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HOW HOUSTON REINVENTED ITSELF AS A CULTURAL POWERHOUSE

In recent years the Texas city has become an artistic and culinary center, attracting visitors from across the globe

Text by Michael Slenske

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When did

Houston—long associated with oil, NASA, crippling humidity, isolating car culture, and McMansion sprawl—become one of the most exciting places in America? Over the past decade the Texas city has welcomed an influx of young professionals, people displaced by Katrina, immigrants, and other transplants enticed by the low cost of living and strong job prospects. At the same time, a growing cadre of avant-garde chefs,



Houston's Discovery Green park. Photo: Katya Horner/courtesy of Discovery Green

artists, and designers have been reenergizing H-Town, as it is nicknamed, creating innovative restaurants and cutting-edge boutiques in hip micro-neighborhoods that barely registered ten years ago. The country's second-most charitable urban center, Houston is also benefiting from healthy philanthropic investments that are helping to expand its cultural offerings. As a result, proud Houstonians will tell you, the city has supplanted Austin as the state's coolest metropolis, thanks to its diverse population and artistically inclined, architecturally ambitious outlook.

Some of the most impressive signs of change can be seen in and around the Downtown area, which "used to be deserted after 5:30," says [Museum of Fine Arts, Houston](#) (MFAH) director Gary Tinterow, who in 2012 moved back to his hometown after nearly three decades in New York, working at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Now there's a vibrant scene centered on [Discovery Green](#)," he notes, referring to the 12-acre arts-and-entertainment venue, which is celebrating its sixth anniversary. In the surrounding blocks, stylish restaurants and bars—like Bryan Caswell's buzzy seafood spot [Reef](#) and the sophisticated tequila-and-mescal joint the Pastry War—have taken root, and the recently renovated 135-room [Hotel Icon](#), in the 1911 Union National Bank building, offers smart lodgings with updated Deco-tinged interiors.

Near Downtown, the live oak–canopied Museum District is anchored by the adventurous [Contemporary Arts Museum Houston](#), and the august MFAH, which in the coming years will add two new buildings by Steven Holl Architects. The MFAH received national attention in 2013 for its James Turrell retrospective, made possible with help from local gallerist [Hiram Butler](#), who shows the work of modern and contemporary masters out of a clapboard cottage. Butler, a longtime champion of Turrell's, recommends the city's two public Turrell Skyspaces, one of which, called *Twilight Epiphany*, resides on the Rice University campus along with large-scale installations by Mark di Suvero, Michael Heizer, and Leo Villareal.

Equally stunning pieces by Di Suvero and Heizer can be found on the grounds of [the Menil Collection](#), which houses the vast art holdings of Houston's ur–society couple, the late Dominique and John de Menil. Occupying a 30-acre Museum District campus—currently undergoing its own extensive redo, overseen by David Chipperfield Architects—the Menil encompasses Renzo Piano's first two buildings in the U.S. and sits adjacent to the iconic [Rothko Chapel](#).

Museum District visitors will want to book a room in the nearby Montrose area, at the five-suite, nine-villa [La Colombe d'Or](#), an art-filled 1923 mansion that Holly Moore, the editor of Texas's *PaperCity* magazines, calls "wonderful and charming." Philanthropist Becca Cason Thrash, who cofounded *PaperCity* with Moore, suggests trying "the best Italian food with the best clientele" at the neighboring [Da Marco](#) restaurant.

At the popular Montrose eatery [Underbelly](#), chef Chris Shepherd highlights the diversity of Houston fare with cross-cultural dishes such as Thai-style oysters Rockefeller and Korean braised goat with dumplings—nods to the local ethnic restaurants whose kitchens he has worked in. For an inventive take on Texas ingredients, Shepherd favors the tasting menu at the Warehouse District's [Oxheart](#), which offers dishes like mesquite-smoked cobia and preserved 'Purple Cosmic' carrots. And he's also drawn to a new Montrose landmark consisting of side-by-side dining venues—[the Pass](#), serving haute cuisine, and the more casual [Provisions](#)—where the constantly changing menus might feature salt-cod gnocchi or lamb with citrus, chard, and coffee yogurt.

West of Montrose, in the tony River Oaks neighborhood, the French bistro [Brasserie 19](#) is "the place to see and be seen," according to Cason Thrash. Another happening R.O. spot is [Liberty Kitchen & Oysterette](#), owned by restaurateur Lee Ellis and culinary director Lance Fegen, a seafood-obsessed surfer who brings in bivalves from across the country. The area is also home to Atlanta-based clothiers [Ann Mashburn](#) and [Sid Mashburn](#)'s new conjoined Houston outposts, with a look interior designer J. Randall Powers describes as "Ralph Lauren meets industrial chic."

For design shopping, Powers heads to the nearby Upper Kirby area's West Alabama antiques row, in particular [David Lackey Antiques & Art](#), which specializes in midcentury-modernist artworks. A staggering array of housewares, furniture, and accessories commingle at the 70,000-plus-square-foot multibungalow store [Kuhl-Linscomb](#), while the eclectic mix at [Found](#) ranges from Christopher Spitzmiller lamps to vintage French bergères. Also on West Alabama is [Tiny Boxwoods](#), a gracious restaurant—overlooking a greenhouse—where lamb burgers and Orange Julia libations draw a chic international crowd as well as local tastemakers.

Among Upper Kirby's art venues, Moore is fond of the [McClain Gallery](#), whose roster includes Larry Bell, James Rosenquist, and Julian Schnabel, and the Texas-focused [Moody Gallery](#), while Powers relies on the [Parkerson Gallery](#) for first-rate 19th- and 20th-century paintings. Hungry art shoppers can't go wrong with [Goode Co. Barbeque](#), just south of the US-59 highway. Says Cason Thrash, "[Fashion designer] Zac Posen had two orders of the barbecue chicken when I took him there."

West of Upper Kirby, the 131-year-old family-run [Hamilton Shirts](#) makes some of the finest

bespoke men's shirts in the country. "I love the fact that you can see the people sewing right there," says singer-songwriter Lyle Lovett, whose second collection of Western shirts for Hamilton came out this year. When he's in town, the Houston-born entertainer often heads to award-winning chef Robert Del Grande's Southwestern spot [RDG Bar Annie](#), in the adjacent Uptown/Galleria area; it's the same neighborhood where Hugo Ortega, the city's éminence grise of Mexican cuisine, just opened [Caracol](#), an airy seafood restaurant with a massive wood-fired oven. The nearby [Hotel Granduca](#), with its 122 Tuscan-inspired rooms and suites, welcomes stylish jet-setters. "I stayed there for a few months," says Moore. "You run into people from all over the world."

It's just one of many examples of the city's increasing internationalism, which can be experienced in all its glory along the six-mile-long ethnic-restaurant thoroughfare of Long Point Road, where, Shepherd notes, the offerings include everything from "pupusas to Polish to great barbecue to live octopus." Lovett observes this global reach in all corners of Houston. "We have such a multicultural influence," he says. "You can see the world just walking down the street here."

[View a slide show of the can't-miss restaurants, shops, and galleries in Houston, Texas.](#)

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