

March 15, 2016
David Taylor

Rebuilt educational park embraces Texas heritage, life



The red-tailed flying bat, longhorn, butterflies, armadillo and more Texas icons have been unpacked and carefully installed in their new home following a brief two-year hiatus.

Tucked behind the new Air Liquide Center on Memorial City Way is a pocket green space that celebrates the culture and rich history of the Lone Star State. The new Texas Heritage Park experience immerses patrons of all ages into the story of Texas--expressed through sculpture, signage with celebrated state symbols and nine water features representing the major rivers of Texas.

The original park, built in 2003, was carefully dismantled and closed in December of 2013 to make way for the construction of the new Air Liquide world headquarters.

But while the park was closed, Glenn Fuhrman, AIA and director of construction and development at MetroNational, said the company was planning something more innovative and unique for the new park.

"We had originally hired metal sculptor Eric Ober to create objects that the state legislature had approved like the state bird, the state's largest mammal, the state butterfly," he said.

Ober basically free-handed the hand-forged steel using welding and fabricating techniques, no casting process.

"All of the work on my art is done entirely by myself," Ober said. "My work is unique in that I worked with steel long before I began creating steel sculpture. My skills, coupled with a degree in mechanical engineering, allow me to create sculpture that appears to defy the bounds of physics or is unique in its own right," he said.

For years the park attracted students from schools, visitors and residents with the dreamy sculptures, but were packed away carefully until the construction was completed.

Fuhrman said the new park would feature the former sculptures, but they were looking for an added twist.

"We wanted to do something unique and actually had a little contest among three different landscape architects to come up with what we now have," Fuhrman said.

TBG Partners won the contract, but Fuhrman said they kept pushing them for something really different from what they were presenting.

"One day they were in their studio playing music in the background and Lyle Lovett's 'The Rivers of Texas' song came on. They found their inspiration and came back to us the following week with this idea of including the rivers of Texas," he said.

Each steel runnel represents proportionally the length to the other rivers in the state of Texas. The design starts from the west and goes to the east with each river accompanied by native plantings representative of West Texas, Central Texas and East Texas
"It's a good blend of the old design with the new," said a pleased Fuhrman.

The design work took about six months and the actual construction another six months to complete.

Each of the runnels has it's own circulating pump. Under the rock is a screen with a fountain with pump equipment to recycle the water.

The original design of the original park was an educational tool for school children or anyone who could pick up a map and walk through the park and learn about the state of Texas. It's rebuilt again like an outdoor museum with plaques.

The steel river plaques are in the shape of the state and are actually cut through so that the visitor can see exactly where the river lies in the state. The length is that squarely residing in Texas.

The plaque also includes fun facts about the river's basin, mouth, where it discharges and more. Even the winding concrete sidewalk is designed to look like a bubbling river.

The sounds of traffic on the freeway just a block or so away are diminished with the peaceful sounds of the running water providing a much-needed respite from busy life.

"The minute we pulled down the barriers and opened the park, people trickled in and sat on the benches to read their books," Fuhrman said.

"Folks parking at the mall walk over and take a look at the park as well."

The native plantings include cactus, prairie grass and even bluebonnets that are in bloom. While they are sparse since they were just recently planted, Fuhrman said it should be a beautiful space in the coming years.

Fuhrman reiterated MetroNational's commitment to the community. "We're a campus. We're not out here just plopping buildings down," he said.

"There's a sweet spot between office buildings and green spaces where our customers can feel comfortable and enjoy a relaxed atmosphere."

The park is educational and open to the public. It's located at 9801 Katy Freeway along Memorial City Way behind the Air Liquide Center.