

The Discovery of Discovery Green

“It’s just basic human common sense. We need places that people feel comfortable in and connect to; that they can be affectionate in, smile, laugh, engage and tell stories. It’s all about bliss, really.” – Fred Kent, Projects for Public Spaces

Plans for significant places often fall short of dreams and reality. But there are rare moments in history when time, people and events converge on a given place to give birth to something genuinely new.

The days following the April 13 Grand Opening of Discovery Green just happened to become the same two “Chamber of Commerce” weeks Houston gets every year when the temperature and humidity rival the Southern California climate. A crowd of more than 20,000 attended the opening, which might have been predicted with the enticing weather.

However, Susanne Theis, the park Program Director, had her first inkling of what Discovery Green would mean to Houstonians the following weekday morning. Her staff had strung a large sheet across the glass wall of their Alkek Building office, for privacy while performers changed clothes during the hectic grand opening that Sunday. Now they were removing it for the daily work of managing the park.

“We pulled back those ‘curtains’ at 9 a.m. Monday morning, and there were 8 children already outside,” Theis said. Those eight crowded the foreground in front of the window; the broader scene gave Theis her first sense of the weeks that would follow.

On the vast lawn, a group of young, muscular men played a relaxing game of bocce ball as if they had been doing it for years at that site.

On Tuesday evening at sunset, Theis heard quiet applause erupting from 30 or so visitors around the deck area. There, at the end of the pier walkway that jutted over Kinder Lake, was a young man, slipping a ring onto a young woman’s finger just after his marriage proposal. The park had only been open two days and it had already become the selected site for a lifetime memory.

“Almost instantly people seemed to know just what to do here -- everyone except us,” Theis laughed in self-deprecation. Theis and the Conservancy staff realized that the opening would in no way signal a break or pause for this unique park. The long hours would only multiply as they dealt with the good problems of success.

As lunchtime approached white-shirted business executives emerged from glass towers and moved toward the Lake House café to down a hot dog or a burger and read the paper. Others would bring their laptops to take advantage of the park’s Wi-Fi connection.

Seeing the business crowd on a typical lunch break -- while toddlers danced through the spraying water garden, in a scene juxtaposed against the downtown skyline -- reflected

more than the scene of the moment. Perhaps this park was taking Houston beyond the long segregation between work and home and recreation; to a space that closed the gap between their proximity just as fuel prices soared making this park look almost futuristic.

“I’ve never considered myself an urban dweller, but this park makes me want to move downtown,” said Carrie Pillsbury. The suburban mother of two said she visited Discovery Green three times during its first week, and is now a weekly regular.

On a Friday night, children scrambled up and down the embankments of the raised lawn facing the Pavilion, while parents and grandparents rocked and swayed to old Beatles tunes performed by local artists.

Are Houstonians experiencing a new form of urban living?

Discovery Green has been designed with the ability to deliver with large events attracting thousands, yet retain a sense of intimacy while doing so. That was apparent on a Sunday evening, when country singing star Lyle Lovett drew 7,000 for a concert there. Park co-founders Rich and Nancy Kinder were among the crowd.

“I told Nancy that night, Lyle Lovett would have been just as good someplace else, the lawns might have been as green, the breeze could have been as nice, but having the immediacy of being right in the center of the fourth largest city in America with the incredible skyline as a backdrop; that could not have been duplicated,” Rich Kinder said.

Looking back now, they realize their views -- and those of many Houstonians -- about urban green space have been transformed dramatically over the four years that started with that first phone call to Mayor Bill White.

The Phone Call to Bill White

In the summer of 2004, Rich and Nancy Kinder received an intriguing letter, complete with a copy of the notice received by many influential Houstonians about downtown land being offered for quick sale.

The couple instantly recognized the listed property. It was about five undeveloped acres in front of the George R. Brown Convention center. That land included a grove of century-old oaks flanking a bronze statue of Brown, the center's namesake. His figure stood defiantly over nearby parking lots and warehouses, dwarfed by the massive convention center just across the street.

On the perimeter of the site were two parking lots that the City bought in 2002, during the mayoral administration of Lee P. Brown. That purchase concluded a sequence of events triggered by the plans of the NBA's Houston Rockets to move out of the city-owned Compaq Center near Greenway Plaza, and into the new downtown Toyota Center.

Greenway's Crescent Real Estate had sued over city plans to lease Compaq to Lakewood Church. That case was settled with an agreement that Lakewood would pay the city \$11 million up-front for a long-term lease. That enabled the city to buy two Crescent-owned

parking lots on either side of the green space now up for sale. The settlement also granted the city an option to buy the land now offered for sale -- the oak grove and a block just north of it.

As indicated by the letter received by the Kinders in 2004, Crescent's sale offer seemed to be timed to force the city into a decision: Buy this potential park land, or let it go for what would certainly be a sale to private developers.

A friend of the Kinders had forwarded the formal notice of sale along with a personal plea. "It would be a shame," the note said, if that unique parcel of downtown land was snapped up for development, and forever lost for public use.

Mayor Bill White had only been in office for a few months when he received the Kinders' call. "If someone wants to make this a park, we're in," Nancy Kinder remembers telling him.

White's response was immediate. The mayor assured the Kinders he knew others interested in preserving the property. He remembered past conversations with his friend, Maconda B. O'Conner, and her desire to preserve land once owned by her father, George R. Brown.

Soon, the Kinders' telephone rang. White had been busy calling more people, broadening interest in saving that property. "I think we're going to try to put together a public/private partnership and see what we can do," Rich Kinder quoted the mayor as saying. "This is the last opportunity that Houston has to acquire a large tract of land downtown."

All of them were keenly aware that more than good intentions would be needed to overcome the hurdles in such a deal. Major civic projects, especially those in the central city, can take a decade or longer to move from the point of inspiration to completion.

Public-private partnerships had been duly credited for bursting through seemingly insurmountable financial and bureaucratic barriers, but they also required considerable lead time. Philanthropic interests and public bodies both needed the studies, planning, deliberations and independent review required to make certain that the details were in proper form and order before funding could be authorized for even great causes. .

There were two certainties with the plans surrounding this land: Massive financing would be needed, and it would have to be found before the deadline a few months away.

Days later, the effort moved forward with speed that the most ardent fundraisers called unprecedented. Rusty Wortham of the Wortham Foundation presided at a quickly convened meeting with representatives of Houston's bedrock families and their funding organizations. The group quieted as the project was outlined and the numbers presented.

Then came the pledges. The Brown Foundation promised \$10 million. Houston Endowment, the foundation created by Jesse H. Jones, matched it with \$10 million. The Kinders offered \$5 million. Another \$2.5 million was promised from the Wortham Foundation. By the end of the meeting, the group had pledged \$27.5 million.

"That was the most money I'd ever seen raised around a table in one meeting, ever," said Wortham.

As the scope and vision of the project soon increased, so did the money, and a growing camaraderie among the foundations. Nancy Kinder went to Wortham with another offer: They could count on \$5 million more from Kinder -- if the Wortham Foundation doubled their pledge to \$5 million.

Rusty Wortham's response: "Done."

Contributions from those foundations would ultimately cap at \$35 million; \$10 million each from the Brown Foundation, Houston Endowment and the Kinder Foundation, and \$5 million from the Wortham Foundation.

Mayor White, meanwhile, pursued other angles to make the project more affordable. A former President of the Wedge Group, White enlisted the help of a colleague. Gregory J. Armstrong, president of Wedge Real Estate Holdings, was asked to assist in negotiating the land purchase and a reduction in the asking price.

With the pledges from the foundations, and a soft real estate market downtown, White thought a fair deal would be \$100 a square foot, rather than the \$140 stated in the court agreement, Armstrong said.

"I was skeptical that he was going to be able to do it," Armstrong said. "There was no certainty in it." The mayor asked Jane Page, Crescent's executive vice president, to go back to her board and explain that in exchange for a price that would be lower than the one cited in the out-of-court settlement, they would have White's personal assurances that the money would be there to complete the deal.

"Once we agreed on price, the mayor said, 'Trust me I'll go raise it,'" Armstrong recalled.

Page would say in the final negotiated agreement, "We share in the Mayor's vision for green space" She added in the sale announcement that, "We believe that this type of gathering spot not only elevates the quality of life for those who live, work and play downtown, it also provides Houston with another way to compete with major metropolitan areas."

The property owner held firm to the year-end deadline, even though the proposed park public/private partnership had yet to be created. In fact, the foundations had not gone through their formal application processes to secure the money at that point, and Houston City Council would also have to review and vote on the complicated actions required to make it a reality.

Any Council member could automatically delay a vote for one-week by invoking the right to "tag" the matter, shortening the window for action. Further constricting the process, the work would have to be wrapped up before the annual two-week holiday break in Council sessions.

Andrews Kurth attorney Cassie Stinson, who had pioneered similar public-private agreements for the Houston Zoo and other entities, would be called upon to create this partnership and have it ready while the money was secured, council action was completed and the land went to closing.

"It came down to a 90-day sprint," Stinson said.

Such processes typically can become snarled by foundations vying for credit for civic accomplishments, naming rights and other discomforts with the details of such a quick arrangement. Remarkably, those rivalries didn't emerge.

"They not only had the interest and the spirit of the project, but they coughed up that money real quick," Stinson said. "So there was not the normal problem of having to get grassroots contributions or bank commitments. They put up the money and bought the property."

Bill White, a strong proponent of public/private partnerships, would lead the city side as the agreement between the city and the foundations would be reached.

Stinson describe the plan: "If the park were a piece of Swiss cheese," the land would be the public piece and the holes would be the private, revenue generating pieces."

The Houston Downtown Park Corporation, which ended up owning the property, would include a board that ensured the public's interest was protected, while the Houston Downtown Park Conservancy would comprise the foundations that manage the park. With only days to spare, City Council discussed and approved the land acquisition, Corporation board, the long-term agreements with the Corporation and Conservancy, and added an annual commitment of \$750,000 in perpetual funding for maintenance of Discovery Green.

"Seeing these large institutions, that aren't built to act quickly -- particularly the city -- and that don't historically partner in this way, come together in this whole new relationship can only be attributed to a sheer force of will," Stinson said.

On December 18, 2004, the sale closed on the nearly 12 acres of land, preserved forever for the public.

"Plan in 2005, build in 2006; and open in 2007." --- Mayor Bill White

"There needed to be a plan for the park by the end of 2005. You need somebody to give structure to it. So to some extent the client becomes Bill or it won't happen." – Bob Eury, Houston Central

Historically, Bill White had known that some similar projects in Houston's past were plagued by snags and delays; the public grew tired of waiting and lost interest. He was determined that this park would be built in less than three years.

His obvious choice to lead the private side of the effort as fund raiser-in-chief was Nancy Kinder, described by those close to the project as "a woman who doesn't know how to procrastinate." The mayor also enlisted Houston Central President Bob Eury for his historic view of downtown, and his skills at coordinating public and private entities in projects. Eury was immediately energized by the team being assembled by White.

"I knew Nancy from her days at Enron," Eury said of the former Enron executive. "She knew how to drive a project. She would lead the remaining fund-raising and answer

directly to the mayor in behalf of the conservancy.”

Guy Hagstette, a seasoned architect and city planner on loan from Central Houston, had just begun working as the mayor’s special assistant for urban design. He gradually became the full-time project manager.

“Hagstette is brilliant. There really isn’t any part of Houston’s downtown history, from the lofts to parks to Market Square, to the light rail, that Guy hasn’t been involved in,” Eury said.

No one knew the seriousness of the mayor’s demands for a speedy process better than Hagstette. He was part of the architectural team that designed Sesquicentennial Park along Buffalo Bayou, adjacent to the Wortham Theater Center downtown. That park was completed in 1989 to commemorate Houston’s 150th anniversary.

“It took 13 years from start to finish,” Hagstette said of Sesquicentennial.

But little about the creation of Discovery Green would be typical. By park development standards, it would be created quickly. Major foundations would not only fund it, but they themselves would oversee the project to the finish.

For the Brown Foundation, the reasons were deeply rooted in two rows of oak trees and 100 years of real estate history.

Before the turn of the century, the space now occupied by the George R. Brown Convention Center was an upscale, “white glove” residential district. As the neighborhood declined into machine shops and warehouses, the oaks continued to grow.

Finally, in a series of quiet real estate moves in that area in 1970, Brown and his Texas Eastern Transmission Corp. bought up 33 contiguous blocks over 75 acres. The plan was to create an ambitious “city with a city” called Houston Center. It was inspired, (the story goes) by a Leonardo da Vinci painting of a two-layered city with monorails, hanging gardens and above-ground pedestrian walkways. Texas Eastern even purchased air rights over the land as an indication of its intent.

Before the corporation could act on the dreams, the boom of the '70s turned to the bust of the '80s, and the elaborate project never materialized. Still, Texas Eastern maintained the block of oaks in a park-like setting while it and the surrounding land remained idle.

The George R. Brown Convention Center now occupies land donated by Brown through Texas Eastern, situated directly across from the oak grove. Although Brown died four years before the Convention Center opened in 1987, Texas Eastern dedicated a bronze statue to him in the shade of the trees Texas Eastern so carefully maintained for so many years.

Not long after that statue dedication in 1988, the oak grove and most of the adjacent property owned by Texas Eastern would wind up in the hands of Crescent Real Estate Equities following a series of real estate transactions.

While the heirs of George and Herman Brown no longer controlled the site, the Brown Foundation actively worked to save the grove against future commercial development. Maconda Brown O'Conner, George Brown's daughter and then foundation president, wrote the Houston Chronicle in 1998. Her letter made it clear that the statue could be

moved -- the trees could not.

“Yes, current plans would necessitate the relocating of the historic statue of George R. Brown, but our major concern has been and remains the preservation of the treasured green space,” O’Conner wrote.

Downtown would continue expanding and redeveloping nearer to the site. In 2000, the Houston Astros moved in to the baseball stadium to become known as Minute Maid Park, a few blocks to the north. The Houston Rockets followed three years later, in the new Toyota Center basketball arena just to the south. Even closer in that period, there was the expansion of the convention center and the new 1,200-room Hilton Hotel Americas.

George R. Brown would stand in statue form beneath those oaks, awaiting the next real estate development.

An Unprecedented Alliance

Nancy Pittman, executive director of the Brown Foundation, made a rare offer. Not only would they support the park, but Nancy Kinder, Guy Hagstette and other staff members could use the Brown Foundation offices in their day to day job of planning the park. Meanwhile representatives of the Wortham Foundation, Houston Endowment and others would come together for regular status meetings.

Joe Nelson spent 32 years on the staff of Houston Endowment, 15 years as president; but this was a first. Four major foundations were not only pooling their money, but originating the project and seeing it through from start to finish.

“We’ve always been friends and allies, jointly funding some of the same projects,” Nelson said. “But this is the first time we’ve all come together at the same time and managed one together.”

“We’re used to hearing other people’s dreams and plans, and them doing the work. Now we were in meetings learning the difference between ‘wet and dry garages,’” said Sheryl Johns, Houston Endowment Vice President.

One meeting on the 22th floor of the Hilton Americas Houston Hotel offered an intriguing perspective of the future park. Johns says she remembers one clear agreement as the group looked down on the lonely green space amid the parking lots.

“Everyone just said this just *had* to be a park people came to,” said Johns.

“We all had stories of our disappointment in past involvement with donations we made that weren’t properly maintained,” Joe Nelson said. He referred to Houston Endowment’s donation of Jones Hall, which later fell into disrepair when the city came up short in maintenance budgets.

Rich Kinder said he knows that feeling. “If you don’t have a conservancy or some sort of private, non-profit apparatus, you run the danger of saying, ‘Okay, I put my money up

and then, five years from now, I look on the news and I find what I put my money in is now a drug haven,”

This is not a problem peculiar to Houston. Bryant Park in New York City was called “Needle Park” before it was rescued by a conservancy and turned into a model for the nation.

“We came to understand that parks that attract people don’t attract crime or homelessness -- just the opposite is true,” Nancy Kinder said. “They are safe because they are self-policed by just the fact that the public is there.”

Projects for Public Spaces

“It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished.” – William H. Whyte, (1917-1999), sociologist, journalist, people watcher.

Many of the innovations of Discovery Green can be traced directly back to William H. Whyte who is considered the inspirational leader behind the planning for many of the most successful urban spaces in the second half of the 20th century. As an urban planner for the City of New York, Whyte spent much of the 1960s studying spaces and what attracts people to them. He used cameras, film and time-lapse photography to document the habits of people. His strikingly obvious conclusions are that people want to be where other people are, and people want to have something to do when they get there.

Whyte said single urban blocks planned with these concepts in mind can revive an entire city.

He was mentor for the group that created the New York non-profit Projects for Public Spaces (PPS). Bryant Park in New York is one of the premier examples of its influence. Once a dangerous and depressing place, the park reopened in 1991 and now has no crime, a budget 20 times the level under prior city management, and has been a huge success with public, press, and nearby institutions. Daily attendance often exceeds 1,000 people per acre on non-event days, which makes Bryant Park the most densely occupied urban park in the world. A study by a national accounting firm has documented huge increases in surrounding real estate values.

Fred Kent, an early colleague of Whyte, is president of PPS, which is dedicated to helping cities recreate urban spaces that ultimately produce socialization. The Conservancy invited Kent to Houston on its quest to build park space that will attract people.

“One of the challenges with Houston is that the space didn’t really exist in a neighborhood to draw from.” Kent said. “The downtown residential community wasn’t very large. So we had to go all over to find focus groups to give us input.”

PPS would conduct over a dozen small workshops with various groups, drawing from areas ranging from Midtown to Third Ward, and from ethnic groups in Houston.

After that initial work, he led the Conservancy in a half-day workshop in May 2005, to help them determine what kinds of “places” would be in the park. He showed them pictures of locations from all over the world so they could examine what attracts people - and what doesn't attract them.

“What’s really wonderful about what happened is that our sophistication about what can be done with a park has grown in the process,” Eury said. "He made us think about this concept called 'Ten Times Ten.'"

“You come up with ten places. Then, within each of those places. you can think of ten things to do,” Eury said. "So each time you come you do one or two things; but you see more reasons to come back, and it continues each time you come -- ten times ten."

By the end of the one-day workshop, the Conservancy had decided Discovery Green's places. “Before you decide how a park should look, you should decide what you want to do in it,” Kent said. “But you should make it a space that will be always evolving and changing. This is a process you will never quite finish.”

The southwest corner, across from the Hilton Americas and the Convention Center, would be Urban Square. It would be an open, flexible space that can accommodate parties, pre-game events, weddings, receptions and other endless possibilities.

A park restaurant should look out on the oak trees and have an upper level, outdoor “treehouse.”

The Plaza Entry would be directly across from the Convention and show off Houston’s most scenic view, its skyline. Keeping Houston’s summers in mind, water had to be a big part of the park, and not just water to be viewed -- it needed to be available to be felt, and to cool visitors. A large pond would encompass the north area where people can stroll, jog, dangle their feet or play with remote-control boats. In winter it will be frozen into an outdoor skate rink.

There also needed to be water to splash in, hills to roll down, places to eat, places for pets, places to listen to concerts, and quiet indoor spots to sit and read.

The Promenade, formerly blocks of Crawford Street, would be bricked into a pedestrian walkway that spanned the width of the park. At times it would be lined with market stalls, other times people would be able to stroll, sit, look at temporary exhibits or attend events or shows performed on its central platform. It will serve as a focal point for sculpture and other art forms.

Bryant Park in New York and Chicago’s Millennium Park were examples of space that was effectively used, and that spawned surrounding development and revitalization. The

PPS focus groups wanted the same for Discovery Green, but it had to be done Houston's way. It had to be an unpretentious park that reflected the full diversity of the residents.

"Houstonians are very comfortable sharing space with people of different ethnic backgrounds," Hagstette said. "We're a port. It's part of our DNA. Not every city is like that."

Chicago's Millennium Park is called "The Gold Standard" for new urban spaces.

Hagstette said the construction cost of building the park component of Discovery Green, about \$30 million, is less than what Chicago spent on the art alone for Millennium Park. "It's kinda show biz," he said. "They don't let you walk on the grass unless it's time to walk on the grass. We didn't want that. We very much want to make this place where you can just come and kick back. That's very much the soul of who Houston is. We're not Dallas."

Houstonians wanted a park where people -- as well as their pets -- can walk on the grass. Residents gave the strong message in the focus groups that their dogs were important. Clean, well kept dog runs would accommodate pets, with picnic tables and benches near by.

When the preferences and decisions for Discovery Green were finalized, Hagstette led the group in the hunt for a landscape architect to add form and structure to the concept. That was a worldwide search that didn't have to look far; the choice was Mary Margaret Jones, an Aggie raised in Baytown. Jones is one of two leading principals in the San Francisco-based firm Hargreaves and Associates. Her award-winning work on the Sydney Olympics project and her international status as a lecturer led to the designation as "Starchitect". Yet, it was her native understanding of Houston that ultimately sold the Conservancy on her abilities.

"She talked a lot about the Texas sun and how it would effect the people's enjoyment of the park," Nancy Kinder said. "She showed us angles at various times of day and where the shadows would be. For example, at four in the afternoon, the sun would be completely behind the Hilton."

Staying true to Texas, and particularly Houston, would be an important theme in this process. Hargreaves and Associates would lead the landscape side, while the Texas firm Page Southerland Page would handle the building side.

The restaurants

In hindsight, with the successes of The Grove and its more casual counterpart, the Lake House, there would appear to be no doubts that a restaurant could survive and even thrive in Discovery Green. But the Conservancy initially sent out requests for proposals to 17 restaurant operators -- and got no responses.

"People just saw these big flat parking lots and they didn't get it. It was a combination of

the location and the unique park arrangement,” said Chris Tripoli of A'la Carte Food Service Consulting Group. He was hired to study the site and recommend a range of options.

Under the terms of the public/private partnership, the Conservancy owned the building; the restaurant would lease the space, with a portion of the profits returned to the conservancy to operate the park.

“I just knew a good restaurant would work. So we just invited some owners to come in and talk to us,” Nancy Kinder said. “Once they saw our plan, we started getting some interest.”

The Conservancy knew that operating the park would be a full-time venture; the restaurant should run itself. That meant that the park would need a proven restaurant operator with the staff and flexibility to handle major catering for the private events that would flow from the hotel, the convention center and the general public.

Schiller del Grande, the owner of the exclusive Café Annie and more casual restaurants such as Café Express was willing to work with the Conservancy to create a space with unique identity suiting the park, rather than inserting a generic chain with no relationship to its surroundings. Schiller also had the skill and personnel to flex for catered events.

Going Green

Mayor White took the lead on making Discovery Green environmentally innovative by raising the funds that would enable the park to get the prestigious Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) status from the U.S. Green Building Council. His efforts were reflected in his February 13, 2007 letter to BP America chairman, Robert Malone.

“ The last piece of this important civic project is the energy efficient design and equipment that will allow the entire park to have a 'gold status' LEED rating for energy efficiency, as established by the American Institute of Architects. Would BP America consider being a named contributor for all or some of the upgrades of features, which will allow Discovery Green to be a public celebration and exhibit for application of the best practices on energy efficiency?”

Malone responded with a donation of \$1 million from BP America. That would cover solar panels for the Alkek Building, which houses the administrative offices and the Lake House café. Combined, these panels harness enough energy to completely sustain the Alkek Building.

Construction design elements added to the park's conservation theme. They include low-wattage bulbs, available natural light for interiors. Visitors may recognize that the buildings have expansive walls of glass on the north sides, to admit light while reducing the intensity of the sun's heat inside. Solar-powered water heaters and low-water toilets

were part of the construction, which relied heavily on materials produced within the region to reduce transportation impacts on the environment.

A Programming Director is hired

Projects for Public Spaces made it clear that available events and activities are more important than even the design of a park, so a strong program director can mean the difference between success and failure.

Recognizing that, the Conservancy turned to a veteran of the creative energy of Houston. Susanne Theis presided over the efforts and organization to preserve and maintain the folk art house called The Orange Show, which has come to epitomize Houston's grass roots creativity. From the Orange Show came the Art Car Parade.

"That project drew hundreds of media from all over the world. And whether they were from England, or the New York Times, or Los Angeles or the German magazine Stern, every one would say the same thing: 'I never knew Houston was so cool. I never knew Houston had people like this,'" Theis said. "It was a revelation that innovative things happened here and that the art community was so vibrant here. I heard it over and over and over again from all kinds of sources."

Theis's confidence in the talents and creativity of Houstonians to create their own enjoyment inspired her to apply for the programming position.

"Four million people go to George R. Brown, three million people go to Minute Maid, and here we have a place where we can present ourselves to the public what we've hidden away. This can be a stage for that," said Theis.

Convention Business

Not only is the park making Houston exponentially more marketable and attractive as a convention and travel destination, Discovery Green is making convention planning far more efficient. The staff of the George R. Brown Convention Center (GRB) recalled some of the logistical problems posed in predictable requests from convention planners wanting outdoor-themed events and exhibits as part of some past conferences.

A large religious organization books the GRB for its annual assembly, the convention center staff pointed out. Part of those festivities include a picnic. In the past, that meant arranging for fleets of buses required to transport more than 2,500 participants to an area park. With Discovery Green, the picnic can be held in the broad green space just across the street.

Even before the formal park opening, the Helicopter Association International booked The Grove for a private event during its Heli-Expo 2008, an exposition that attracted more than 17,000 participants.

The park's environmentally friendly features made an ideal match for GRB's Windpower

2008 Conference and Exhibition in June 2008. The American Wind Energy Association (AWEA) hosted the world's largest convention for that industry. The number of registrants -- 13,000 -- was almost double the size of the 2007 event in Los Angeles.

AWEA recognized the value of Discovery Green, touting it as a new attraction for attendees. The park was used to showcase 30-meter-long turbine blades; country singing star Lyle Lovett took the park's main stage for a concert to launch the four-day convention. AWEA relied on extensive recycling for the convention and insisted on plates and utensils made from sugarcane and other 100-percent biodegradable sources. Wind energy officials welcomed Discovery Green's environmentally friendly features and services as an extension of that "green emphasis."

More major conventions are incorporating Discovery Green in their planning, the GRB staff reported. One will use a section of the park for a "great outdoors" closing party. Officials of another upcoming conference are inviting attendees to special convention events such as fly-fishing and miniature boat races at the park.

The staffs at the GRB and Discovery Green, which have partnered closely to coordinate activities, said the park enables them to provide convention clients with more personal service levels than ever before. That is expected to translate into more business for Houston in the highly competitive convention industry, as well as allow conference visitors to experience the "new" Houston downtown scene highlighted by the park.

Hotels are also planned around the park, to boost the city's attractiveness as a major convention and visitor destination. Embassy Suites announced its intentions in 2007 to build a 250-room hotel at the nearby corner of Dallas and La Branch streets. The city undertook an ambitious study, reported in January 2008, on the prospects for adding another major convention center hotel, possibly just north of Discovery Green.

Discovery Green described....

For both visitors and staff, the Discovery Green learning curve starts with the winding perimeter trail and turns inward, toward diverse destinations within the park itself.

The one-acre Kinder Lake and adjacent Lake House restaurant deck exude a casual, spontaneous resort feel, prompting such moments as a marriage proposal made during the first week.

"I wanted people who may never have the chance to enjoy some exotic place in another part of the world to feel a bit of the atmosphere of one," Hagstette said.

In the winter, the model boat area of the lake will be frozen to create an outdoor ice skating rink. "I think when the tall buildings emerge around the park, that spot will have the feel of the hang-out spot around Rockefeller Center in New York," Rich Kinder said.

On the Monday morning after the grand opening in April, Tim Marshall, a consultant from New York's Central Park, met with the Discovery Green staff to offer his initial observations. Marshall, who will help develop the Discovery Green operations manual, said he saw a potential problem in overcrowding and overuse, from the sheer numbers of visitors at the park facilities.

Theis said Marshall recommended adding monitors to supervise the young crowds drawn to the playground. "Fortunately, our (model) sailboat rentals were going so well we could pay for the (added) staff with that revenue."

The park has six miniature, remote-control sailboats that rent for \$5 for 30 minutes. Waits for available rentals extended up to two hours during some weekend times, although fans of the boats can bring their own sailing and powerboat models in for free.

"The thing people do around that lake most is relax," Theis said. "We don't have many expansive, calm bodies of water around Houston. But the funny thing is that it is right next to the most noisy, active spot in the park -- the fountains."

The Gateway Fountain, near McKinney Street, invites as many as 200 participants onto a granite-floored basin, to be sprayed by water-jets. Plumes of water shoot upward in varying intensity -- the largest plumes reach 14 feet high. The irregularly timed sprays can elicit shrieks and startled jumps from children and adults standing around them.

Youngsters typically cool off in the fountains' water, then run to the climbing challenges of the McGovern Playground. More respite from the Houston heat awaits nearby at the Sarofim Tree Mist fountain and sculpture.

Beyond is the Jones Lawn. The expansive green space was instantly adopted by bocce ball and soccer players. That scene is often accented by ascending kites. The popular weekly Zumba dance/exercise class migrated to the lawn after the 50-plus members outgrew the original meeting place on the amphitheater stage.

Walking on the grass, even with leashed dogs, is welcome here, unlike many more restrictive parks. Two dog runs, divided between large and small breeds, cater to the growing recreation needs of urban pets.

The Grove, and its upstairs bar, the Tree House, are comparatively upper-tier establishments in terms of prices, adding an intriguing dynamic in a free public space that attracts Houstonians from all walks of life.

"Once a place becomes public, it tends to close off people in the higher end bracket because they have options. But having a high-end restaurant brings them to the park and invites them in to mingle with the other park users," said Theis.

Another benefit is that a percentage of the revenue generated from the Grove and its more casual counterpart eatery, the Lake House, is returned into the operational budget for

Discovery Green.

The Bill and Andrea White Promenade is a granite pedestrian-only streetscape that flexes with the parks programming. Canopied kiosks line the walkway to accommodate the range of weekly programming, the most popular being the Thursday Green market for sales of fresh produce.

The Anheuser Busch Stage and Fondren Foundation Performance Space with its expansive green sloping lawn is the site for concerts, plays, and other performing arts. That lawn can seat an audience of up to 2,000, and doubles as recreational green space when there are no stage performances. During the week, the stage itself serves as a breezy location for week-day Pilates and yoga classes, drawing close to 50 regular participants each class.

Another feature of the amphitheater is the regular showing of films on the outdoor screen. That has been a special draw with younger adults unfamiliar with the drive-in movie traditions of earlier generations. Art films mix with popular modern classics.

“We showed *Urban Cowboy* one night and over 300 came. Then our phones started ringing and our e-mails started filling up with people asking for more movies,” said Theis.

“My ideas about the way the park was going to be are really so different from the way the park actually is,” Theis said. “We are learning the park at the same time everybody else is.”

Theis said images of “topographically challenged” Houston kids rolling down the hills and inclines and squealing in the fountains could be expected. But what surprised her is the time people spend just sitting and relaxing, in the shaded Brown Foundation Promenade, home of the stately oaks, nearby Maconda’s Grove, or just in a chair outside the Lake House. More than a dozen gardens featuring plants indigenous to Houston will mature, attracting butterflies and a variety of bird species, inviting even more restful contemplation.

The Houston Public Library room offers an indoor resting spot for reading, cruising the internet or nursing a baby. The library’s Saturday writing workshop for children is held on the shaded breezeway just outside. It’s become a Saturday routine for families who make the park visits a regular part of their park visits.

“Projects for Public Spaces made it clear that we needed to have space where kids, parents and grandparents could all have something to do at the same time,” said Hagstette, who sees the contrast between activity and rest as essential for multi-generational family gatherings.

The park feature that seems to be for everyone is known as the Listening Vessels.

“I always see people in the listening vessel, always. Even when there is no one else on that side of the park, I always see people sitting there,” said Theis. The Listening Vessels, donated by Maconda Brown O’Conner, are two solid limestone parabolas spaced 60 feet apart. Visitors sit facing each other inside each vessel and discover they can hear each other while speaking at in a normal voice tone.

The Future

“We really feel Discovery green is going to be a difference maker in downtown, just like Millennium Park in Chicago and Bryant Park in New York.” –Matt Khourie, President, Trammel Crow, Central Region

Long before it opened, the investment in Discovery Green began showing returns in stimulating development and expanding options for once dormant areas of eastern downtown.

In early 2007, Mayor White and other officials gathered for the announcement of the \$170-million, multi-block Houston Pavilions project for retail, office and entertainment facilities, not far from the park.

"If you want to invest in projects in downtown Houston, you better get in line," the mayor said at the event.

After making a thorough evaluation of the central city area, Trammel Crow developer Aaron Theilhorn decided Discovery Green would bring future downtown development to the east side of Main. Trammel Crow chose the block directly across the street to develop Discovery Tower, described as the first high-rise office building to go up in downtown in six years.

Besides playing off the park in the name and location of the 30-story tower, the park’s emphasis on sustainable energy inspired the design for the tower. Discovery Tower has applied for LEED certification; the top of the structure will be highlighted by huge wind turbine generators producing energy for the building.

“We normally think of the spots with the views as being from the higher floors," Theilhorn said. "But we think our lower offices will be the premium views because they provide a look into the park."

Discovery Tower will have ground level stores and retail space to meet needs of an emerging area that is being instantly produced between the Discovery Tower, Discovery Green and One Park Place, luxury high rise apartment complex across La Branch from the park.

One Park Place, a 37-floor luxury high rise apartment building will bring residential living directly across La Branch from Discovery Green in February 2009. The project

was a decision made by developer Marvy Finger while the success of Discovery Green was hardly a foregone conclusion.

“I just saw who was involved, Mayor Bill White, the Kinders, the other major foundations. It was basically the 'A' team so I took the plunge,” said Finger.

Finger said One Park Place will lease its street level to businesses that will complement the park, such as a food and fresh produce market, wine shop and/or sidewalk café.

Streetscapes that encourage pedestrians, bike traffic and public transit are in the earliest planning stages, beginning with the large expanse between the George R. Brown and Discovery Green.

Maybe George R. Brown's early, Da-Vinci-inspired dreams of an idyllic mini-city aren't so far fetched.

"Discovery Green caps at least a 30-to-40 year odyssey in terms of the development of downtown," said Bob Eury. "Of course, it's not over yet."

As the nation is suddenly coming to grips with its need to reduce energy dependency, Discovery Green is looking like a staging ground to point the way to a new form of urban living.