

*Prepared by The Trust for Public Land  
Center for City Park Excellence  
Washington, D.C.  
Written by Peter Harnik  
June 1, 2004*



# RENEWING THE SOURCE

---

THE REDESIGN OF A SAN ANTONIO PARK  
RECONCILES CITIZENS FROM OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE TRACKS



---

THE TRUST *for* PUBLIC LAND  
CONSERVING LAND FOR PEOPLE

## “Renewing a Historic Park”

Landscape Architecture

June 2004

### Contact:

Peter Harnik  
Director, Center for City Park Excellence  
The Trust for Public Land  
660 Pennsylvania Ave., S.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20003  
(202) 543-7552  
peter.harnik@tpl.org

---

*The Trust for Public Land  
conserves land for people to enjoy  
as parks, gardens, and other natural places,  
ensuring livable communities  
for generations to come.*

www.tpl.org

The Alamo may be more famous and the Riverwalk more visited, but the most venerable spot in the most authentic city in Texas is San Pedro Springs Park.

The origin of the park is a spring from time immemorial, but this isn't a dusty "historical" park: a few feet away is a modern, groundbreaking landscape incorporating the city's most popular swimming facility. San Pedro's vibrant history plays off all the forces pushing and pulling today's San Antonio, including geology, hydrology, race, class and the politics of park renovation.

San Antonio is an anomaly in Texas. It's big (America's ninth largest city, with more than a million residents) but it's a world away from Dallas' gleaming skyscrapers, Houston's miles of McMansions or Austin's go-go technology pavilions. With roots reaching back to Spanish conquistadors, Catholic missionaries and native Coahuitecan hunters, San Antonio, surprisingly, retains many of its old downtown buildings (thanks to façade easements); it's kept a number of the old Spanish irrigation acequias (including one in San Pedro Park); and the world-famous Riverwalk is, from many angles, so quaint it feels downright European.

As for San Pedro Springs Park, historic is almost too mild a word for it. It's older than Patterson Park in Baltimore (1827), Laclede Park in St. Louis (1812), the Public Square in Cleveland (1796), the Pueblo in Los Angeles (1781) and Johnson Square in Savannah (1733) - and when New York's Central Park was opened, San Pedro had already been in the public domain for 130 years. First described in 1709 by Father Felix de Espinosa as "water enough to supply a town," the springs were officially set aside 20 years later for an ejido -- a "public place" -- by King Philip of Spain.

As with all other ancient public spaces, Agua de San Pedro didn't start out as much of a park and it didn't become one for a long time. (In fact, the word "park" didn't achieve its modern meaning until around 1850.) San Pedro served as a place to get drinking and irrigation water, wash clothes, bivouac the troops of various wars (including Mexican General Santa Anna's soldiers before they attacked the Alamo in 1836), hold prisoners of war, stage contests, host picnics and deliver political speeches (including a pro-union stemwinder by Governor Sam Houston in 1860 which was so effective that San Antonioans overwhelmingly voted against secession).

Sometime after 1852 the area around San Pedro Springs began to take on the trappings of what passed for a park at that time. Under the guidance of a Swiss immigrant family, the area gradually became a pleasure ground that included artificial lakes, a race course, an aviary, a Mexican lion, a blind emerald-eyed dancing bear, a pavilion, a saloon, a theater and a dance hall. Over the next 70 years the park evolved through an astonishing variety of alterations as a result of changing economics, architecture, technologies, fashions, amusements, law enforcement and just plain entrepreneurial commitment. Buildings were erected and demolished, lighting was added, new sports were accommodated and old ones dropped, flower gardens planted and animals exhibited, and parking was inexorably increased. The park arguably reached its zenith in the 1920s, becoming San Antonio's central park, when the sides and bottom of the lake were cemented, turning it into a huge swimming pool. The city also built in the park the first branch library and an iconic performing arts center. Ten years later San Pedro began to teeter, partly

because of cutbacks due to the Depression and partly because of the opening of a new park, Brackenridge. Like a “big box” compared to a mom-and-pop store, Brackenridge was larger, further out in the country and glitzier, with such attractions as a new art museum and the relocated zoo.

Then, in the 1940s, through a bizarre convergence of natural and man-made calamities, San Pedro Springs Park crashed.

Water had always been paramount in San Pedro - pure water springing miraculously from the gargantuan Edwards Aquifer, 10 separate streams escaping through cracks in the Balcones Fault after a trip of up to 60 miles. In the '40s, thanks to a drought and to relentless pumping for San Antonio's growing population, the aquifer dropped and the unthinkable happened: the springs sputtered to a trickle. Sewage seeped into the pool which became fetid, and the concrete walls threatened to collapse. In 1946 a polio epidemic broke out and children were told to avoid public gatherings. Finally, a freak wind-storm uprooted many of the park's grand oaks and cypresses.

With wild and beautiful 336-acre Brackenridge Park only a few miles away, the emasculated 46-acre San Pedro Springs Park lost its preeminence. Perhaps the populace felt it wasn't worth fixing. Gradually San Pedro was reduced from central park to district park to neighborhood park. Soon it wasn't strong enough to help maintain even its neighborhood, which also lost vitality. Asphalt roadways and parking lots proliferated haphazardly; the organically shaped natural lake was replaced with a rectangular, chlorinated swimming pool surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire; and various institutions began to request encroachments in the park. The proposal to convert it into a college campus was defeated, but the offer to privately build (and later expand) a tennis center was approved. By 1983 a quarter of the park was effectively privatized by a racquet club, and a massive grandstand cast its shadow across the very springs that had created the park.

“It's taken almost 25 years to bring this park back, and we've still got about five years of work to go,” said Bob Comeaux, long-time board member of the Alta Vista Neighborhood Association and one of the sparkplugs who made it happen. “I remember the starting point vividly. Our city councilwoman, Maria Berriozabal, gave a speech at a community event and said, ‘We've got the second oldest park in the country and it is in such bad shape.’ I thought to myself, that's incredible -- we live by the second oldest park in the country!”

In truth, San Pedro is probably America's seventh oldest park, but the actual number doesn't matter. The concept was profoundly motivational to San Antonioans, particularly to residents of Alta Vista.

Alta Vista is the kind of mixed-income, mixed-race, mixed-lifestyle neighborhood that can effect change. Residents of poorer Beacon Hill on the other side of the Burlington

Northern tracks didn't have the time and the political wherewithal to fight City Hall; residents of upscale Monte Vista to the park's northeast are wealthy enough to "get out of Dodge," as Comeaux put it, when San Antonio's summer heat becomes oppressive. Saving the precious greenspace was up to the folks of Alta Vista, people who didn't have second homes to let them off the hook but who had the political strength to organize and agitate.

The single worst injury to the park was the construction by the tennis center of a new 45-foot-high grandstand in 1978. Neighbors who had been only dimly aware of a subtle decline in San Pedro were faced with the blatant intrusion. The assault was not only physical but also sociological since few of the club's players lived in the community. Yet it was not the only issue facing the neighborhood. Alta Vista had become dangerous, people were moving out, and the park was partially to blame.

"We would hold rallies and chant, 'Bring the neighbors back in - Send the hoods a-packin'," said Comeaux, a labor organizer who joined with some neighbors to rejuvenate the Alta Vista Neighborhood Association. "Crime was the biggest problem, but turnout at the meetings was always biggest when we talked about the park."

Despite fundraisers, rallies, letters to the editor and endless meetings, progress was frustratingly slow. Finally, after more than a decade, a breakthrough came. The city council put a \$43-million infrastructure bond issue on the ballot in May, 1994, and it passed handily. Of the total, \$4 million was for San Pedro.

"In retrospect, you can trace the rejuvenation of the neighborhood to the May 7th vote," says Hector Cardenas, president of Friends of San Pedro Springs Park. However, at the time no one knew that standing in the way were three political hurdles, like invisible mines in a field.

Even before the money became available, the city's park department had hired RBVK Associates, a San Antonio-based design firm, to draw up a master plan for restoring the park. Working intensively with community members and the city, the firm devised an ambitious scheme to recreate the romantic lake and to construct an entirely new functional swimming pool a short distance away. (Since the springs continued to flow unevenly and unpredictably, both the lake and the pool would be filled with treated water pumped from the municipal system.) The RBVK plan also included renovation of the bandstand and the so-called "Old Fort," elimination of two fenced softball fields, elimination of the unsightly grandstand and more. The plan had multiple goals, but inevitably the driving force was thematic unity for San Pedro.

"But when you've got a park that evolved on its own for almost 300 years, it's not enough to simply say, 'Make it historically accurate,'" explained Mike Beatty, who left RBVK to form Beatty and Partners Architects and kept the project. "Which historical moment do you choose? Do you want it to look like a Civil War prisoner camp? Do you want to

arrive by horse? We decided to go with an adaptive reuse, not a historical restoration. We wanted some formality, certainly more pedestrian orientation, but we purposefully did not choose a Victorian light fixture - we're using one that is much more neutral."

Beatty and his partner, Terry Palmer, were able to rationalize many of the elements that had accreted randomly over time, eliminating unnecessary 1950s drainage ditches (though not the historically significant bridges over them, which now sit rather comically in the grass), burying all the utilities, removing an ugly concrete block restroom adjacent to the spring and depaving many roadway stubs. The park today has fully an acre less asphalt than before while it provides more parking spaces.

The first blow-up came when the community learned that the agreed-upon renovation plan was budgeted at \$9 million while the bond earmarked less than half that much. The city responded by phasing the construction over a multi-year period and making only one significant change: eliminating the swimming pool and merging swimming into a never-before-attempted concrete structure (dubbed a "lake-pool") with a pastoral appearance and no fence.

"As for the phasing," said Scott Stover, ASLA, park projects supervisor for the Parks and Recreation Department, "we all agreed that we would begin at the center - with the springs, the lake-pool and the tennis center - and move outward later."

The next assault, launched by the politically powerful San Antonio Tennis Association, almost buried the project. Through private fundraising the association had grown accustomed to writing its own ticket in the northeast quadrant of San Pedro Springs Park - so much so that the locals referred to the tennis center as "the country club" and its members as "09ers," after San Antonio's prestige zip code, 78209. (The center is technically public but is fenced and gated and feels private; during the park's nadir years, about 90 percent of all the landscaping work in San Pedro took place only within the tennis grounds.)

"The huge grandstand to view tennis matches was independently funded in 1978. That's what catalyzed the movement to redesign the park," said Stover. "But it took the tennis folks a long time to realize that fixing San Pedro meant dealing with the grandstand. At the 11th hour they came in and said, 'Don't touch anything here.'"

The meetings over the tennis center were vitriolic with both sides pulling out all the political stops; on the nightly news San Antonioans saw weeping Native Americans arguing with scowling Anglos in tennis whites. To the city's credit, it didn't slide into paralysis. With Beatty and Partners reworking design after design, the two sides finally compromised: the grandstand would come down and the center's layout would be repositioned, but the total number of courts would be maintained. "In the end it came out fabulous," said Joe Alderete, chair of the Tennis Center Advisory Committee.

Just when it seemed safe to begin construction, crisis number three hit like a bombshell:

the city attorney decided that liability concerns necessitated a fence around the lake-pool. Alta Vista roared in betrayed outrage. Pointing out that eight million tourists annually stroll the totally unfenced Riverwalk, they threatened to force the city to erect an ugly barrier there, too, if one were mandated at San Pedro. But the lawyers held firm.

Attending the showdown meeting was Malcolm Matthews, newly appointed director of the Parks and Recreation Department. It was his first day on the job and his first public meeting. Grabbing at an idea suggested by a newspaper columnist, Matthews made a suggestion: how about a removable fence to be used only during the swim season?

From a drowning standpoint, the compromise made no sense - the pool would be fenced when lifeguards were around and unprotected when they weren't. But it would control the crowds at San Antonio's most popular pool and, more important, both the lawyers and the community bought the concept.

"We made the choice out of necessity," Matthews said later. "They were going to hang us."

The lake-pool and the removable fence were approved, but neither had ever been tried before and no one knew if they could be built.

David Anthony Richelieu, the frustrated-architect-turned-journalist who had suggested the fence solution, says he got the idea from an Italian brochure he had once seen, but he didn't know if it had ever actually been built. And this was for a heavily used public facility, not some exclusive European residence.

"We had to design the fence modules with maximum uniformity so that putting them together every year wouldn't be like assembling a Swiss watch," architect Palmer said. In the end they were able to reduce the pieces to only four different shapes, based on the slightly sloping terrain, and each one fits into standard holes drilled in the concrete. In the fall, the fence is removed and the pieces stored in the bathhouse.

## The lake-pool is even more complex.

"The original lake was spring-fed," explained Palmer. "With the aquifer now so unpredictable, the city didn't want to risk that, so the remaining spring water is actually carried in two large bypass pipes under the pool. The lake looks spring-fed, but it really isn't - the spring water reemerges beyond the lake-pool and becomes the San Pedro River. The lake-pool uses recirculated, filtered city water and consists of a concrete structure sitting on a bed of drain gravel. Every now and then there's a lot of rain and the aquifer level rises - so we installed pressure release valves going up from underneath in case the aquifer rises too high. The pool is like a boat floating on the spring. It's a first."

To make it look natural, the lake-pool was given an unsymmetrical, organic shape and surfaced in dark plaster. It's cleaned regularly during swim season but allowed to accu-

mulate leaves and natural debris the rest of the year. The existing handsome allee of mature cypress trees was carefully protected during construction, and they provide not only cooling shade in the summer but a striking backdrop the rest of the year. The nearby natural spring which, though diminished, still flows, was brought to life with a new limestone and decomposed granite edge, “a way to keep it natural looking but to allow it to stand up to foot traffic,” according to Palmer.

The rest of phases I and II of the renovation proceeded smoothly with the rehabilitation of the 1890s bandstand and the historic “Old Fort” (reputed by some to be the oldest standing building in Texas but more likely erected in the 1850s), and the re-roofing of the library. The Tennis Center is now much less intrusive, with a Beatty-designed berm to soften the view up from the spring, although the powerful spotlights haven’t been modified and still glare out into the park at night.

Because of the phenomenal success of the Riverwalk downtown, San Antonio’s park system is world famous. The city also gets high marks for its recent massive land acquisition program to try to prevent development from sprouting over the critically important Edwards aquifer, from which San Antonio gets its drinking water. But in reality the park system is unbalanced. It scores high on economic development and water quality protection, but neighborhood parks tend to get lost in the shuffle and, with them, the park needs of many of the residents and taxpayers of the city.

In part, this is what makes the San Pedro story so exciting. The “regular folks” of the Alta Vista neighborhood turned out to be a very special group, indeed. But they might not have been able to succeed with the city if they had not been working with such a special place as San Pedro Springs Park. Now private groups are also rising to the occasion. Using a design created by RVK landscape architects, the public radio station recently sponsored a community xeriscaping project that serves to educate the public and to specifically attract species of birds, hummingbirds and butterflies.

A total of \$5.6 million has been spent thus far; the next influx of bond money, expected in 2007, will be used to remove two fenced softball fields, install a jogging trail and improve some footpaths. Meanwhile, Friends’ President Cardenas is on to his next project: helping lower income Alta Vista residents fix up their residences so they won’t be forced out by rising property values due to the improved park.