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## 24 RENAISSANCE FOR DALLAS PARKS

New concepts for picnic pavilions  
WILLIS CECIL WINTERS, AIA

## 26 INSPIRED CONNECTION

Footbridge, Austin  
*Miró Rivera Architects*  
LARRY CONNOLLY, AIA

## 30 AT HOME ALONG THE FLYWAY

World Birding Center, Mission  
*Lake/Flato Architects*  
KAREN HASTINGS

## 36 HEALTHFUL HOSPITALITY

Baylor Regional Medical Center, Plano  
*Page Southerland Page, Dallas*  
NESTOR INFANZÓN, FAIA

## 40 WHIMSICAL VOLUMES

Henry Guerra, Jr. Branch Library, San Antonio  
*Sprinkle Robey Architects*  
JON THOMPSON

## 44 CULTURAL REFLECTION

Nguyen Residence, Houston  
*MC<sup>2</sup> Architects*  
MARK OBERHOLZER, AIA

NATURE



DEPARTMENTS

- 05 EDITOR'S NOTE
- 08 NEWS/CALENDAR/PAPERWORK
- 20 ESSAY The Grace and Disgrace of Weathering
- 48 PORTFOLIO Recreation Centers
- 52 INSIGHT Risk Assessment
- 61 MARKETPLACE
- 64 BACKPAGE

### ON THE COVER

Footbridge, Austin, by Miró Rivera Architects; photo by Paul Finkel

# Renaissance for Dallas Parks



Among the future pavilions is a thin concrete-frame structure designed by Laguarda-Low Architects for St. Augustine Park in the east-side neighborhood of Pleasant Grove.

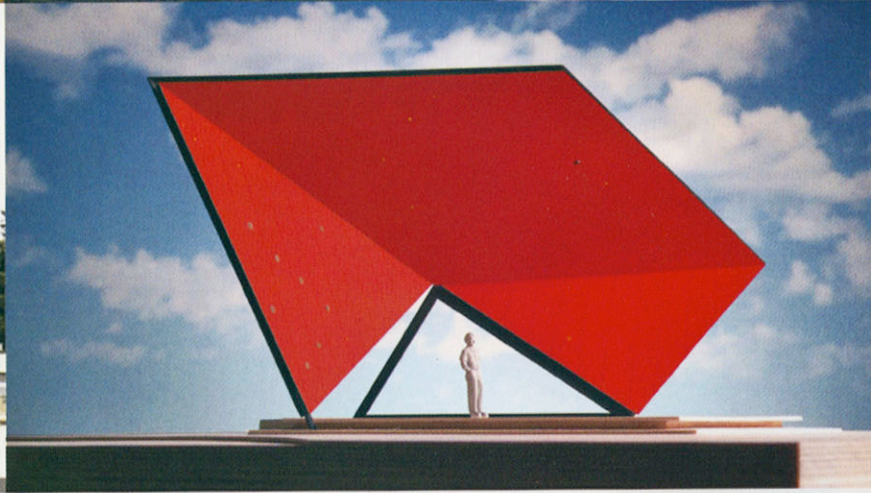
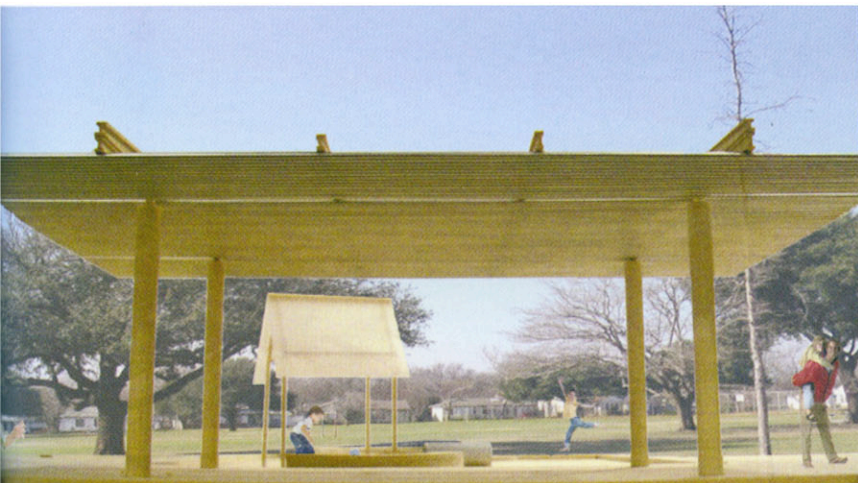
*Once cherished by citizens as a public work of art, source of wholesome pleasure, glimpse of unspoiled nature; admired as the democratic equivalent of the royal garden, the American city park, after little more than a century, has lately fallen on evil days.*

— from “The Origin of Parks” by cultural geographer J.B. Jackson

THE “evil” to which Jackson referred in his 1979 essay concerns the changing public perception of municipal parks. Jackson, our era’s eminent observer of the American landscape, was lamenting the fact that city parks were no longer viewed as neighborhood assets. As he observed in his essay, the nation’s city parks attained their ultimate prominence in the early twentieth century as attributes of a community’s economic health and vitality. However, less than a hundred years later, public perception had fallen to the point where they were seen as unsightly liabilities to neighborhood security.

The decline of Dallas’ neighborhood parks began much later than in most American cities, but the fall was nevertheless precipitous. In 1985, Dallas’ park system was nationally acclaimed, having been recognized by the National Recreation and Park Association with its Gold Medal award for large cities. That year also marked the onset of the collapse of Dallas’ real estate, banking, and insurance industries, which severely effected property values in the city. Tax revenues declined drastically, and the city slashed its operating budgets due to the shortfall. For the next 17 years, the annual budget of the Dallas park system decreased, with a commensurate negative impact on park maintenance. By 2001, neighborhood parks were warily viewed by surrounding residents who were concerned over upkeep and crime. Picnic pavilions were a source of particular anxiety because they had become popular venues for illicit behavior by day and gang activity at night.

To come to terms with years of benign neglect and to restore its tarnished reputation as one of America’s great park systems, the Dallas Park and Recreation Department completed a long-range strategic plan in 2002, followed by the successful passage of a bond referendum the following year



that provided the largest single amount for park capital development in the city's history—more than \$100 million. The bond program also included a generous allocation dedicated toward restoring or replacing aging and unsightly picnic pavilions throughout the city.

In 2002, there were 107 pavilions distributed throughout Dallas' 336 parks. The oldest dated to the 1920s, including a stucco-covered Doric tempietto designed by Flint & Broad and erected in 1925 at Randall Park in East Dallas. During the late 1930s, the Works Progress Administration funded four picnic shelters clad in Millsap stone at Lake Cliff, Stevens, and Kiest parks in Oak Cliff, and Tietze Park in East Dallas. These substantial, random-ashlar rock structures were designed by Dallas architect M.C. Kleuser, who employed the heavy rustic style used by the National Park Service and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) for thousands of park structures built during this era at state and national parks across the U.S. The CCC built two shelters in Dallas – one at Flag Pole Hill on the north end of White Rock Lake and another at Bachman Lake – between 1935 and 1942 when the federal work relief program established a camp on White Rock Lake's eastern shore. Both of these structures eschewed the "National Park Rustic" style through the use of creamy Austin chalkstone, which was squared and dressed for a more refined appearance.

The 1960s saw Dallas' population grow by 20 percent, along with a similar increase in the number of new parks built in new subdivisions to serve the increased demand for recreational facilities. Between 1963 and 1970, the Park and Recreation Department designed and constructed a new prototype picnic shelter in 42 parks. Composed of four precast concrete T-beams supported on steel pipe columns, these utilitarian structures provided cheap, basic shelter to park users and were easy to erect. Although these picnic pavilions were considered "modern" during the 1960s, within 30 years they had deteriorated and were no longer considered an asset in many of the city's neighborhood parks.

**The 2003 bond package funded the design and construction of picnic pavilions at 23 city parks, including (clockwise from top left) Casa View Park by Sharon Odum, AIA, and Ron Wommack, FAIA; H.R. Moore Park by Pablo Laguarda, AIA; Opportunity Park by Rand Elliott, FAIA; and Ridgewood Park by Ed Baum, FAIA.**

"Pavilions" continued on page 59

In 1996, the Park and Recreation Department commissioned a new custom picnic pavilion for a small inner-city park located in the shadow of Aldo Cossutta's Cityplace Tower. This elegant and diminutive shelter at J.W. Ray Park was designed by landscape architect Coy Talley as part of a larger site re-development project. Its critical success was followed two years later with the completion of the department's first custom "replacement" pavilion at Lindsley Park. Designed by Brown Reynolds Watford Architects, this shelter represented a conscientious effort to incorporate architectural forms, details, and materials prevalent in the surrounding neighborhood, a 1920s subdivision of brick- and stone-veneered Tudor cottages. The pavilions at J.W. Ray and Lindsley parks were exceptions to how picnic shelters were built in Dallas parks throughout the 1990s, however. Due to tight capital budgets, the overwhelming majority of these pavilions were prefabricated shelters adapted to each park site.

With the successful passage of a \$100 million bond referendum in 2003, Dallas was in a position to upgrade the standard replacement pavilion to something more ambitious than a catalog specification. Ample funding in the bond program was allocated for 23 new or replacement pavilions. Each of these was assigned to an architect with a record of design excellence, along with a straightforward architectural program: the pavilion should be durable and easy to maintain; it should be contextual within the surrounding community and embraced by the neighborhood; it should be functional; and most importantly, it should be safe. The final deliverable product requested of each architect was a one-quarter-inch scale wood model and a single presentation board, both suitable for exhibition.

Among the Dallas architects invited to participate in the program are the Beck Group; Oglesby-Greene Architects; Sharon Odum, AIA, and Ron Wommack, FAIA (in collaboration); Cliff Welch, AIA; Laguarda-Low Architects; Frank Welch, FAIA; dsgn; Good, Fulton & Farrell; Ed Baum, FAIA; T. Howard & Associates; and Dan Shipley, FAIA. In addition, Lawrence Speck, FAIA, of Page Southerland Page in Austin, and Rand Elliott, FAIA, in Oklahoma City were invited to contribute pavilion designs, along with four firms based in New Orleans—BildIt, Barron & Troups Architects, Wayne Troyer, and Eskew+Dumez+Ripple Architects. (Considerable effort was taken in tracking down these architects who had evacuated New Orleans in the diaspora caused by Hurricane Katrina last September. The invitations to participate stemmed from a desire to help the architects begin to recover their interrupted practices.) And drawn from even further afield were Allied Works Architecture in Portland, Ore., W Architecture in New York City, and Snøhetta in Oslo, Norway.

Seven pavilion designs had been completed as of early April, in addition to the design of a shade structure at Randall Park added to the program last year. (See "Will's Plaza" on page 16 in the March/April 2006 edition of *Texas Architect*.) In several cases, the pavilions are but one component of a larger site development package that might also include a playground designed by the same architect. The designers have adopted a wide range of approaches, starting with Cliff Welch's sensitive refurbishment (at the request of the neighborhood) of an existing 1960s precast concrete "T" shelter at Churchill Park to be architecturally compatible with a nearby recreation center. The replacement pavilion at Martin Weiss Park, designed

by Bob Meckfessel, FAIA, of dsgn, also acknowledges adjacent park buildings while simultaneously coping with a stream that meanders through the site. In their pavilion at Casa View Park, Odum and Wommack created a ceiling plane of galvanized tubes suspended beneath steel beams and a translucent fiberglass skylight. At night, up lights beneath the skylight will transform the pavilion into a lantern for the surrounding neighborhood—a stalwart symbol of security in a park previously ravaged by gang activities.

Baum's elegant design for a pavilion at Ridgewood Park (currently under construction) incorporates a graceful folded-plane roof that recalls a modernist chaise lounge—an appropriate metaphor given its location adjacent to a water-spray park. Good, Fulton & Farrell's Jon Rollins, AIA, designed a pavilion for Pecan Grove Park that consists of a series of structural frames and roof panels that transform through multiple planes of motion, varying in sequence from flat to steeply pitched, thereby creating a directional focus on an adjacent meadow. In contrast, Shipley's design for a pavilion at Valley View Park incorporates a more traditional architectural form reminiscent of the open-air tabernacle buildings found at Methodist revival campgrounds throughout East Texas during the nineteenth century. The shelter's truncated hipped roof—made of corrugated Cor-Ten steel—is capped by a flat, open-sided monitor that both ventilates the structure and admits natural light. Photovoltaic cells located atop the flat roof panel will

power up lights suspended within the space on steel rods. Elliott's pavilion is a brilliant piece of red and silver origami—a folded aluminum plane that will become the visual focal point of Opportunity Park in South Dallas. Situated amongst a magnificent grove of stately pecan trees, Elliott's shelter will serve as a performance shell for festivals and special events.

Laguarda-Low's Pablo Laguarda, AIA, has designed two pavilions. For St. Augustine Park in Pleasant Grove, the architect envisions a striking horizontal structure carefully placed within a spacious play field surrounded by trees. Its side walls, roof, and floor will form a thin concrete shell that will frame stunning views "through" the shelter from one side of the park to the other. Laguarda's pavilion design for H.R. Moore Park in West Dallas, by contrast, takes a more metaphorical approach by featuring two rows of gigantic folded-plane "leaves" supported by structural "twigs" and "branches."

Although less than half the pavilions funded in the 2003 bond program have been designed, the early response from citizens and stakeholders has been positive. The pavilion projects are viewed by residents as a vital and encouraging sign of neighborhood reinvestment by the City of Dallas. The ability of architecture to transform these parks back into the solid neighborhood assets they once were—as well as the economic impact on the neighborhood itself—will be closely studied. In the meantime, Park and Recreation Department officials are preparing another bond package. Tentatively scheduled to go before voters this November, the referendum will request as much as \$400 million toward continued reinvestment in the city's park system—including more park pavilions. ■

*Designs for the picnic pavilions will be displayed at the TSA convention slated Nov. 2-4 in Dallas.*

A *TA* contributing editor, Willis Cecil Winters, AIA, is the assistant director of planning, design, and construction for the City of Dallas Park and Recreation Department.

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**Residents see the pavilion program as an encouraging sign of the city's reinvestment in their neighborhoods with architectural assets that can transform their parks from gang-ravaged liabilities to attributes of their community's economic health and vitality.**

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