

HOUSTON, TEXAS

A first-time visitor to Houston may find the nation's fourth-largest city visually perplexing. Skyscrapers by Philip Johnson and I.M. Pei command the skyline, while the streets are a visual jumble of small, tired 1950s apartment buildings abutting 1910s gingerbread houses and 1990s convenience stores. This is not surprising, for among America's large cities, Houston is unique in having no zoning. In that populist independence lies a key to understanding Houston's arts scene. Individuals and institutions with good and big ideas are free to pursue their dreams without exceptional governmental or social hindrance.

Houstonians have followed the standard American civic format of founding essential cultural institutions. Some, like the Alley Theater, the Houston Ballet, the Houston Grand Opera, the Houston Symphony, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the Society for the Performing Arts attract deserved national and international attention.

One of Houston's most distinctive museums is the Menil Collection. Located in a residential neighborhood southwest of the city's downtown, the Menil's sparsely modernist main building by Pritzker Prize-winning Italian architect Renzo Piano contains an astonishing 10,000-piece collection that spans the Paleolithic era to the modern age. Over the years, Dominique de Menil, an heir to the Schlumberger Oilfield Services fortune, expanded the museum, creating around it an arts village that includes the Cy Twombly Gallery, also by Piano, the Rothko Chapel, named for the Mark Rothko paintings it houses, and the Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum.

While not as polished as the Menil Collection, Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses is also vital to the city's cultural life. In a barren area southeast of downtown, Lowe turned a group of identical, one-room-wide shotgun houses into both galleries for local artists and homes for unwed mothers. In the five years of its existence, Project Row House has become a nationwide model for urban as well as artistic renewal in marginal, impoverished neighborhoods.

The Alley Theater is Houston's main theater, presenting such fine plays as Trevor Nunn's recent production of Tennessee Williams' "Not About Nightingales." The only other equity company in town is Stages, though Houston also has a firmly established black troupe, the Ensemble.

The city can boast one of the nation's finest orchestras, formerly under the baton of German conductor Christoph Eschenbach. It also has the Houston Grand Opera, which is famed for its

new productions as well as such crowd-pleasing innovations as a recent “Carmen” complete with staging that looked like it sprung from a Rolling Stones concert. Chamber music thrives with four groups, including Da Camera of Houston, presenting imaginative, first-rate programs. And a promising trend in town is the return of native composers and performers, such as John Axelrod, to establish programs and groups that currently include a chamber orchestra and a contemporary arts festival.

Yet when it comes to avant-garde works as well as smaller organizations, Houstonians are not as supportive. For while the innovative, Texas-born director Robert Wilson is hugely popular, virtually none of the major touring orchestras and soloists appear in Houston. They don’t sell. There is also no professional dance company other than the Houston Ballet, and the Jewish Community Center’s “Dance Month at the Kaplan” is the only main venue for local dance.

While Houston is a conservative town, Houstonians do enjoy the occasional off-beat event. The annual Art Car Parade is the granddaddy of art car shows, and participants rumble by in elaborately decorated automobiles. Guests at the accompanying Art Car Ball also sport wacky outfits. The ball benefits the Orange Show Foundation, which maintains an appropriately quirky outdoor installation that pays homage to the tasty orange.

More art and cultural institutions will soon appear around the city. When the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts opens in 2001, downtown will boast a cluster of up-to-date theaters funded and built almost entirely by private citizens. These will include the Jones Hall for the Performing Arts (symphony) and the Wortham Theater Center (opera and ballet).

Similarly, a museum district has developed two and a half miles south of downtown around the Museum of Fine Arts. As part of a state-wide boom in museum construction, the MFA is

building a new exhibition hall designed by another Pritzker laureate, Spanish architect Rafael Moneo. It will be the crown jewel in an area that includes the Contemporary Arts Museum, the Museum of National Science and the Children’s Museum.

The de Menils and other benefactors could carry out such commitment to the arts because they had the money. At the same time, Houston’s art institutions thrive today because the family oil, construction, insurance and publishing fortunes amassed earlier this century were left to foundations whose huge endowments support the arts, education and medicine.

This is fortunate, for despite widespread private support for museums and other cultural institutions, centers of arts activity have come about without city fiat. To its credit, the city did turn the old city convention center in the heart of the Theater District into an entertainment complex that literally breathed life into the downtown overnight. But while the city might supply the land and operate many of the downtown theaters, the government provides mostly desultory support for the arts. No taxes from local citizens go directly to maintain daily activities, and residents have to raise the necessary cash for major capital improvements. Since 1977, though, the city has chipped in a few dollars by using some hotel tax money to finance the arts. It currently amounts to \$5 million a year, and is distributed by a city-county arts council.

During the summer the city’s humidity-laden heat slows down the arts, and none of the larger music groups have been able to sustain programs that match their main season. Nor have the two major outdoor sites, Miller Theater, a city facility, and the Woodlands Pavilion, a shed that is a home of the Houston Symphony. Even so, first-time visitors to Houston often are amazed at the artistic activity they find in this Texas city. There may not be a large amount of it, but almost everything is of high quality.

HOUSTON METROPOLITAN
AREA POPULATION:
4,253,428

TOP FIVE CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS
(BASED ON ATTENDANCE)
1. Houston Museum of
Natural Science
2. Museum of Fine Arts
3. Children’s Museum of
Houston
4. The Menil Collection
5. Holocaust Museum

Houston Chronicle

The Hearst Corporation's flagship paper is one of the largest newspapers in the United States. It is also the largest monopoly paper. Its last competitor, *The Houston Post*, folded five years ago. No other metropolitan area this big relies on a single paper for its news.

Touted as "Houston's leading information source," the *Chronicle* cuts a confident image. The paper's modernist headquarters served as an anchor for the revival of the blighted downtown, which was hit hard by the recession of the 1980s. The *Chronicle's* once-dismal offices were modernized. And thanks to massive local infusions of cash for cultural facilities, the *Chronicle* now looks onto a Theater District abuzz with activity. Houston is booming, and a young, urbane audience is interested in reading about what's new in arts and entertainment.

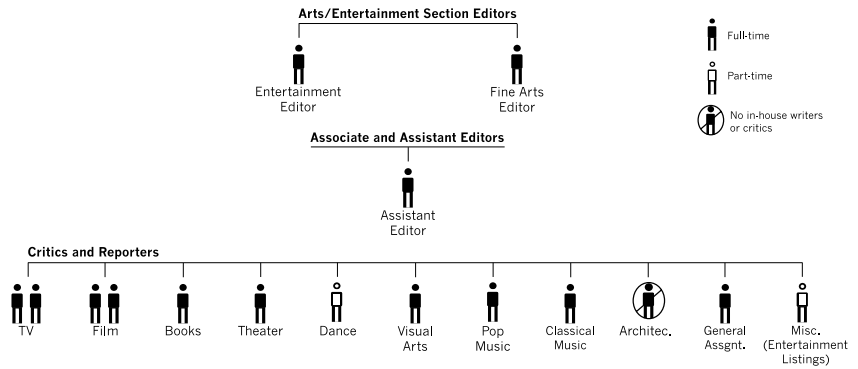
The outline of the *Chronicle's* existing arts and entertainment system fuses arts and features; editors strive to emphasize newsworthy reporting about the commercial side of culture. The Sunday arts and entertainment tabloid, "Zest," is the second most widely read section after section A, and last year the paper launched a Thursday tabloid features section, "Preview."

But when it comes to the arts, the *Chronicle* doesn't live up to its status as a ranking metropolitan daily. Compared to other papers in the study, it devotes a comparatively small share of space to arts and entertainment articles, less than papers in smaller cities like Portland. A high proportion of the *Chronicle's* total arts and entertainment space is taken up by listings, particularly the daily television program grid.

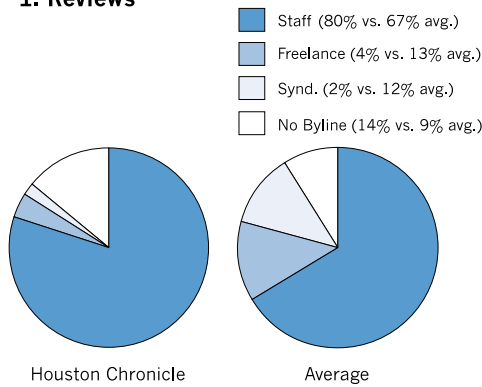
The arts and entertainment staff is also small for a paper of this stature. Despite the recent cultural boom, and with the exception of a hire of an editor for the new Thursday section, full-time arts and features staffing has remained flat for the last ten years. And in a town noted for its sprawl and absence of zoning, the *Chronicle* lacks a writer dedicated to architecture. In general, the paper makes comparatively little use of freelancers and syndicated columns.

Owner: Hearst Newspapers Daily Circulation: 549,101 Sunday Circulation: 748,036

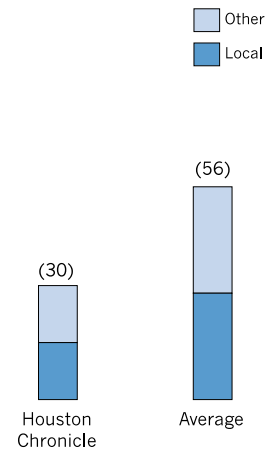
In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)



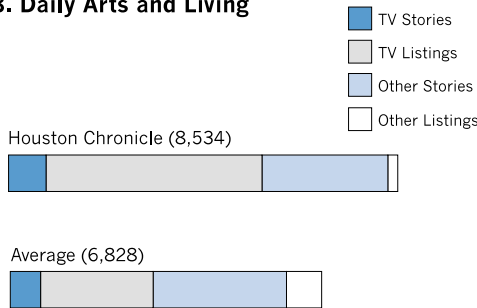
1. Reviews



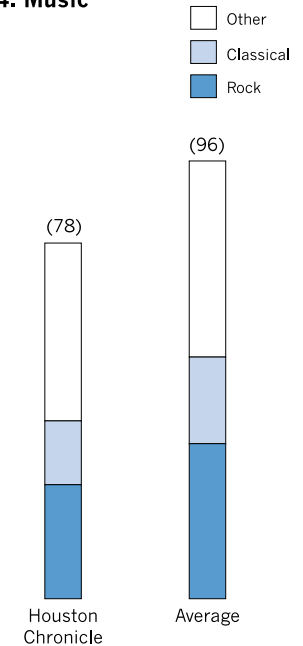
2. Theater



3. Daily Arts and Living



4. Music



Notes (All data for October 1998. Comprehensive data available at www.najp.org.)

- Proportion of editorial space assigned to reviews written by in-house staffers, freelancers and syndicated wire services compared with the 15-newspaper average
- Number of theater stories, listings excluded, compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of theater articles
- Volume of coverage devoted to arts and culture in the daily Arts & Living section compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches
- Number of music stories, listings excluded, compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of music articles

ARTS COVERAGE IN HOUSTON: A CRITICAL VIEW

Since Houston is the fourth-largest American city, it is not surprising that it has one major daily newspaper; a feisty alternative; Spanish, black and Asian papers; dozens of neighborhood, community and suburban papers; 14 television stations; 60-odd radio stations; two online news services and a number of specialized publications. Yet with all those outlets clamoring for copy, Houston is a tough place for the arts to attract media attention. This is especially startling in a city that can claim such renowned institutions as the Houston Grand Opera, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Houston Ballet as well as the Menil Collection. And when the press does write about those and other art institutions and groups, it is often only the new, the glitzy, the blockbuster as well as the decidedly local that garners column space and air time.

The daily is the *Houston Chronicle*. Owned by the Hearst Corporation, it became the city's sole main newspaper when the *Houston Post* shut down in the mid 1990s. With over half a million daily readers and a Sunday circulation of approximately 750,000, it is one of the ten largest metropolitan newspapers in the nation. Even so, its arts and entertainment staff is relatively small. The staff fill the pages of the *Chronicle's* daily "Lifestyle," the Thursday "Preview" section and the Sunday "Zest" tabloid with well-written pieces. In general, the paper's emphasis is on the local, and it tends toward a standard format of advance stories and reviews mixing arts and features. Only a smattering of arts news stories or pieces covering events outside of Houston make it into the pages. Surprisingly for a city with such renowned architecture, there is no regular coverage of the field. And with so small a staff and a policy within the paper that generally forbids the use of stringers, it is difficult for the staff to do investigative journalism or large feature pieces especially when it involves detailed work or a long lead-time.

Besides the *Chronicle*, an additional and important outlet for stories on the arts is *This Week*. The publication is published by the *Chronicle's* advertising department, and its 19 zoned sections cover Houston and most of the surrounding counties. *This Week* uses its own as well as contract writers, and offers arts groups a much needed added spot for features, announce-

ments and news that would be completely overlooked by the *Chronicle*.

Houston's alternative weekly is the *Houston Press*. Owned by the New Times chain, the free publication has a circulation of 108,500. Its coverage is strongest, and most irreverent, in theater and art. The paper's dance and classical music stories, though, have generally been less successful, and up until last year the paper basically ignored classical music.

Unfortunately, part of the problem at the *Houston Press*—as well as all of Houston's other small publications—is that the city lacks a stable of qualified art critics and writers to tackle complicated arts stories. Such a dearth of talent makes it especially hard for art groups to draw attention. As a result they have to spend a lot of time pitching and tailoring ideas and pegs for niche publications—such as those catering to the Hispanic, black, Chinese or gay community—that may find a particular event appealing. In most cases, the arts groups deliver prewritten articles and other ready-to-use material so the papers and magazines can just drop the copy into the appropriate spot.

Among electronic media, the two classical music stations are KRTS-FM and KUHF-FM, one at the University of Houston, the other privately owned. At Texas Southern University, a historically black school, its station KTSU airs jazz and gospel music and is an important institution in the black community.

Commercial radio does offer some good opportunities for arts coverage, especially since the demographics of Houston's individual stations are sharply defined. This allows arts groups to reach audiences who are normally not exposed to the arts, yet who might be attracted to a specific event by the placement of on-air ads, promotions or live interviews.

Television basically ignores the arts. In recent years, only one TV program has run regular coverage of the arts. Unfortunately, it is hard to find with the remote control because it doesn't always appear on the same station.

The two online services are run by the *Houston Chronicle* and Microsoft Network's Sidewalk.com. On its site, the *Chronicle* makes available online stories, reviews and calendar listings from the newspaper. It also generates some of its own original material. Sidewalk.com has "Arts Wednesday" with features, reviews, pieces by an arts columnist, and calendars of upcoming events.

"There is a real sense of entitlement from the arts groups. Our role is not to meet the expectation of some of the arts groups to fill their seats."

Susan Bischoff
Assistant Managing
Editor, Features
Houston Chronicle