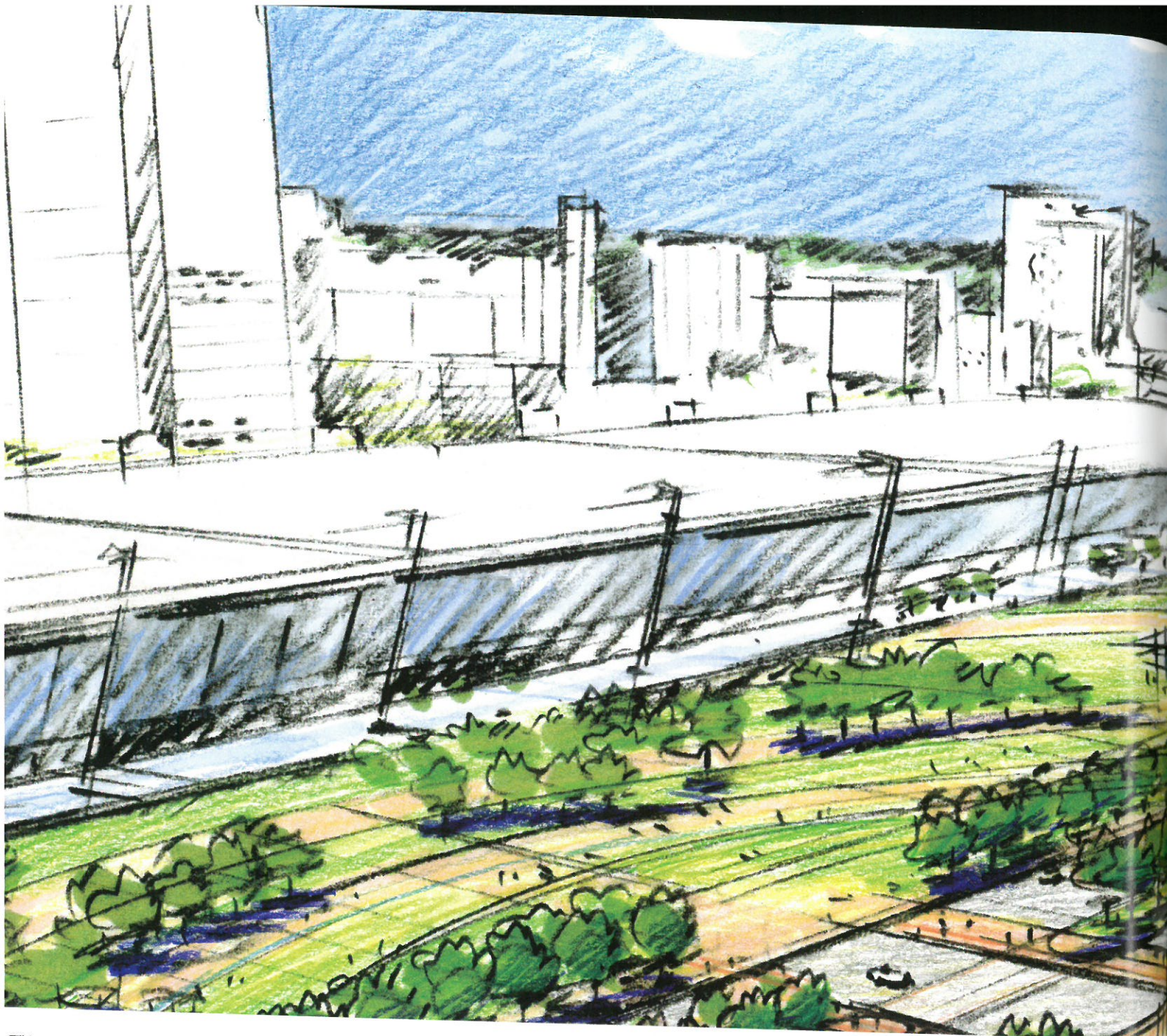


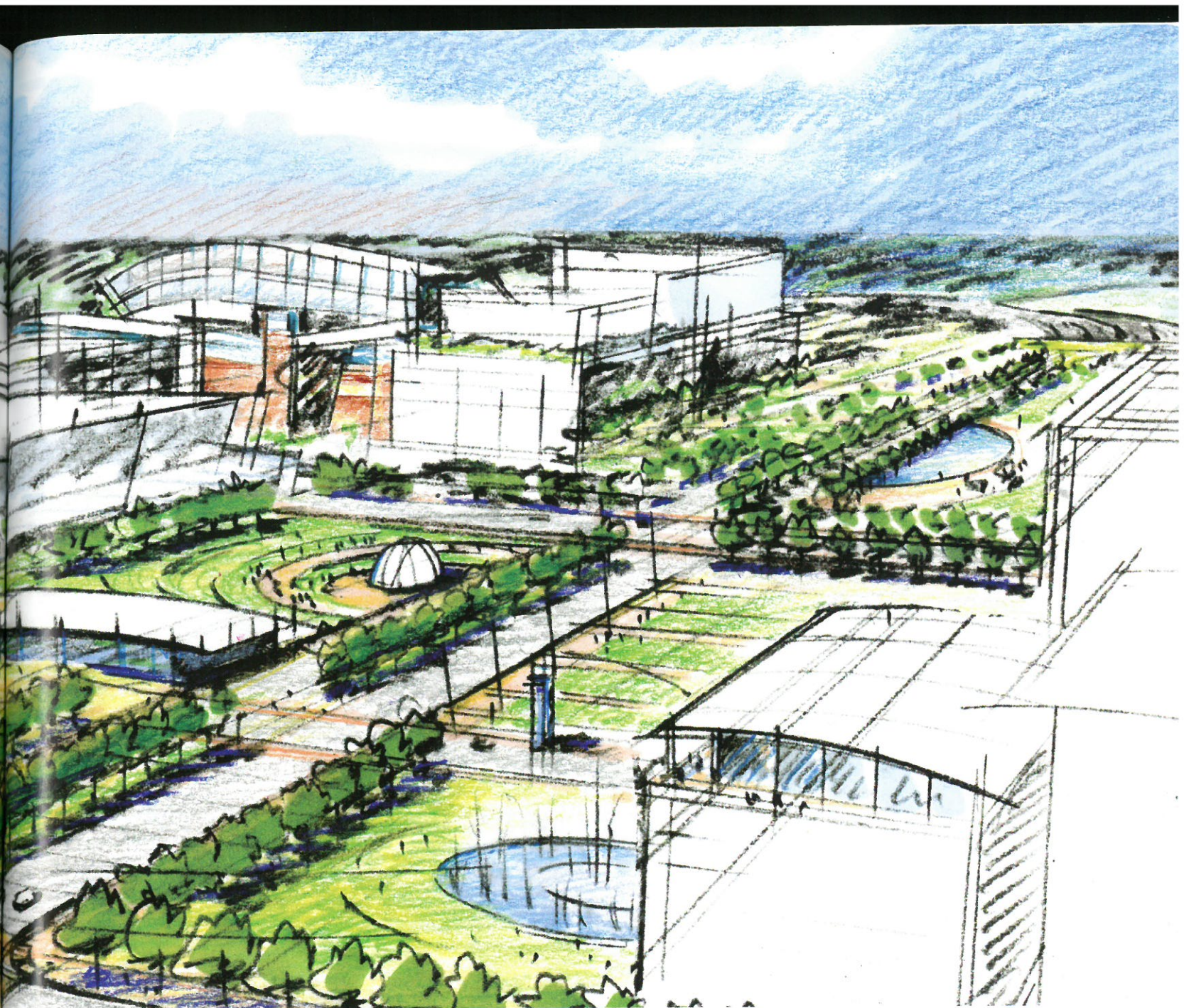
# Texas Architect







*This conceptual sketch shows the 8-block-long cap park that could be placed on top of I-45 and I-69 on the eastern edge of downtown, if donors can be found to sponsor it.*



## Freeway of Love

THE NORTH HOUSTON HIGHWAY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT HAS BEEN IN THE WORKS SINCE THE LATE 1990S, AND MAY REMAIN ON THE DRAWING BOARD FOR SOME TIME TO COME. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PLAN, HOWEVER, SHOW THAT TXDOT IS OPENING UP TO STAKEHOLDER CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPROVED PUBLIC SPACES COULD BE THE RESULT.

by Ben Koush





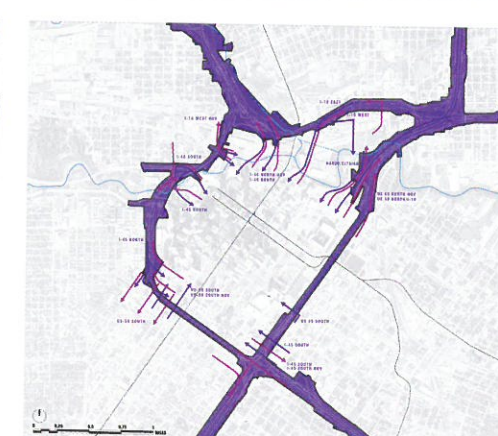
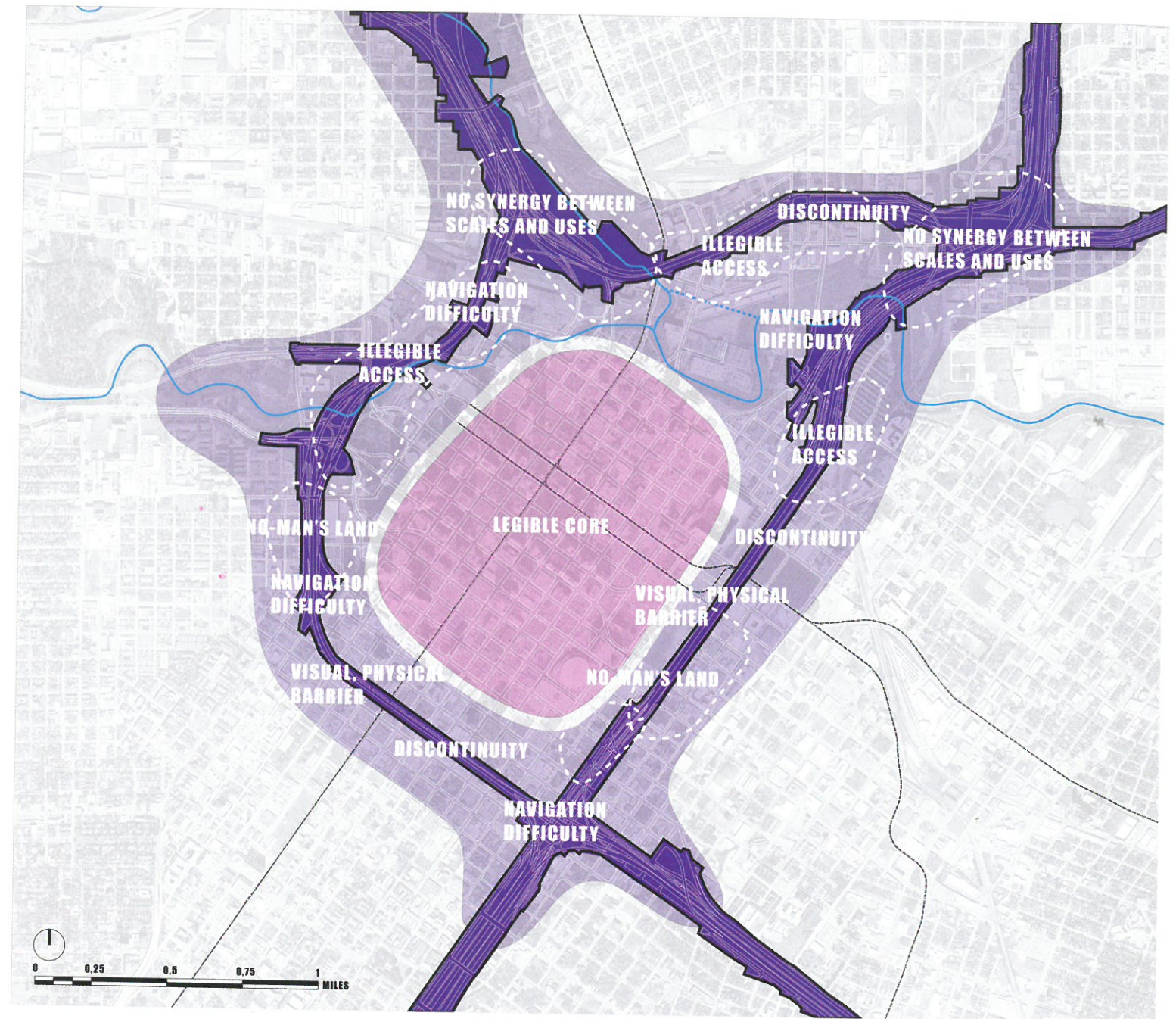
Houston, like most modern American cities, is almost completely dependent on cars as transportation. Because of the city's table-flat geography, interrupted only occasionally by its meandering system of bayous that have been drafted into service by the Harris County Flood Control District as unruly storm sewers, its massive freeway network takes on a de facto role as an urban place-maker through its spread and sheer bulk. Rising and falling, curving and straightening, all the while with roaring traffic ebbing and flowing, the freeways seem almost like a natural system. It is thus with no small amount of trepidation that Houstonians await news of the newest massive freeway construction projects, whose disruptive effects on daily life are akin to those of destructive hurricanes blowing in periodically from the Gulf. Coming on the heels of the multi-billion-dollar Katy Freeway widening, completed in 2008, and the Northwest Freeway widening still under construction, TxDOT's \$6.5 billion North Houston Highway Improvement Project includes the section of Interstate 45 from Beltway 8 to downtown and the baby loop surrounding downtown where I-45, I-10, and I-69 (the "freeway of love," US 59's new designation as of March 2015) join each other — and it promises to be a doozy.

Although formal studies for this project have been going on since the late 1990s, it is now reaching a critical phase where alignments have been more or less decided, funding is going to be secured, and the first right-of-way purchases are going to be made. The 24-mile-long plan is broken into three segments. Beginning from Beltway 8, Segment 1 is the nine-mile stretch to the North Loop. Segment 2 is the three-mile section from the North Loop to I-10. And Segment 3 is the 12-mile downtown loop system. Segments 2 and 3 are consistently included in the top 10 of the most congested roadways in Texas, and none of the segments has been repaired or upgraded in decades. All this points to a massive reconstruction.

According to TxDOT's published plans, Segment 1, which will be the last section completed, will be built according to design standards similar to the Katy and Northwest Freeways — that is to say, super-wide at 18 lanes. (Last year, in the *Houston Chronicle*, a researcher from the Texas A&M Transportation Institute said that if there's any freeway wider than the Katy, he hasn't heard of it.)

Segments 2 and 3 are going to be more interesting. When a group of concerned residents in the neighborhoods just north of downtown heard about the impending project, they formed the I-45 Coalition in 1998 to present their concerns to TxDOT, which at the time was proposing the same design standards as Segment 1 for Segment 2, essentially doubling its width through the area. With the help of elected officials, they worked with TxDOT to reconsider design options. The current plan reflects this process and proposes not to increase the right-of-way in most of this segment. The big feature of this section will be at the choke point between Hollywood Cemetery and Houston Avenue at North Main Street, where the freeway will be undercut with cantilevered feeder roads above it. This section will also be designed so that it could be capped eventually to create new green space.

Section 3, however, is where TxDOT really stepped out of their comfort zone. With right-of-way issues more constraining than in segments 1 and 2, multiple design options were studied. Two of the more radical ones included making the entire loop a one-way artery like a gigantic Parisian traffic circle, and boring bypass tunnels deep under downtown. This last plan alarmed a major stakeholder, the Houston Downtown Management District — a semi-public planning agency that works with its affiliates Central Houston and the Downtown Redevelopment Authority to promote downtown and encourage further investment in the downtown Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone. They believed (perhaps rightly, after Boston's messy



**Facing** Another view of the proposed freeway capping greenspace with Minute Maid Park in the background.

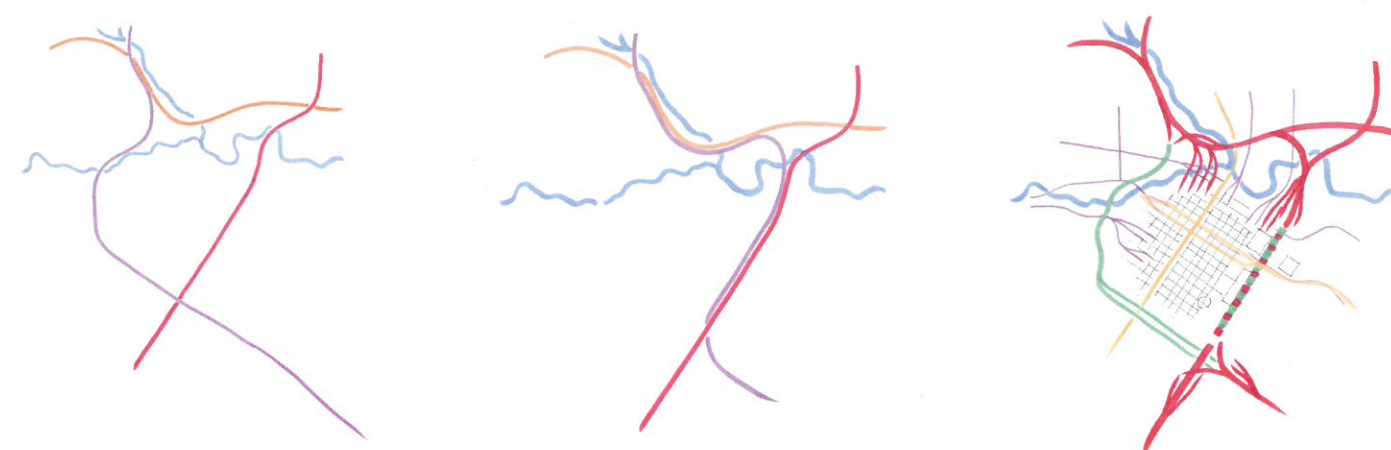
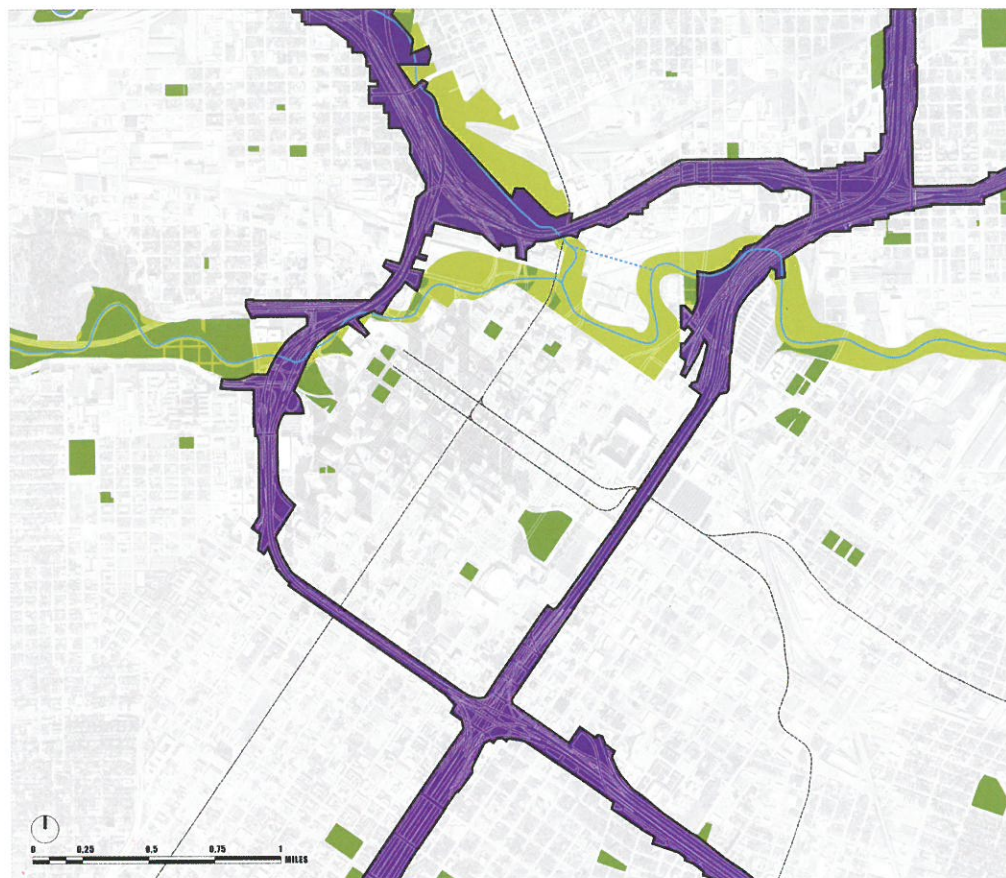
**This page** The hard to navigate tangle of freeways has been choking downtown since it was first constructed. The diagrams at left show the existing green space and traffic connections.



**Top right** The design and alignment of the existing freeway loop around downtown disregards Buffalo Bayou and several parks in its immediate vicinity.

**Below right** The currently approved scheme addresses these green spaces as amenities rather than obstacles to avoid.

**Facing from left to right** The existing layout, the proposed merging of I-45 with I-69 on the east side of downtown, the fleshed out new scheme showing traffic connections and public greenspace.



Big Dig) that tunnels created another problem, not the solution to traffic woes. Ever the marketers, they also believed that this project should be considered not just on its merits as an improvement to infrastructure but also for its image-making possibilities.

The loop, depending on whether you see it encircling or choking downtown, was a symbol of the old way of thinking: the engineering logic that cared more about traffic counts than the delicate urban tissue that was wrecked when they forced the first freeways through American cities during the postwar era. Although the Downtown District acknowledged that TxDOT would not remove the freeways completely, they believed the agency could be massaged into a more sensitive configuration that would still move cars while appearing less obtrusive, helping stitch together neighborhoods, and even allowing for new public green space. They conducted their own study sessions with other less well-financed stakeholders, includ-

*Rising and falling, curving and straightening, all the while with roaring traffic ebbing and flowing, the freeways seem almost like a natural system.*

ing the Greater Northside Management District and the East Downtown Management District and their consultant landscape architecture firm, SWA Group, to devise an alternate scheme for TxDOT to review.

The big move of this scheme, which has been adopted officially as of last year, proposes to run both I-45 and I-69 in a deep trench along the rear side of the George R. Brown Convention Center (GRB). By relocating I-45, the obnoxious Pierce Elevated could be decommissioned and downtown could again reconnect with midtown as it did before the freeways. While at first it seems like a poke in the eye to the East End, the plan makes sense because there was already a series of physical barriers that were not going away on the eastern edge of downtown, including the Toyota Center, the GRB (which currently has plans to expand), and Minute Maid Park. The East End's consolation prize, however, isn't too bad. The eight-block-long section of trenched freeway between Lamar Street and Congress Street is slated to be topped with a park (once a private donor can be found) à la Dallas' popular Klyde Warren Park, which caps three blocks of the Woodall Rodgers Freeway.

While there have been some plans floated around to convert the decommissioned section of the Pierce Elevated into Houston's version of the Highline,

most people I spoke with didn't think that was going to happen, simply because TxDOT needs the money it could get from selling that right of way to private developers. Some still hold out hope that at least some of the land or maybe even a small section of the elevated roadway could be made into a public green space. The recently completed Buffalo Bayou Park will also benefit a little, due to the smaller bridges that will be rebuilt over the waterway as on and off ramps for the new freeway system.

On the north side, the freeway will be straightened in two sections. The first is where the freeway currently wraps around the Clayton Homes housing project (which will get axed, in the current scheme), and the second is where it dips in and slices the University of Houston Downtown campus in two. What is bad news for Clayton Homes is good news for James Bute Park, currently isolated and unused, which will be able to increase in size, and UH Downtown will be able to stitch its bifurcated campus back together.

Despite all the work it has taken to get to this point, unknowns still abound. There are plans for the Hardy Toll Road to be extended to downtown, but it is administered separately by the Harris County Toll Road Authority and only appears as dashed lines on TxDOT's latest published plans. All the lovely park schemes are just that until they get private funding. TxDOT is not the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, and the city doesn't seem to have the wherewithal to fund such projects itself. There are numerous issues with convoluted and discontinuous city streets just to the east and north of downtown that should be addressed but so far haven't been included in a holistic examination of all the effects the new plan will have on adjacent areas. Induced demand has brought traffic to a standstill on the new Katy Freeway, but TxDOT suggests no options other than to build bigger freeways. And finally, the kicker: TxDOT doesn't actually have the money to build the entire project and is not currently sure when or if the money will become available.

All in all, while TxDOT's is not as radical a proposal as, say, what happened in Portland, Oregon, where money for new freeways was instead used to build its first light rail lines in the early 1980s, for Houston it is a big step in the right direction. It is to be hoped that new freeway projects from here on out will continue to incorporate stakeholders' considerations into master plans that are as sensitive and nuanced in their way as this one has slowly but surely become.

Ben Koush is an architect and writer based in Houston.