



News Release

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TRANSFORMATIONAL LAND BRIDGE AND PRAIRIE PROJECT DEBUTS AT HOUSTON'S MEMORIAL PARK

The new 100-acre project thoughtfully reconnects the park and converts previously degraded and inaccessible land into healthy native ecologies for the benefit of Houstonians, wildlife, and the environment

Houston, TX – Memorial Park, Houston's largest urban wilderness and recreation park, announces the official opening of the **Kinder Land Bridge** and the **Cyvia and Melvyn Wolff Prairie** on February 11, 2023. The nearly 100-acre destination reconnects the north and south halves of the park with safe pedestrian passage over Memorial Drive. Expanding the existing network of trails and creating a dynamic new community space, the transformational project offers enhanced active and passive recreation opportunities for Park users alongside unmatched views of Houston's urban skylines. The newly created Prairie that surrounds the Land Bridge re-establishes endangered native Gulf Coast prairie as well as savanna, wetlands and reforested areas to promote regional biodiversity and strengthen surrounding ecologies.

“The Kinder Land Bridge and Cyvia and Melvyn Wolff Prairie will elevate park visitors’ experiences and our city on a national and even global level,” said Shellye Arnold, President and CEO of Memorial Park Conservancy. “With endless gratitude to our generous donors, Memorial Park Conservancy is honored to gift this project to Houston.”

Highlights and benefits of Memorial Park's Kinder Land Bridge and Cyvia and Melvyn Wolff Prairie include:

- **Greater safety and connectivity** for both humans and animals crossing Memorial Drive. The Land Bridge establishes two dynamic greenspace connections over Memorial Drive that reunite the north and south sides of the Park while expanding the existing trail network and providing increased connectivity within the Park. While the Land Bridge provides connectivity for Park visitors and wildlife *over* Memorial Drive, a culvert for a stream

corridor constructed to run through the Prairie provides connectivity *under* Memorial Drive. This culvert also serves as a wildlife tunnel. Together, these elements address ecological fragmentation by creating re-connecting habitats and re-establishing the natural hydrology of the site provide much-needed connectivity within Houston's largest urban wilderness park and for water flow to the natural Buffalo Bayou corridor.

- **Reestablishment of native coastal prairie** will enable a more resilient ecology during extreme weather events and improve animal habitats. Although this site was native coastal prairie for thousands of years, most recently this area was largely occupied by ballfields, parking lots and a roadway, which have been relocated to the north side of the park. Native coastal prairie is one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America, with less than 1% of its historic range remaining today. These forthcoming ecosystems will nurture existing wildlife and attract additional species, thereby promoting biodiversity.
- **Improvements to stormwater management** by detaining stormwater that flows through Memorial Park to Buffalo Bayou during heavy rain events, lessening the impact of peak storms. An ephemeral stream channel constructed through the site, along with a network of native prairie and savanna, will support greater regional biodiversity and act as a green sponge helping to absorb and clean stormwater. Similarly, constructed wetlands will help to purify stormwater and reduce roadway pollutants that would otherwise be released into the watershed.
- **Creation of a new iconic destination for visitors** that will offer a variety of enjoyable experiences and newly accessible public space for gathering and recreation. These will enhance the urban wilderness character of the Park and provide more opportunities for nature education, leisure walking, running and cycling, stargazing, relaxing and more. At 34 feet high above Memorial Drive, the Land Bridge will offer incomparable views of the Uptown and Downtown Houston skylines and unique points of prospect over the surrounding Memorial Park landscape.

“Today we celebrate another major milestone resulting from Memorial Park’s visionary master plan,” said City of Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner. “This landmark destination is a model of an extraordinary public/private partnership that has produced a legacy project for generations to enjoy for years to come.”

Memorial Park was first acquired by the City of Houston in 1925. The Memorial Park Conservancy manages the park for the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department.

“This project is a spectacular addition to the already spectacular Memorial Park greenspace,” said Kenneth Allen, Director, Houston Parks and Recreation Department. “It’s not only a sight to behold but it also offers numerous benefits for wildlife and our native coastal prairie. It will instantly become a destination stop in the City of Houston, and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department is proud to be a part of the incredible partnership that helped make the Kinder Land Bridge and Cyvia and Melvyn Wolff Prairie a reality.”

Just one year ago, Houstonians were invited to celebrate a major milestone in the project: the completion of four spacious tunnels—two in each direction of traffic measuring 300 and 460 feet long respectively—which together enable over 55,000 cars each day to pass below the massive earthen Land Bridge. The four tunnels were constructed of 620 separate prefabricated concrete panel arches that resolve at each end with geometrically pure, cast-in-place elliptical headwalls. Drivers enter and leave the well-lit tunnels through these crisply framed openings which offer striking views of the Houston sky and sweeping vistas of the Prairie. Subsuming the six-lane highway that has bisected Memorial Park since the 1950’s, the Land Bridge tunnels are blanketed with layers of soil, plantings and amenities to create new park land that rises up and over the noisy roadway, re-connecting the north and south halves of the park. The earthen blanket of the Land Bridge effectively diminishes traffic noise, improving the experiences of pedestrian visitors and non-human inhabitants of the Park.

The project team focused on responsible use of onsite resources including the reuse of materials. All of the 540,000 cubic yards of earth needed to build the Kinder Land Bridge were provided from within the Park, saving 61,500 trucks of soil from traversing Houston’s roadways. Similarly, existing topsoil was harvested, stored and then amended with compost and mulch from the Memorial Park

Conservancy's BioCycle program to provide the growing medium for the new Prairie. In addition, upcycled blocks of pavement from a former section of Memorial Drive that was removed and realigned as part of the project were used to create a distinctive architectural feature: **The Emily Clay Family Scramble**, which provides visitors direct access to the Kinder Land Bridge from the popular Seymour Lieberman Exer-Trail via a series of these large blocks that ascend to the top of the East mound.

A Visionary Plan for the Future of Memorial Park

Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects (NBW) was engaged by Memorial Park Conservancy (MPC), Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD) and Uptown Development Authority to create a **bold, visionary [Master Plan for Memorial Park](#)** in response to severe weather events that had devastated the trees and environmental conditions of Memorial Park. The NBW plan addressed the general degradation of the park from decades of heavy use and includes many innovative capital improvements, long-term conservation and ecological restoration, and an operations and maintenance plan for stewardship of the 1,500-acre Park.

As lead designer, NBW deployed its unique creativity and research-based design process into ecology and history to design an innovative plan that inspired and catalyzed an unprecedented level of community input from across Houston. The comprehensive redesign of the park sensitively honors its essential character as an urban ecologically focused park while introducing exciting new features and gained unanimous approval from Houston City Council in 2015. Beyond the support of MPC, Uptown Houston and HPARD, the plan was informed by extensive public engagement with over 3,000 Houstonians participating in a nearly 2-year public engagement process.

Thomas Woltz, Principal and Owner of NBW, remarked "I'm very proud that, with this project, we can demonstrate how impactful ecological restoration and the creation of accessible public open space, both of which are so critical to the health and civility of our culture, is possible through thoughtful design."

He continued, "Memorial Park is nearly twice the size of Central Park and is in the geographic heart of Houston, one of the largest and most diverse cities in the U.S. Not only are we providing an

expansive land bridge for humans and wildlife across a major commuter artery, but we are also re-establishing an important and endangered ecological habitat by planting nearly 45 acres of native Gulf Coast prairie. As a result, my expectation is that this project will have a reverberating positive impact on the human residents of Houston, the wildlife and the overall ecological health of the city.”

The subsequent [Ten-Year Plan](#), announced in 2018, created a public-private partnership catalyzed with a \$70 million gift from the Kinder Foundation that leverages public funds through the Uptown Development Authority. This partnership, along with the generosity of other donors, has enabled the Conservancy to implement significant components of the Master Plan—including the Land Bridge and Prairie project and [Clay Family Eastern Glades](#), which opened in 2020 and reclaimed 100 acres of previously inaccessible parkland.

“When we first invested in the bold idea of a land bridge in Memorial Park, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what to expect. The reality has exceeded my expectations. The Land Bridge and Prairie are quite spectacular,” said Rich Kinder, Chairman, Kinder Foundation. “I commend Memorial Park Conservancy, the project partners, and all the park donors and users for supporting the project. We look forward to Houstonians and visitors enjoying this iconic area of the park for years to come.”

“Memorial Park is Houston’s Park, and I am proud it is part of Uptown,” said John Breeding, Uptown Houston TIRZ/UDA Administrator. “This project shines a national spotlight on an imaginative marriage of complex urban infrastructure and visionary greenspace.”

Native Prairie Restoration

The Cyvia and Melvyn Wolff Family Foundation committed \$10 million towards the re-introduction of native Gulf Coast prairie to Memorial Park, a defining element of the Land Bridge and Prairie project. While the Kinder Land Bridge itself is complete, the Cyvia and Melvyn Wolff Prairie will take years to establish and fully mature. This large-scale prairie restoration offers Park users the unique opportunity to see a native Gulf Coast prairie conversion process from the ground up as it evolves through the seasons and the grasses and other plantings become established and more diverse. Park visitors will be able to experience this dynamic landscape up-close while meandering through the prairie on boardwalks and trails.

“Houstonians are coming together to transform Houston,” said Cyvia Wolff. “Together, we are creating one of the largest urban prairie reclamation efforts in Texas so that Houstonians can experience a native landscape that has largely been lost.”

The Prairie conversion will be aided by Memorial Park Conservancy’s BioCycle Program, which utilizes trees lost in the 2011-2012 drought and other trees removed within Memorial Park, to create abundant, rich compost soil for the project. In addition to the compost, living organisms (barely visible fungi) were collected from nearby prairie ecosystems and added to soil on the Land Bridge and Prairie to increase biological activity for healthy growth. This soil-deep rehabilitated ecology will sequester atmospheric carbon, providing cleaner air, increasing stormwater resiliency, and improving animal habitat.

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ABOUT MEMORIAL PARK CONSERVANCY

Memorial Park Conservancy is a non-profit organization created to restore, preserve, and enhance Memorial Park for the enjoyment of all Houstonians, today and tomorrow. Now celebrating its 22nd year, the Conservancy’s vision is to implement the principles of world-class park management and stewardship in partnership with the Houston community. A volunteer Board of Directors is led by Chair Carrie Pepi, and a highly qualified staff works under the leadership of President and CEO Shellye Arnold. Memorial Park Conservancy is responsible for managing 1,100 of the Park’s 1,500 acres.

ABOUT THE MEMORIAL PARK MASTER PLAN

The **Memorial Park Master Plan** is a visionary plan for the future of Houston’s largest urban wilderness and recreation park. The Master Plan focuses on restoring the Park’s ecological systems and creating greater resiliency; reconnecting the Park’s land, waterways, trails, and people; consolidating compatible uses together in appropriate areas; tending to the land and the Park’s cultural history, maintaining balance through responsible management; and enhancing the overall

Park experience and amenities. It includes capital improvements, long-term conservation, and an operations and maintenance plan for the Park. It was unanimously approved by Houston City Council in 2015.

The Ten-Year Plan enables Memorial Park Conservancy to accelerate design and construction of significant components of the Memorial Park Master Plan and was made possible by a \$70M catalyst gift from the Kinder Foundation, which leveraged funding through the Uptown Development Authority, and by the generosity of other donors. Execution of the Ten-Year Plan is overseen by the Memorial Park Standards Committee, a partnership comprised of Houston Parks and Recreation Department, Memorial Park Conservancy, the Kinder Foundation, and Uptown Development Authority.

ABOUT NELSON BYRD WOLTZ LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects (NBW) is an internationally recognized landscape architecture firm with studios in New York City, Charlottesville VA, and Houston TX. NBW has garnered over 100 awards within the past 10 years and is often featured in numerous national and international publications. The firm is dedicated to aesthetic and environmental excellence, social justice and innovation as it is designing major public landscapes across the United States and abroad, placing years of experience and innovation in greater service to the public realm. The NBW design process is rooted in deep listening and research to reveal the various cultural and ecological forces that have shaped the identity of a site.

Current projects include Centennial Park in Nashville TN, Karen Cragolin Park in Asheville NC, Lakeshore Park in Knoxville TN, the Angel Oak Park in Charleston SC, and the Cultural Arts Corridor and Ramble in Fayetteville AR.