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"Imagine if this was wild. Why can't it be wild? Something you don't need to cut. There can be areas where you have this latent and nascent thing. Give it water, and something will pop up."

Walter Hood, designer and landscape architect



Jon Shapley/Staff photographer

New vision for MacGregor Park

Landscape architect plans to let nature play its part in \$54 million renovation plan

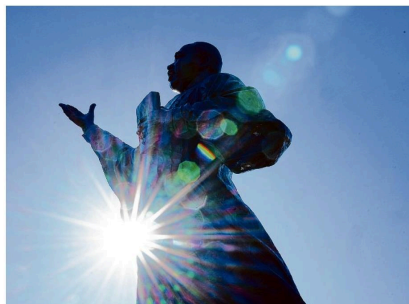
By Andrew Dansby STAFF WRITER

On a pleasant spring Saturday, Walter J. Hood takes a break from the commotion of the Art Bike Parade that occupies part of MacGregor Park and watches a few kids play basketball on the park's iconic covered court.

From a courtside bench, Hood — a renowned designer and landscape architect — scans part of the park's 65 acres and identifies some spaces that need attention. He points to some native grasses growing in a forgotten corner framed by blacktop.

"There need to be more areas like that," he said. "That should not be pushed out on the edge."

He gestures to the spaces around the basketball court. "Imagine if this was wild. Why can't it be wild? Something you don't need to cut. There can be areas



Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer

One of the standout features of MacGregor Park is a statue dedicated to civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

where you have this latent and nascent thing. Give it water, and something will pop up.

"Ecology is way down the list of things that matter. But in a place like Houston, ecology has to be important. Right?"

Hood's visit last week was his first to Houston since his Hood Design Firm was selected by the Houston Parks Board to lead the design of a \$54 million renovation of MacGregor Park that begins next year and will run about five years.

The project is largely driven by a \$27 million catalyst gift from the Kinder Foundation and involves a complicated matrix of parties assembled by the Houston Parks Board.

Houston Parks Board president and CEO Beth White called Hood "one of our most important thinkers in terms of urban spaces"

Park continues on G8

Top: Landscape architect Walter Hood looks at Brays Bayou as he surveys MacGregor Park during a recent visit.



Edward Brown is guarded by Kelvaughn Dorsey as they play basketball with friends at MacGregor Park. The park is seen as vital park of the community.

PARK

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"He's someone who's practice is all about the connections between history and culture and nature and public space," she said. "I love getting to see how his mind works and what his observations are when he's in a space. He has a real deep passion for beauty and functional beauty, connection to nature, and making spaces work."

Hood has a lot of natural attributes to work with. He also has a park that has been crucial to the surrounding communities.

Its tennis courts nurtured Olympic gold medalist Zina Garrison. Hakeem Olajuwon, Clyde Drexler and Moses Malone played basketball there. Darryl Scott, an influential Houston DJ, would play music and sell mixtapes at MacGregor in the 1980s. "I've been coming here for decades," said Bernard Freeman, better known as rapper and hamburger honcho Bun B. He was on hand at the park last week for the Art Bike Parade.

"I'm excited to see the intense attention, not just for the beautification of this park but for the community as well," Bun B said. "To give people a better neighborhood to present to the world. Third Ward, South Side ... there's so



Sean Smalls, from left, Michael DeGregorio and Walter Hood look at Brays Bayou as they survey MacGregor Park in anticipation of the \$54 million renovation plan.

much rich history here." Much of that history was created during a bygone era of park evolution. Hood outlines the different eras of urban park development — defined by Galen Cranz in her 1982 book "The Politics of Park Design" — that date back 175 years.

The first stage sought to provide what Hood calls "an antidote to the city." A new phase began around the turn of the 20th century, one where a spike in immigration pushed parks to include com-

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Bernard Freeman, aka rapper Bun B

munity centers and spaces to promote assimilation. The recreation era began around 1930. The survey for MacGregor took place in 1926.

The century since has been one of growth and attrition, of care and neglect. Hood — a MacArthur "genius grant" fellow in 2019 — has worked on landscape projects for museums like Cooper Hewitt in New York and the Broad in Los Angeles. The organization has also designed spaces like Lafayette Square Park in Oakland; Baldwin Hills Park

in Los Angeles and Hunter's Point in San Francisco.

The ecologies of American cities are all different, Hood said, but he'd like to change the language and morphologies common to many urban areas in the country.

"I hear this all the time," he said: "No maintenance." But what does that mean? It's like the phrase 'low-income housing.' Once you put these prefixes on top of something, you know what you're going to get? I'm trying to fight these monikers that gets set up. To get people to stop thinking of things as 'low-maintenance' or 'low-income.'

"I'd rather focus on living in an ecologically sound landscape that will take care of itself. That's what sustainability is about. Nature doesn't need us. Nature will take care of itself, right? It rains, it grows."

Hood brings up a project he worked on in the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

"It was an area with 70% vacancy," he said. "Give it a few years and then there are turkeys and rabbits running around. You can see nature breaking up the concrete. Black locust comes through, lives fast and dies, and maybe that makes way for an oak tree. It's about getting people to understand ecology as a system and not something that you have to come in and cut every week."

The Architect's Newspaper last year presented its cultural award to Hood Design Studio for its work on the International African American Museum in Charleston, S.C. Juror Michael Hsu wrote: "There's so much more to this project than just the architecture. In fact, it seems they purposefully let the landscape and the site speak louder than the new building. The way the form floats above the ground shows respect and allows a place for people to engage with history in a tactile way."

Hood has already started studying the space at MacGregor, as well as its history. He says he's excited about the prospect of working in Houston. He says he collaborated with Rick Lowe on a Project Row Houses installation 20 years ago. But MacGregor feels like an opportunity to leave a more lasting mark here.

His visit last week was just the kickoff, he said. "It's a chance to look, but mostly just listening to people. Someone wanted tall swings. One person wanted more ways to connect to the bayou. Some say, 'Don't get rid of this or that. It's sacred.'"



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