



Vibrant Colors

The rainbow crosswalks on Westheimer and Taft were installed in 2017 in memory of Alex Hill, a young member of the Montrose community tragically killed in a hit-and-run, and to commemorate the LGBTQ+ community's resilience and contributions in Houston. In 2025, the crosswalks have been removed per a directive issued by Governor Greg Abbott and the Texas Department of Transportation for safety and to eliminate political messaging on roadways.¹

Photo courtesy of Jimena Ramirez Loyola.

By Marie Theresa Hernández and Brian Riedel

Most people who know Montrose think of it as a hip community with interesting restaurants and artsy neighborhoods. The University of Houston (UH) photography students from Global Studies and Anthropology were energized by their visits there during the fall of 2024. It felt to them like a place where people of diverse backgrounds lived and worked, and where, at least initially, the students admired the neighborhood's advocacy of its LGBTQ+ community. Because of this, the students felt they could comfortably fit in there.

As we walked the different streets – Westheimer, Lovett, Hopkins, Fairview, and others – the students were awed by the restored Craftsman homes, the eclectic gardens, and the public artwork. Their interactions with neighborhood residents were informative and welcoming, especially with a man named Martin who lives on Hopkins in his meticulously restored century-old cottage.

Yet Montrose is much more than what we saw on our early visits. Its history as a streetcar suburb began in the early twentieth century. In 1912, John Wiley Link constructed the Link-Lee Mansion that became the showcase of the University of St. Thomas, which purchased the home in 1940. Most of the UH students had previously seen the mansion. Nevertheless, its ornate detail mesmerized them, and they photographed its essence with vigor and boundless creativity. They then viewed the many other opulent homes that were part of the neighborhood's early development and learned of the Jim Crow policies that the 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer* decision partially restrained, and the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968 abolished.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the developments during the 1960s that established Montrose as a “gay” enclave grew in response to these early policies that kept out so many people, except the servants and groundskeepers – people of color who entered through the mansion's back doors. Many



Wildlife Habitat

Finding a house with a “wildlife habitat” for a garden did not appear unusual. Residents in Montrose feel strongly that their neighborhood’s quality of life is tied to the preservation of fauna in the neighborhood. Recently, residents made an effort to preserve the live oaks in the neighborhood.²

Photo courtesy of Cristina Granados.

Untitled

The metal stairways remind me of New Orleans and appear like they belonged to a grand old house.

Photo courtesy of Muhammad Umar Qadeer.



significant events and locations of the national LGBTQ+ movement (such as the bar Mary’s) were in Montrose.

In the twenty-first century, Montrose has a multi-layered identity. Its history as a home for early twentieth-century, ultra-wealthy, white Houstonians has given way to its reputation as a gay neighborhood in the minds of most Houstonians. What most people see today are the busy streets with offbeat coffee shops and exceptional restaurants. Yet what caught the eye of the students were the brightly painted traffic signal boxes with scenes from the neighborhood and stop signs with stickers announcing everything from records to revolution. 🇺🇸



Hopkins Street

Blue and white tile street signs were used from the 1920s to 1950s for budding Houston development. Today nostalgia has created a demand for people to have street names and house numbers added to their property. Other styles of vintage signage, such as concrete pillars, can be found around the city as well.³

Photo courtesy of Brianna Treviño.



The Raised Fist

At Taft and Pacific Streets stands a stop sign with a black line drawing of a raised fist. Since the 1968 Olympics when Black athletes raised their fists while standing on the awards podium, the raised fist has stood for solidarity, resistance, and unity.⁴ It makes me wonder if it was created during the demonstrations protesting George Floyd's death at the hands of police.

Photo courtesy of Charlotte Robinson.



The Past in the Present

The Link-Lee Mansion was constructed in 1912 as a testament to Houston's Gilded Age. At the end of World War II, it became the first building of the University of St. Thomas. Today we can see the ornate building but only imagine its 114-year history with a multitude of stories.⁵

Photo courtesy of Luis Rosales.

Put a Lease on It

The beloved Tower Theatre in Montrose has undergone many facelifts in the 90 years since its construction. Built in the iconic Art Deco style and opened on Valentine's Day in 1936, it has since housed a video rental store, a Tex-Mex restaurant, and more recently the late Acme Oyster House. It reopened as a new jazz club in late 2025.⁶

Photo courtesy of Eboni Boyd.



The Third Eye

The Magick Cauldron—a Pagan/Wiccan supply shop—first opened on the Katy Freeway in 1985 and quickly grew in popularity before moving to its permanent and current location in Montrose. An unidentified artist painted the mural during the pandemic. The face seems to call out to you, while the security camera at left grounds the photograph.⁷

Photo courtesy of Mariano Vasques Ojeda.



Mister McKinney on the bus

The photography students from the Global Studies and Anthropology Department and Houston History thank Mister McKinney for his wonderful Historic Houston tour of the Montrose neighborhood.

Photo courtesy of Umar.



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A Reminder of Mary's
Opening in 1968, Mary's (originally Mary's, Naturally) was considered Houston's oldest gay bar when it closed in 2009. During the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, it became the site of community fundraising, memorials, and interment, with many who lost their lives during the epidemic having their ashes interred in Mary's' backyard.⁸

Photo courtesy of Emme Tomasello.

