



WELCOME TO...WHERE ARE WE AGAIN?

SEARCHING, DESPERATELY, FOR A SENSE OF PLACE AT IAH

BY ALISON COOK

During a brief lull in the fall monsoons, I overheard a Houstonian welcoming his out-of-town visitor as they walked from the baggage claim at Bush Intercontinental Airport's Terminal C. "You can tell you're in Texas, Jim!" chortled the native. "Smell that musty mold?"

Ah, yes. The musty mold. The wall of hot, damp air that smites you as you emerge from IAH. It's an indelible sensory impression, all right. But why does it have to be the most vivid memory travelers take away from the major airport in America's fourth largest city?

I love airports. There are airports I look forward to with an almost ritual sense of anticipation, and it has always grieved me that my own is not among them. I have been known to route a trip through Amsterdam's Schiphol solely for the pleasure of standing at one of its open-faced sandwich kiosks, nibbling on fresh herring and sipping a teeny-tiny bottle of champagne. Serious shopping for chocolates and cheese ensues. How civilized can you get?

At Chicago's O'Hare, I hop on the moving sidewalks between United's two terminals whether I need to or not, just to soak up the weird magic of the connecting tunnel. Neon tubes pulse overhead, unearthly music pings, back-lit wall panels surge with color. The tunnel is in ill repair these days, but it says "Chicago" to me as powerfully as the aromas of pizza-by-the-slice in the lobbies upstairs.

I long to revisit the charming little salmon run inside the airport lobby at Cork, Ireland. I shoot for long stopovers at Heathrow just so I can browse the great English bookstores. I show up early for flights out of San Juan, the better to cruise the artisanal shops in the gate areas. I pick a seat that gives me an approaching view of Denver's Stapleton airport — its stark-white tented silhouette as festive as a nomadic encampment, poised theatri-

cally on the far edge of the Great Plains with the Rockies as backdrop.

So what if furnace-like desert heat lurks outside the Phoenix airport? As a people-mover whisks me to the rental cars, I'm too busy checking out the cool xeriscaping to suffer. Nonsmoker that I am, I even welcome the acrid stench of cigarette smoke that greets arrivals at DeGaulle in Paris. One whiff and I know exactly where I am: on the brink of a French adventure.

At IAH, one could be anywhere. Okay, so we'll never have the jaw-dropping, snow-clad volcano setting that makes the descent into Portland, Oregon's airport such a thrill. But an airport can create a unique world with its architecture, art, interiors, retail, food, and landscaping. So far, IAH has blown the opportunity.

Domestic-flight terminals A, B, and C — which I think of as the Bland Beige Boxes — are remarkably devoid of a sense of place. The main gesture towards local color is those eerily waxen studio portraits of the mayor, city council, and entire congressional delegation hung mercifully high overhead.

And that's pretty much it, unless you count the Terminal A shoeshine guy who affects a cowboy hat. Or the amusingly in-yer-face sculpture of the late Congressman Mickey Leland inside the grand industrial hall of the international terminal, a space that at least provides a pleasing color palette and some sense of occasion. But what's up with the colossal, flag-wrapped pick-up sticks flung into the earth outside Terminal D? I can't help but think of this lame sculpture garden as the International Obelisk Ranch; it's something Stanley Marsh 3 might dream up on a bad day.

For a literal taste of Houston, the traveler can get a

decent sliced brisket sandwich from Harlon's BBQ, the only palatable local choice among the woeful food purveyors. "Airport Food Doesn't Have to be Terminal," brags a poster from CA One, the company that holds the IAH concessions contract. They could have fooled me.

You would think a city so self-conscious about its image — and so rich in its food culture — would contrive to offer better eats at the one facility that presents its public face to the world. Or, for that matter, that Houston would set up visitor information desks to rival the excellent ones at airports from Cleveland to Albany to Denver, where every conceivable map and brochure is available in a soaring lobby centered by a fountain and staffed by retirement-age greeters in Western outfits. Sweetly corny; wonderfully useful.

At IAH, one searches in vain for such amenities. At 6:30 on a recent Saturday evening, a tiny visitor information booth near the baggage claim in Terminal A was shut up tight, with just one lonely brochure set out for our guests: a guide to Greenspoint.

Getting around inside our terminals involves entirely too much trudging: even the grim Newark airport has enough moving sidewalks to lighten the task. But I confess to a perverse fondness for our toy-like trains that make an underground circuit among four terminals and the Marriott Hotel. With an SRO capacity of only 36 passengers, the three-car trams provide a wild, whippy ride reminiscent of the state fair. ("You really slide around if you're wearing polyester pants!" an airport employee told me.) World class? No. Fun? Absolutely.

Getting around IAH is more difficult than ever of late, thanks to the welter of construction wrought by the capital-improvements project. The vast new parking garages con-

found the unwary; helpful graphics urging you to remember your level omit the crucial instruction that you must also remember your area. It is not uncommon to see visitors wandering between the Great Wall of China Level and the Leaning Tower of Pisa Level, nursing blisters and punching their panic buttons in the forlorn hope that they will hear their lost vehicles bleating somewhere in the maze.

There is frustration in the makeshift arrangements; trying to access Terminal C from parking deposits you in front of hand-lettered plywood signs directing you elsewhere, as primitive as something you'd find at a trading post deep in the Amazon basin. But there are also signs of hope, of intelligent airport life.

The new garage ramps, big drums clad in skins of diamond-patterned mesh, are luminous and airy at night. Plantings of native oaks and holly are digging in around Terminals A and B. The waiting areas for private cars and taxis are newly user friendly: landscaped, comfortable, attractive. Quite a change from the grimy concrete holding areas of old, which resembled nothing so much as a minor level of purgatory.

And in at least one location, even Gertrude Stein would have to admit there's a there there. The new corridor linking Terminal B with its parking garage is filled with seaweedy underwater light and undulating mosaics of Texas wildlife: great blue herons, egrets, roseate spoonbills, giant surreal hummingbirds. Embedded in the wavy lines of colored granite flooring are detailed metal reliefs of aquatic fauna.

Finally, something I could learn to look forward to. In that corridor, I spied two small Asian boys down on their hands and knees, inspecting the likeness of a blue crab. Their faces were studies in wonder, and surprise. ■