

Just Say Goodbye

When Annise Parker became Mayor, I cried at her inauguration. The ceremony's euphoric energy made me feel inclusive: for the first time we have a gay Mayor for Houston. I also remember her acceptance speech. I hope she will do the right thing with the gardens and respect what they represent.

Removing specimen trees for the proposed 10 foot wide bike trail is sad, especially when our community has no urban garden. It not only destroys specimen trees, it destroys a garden of memories. The many trees, the garden settings, and the memorials represent the memory of people who have died of AIDS. Removing them, removes that memory. The loss of a large Texas Mountain Laurel, dedicated to Randy Rhulman, with its fragrant tears of purple flowers will be sadly missed. When walking in the garden I feel contented. It substitutes for grief. Extremely talented friends--, designers, artists, politicians, landscape architects, teachers, writers, engineers are remembered in this unique retreat in the middle of an urban center.

The local community does not want or need a 0.25 mile bike trail appendage leading to a dead end, violates the security of residents and puts children's lives at risk at a crossing. It is sad that special interest groups trump local community needs. This is a place of refuge, not a place for a 10 foot wide freeway bike trail.

I began the garden in 1986 in Riverside Terrace, and later my partner participated. A train routinely passed behind my house. Looking out of a second story window, I saw the conductor at eye level. Within months the trains stopped. We don't miss the 5 am horns. Once the tracks were removed, the dumping began. The SAE fraternity made it a parking lot. A barrier of berms and broken concrete stopped everything except the four-wheelers. I do not miss the SAE's, known for loud mega-parties which sent me to sleep in a cedar closet. Later, trees and shrubs replaced the the barrier. Boxwoods, Red Baron flowering peach, volunteer crape myrtles are now large specimens. The mahogany barked crape myrtles will be missed as will experimental varieties of loquats, each with a unique flavor, some sweet, some tasting like cherries when preserved. We will miss the migrating birds that stop and feast here in the early spring. When the City of Houston stopped maintain the site, wild life soon returned and took refuge here.

Recently I removed Princes Persimmons that long ago jumped out of their pots, to protect them from bulldozers, because he City's budget allows \$3,000.00 for demolition and \$0.00 for landscaping. I hope that they will live, because June is not a good time of the year for

transplanting. Requests to the Mayor's office to postpone the construction until the dormant season have been denied.

Recycled concrete formed raised beds for the daylily node. I call the raised beds, with a perimeter of recycled concrete, nodes. They served as a model for future gardens. Seeds collected from pollinated daylilies produced hundreds of seedlings, filling the raised beds, and each seedling is genetically unique.

Each node represents a specialized planting experiment. Unknown bulbs, iris and crinum lilies collected from tear-downs in West University, have found a new home here. Blooming unknown bulbs revealed their identity in the spring.

My favorites are the bog nodes. Dammed drainage ditches created waddles where Louisiana Iris thrives and amphibians reproduce. Louisiana iris seeds, collected from Mercer Arboretum, produced an abundance of seedlings, filling the bog node. The waddles then stair step down the slope to a large waddle planted with Iris pseudacorus growing six feet tall, with green blades contrasting their yellow Fleur-de-lis blossoms. After a tropical deluge, water further downstream creates a waterfall.

As the main garden becomes shaded by mature trees, sun loving plants were moved -- usually up to the AIDS garden. Maintenance is easy. Weeding makes me feel that I have accomplished something,

Arbor Day seedlings of bald Cypress now form a canopy for understory Japanese maples. When I compare a 24 inch tall Bald Cypress bonsai in a pot to the 60 foot giants, it surprises visitors that they are actually the same age. Understory dwarf palmetto, a native quickly disappearing in the wild, thrive in an environment with poor drainage.

Opposite side the drainage is a 20 feet deep ravine, always cool in the summer. Timber bamboo there thrives and shields the view of new shoe-box town homes. Native elderberry and blackberry line the steep slopes.

Surplus concrete rubble was used to create a wall. A notice distributed in the neighborhood, "broken concrete needed" provided the concrete riprap what was in short supply. A professor from Baylor cares now cares for the rain lily node. After a rain her experiment becomes an ocean of white, pink and yellow blooms.

As the specimen pomegranates, grapefruit trees and crape myrtle grew, they created too much shade, so I relocated them to another node. One of the pomegranates sports a variegated red and

white carnation-like flower and is contrasted by another solid red flower. Various citrus trees, including pink, red, and yellow flesh grapefruit trees, thrive in a raised railroad ties bed. Neighbors pick citrus fruit all winter long. The variegated pomegranate genetic cuttings of a bonsai are reported to have come from Nagasaki before the atomic bomb. Are all of these specimens destined for the mulch pile?

Twenty different types of tropical ginger, varieties of bananas, palms, and a great bird-of-paradise create a tropical setting. These and other exotic tropical fruit trees surprisingly survived a rare Houston cold snap. These and other experimental plantings demonstrate their potential to the landscape industry.

The lush four acre Wright Morrow estate and beautiful house once bound one side of the AIDS garden. Unfortunately it became a victim to a foreign developer with no concern for history. It was the last big estate outside of River Oaks to fall and be replaced by ubiquitous box townhomes. The Morrow estate marked the entry to Riverside Terrace. What a blow to local history. I remember walking past stacked piles of huge tree trunks and watching frantic birds look for their nests. I rescued a koi before the pond filled.

Unfortunately The Houston Parks Board had other priorities. Now the City plans to build a bike trail that the community does not need. Rather than skillfully plan a design that complements an existing beautiful and unique landscape, it will allow it to be destroyed. I pray that our Mayor will reconsider the present plan. It is not unusual for gardens and bike trails to coexist, but it does require careful planning. The current plan will destroy the memorial garden.

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