



Discovery Green

A Green Transformation in Downtown Houston

BY ANNETTE BERKSAN

IT'S A SUNNY SUMMER SUNDAY AFTERNOON, and the 12-acre Discovery Green — a park located in the heart of downtown Houston — is alive with the sounds of laughter and music. Children squeal with delight as they run through Gateway Fountain, where synchronized jets of water shoot 14 feet into the air. Families enjoy picnics on a grassy lawn while a golden retriever and two boxers bark enthusiastically as they chase a ball. Remote-controlled sailboats glide across the one-acre Kinder Lake, as music from a concert fills the air.

Surrounded by towering skyscrapers of concrete, glass, and steel, Discovery Green is truly an oasis. That wasn't always the case.



BEFORE

Discovery Green in Houston was once an undeveloped, concrete eyesore. Today it is an oasis, surrounded by towering skyscrapers of concrete, glass, and steel.

Photos courtesy of Discovery Green Conservancy

Not So Green

Originally a high-end residential neighborhood in the late 19th century, the area became primarily industrial in the 20th century. Its occupants included dry cleaners, filling stations, auto service and repair facilities, and machine and maintenance shops.

During the 1970s, a gas pipeline company acquired 32 blocks of downtown Houston and developed an expansive, mixed-use commercial complex with large office buildings, a shopping complex, and a luxury hotel. The remaining blocks, which included the current location of Discovery Green, became surface parking lots to service the development.

Public-Private Partnership

In 2004, a public-private partnership to secure the site for a downtown park was initiated by a group of civic leaders (from The Brown Foundation, the Kinder Foundation, the Wortham Foundation, and the Houston Endowment, Inc.) and the City of Houston. A private nonprofit organization, the Discovery Green Conservancy, was formed to raise funds, operate, and care for the park.

Ron Erlichman, a native Houstonian and partner in Bracewell & Giuliani, L.L.P., is general counsel to Discovery Green. “My involvement started when the foundations came to our firm and asked if we would be able to provide assistance in the legal aspects of putting the project together,” he says. “I worked for the first two years on the documentation necessary to put the structure in place behind the public-private partnership with the city. Discovery Green then became a passion of mine.”

Discovery Green’s unique public-private partnership has been such a success story that Erlichman frequently receives calls from people across the country wanting to learn more so they can duplicate it in their own cities.

Cleanup before Construction

Because much of the land for the park had been used for industrial purposes, there were environmental issues that needed to be addressed before the construction of Discovery Green could begin. To help make this happen, a Voluntary Cleanup Program (VCP) application was submitted in 2006 to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), the state’s environmental agency. The VCP provides administrative, technical, and legal incentives to participants for investigation, cleanup, and redevelopment of properties with contamination. The site was accepted into the program.

Soil with elevated levels of metals and petroleum hydrocarbons was properly disposed of at an offsite permitted recycling facility. Groundwater was treated chemically with in-situ bioremediation (ISB) to address volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and hydrocarbons. ISB is the onsite use of microorganisms to break down contaminants with the goal of obtaining harmless chemicals as end products.

When cleanup at the site was accomplished, the TCEQ issued a certificate of completion and construction on the park began.

Discovery Green opened in 2008.

REDEVELOPED PROPERTIES

Discovery Green is just one of hundreds of properties across the state that have been cleaned up and redeveloped as part of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality’s Voluntary Cleanup Program. Here are a few more success stories:

- **Crestview Station, Austin.** From 1949 until 2005, a research facility that processed components for soaps, foams, and glues operated on 71 acres at the intersection of Lamar and Airport boulevards. Today, the property is a mixed-use area with apartments, office and retail space, single-family homes, ball fields, and a commuter rail stop.
- **Crescent Complex, Dallas.** In 2003, the area located between Cedar Springs and Pearl streets in Downtown Dallas became contaminated by petroleum-related chemicals. Now, the area includes new office space and upscale businesses.
- **Montgomery Place, Fort Worth.** The 46-acre property once housed a retail store, catalog center, and warehouse for Montgomery Ward. The use of underground storage tanks, paint booths, and an auto service building led to chlorinated solvents in soil and groundwater on the site. Today, the site houses a mixed-use residential and commercial center.

For more success stories, visit
www.tceq.texas.gov/goto/vcp.

Downtown Revitalization

As a place for people to gather, interact, and participate in healthy outdoor activities, Discovery Green welcomed more than 3 million visitors and hosted more than 800 public and private events in its first three years. The park also became an anchor for \$500 million in downtown development. Two significant projects were the Hess Tower office building and One Park Place, a high-end residential tower with 346 units.

Erlichman credits Discovery Green for the transformation and revitalization of the east side of downtown Houston. “It’s much more attractive for someone to consider living in downtown Houston when they are now looking at a completely redeveloped area,” he says.

As to the success of Discovery Green, Erlichman credits the people who have been involved since the beginning of the project. “I’ve never worked with a more tremendous group of people,” he says. “This is not a business for them. It’s a passion.”

For more information, visit www.discoverygreen.com.

ANNETTE BERKSAN

is publications manager for the State Bar of Texas.