HOUSTON — As Houston prepares to host Super Bowl 51 on Feb. 5, its leaders are eager to show off a makeover that has transformed the city since it last hosted the game more than a decade ago.

The Houston that awaits nearly 140,000 Super Bowl visitors and millions of television viewers is the result of an ambitious effort aimed at turning the city into a world-class destination. In contrast to its past reputation as an urban dead zone after dark, Houston now includes a greater array of restaurants, high-rises, green space, and cultural and entertainment venues.

“They are in for a big positive surprise,” Mayor Sylvester Turner said of out-of-towners who may still have an earlier perception of Houston.

Houston, the nation’s fourth-largest city, is continuing to struggle with the aftershocks of a two-year economic downturn caused by a plunge in oil prices. There is a widespread belief that the economy is showing signs of improvement, but most experts project a long and slow recovery.

“Improved conditions in the energy industry continue to affirm an increasingly positive outlook for Houston, although a broad-based recovery remains elusive,” the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas said in a Dec. 27 report.

Per-barrel prices dropped to a low of $26 in February last year, from an oil-boom peak of $108 in June 2014, before starting to swing upward, hammering Texas and other energy-producing states.
Energy companies in Houston abruptly shifted from expansion to retrenchment, slashing more than 70,000 energy-related jobs while bowing out of planned projects, consolidating resources and dumping unneeded property.

Oil and gas companies based downtown or along the “Energy Corridor” — a miles-long stretch of Interstate 10 west of downtown — scrambled to jettison excess space by vacating offices or by subleasing to other tenants at appealing rates.

The economic turbulence reflects Houston’s vulnerability as a world oil capital and has stirred reminders of a devastating crash in the 1980s. Prices plunged to as low as $9 per barrel in 1986, causing the Houston economy to collapse and ultimately claiming more than 221,000 jobs.

Houston residents have found some solace in that the latest round of hardships is less severe than what occurred 30 years ago. The city has become more economically diverse and is no longer solely dependent on oil prices and rig counts to stay afloat. Continued overall job growth — though far lower than in the days of $100-a-barrel oil prices — has produced guarded optimism.

“Every other time energy has crashed, the world stopped,” said Stuart Showers, the director of research at Transwestern, a Houston-based real estate company. “But we still have positive growth. We still continue to move forward.”

Energy prices increased in November when the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries announced a reduction in the world supply of crude oil, sending oil prices into the $50-plus range. The recovery could accelerate if prices continue to rise through the winter months, the Dallas Fed said.

“I think many people will agree that things have kind of bottomed out,” Mayor Turner said in an interview. “We’re slowly coming back.”

Two other core elements of the Houston economy — the Texas Medical Center, the world’s largest, and the Port of Houston, one of the country’s busiest — are both thriving, helping the city absorb the blow to the energy industry. Houston’s sprawling petrochemical industry is also flourishing, largely because of low-priced natural gas used for feedstocks.
Single-family home building remains strong, real estate experts say, but a glut in office and apartment developments, largely a result of the boom-to-bust turnabout in energy, has raised fears of substantial cuts in construction jobs. A surplus of apartment units has created what real estate experts describe as a renter’s market, as landlords offer discounts and other concessions to lure tenants.

Bob Eury, the president of Central Houston, a civic planning organization, said Houston’s revamp had its origins after the 1980s oil bust, when a host of civic groups emerged with the collective goal of diversifying the economy and “making this a much, much better city.”

A series of voter-approved initiatives starting in the 1990s and accelerating in the 21st century included the expansion of the light rail, new professional sports stadiums and the development of more than 3,000 acres of green space along Houston’s famous bayous.

The urban overhaul intensified after Houston’s last Super Bowl, in 2004, and helped lead to the city’s selection in 2013 to be host of Super Bowl 51.

This year’s contest, between the New England Patriots and the Atlanta Falcons, will be played at NRG Stadium, less than eight miles from downtown, and is expected to generate a net economic windfall for Houston of more than $350 million. Mr. Turner said the tax revenue could be a “huge stimulant” for the city’s economy.

But Laura Perez-Boston, the campaign director of the Texas Organizing Project, an advocate for low-income African-Americans and Hispanics, expressed concern that the economic gains would primarily benefit wealthy developers and largely bypass those at the lower end of the economic spectrum.

“‘It’s exciting to have the spotlight on us but in terms of what it’s really leveraging for regular folks, unfortunately, there’s not much of a difference,’” she said. “‘There’s really no trickle-down.’” She called on city leaders to steer the revenue toward low-income communities that “need it the most.”

City planners have spent more than two years beautifying the city for the Super Bowl and wrapping up construction projects, most of which were begun before energy prices crashed.
Upgrades include a $175 million overhaul of the George R. Brown Convention Center, which sprawls across the equivalent of 11 city blocks in east downtown and has design elements resembling a ship. A new Marriott Marquis, which will serve as Super Bowl headquarters for the N.F.L., opened the day after Christmas, joining the Hilton Americas-Houston as the city’s second convention district hotel.

Although the improvements are part of Houston’s long-range goal to become a mega-convention city and were not tied to landing the Super Bowl, officials said, the game next month nevertheless served as a deadline for completion. The Super Bowl “concentrated efforts to make improvements we were going to make anyway but to get them into the pipeline faster,” said Stephen Klineberg, the founding director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University.

A major catalyst for Houston’s downtown transformation was the 2008 opening of Discovery Green, a 12-acre park that replaced two parking lots to become one of the city’s most popular recreational and entertainment destinations.

Located just across from the convention center and within walking distance of the two convention hotels, Discovery Green will anchor a 10-day festival, Super Bowl LIVE, which is expected to draw more than one million people in the buildup to the game.

An increasing number of downtown residential units, spawned in part by city tax incentives to developers, has drawn thousands of Houstonians to live in the central city.

The progression of improvements serves as evidence of “a city reinventing itself in ways that would have been inconceivable” in an earlier era, Mr. Klineberg said.

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