co-sponsored the Heart of the Park Competition. Since that time, remarkable changes, both physical and philosophical, have occurred. Laurie Olin’s Master Plan (begun in 1993, finished in 1995) allowed both public and private sectors to see the park as a whole, while providing a sense of direction to necessary improvements and a sense of possibility to visionary ideas. Improvements that began in 1995 represent tangible evidence of renewed community commitment in a spirit similar to that which established Hermann Park almost 80 years earlier.

1910 -
As part of the nationwide City Beautiful Movement at the beginning of the 20th century, Houston enjoyed a political atmosphere that promoted city planning. In 1910 Mayor H. Baldwin Rice, a progressive reformer, appointed the first Board of Park Commissioners. This board, which included George H. Hermann, retained Arthur Coleman Comey, a landscape architect from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to analyze local conditions and make recommendations for a park and parkway system in Houston.

Comey’s report, published in 1913, recommended a city-wide park system, the major element of which was to be a large public open space called Pines Park. Comey’s plan, not accidentally, identified a tract along Brays Bayou across Main Street from the newly founded Rice Institute as the ideal location. Most of this property was owned by Park Commissioner George Hermann, who in 1914 announced a gift to the city of these 285 acres for construction of Pines Park with the stipulation that it always be used for recreational purposes.

George Hermann died on October 21, 1914 before any improvements had been made to the park. As a result, the initial plan conceived by the city engineer John W. Maxcey was not implemented. In 1915, Mayor Ben Campbell, another enthusiastic supporter of the parks movement, encouraged the city to purchase an additional 122 acres between the original park site and Main Street, increasing the total acreage to 407. At the southwest corner of this strip the trustees of the Hermann Estate reserved ten acres for Hermann Hospital (1922-25).

George E. Kessler (1862-1923), a celebrated landscape architect from St. Louis who had worked with Frederick Law Olmsted, was commissioned to produce a new park plan in 1915 for what would be called Hermann Park after its primary benefactor. Kessler not only laid out the park but redesigned South Main Street as an oak-lined parkway along its western edge. The main entrance was established at the intersection of Main and Montrose boulevards where, in front of the Museum of Fine Arts, Kessler placed a landscaped elliptical island for a Sunken Garden, which now holds the landmark Mecom Fountain. The bronze equestrian statue of Sam Houston (1925, Enrico F. Cerracchio, sculptor) in the landscaped traffic circle just inside the park stands where Kessler intended to place a monument to George Hermann.

Kessler’s plan established important elements that remain today in Hermann Park: the main axis along a continuation of Montrose Boulevard; the Reflection Pool; the Grand Basin; a music pavilion (Miller Theater); various walks and carriage trails; and the golf course. World War I and the exhaustion of funds from a 1914 bond issue brought park improvements to a standstill in late 1917.

1920 -
By 1922 things were in full swing again. The Golf Course and Miller Memorial Theater both
opened that year. An Automobile Camp also opened in 1922, but it had mercifully disappeared by 1930. Mayor Oscar F. Holcombe appointed Houston’s first City Planning Commission in 1923, the same year George Kessler died prematurely. Kansas City landscape architects Hare and Hare were appointed to succeed Kessler. Improvements called for in the Kessler Plan, which was carefully preserved by Hare and Hare, began to be realized, although the new landscape architects modified parts of the Kessler Plan and added several ideas of their own. Hare and Hare designed the Houston Zoological Garden, which opened in late 1924 in the area Kessler had specified for athletic fields. Excavation of the Grand Basin just north of the zoo began in 1925, but only half of the 13-acre lake on the Kessler Plan was constructed. In 1927 botanical gardens designed by Hare and Hare were constructed along Hermann Drive east of the main entrance. In addition to these improvements the parklands were expanded in the 1920’s. Will C. Hogg donated a 133-acre tract behind and to the east of Hermann Hospital, and Mrs. Henry F. MacGregor donated 108 acres of woodlands on Bray’s Bayou two and one-half miles east of Hermann Park.

1930 -

The Great Depression marked the end of the second epoch of Hermann Park’s development. The Herman Park Clubhouse (Alfred E. Nutter, architect), a handsome Spanish Colonial Revival building adjacent to the golf course, was completed in 1933. Little else was accomplished during the 1930’s with the exception of the opening of North and South MacGregor ways to join Hermann and MacGregor parks. Also during this period the Pioneer Memorial (1936, Frank A. Teich, sculptor) and the Memorial Log House (1936) were added to the park and the Garden Center and Rose Garden were designed (1938), although construction was not completed until 1941.

1940 -

The 1940’s marked several losses for Hermann Park. Despite the opposition of park supporters and city planners, local citizens voted in 1943 to sell the 133-acre Hogg tract for what became the Texas Medical Center. In addition to the deacquisition of almost a third of the park's acreage, Fannin and San Jacinto streets were unfortunately extended through the park, effectively creating a new western boundary. After World War II proposals were made for a new Miller Theater, the Museum of Natural History, a planetarium, an aquarium, and expansion of the zoo. Eventually, all of these ideas were realized, but in several cases such as the Museum of Natural History (completed in 1964), delivery of specific destinations was delayed for many years.

1950 -

Other than zoo improvements, no major work was done in Hermann Park during the 1950’s. To alleviate flooding, the Harris County Flood Control District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers straightened the channel of Brays Bayou and lined it with concrete between 1956 and 1959, stripping the banks of all vegetation.

1960 -

After two decades of mistreatment, Hermann Park got some attention in the 1960’s when several important institutions were built. The Museum of Natural Science and the Burke Baker Planetarium were completed in 1964, and a new Miller Outdoor Theatre was constructed between 1967 and 1969 on the site of the old Doric proscenium. As the first project of the Neighbors of Hermann Park, the columns of the old theater were salvaged for the Mecom-Rockwell Colonnade, which encircles a fountain on Hermann Drive opposite the Warwick Towers. The much larger tri-part Mecom Fountain was constructed in 1964 in the Kessler-designed Sunken Garden at the entrance to the park.
1970 -

In 1972 Lockwood, Andrews and Newnam and James Cummins, Inc. collaborated on a new master plan that departed considerably from the Kessler and Hare and Hare plans. The result was the continued carving up of the park with expanded roadways and parking lots, with little attention given to green spaces and gardens in between the new buildings. As Hermann Park became more and more a neighborhood of public institutions, it ceased to be a pleasant outdoor recreational space. With essentially the abandonment of the original plans, there were no guidelines about what could be put in the park or optimal locations for a given project. For example, a charming red lacquered Chinese Teahouse was plopped down in an isolated area at the end of Crawford Street on the Hermann Drive side of the park.

1980 -

At the beginning of the 1980’s random improvements continued without the guidance of a master plan. In 1980 the Cravens Walkway was constructed in the esplanade along Main Street that had been separated from the park by Fannin Street. The Kipp Aquarium (1981-1982) was constructed astride Kessler’s main park axis. A memorial to George Hermann was finally built across the street from Hermann Hospital on the southwest corner of the park. Feeling that it still might be possible to retrieve the spirit, if not the detail, of the Kessler Plan the Municipal Arts Commission engaged Charles Moore and his associates at the Urban Innovations Group from Los Angeles to design a new plan. Moore’s ideas proved to be an interesting intellectual exercise only because neither funding nor community and political support were forthcoming. The Moore plan did, however, raise important questions about planning in the park, which were not entirely forgotten.

The downturn in the local economy during the 1980’s, combined with a lethargic attitude toward public space had left the park with few advocates, even though the numbers of people visiting park institutions grew every year. It was the spaces in between and adjacent to these institutions that desperately needed attention.

1990 -

Like Mayor H. Baldwin Rice in 1910, Mayor Bob Lanier in the 1990’s used his interest in parks and public spaces to garner political support necessary to begin a renaissance for Hermann Park. Coinciding with City Hall’s interest, the Parks and Recreation Department admitted that neglected areas needed landscaping, a more adequate maintenance schedule was overdue, pathways, including a new jogging trail, needed work, and drainage and infrastructure problems were almost out of control. At this juncture several advocacy groups, including the Rice Design Alliance, Friends of Hermann Park, and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, came together to plan the Heart of the Park design competition to renew the entrance sequence from the Sam Houston monument to the Grand Basin. The competition was held to commemorate the legacy of long-time park supporter O. Jack Mitchell, Dean of the Rice School of Architecture. Its ultimate impact — the commissioning of a new master plan for the entire park — was due to a constellation of forces, including political support, a growing economy, and a new public consciousness about public space in Houston.

After a national search Hanna/Olin, Ltd. was commissioned in 1993 to develop a new Master Plan. At its most basic level, the Olin report called for a greener and bluer park and identified four main design principles on which all new projects should rest: reinforcement of the historic armature of the park (the Kessler and Hare and Hare plans); reorganization of park circulation (provisions for better roadways and adequate parking); bringing visitor services to lesser used areas of the park; and stewardship of the park.

Heightened awareness of the park’s importance to the city and a thorough investigation of current conditions in the park prompted the Houston Parks and Recreation Department to substantially upgrade its maintenance program immediately. But specific projects outlined in the Master Plan had to be prioritized and planned according to need and funding ability. The City of Houston and...
Friends of Hermann Park divided responsibilities for getting things done. Friends of Hermann Park promotes and oversees planning, design, and project management, and contributes fundraising efforts to match and exceed public funds. Friends of Hermann Park’s portion of construction typically focuses on finish work, while the City portion focuses on earlier stages of construction.

Since 1995, and in partnership with the City, Friends of Hermann Park (FHP) has initiated six major capital improvement projects: (1) Phase 1 improvements at Miller Outdoor Theatre; (2) expansion and improvements to Kessler’s Grand Basin, now called the McGovern Lake; (3) Phase 1 improvements to Bayou Parkland, where Friends of Hermann Park provides outstanding environmental educational programs within the park; (4) monitoring the renovation and reconfiguring of the Golf Course by private concessionaire; (5) beautifying and enhancing N. MacGregor Street, including a new Zoo West Entrance, and (6) reworking of the central axis from the park entrance to the Grand Basin, the Heart of the Park; The issues of reforestation, park access, maintenance, drainage and park graphics are of ongoing concern and commitment.

Between 1995 and 2000, FHP raised, spent, and committed approximately $13.5 million to Hermann Park. This exceeds the $13.0 million spent and committed by the City.

Miller Outdoor Theatre, even though it had dramatically expanded its repertoire, had received no comparable facility improvements. FHP and the City of Houston chose this area of the park for its initial capital project. The first phase was completed within budget and on time for the opening of the 1998 Miller Outdoor Theatre season. The building itself was expanded to accommodate new restroom facilities (from 17 to 85 toilets) used not only during Miller performances but by park users throughout the day. A new ticket office, employee offices, and storage utility areas were also added. All systems within the existing building were fully renovated and upgraded. The grounds around the theater were expanded and improved to include landscaped plazas and terraces, new outdoor lighting, employee parking and service areas. The completed cost of this project was $5.4 million, $2.6 million of which was provided by FHP.

Phase 2 of the Miller Outdoor Theatre project will include construction of a new structure for food concessions placed next to the landscaped plaza already complete. This structure has been designed in a manner compatible to the completed additions to the renovated theatre building. Future plans for Miller Outdoor Theatre include providing a sharper incline to the existing Miller Hill, affording improved sight lines to the stage, and creating a small woodland amphitheater between the hill and the Reflection Pool. This facility has been proposed to seat approximately 150 people.

The successful completion of the Miller Outdoor Theater Project proved that this sort of public-private partnership can be enormously sensible and beneficial to the Houston community.

Reconstruction of the Grand Basin into the McGovern Lake is almost complete. As outlined in the master plan, the expansion project almost doubles the size of the lake and includes three new islands — two for migratory birds and a third for park users. This third island features a wetland area, paths linked to adjacent parts of the park, and a crossing for the miniature train. Key new features of the lake are: a trenched and landscaped concrete edge to make the lake’s perimeter green, an aeration system that will maintain a healthy environment for fish and wildlife, a small wetland habitat, a fishing pier, and boathouse with launching and docking facilities. After having been filled with water by the end of 2000, McGovern Lake will be stocked with fish in the Spring of 2001. This $3.8 million project cost was split between FHP and the City of Houston.

Bayou Parkland in Hermann Park consists of approximately 80 acres of underutilized land separated from the body of Hermann Park by the MacGregor Way pair. In 1995, the Friends began working to reclaim this area where an urban forest, Post Oak grove, and wooded hill are unique to the
park and urban Houston. Revitalization of this area has included debris removal, clearing of invasive plants and development of wildflower and wetland areas. The revitalized site has become the home of environmental education programs offered by FHP. New trails and boardwalks have been constructed in the urban forest and a multi-use pavilion has been built for educational outreach activities. Reforestation will continue in this area as part of FHP’s park-wide tree planting program.

Phase 2 of Bayou Parkland improvements will include an Outdoor Education Center with classrooms, office space and areas for support facilities. This project is being designed currently and is scheduled for ground-breaking in 2001. An overlook on the wooded hill (coined Mt. MacGregor), new ponds, another jogging trail, and a pedestrian bridge over Brays Bayou are each being considered as ways to further develop Bayou Parkland.

Under a concession agreement with the City of Houston and following principles of the Master Plan, BSL Golf Corporation commissioned designer Carlton Gipson to reconfigure and renovate Hermann Park’s 18-hole golf course. A new clubhouse and driving range were constructed at the corner of Almeda and South MacGregor, providing easy access to the public course, while diminishing traffic congestion in the center of the park. Although this project was completely funded by BSL, the City and FHP were closely involved in its planning and execution, assuring that existing trees were protected, new water features were added, and good drainage was provided. FHP celebrated the opening of the course with its First Annual Golf Tournament in October, 1999.

As part of its effort to work with institutions within the park to enhance the whole area, FHP undertook building a new West Entrance for the Zoo along with beautification of North MacGregor Way. From Fannin to Braeswood Boulevard, North MacGregor has been widened and relandscaped to enhance traffic safety and transform the roadway into a parkway. As part of the park-wide reforestation program, 254 200-gallon Live Oaks were planted along North MacGregor, and a new water main was installed by the City of Houston. Benches and drinking fountains were added for pedestrians. The Zoological Society and Zoo Administration were active participants in the design review process of the new zoo entrance across the street from Ben Taub Hospital. The Zoo West Entrance has a large, landscaped semi-circular plaza with a life-size cor-ten elephant sculpture designed by Robert Fowler. Ticket booths are inside a festive gatehouse. The Zoo West Entrance is expected to be used heavily by pedestrians from the Medical Center and those arriving by public transportation. A large vehicle drop-off area accommodates school buses and vans. FHP contributed $300,000 to this $950,000 project.

As park-wide stewards of Hermann Park, FHP seeks to advance inclusive leadership related to varied issues needing attention and resolution. In November of 1999, FHP teamed with Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD) to organize, fund, and deliver an Access and Parking Charrette. This three-day focused workshop was attended by multiple park stakeholders, and a team of local and national traffic, parking, and landscape design experts. By analyzing statistical data and projections for future park needs, this team worked in concert with volunteers and institutions to arrive at a series of eighteen recommendations for submittal to the City of Houston. Participation was collaborative, and the results of these recommendations are being monitored for action.

So thorough and productive was this workshop that FHP and HPARD are seeking to address other complicated issues in a similar manner. These include, but are not limited to, maintenance master planning, park concessions, park graphics master planning, and park management and operations.
2000 -

Phase 1 of the Heart of the Park, is now underway. The Reflection Pool, flanked by mature Live Oak trees delineates this axis. This project includes four key areas that will be completed in separate phases as funding becomes available. The Reflection Pool, of grand design but never fully constructed, has fallen into disrepair. When complete, the pool and its shaded surrounds will be the park's most dominant feature, and Houston's most significant civic space. With sculpted stone edges, the pool will measure 740 feet long by 80 feet wide. A state of the art bio-filtration system and a black stone bottom will allow the pool to feature clear water and crisp reflections. A "white water" cascade will enchant visitors and serve as part of the new filtration system.

The Lake Overlook and Molly Ann Smith Plaza, linking McGovern Lake to the Reflection Pool, is now under construction. Featuring interactive fountains that will come on as the park's miniature train passes, this part of Heart of the Park will offer shade, open lawn, and the relocated Pioneer Monument. Construction is scheduled for completion in 2001.

The O. Jack Mitchell Garden will be a quiet contemplative space with flowering plants, a water feature, and seating areas that will provide a respite at midpoint of the Reflection Pool. Opposite the Mitchell Garden is a functional necessity turned park amenity. Housing the pumps and equipment for the substantial underground services for McGovern Lake and the Reflection Pool, a structure is underway which will feature an arbor and bench amid Pine and Live Oak trees.

At the north end of the pool, the North Plaza and the Sam Houston Monument and traffic circle will be renovated. The miniature train route has been expanded, and will include an interim stop just east of this area. Parking spaces around the traffic circle will be relocated to a new, larger parking area nearby, making the grand entry into Hermann Park safer for pedestrians while more visually appealing and open to park features.

Pending completion of needed funds, Friends of Hermann Park and the City expect to break ground on the balance (Phase 2) of the Heart of the Park improvements in mid 2001.

85 years after initial drawings were made, the promise of Hermann Park as Houston's most significant urban park is taking shape in built form. Due to an increasingly effective public/private partnership between Friends of Hermann Park and Houston Parks and Recreation Department, momentum towards further progress is growing. As awareness and enjoyment of Hermann Park's renewal also grows, the spirit of philanthropic support of public space in Houston seems centered in this urban park.