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Mark Lamster

Lamster: A park between Trinity River levees would be an amenity that protects Dallas

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Architecture Critic

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To hear the naysayers and the pessimists, the flooding of the Trinity River this spring was an indication that the flood plain is permanently benighted, a place with no future and certainly unsuitable for a park. “If swollen Trinity is such a menace, why build anything at all between the levees?” begged a headline in this newspaper. How can you put a park in a space that floods? The very idea defies common sense.

As Voltaire would have it, common sense is not so common and especially when it comes to something so complex as a major work of urban landscape infrastructure. Here you would do better to trust experience and expertise, which in both cases suggest that a park within the confines of the levees is not only possible, but a sustainable amenity that would actually protect the city in the future.

“In some ways, the effect is really counterintuitive,” says Chris Reed, a principal with Stoss, the Cambridge, Mass.-based landscape architecture firm that was a winner of the Connected City Design Challenge, the 2013 ideas competition for the development of the Trinity. “You want to pack the

floodway — more vegetation, more rough surfaces — in order to dissipate the effects of the flood. You want to work with the flood, as opposed to repel it.”

That understanding is shared by Dallas landscape architect Kevin Sloan, a consultant to one of the other finalists in the Connected City contest. Sloan envisions a reconstruction of the blackland prairie that once defined the Dallas landscape. “What that area seems to want to become is a kind of combination of a grassland and wetland,” he says. Contouring the flat basin between the levees would allow for a landscape of geological and plant features that could handle inundation while supporting wildlife.

It is an extraordinary vision, what would effectively be a massive nature and wildlife preserve, open to the public and laced with trails, running through the very core of the city, an attraction for citizens and a linchpin of future development.

That landscape can serve as a mediating factor in the face of flooding should not be a surprise to anyone who witnessed the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, which had seen so much of its protective wetland stripped away by development.

That a park along the banks of an urban river can stand up to flooding is not simply a matter of conjecture. Waterfront Park in Louisville, Ky., designed by the landscape architecture firm Hargreaves Associates, was engineered to withstand flooding by the Ohio River and has done so repeatedly.

In Texas, the same storms that sent the Trinity to record levels in Dallas similarly inundated Houston’s \$150 million Buffalo Bayou Park, completely submerging much of its new infrastructure and planting.

Its rebound, though, has been astonishing and rapid, with only a few sections of trail still in repair. “The lighting survived. The architecture survived. It’s just a big mess to clean up,” says Guy Hagstette, project director for the

Buffalo Bayou Partnership, which built the park and oversees its maintenance. “You just have to be prepared to budget for it.”

That meant retaining some \$500,000 for improvements. Much of that has now been spent repairing and reinforcing the bayou’s banks, so that they will not fail in future events.

“The benefits for the city really outweigh the challenges,” Hagstette says. The biggest challenges, in fact, may be the park’s various successes and the degree to which Houstonians have already come to take it for granted. The two weekends it took to clear silt from a popular dog park left many locals impatient for its reopening.

“I get complaints that the dog park floods and you can’t use it for days,” confirms Lisa Gray, a columnist for the *Houston Chronicle*. “It’s such a good park, people don’t realize a lot of this is retention. They do have to get in there and clean up whatever washes downstream.”

Another problem: An invasive Mexican petunia, brought in for its resilience by landscape architects, has gone rogue, spreading beyond the bayou banks and threatening local flora.

If nothing else, that demonstrates that a flood-prone zone is hardly hostile to plantings. “Pick the right trees and they do just fine,” Reed says. “Even within the current levees, you see very resilient stock of trees that are capable of withstanding and adapting to flood conditions.” A walk between those levees only confirms this. The trees that were submerged only a month ago seem fine today, blooming as before. The grass is greener than ever.

“In one month, we had 50,000 people out on the Continental Bridge looking at the waters,” says Gail Thomas, director of the Trinity Trust, one of several organizations looking to make a park between the levees a reality. “This Trinity River that has been what has divided the city for so long could be the

impetus to reunite us, and that would just be a great joy. ”

It would, though it is worth pointing out that the Trinity is what divides the city only literally, and it is the proposed toll road that is responsible for the political rift. It seems, however, that a consensus within the city is finally coalescing around the idea that such a road is a bad idea, that a low-impact, low-speed parkway that would provide convenient access to a park is the ideal outcome. It is that vision that the mayor’s Dream Team has promoted, and it is that kind of vision that Dallasites should demand — and not some alternate vision prone to metastasizing into something altogether different.

Here again, the lessons of the Buffalo Bayou are instructive. In the coming days, work will begin on Houston’s Allen Parkway, the high-speed road that runs along the bayou park, scaling it down, installing signals and introducing more space for alternate forms of transit. “It’s going to make a huge difference not having that traffic whizzing by directly adjacent to the trails,” Hagstette says.

Dallas planners should take that to heart. “Every time I go down to the Trinity, I see more and more people,” says amateur naturalist Ben Sandifer, an accountant who spends much of his free time in the Trinity, hiking its trails and photographing its wildlife. “It used to be I was the only one. It’s almost been exponential. The city and all the people that are in charge of designing this need to be smart about it.”

It’s only common sense.

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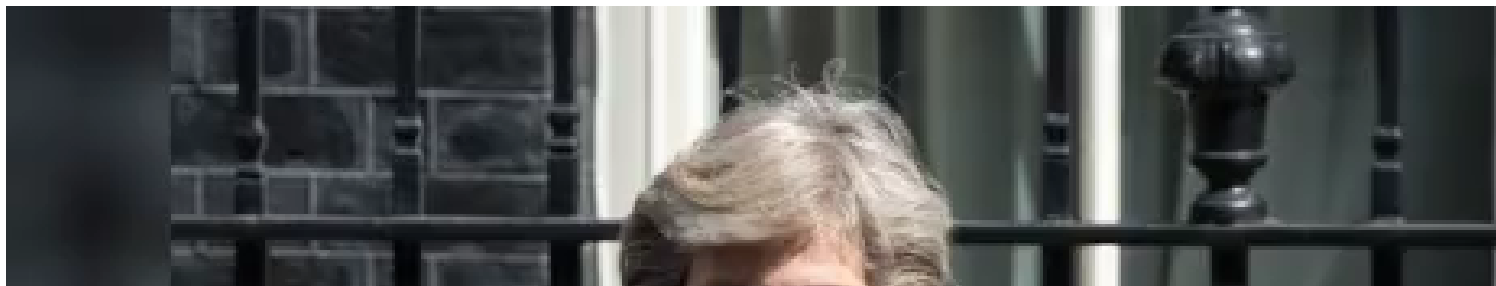
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