

# On the Town

WHERE TO GO, WHO TO SEE, AND WHAT TO DO

# HOUSTON 's PUBLIC ART

THE BAYOU CITY'S SEEN A PUBLIC ART BOOM IN THE LAST 20 YEARS, AND IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY.

**YOU'RE WALKING ALONG** Fifth Ward's Lyons Avenue, jamming to the music in your earbuds, when you spot a mass of wooden boards ripping through the walls of a nearby house, painted and natural-toned planks frozen in the air in a wave of angles, a sight that leaves you feeling as if you've walked right into a demolition zone frozen at the point of destruction, and you find your heart is pounding as you take in the forever-exploding vortex of wood that is *Fifth Ward Jam*.

The miracle of this moment—stumbling upon a work of tangible, eviscerating feeling in the middle of one of Houston's oldest neighborhoods—is how commonplace it now is.

“Public art that was being made in 1999 and 2000 is going to be a little bit different than the public art that is getting made right now in 2020, and was obviously different than the public art that was being made in the 1930s,” says Jimmy Castillo, director of the Houston Arts Alliance's Civic Art + Design, which is charged with implementing the city's art program. “Yet all of that is out and around and available, and it sort of creates a depth of history, a depth of experience, to anybody getting a sense of Houston's culture.”

Adds María Gaztambide, director and chief curator of UH's public art system, one of the oldest collections in the city, “I

think a lot of people in the national stage don't realize the wealth of public art that exists in the city of Houston.”

Once Houston's biggest claim to public art fame was a few privately funded statues (including one of the earliest, a rendering of Confederate Commander Dick Dowling that presided over Hermann Park's Cambridge Street entrance from 1905 until it was removed earlier this year). The odd mural was thrown up, of course, but for decades, if you really wanted to find creations of unexpected beauty smacked down in the middle of town, most Houstonians would have advised you to go check out Austin.

However, that began to change in the 1990s. The concept of public art—pieces that are located in accessible places where the entire community can engage with them—became increasingly appealing. Everyone loved the Waterwall, after all. Why wouldn't we want more sculptures, murals, and other gems from the minds of some of the world's best artists nestled in plain sight where everyone could enjoy them? So the thinking went. Starting in 1999, the City of Houston began devoting a small portion of its budget to public art projects.

Since the passage of the Civic Art Ordinance, the city's official art collection has swelled to more than 600 pieces, ranging from the modern cultural icon *Synchronicity of Color* to the suspended forms of *Soaring in the Clouds* that turn above the heads of visitors to the George R. Brown Convention Center.

We've been all the better for every piece that has been added to Houston's infamously rambling, unzoned, concrete urban sprawl. “Public art, in general, adds a little bit of magic to your life,” explains Castillo. “It's something that is sort of beyond functional, something that can be beautiful, maybe exciting, that sort of interrupts the mundane aspects of your everyday life.”

And engagement really is the key. “Visiting museums and, even more so, galleries can be a kind of intimidating experience,” says Lea Weingarten, the founder and head of the art advisory firm Weingarten Art Group, which manages the art projects and collections of public, private, and corporate entities across the globe. Public art meets everybody exactly where they are, invites them in, and opens their minds to infinite possibilities and conversations, she contends. “Because of that we've seen this beautiful blossoming of interest in the arts,” she says. “They want to feel a part of it; they want to understand it.”

## AMERICAN STATESMANSHIP PARK (AKA MOUNT RUSH HOUR)

A Texas-sized version of one of our country's most iconic monuments, the gigantic concrete busts of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Stephen F. Austin, and Sam Houston by famed Houston artist David Adickes have been delighting traffic-bound travelers as they inch down one of the Bayou City's most notorious bottlenecks for almost a decade. Technically called *American Statesmanship Park*, its placement in the tiny, freeway-side First Ward park overlooking the I-10 and I-45 interchange has earned the iconic sculpture the nickname “Mount Rush Hour,” which, if you ask us, is way catchier.

At 18 feet tall and weighing about two tons each, the sculpted faces of two American Presidents and the duo of Texas Founding Fathers epitomize the cliché of all Texas clichés, that everything's bigger in the Lone Star State. The base the quartet rests on bears the words “A Tribute to American Statesmanship.”

Though Adickes's Texas-sized creation has been sitting beside the freeway since 2012 (it was actually created in 2008), it's still being used to make social and political statements. Just this spring, another artist adorned these famous heads in super-sized, star-spangled face coverings as a reminder to mask up.

Public art isn't just a way for us to tap into our creative potential, it's also a way for the city to express itself—seriously, just think about our most famous murals, from the famed words on the railway bridge over I-45 exhorting drivers to *Be Someone* as they approach Downtown (yeah, yeah, we know it's technically a tag) to the crazy colorful Gonzo247 Market Square original *Houston is Inspired* and Daniel Anguilo's Heights classic *Greetings from Houston*. These pieces all help convey something crucial about what kind of place Houston is, or at least what it aspires to be. "Identity comes from a lot of things," Castillo says. "It comes from the identity of the community around it; it comes from the businesses, the restaurants, the staple things. Public art gives this very visual identity to a place."

That's exactly what's happened with *Jam*. Design team Havel/Ruck originally built it as a temporary installation in 2011 to highlight the deep musical history forged in the Nickel. But the community so fell in love with the creative chaos (crafted from the remains of the beat-up bungalow that once sat on that very lot) that they made it a permanent fixture in the neighborhood. In fact, they built a park around it.

Public art has become so interwoven with the fabric of our communities (thanks in part to our culture of instant sharing) that it's even started to become a central part of major construction projects, says Weingarten, whose clients include H-E-B, real estate developer Midway, and Discovery Green. "It's so much more thoughtful than it ever was." The best part? It's everywhere—and not just in the places you'd expect, like your local performance venues and just about every park acre. It's in your local library, the fire station a few blocks over, and both airports (in every terminal, in fact). Experts say it's no surprise the Bayou City's seeing a boom in public art. "The more people see, the more people want it," says Castillo. "You don't know you want it if you don't see it, if you don't experience it in your everyday interaction with the built environment. Once it's there, it's a lot more enticing to want more."

We've rounded up some of our favorite public art pieces that have sprung up across our cityscape over the decades. Although you'll surely recognize some of these, you might, just possibly, have your own moment of surprise. Enjoy it. That's what this stuff is all about.

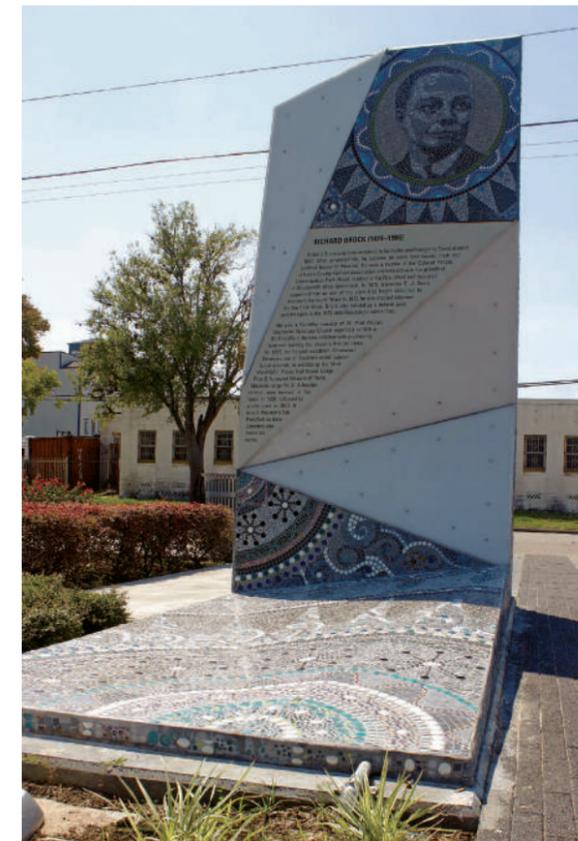


**ELEMENTS OF CHANGE**

In 1872, former slaves Rev. John "Henry" Jack Yates, Richard Brock, Richard Allen, and Rev. David Elias Dibble came together and bought a plot of land to create a space where their descendants could celebrate Emancipation Day in peace. Those 10 square-acres became what is known today as Emancipation Park, the oldest municipal park in both Houston and Texas.

*Elements of Change*, completed in January of 2020, relays the story of both the park and its founders in a visually captivating way. Artist Reginald Adams, a Third Ward resident himself, took four unadorned geometric pillars, remnants of the renovation that anchor the corners of the greenspace near each set of cross streets, and transformed them into three-dimensional mosaic murals, each one honoring one of the park's founders. The individual structures have a color palette representative of one of the natural elements: earth, water, air, and fire—a creative choice meant to reflect the change these four men helped bring about in both Third Ward and Houston.

Befitting the original unifying purpose of the park, community volunteers spent almost 4,000 hours filling in the men's portraits. They used more than 800,000 shards of brilliantly colored glass tiles to decorate each image along with tribal designs that incorporate West African Adinkra symbols (a subtle reference to the founders' slave pasts as most of America's enslaved community were captured from West Africa). Below each portrait is a panel of biographical information describing that founder's life and contributions to Third Ward. The effect of the sculptures, completed at the beginning of this year, is stunning, with the individual tiles sparkling whenever the sun comes out.





### WHO SAYS THAT CHICKENS CAN'T FLY OR THAT MONEY CAN'T FALL FROM THE SKY?

As we've mentioned already, public art isn't limited to outdoor parks and building walls these days. Many pieces sit on private property, just waiting for passersby to enjoy. Enter H-E-B. Through its public art program, launched in 2018, the Texas-based grocery store chain has begun installing works in some of its newer locations, including Elaine Bradford's whimsically wacky piece in which chickens appear to soar through the air at the Heights H-E-B. Crazy as it sounds, Bradford drew her inspiration for the piece from some H-E-B history. During the Great Depression H-E-B employees would throw handfuls of nickels and, yes, tagged live chickens, good for free groceries, as part of an ad campaign. So, playing with two classic idioms of the English language, Bradford hung a funky flock of poultry and oversized

coins from the ceiling of the Heights store's entrance via nearly invisible wires that make the birds, and the coins, appear to be flying. Take some time out of your shopping trip to look up, and you'll notice those chickens are covered in more than just feathers; They're all wearing handmade sweaters—a signature element of Bradford's work (her grandmother taught her to crochet when she was a kid). The color combinations on those garments aren't random, either. They're pulled directly from the packaging of some of H-E-B's most popular products, including its Texas-shaped tortilla chips, That Green Sauce, and the Spicy Whataburger Ketchup. Keep staring, and you might just spot the Buffalo nickel hidden among the floating coinage.

### CURTAIN MURAL HOUSTON

Some pieces capture the vibe of a neighborhood, while others reflect an area's culture. But there's also plenty of art that documents a specific moment in time, serving as a place of reflection and remembrance. Painted in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, *Curtain Mural Houston* in Midtown depicts how strong we are when Houstonians unite.

In the mural, a group of neighbors is literally pulling back a stormy, gray curtain to reveal the Houston skyline bathed in the pink, yellow, and purple rays of a setting sun that stretches from the tops of the buildings out over the nearby bayou. Dotting the expanse is a flock of white doves, a universal symbol of peace.

The best part about this mural? It not only immortalizes a moment that resonates with Houstonians young and old, it is populated by images of real Houstonians. Street artist Emily Ding, who was brought on to paint this commissioned design, featured real Midtown residents on the wall. The long-haired man lives in the building the mural is painted on, while the man in the bandana was cutting the grass on the days Ding was painting. The adorable bandana-wearing dog, Leon, lives across the street from the mural with his beanie-wearing owner, who also makes an appearance.

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### CESAR CHAVEZ/67TH STREET STATION

When Harris County's Metropolitan Transit Authority launched its Art in Transit program back in 2006, the aim was not only to build the Bayou City's light rail system, but also to make the 20 station platforms distinctive and unforgettable. Each station would be decorated with eye-catching works of art that reflect the city's diverse neighborhoods.

One especially colorful creation is Cesar Chavez/67th Street Station by Arizona-based artist Mary Lucking. In a nod to the neighborhood's Hispanic roots, the East End Green Line platform has glass screens and fencing panels designed to mimic "papel picado," a Mexican folk-art tradition in which intricate patterns are cut into tissue paper to form banners. But instead of featuring the classic images that often appear in the craft, Lucking's motif highlights 12 locales connected specifically to East End history, including the Houston Ship Channel, the former Maxwell House coffee plant, and Our Lady of Guadalupe, the first Mexican American church in Houston. Blooming magnolia trees also serve as a recurring theme in various parts of the design in an homage to the ones that lined the esplanades from Harrisburg Boulevard to Downtown back in the day.

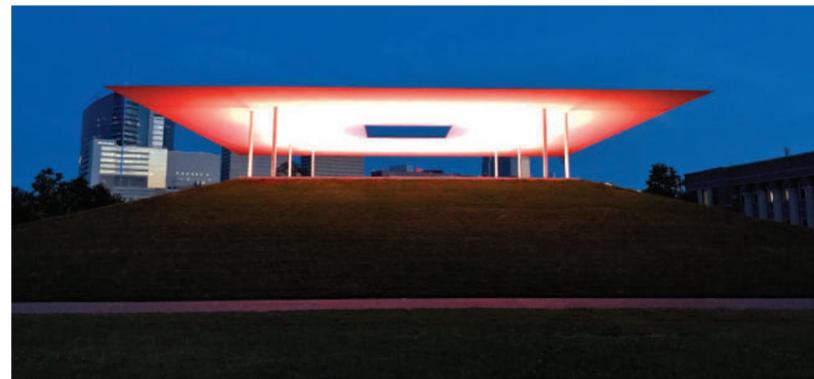


## PLANTER AND STEMS

Wander through the concrete jungle of downtown Houston, and odds are you'll stumble on a wackily whimsical oasis right on Main Street. Artist and educator Floyd Newsom's *Planter and Stems* was commissioned as part of the downtown beautification project ahead of the 2004 Super Bowl. And as with most of Newsom's work, there's a deeper meaning beyond the piece's whimsical shapes, Seuss-like drawings rendered in stainless steel in exuberant hues.

The large, multisided structure (the planter) is meant to represent the members of the "8F Crowd," the wealthy and influential Houstonians, who once ruled the entire state's business and political spheres from the smoke-laced, whiskey-rivered 8F suite of the now-demolished Lamar Hotel for nearly four decades. You might just recognize their names—Abercrombie, Brown, Elkins, Hobby, Jones, Smith, and Wortham—after all, several are plastered all around the city. Squiggling up from the asphalt around the planter are the "stems" of Newsom's creation, which represent the Bayou City's less influential but no less important diverse scope of entrepreneurs, like O.P. DeWalt, owner of Houston's first Black theater, the Lincoln, and Mexican American restaurateur Felix Tijerina, who opened the first Tex-Mex restaurant in town, the dearly departed Felix's.

While the amorphous yellow buds on the stems (no, they're not peanuts—even if they look like them) don't hold a specific meaning, the line drawings on the planter do. The squiggles covering the structure's sides are actually mapping out the area's bayous and roadways, while the wild forms and bright splashes of color are meant to represent the energetic hustle and bustle of the Bayou City. Look long enough and you might even spot the Astrodome.



## TWILIGHT EPIPHANY SKYSPACE

People come from far and wide to experience James Turrell's transcendent visual ode to dusk and dawn. Though not the only piece in Houston designed by the world-renowned light artist, *Twilight Epiphany* at Rice University's Suzanne Deal Booth Centennial Pavilion is the first in his *Skyspace* series (he's done more than 70 of them in 29 countries) to be acoustically engineered as a performance venue.

Built in 2012, the same year as Rice's 100th anniversary, the Houston *Skyspace* consists of a pyramidal grassy mound topped by a square roof that, balanced on thin steel rods, appears to be almost floating in midair. Punctuating the canopy is a square-shaped aperture through which those sitting in the two-level atrium enclosure below can observe the skies. Since this space was designed with live music in mind, the walls of the viewing area, in which a sur-

round sound speaker system is embedded, are slightly slanted to maximize acoustic potential.

While you can visit the piece any time during the day, the true magic begins in the 40-minute leadup to sunrise and 10 minutes before sunset when a series of LED lights project a seamlessly blending, hypnotic array of hues onto the knife-edge ceiling. The sequence of colors—which moves from cerulean blues and bruised periwinkles to brilliant tangerines, deep pinks, and sage greens—changes throughout the year as the length and luminosity of dawns and dusks vary with the seasons. Add that to the ever-changing atmospheric conditions of Houston, and no two light shows are ever the same. Gradually brightening and darkening as they shift, the rainbow effect is so beautiful, it feels as though the heavens themselves are being painted before your very eyes.

SKYSPACE: ALEX SANDLIN/SHUTTERSTOCK

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## SEVEN WONDERS

It's impossible to miss the seven towering pillars as you stroll along the Sesquicentennial Park promenade or across Preston Street Bridge. By day, the looming 70-foot structures that make up *Seven Wonders* echo the city's impressive skyline, while they double as enormous lanterns that bathe the nearby Buffalo Bayou and the back of the Wortham Center in a warm glow by night. Yet *Seven Wonders*, also called *Pillars of the Community*, is far more than just a hat-tip to local architecture or a ginormous night light. It is designed to act as a time capsule, a history book, and a crystal ball—capturing a single moment of Houston life, commemorating a historic event, and looking toward the city's future all at once.

Dreamed up by famed artist and Fifth Ward native Mel Chin, *Seven Wonders* was envisioned in 1986 as part of the park project to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the city's founding. The pillars wouldn't actually be

installed until 1998, when the park was finally completed, but the delay ended up working to Chin's advantage, giving the artist time to work in even more detail. Each stainless-steel column is composed of 150 filigreed cutouts that highlight Houston's history through the themes of agriculture, energy, manufacturing, medicine, philanthropy, technology, and transportation. Since the project was so far behind schedule, Chin decided to incorporate an element of the city's future as well and put out a call asking HISD students born in 1986 to illustrate one of the original themes. After receiving thousands of submissions, Chin took 1,050 designs and added them into the pillars' lacelike cutouts. Of course, working with children is always a risk; some of the youngsters got a little creative with their interpretations. One pillar sports the blueprint for a "butt warmer" complete with an on-and-off switch. The theme for that one? Innovation, obviously.





## RAIL TO THE SEA

Water is at the heart of artist (and impassioned marine conservationist) Janavi M Folmsbee's almost 5,000-square-foot mural in the heart of the Washington Arts District. In bright hues meant to represent the diversity of Folmsbee's adopted city, Rail to the Sea draws attention to rapidly disappearing underwater environments that face ever-growing threats under the rising tide of global warming.

Of course, we understand if you don't catch this deeper meaning on the first glance at the piece, installed on the side of an old Union Pacific Railroad building, given the Mumbai transplant's use of ethereal shapes, which she refers to as her "characters." The lines running through these abstract forms are

inspired by oceanic patterns of hard coral in the Flower Garden Banks Marine Sanctuary, just off the Texas coastline, while the eye-popping reds, purples, yellows, greens, and, of course, blues are pulled from the vibrant scales of various tropical fish swimming throughout the Gulf of Mexico, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and other bodies of water. Folmsbee's watercolor-like brushstrokes add a layer of otherworldliness reminiscent of the seascapes below the crashing waves.

If you're wondering about the piece's name, the mural, which was dedicated to the city in 2016, sits right next to the active rail line that crosses Sawyer Street before eventually ending at the Port of Houston.



## BOOKS OF A FEATHER

Drawing parallels between the physical flight of birds and the flights of imagination that burst from the pages of books, Dixie Friend Gay's nationally award-winning sculpture took roost outside the Alice McKean Young Neighborhood Library in 2017 as part of the city's feathering of its public art nest. So fly, right?

Like the three Greek muses of theater, a trio of plucky birds welcome visitors to the library. To bring her gigantic birds to life (they needed a lift to install them), the Houston-based artist covered the 15-foot concrete and stainless-steel bodies with thousands of pieces of multi-colored glass and ceramic mosaic tiles, creating arcs of colors and patterns that capture the free movement of feathered plumage rippling in the wind.

Not only do the birds sparkle and shimmer with different iridescent hues, each of the Gulfgate neighborhood library's friendly fowls has a different crest atop its head, which, along with its startlingly anthropomorphic eyes, gives it its own unique personality. Tying in the literary theme, tiles hand-stamped with bird-related book titles, including *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Pelican Brief*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, wrap around the birds in ribbon-like fashion. Talk about fancy flights.

DESTINATION MOUND TOWN: COURTESY PHOTO



## DESTINATION MOUND TOWN

If you grew up in the Bayou City, chances are you've climbed aboard the Hermann Park Railroad a time or two. And if your favorite part of the ride was going through the tunnel, you weren't alone. But part of that view is definitely different from your childhood memories. In 2014 local artist superstar Trenton Doyle Hancock redecorated the interior of the railroad's 140-foot train tunnel as part of the park's centennial public art project. Well, redecorated might be a bit of an understatement.

Gone are those loveable yet be-draggled puppets—admit, they'd seen better days after 50 years—now replaced by a fantastical landscape of creatures, both real and imagined. Destination Mound Town takes travelers through a day in the life of the Mounds, the ancient half-animal, half-plant creatures Hancock's been drawing since the '90s. Passengers join the artist's superhero alter ego, Torpedo Boy, at the helm of the train (which looks remarkably

like the one they happen to be riding) amid the Starburst colors of morning, before spending time with cartoon versions of the nearby Houston Zoo residents, various furry park inhabitants, and even Rice's owl mascot. Text phrases encircle and animate this zany entourage as cutouts of critters and plant life bring the action off the wall and onto the Astrotruf running up to the tracks.

Oh, did we mention that's just the right side of the tunnel? A black and white mirror image of the scene covers the opposite wall, strategically bedecked in mirrors that let passengers see themselves in the middle of the action. A little bit pop art à la Peter Max, a touch Hanna-Barbera-meets-Sesame Street, plus a splash of those old '70s Tootsie Pop commercials, Destination Mound Town's graphic lines and bold colors, melded with a comic book-esque iconography and a dizzying degree of maximalism, encapsulate a style that's completely Hancock's.



## THE WATERWALL

In the immortal (almost) words of TLC: Don't go chasing waterfalls. Seriously, the gem at the center of Gerald D. Hines Waterwall Park has been there since the '80s—and it isn't going anywhere. Houstonians and out of towners alike have spent almost four decades watching sheets of water rain down the horseshoe-shaped fountain's 64-foot sculptural walls. That height's no accident, by the way. The number was specifically chosen by internationally acclaimed architectural team John Burgee and Philip Johnson as a reference to the 64 stories of the Williams Tower (then dubbed the Transco Tower). Both were commissioned by real estate magnate Hines as part of the



development adjacent to his nearby creation, the Galleria. (Hines, who passed away earlier this year, was nothing if not savvy about aesthetic values in his crown jewel of a development.)

According to the architects, the Waterwall recirculates 11,000 gallons of water per minute. The postmodernist design also references those of ancient theaters with its Roman-style arches. This marriage of art and architecture has made the Uptown District fountain one of Houston's most prominent photo-ops for years now. Weddings, parties, prom-goers, quinceañera celebrators, newly engaged couples—they've all posed in front of that urban waterfall. And you can see the proof all over Instagram.

## CITY HALL CEILING MURAL

When Houston officials finally got approved for New Deal funding to construct a brand-new Houston city hall, they spared no expense, outfitting the sleek-lined art deco-style building with marble, wood trim, and air conditioning. Then they topped the whole thing off with a mural covering the vaulted ceiling of the first-floor lobby.

The newspaper illustrator-turned-commercial artist Daniel MacMorris knew what he was doing when he designed this allegorical and idealized depiction of industry, culture, law, and government in Houston. For one thing, every figure in the mural scenes, including the farmer, sports Grecian-style robes. For another, though, the effect of the firm, clean lines of each image rendered in soft pastels on the ceiling lends the space a feeling of grace and history that it clearly didn't have when it was newly constructed in 1939. (Making new things and places look old was something of a specialty of the Kansas City-born artist's.)

A layer of dusty pink and saffron-colored clouds help the eye move from the soft tones of the painting to the plasterwork inside the star-studded inverted ceiling. At the ceiling's center, a relief of the Western hemisphere, the state of Texas, and especially the city of Houston, clearly marked by a noticeable change in color and a small star, adds a layer of dimensionality. Surrounding the continent are the symbols of the Zodiac.

