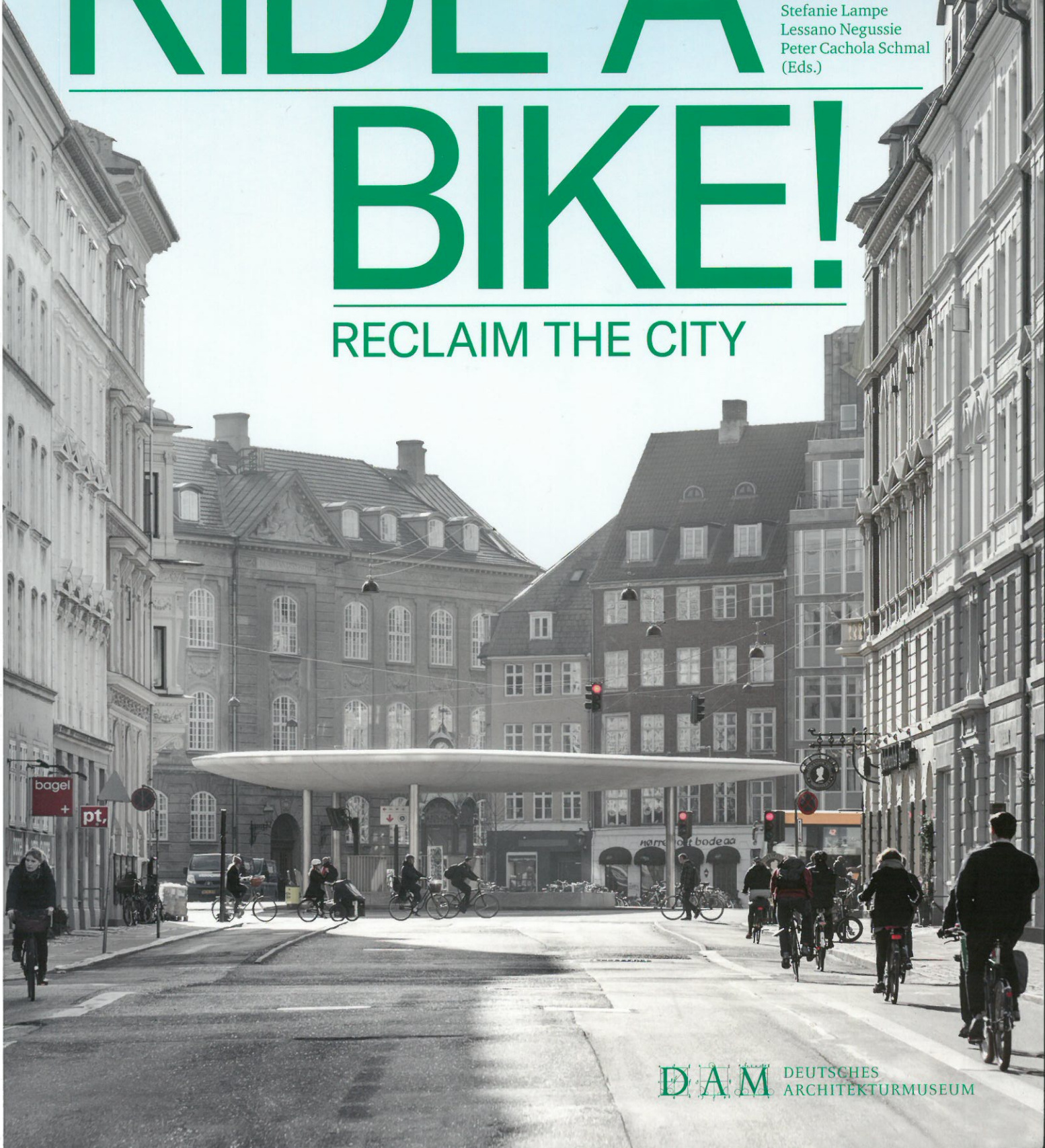


RIDE A

Annette Becker
Stefanie Lampe
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(Eds.)

BIKE!

RECLAIM THE CITY



DAM DEUTSCHES
ARCHITEKTURMUSEUM

RIDE A BIKE!

RECLAIM THE CITY

EDITED BY
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Stefanie Lampe
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Birkhäuser Basel

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BUFFALO BAYOU PARK

HOUSTON, USA



1

LOCATION	Sabine Street to Shepherd Drive, Houston
COMPLETION	2015
DESIGN	Landscape architects: SWA Group, Houston; architects: Page Southerland Page, Houston; horticultural/specialty landscape architects: Reed Hilderbrand, Cambridge; civil engineering: United Engineers, Houston; Traffic Engineers: AIA Engineers, Houston
CLIENT	Buffalo Bayou Partnership, N/A, owned by City of Houston and Harris County Flood Control
PROGRAMME	0.6 km ² park within an important urban floodway, including over 14,000 trees and the restoration of over 50 per cent of the park's landscape to its native ecological condition

The last time a hurricane slammed into Houston, Buffalo Bayou Park was a very different place.

In 2008, just a few weeks before Hurricane Ike, I moved to the swampy, sprawling city. Houston struck me as wider than it was deep, spreading out more than 1,500 square kilometres across the prairie but only rarely rising more than a few storeys into the sky. This was a city of parking lots and strip malls – long and low-slung, flat and far-flung – with streets designed to move cars and

everything else designed for their convenience. Since the car is the rule, to see someone on foot or on a bike was to see something exceptional. All Houston pedestrians have a version of the same story: they'll be biking or walking to their destination when a car pulls over and asks if they're OK, if they need a ride.

And when I first saw Buffalo Bayou Park, no one would have described it as 'iconic'. Though the park existed, the trails were more like desire lines.

Crude footpaths had been worn into the banks, shaped by shoes and bicycle tyres. Vast stretches of the park were inaccessible, choked out by thick invasive vegetation that not only barricaded views of the bayou itself but was creating unhealthy monocultures.

Often, even in the middle of the day, I would be alone on the trails, save for a few people who may have been homeless and were camping out.

Now, in 2017, the park is iconic. After a redevelopment project, funded in part by a Houston-based foundation and a dedicated non-profit that stewards the green space, the park has been redone – reimagined, reconfigured, revitalised.

Scott McCready of SWA Group, the firm behind the redesign, once told me he envisioned the 3.7 kilometres of the park as a series of 'rooms'. I like to think of it as a series of sensations. To ride the trails now is to experience a progression of views and physical phenomena that's unlike anything else in the city. Either on foot or on a



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- 1 One of the new bridges for pedestrians and bicyclists crossing Buffalo Bayou
- 2 Buffalo Bayou Park leads directly to Downtown Houston

bike, you can descend and dip low, skimming the surface of the bayou like a dragonfly, and you can rise high on a climb to take in views of skyscrapers.

You can cling close to the cool concrete of a retaining wall that's shaded by trees, and you can expand up and out to the warm brightness of a meadow of native grasses and wildflowers.

You can see works of public art and reclaimed infrastructure, new pavilions and open spaces, gardens and historic cemeteries, views of the skyline and the sky, even a new restaurant.

To complete the entirety of this sequence, to explore its permutations of low paths and high trails, climbs and descents, prospects and refuges, landscapes and structures, is to experience the city at its very best. But it is a limited experience.

The bayou has always been surrounded by two high-speed streets, Allen Parkway and Memorial Drive. In a very Houston way, these streets are excellent for cars, but they're dangerous, useless, really, for everyone else. Crosswalks are few and far between. The redevelopment project spilled just slightly outside the boundaries of the park, as new pedestrian bridges were installed and new crosswalks added, but these seem to reinforce the danger without addressing the lack of accessibility to the park on the whole. It is better now, but it is still not good enough. The contradictions inherent in the redevelopment make the new Buffalo Bayou Park so typically Houston. Lovely though it is, the park is a closed system that succeeds as a place in and of itself but fails to connect in meaningful ways to the larger city.

Fortunately, the city is beginning to talk to itself in meaningful ways about connections. But, even with a new 'bike master plan' in place, approved by city council in 2015 and recommending where it makes sense to build new on-street, dedicated lanes and other infrastructure, the larger city struggles to connect.

Moreover, almost all of this is nullified by the imminent threat of more flooding and more hurricanes. Houston is beset by almost annual 'hundred-year floods', in which the bayou rises out of its banks and inundates not only the park but Allen Parkway and Memorial Drive too. It happened in 2008 during Hurricane Ike. It's now happened three years in a row.

In August 2017, Hurricane Harvey stalled over the city, dumping more than 125 centimetres of rain in just a few days, overwhelming the city's ability to drain itself and forming pools of floodwater that inundated both brand new subdivisions and historic neighbourhoods alike. Buffalo Bayou Park, and all its newfangled amenities, its high-comfort bike paths and spectacular vistas, was completely underwater for at least a week.

And in a flash, the city's best place was gone. As the potentially contaminated sludge sediment that the floodwaters have left behind is cleared away and the park is restored to functionality, the limitations of the city's piecemeal urbanisation are clear. Buffalo Bayou Park is the best place in the city when we can use it, and it's a painful reminder when we can't that it's just about all Houston has. — *Allyn West*

- 3 Site plan
- 4 At its eastern end Buffalo Bayou Park is overstretched by the Gulf Freeway (Route 45)



3

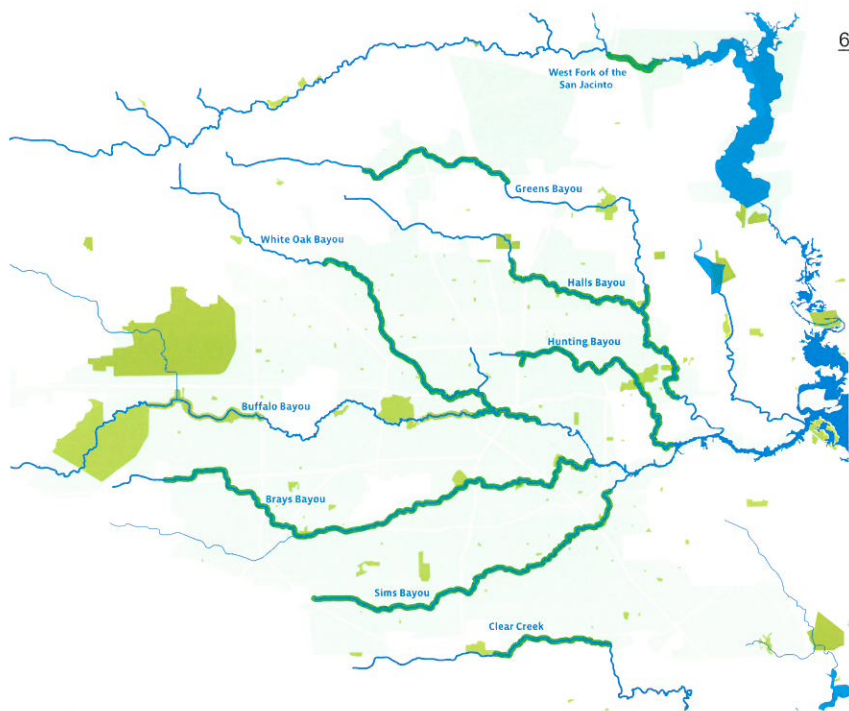


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- 5 View over Houston. In the middle between the Highways Buffalo Bayou Park, in the Background Downtown Houston.
- 6 Buffalo Bayou Park acts as a catalyst and case study for Bayou Greenways, a citywide initiative to transform more than 3,000 acres of under-utilized open space into equitably distributed linear park green space.
- 7 There are five Bikeshare stations of *Houston B-Cycle* directly at or near entrances to Buffalo Bayou Park



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