HOUSTON — The shimmery bungalow, set back a bit from sunny Malone Street in Houston's Rice Military neighborhood, looks as though it's covered in dangly metallic fur, like an aluminum Snuffleupagus. Aptly named the Beer Can House, it took an estimated 50,000 beer cans and a dedicated — if thirsty — upcycler to cover the home with this unique interpretation of aluminum siding.

A tall docent with a booming voice welcomes me as I approach the front gate (made of beer cans, of course) and invites me in. Now that I'm a can's throw from the house, with its mosaic of beer can parts — flattened aluminum strips from the cans here, circular bottoms there, garlands of lids everywhere — I'm less awed than incredulous. Behind my "Yep, it really is all covered in beer cans!" smile is
a nagging question: "Why?"
The docent fills in some blanks, explaining that the can collector, John Milko-visch, was an upholsterer for the railroad. In 1968, he began this project, and he wouldn’t stop until he died two decades later. His original plan was to cover the domicile in leather, the docent tells me, but he couldn’t get enough of the material. So he opted for an abundant Texas resource: beer cans. He used every part of the can - tab to tail, if you will.

As an aside, she explains that he also got tired of mowing the lawn, so he covered it in concrete and stone, embellished with his marble collection, which numbered well into the thousands. She motions to a rusty old wheelbarrow in the yard - nicknamed "the Culprit" - and says John used it to haul rocks here from the nearby rail yard. His wife, Mary, was supportive - to a point. She reportedly told him that he could do what he wanted with the outside of the house, but the inside was hers. Over the years, he and Mary drank a lot of beer and created this aluminum beast, which served as an insulated, energy-efficient home. One that John would never have to paint again.

I tour the grounds, peeking inside the house at a documentary about its creation and admiring the museum-like displays hanging from the interior walls - "Budweiser curtain from south wall of house c. 1980." But the question remains.

SEE HOUSTON, G3

And then I see this quote from John stenciled on the wall: "I don’t consider this art. It’s just a pastime. But sometimes I lie awake at night, trying to figure out why I do it." I saw no T-shirts or bumper stickers requesting that people "Keep Houston Weird" like the ones in Austin. But there’s no shortage of beautiful weirdness in the country’s fourth-largest city. This is, after all, where I developed my own affinity for the quirky, growing up in the Houston suburb of Clear Lake.

It’s been about 20 years since I left for college in the Midwest. I’ve watched from my home in Chicago as Houston tops best-of lists for affordability, culture, business and other categories. Every time I go home, I make it a priority to view the city with a visitor’s eyes, rather than those of a hard-to-impress suburban youth. And every visit, I’m drawn to something that fits snugly in the offbeat category.

Like the time Linda Lay, wife of former Enron chairman Kenneth Lay, briefly opened Jus’ Stuff, a secondhand store that sold many of the belongings they’d acquired at their estates. (This happened in 2002 after Enron filed for bankruptcy.) I bought the cheapest thing I could find: a tacky wooden Santa Claus wearing a cowboy hat that sold for $15.

On this visit, after touring the Beer Can House, I head to the Art Car Museum, another ode to idiosyncrasy conveniently located just two miles away. Houston, it turns out, claims the world’s largest collection of “art cars,” that is, vehicles that double as functioning art. A couple of classic cars are on display at the small museum, but what really catches my fancy is a documentary that’s showing on nine stacked televisions. In the film, several car artists are discussing their creations. The roof of one vehicle is covered in a miniature version of the New York City skyline. Another looks like a hippopotamus lurking in the street. My favorite is the car an artist covered in soil and seed so it sprouted like a giant Chia-mobile.

“IT’s like a living thing,” he says earnestly. I make a mental note to plan my next Houston trip around the annual Art Car Parade, held each spring. It’s the largest gathering of its kind in the world. To get the full Houston visitor’s experience - and to continue on my offbeat journey - I’d reserved a room for a night at Sara’s Inn in the Heights, an artsy, walkable neighborhood northwest of downtown, filled with Arts and Crafts bungalows and enormous Victorian homes. When I booked the room, I got to choose from a list of regional themes: Dallas, Austin, Galveston and even a tiny Paris, Texas, room that sleeps one. I opted for Fort Worth - one of my favorite Texas towns - and, true to the Wild West character of Cowtown, the bathroom wallpaper is speckled with floating guns, cowboy boots, cowboy hats and ropes, with different types of barbed wire displayed on the wall art by the bed.

After dropping off my bags, I’m determined.
to spend the afternoon walking around the neighborhood. Much of Houston was built without giving much thought to pedestrians, but a few neighborhoods, including the Heights, are an exception, and I’m eager to explore by foot. So I stride past the Victorian-style inn’s lazy, wraparound porch and cross over busy Heights Boulevard, admiring the well-trafficked Paul Carr Jogging Trail that cuts through the median. I wind my way about a mile through the neighborhood to Hello-Lucky, a little shop inside what appears to be an old home that’s filled with darling jewelry, bags and T-shirts (like the armadillo silk-screen T-shirt I buy that says “Texas-ness”) made by local artists. I chat with the owner, Teresa O’Connor, who suggests I also visit another patch of local shops on 19th Street, so I walk about two miles to get there. (She suggested using Uber to get there before the shops close, but I’m obsessing on the whole walking theme.) Awaiting me is a chain-store-free zone, with blocks and blocks of shops, including vintage stores (Replay and Retropolis), a manly hipster mart (Manready Mercantile) and even a sassy, frilly cowgirl shop (Jubilee). I browse a bit and then head back to my hotel to rest, pleased to have sore feet in a city where driving, not walking, dominated my youth.

I meet a friend for dinner a couple of blocks away at Eight Row Flint, a gas-station-turned-bar specializing in the holy Texas trinity of whiskey, beer and tacos. We grab seats on the patio (in February!) and order cocktails, Brussel sprout tacos and beef cheek tacos. The beef cheek tacos are delicious, but the Brussels sprout ones, with their smoky char and tender-crisp bite, immediately raise the question: Why are all tacos not Brussels sprout tacos?

The next day, my parents drive up from their home in the ‘burbs and meet me in the city at one of their favorite lunch spots: Brennan’s of Houston. The “Texas Creole” restaurant has Louisiana-meets-Lone Star flair, with items such as Louisiana crawfish enchiladas and Texas Creole seafood gumbo. I opt for one of the more eyebrow-raising dishes: chicken-fried country rabbit. It’s hearty and does, indeed, taste like chicken, if that chicken was pounded, fried and topped with an egg and duck giblet gravy. I have no problem inhaling the entire dish, along with a couple of 25-cent martinis (they were small, don’t judge), before helping my dad eat his Mississippi mud pie.

On the way home, we pass a series of chemical plants and refineries — many of which employed my dad when I was growing up - and I admire a series of murals that color the gargantuan oil and chemical storage tanks. It’s known as the EpicArt project, and the handful of photographic reenacted scenes, spaced miles apart, depict the Battle of San Jacinto, when Texas won independence from Mexico.

For any native Houstonian, the oil that’s built this city (not to mention the smells of the chemical plants that swaddle the greater Houston area) is as much a part of its history as any military battle. That the murals rise before us, Texas-size, amid a farm of giant oil storage tanks, feels about as lovably, artistically and weirdly Houston as it gets.
IF YOU GO

WHERE TO STAY:
Sara’s Inn, 941 Heights Blvd. 713-868-1130; saras.com. Choose from 11 rooms, each themed after a city in Texas, at this Victorian inn. Enjoy wine in the evening and a buffet and/or made-to-order breakfast in the morning. Rates start at $120.

WHERE TO EAT:
Brennan’s of Houston, 3300 Smith St. 713-522-9711; brennanshouston.com. Be adventurous and order the chicken-fried country rabbit or stick with a classic, such as the seafood gumbo, at this Texas-Creole mashup. Reserve a table for lunch and enjoy 25-cent martinis. Lunch entrees start at about $24.
Eight Row Flint, 1039 Yale St. 832-767-4002; eightrowflint.com. Strong cocktails with a whiskey focus, solid local beer selection, stellar tacos (order the Brussels sprout) and an awesome patio make this bar a favorite new hangout in the Heights neighborhood. Tacos start at $4.

WHAT TO DO:
Beer Can House, 222 Malone St. 713-926-6368; beer-canhouse.org. It took nearly 50,000 beer cans and one inspired beer lover to complete this Houston landmark. Admission is $5.
Art Car Museum, 140 Heights Blvd. 713-861-5526; artcarmuseum.com. Known as the “Garage Mahal,” the Art Car Museum peers into the world of art cars, i.e., vehicles turned into moving sculpture. Houston says it has more art cars than any other place in the world. Free, donations accepted.
Hello-Lucky, 1025 Studewood St. 713-864-3556; hellolucky.com. Take a piece of Texas home with you at this fun boutique, which specializes in jewelry, T-shirts and accessories, many of which are made in Houston.
INFORMATION: visithoustontexas.com
MIDDLE: The Beer Can House in Houston's Rice Military neighborhood is covered with approximately 50,000 beer cans, some hanging in garlands from the roof, others flattened and used as siding.

BOTTOM: Houston claims the world's largest collection of "art cars" - vehicles that double as art - such as this mirrored sedan on display at the Art Car Museum. An Art Car Parade is held in the city each spring.

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