

# Our Treasured Oasis: Preparing for a Century of Hermann Park, 1914-2014

*By Eliza Wright*



All photos courtesy of the Hermann Park Conservancy unless otherwise noted.



Entrance to Hermann Park, Houston, Texas



Houston's Hermann Park has been a treasured oasis of green and blue in the heart of the city since its opening nearly a century ago. George H. Hermann, industrialist, real estate investor, and one of Houston's first park commissioners, donated land for the park in June 1914, and his estate bequeathed additional acreage upon his death later in the year. Though hard to imagine today, at the time, the heavily forested area extended to Brays Bayou and had little development surrounding it, save for Rice Institute, established in 1912 on the edge of the prairie.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly 100 years later, Hermann Park is located in one of Houston's busiest destination areas. With its proximity to the Texas Medical Center, the Houston Museum District, Rice University, and diverse residential neighborhoods, Hermann Park serves an estimated six million visitors a year who come to relax and play among its 445 acres. It is home to more than 8,000 trees, many of them nearly a century old that not only look beautiful but also provide cooler temperatures, cleaner air, shade, and a wildlife habitat.

In 1915, the city commissioned renowned St. Louis landscape architect George Kessler to create a master plan for Hermann Park, and many of his signature design ele-

◀ *The 1992 design competition for the Heart of the Park, the Hermann Park Conservancy's first major endeavor, caused the group to realize that a master plan was needed. The area includes the park's most iconic stretch from the Sam Houston Monument to the grand basin, now McGovern Lake. Landscaping around the Sam Houston Monument, added in 1925, was restored and the parking areas around it removed. Today, the rose beds in the Sara H. and John H. Lindsey Plaza greet visitors. Just beyond it is the Jones Reflection Pool with the O. Jack Mitchell Garden on the east. Mitchell, the late architect and former School of Architecture dean at Rice, was an inspiration for the Heart of the Park competition. The Molly Ann Smith Plaza surrounding the Pioneer Memorial obelisk delights children with its interactive water features. Since the obelisk, dedicated in 1936, stood several feet off center, a giant crane carefully raised and repositioned the monument to create the proper sight line from the Montrose axis to the lake.*<sup>6</sup> Photo by David Schmall.

ments remain today: the main entrance at Montrose Boulevard and Main Street, the reflection pool, the grand basin (McGovern Lake today), the music pavilion (now Miller Outdoor Theatre), the paths and carriage trails, and the golf course. At the park's entrance, Kessler called for an elliptical sunken garden, later replaced by the Mecom Fountain in 1964. Many park features extended from the Montrose Boulevard axis with the visual line beginning at the park entrance and following along the reflection pool to the grand basin.<sup>2</sup>

After Kessler died in 1923, the Kansas City landscape architecture firm Hare & Hare took over the job for the next twenty-five years. They used aspects of Kessler's plan while adding elements like the zoo and garden center. The mid- to late-1960s saw the construction of the new Houston Museum of Natural Science and Miller

Outdoor Theatre.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s as the park attracted larger crowds, new roads and parking lots addressed the growing traffic problem. Although aiding the congestion, these changes contributed to the park's decline as a recreational resource and shifted its identity to a series of empty spaces between institutions.<sup>4</sup>

Several community groups formed to revitalize the park. Joining forces in 1992, these park neighbors and friends created the Friends of Hermann Park, which later changed its name to Hermann Park Conservancy to better reflect its mission to improve the park and to conserve and steward its resources. Its founding spurred today's renaissance of Hermann Park. The Conservancy and the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department commissioned Philadelphia landscape architect Laurie Olin of Hanna/Olin to develop an updated plan to revive the historic park and guide its improvements. In 1997, Houston City Council adopted this plan, which has several goals to increase accessibility, restore the park's historical elements, encourage community activity by adding gathering spaces and increasing services, and maintain the park through stewardship programs.<sup>5</sup>

Collaborating with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, Hermann Park Conservancy has secured over \$98 million to date toward its \$121 million goal to complete the plan. Half has come from public funds, while generous individuals, foundations, and corporations have supplied the other half. The Conservancy manages all enhancement efforts, regardless of the funding source, to ensure cohesiveness.

Today Hermann Park stands as a testament to the value of philanthropy and community participation. Thanks to the generosity of everyone from George Hermann a century ago to today's donors and volunteers, Houston has an unparalleled recreational resource. As the city grows, Hermann Park offers its visitors a common ground to experience nature, bond as a diverse community, and connect with almost 100 years of Houston history.





◀ *The creation of McGovern Lake, completed in 2001, nearly doubled the size of the grand basin. Its shallow edge design allows visitors to safely get a close-up look at the wetland plants, fish, and waterfowl. A fishing pier and benches along its perimeter give visitors shoreline spots from which to admire the view. The lake contains three islands, with one accessible to pedestrians. The other two serve as migratory bird islands, giving waterfowl and birds a place to nest and rest, whether making a permanent or temporary home in Hermann Park.<sup>7</sup>*

Photo by Jay Baker.



▲ *Renowned landscape architect Ken Nakajima designed the Japanese Garden. It opened in 1992 on five acres between the Fannin Street edge of the park and the Jones Reflection Pool. Following a visit by former Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, the Commemorative Association for the World Exposition donated the garden's Japanese teahouse, constructed by craftsmen from Japan without the use of nails or screws. Houston's sister city, Chiba, donated a stone lantern, positioned by a stone waterfall on the edge of the garden's lake. The garden took on a heavy Texas tilt because its caretakers lacked knowledge of Japanese landscaping principles. To restore the garden to its original intent, private funding has brought a landscape team from Japan to visit annually for the past six years. The garden has since become characteristic of the traditional Japanese style, and the staff has received training regarding proper care and pruning techniques.<sup>9</sup>*

*Part of Kessler's 1916 master plan, the reflection pool was installed but not completed according to his design. Decades later, the once elegant feature became a muddy pit with a jagged edge. Thanks to the Heart of the Park renovation, the Mary Gibbs and Jesse H. Jones Reflection Pool, completed in 2003, extends 740 feet long by 80 feet wide and features stone edges, a black bottom to maximize reflection, and a cascade feature at its north end. Single rows of mature live oaks historically lined the pool on each side and more were transplanted as part of the renovation to create double allées.<sup>8</sup>*

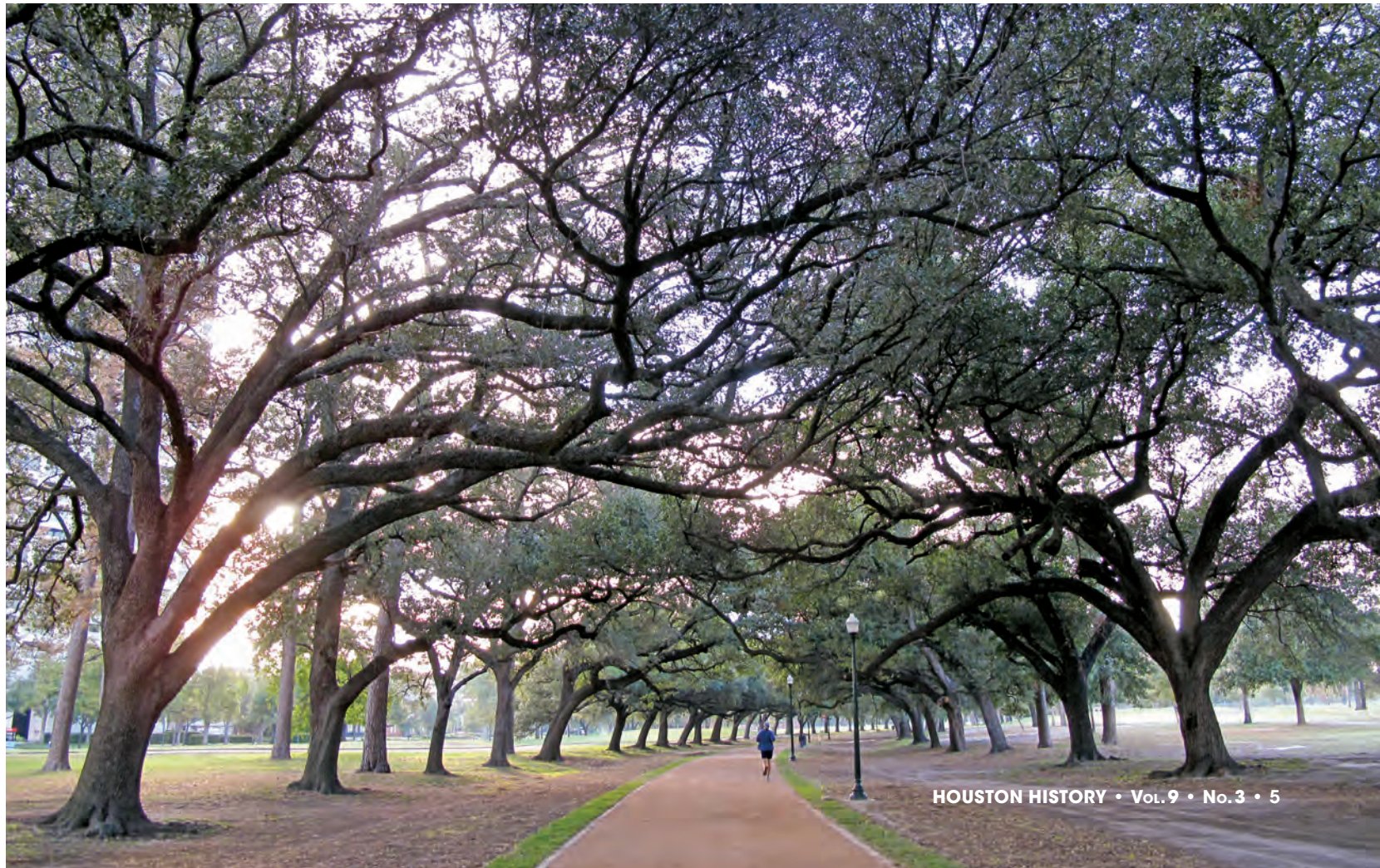




◀ The popular Houston Zoo, located in Hermann Park, opened in late 1924. Designed by Hare & Hare, it stands where Kessler had originally planned to put athletic fields. The Aviary stood out as the zoo's largest structure when it was completed in 1926. Even though a hurricane later destroyed much of it, some features remain. The Aviary was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005.

A major expansion of the zoo, also planned by Hare & Hare, opened in 1950. In 2000, Hermann Park Conservancy worked with the zoo to create a West Zoo Entrance and beautify North MacGregor Way to enhance access from the Texas Medical Center. Today, Houston Zoo, Inc., a non-profit organization, runs the fifty-five-acre zoo through a public-private partnership with the City of Houston.<sup>10</sup>

▼ Kessler's plan incorporated carriage trails for leisurely rides through the park. Today, runners and walkers enjoy their scenic, shaded paths. The 2010 rerouting of North MacGregor allowed the park to restore one historic carriage path for pedestrian use and now features a widened, decomposed granite surface, with lighting, and drainage. Some of the park's oldest and most majestic live oaks line these trails. Will C. Hogg donated 200 of these trees in memory of Harris County men who died in World War I. Today, the trees receive special care, particularly during extreme drought conditions, such as those experienced in 2011. Another historic carriage path follows Fannin, linking the George Hermann statue on the corner of Fannin and Cambridge to the park's main entry. The most convenient to METRORail, this path recently had new lighting installed, aiding those heading home from evening performances at Miller Outdoor Theatre.<sup>11</sup>







▲ Completed in 2009, Lake Plaza sits on eight acres along the eastern edge of McGovern Lake adjacent to the main Houston Zoo entrance. Following Olin's master plan to create community gathering places, Lake Plaza maximizes the potential for the area as a civic space. Prior to the renovation, the area had minimal landscaping, a carport-like structure where patrons boarded the Hermann Park train, and portable restrooms. Today, it includes Kinder Station, The Tiffany & Co. Foundation Bridge, McGovern Promenade, a café, dining terrace, public restrooms, Conservancy gift shop, pedal boat lagoon, and a volunteer and maintenance building. Chosen for their sustainability, all of the plants in the plaza are native to the region, and new trees provide shade to strolling couples and children lining up to visit the zoo. The new buildings blend seamlessly into the park setting. The entire project is Gold LEED certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). Photo by Scott Adams.

▼ A public art project in Lake Plaza reinforces the concepts of conservation and community. Local artist Jesse Lott integrated art objects and materials found around the city into the plaza's walkways. Photo by Scott Adams.



▲ The Mary Gibbs and Jesse H. Jones Greenway is a walking trail and waterway through the main Lake Plaza and Houston Zoo parking area. The bayou swale-style basin, full of lush plantings, collects water from the plaza, and filters pollutants before the water flows into Brays Bayou. It also holds water during heavy rainfall to reduce flooding and offers an enhanced wildlife habitat. From there, another greenway trail takes walkers through the golf course to Bayou Parkland, an eighty-acre urban forest separated from the formal center of the park by North and South MacGregor Ways. During the 1990s and 2000s, it underwent a revitalization that included construction of walking trails, boardwalks, and multi-use outdoor pavilion. Accessibility to Bayou Parkland will increase with the new Bill Coats Bike Bridge over Brays Bayou scheduled to open in late summer 2012. It will connect cyclists and pedestrians to trails along the bayou on both sides, giving visitors convenient walking access to Bayou Parkland and its amenities from the main body of the park.<sup>12</sup>

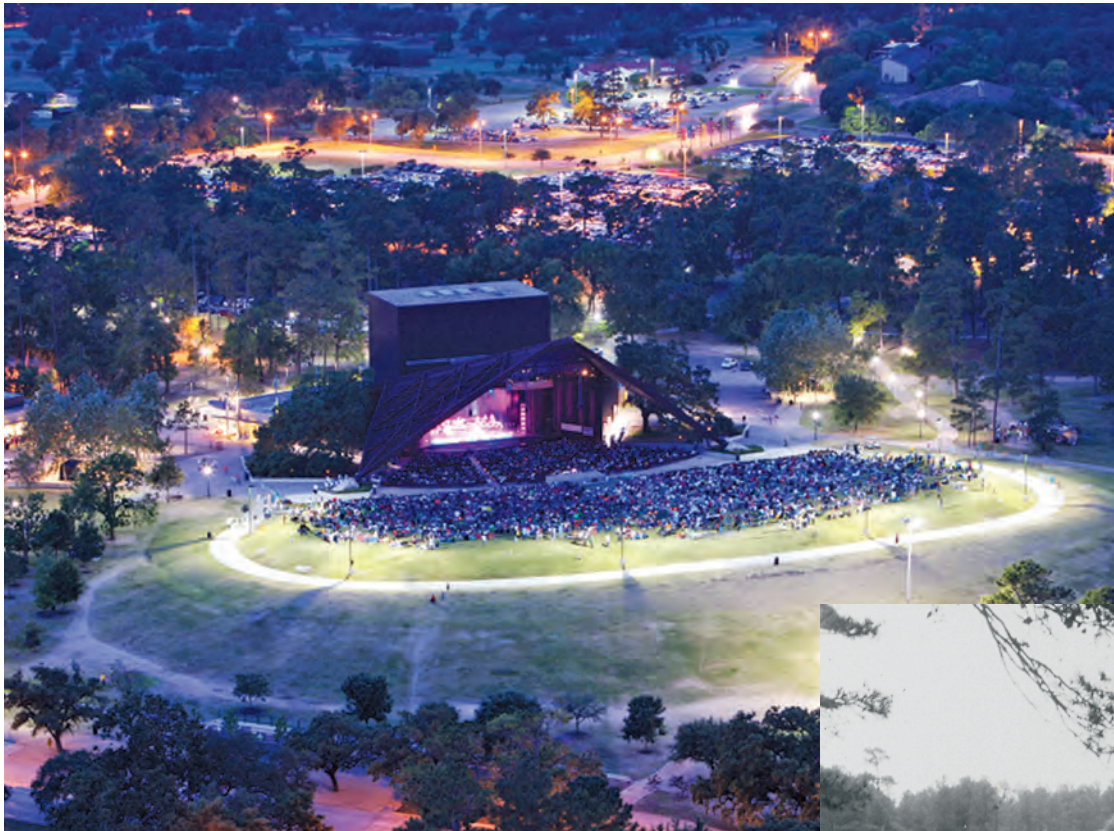




Engineer David M. Duller and Houston golfer George V. Rotan designed the Hermann Park Golf Course as part of Kessler's original 1916 plan. It opened in 1922. One of the city's oldest and most popular municipal courses, it is also celebrated as one of the first public golf courses open to all races. BSL Corporation, which commissioned designer Carlton Gipson, renovated the course in 1999. A new clubhouse, in use today, was constructed at the corner of Almeda and North MacGregor, helping to alleviate traffic congestion within the park. Arthur E. Nutter designed the original Spanish colonial revival-style clubhouse in 1933. In 2006, the exterior of the historic clubhouse, shown here, was restored and the interior converted to fit the needs of an office staff. Today, it houses Parks Department and Hermann Park Conservancy offices.<sup>13</sup>



Photo by Nash Baker.



Dedicated in 1923, the park's original outdoor amphitheater was named Miller Memorial Theatre for its benefactor, Jesse Wright Miller, a mining engineer and cotton broker. Today, its original columns make up part of the Mecom-Rockwell Colonnade. Construction for the current Miller Outdoor Theatre began in 1967 on the site of the original theatre, and it opened in 1968. In the late 1990s, the Conservancy updated the building systems and expanded Miller's restroom facilities. New offices, a ticket kiosk, concessions, and landscaped plazas were added to accommodate the demands of its growing popularity. The theatre, which is an integral part of the park space, produces over 100 shows a year free of charge to the public.<sup>14</sup>



▲ Photo courtesy of Miller Outdoor Theatre.





◀ *The Hermann Park train has been a beloved park feature since 1957. The Conservancy took over the train's operation in 2008 after decades of its being run privately. New trains replaced the old with cleaner burning engines, handicap accessibility, and larger seats. The Conservancy extended the railroad to two miles, created Kinder Station as the main station in Lake Plaza, and added three new stops along the track. The additional stops make it easier for visitors to explore the park, encourage the use of METRORail, and accommodate visitors from the Texas Medical Center.<sup>15</sup>*

Photo by Nash Baker.

## Completing a Treasure

Although many projects were completed in the last two decades, two more major components of the current master plan remain. The Conservancy hopes to reach substantial completion on these efforts in time for the park's centennial celebration in 2014. These monumental efforts include the renovation of the Grand Gateway, the historic main entrance to the park, and the complete transformation of the Garden Center, to be reborn as the Centennial Gardens. Similar to the improvements mentioned throughout this article, these projects will respect the historic aspects of the park's past while addressing modern needs. With continued community support, the master plan for Hermann Park will finally be complete—a fine 100th birthday present for a place that has meant so much to so many.

Eliza Wright is the marketing manager at Hermann Park Conservancy.

▼ *The June 1930 Hermann Park plan created by Hare & Hare based on George Kessler's original design.*

