

Left: Programmatic features like the model boat basin and the ice rink attract the majority of visitors. Middle: Water features are popular amongst families with young childrens. Right: Quiet paths and shaded seating present opportunities to take in public art, have a conversation or simply relax.

## Benchmark: Discovery Green Houston, TX

### Cost to Build

\$125 Million

### Date Opened

October 2008

### Owned By

City of Houston,  
Local Government Corp.

### Operated By

Discovery Green Conservancy

### Size

11.78 Acres

### Place Description and Background Information

Discovery Green is an amenity for all of Houston that has supported the growth in downtown residents as well as major real estate investment in the area surrounding the new park. According to the Discovery Green Conservancy's website, "Discovery Green plays an important role in the City: it has engendered a level of ownership by all residents in the downtown core and throughout the region, and instilled a renewed sense of civic pride in the city." Adjacent to the convention center, between two professional sports team stadiums and only a short walk from the commercial and financial hub of Houston's high-rise downtown, Discovery Green's almost 12 acres is downtown Houston's first major urban park.

### Process

Through a process of land acquisition and visioning that began in 2002, the city of Houston and philanthropic partners established a public-private partnership with a mission to create a downtown green that would benefit the "public at large." The Brown Foundation, Kinder Foundation, Wortham Foundation and the Houston Endowment, Inc. were instrumental in getting the project started. The Discovery Green Conservancy, the partnership between local businesses, the City of Houston and several foundations, is responsible for managing and programming the park today and was instrumental in the early phases of visioning, fundraising and the design process.

Following the visioning workshops PPS helped implement, San Francisco-based Hargreaves Associates was selected to coordinate the design team. Landscape architects, architects, water feature and playground specialists and engineers created a thoroughly enjoyable experience right in the middle of downtown by keeping the community vision and experiences at the forefront of their designs. The variety of design elements reflects the community's diverse interests.

## Vision

*"Discovery Green's mission is to operate an urban park that serves as a village green, a source of health and happiness for our citizens, and a window into the diverse talents and traditions that enrich life in Houston."*

–Discovery Green Conservancy



Downtown buildings before Discovery Green



Downtown buildings after Discovery Green

## Timeline

- **2002:** City of Houston purchases two large parking lots adjacent to George R. Brown Convention Center
- **Early 2004:** Houston Center and Houston Center Gardens goes up for sale
- **Late 2004:** A public-private partnership between the City of Houston and philanthropic foundations purchases properties that ,when combined with nearby parking lots and a donated street (from the city) that had run through the gardens, totals slightly less than 12 acres
- **Spring 2005:** PPS, with recently formed Discovery Green Conservancy, begins coordinated workshops and exercises to engage the public in the design process, develops activity program for the park
- **2005:** Design team led by Hargreaves Associates uses community input in its plans for a new park
- **Fall 2005:** Construction starts
- **Spring 2008:** Discovery Green grand opening

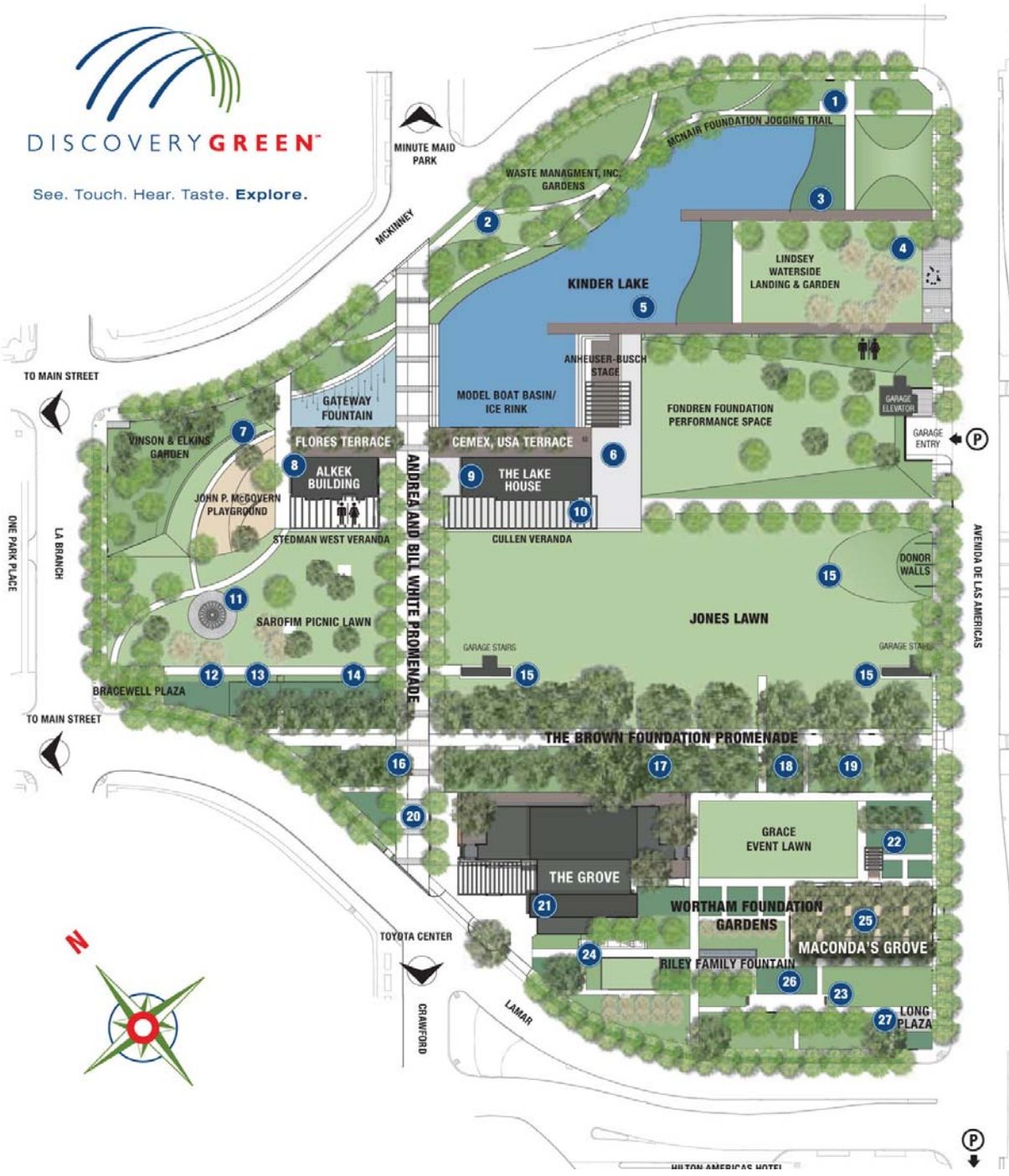
## Initial and Ongoing Financing and Budget

- Discovery Green cost \$125 million
- Discovery Green Conservancy raised \$56 million (45%)
- Small-donor campaigns, naming rights and large contributions from the principal foundations helped pay for land acquisition and remediation, soft costs, construction, and the purchase of public art.
- The City's \$69 million (55%) provided the balance of the budget . Including \$22 million for the underground garage, the donation of two parking lots and a street right-of-way valued at \$33 million, and \$14 million in additional acquisition and construction funds.



Left: A young family strolls through Discovery Green Middle: Thousands of people enjoy Discovery Green's lawns throughout the year Right: The view of new downtown construction from Discovery Green, 2008

# Layout



## Program (Activities & Uses)

- 11 different gardens
- 4 water features
- 2 hills, 2 restaurants
- 2 outdoor catered-event areas
- 2 outdoor market areas
- 1 stage
- 2 dog runs
- 2 dog fountains
- 2 bocce ball courts
- 2 outdoor library reading rooms with library services and wi-fi
- 1 putting green
- 1 playground
- 1 jogging trail
- 1 shuffleboard court.
- 1 620-stall parking garage

## Visitor Data

2.3 million plus visitors since its opening in April 2008 through 2010  
 Most visitors drive to the park or walk from businesses or residences nearby

Approximately 70% of visitors come from within Houston's Beltway 8 ("the loop")

25% of visitors come from the surrounding suburban areas and the remainder come from out of town

Programming, which includes events and some specific uses - like the model boat basin and ice skating, generates approximately 70% of the visits with the remainder of visitors coming to enjoy the interactive fountain, playground, lawns and gardens as well as other amenities.

More than 800 public and private events each year

More than 20,000 annual skaters at The Ice at Discovery Green



Before



After

## Management and Operations

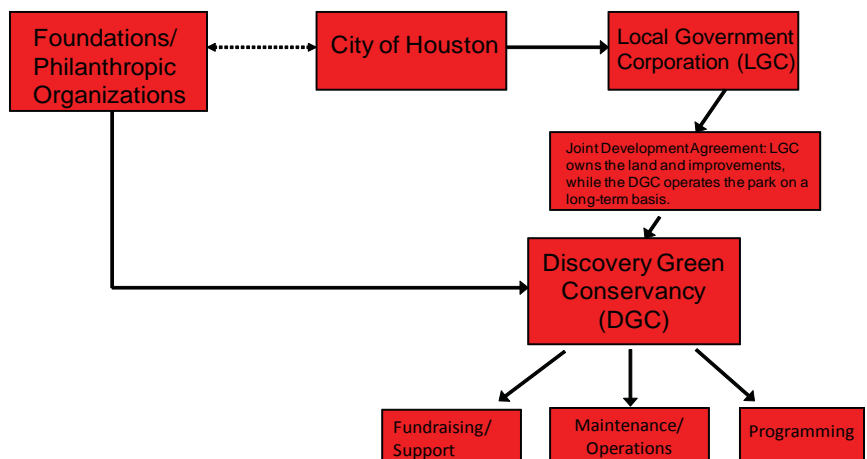
Mission: "to operate an urban park that serves as a village green, a source of health and happiness for our citizens, and a window into the diverse talents and traditions that enrich life in Houston."

- The Discover Green Conservancy is responsible for on-going fundraising, managing the day-to-day operations of the park and attracting financial support from a variety of sources.
- Total annual expenses: estimated \$3.5 million
- Annual operating revenue: \$1.5 million – mostly from facility rentals and sponsorships.
- Balance (roughly \$2 million) comes from government grants and charitable contributions
- 29 permanent (not-seasonal) employees
- Rented restaurant space—The Grove (high-end) and the Lakehouse (casual)
- Contacts with 2 other vendors
- Weekly farmers market
- More than 400 free events for Houstonians and visitors each year that range from free exercise classes to concerts, movies and festivals
- More than 150 nonprofit organizations and corporations license space in the park for public and private events

## Economic Impact

"Creating the corporate environment of tomorrow starts with the right location." -Discovery Green Conservancy website

- Catalyst for more than \$500 million in downtown development projects (completed or underway) that specifically note the park's creation as an impetus for the dramatic investments, including the creation of the Embassy Suites Hotel, One Park Place Luxury Apartment Building and the Hess Tower (Hess Corp.)



Public-private framework

- Nearly one billion dollars in downtown development (future/planned) nearby to Discovery Green since the park was announced in 2006
- A different way to think about that figure: \$8 of downtown construction for every \$1 invested in Discovery Green
- According to Stephen Lewis, deputy director of the city's Department of Convention and Entertainment Facilities, "Discovery Green has caused land prices around the convention center to skyrocket to between \$200 and \$300 a square foot."
- Media and advertising contributed an estimated \$7.5 million in sponsorship value to Local 2, Comcast, Univision 45, the Houston Chronicle, KUHF Public Radio, CBS Radio, KPFT, and Cumulus.

### One Park Place

- Opened spring 2009
- 37 story luxury apartment building; more than 2 million square-feet of residential and retail space
- The first new residential construction in Downtown Houston in more than 50 years.
- 346 apartment units -90% were occupied - early 2011.
- Ground floor retail including a 28,000 square-foot grocery store.
- Supports the increasing number of residents choosing to live downtown
- Sales material highlights proximity to Discovery Green as major amenity



One Park Place

### Hess Tower

- Opening summer 2011
- 844,763 square-feet of office space
- 100% leased by the Hess Corporation
- Hess Corps. moved its corporate headquarters from New York City and consolidated other Houston offices; originally called Discovery Tower
- Houston's first green office tower; state of the art 30 story building, topped with wind turbines
- Class A office building is Gold LEED pre-certified
- Two-stories of retail and restaurant space, including ground floor retail
- 10-story parking structure on the adjacent northern block.



Hess Tower

### Embassy Suites Hotel

- Construction started spring 2009
- Opened early 2011
- \$34.5 million full-service hotel
- ~260 rooms
- Funded in part by Houston's tax incentive initiative in an attempt to attract more hotels downtown.



Embassy Suites Hotel

## Sources

The majority of the information for this report came directly from the Discovery Green Conservancy and its website, DiscoveryGreen.com. Susanne Theis, Program Director for the Discovery Green Conservancy, was tremendously helpful. She provided information regarding up-to-date management structure, access to the Conservancy's image database and many of the specific figures that were included in the report.

Amalgamation of news articles, radio news transcripts, television broadcasts and press releases were also referenced, though not all cited. PPS was also fortunate to read a BAE Urban Economics report from its consultant work as part of the Brooklyn Bridge Park Report that was published earlier this year. In the report, BAE Urban Economics highlighted Discovery Green as an example of an economically successful park project. BAE is a highly respected and award-winning consultancy firm specializing in feasibility studies, strategic planning, revitalization, public-private transactions, public financing, fiscal and economic impacts analyses, and development advisory services.

PowerPoints and other presentations, notably one given by former Conservancy President and Park Director and individual catalyst for the development of Discovery Green from its inception, Guy Hagstette were also relied upon for images, history of the project, a general understanding of the project scope and capital financing challenges.

## Citations

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