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HOUSTON---In the diverse sphere of American cities, Houston is a wild pitch. The nation's fourth largest metropolitan area is a rockin' 640 square miles of zoning-free combustion. There's boisterous billboards and strip malls, silver skyscrapers and blue bayous.

The big ol' Astrodome was once the Eighth Wonder of the World.

It now sits like a forsaken wedding ring in the shadow of the new Reliant Stadium, the home of the NFL's Houston Texans. The downtown skyline incorporates a 100-foot turquoise Ferris wheel that's part of a 16-month-old aquarium complex. Even the proudest locals don't take that sea world-to-the-sky touch sitting down.

And did I mention furniture stores?

Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale's Gallery Furniture on I-45 North sells more furniture per square foot of retail space than any store in the world. Mattress Mack's fast-talking showroom incorporates 100,000 square feet.

"Big enough, bad enough, bold enough to do whatever you want," says G.J. "Jordy" Tollett, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau in a conversation over a downtown cocktail. "We're entrepreneurial: 'If you're going to do that there, I'm going to do that over here.' Everybody wants to outdo everybody. That's the way Houston grew from the 1940s to five years ago when people started to think, 'If we talk about this together, we can make Houston better.' We've since focused on that."

For the second time this year, the sports world focuses on Houston as it hosts baseball's 75th Annual All-Star Game Tuesday at Minute Maid Park. Houston (4.94 million residents in the greater Houston area) also hosted this year's Super Bowl.

"We now have the sports world looking at us, which is a new element," Tollett says.

I visited Houston last month. Before that, the last time I was in Houston was for the 1989 NBA All-Star Game. My buddy Angelo and I scored seats in the upper stratosphere of the Astrodome, which was no place to watch basketball.

Houston is a different place today. The city has grown into four distinct and contemporary business communities: Downtown; Galleria, 10 minutes west of downtown (named after the 350-shop Galleria Mall); Medical Center, southwest of the city center, and Greenspoint, with 80 energy-related businesses north toward

George Bush International Airport.

During the late 1980s, Houston was still reeling from the end of the oil boom as production grew from new sources in Mexico and the North Sea. "We had a voter referendum to build a convention center in 1983," says Tollett, a native Houstonian, whose father owned the H.J. Tollett real estate company. "The referendum passed by about 63 percent. (The downtown George R. Brown Convention Center opened in 1987.) It was only from 1984 to mid-'86 when we lost about 2,000 hotel rooms downtown because of the oil thing. It has taken us 20 years to come back.

"Things started happening when we made a conscious decision to build a baseball park. It went bonkers after that."

The Houston Astros began playing in Minute Maid Park in 2000, back in the day when it was Enron Field. In its first incarnation, the \$248 million stadium was known as The Ballpark at Union Station. The retro stadium incorporates the refurbished train station on the east edge of downtown. Union Station opened in 1880 with former President Ulysses S. Grant aboard the train.

Spindletop was discovered in 1901 in Beaumont, Texas. The gusher produced 3.2 million barrels of oil in its first year, attracting thrill-seekers, risk-takers and little big shots from across America. By 1910, railroads became Houston's largest industry.

Union Station was redesigned and rededicated in 1911. Visitors can still walk under the ornate archways and 45-foot-high-lobby that incorporates three varieties of polished marble. By the mid-1940s, Union Station was handling 5,000 travelers daily on 36 passenger trains.

Astros officials estimate 60 percent of fans enter the ballpark through Union Station. When the Astros hit a home run, a 19th century locomotive engine chugs down an 800-foot track atop the left field wall. The engine pulls a coal tender that appears to be filled with pumpkins, at least from my seat in Section 432 in the upper deck right field corner. A glorious view of the skyline! But after greater thought, I figure the pumpkins are really oranges to tie in with Minute Maid Park. Remember, everything is bigger in Houston.

Texas women apparently had a big influence on the ballpark design. According to the Astros media guide, there are 25 womens bathrooms and only 24 mens bathrooms at the ballpark. One for every 68 women, one for every 72 men, assuming 50 percent male and 50 percent female spectators.

The downtown train station location was a dicey proposition for a team named after the futuristic space industry. Only four months before the November 1996 referendum on the stadium, Astros owner Drayton McLane told the Houston

Chronicle that a move downtown "could be a big mistake for me."

Instead, the ballpark has inspired downtown loft living, new hotels and the Toyota Center, the home of the NBA's Houston Rockets that opened last fall. The historic Sam Houston Hotel had been closed for 25 years before reopening in December 2002. I was a guest of the Inn at the Ballpark, a baseball-themed hotel that opened on Jan. 1 across the street from Minute Maid Park. The brick and stucco building had sat vacant for 20 years. The 12-story structure was built in 1961 as the World Trade Center for the Port Authority of Houston.

Each of the boutique hotel's 201 rooms and the hallways features commissioned baseball art done by Kim Baker of Houston. A Ballpark Cafe incorporates Yankee Stadium (New York-style bagels and Italian dishes), Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles (Asian and California inspired cuisine) and Chicago (German and Polish selections).

The lobby includes a fine collection of baseball books including Robert Reed and Rusty Staub's *A Six-Gun Salute: An Illustrated History of the Houston Colt .45s 1962-64*, (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999) which I found enthralling during a post-game read. I guess I'm not the nightlife animal I used to be.

The Inn at the Ballpark is just a short walk away from licking your wounds after a Cubs loss.

The Cubs legendary futility helped give birth to professional baseball in Houston.

On April 10, 1962, the Houston Colt .45s played the first regular season major league game in Houston. They beat the Cubs 11-2 in between the giant mosquitoes at Colt Stadium at what is now the Astrodome parking lot.

In 1970, the stadium was dismantled and moved to Torreon, Mexico, where it became home to a Mexican baseball team. In fact, the expansion Colts finished the 1962 season in eighth place, ahead of the expansion New York Mets--and the Cubs.

Tuesday will mark the third time Houston has hosted a baseball All-Star game. Cubs Ron Santo and Billy Williams played in the 1968 game at the Astrodome as did White Sox Tommy John and Duane Josephson. The National League won 1-0. Roger Clemens and the American League won the 1986 game 3-2 when it returned to the Astrodome. Harold Baines was the White Sox lone representative and Jody Davis and Ryne Sandberg appeared for the Cubs.

Former Astros manager Larry Dierker has seen it all.

Dierker is to Houston baseball what J.R. was to Dallas. On his 18th birthday, Dierker debuted with the Colt .45s in 1964. He was an Astros All-Star in 1969 and

1971. From 1997 to 2001 he managed the Astros and he has been an Astros broadcaster.

Last year, Dierker wrote a book, "This Ain't Brain Surgery: How to Win the Pennant Without Losing Your Mind," citing his 1999 brain aneurysm during a game at the Astrodome. Dierker now writes a weekly baseball column for the Houston Chronicle and MLB.com. His work also has appeared in Texas Monthly magazine.

Dierker just opened Larry's Big Bamboo tropical bar in Minute Maid Park.

The Big Bamboo is directly behind home plate. When the ballpark opened in 2000, the space was used for a sports art gallery. "Most of the art was \$1,000 and up," Dierker says while working the room before a recent Cubs-Astros game. "People would walk by and say 'That's nice,' but I don't think they sold anything. The concessionaire had the idea to do this. They asked me if they could use my name. Of course, anybody would be Larry, but I said OK. I don't own it. But I make appearances here, about once every homestand."

Larry's Big Bamboo is modeled after the original Big Bamboo on U.S. Highway 192 in Kissimmee, Fla., where Dierker spent his idle time during spring training with the Astros. That's the oldest spring training joke: Kissimmee Astros--say it fast. The ballpark Bamboo features a lot of baseball memorabilia, including Dierker's induction into the Texas Baseball Hall of Fame mixed with tiki and Jimmy Buffett artifacts.

Wearing his trademark Hawaiian shirt, Dierker says, "The original Bamboo is a cinderblock hut, lower than grade level of the road, and back into the bushes and trees. A wooden sign, no lights. And that whole strip is like Las Vegas with neon and gift shops. It's like the poor man's entry to Disney World."

He buys me a Shiner Bock (out of Shiner, Texas). Over my writing career, I've had plenty of bartenders and musicians buy me a drink, but Dierker is just the third professional athlete to pony up. Back in the early 1990s, former Bulls coaches Phil Jackson and Johnny Kerr bought me a few beers when I was on the road with the Bulls.

Dierker is a rodeo cowboy who is happy to be alive. He is known for his ample collection of Hawaiian shirts. When Dierker managed the Astros he used to rollerblade up to Wrigley Field from the team hotel on North Michigan Avenue. While in Houston, Dierker recommends rollerblading in city parks such as Eleanor Tinsley Park, close to downtown and part of the Buffalo Bayou.

Professional sports needs more diverse personalities like Dierker, a native of Hollywood, Calif.

He reflects, "I was always hanging out by myself wondering, 'Why isn't there somebody like me?' Part of it is my parents, part of it is the guys I came up with

when I was 18 taking me out for a beer and friends back home taking me in the ocean. I've never been able to focus 100 percent on anything. That was the hardest thing for me about managing. It required more of my time than I liked to give. I'll probably never be the best at anything because I'll never be willing to give all my time to one thing.

"But it's been a great ride."

If you ride around Houston enough, you can find ample free spirit.

A quick Monday night drive rolls past the West Alabama Ice House, 1919 W. Alabama St., with dozens of Houstonians downing cold beers on outside picnic benches. Built in 1928, West Alabama is the oldest "ice house" in town . "Ice Houses" along I-10 used to sell blocks of ice. Now they are "beer joints." West Alabama Street leads to the Midtown neighborhood south of downtown.

"People had no idea about Houston," Tollett says. "After the Super Bowl we did random surveying (820 visitors) at airports and hotels when people left. Well, 71 percent said Houston was fun and people were overly friendly. We won."

Tollett doesn't stop. He's from Houston. He continues, "Of course, I'd turn the Astrodome into the World's Largest Indoor Casino, but no one is going for that."

Such is Houston's legacy; a wild crap shoot in the bayous of southern Texas. The city is enjoying the payoff.