DOG DAYS OF SUMMER

A HOUSTON LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT IS HONORED IN A SURPRISING WAY

BY MARGARET SHAKESPEARE

With the help of the city of Houston and a flock of civic-minded designers, the Buffalo Bayou Partnership has galvanized the transformation of Houston's historic urban waterway from a shunned marsh to an emblem of sustainable revitalization. The multiuse design of the 1,650-acre Buffalo Bayou Park invites all kinds of leisure activity, including, following a master plan that incorporated a community wish list of dedicated functional spaces within the park, the Johnny Steele Dog Park.

Texas landscape architects may recognize the name, Johnny Steele, ASLA, is a longtime local landscape architect and former Buffalo Bayou Partnership board member who repeatedly has donated his services to the organization. He is also the owner of two Maltese-toy poodle dogs. According to a representative from the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, eight donors worked together to raise $800,000 for the naming opportunity to honor Steele's involvement.

Kevin Shanley, FASLA, a principal at SWA Group (and a dog person himself, he says), helped develop the park’s master plan. “This was forever an unofficial dog park,” he says of the two acres that officially opened to the public in January. “It’s a flat shelf that drops down from the street, with trees, so it’s out of the way. There was an old oxbow that sometimes filled with water. It was a happy place to take a dog, but not everyone else was happy—once in a while the police would show up and issue tickets.” He says the bayou's banks became muddy and were in danger of erosion.

Shanley kept the transformation simple, adding fences to avoid blocking the main park’s footpaths, water features for the dogs to splash in, lawns for Frisbee, and separate little-dog and big-dog areas, each with spring-loaded gate entrances. He planted new sycamores to supplement the shade of established red oaks, cypress, and cottonwoods. The oxbow was easily modified into a dog pond, and he created a second pond as well. “We learned, from previous work on local artificial lakes, that they need a good solid surface—crushed gravel for the shallower pond and pavers for the [larger],” Shanley says. All the water ultimately cascades into a wetlands treatment pond and is circulated back up to the park.

Houston lies in an active floodplain, and the dog park has been designed to withstand the torrential summer thunderstorms that afflict coastal Texas. But questions remain: “Sediments drop out of the water, and the sediment can be three to six inches,” Shanley says. “It’s easy enough to scrape it off shoes, hard surfaces, even paws. But the challenge is to keep it from the grass. The hope is that scraping or hosing will work. Maybe we can bag it and sell it as Buffalo Bayou Topsoil? That’s a daydream.” •