

The background image shows a scenic view of Brackenridge Park. In the foreground, there's a rocky shoreline with large, light-colored stones. A river flows through the middle ground, with a small waterfall or dam visible. In the background, a black metal truss bridge spans the river. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is lush with green trees and foliage.

# Brackenridge Park

## Cultural Landscape Report & Ecological Site Assessment

## Setting the Course for Brackenridge Park's Future

### Summary



**Brackenridge Park is a landscape abundant with culture, history, and ecology. Like historic structures, historic landscapes require specialized approaches for their preservation and long-term management.**

## AMERICA'S PREMIER CULTURE PARK

Brackenridge Park's landscape contains 12,000 years of documented human interaction with the upper course of the San Antonio River.

With its relatively short 120-year span as a public park, Brackenridge Park is more than an urban park—it is a complex cultural landscape.

The relationship to the San Antonio River and its ecology, along with its culture and history, the landscape has national, state, and local significance, and even international significance.



## PLANNING

- February 2017 — City of San Antonio Master Plan for Brackenridge Park approved  
A plan to shape the future development and rehabilitation of the Park
- June 2018 — Brackenridge Park Conservancy, San Antonio River Authority, and San Antonio Parks and Recreation commissioned the Brackenridge Park Cultural Landscape Report (CLR)  
A holistic understanding of the landscape from ecological and cultural perspectives
- December 2019 — 772-page Cultural Landscape Report completed  
A guide to the Park's preservation and its future management that will provide the underpinning to prepare the nomination for a National Heritage Area



## WHAT IS THE CLR?

- A long-term management document that supports the goals defined in the Master Plan
- Thorough historic documentation that puts Brackenridge Park into a larger perspective in the state and nation
- Uses the landscape's past to set a course for its future



## DESIRED CLR OUTCOME

Brackenridge Park should be elevated in the minds of the local community and widely known outside of San Antonio.

The Park is a backdrop for understanding the diversity of culture. It should be experienced as an “immersive landscape of learning—a cultural park that is equal parts ecological laboratory, outdoor museum, leisure and recreational park, and revered setting.”

The CLR is the guide for reaching this outcome and for engaging the public in the process to achieve a thriving urban park.

## INTENTIONS OF CLR

Today, Brackenridge Park's complicated ecological and cultural layers are barely evident. It does not appear to be the landscape that its history merits. The CLR focuses on the many ways that this landscape defines San Antonio's identity, and it sets out four intentions:

1. To heal Brackenridge Park's ecology
2. To protect and celebrate the many layers of historic significance and cultural diversity
3. To elevate its identity locally and nationally
4. To usher it into 21st century



**Landscapes are constantly in a state of growth or decline, making them difficult to stabilize or preserve, as represented in Brackenridge Park.**

## NARRATIVES

There are four critical narratives or storylines that relate to the site, and they form the framework for understanding the Park's development in relation to national and local events and movements.

- Stories of humans and hydrology, including the Park's ecological transformation and interpretation of future projects that aim to restore riparian health
- Prehistoric and historic life, including hidden and difficult cultural histories
- Regional vernacular character, including the river as the Park's form-defining element, early vehicular traffic circulation, cultural access to the river, and regional art/craftsmanship
- Cultural layering that contributed to the physical and everyday development with focus on historic ties to indigenous people, people who were enslaved, and the Mexican-American community



## TREATMENT PRIORITIES

### System-Based Approach, Eight Systems

Every park contains a foundational framework of systems that define the landscape holistically. The CLR calls for an interdisciplinary systems-based approach to the Park's preservation and future growth.

Brackenridge Park is defined by eight natural and constructed landscape systems:

1. Archeology; 2. San Antonio River and Riparian Corridor; 3. River Structures (acequias, dams, ditches, tunnels, and retaining walls); 4. Vegetation/Soil/Hydrology; 5. Entry/Arrival Areas; 6. Circulation; 7. Edges Between Cultural Institutions; and 8. Collection of Historic Buildings, Structures, and Art.

### New Framework, Five Priority Systems

Leadership must create a new framework by which each system is addressed comprehensively, moving away from the current piecemeal approach to funding and isolated development.

Brackenridge Park has many periods of significance that have resulted in its distinctive character; however, this layering has presented the challenge seen today in a broken framework in which the culture and ecology are endangered. The recommendation is for a new framework focusing initially on five of its eight systems:

- River and Riparian Corridor—The Heart
- Circulation Through the Park—Connective Tissue
- Entry and Arrival Areas—The Public Face
- Archeology—Hidden Bones
- Interpretation—The Soul



## RECOMMENDATION PROJECTS

In each system, projects should be identified that rise to the highest level of action and must be part of larger design efforts. The projects should concentrate on restoring a greater level of health to the Park's ecology; preserving and maintaining its distinctive homegrown regional character; making ecological systems and prehistory and history more evident and understandable; and creating a unified municipal park.

Character zones within the Park have been defined, each possessing a distinct experiential quality resulting from its cultural and ecological layering.



## NEXT STEPS

Fundraising will be crucial to management and adoption of a systems approach. Funds will be needed to hire interdisciplinary teams to design each system. One or more of the five systems should be identified as a starting point for investment.





**Olmos Basin**



**Spirit Reach**



**Brackenridge Park**



**River Walk**



**San Pedro Springs**



**Confluence Park**



**Mission Reach**

## NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

Brackenridge Park has the potential to become part of a National Heritage Area (NHA), and the CLR gives the City of San Antonio the underpinning to pursue this designation.

Linkages between the parks and historic sites along the San Antonio River—Olmos Basin, Spirit Reach, Brackenridge Park, San Antonio River Walk, the Alamo, San Pedro Springs Park, Confluence Park, the San Antonio Missions World Heritage Site—would illustrate the relationship between the city's natural hydrology and its cultural development.

The NHA designation is an avenue for financial sustainability for San Antonio's public lands and cultural institutions. Of the National Park Service's 55 NHAs, there are few in the southwest and none in Texas.

## PARK LANDSCAPE CHRONOLOGY

The Brackenridge Park landscape encompasses the story of San Antonio.

It is the site of:

- Stomping ground for mammoths and other prehistoric life
- Migratory route of indigenous people
- Origin of one of the country's earliest water delivery systems built by the Spanish for the missions and later the secular settlements
- Early industrial development in the limestone quarries that built up the city
- Civil War-era Confederate tannery and sawmill
- San Antonio Water Works, the privately owned system, that pumped water into homes
- Cement company, the first municipal golf course in Texas, the San Antonio Zoo, the Witte Museum, the Japanese Tea Garden, and the Sunken Garden Theater
- Public art, including faux bois bridges and benches created by Mexican-born Dionicio Rodriguez as well as works by other artists
- Recreational activities including remnants of the historic Lambert Beach swimming pool
- Public space where civil rights for African Americans and Mexican Americans were once denied and eventually enacted
- In 1997, it became home to the tunnel inlet, an engineering feat that protects the downtown from flood events

## CLR Teams

### Leadership Team

- City of San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department
- San Antonio River Authority
- Brackenridge Park Conservancy

### Consulting Team

- Reed Hilderbrand, Cambridge, Mass., Landscape Architecture Firm
- Suzanne Turner Associates, Baton Rouge, La., Landscape Architectural Historians
- Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Austin, Texas



REED-HILDERBRAND



suzanne turner ASSOCIATES  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

