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# Houston

Bold and brash, Texas's largest city is a lively mix of high culture and down-home hospitality, charming neighborhoods and standout shopping. By Rob Brinkley

The same city that simultaneously controls NASA space missions and boasts the only known residential interior by the great American couturier Charles James is a city worth exploring—and how. Progressive, resolute, and entrepreneurial, the tall-walking citizens of Houston, Texas, will, at any given moment, puff out their chests and proudly remind you that theirs is a town of superlatives: It is the fourth-largest city in America; has the planet's largest number of health-care and -research facilities; gave the world its eighth wonder, the Astrodome arena, in 1965; and, yes, was the first word ever uttered from the moon. It is also home to the largest shopping mall in the largest of these United States. But for all its firsts and bests and enormous physical size—New York, Boston, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Miami ▷



The gardens at Bayou Bend.



Shabby Slips home store.



The apothecary at Kuhl-Linscomb.



Design finds at Sloan/Hall.

combined would fit within its limits—for natives, Houston quickly shrinks down to its diverse neighborhoods and suburbs. Those who live here consider it a city of charm and quaintness, with can't-miss restaurants, one-off shops, and quirky sights, all infused with that certain Texas élan. Dichotomous? That's a watchword here.

New York real-estate pioneers Augustus Chapman Allen and John Kirby Allen couldn't have known quite what they were touching off with their 1836 purchase of 6,600 acres along Buffalo Bayou, whose waters flow to the Gulf of Mexico, a little more than 50 miles to the southeast. The brothers Allen established a city, naming it for the beloved general Sam Houston. Fueled by its oil businesses, it soon became one of Texas's brightest lights, and by 1930 was the state's most populous city. It still holds a power position on the global petrochemical and energy chessboard: The world's top five energy companies all maintain bases here.

"That wonderful wildcatter spirit still pervades this city," says Laurann Claridge, features editor of the Houston society and lifestyle magazine *Paper-City*. "It's a can-do place where people don't set limits on what can be achieved."

The sounds of hammers and saws fill the air here, most recently at West Ave—not Avenue—a buzzy, mixed-use development coming alive at the busy corner of Kirby Drive and Westheimer Road in River Oaks, where the nearly 400 apartments atop glittery retail shops and restaurants are already luring Houston's be-seen crowd. Across town, 37 acres have been newly transformed into CityCentre, with its boutiques and dwellings and the post-modern Hotel Sorella, complete with a cabana-bedecked rooftop for surveying it all.

The city's cultural scene is a further example of the can-do spirit. Houston (text continues on page 170) >



The rooftop of Hotel Sorella.



The Rothko Chapel.



## ESSENTIAL HOUSTON

The area code is 713 unless noted.

**Gallery hop.** Check out the avant-garde at the nine influential spaces on the Upper Kirby district's Gallery Row (galleryrowhouston.com) and in the multigallery edifice at 4411 Montrose Blvd.

**Marvel at the architecture.** Look up and you can't miss Cesar Pelli's glassy former Enron tower, I. M. Pei's JPMorgan Chase Tower, Johnson/Burgee's dramatically gabled Bank of America Center, and the brutally elegant ExxonMobil Building by Welton Becket Assoc.

**Find your inner Neil Armstrong.** Blast off to the Space Center Houston, 25 miles south of downtown (1601 NASA Pkwy., 281-244-2100; spacecenter.org), for a look at spacesuits, simulators, rockets, and Mission Control.

**Shop for patina and pedigree.** Houston's antiques stores are second to none, yet prices tend to be low. Top-tier haunts include Brown (2940 Ferndale St., 522-2151; shopbybrown.com), Carl Moore Antiques (1610 Bissonnet St., 524-2502; carlmooreantiques.com), Jas A. Gundry Inc. (2910 Ferndale Pl., 524-6622; jasgundry.com), Kirby Antiques (2927 Ferndale St., 520-1600; kirbyantiques.com), Tara Shaw Antiques (1845-A W. Alabama St., 533-9744; tarashaw.com), and W. Gardner Ltd. (2930 Ferndale, 521-1027; wgardnerld.com).

## WHAT TO SEE

**Bayou Bend, 1 Westcott St., 639-7750; mfah.org/bayoubend:** Lush gardens plus awe-inspiring American antiques and decorative arts in Ima Hogg's mansion.

**Chapel of St. Basil, 3800 Montrose Blvd., 525-6981; stthom.edu:** Philip Johnson's meditative chapel in three parts—a cube, a sphere, and a plane—at the University of St. Thomas.

**Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 5216 Montrose Blvd., 284-8250; camh.org:** Founded in 1948 but now in a 1972 steel building, this institution presents the new, the edgy, and the controversial.

**The Cullen Sculpture Garden, 1000 Bissonnet St., mfah.org/sculpturegarden:** Designed by Isamu Noguchi and studded with works by Matisse, Calder, and Kelly.

**The Menil Collection, 1515 Sul Ross St., 525-9400; menil.org:** The renowned family's breathtaking collection of antiquities and Byzantine, medieval, and modern art. Don't miss the nearby Cy Twombly Gallery and Rothko Chapel.

**The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonnet St., 639-7300; mfah.org:** Global art treasures in impressive galleries designed by Mies van der Rohe.

**Rienzi Center for European Decorative Arts, 1406 Kirby Dr., 639-7800; mfah.org/rienzi:** A glamorous 1952 villa filled with a stunning array of furniture, porcelain, and English and Spanish paintings.

## WHERE TO STAY

**Alden Houston, 1117 Prairie St., 832-200-8800; aldenhotels.com:** A sleek downtown retreat that's a favorite of the design cognoscenti.

**Hotel Derek, 2525 W. Loop S., 866-292-4100; hotelderek.com:** A high-style hotel with 314 rooms and an excellent new wine bar in the lobby.

**Hotel Granduca, 1080 Uptown Park Blvd., 418-1000; granducahouston.com:** An amenity-laden Italian-style palace with 123 opulent suites.

**Hotel Icon, 220 Main St. (enter the hotel on Congress St.), 224-4266; hotelicon.com:** Neoclassical splendor meets *Sex and the City* style in this former bank.

**Hotel ZaZa, 5701 Main St., 526-1991; hotelzazahouston.com:** The 1926 Warwick Hotel now pulsates with pool bungalows, a holistic spa, crystal chandeliers, and over-the-top suites.

**St. Regis Houston, 1919 Briar Oaks Ln., 840-7600; stregis.com/houston:** A newly refurbished Houston landmark. Don't miss afternoon tea or having the butler uncork your Champagne with a saber.

## WHERE TO EAT

**Armandos, 2630 Westheimer Rd., 520-1738; armandosrestaurant.com:** A luxe, clubby Mexican cantina full of A-listers.

**Benjy's, 2424 Dunstan Rd., 522-7602; benjys.com:** Benjy Levit was doing local

before it was de rigueur, and foodies continue to crave his elegant organic fare.

**BRC, 519 Shepherd Dr., 861-2233; brcgastropub.com:** Tufted banquettes and sofas, scrumptious American gastropub bites, and an array of craft beers.

**El Tiempo Cantina, 3130 Richmond Ave. and other locations, 807-1600; eltiempocantina.com:** Strong and tasty margaritas and classic Mexican dishes; the chicken fajitas are a Houston fave.

**Ouisie's Table, 3939 San Felipe Dr., 528-2264; ouisiestable.com:** Chef Elouise "Ouisie" Adams Jones proffers Southern comfort food with gourmet tendencies at this antiques-jammed spot, complete with a porch and herb garden.

**RDG + Bar Annie, 1800 Post Oak Blvd., 840-1111; rdgbarannie.com:** Delicious slow-grilled pork and lobster meatballs served amid onyx-and-wood decor to boldface-name Houstonians.

**Tiny Boxwoods, 3614 W. Alabama St., 622-4224; thompsonhanson.com:** Perfect for breakfast or brunch—homemade croissants, bacon-and-egg pizzas, even buffalo burgers.

**Tony's, 3755 Richmond Ave., 622-6778; tonyhouston.com:** Power-broker types come for the moody main room and its steaks and seafood, but look for socialites and swells huddled around the fireplace in the cozy Bar/Bistro.

## WHERE TO SHOP

**310 Rosemont, 1965 W. Gray St., 522-8133; 310rosemonthouston.com:** On-trend designer clothing and the latest denim lines for men and women.

**Found, 2422 Bartlett St. #5, 522-9191; foundforthehome.com:** Recherché furnishings, from 1940s upholstered pieces to architectural fragments.

**The Galleria, 5085 Westheimer Rd., 966-3500; simon.com:** The reigning monarch of Lone Star malls, replete with luxury stores small and large (a huge Neiman Marcus), plus the famous indoor ice rink under a Texas-size domed skylight.

**Kuhl-Linscomb, 2424 W. Alabama St., 526-6000; kuhl-linscomb.com:** This high-style hybrid mixes jewelry, stationery, and fragrances with home furnishings by such top names as Armani/Casa, Dornbracht, Georg Jensen, and Minotti.

**Shabby Slips, 2304 Bissonnet St., 630-0066; shabbyslipshouston.com:** Modern and chic handcrafted furnishings—lamps of cast resin, limestone, or leather, and chrome or iron benches covered in everything from antelope to zebra.

**Sloan/Hall, 2620 Westheimer Rd., 942-0202; sloanhall.com:** The design set's go-to gift store for artisan jewelry, Italian bath and body potions, Waylande Gregory ceramics, and the latest style books.

**Tootsies, 4045 Westheimer Rd., 622-9990; tootsies.com:** Where Houston's fashionistas have flocked for more than 30 years in search of everything from Michael Kors to Monique Lhuillier, Ralph Lauren to Roberto Cavalli.

**Wayne Smith Jewels, 2736-C Virginia St., 524-0100; waynesmithjewels.com:** An under-the-radar jeweler who crafts knockout pieces inspired by such greats as Verdura and Mauboussin.



The ballroom at the  
Rienzi Center for Euro-  
pean Decorative Arts.

is that rare American metropolis that is home to resident companies in all the major performing arts: opera, symphony, drama, and ballet. Its museums impress too, from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston—with its buildings by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and top-notch collection of almost 63,000 works (linger at its French Impressionist and Italian Renaissance masterpieces)—to the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where, in a stainless-steel stunner of a box designed in 1972 by Gunnar Birkerts, you can become immersed in a mix of recent regional and international art.

Mark Rothko and Cy Twombly get their due in two must-see spaces dedicated to their work: Rothko in a modernist chapel where 14 of his paintings hang in a whisper-quiet non-denominational space commissioned by the great Houston philanthropists Dominique and John de Menil; and Twombly in a contemporary gallery by Renzo Piano that houses a five-decade survey of his paintings and sculpture. Across a leafy street from the Twombly gallery is its larger sibling, another clean-lined Piano composition, the Menil Collection, a gorgeous repository of works ranging from African and medieval pieces to paintings >

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Chapel of St. Basil.

by Fernand Léger, Robert Rauschenberg, and René Magritte, among many others. It was the forward-thinking Menils who not only gave a young Philip Johnson one of his first residential commissions, their sleek house in Houston's posh River Oaks neighborhood, but also hired couturier Charles James to devise its interior, an almost baroque whirl of chartreuse silks and pink walls that set purists, Johnson included, on their ears.

But it's not just museum-worthy art and high culture that are embraced here. Houston celebrates all things funky, from one of the nation's largest annual parades of artist-decorated cars to the Orange Show Center for Visionary Art, an outsider-art foundation that encourages and extols personal, not to say eccentric, artistic expression. Two of the main attractions? 2401 Munger Street, which is one man's architectural ode to his favorite fruit, the orange, via a maze of found objects that envelops an oasis and a wishing well; and 222 Malone Street, the Beer Can House, where a retired upholsterer covered his front and back yards with glass marbles, rocks, and metals, then moved on to his humble domicile, festooning it with nearly 50,000 flattened cans.



Tailored menswear at Hamilton Shirts.

Ask any Houstonian where he or she lives, and the answer will be one of the city's distinct neighborhoods: Montrose, Memorial, Downtown, Midtown, et al. Each comes with its own identity and reputation, fiercely guarded by its inhabitants. For a tantalizing taste of deep-pockets living, go no further than River Oaks. "It's jam-packed with a lot of very pretty houses," says decorator Randy Powers. "Drive down almost any street and you'll see the influence of architect John Staub, if not one of ▷

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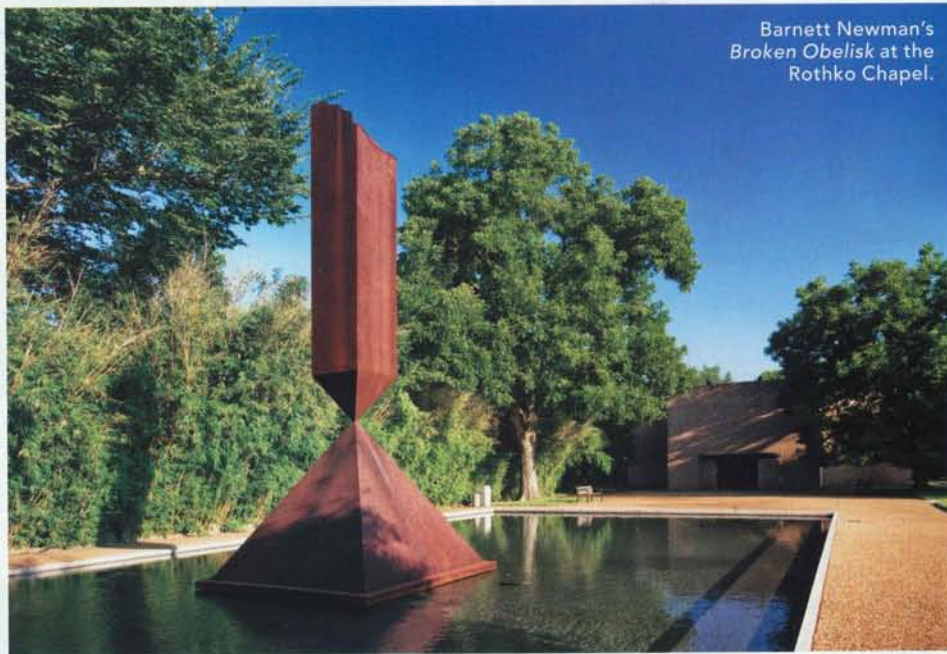
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Barnett Newman's  
*Broken Obelisk* at the  
Rothko Chapel.

his masterpieces itself." Of all of Staub's elegant manses of the 1920s to the '60s, the most famous is the pink stucco Bayou Bend, at 1 Westcott Street, built in 1928 for the benevolent heiress Ima Hogg. Now Hogg's jaw-dropping gardens and collections of American furniture and decorative arts are open to the public, and her mostly Georgian-style Bayou Bend shares the River Oaks neighborhood with the modern Menil House and a bevy of other wildly disparate dwellings. "One friend's delicious home here could be mistaken for a centuries-old townhouse in Boston or London," says Holly Moore, editor in chief of *PaperCity*. "Another's might be a triumph of modernity in 20,000 square feet, complete with an indoor lap pool, and yet another a cozy cottage set in the woods."

That diversity in design plays out across Houston's ample skyline too, with downtown towers by Philip Johnson and John Burgee, I. M. Pei, Cesar Pelli, and other noted architects thrusting into the broad Texas sky.

As fervently as Houstonians support the arts and build big, they also shop. (In this part of the state, which is as flat as a tabletop, natural attractions such as mountains and gorges are in short supply. Free time must be filled somehow.) The Galleria and its famous indoor ice-skating rink is a top destination, brimming with the likes of Baccarat, Chanel, and Gucci.

The Galleria's Neiman Marcus is renowned, of course, for its luxurious stash and legendary Texas service. But it is Houston's smaller, idiosyncratic shops that add crackle and pop.

"The boutique scene is vibrant," Claridge says. "There is definitely something for everyone." The well-curated 310 Rosemont captures the city's modern zeitgeist with women's and men's lines such as James Perse and Earnest Sewn. At Tootsies, an inimitable women's store in the Highland Village area, a who's who of American and European names dangles from the racks: Donna Karan, Etro, Jason Wu, Stella McCartney. (After nearly three decades at the same location, Tootsies is moving into a 35,000-square-foot prime corner spot at West Ave this January.) For gents who seek old-school style—terribly in vogue at the moment—a trip to Hamilton Shirts is required. There, one family has been crafting shirts from Swiss and Italian fabrics >



RDG + Bar Annie.



Benjy's restaurant

since 1883. You may even bump into a British lord who's come for a fresh supply of bespoke poplins and tattersalls.

Dining is nearly as adventurous as the shopping, with little surprises along every boulevard. "The food is insanely good," says Jackie Bolin, co-owner of the Dallas clothing boutique V.O.D., who makes the four-hour drive back to her hometown every chance she gets. "The diversity in cuisine is amazing. The quality of the Vietnamese food in particular is the best I know of outside of Vietnam." But this is Texas, after all, and Mexican fare is a given. Two spots of note are the beloved El Tiempo Cantina ("I dream about the crab enchiladas there!" says Bolin), where the Lorenzo family, whose roots in the food business trace back to 1949, serves authentic Mexican favorites; and the white-tablecloth Armandos in River Oaks, where socialites and celebrities often dot the sumptuous main room.

It is those same movers and shakers who embody Houston's trademark elegant ease. "Because Houston is such a bootstrap town," Moore says, "the social scene here is very much a mix of ages and social strata. New names freely mingle with the city's oldest >



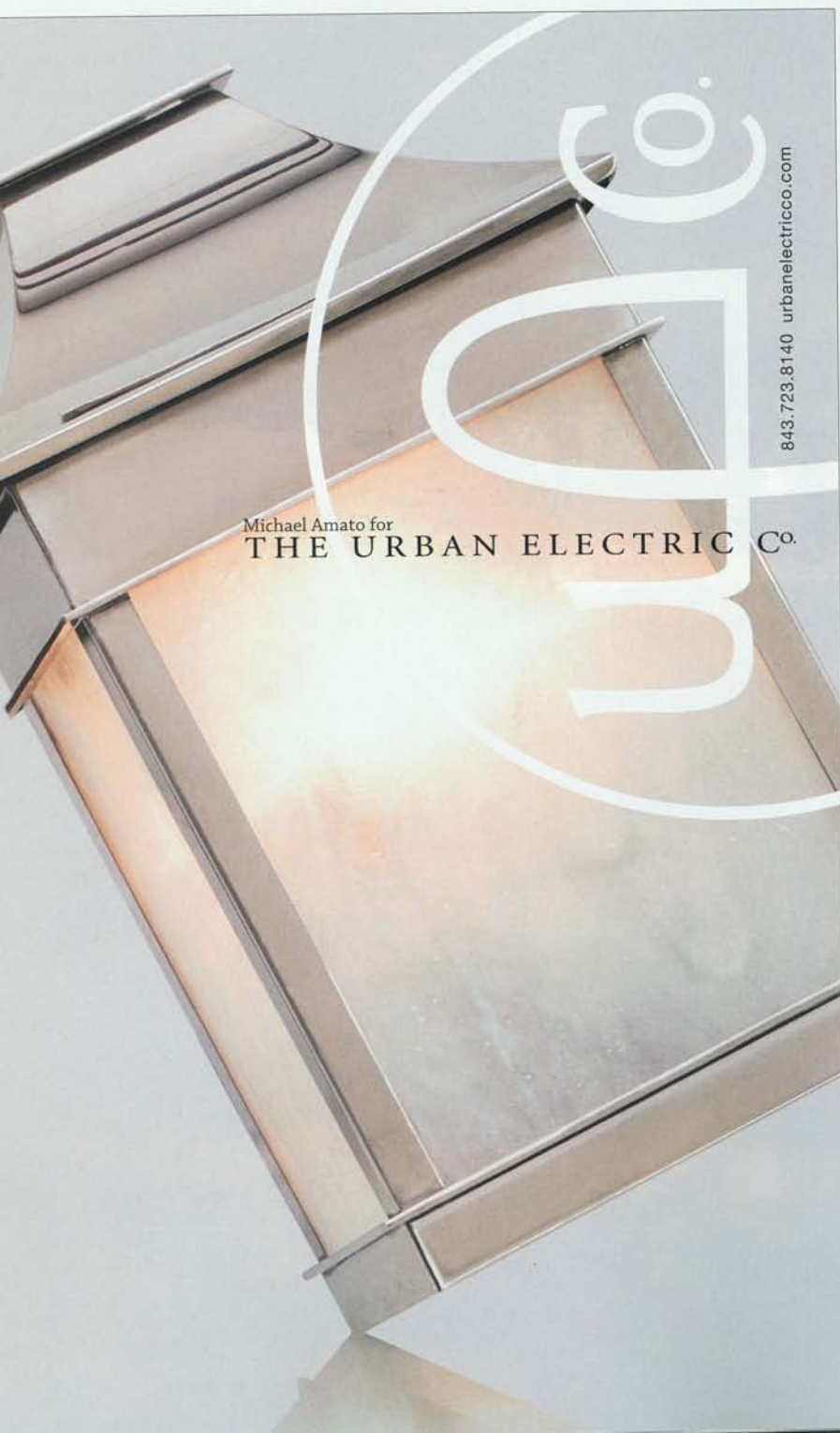
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names—and by old I mean anyone who has been here for ten years. Grande dames, thirty-somethings, singles, marrieds, wouldn't-dream-of-getting-marrieds: It makes for fun fêtes." Claridge also relishes the anything-goes atmosphere. "Snobbery about one's schooling and social rank simply doesn't exist here," she says, "save for the proud Texans who are fifth, sixth, seventh generation. It's really a refreshing place to be."

One of Randy Powers's recent nights out tells almost all there is to know about Houston's freewheeling spirit and Texas charm. "At a dinner party," says the dapper decorator, "I was seated across from my hostess, a chicly dressed socialite, with the most magnificent Willem de Kooning peering over her shoulder, all while using William Spratling silver and conversing about the pagodas on the table. When I asked about them, she replied, 'Aren't they terrific? They were Tony Duquette's.' Then she looked down at my plate and said, 'You need more fried chicken!'" ■



An eclectic mix of furnishings at Found.