

# ZILKER METROPOLITAN PARK VISION PLAN

*An Urban Treasure in Need of a Comprehensive Plan*

## Interpretive Story

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Prepared by

**DESIGNWORKSHOP**

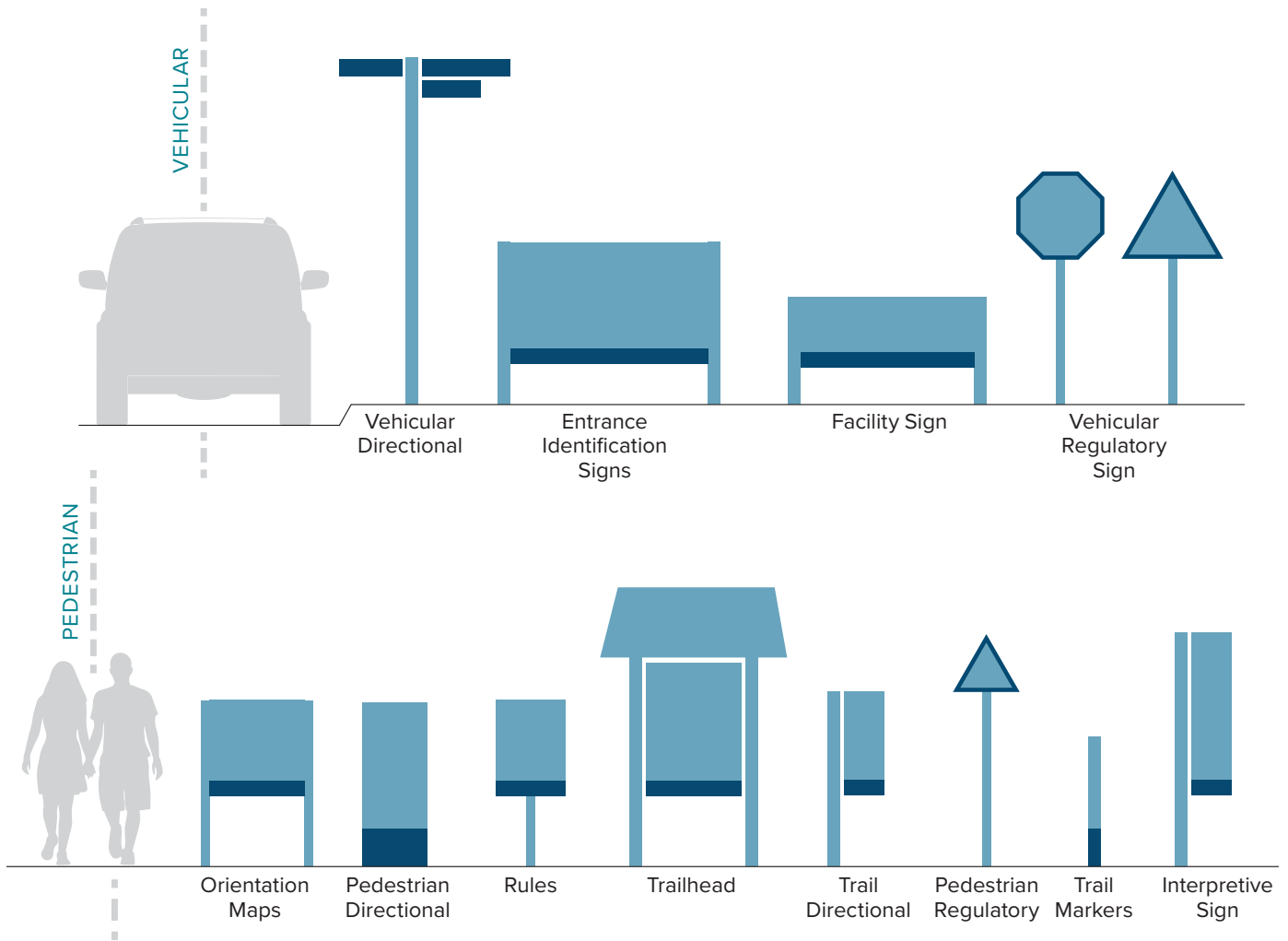
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# INTERPRETIVE STORY

## SIGNAGE FAMILIES



A well-considered wayfinding program aids navigation but can also engage visitors when a thoughtful strategy is employed. Zilker Park does not have a cohesive signage system currently and this issue has brought up during community engagement process. The signage in a park can be divided into four types. Type 1 are such as entrance identification signs or facility/donor signs. Type 2 are directional signs which can be vehicular, pedestrian, or trail directional. The third type is about regulatory or rules in the park. The last type is informative signs like interpretive signs.

Besides the development of the vision plan, separate planning efforts is needed specifically to address wayfinding needs and opportunities, and present a unified the navigational strategy that defines the programming, function and visual character of the park signage. The wayfinding vision plan would provide a design framework to consistently inform future signage design and function.

**Table 4:** Types of Signage

TYPES OF SIGNAGE	
<b>Type 1</b>	Entrance Identification Sign
	Facility/Donor Sign
<b>Type 2</b>	Vehicle Directional
	Pedestrian Directional
	Trail Markers & Directional
	Rules Sign
<b>Type 3</b>	Vehicular Regulatory Sign
	Pedestrian Regulatory Sign
<b>Type 4</b>	Orientation Map
	Interpretive Sign

## INTERPRETIVE STORYLINE

- » This framework focuses on Zilker Park as a whole. Specific destinations within the park (Barton Springs, Zilker Botanical Garden, and Austin Nature and Science Center) already have their own vision and interpretive plans that are in various phases of implementation, and are only mentioned as they relate to the larger whole. It is assumed they will be interpreted as stand-alone destinations as well.
- » The storylines listed here are only a road map. Anyone doing interpretive planning in the future will need to conduct additional research and develop interpretive themes, in addition to writing the actual interpretive products.

### STORYLINE I: BARTON SPRINGS HAS BEEN A CONSTANT, BUT EVOLVING, DESTINATION FOR HUMANS FOR AT LEAST 10,000 YEARS.

- » Indigenous occupation: Archeological sites reveal that Indigenous people camped, hunted, fished, and quarried rock here for at least 9,000-10,000 years before European colonizers arrived. The Vara Daniels site, which lies beneath the Great Lawn and rugby fields, is one of the “largest deeply stratified sites known in Texas.” Today, it serves as evidence of Indigenous people’s long-term presence on this land, and presents an opportunity for contemporary Austinites to learn more about the generations of Native people who preceded them here.
- » Euro-American settlement and business enterprises: Beginning in the 1830s, Euro-American settlers brought their agricultural traditions and commercial/ industrial enterprises to this landscape. Within the present-day park boundaries, men including William Barton, Ashford B. McGill, and Dr. Barclay Townsend farmed and ranched; Michel Paggi, Jacob Stern, and the Rabb family all operated mills on the creek; Michael Butler mined clay for his brickworks; and Andrew J. Zilker used the spring water for his icemaking business and pasture for the horses that pulled his delivery wagons. While Barton Springs was already a popular swimming destination by the mid-1800s, Paggi built a dam on Barton Creek in the 1870s to create a swimming hole and a bathhouse to accommodate swimmers.
- » Park origins and development: Through a series of land deals between 1917 and 1934, Andrew J. Zilker transferred three parcels of land that would become Zilker Park to the City of Austin. However, Zilker did not profit from these transactions; rather, he specified that the proceeds from the first two deals be placed in a trust for Austin High School, and gifted the third parcel of land outright. The subsequent development of Barton Springs and the surrounding land reflected popular ideas about recreation at the time (active recreational facilities in a naturalistic environment). Under the City of Austin and various New Deal institutions, the park’s naturalistic features and recreational facilities were expanded and remnants of its commercial and industrial past were removed. As the city grew and automobile ownership became more accessible, the park became a popular destination for white, middle class Austinites.
- » Modern gathering space: Today, Zilker Park is a blend of active recreational facilities (e.g., Barton Springs, hiking trails) and gathering spaces for events large and small, public and private (e.g., Zilker Clubhouse, Girl Scout Cabin, picnic tables for private gatherings; large open spaces for public events like ACL, Blues on the Green, the Zilker Kite Festival and Austin Trail of Lights). Austinites have also built a culture of informal gatherings at sites throughout the park, such as the Monkey Tree on Azie Morton Road.

# INTERPRETIVE STORY

## BENEFITS OF SHARING INTERPRETIVE STORY

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**1** It illuminates the power of place. Clear educational messages and content inform the public of each site's historic significance.

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**2** It does more than provide just dates and facts, but also inspires a feeling of stewardship in site visitors, strengthening awareness of cultural and natural resources.

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**3** Thoughtful and well designed signage programs demonstrate community pride in local heritage.

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**4** It provides a high-quality interpretive experience without the requirements of staff or facilities to maintain.

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## STORYLINE 2: ZILKER PARK'S EXTANT BUILT ENVIRONMENT TELLS PART OF THE STORY OF AUSTIN'S SETTLEMENT, DEVELOPMENT, AND EVOLVING IDENTITY.

- » Zilker Park's built environment reveals clues to some aspects of Austin's history:
  - Settlement and Early Industry: The old Rabb homesite and the location of the Paggi grist and ice mill (at Sunken Garden/Old Mill Spring) both evoke Austin's early industrial period and speak to how crucial access to flowing water was for many people and industries.
  - Expansion: As Austin's population expanded, it outgrew some of Zilker Park's facilities. One of these was the Barton Springs Bathhouse. Completed in 1947, architects Delmar Groos and Dan Driscoll designed the new bathhouse with a Streamline Moderne aesthetic. This style strayed from the rustic-style park buildings constructed during the 1930s, but both approaches had something in common: they took inspiration from Zilker Park's landscape. The bathhouse was sited around the location's large trees, and the low-slung building took inspiration from the horizontal limestone terraces found throughout the park.
- » Zilker Park by Austinites for Austinites: Zilker Park's design was led by two local men: engineer Frederick A. Dale and architect Charles H. Page. Other Austinites were also involved in its design and construction: Hugo Kuehne designed the Caretaker's Cottage and the first Barton Springs bathhouse; plants for the Rock Garden came from the home garden of Dr. T.S. Painter on W. 33rd St.; young architect Bubi Jessen designed the iconic entry columns; materials and labor for custom light fixtures were donated by Gage Brothers, Weigel Iron Works, and Fox and Schmidt; and the Austin Police Department helped fund and build the shooting range.
- » Zilker Park and the New Deal: Many of Zilker Park's most iconic features were developed under various public works programs during the Great Depression.
  - Funding: Most of the Texas parks projects that were developed during this time were intended to be state parks. Zilker Park was an exception, and it received funding thanks, in part, to Congressman James P. "Buck" Buchanan, who represented Austin in the House of Representatives and was able to use his position on the House Appropriations Committee to fund work in his district.
  - Design: The park was developed under various New Deal programs, and its design was especially influenced by the National Park Service's emphasis on highlighting the natural topography and flora, and

constructing rustic-style buildings using natural materials.

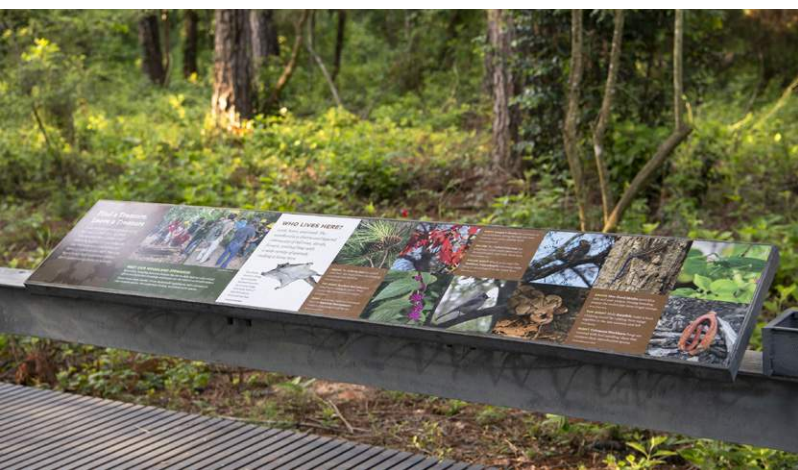
- Construction: In 1933, Charles Page secured funding from the Civil Works Administration (CWA) to build the park, including the stone entrance columns and the beloved Zilker Clubhouse, both of which still stand today. In 1934, Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Company 1814 designed and built roads, cleared land, and constructed park facilities (picnic tables, barbecue pits, and lighting). The National Youth Administration (NYA) repaired flood damage in 1935-1936 and built the Sunken Gardens in the late 1930s, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) helped improve the park's lily pond. Without this substantial federal investment, Zilker Park would look very different today.

### STORYLINE 3: ZILKER PARK HAS A LONG HISTORY AS A CONTESTED LANDSCAPE.

- » White settlement and white supremacy at Barton Springs:
  - Enslavement of African Americans. When William Barton settled on the banks of Spring Creek (known today as Barton Creek) around 1837, he brought his wife, children, and up to 30 African Americans he enslaved with him. The Bartons ranched cattle here. The African American men and women whom Barton enslaved likely worked in the Barton Family's ranching and domestic activities, increasing the Bartons' wealth through their uncompensated labor.

- Settlement on Indigenous lands. As a white settler in Indigenous people's traditional homelands, William Barton was in frequent conflict with Comanches who claimed the land as their territory.

- » Exclusion of non-white and lower income citizens: When the City of Austin took ownership of Zilker Park in 1917, it instituted fee-based access, which solidified the pool as the domain of the white middle class. The implementation of the 1928 Master Plan, and specifically its recommendation for segregated facilities for Black citizens, codified this racial division. It wasn't until Black activists, such as Joan Means Khabele, Bertha Means, V. Sandra Kirk, and Willie Mae Kirk, fought to integrate Barton Springs that the park became officially accessible to Black Austinites. Nevertheless, racial disparities persisted: many Black community members continued to feel unwelcome in the park and at the pool well after the facilities were officially desegregated.
- » Community organizing and activism: Since the late 1960s, community members and grassroots activist organizations, including the Zilker Park Posse, Save Barton Creek Association, Save Our Springs Alliance, and Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, have challenged development plans that would negatively impact the springs and the park (e.g., development in the Barton Creek watershed, construction of MoPac Expressway in the park). They have also supported scientific research and education, and advocated for better regulations to protect and preserve Barton Springs, Barton Creek, and Zilker Park.



# INTERPRETIVE STORY



Donation Signs

## STORYLINE 4: THE EBB AND FLOW OF WATER INDELIBLY SHAPES THE ECOLOGY OF ZILKER PARK.

- » Water as it shapes the landscape: The creeks and river create riparian habitat where water-loving plants thrive, wildlife is drawn to the fresh water, and resident bird populations seek out prime nesting and feeding locations. In the western half of the park, which is more characteristic of the Edwards Plateau, oak-juniper woodlands grow in shallow soils that formed atop limestone rock. Here, rainwater flows down through the limestone and into the Edwards Aquifer far beneath. The plants that grow in this area are adapted to the faster draining soils.
- » Springs as habitat: The springs in the park and the Edwards Aquifer beneath it support the endangered Barton Springs and Austin Blind Salamanders. As the park was developed and new buildings and features were constructed, the springs' flow was disturbed and the salamanders' populations decreased. Through careful planning, habitat restoration, and limited development, the salamander populations in Zilker Park are growing.

## STORYLINE 5: ZILKER PARK OFFERS AUSTINITES THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE GREAT BIODIVERSITY IN A RELATIVELY SMALL AREA.

- » Ecotone: Zilker Park provides habitat for more than 600 plant and animal species. It straddles the Edwards Plateau and Blackland Prairie ecoregions and blends characteristics of both. Within the park's 351 acres, Austinites can spot armadillos while hiking through oak-juniper woodlands typical of the Texas Hill Country, paddle along shoreline communities of bald cypress trees and snapping turtles, and wade in a natural pool fed by the same springs that support two species of endangered salamander.
- » Biodiversity: At least 224 species of birds – more than 85% of the wildlife species that call the park home – can be found in Zilker Park. They include a diverse array of species drawn to the varied habitats that make up the park. Migratory songbirds stop to rest in the park on their way to their northern breeding grounds, and egrets and herons hunt along the banks of the river and in the creeks.



Outdoor Classroom with Interpretive Signages

## GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE

When developing interpretive signage, planners should consider the following factors:

- » Layering: Offering interpretive information in successive layers of depth allows visitors to engage with content based on their particular interest levels. The complete suite of interpretive signage should include high-level overview signs and more in-depth specialized signs. Individual signs should also be designed to accommodate those with passing, moderate, and deep interest in the content. Using headlines, lead text, body copy, captions, and sidebars to layer information allows users to engage with bite-sized "chunks" of information and decide how deeply they want to delve depending on their interest.
- » Modalities: Visitors learn in varied ways. Incorporating tactile, visual, text-based, manipulative, and interactive elements into signage offers a wide variety of users the opportunity to engage with the content they find most accessible.
- » Consolidation: Where possible, consolidating interpretive signage at existing gathering points (e.g., trailheads) and structures (e.g., restrooms, parking structures) will reach a larger number of users and also prevent the landscape from being littered with signage. However, consolidation of signage should be thought of as a guideline rather than a rule. Any efforts to consolidate signage into "nodes" will have to be balanced with the need/desire for visitors to be able to view and/or experience the resource being interpreted. In some cases, it will make more sense to locate an interpretive sign closer to a resource and away from an existing gathering point/structure.
- » Accessibility: Community input revealed strong support for considerations of equity in the Zilker Vision Plan. In that same vein, planners should consider interpretive signs' accessibility from a multitude of viewpoints. In addition to complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act, placement, legibility, language, and reading levels should also be considered.

Beyond the text and images on a sign, the design of the sign and its support structure are opportunities to engage visitors playfully and/or create a sense of place. At Zilker Park, appropriate design inspirations could include the park's New Deal-era architecture and its flora and fauna.



Layering Interpretive Signage



Accessible from a multitude of Viewpoints



Interpretive Signage Located in Gathering Space