



# MIDTOWN PARK

HOUSTON, TEXAS, UNITED STATES

*Finalist: 2021 ULI Americas Awards for Excellence, Urban Open Space Category*



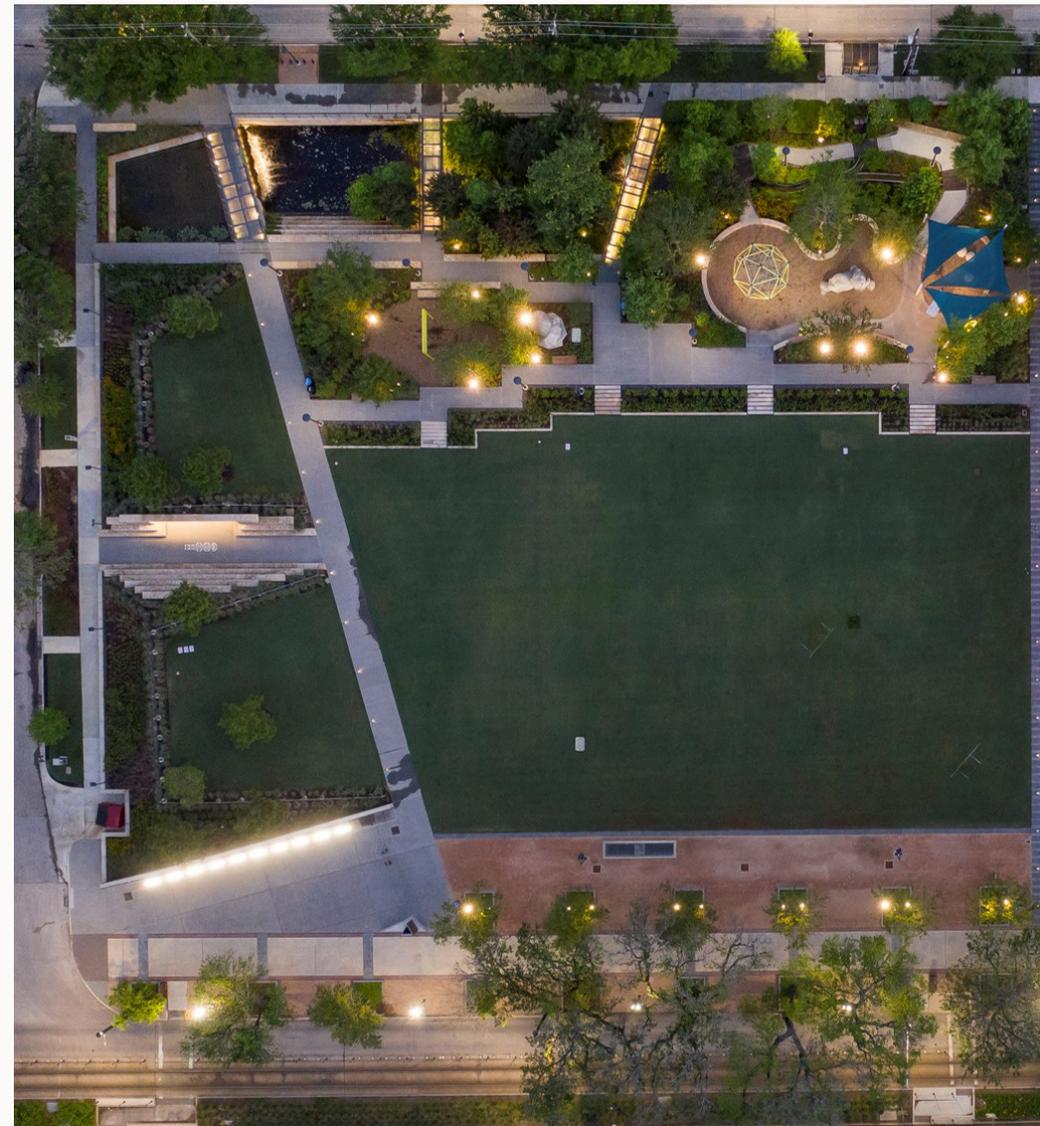
Developed through a public/private partnership, Midtown Park transformed an abandoned property in central Houston into a dynamic and resilient urban oasis. Located in a neighborhood that is expecting tremendous growth in residential population, Midtown Park provides new green space and recreational amenities close to housing, retail, and transit.

**Owner/developer:** Midtown Redevelopment Authority

**Designers:** Design Workshop, Walter P. Moore, Urban Architecture

**Size:** 3 acres (1.2 ha)

Cover Image: Trees and gardens at Midtown Park thrive above an underground parking garage. *(Design Workshop)*



Fulfilling park programming needs in Midtown Park was of utmost importance in the implementation of the project. By understanding the community's desires, the design team assembled critical program elements while maintaining flexibility for a wide range of park users. *(Design Workshop)*

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## Park Overview

Situated between two major employment hubs—downtown Houston and the Texas Medical Center—Midtown Park fulfills a vision established 20 years ago by the Midtown Redevelopment Authority (MRA) to create a premier park destination on a once-abandoned property and the last of the “super-blocks” in Midtown. The public park occupies half of the full six-acre (3.4 ha) redevelopment site, which includes retail space, a public parking garage located underneath the park, and a multifamily residential development. Midtown Park is easily accessible to adjacent residents and beyond, via a nearby light-rail stop and the pedestrian-oriented streetscapes surrounding the park.

Midtown Park consists of a variety of flexible, multi-functional spaces, including a great lawn, a pavilion and stage area, a playground, and a dog park. Designed to engage people of all ages and abilities, the park accommodates a variety of events and programs such as markets, fitness classes, music festivals, cultural activities, and dynamic art. Large berms reveal prominent views of downtown Houston and provide topographic relief to an otherwise flat terrain. A notable feature of Midtown Park is the bayou, a recirculating water feature that runs the entire length of the park, which mimics the natural bayous, shrubs, swamps, and wetlands of Houston.

Since opening in 2017, Midtown Park has welcomed more than 300,000 visitors who come to enjoy weekly and annual programming and the various flexible spaces within the park.

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## Social Equity and Community Engagement

Public meetings for the entire six-acre (3.4 ha) site helped engage community members in creating a vision that included a new public park. The Midtown Strategic Plan, adopted in 2013, followed an engagement strategy that included community workshops, focus groups, and online input. The ultimate design of the park supported the vision and goals of the strategic plan. Midtown Park transformed an underused site into a high-quality public space that improves the quality of life for residents and workers in the Midtown District.

The implementation of Midtown Park also helped address a park deficit within the Midtown District: upon its completion, nearly 2,000 more residents had access to a world-class park within a five-minute walk of home. Midtown Park has hosted several large cultural events that celebrate the diversity and richness of Houston, such as World Series celebrations and the Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican Festival. During these events, as many as 15,000 attendees have come from all over the city.

Midtown Park was designed to be accessible to people of all abilities: the pavilion, bayou, fountain, and play areas are all wheelchair accessible via ramps and flush surfacing.



The bayou not only provides on-site detention but also creates opportunities for learning and teaching about natural systems and hydrology, empowering park patrons with knowledge and insight. (*Design Workshop*)

Play elements are flexible in nature and do not require an able body for interaction. All other surfacing and ground materials are designed to be accessible to all.

The park serves the needs of the neighborhood and greater community by improving access to green space and amenities for its 70,000 annual visitors while creating a balance of programming, recreational opportunities, and events within the park that is defined by its focus on environmental sustainability.

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## Resilience and Sustainability

Sustainability and resilience were integral to the development of Midtown Park, and the bayou is a signature feature of this approach. Along with bioswales and rain gardens, the bayou was designed with an assortment of native plant materials and has proved to enhance economic and ecological resilience by protecting against flooding while also improving water quality and wildlife habitat for amphibians, insects, and birds.

The extensive rainwater collection system stores water from the lid of the underground parking garage, the roof of the restroom, the plaza area immediately adjacent to the restroom, and the north half of the pavilion. The water is stored in a 70,000-gallon (265,000 liter) subsurface cistern to be reused on site for irrigating plant material or in the bayou if needed.

Despite being located above an underground parking garage, an environment where trees and gardens thrive in adequate soil volumes was created by the design team. The use of native plants and sustainable construction methods is allowing Midtown Park to become Houston's first SITES-certified project, a rating system designed to protect ecosystems. The park's approach to sustainability and particularly stormwater management helps offset operational costs.

## Funding

The Midtown Redevelopment Authority (MRA) and the parallel Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone No. 2 (TIRZ) were created in 1994 to redevelop the area and provide an operating and financing vehicle. The construction of Midtown Park was made possible primarily through public-sector MRA/TIRZ funds but the project also relied on corporate sponsorships for roughly 20 percent of the cost. The total cost of developing Midtown Park was about \$48 million, which included the land, the construction of the underground parking garage, and the park elements.

Private redevelopment totaling more than \$400 million has occurred in immediate adjacency to the park, and MRA/TIRZ is able to use tax increment collected on this investment to capture \$60 million in capital that not only completely covered the cost of the park but also has provided \$12 million for future capital projects.