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BUFFALO BAYOU PARK
HOUSTON, USA

The last time a hurricane slammed into Houston, Buffalo Bayou Park was a very different place.
In 2008, just a few weeks before Hurricane Ike, I moved to the swampy, sprawling city. Houston...
bike, you can descend and dip low, skimming the surface of the bayou like a dragonfly, and you can rise high on a climb to take in views of skyscrapers. You can cling close to the cool concrete of a retaining wall that's shaded by trees, and you can expand up and out to the warm brightness of a meadow of native grasses and wildflowers.

You can see works of public art and reclaimed infrastructure, new pavilions and open spaces, gardens and historic cemeteries, views of the skyline and the sky, even a new restaurant. To complete the entirety of this sequence, to explore its permutations of low paths and high trails, climbs and descents, prospects and refuges, landscapes and structures, is to experience the city at its very best. But it is a limited experience.

The bayou has always been surrounded by two high-speed streets, Allen Parkway and Memorial Drive. In a very Houston way, these streets are excellent for cars, but they're dangerous, useless, really, for everyone else. Crosswalks are few and far between. The redevelopment project spilled just slightly outside the boundaries of the park, as new pedestrian bridges were installed and new crosswalks added, but these seem to reinforce the danger without addressing the lack of accessibility to the park on the whole. It is better now, but it is still not good enough. The contradictions inherent in the redevelopment make the new Buffalo Bayou Park so typically Houston. Lovely though it is, the park is a closed system that succeeds as a place in and of itself but fails to connect in meaningful ways to the larger city.

Fortunately, the city is beginning to talk to itself in meaningful ways about connections. But, even with a new 'bike master plan' in place, approved by city council in 2015 and recommending where it makes sense to build new on-street, dedicated lanes and other infrastructure, the larger city struggles to connect.

Moreover, almost all of this is nullified by the imminent threat of more flooding and more hurricanes. Houston is beset by almost annual hundred-year floods, in which the bayou rises out of its banks and inundates not only the park but Allen Parkway and Memorial Drive too. It happened in 2008 during Hurricane Ike. It's now happened three years in a row.

In August 2017, Hurricane Harvey stalled over the city, dumping more than 125 centimetres of rain in just a few days, overwhelming the city's ability to drain itself and forming pools of floodwater that inundated both brand new subdivisions and historic neighbourhoods alike. Buffalo Bayou Park, and all its newfangled amenities, its high-comfort bike paths and spectacular vistas, was completely underwater for at least a week.

And in a flash, the city's best place was gone. As the potentially contaminated sludge sediment that the floodwaters have left behind is cleared away and the park is restored to functionality, the limitations of the city's piecemeal urbanisation are clear. Buffalo Bayou Park is the best place in the city when we can use it, and it's a painful reminder when we can't that it's just about all Houston has. — Allyn West
5 View over Houston. In the middle between the Highways Buffalo Bayou Park, in the Background Downtown Houston.

6 Buffalo Bayou Park acts as a catalyst and case study for Bayou Greenways, a citywide initiative to transform more than 3,000 acres of underutilized open space into equitably distributed linear park green space.

7 There are five Bikeshare stations of Houston B-Cycle directly at or near entrances to Buffalo Bayou Park.