



ON FOOT

Small Town in the Big City

Houston Heights offers Texas history, global cuisine, and stately architecture. By ADRIANA GARDELLA

The Heights sits just four miles northwest of downtown Houston. But stroll the area's broad, tree-canopied esplanades and side streets dotted with homes dating from the early 1900s and you may think you've landed in a small town. Residents wave cheerful greetings as they walk dogs, tend to gardens exploding with palms, crape myrtle trees and trumpet vines, and tote farmers market finds. This seems a world away from the freeways and sprawl of America's fourth largest metropolis, a place

where bigger—think McMansions and gas guzzlers—is often better, and new has long trumped old.

Incorporated as the independent city of Houston Heights in 1891 and annexed by Houston proper in 1918, the neighborhood maintains a quirky sense of individuality. The Heights passed its own Prohibition in 1912, and a large section of it remains dry, as required by the annexation agreement (restaurants have skirted the law's intent by forming private clubs that allow diners to instantly join and order a drink). In a city where development has typically been willy-nilly and zoning laws are nonexistent, the Heights stands out as one of the earliest planned

communities in Texas, boasting 117 places that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places (check some of them out during the annual Spring Home & Garden Tour, held April 10 and 11 this year). Following a period of decline that began when industrial interests moved in after World War II, Houston Heights now flourishes as a destination for foodies, architecture buffs, and creative types (the neighborhood is said to be home to the highest concentration of professional artists in the state).

A mix of old and new (clockwise from upper left): Casa Ramirez specializes in Mexican folk art; Textile serves contemporary cuisine in a historic setting; a Victorian house enchants.

Begin your explorations on **1 Heights Boulevard** around 10th Street. Patterned after Boston’s Commonwealth Avenue, it’s lined with some of the district’s most impressive and well-restored homes, including Victorians and Craftsman bungalows. The vibe is more Bay State than Lone Star—except for the humid subtropical climate and the riot of vegetation it enables. Pause in the esplanade between 10th and 11th Streets to check out the **2 Houston Heights World War II Memorial**, which honors locals who served.

Pockets of galleries dot the Heights, showcasing the work of artists from Houston and beyond. Don’t miss the **3** cluster located on East 11th Street near Cortlandt Street. They include **Nau-Haus**, **G Gallery**, and **Redbud**. The eco-friendly **4 Apama Mackey Gallery**, three blocks east, is housed in three recycled shipping containers. The gallery, owned by an Iranian emigré, is known for featuring the work of international video artists.

If you’ve worked up an appetite, head back west to **5 Lola** on Yale Street just off Heights Boulevard. It’s a modern interpretation of the diner housed in a recently renovated art deco building. Try the popular chicken and fruit waffles (yes, really) or the Day After Thanksgiving sandwich. Steps north on Yale, turn your body into a canvas with a henna tattoo at **6 The Original Henna Company**. Owner



At the shopping district on West 19th Street, **Gallery M Squared** showcases the work of sculptors, painters, photographers, and other artists.

Soniya Ekici is a third-generation henna artist who can decorate a hand, foot—or more—with an ornate design.

Continue your stroll up Heights Boulevard to **7** West 16th Street. **Houston Zen Center** sits near the corner, offering meditation talks and classes—some of them free—from a restored, pale-yellow Mission-style residence.

Two blocks north, **8 Opera in the Heights** stages 40 performances a year (*La Boheme* is slated for spring). Productions are held in the former sanctuary of the Heights Christian Church. The historic hall seats just 314. “It’s opera up close,” says managing director Bill Haase. “Our singers can communicate more with one raised eyebrow than a singer at a major house can convey with two raised arms.”

Tree-lined **9 Marmion Park**, at the intersection of Heights Boulevard and West 18th Street, is a tranquil spot to regroup, named in honor of J.B. Marmion, the last mayor of Houston Heights. The design of the park’s gazebo was inspired by a turret atop Cooley mansion, which once stood here.

10 Shade, a restaurant that dishes out acclaimed global comfort food such as wasabi-coated Thai red curry snapper and fried green tomato BLTs, was something of a

pioneer when it settled into space on West 19th Street in 2003. It now anchors a shopping district that lays claim to the greatest concentration of Heights businesses. They include antique shops **AON** and **Grace Hart and Company**, vintage clothing boutiques **Retropolis** and **Replay on 19th**, and gift and home décor retailers **Jubilee**, **Bliss**, **Eclectic Home**, and **Coda**. This stretch of West 19th Street is also a must for art lovers, who can check out **18 Hands Gallery** (ceramics), **Casa Ramirez** (Mexican folk art), and **Gallery**

M Squared, which showcases the work of established artists such as printmaker and painter Dan Mitchell Allison, as well as emerging talents including the creative duo of photographer Katy Anderson and painter/sculptor Patrick Medrano.

After gallery hopping, head north one block to **11 Mam’s House of Ice** for a cool sugar rush. This snowball stand, painted baby blue and parked at the corner of West 20th Street and Rutland Street, sells New Orleans-style—soft, not crunchy—snow cones in a dizzying array of flavors that include cookie dough, dill pickle, pink champagne, and wedding cake.

On the other end of the culinary spectrum sits **12 Textile**, a ten-table eatery that serves contemporary fare in a former textile mill, the ninth oldest building that still stands in Houston. Executive chef Scott Tycer, who also owns American bistro **Gravitas** and artisan bakery **Kraftsmen Baking**, creates dishes such as line-caught wild salmon with basil-fed snails and a tart made with bacon that is cured and smoked onsite. “We haven’t been able to take it off the menu,” says Tycer. Textile’s décor features many unique finds from **InstallationsAntiques**, which also occupies the old mill. The expansive space contains a well-edited mix of antiques and creatively reclaimed furnishings and collectibles. You can take home a vintage American purse constructed from folded cigarette packs or a department store price tag from the 1940s—reminders that the past is ever present—even in forward-looking Houston.

