

Top Flight

# New facilities in a postindustrial Texan landscape welcomes migratory birds—and onlookers

By [Lila Allen](#) • June 16, 2021 • [Architecture](#), [News](#), [Southwest](#), [Sustainability](#)



On High Island, a new, elevated 700-square-foot long canopy walkway, designed by SWA Group and SCHAUM/SHIEH, weaves through the 177-acre site, allowing visitors birds-eye views of the surrounding flora and fauna. (Jonnu Singleton/Courtesy SWA Group)

SHARE [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Email](#)

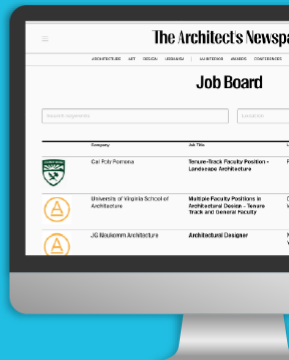
At first blush, High Island, [Texas](#), sounds downright dystopian. A site of 20th-century oil extraction, the landscape has as its defining feature a massive salt dome—a pimple-like swell rising 38 feet above sea level. Located on the eastern side of Galveston

## Firms are hiring.

Reach real architects with the **AN Job Board**

Connecting AEC Firms with job seekers.

[Learn More](#)



But for some, High Island is a haven: each spring, the site welcomes thousands of migratory birds on their northward journey from Mexico that are drawn to the freshwater reservoirs and local flora. Ten thousand birders flock to High Island's bird sanctuaries annually, including Smith Oaks, a 177-acre site operated by the Houston Audubon Society. Now that site is better equipped to welcome them, thanks to the introduction of a 700-foot-long canopy walkway and support facilities from architects SWA Group and SCHAUM/SHIEH.

## Training Notes

Leaders. Thinkers. Solvers.

Livestreaming every Friday at 1PM ET.

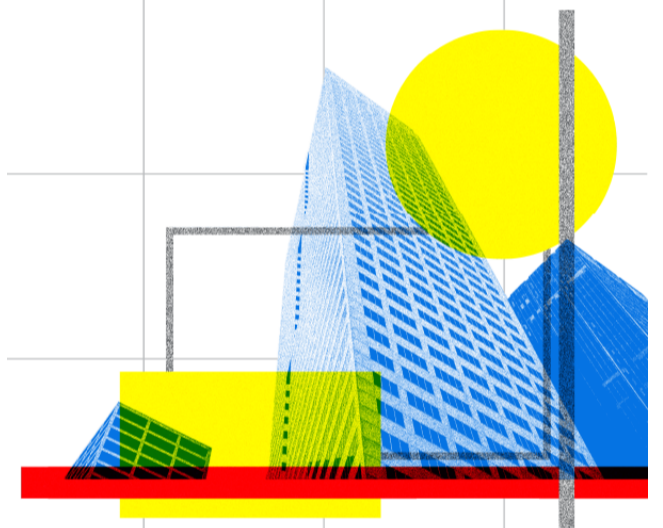
facadesi7AM

WE ARE LIVE IN

# DALLAS

July 22, 2021

Marriott Downtown



### Trending Now

- 1 [The 2021 Chicago Prize Competition tasks designers with reimagining an imperiled Thompson Center](#)
- 2 [Why everybody's mad at Anish Kapoor \(hint: it involves the blackest black\)](#)
- 3 [Park and playgrounds lead the NYC Public Design Commission's 39th Excellence in Design awards](#)
- 4 [Chain10 showcases the power of time and light at the 2021 Venice Biennale](#)
- 5 [The National Building Museum's Summer Block Party returns with an outdoor outing](#)
- 6 [Check out this year's virtual end-of-year exhibitions from architecture students across the country](#)
- 7 [Henning Larsen ditches the standard office block lobby for its first London project](#)

## New facilities in a postindustrial Texan landscape welcomes migratory birds—and onlookers



Thousands of migratory birds—and nature-loving tourists—flock to the freshwater reservoirs of Smith Oaks bird sanctuary in High Island, Texas each year. (Jonnu Singleton)

SWA, which Houston Audubon has engaged in a larger master-planning initiative for the High Island site, sees the interventions as a means of making the landscape and fauna accessible to a larger population. The Kathrine G. McGovern Canopy Walkway opened in the late spring of 2020, providing an outdoor escape for Houstonians an hour and a half up the road. Matt Baumgarten, an associate principal in SWA's Houston office and design lead on the project, pointed out that the new elevated path immerses visitors in the landscape in a new way, “getting people up in the trees” and carving out “visual and educational accessibility that wasn't here before.” (He and his children have frequented the site since the project's opening last year.)

**Firms  
are hiring.**

Reach real architects with  
the AN Job Board.  
Connecting AEC Firms  
with job seekers.  
[Learn More](#)

**ALPOLIC**  
METAL COMPOSITE MATERIALS

Calculate and compare  
warranty values today.



### Popular Posts

- 1 [Prefab startup wunderkind Katerra is shutting down](#)
- 2 [Two historic homes in Lexington, Kentucky face potential demolition](#)
- 3 [Two historic Brutalist buildings in Trenton, New Jersey are being demolished for surface parking](#)
- 4 [Terence Riley, former Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at the MoMA, is dead](#)
- 5 [KPF is designing another Manhattan supertall just blocks from One Vanderbilt](#)
- 6 [Cooper Robertson awarded riverfront master plan for Middletown, Connecticut](#)
- 7 [Will SHoP's 111 West 57th Street supertall house the world's largest NFT museum?](#)

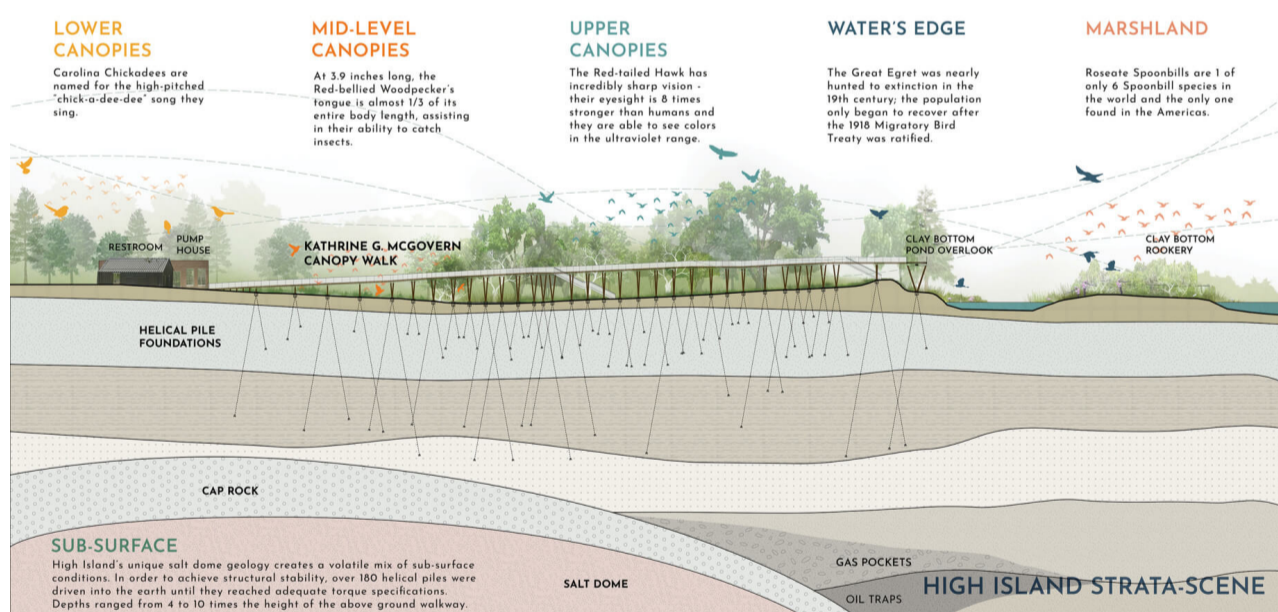
**AN** DIGITAL  
EDITION

Sponsored by

**KALWALL**  
high performance translucent building systems

## New facilities in a postindustrial Texan landscape welcomes migratory birds—and onlookers

Building in a bird sanctuary is a sensitive endeavor. Nesting seasons had to be factored into construction timelines, and the walkway needed to seamlessly integrate into the surroundings so as not to disturb bird populations. To accomplish that, the designers embraced visual and acoustic forms of camouflage and a V-shaped base that was minimally invasive. The designers eschewed noisy metal decking in favor of kiln-dried southern yellow pine, a readily available material, so that the decking could be repaired easily as needed. “You can’t necessarily make something that’s going to last 500 years, but we did need the walkway to take high wind loads and copious rainfall,” said Baumgarten. Natalia Beard, principal in charge of the project at SWA, said that Smith Oaks’ industrial remnants were also taken as cues for the detailing of the underside. “It looks like this structure has always been here,” she said.



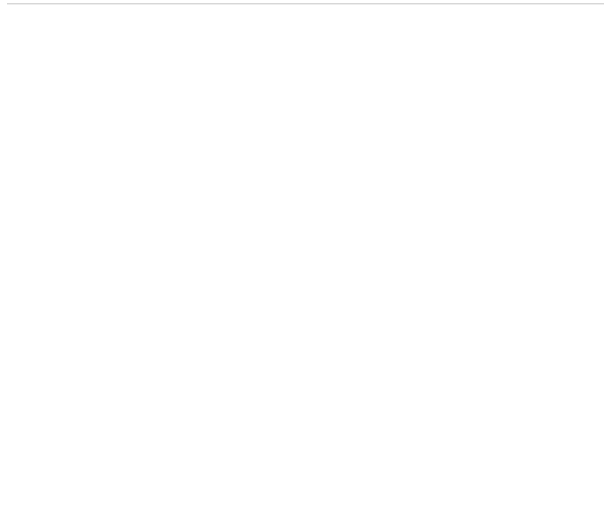
The structure’s minimally invasive design visually integrates it with the natural environment while protecting the homes of the park’s avian residents. (Courtesy SWA Group)

Elsewhere at Smith Oaks, the Houston- and New York City-based firm SCHAUM/SHIEH has completed two structures to support bird-peeping visitors. A 1920s brick pump house left over from the site’s oil-extracting years has been renewed and transformed into a flexible open-air pavilion. Adjacent to it, the designers have built a new concrete structure containing restrooms, water fountains, and an information kiosk. Whereas SWA’s walkway was intended to blend into the landscape, however, this structure needed to suggest arrival, explained Troy Schaum, co-principal at the studio: “Even if you’re one person down there—which often you might be—you would feel welcome, and it would be a marker that this is it,

## New facilities in a postindustrial Texan landscape welcomes migratory birds—and onlookers

composition was inspired by the wind-bent local trees, said Schaum.

In all areas, the avian populations came before anything else: if there was any evidence of disruption to a habitat during build-out, for example, construction had to cease. (Schaum said that there was even concern about the noise of the door closers on the bathroom potentially startling birds.) In activity and form, the goal was to intervene as little as possible: “It’s easier in architecture to imagine a solution that’s built, or that’s an action,” said Schaum. “It’s very hard to imagine a solution born out of restraint.”



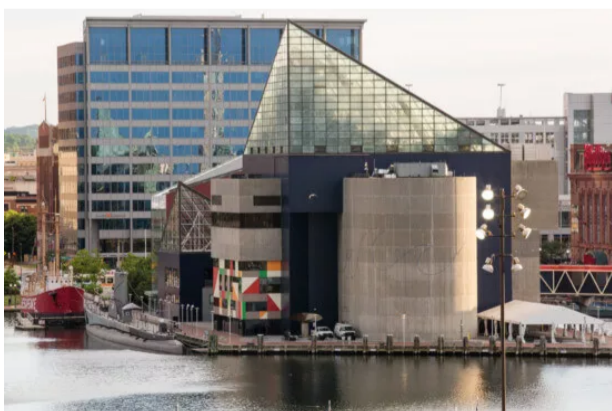
Birds

SCHAUM/SHIEH

Texas



### Related Posts



[Bird-Safe Baltimore](#)

**[Baltimore’s National Aquarium will make its iconic glass pyramid bird safe](#)**

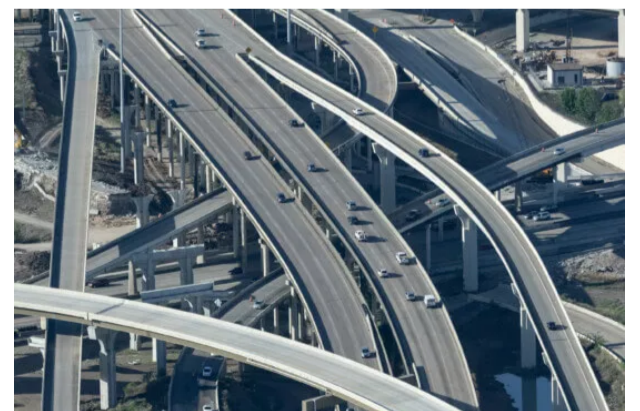
June 7, 2021



[Not Great](#)

**[Donald Judd’s Architecture Office in Marfa severely damaged by fire](#)**

June 4, 2021



[End Of The Road?](#)

**[A highway expansion project in Houston is the site of a battle over environmental justice](#)**

May 31, 2021

# New facilities in a postindustrial Texan landscape welcomes migratory birds—and onlookers

---

## Information

[Contact](#)

[About](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

## Regions

[International](#)

[West](#)

[Southwest](#)

[Midwest](#)

[East](#)

[Southeast](#)

[United States](#)

## Topics

[AN INTERIOR](#)

[Architecture](#)

[Art](#)

[Design](#)

[Development](#)

[Preservation](#)

[Transportation](#)

[Urbanism](#)

## Newsletters

[City Terrain](#)

[Facades+](#)

[Monday Morning](#)

[Late Edition: East](#)

[Late Edition: West](#)

[Late Edition: Midwest](#)

[Late Edition: Southwest](#)

[SpecSheet](#)

## Conferences

[Re-use Summit](#)

[Facades+](#)

[Tech+](#)

[TimberCon](#)