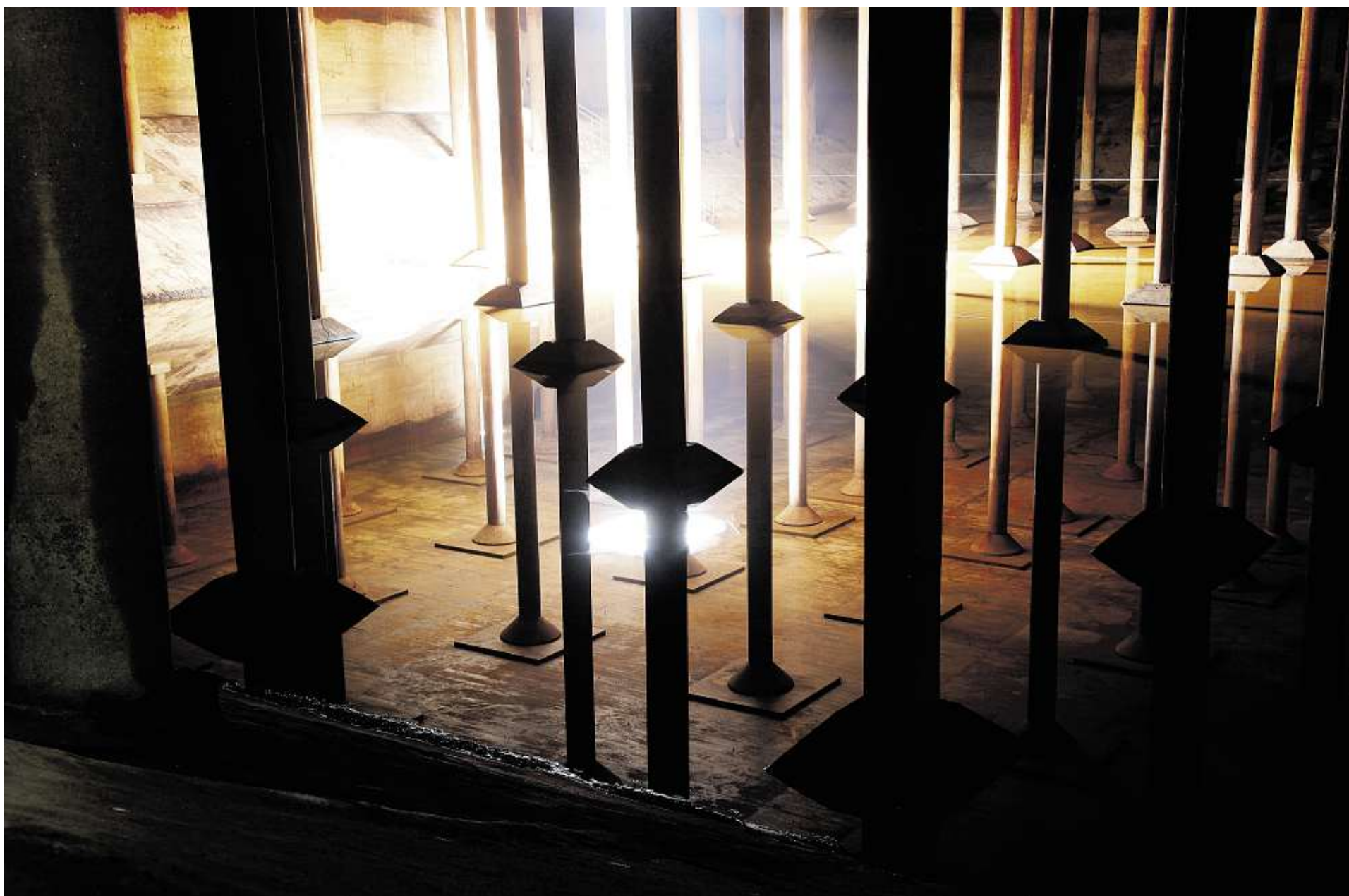


STAR



Mayra Beltrán photos / Houston Chronicle

The city of Houston's first underground reservoir was built near Buffalo Bayou and Sabine Street in 1927. Decades after it was abandoned, the city asked for bids to demolish it. Now that the Buffalo Bayou Partnership is taking over the land above the reservoir, planners are looking for a way to use it.

# Buffalo Bayou's dark secret

A couple of Public Works guys opened the hatches — several hatches for no reason but to let sunlight down into the reservoir; and one hatch with a skinny ladder that our party of four would climb down into the darkness.

"Do you have an air monitor?" the Public Works guys asked Guy Hagstette, our leader. "And a winch?"

"They're in my truck," Hagstette said.

"A winch?" I asked.

"Emergency equipment. The city requires it. So that we could haul someone out if they're injured."

This was not, in my experience, how encounters with sublime beauty usually began. But then, I'd never gone hunting for sublime beauty in an underground reservoir.

### An odd hill

A few weeks earlier, I'd run into Hagstette, Buffalo Bayou Partnership's consultant in charge of planning, at a party, and he'd told me about the Cistern. Ever since, I'd been dying to see the place.

In 1927, he told me, the City of Houston built its first underground drinking-water reservoir — a concrete holding tank roughly the size of one and half football fields on Sabine Street, near Buffalo Bayou. But after decades of service, the reservoir

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sprang a leak that couldn't be found, much less

stopped. So the reservoir was drained, and for years it sat unused: just an odd hill topped with hatches behind a Public Works building.

About a year and a half ago, when the city was taking bids for the reservoir's demolition — to remove the concrete and fill the depression with heavy dirt, suitable for building atop — the Buffalo Bayou Partnership began doing due diligence to acquire the land.

The partnership was in the thick of the Shepherd-to-Sabine project, a \$55 million attempt to upgrade that 2.3-mile, 158-acre stretch of the bayou into something like Central Park. As part of that project, the partnership planned to build a concert hall atop the reservoir and its artificial hill to take advantage of the stunning, up-close view of downtown. And if the reservoir were in good shape, they thought, maybe they could figure out a way to use it. Maybe it could be converted to underground parking. Or it could store mulch.

But when the partnership's consultants climbed through the hatch, they were stunned. When their eyes adjusted to the steamy darkness, they saw row upon row of slender concrete columns, 25 feet tall and reflected in about 6 inches of water at the

reservoir's floor. From the hatches, light fell in dramatic shafts. The enormous old reservoir, never intended as anything more than efficient infrastructure, turned out to be stunningly, startlingly beautiful: an industrial cross between a cavern and a cathedral.

### Unintended skyspace

The skinny metal ladder ended about halfway to the bottom of the reservoir, on a concrete ledge, about 6 feet wide, probably built for maintenance workers. Hagstette, who'd gone first, turned on a flashlight. I followed him down the ladder; then came Mayra Beltrán, the Chronicle's photographer; then Kevin Shanley, a landscape architect with a lyrical turn of mind.

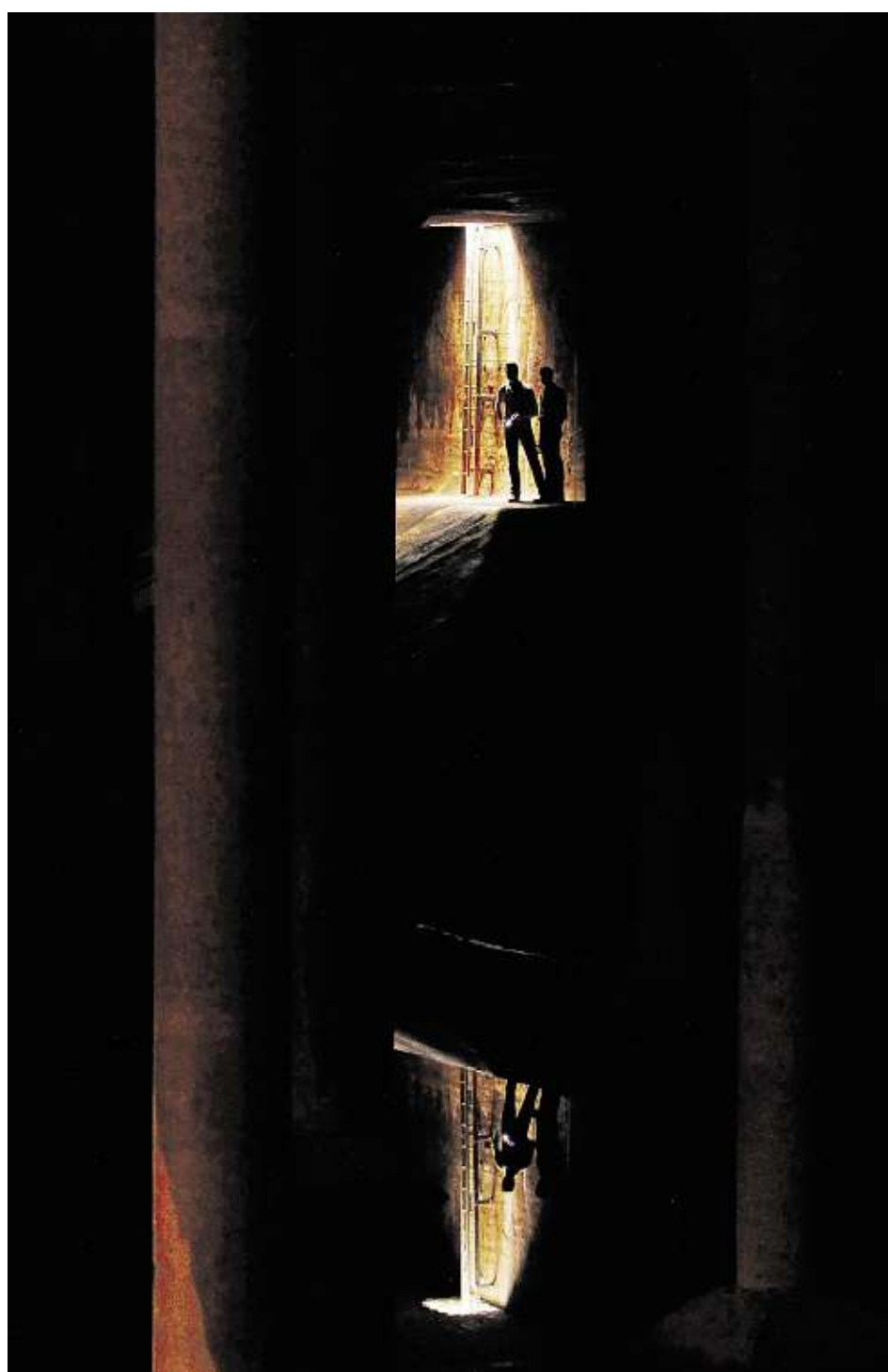
It was Shanley who first called the reservoir "the Cistern." The place reminded him of the ancient Roman cisterns under Istanbul. It also reminded him of art. He pointed across the dark expanse of columns to one of the big hatches. Blinding-bright sunlight poured down onto the metal ladder; it looked possible to climb to heaven. "Doesn't that look like Caspar Friedrich?" Shanley asked. And I thought yes: It was exactly the über-dramatic light the old Romantic painter would have loved.

Moody light also fell from smaller square hatches cut in the 1970s. Those put Shanley in mind of modern artist James Turrell: Look straight up at one of those hatches, and it dramatically frames the sky — an unintended replica of one of Turrell's Skyspaces.

Our footsteps echoed in the cavernous place. Everything echoed. Even hushed, our voices sounded amplified and as though someone had turned the reverb all the way up. With a sharp sound — like a hand clap — we could hear the sound waves interfering with each other as they bounced off the walls, pulsing erratically in the 17 long seconds before the sound finally died away.

### Cathedral of light

The question now, of course, is what to do with the Cistern. Hagstette says that everyone now agrees it won't be used for parking or storage. But what should it be? How



The industrial place looks like a modern-art installation — maybe something by James Turrell. Here, sunlight from an open hatch falls onto a ladder and is reflected in the reservoir's watery bottom.

should the public have access to it? And how will it be paid for? (The Cistern was discovered after the Buffalo Bayou Project had budgeted all its Shepherd-to-Sabine money for other projects.)

When we reached the far end of the Cistern, we left the ledge, walking down concrete stairs to the muddy floor. The silty red mud, Shanley explained, was composed of iron and other minerals that long ago settled out of the reservoir's water. Every now and then, a drop of condensed water from the ceiling would hit the soft mud, and the tiny sound would echo. Shanley shone his flashlight on the ground, examining the droplets' marks. "It's like the surface of Mars," he said.

Down the middle of

the Cistern, a thin strip of slightly elevated ground offered a less muddy path back to the hatch where we'd entered. We walked single file, through the columns, in a world of echoes and moody darkness.

"What do you think it should be?" I asked Shanley, after we'd climbed the stairs and stood again on the ledge.

"Basically, it's a cathedral of light and sound," he said. "Can you imagine the right concert in here? Or art or sound installations? Different lights could change the look completely. Sometimes you might have water on the floor, but sometimes not."

You'd want to keep the industrial look, Hagstette agreed. But whatever you did, you'd have to have

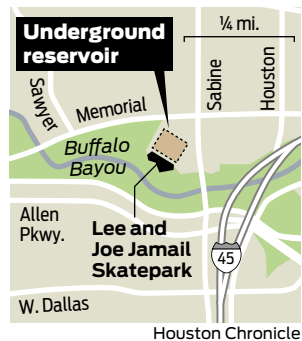
safety railings and a safe, easy way for people to come and go. Winches and 14-foot ladders won't cut it. And the red mud: That has to go, too.

"What do you think of a bar with a window right here, looking in?" Hagstette asked. "Would that cheapen the experience?"

"You know what I think we should do?" Shanley said. "Throw it open to architecture classes at Rice and UH to imagine uses for it. And HSPVA. And get visual artists in here, people like James Turrell. Ask what they'd do."

"I like that idea," said Hagstette. He paused, looking out at the columns, into the darkness. "There are so many possibilities."

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Kevin Shanley, left, and Guy Hagstette prepare to climb into the hatch on top of the reservoir's artificial hill near downtown.