

SEPTEMBER 2014
TRUTH IN TRAVEL

Condé Nast Traveler



STYLE & DESIGN SPECIAL

TAKE OFF!

**AMSTERDAM / TOKYO / SEVILLE
LONDON / HOUSTON**

THE NEW JET SET

Liya Kebede and 15 global
citizens we love

Photograph by Inez and Vinoodh

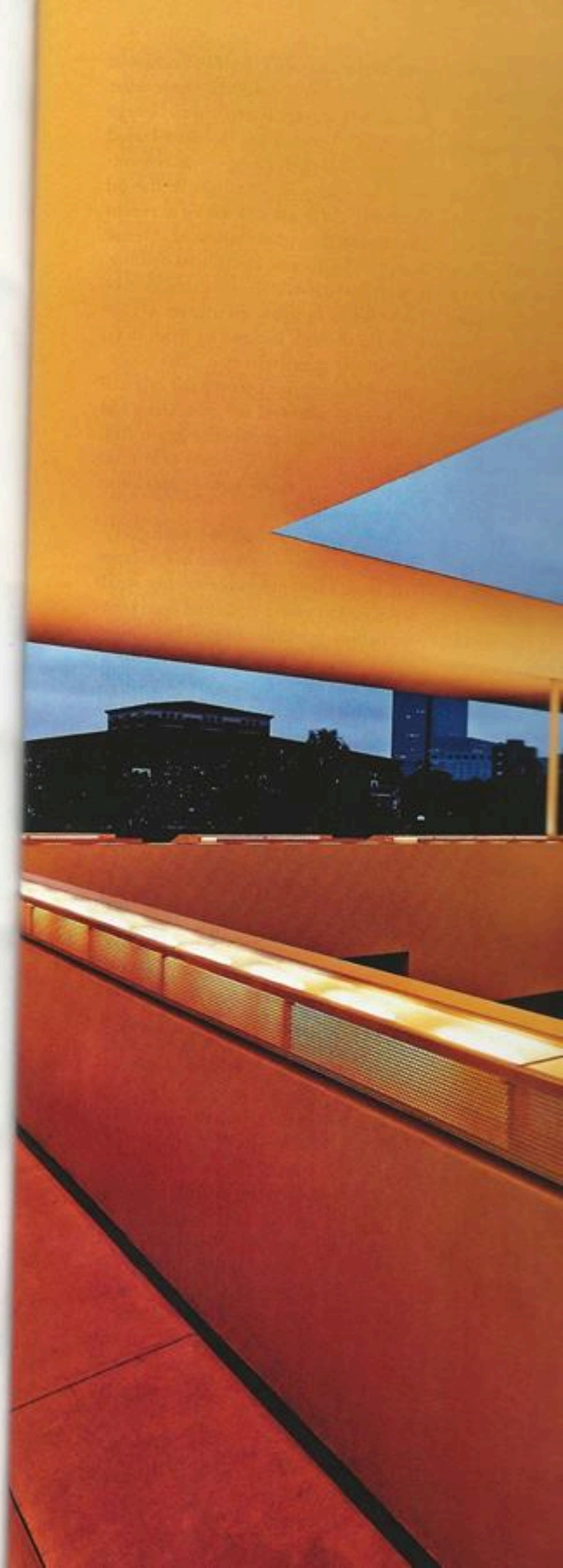
THE

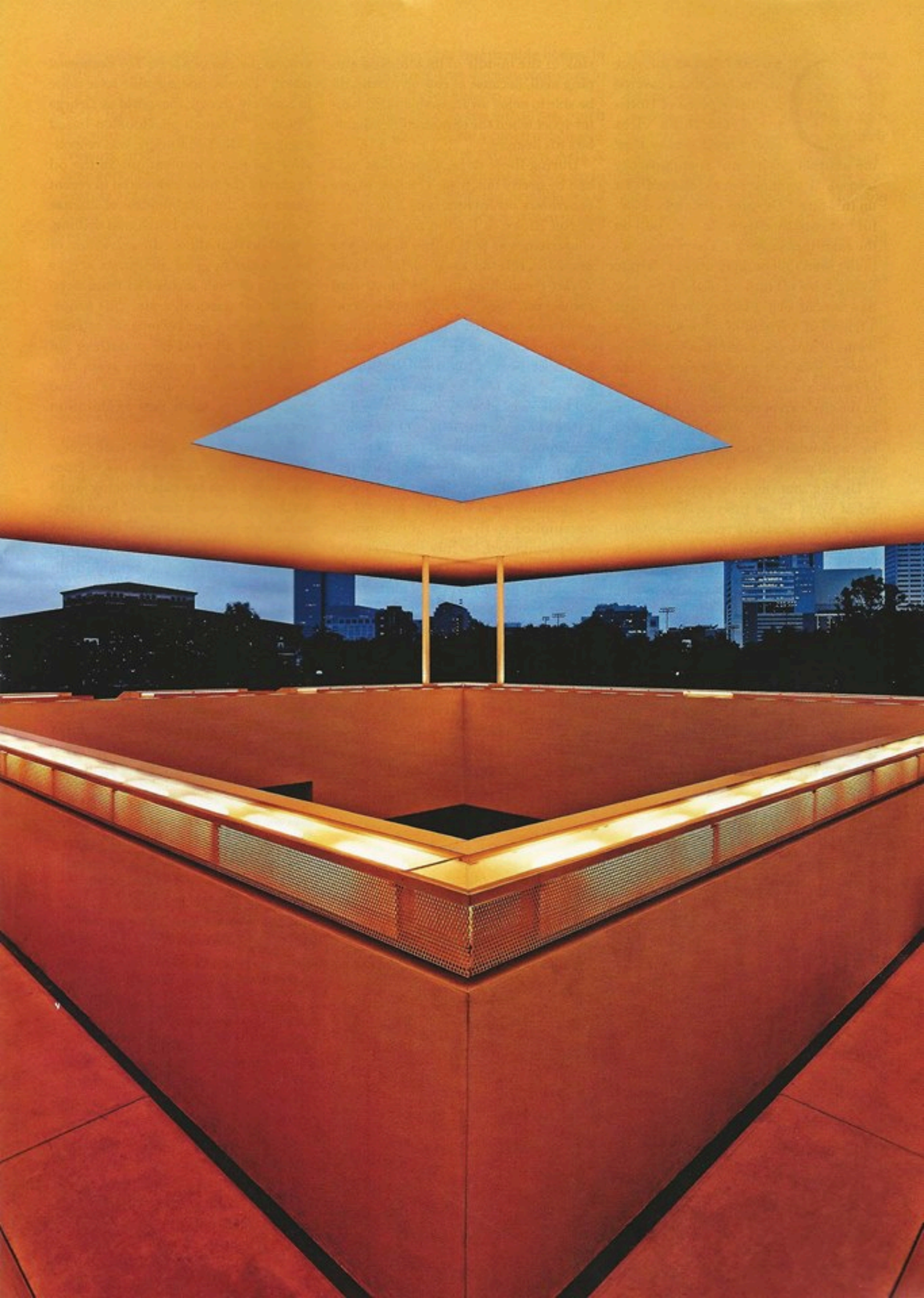
*In the oil-slicked '80s,
Houston put up
look-at-me skyscrapers
and covered everything
in car-friendly asphalt.
But now, flush from a new
energy windfall and
building like mad, the city
is reinventing itself
as a greener, more
cultured, more human-
scale cosmopolis.*
By Mimi Swartz

NEWT

BOOM

Photographs by Ian Allen





ONE PARTICULAR bumper sticker remains a coveted if elusive piece of Houston memorabilia, circa 1986. "Lord, please send me another oil boom," it supposedly begged. "I promise not to [obscurity] it up this time." Or some other less colorful but equally desperate variation on the same theme. In fact, I have never actually seen this bumper sticker despite living here off and on since 1976, nor has anyone else I know, even though a friend of a friend of a friend always seems to have one somewhere. It holds a place in local history as the most fervent of Houston prayers, a plea for a return to the city's great economic boom of the late 1970s and early '80s, the one fueled by confounding and supposedly ever-rising oil prices.

During that time, the price of a barrel of West Texas Intermediate crude went from a perfectly reasonable \$14.90 a barrel in 1978, to a damn fine \$32.50 a barrel in late 1979, to a nearly unheard-of \$39.50 a barrel a year later. While Exxon executives and the last of the wildcatters went to bed dreaming of \$50 oil—Never! Impossible!—Houston was already reaping major benefits. Within a few short years, it could boast a designer skyline (Philip Johnson, I. M. Pei, etc.), freeways packed with Mercedes-driving sheikhs, and the dubious then-novelty of an ice-skating

rink in the middle of its toniest shopping mall, because of course we should be able to enjoy an altogether alien winter sport when the temperature outside hits 103 degrees.

During those days, a good time was had by pretty much all. The heir to one enormous oil fortune, the late, great Baron Ricky di Portonova, kept boa constrictors as pets in his River Oaks mansion. International socialite Lynn Wyatt frequented the chichiest local restaurant, Tony's, with her pals Princess Grace and Mick Jagger (even he had to wear a coat and tie). Gilley's, which had once been a plain old shitkicker bar—albeit a big one with a mechanical bull—was glossily immortalized in *Urban Cowboy*, a movie about blue-collar Houstonians that starred John Travolta, who hailed from Englewood, New Jersey. The good times, however, came to a calamitous end when the price of oil succumbed to the laws of economics and plummeted, by July 1986, to \$11.60 a barrel. That's when the harsh lessons of humility set in, and when the bumper sticker, apocryphal or not, reflected the collective craving for a do-over.

Now, almost 30 years later, that prayer appears to have been answered, big-time. Houstonians who are not inclined to thank the Lord for this blessing might instead pay tribute to a Galvestonian by the name of George Mitchell, the child of Greek immigrants, who died last

year at the age of 94. As *The Economist* put it, "Few businesspeople have done as much to change the world as George Mitchell." Though his Houston-based company, Mitchell Energy, was responsible for many innovations in the oil business, the most influential in recent years was the combination of intense water pressure and horizontal drilling, a method that allows the extraction of oil and gas in great quantities across a strata of rock instead of from deep within one particular site. This procedure—*fracking* has become the catchall term—has allowed for countless old wells to be made productive again and, with oil prices holding steady at around \$100 a barrel, made new exploration economically viable.

Fracking may not sit well with everyone, particularly those who live in cities and towns that are experiencing small earthquakes where none had been present before, but it has helped the United States to move closer to energy independence and has created a veritable drilling stampede here in Texas and beyond. It isn't just the oil companies that stand to profit from new finds, of course; it's all the engineering and oil service companies that are now working 24/7 to keep consumers in their SUVs. And most of those companies, as well as many offshore oil drillers, are located in Houston. Hence, as folks around town like to say, it's *déjà vu* all over again.



Previous page: Every sunrise and sunset, a sequence of colored lights illuminates James Turrell's *Twilight Epiphany* skyspace (2012), on the Rice University campus, altering the perception of the sky revealed in the square cutout at its center for viewers seated below.

Left: Jesús Rafael Soto's *Houston Penetrable*, at the city's Museum of

Fine Arts through September 1, envelops visitors in 24,000 dangling plastic strands.

Right: The 22,000-seat BBVA Compass Stadium, opened in 2012 in the eastern part of the city's downtown, is primarily a venue for the Houston Dynamo (a Major League Soccer club) and the Houston Dash (a National Women's Soccer League team).

Once more, people are moving here with a vengeance, for the same reason they flocked to Houston 30 or so years back: jobs. With 2.1 million people, Houston is currently the second-fastest-growing city in the nation, just behind New York. The metropolitan area, however, is arguably the most diverse in America—more than a quarter of the residents were born in other countries. During the last boom, the city streets filled up with cars bearing Michigan license plates. Now, at an upscale shopping mall like the Galleria, or at a lower-end place like Sharpstown Mall, or even farther out in the exurbs at First Colony Mall, English is only one of many languages overheard, and it's usually overwhelmed by Spanish, Farsi, Vietnamese, or Hindi.

The freeways, too, are again impassable, though Teslas now compete with Mercedeses, Bentleys, and BMWs. Historically, any display of wealth would do as long as it was displayed; now we have display that conveys not only great wealth but great sophistication, which in turn conveys a greater distance from the stereotype of the rich, boorish oilman of yore. The high-end restaurants and luxury retailers are once again doing a fine business: Tory Burch, Prada, and Bottega Veneta have joined Neiman Marcus, Ralph Lauren, and Chanel in the Galleria's five-star lineup, with new, even more luxurious shopping bazaars planned just a few miles away. Uptown Park, which was pretty ritzy to begin with, is undergoing a \$1.2 billion redevelopment that will include the addition of a 26-story luxury rental tower. (Houston's relatively new penchant for walkable outdoor shopping centers with trees, flowers, and sidewalk cafés strikes me as a reflection of the optimism so intrinsic to the oil business, and to Houston; people here can change a lot of things, but the subtropical climate is so far not one of them.) There is a veritable feeding frenzy for homes in the best neighborhoods: At this point, the inventory is so low in these areas that a 7,800-square-foot property near Rice University which was listed for \$780,000 ended up going for well over \$1 million, with 14 bidders. The average price of a single-family home here is now about \$260,000, up 11 percent in a single year; the fact that that price is still

far cheaper than comparable homes in Manhattan or Los Angeles continues to draw people to Houston.

Just as it did in the late 1970s, much of the city looks like a construction site. The new MATCH (Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston) is going up in Midtown, a gentrifying neighborhood just south of downtown; construction cranes dot the landscape of the central city and the Texas Medical Center, which is already the world's largest. The developer Gerald Hines, largely responsible for Houston's designer skyline of the boom years, has two new projects in the works: a 48-story downtown office building by the famously green firm of Pickard Chilton and a second tower near the tony neighborhood of River Oaks. (High-rise protests have also become a trend here, where once the bulldozer was king.) Of course, the biggest project is north of town, near the Woodlands: the brand-new 385-acre Exxon Mobil campus (also by Pickard Chilton) that will accommodate 10,000 people. Seen from afar, it looks like nothing less than the capitol of a small country, nestled in the pines.

WHAT IS most compelling to those of us who have stuck around through the booms and busts is the new emphasis on "quality of life" by local government and businesses. In the old days, that term meant you rolled up the car

windows and turned on the AC when the air smelled too much like toxic petrochemicals. Now, community leaders—realizing that a younger generation of corporate honchos and their employees actually want to live someplace . . . nice—have applied their passion for innovation to making Houston a far more verdant and pleasant place to live and visit. Thanks to public and private partnerships, a lively downtown park called Discovery Green has replaced a desolate sea of asphalt parking lots, and Houston's most urban park, Hermann, is receiving a major face-lift. Last year the Chicago firm of Hoerr Schaudt, known for the beautification of Michigan Avenue, started working with the local firm White Oak Studio on the McGovern Centennial Gardens, which will have eight acres of gardens and a pavilion designed by Peter Bohlin (better known as the architect of the Apple store on New York City's Fifth Avenue). And \$58 million has gone toward the revivification of Buffalo Bayou, turning a historic but weedy bog into a semitropical paradise, with a skateboard park, a dog run, hiking and biking trails, a canoe dock, and even a lake—not to mention a sculpture by Henry Moore and a series of elegant kneeling figures by the Catalan artist Jaume Plensa.

Community leaders have been highly selective in their choice of designers,



The Houston Ballet, the fourth-largest ballet company in the United States, unveiled its Center for Dance in 2011.

For more images of Houston by Ian Allen, download our digital edition.



seeking out those who share their concern for walkable streets and ever more green spaces; Laurie Olin, who designed New York City's Bryant Park and the Getty in Los Angeles, was the lead landscape architect for Discovery Green. In fact, what is most different this time around is the city's view

of itself. In the past, the good times were always an occasion to be outer directed, to prove to the rest of the world for the umpteenth time that Houston was a sophisticated city with art museums, concert halls, French food, and indoor plumbing. The Houston of today, however, is more self-involved—in a good way. While many of the major projects are by internationally known firms—just as Renzo Piano was chosen to design the Menil in 1987—the city is also awarding high-profile developments to local architects. The most notable is the San Antonio-based firm Lake/Flato, designers of MATCH. Thirty years ago, the idea of hiring a firm from a smaller city for such a big project would have been akin to wearing a dress made by a seamstress in Lubbock to the opening of the opera. It might work, but then again it might not, and the potential for humiliation wasn't worth the risk. Now, the fear of humiliation is gone: The award-winning Lake/Flato was simply the firm that best understood the local culture and had the right aesthetic.

It is this self-confidence that probably surprises visitors most. No one in Houston thought it was particularly remarkable that in 2010 it elected the first lesbian mayor in the country: Anise Parker had been in public office for more than a decade. Few of the best restaurants now require that patrons dress for dinner, and even fewer feature old-fashioned, stuffy Continental menus. Many have an intimate, casual feel—fewer diamonds in the daylight—and most accomplished chefs have committed themselves to sourcing locally. But more interesting has been the creation of menus that draw on the many cultures and cuisines flavoring the city itself. Chris Shepherd, who was honored by the James Beard Foundation earlier this year, began the trend with Underbelly, which opened in 2012—the current menu includes smoked pork collar with cheddar grits and crawfish creole gravy; and a salad of bacon, tomato, egg, and crawfish hush puppies. But Shepherd is not alone in reflecting the local scene with pride: Hugo Ortega, once a poor Mexican immigrant, is now the chef/co-owner of Hugo's and Caracol. Both Mexican restaurants reveal a supreme

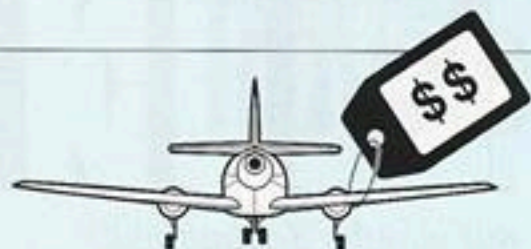
confidence that diners are ready for more than tacos and enchiladas (I for one am great with the beef cheeks and the duck *carnitas*, but not quite ready for the pan-sautéed grasshoppers served with guacamole and tortillas). It is perhaps a tribute to Houston's global stature that very few waiters at the city's Thai, Vietnamese, Indian, or African restaurants bother to ask how hot you want your food anymore.

WHAT MAY be best about Houston, though, is what hasn't changed over the years. Its passion and respect for eccentricity remains: An inner-city cottage covered entirely in beer cans is now protected by a nonprofit foundation, and there is even a move afoot to save the Astrodome from the wrecking ball, despite the fact that the world's first domed stadium long ago outlived its usefulness. And thank the Lord, just as Houston has a new generation of sophisticates, it also has a new generation of show-offs, with tons of cash to use for entertainment—for themselves and everyone else. Chain restaurant and casino mogul Tilman Fertitta recently managed to put both his plane and his yacht on display for a group of journalists in a single day. A recent charity event featured chickens in a backyard aviary and duck calls as entertainment. (Okay, it was a fund-raiser for a local conservancy.) At another event for charity, where local socialites donated their designer handbags—Vuitton, Valentino—the acquisitive desperation was so hot and heavy that afterward the auctioneer joked, "You all were like you were on crack."

In the over-the-top department, there's also the Hindu temple in Stafford. A massive yet intricate structure hand carved in Italian marble and Turkish limestone, it was finished on Houston time—within 16 months. Some of the festivals celebrated include Diwali, Annakut, and Ramnavami. But the temple also offers many youth sports programs for the next generation of Houstonians, including football, volleyball, and basketball.

That's Houston, too, and no one has to pray that these good times will last. ♦

For a guide to Houston's liveliest neighborhoods, including where to stay and eat and what to see, turn to page 154.



What's Happening to Frequent-Flier Programs?

With major changes looming, here's what you can do to come out on top.

DELTA SKYMILES

For years, you've earned frequent-flier miles based on the mileage you flew. Next year, you'll earn miles based on money spent. So on a \$300 round-trip ticket from New York to Miami, you'd log 2,194 SkyMiles in 2014. Next year, it'll come to 1,500.

What to Do: Sign up for a Delta American Express card to get some of the same benefits offered with the lowest tier of elite status (priority boarding, free checked bags). You'll also earn 30,000 miles when you enroll.

UNITED MILEAGEPLUS

As with Delta, you'll earn miles based on what you spend, not the miles you fly.

What to Do: Rack up miles with every credit card bill. Both the Starwood Preferred Guest and Chase Ultimate Rewards cards earn points for flights across many airlines.

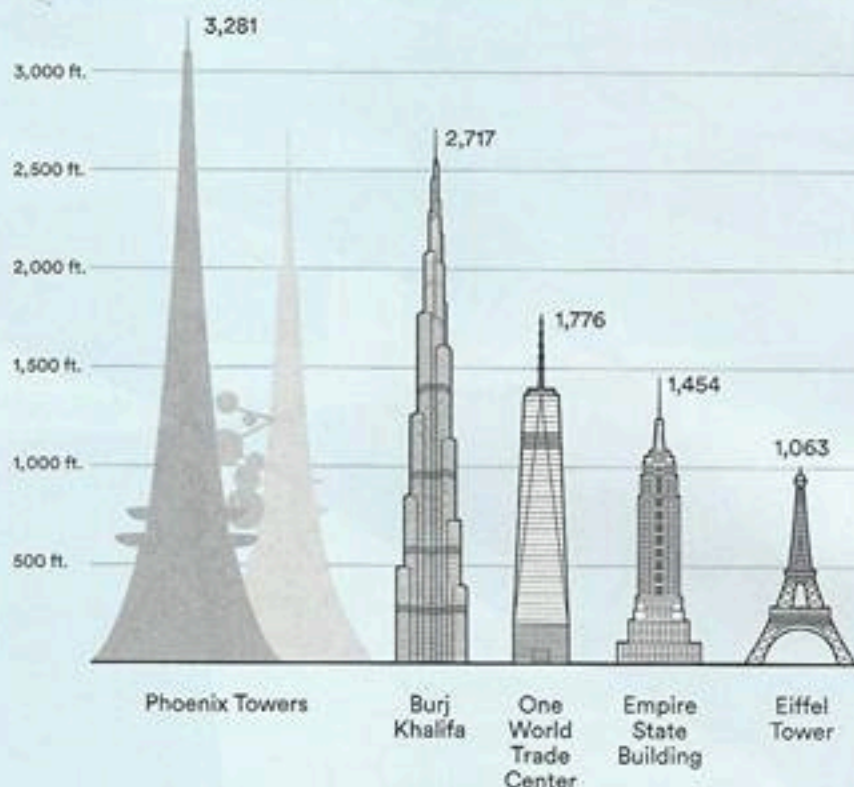
AMERICAN AADVANTAGE

Unlike its rivals, this program remains largely unchanged for now—the airline has more pressing issues at hand with its recent \$17 billion merger with US Airways. But experts say AA may follow the competition next spring.

What to Do: Fly as much as you can to rack up miles. It's cheaper to earn them now than it will be if those changes eventually go through.

HOW THE (SOON-TO-BE) TALLEST BUILDING IN THE WORLD MEASURES UP

When the Phoenix Towers in Wuhan, China, are completed in 2017-18, they will top the world's current record holder, Dubai's Burj Khalifa, and its runners-up around the world.



HOUSTON NEIGHBORHOODS

Where to go (and stay and eat) on your next trip to H-Town.

1. THE HEIGHTS

Prepare to stay out late when you come to this low-rise district. It feels like Austin, Houston's hip neighbor to the north, with its outdoor bars that keep the laid-back atmosphere lively into the wee hours. Grab cocktails and small plates at **Coltivare** (coltivarehouston.com).

2. DOWNTOWN AND MIDTOWN

A mix of skyscrapers and warehouses turned lofts draws young professionals, and there are plenty of great bars and restaurants, including the veggie-centric **Oxheart**, one of Houston's finest—book early (oxheart-houston.com). Two parks, Discovery Green and Market Square, have prime people-watching.

3. MUSEUM DISTRICT

Twenty museums dot the broad boulevards and public green spaces here. Don't miss the Museum of Fine Arts' two galleries and sculpture garden—or the James Turrell skyspace at nearby Rice University. Stay at the quirky **Hotel ZaZa** (hotelzaza.com) and do lunch—shrimp and grits—at **Lucille's** (lucilleshouston.com).

4. RIVER OAKS AND MONTROSE

The pillared mansions mean you're in River Oaks, one of the nation's wealthiest neighborhoods; stay at the sleek **Hotel Derek** (hotelderek.com). Westheimer Road, which runs straight through River Oaks into Montrose, has a cluster of luxe shops and restaurants, like James Beard Award-winning chef Chris Shepherd's **Underbelly** (underbellyhouston.com). His Korean braised goat and dumplings is the dish to get. In historic Montrose, check out the world-renowned Menil Collection and the Rothko Chapel.