

H O U S E S

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PHOTO ESSAY BY PAUL HESTER

SRI MEENAKSHI TEMPLE, 1982
Hindu
17130 McLean Road

The third traditional Hindu temple built in the United States, and the first devoted to a goddess (Sri Meenakshi), this Brazoria County landmark has become a place of pilgrimage for Hindus from across the Southwest. Designed by two noted Indian temple architects, Padmasri S.M. Ganapathy Sthapathi and Padmasri Muthiah Sthapathi, it was built by artisans imported from India.

It wasn't really that long ago that Houston, like the state and nation it's a part of, could be fairly accurately described as a Christian community. It's not that Christianity was the only religion practiced in the city — Judaism, of course, was present, as well as other faiths — but its dominance was unquestioned. This was particularly true in terms of physical presence. Churches could be found almost anywhere you looked, from the neo-gothic spires downtown to the sprawling mega-complexes beyond Loop 610. Other traditions tended to be less obvious, their adherents meeting in rented auditoriums or renovated business space. The architecture that marked their history was nowhere to be seen.

Since the mid-'80s, though, that's changed. While Christian churches are still by far Houston's most common religious structures, mosques that would not look out of place in the Middle East and temples that would fit easily into the landscape of India or China can also be found. Richard Vara, the *Houston Chronicle's* award-winning religion reporter, remembers that when he started working his beat in the mid-'80s he had to look hard to find non-traditional stories. But by the early '90s, he could drive around Houston and see the city's newly emerging faiths in newly emerging buildings.

Rice University sociologist Stephen Klineberg points to the immigration boom of the last two decades as one possible reason for this change. During the 1970s, when Harris County grew by 38 percent, most of the new Houstonians were Anglos from other parts of America. But between 1982 and 1990, when Harris County grew another 17 percent, the Anglo population grew only 1 percent. The Hispanic and African-American populations grew 75 and 12.5 percent respectively, but the most astonishing increase was that of the Asian population, which expanded 129 percent. The influx of non-European immigrants has continued throughout the 1990s, says Klineberg, putting Houston, along with Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Miami, at the forefront of America's transformation into what Klineberg terms the first truly "universal nation."

Part of the culture these new Houstonians bring with them is the culture of their religion, and as their numbers grow to sufficient size, that culture is expressed in religious structures — structures that often, like the immigrants themselves, end up in the city's suburbs. Already, Houston's followers of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism have made their presence known through their houses of worship. That these temples tend to follow traditional designs isn't surprising; for many of the faithful, these holy places are ties not just to the infinite, but to an ancestral home. They are buildings both of belief, and of memory.

Mitchell J. Shields

TEEN HOW TEMPLE, 1987
Taoist
1507 Delano Street

On most mornings, passersby in this industrial neighborhood in Houston's East End can hear the sound of gongs as the Teen How Temple comes to life. Constuction material for the temple was imported from Taiwan, though some of the carving was done by local Chinese artisans.



SYNOTT MOSQUE, 1989 (TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT);
AL-FAROUC MOSQUE, 1998 (BOTTOM RIGHT)
Islamic
10415 Synott Road, Sugar Land, and 1207 Conrad Saur

The Islamic community has been one of the fastest growing in Houston. At the start of this decade, it was estimated that the city's Islamic faithful numbered around 50,000. Recent estimates put the number closer to 100,000. This increase has led to the construction of a few traditionally designed mosques with recognizable minarets.



JADE BUDDHA TEMPLE, 1989 (TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT);
VIETNAMESE BUDDHIST CENTER, 1991 (BOTTOM CENTER AND BOTTOM LEFT)
Buddhist
6969 West Branch and 10002 Synott Road

The Jade Buddha Temple complex covers two-and-a-half acres in southwest Houston and, with more than 1,000 participating members, is one of the largest Buddhist institutions in Texas. The Vietnamese Buddhist Center, while primarily serving the city's large Vietnamese community, has also begun attracting more non-Asian American adherents, evidence of how faiths once seen as foreign are making themselves part of the regular fabric of Houston.

