

The Design Standards for Buffalo Bayou's Downtown Sector are intended for use by public agencies and private entities as they develop projects along Houston's historic waterway. All property owners and developers are urged to abide by these guidelines as they plan and construct their waterfront projects.

Design Standards Objectives

- To create a continuous pedestrian walkway/trail along Buffalo Bayou's downtown waterfront
- To transform Buffalo Bayou's downtown waterfront into a high profile visitor destination and recreational amenity, thereby enhancing Houston's image as a desirable place to live, work and visit
- To establish the downtown waterfront as a prestigious development corridor that promotes quality urban design

Bayou Segment Categories

The Buffalo Bayou Partnership has created a Master Plan diagram of Buffalo Bayou which designates four distinct bayou development categories, each representing desired design characteristics. (Please see categories listed inside this publication.)

Design Characteristics

ACTIVITIES Downtown's Buffalo Bayou waterfront is envisioned to be an active, people-oriented environment. Visitors should be able to walk or cycle along the water, to sit comfortably, to rest or picnic, and to watch or participate in assemblies, group events and performances.

The downtown bayou environment should recognize the different people-use cycles of downtown: daytime working, nighttime entertainment and weekend recreation.

When possible or appropriate, activities along the bayou should reflect the activities in the adjacent land use. For example: A building with primarily office uses should allow for adequate lunch and break time connection to the bayou by providing terraces and patios and by locating snack or dining facilities with an attractive bayou view. Likewise, a theater arts building should provide outdoor amphitheaters and other rehearsal spaces along the bayou to allow interaction between performance artists and the public.

BAYOU SETBACKS Minimum building setbacks from the edge of the bayou waterline are recommended to allow activities, access and visibility to occur between the building and bayou. Greater setbacks are needed in the Pastoral Parkspace segment category and lesser setbacks are required in the Urban Green Parkspace and Urban Plaza Parkspace segment categories. Setbacks are intended to create an incentive to locate and orient people-friendly building elements towards the waterfront.

WATER'S EDGE At normal low water, Buffalo Bayou's water edge will vary depending on the intended use of the waterway's banks. A totally natural edge condition in the Pastoral Parkspace area will transition to a hard, urban waterfront section in the central business district. A hard edge is needed to allow access to the immediate water's edge and to protect the bank from erosion-intense usage.

CONSTRUCTION Materials used along the bayou need to be durable and capable of being submerged during periods of high water. Buffalo Bayou carries a heavy silt load and will deposit silt during every period of high water; the selection of materials needs to accommodate frequent silt removal. All vertical elements need to be designed to resist water pressure from hung-up debris which is caused by high water levels.

Textured concrete walks and retaining walls will meet minimum design standards. Developers are encouraged to upgrade materials and finishes. Walking surfaces need to be safe when wet, yet smooth enough to be easily cleaned after a storm.

PLANTING Even in the city's urban core, the bayou corridor should remain a green passageway. Trees, particularly bald cypress, should be planted along the bayou promenade and vines should be planted to cover vertical walls and retaining structures. Shrubs and ground covers that can survive periodic inundation can be used judiciously. Lawn areas will need to be periodically lowered and replanted as silt deposition can raise the lawn surface several feet over a short period of time. Native trees, shrubs and grasses should be utilized as much as possible.

ACCESS Waterfront properties should provide for a trail or walkway connection along the bayou. There can be two levels of walkway, one at an upper level above the flood water elevation and a lower trail closer to the water suitable for cycling and connecting to the existing set of trails.

The street level pedestrian system should directly connect to the bayou trails, with safe, easy and well-defined connections at street crossings. Building lobbies also should connect to bayou-side walkways and terraces.

VISIBILITY Because the bayou's downtown reaches are envisioned as an extension of the urban street experience, it is very important to have visibility from the street to the bayou, from building to bayou and from the bayou back to the street and building. Building massing and orientation should be carefully considered to maximize exposure of the bayou environment.

Visibility is important for real and apparent security. Active building uses should be placed along the bayou side of properties so there will be many eyes on the waterway and its trails and terraces. People on the trails should be able to see building activities and know that they can be viewed. All normal CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) principles should apply to the urban bayou environment.

PUBLIC ART Whether it is site specific pieces, infrastructure design or functional elements, Buffalo Bayou holds enormous opportunity for many exciting public art collaborations on the part of artists, architects, landscape architects, and neighborhood residents. The city's historic waterway is already home to many significant public art installations, including Jesús Morales' Police Memorial, Mel Chin's Sesquicentennial Park pillars, and the temporary artworks found in the Buffalo Bayou Artpark.

Design Review

For over a decade, the Buffalo Bayou Partnership has been fostering a vision for downtown's waterfront. The organization should be seen as an invaluable resource for Buffalo Bayou's history, conditions, and uses.

Project proposals for bayou development should be reviewed with the Buffalo Bayou Partnership at their earliest stage of diagramming and conceptualization to see if there are missed opportunities to enhance the bayou environment or to see if there are potential fatal flaws in the project program. At this point in time, the Partnership can share with the development entity unique or particular planning concerns related to that location along the bayou or identify other projects underway that may affect the planning and design of the project at hand.

