

Beyond Random: A Discussion of “Houston As Is”

Cite gathered five people at The Brandon Gallery to discuss the 100 photographs for *Cite* 100 taken by Paul Hester.

For three hours, over pizza and beer from the adjacent Brasil Café, the participants looked and talked in a far-ranging discussion.

This is an edited transcription. Some sections were reordered, abbreviated, and revised with additional details.



Stephen Fox is a founder of *Cite*, an architectural historian, a fellow of the Anchorage Foundation, lecturer at Rice University and the University of Houston, and author of *Houston: An Architectural Guide* among many other publications.

Lisa Gray served as a managing editor of *Cite* in the early 2000s, and is an editor and columnist at the *Houston Chronicle*.

Lee Bay is an architectural photographer, teacher, and writer. He served as the architectural critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

José Solis is a member of the *Cite* editorial committee. He is the founder of Big and Bright Strategies, which specializes in project design and architecture.

Cynthia Dehlavi is a member of the *Cite* editorial committee. She is a research and design associate at OJB.

José I have a question for you, Stephen, since you were among those who started this journey for the rest of us. When you see these photos, how is Houston different than in *Cite* 1?

Stephen It is the same. What stands out to me is the essential and inescapable junkiness of Houston.



001

After living here for 50 years, I need to get over my problem and just embrace junkiness, and look for cool and interesting junkiness.

Cynthia The way junkiness is portrayed in these photographs looks cool.

José I think it actually is cool. I moved to Ann Arbor recently and then moved back. A friend calls Ann Arbor a precious jewel. I found it very uncomfortable to live there. Everything was perfect. I am used to a mess. There seem to be more possibilities in a mess than there are in a place like Ann Arbor.

Lisa Lee, what do you notice comparing these Houston photographs to Chicago?

Lee The two things that jump out, the lack of people in the photographs and how low the scale is. It seems like once you get out of Downtown things step down quickly. And the width of the streets, my God!

If you did look at the greater Chicagoland, Cook County and a little bit of DuPage, you would find a lot of open space. There is a ribbon of forest preserves that stretch around

the western part of the city. There are individual, self-contained suburbs. Some parts of the South Side would not look all that different than what we see here. You wouldn't see a horse in a yard.



072

Otherwise, that house could be at 6700 Racine in Chicago. If you told me that is where it was, I wouldn't argue any different. The mix of religious places would be about the same, a mosque, a church, you wouldn't find as many places like Deer Park or Morgan's Point.

Cynthia I like your point on the density. The density of Houston is not depicted here. If you were to put all of the housing types next to each other, you would see mostly one-story, single-family houses. You wouldn't see many high-rises. When I think of current development in Houston, I think of mixed-use housing, big apartment complexes. Very little of that appears in these photographs.

José More people live in this low-density kind of Houston shown in the photographs than the dense Houston that we live in. This is more real Houston than what we perceive it is.

Stephen It is. Based on doing surveys for the *Architectural Guidebook*, and since I don't

have a car and am really confined to a part of the inner city, it is a shock to see how even as suburbanized as the inner city is, how much more representative that these photos are than what I see on a daily basis. And it is amazing that it is a very disurbanized city inhabited by people who don't want to live in cities and live in cities the way they would live in small towns or on the edge of town in the countryside.

José If you look at Houston as the metropolitan area, the vast majority of the growth is in the periphery. The majority of people live in that big, open space. For architects, landscape architects, designers, engineers, this is the city we should be looking at, not only the city we are imagining inside the Loop. That is an important issue to think about. Many of these photos look like what we think of as Detroit.

Stephen When you consider that Detroit is 160 square miles, there are 160 square miles of "Detroit" in Houston. If it had the advantage being a 600-square-mile city like Houston, Detroit would encompass all its affluent neighbors and it would be as economically great as Houston.

Lisa The average price of housing in Houston masks what we are talking about. Before, almost all of Houston was affordable. In the last couple of decades, the difference between the rich and poor has been widening fast. This is why folk art is disappearing from parts of the city. Things like art cars. People used to have tons of empty space and they could do these nutty things. It's not that we have more zoning or better neighborhood associations.

Stephen Much of Houston remains a low value city. That's the difference between Houston and Chicago. Houston has based its whole economic structure on being a low-value city where you can come and do things you can't get away with in any other major American city. It has worked so well there is no incentive to change.

Lisa And yet the close-in areas are not as affordable as they once were. That's the question, the difference between where people can afford to live and where they want to live.

José There are a lot of places that are cheap, like Beltway 8 and Westheimer, but it is not attractive for artists to go to them. They crave the image of the grungy, gritty, I'm-going-to-go-to-the-East-side, post-industrial part of town.

Lisa Is this one of the things *Cite* should be thinking about? How do you do "creative placemaking" at Beltway 8 and Westheimer?

Cynthia I think that's a huge thing architects should do. You can make a place. You can design the cool spot. If it is designed appropriately and programmed. Berlin, Medellin, Chang Mai. The only thing they have in common is very low housing costs. If enough people came together you could make that cool Houston suburb a reality.

Lee You need public transit though. That seems to be the generational thing.

Herman Dyal I hear again and again that Sugar Land is very diverse. Which one of these images shows Sugar Land?

José Is that it? [Friendswood.] It could be this? [Cypress.]

Lisa How interesting is it that we cannot identify the suburbs!

José Each one is 20 miles from where we are but in any particular direction.

Lisa Here it is. [Sugar Land.]



035

This is the most diverse place in the United States. [Laughter] Fort Bend County, where this photograph was taken, is 25 percent Asian, 25 percent White, 25 percent Black, and 25 percent Latino. This is the most boring melting pot in America. This is utterly placeless.

Cynthia I am on your team but this is somebody's dream. When I drive through the suburbs I feel nauseated, but my family loves this stuff. If you ask someone to draw a home, this is what they would sketch. I live in a cool loft now. It is still not as homey.

Stephen Immigrant communities have been mainstreamed into American suburban culture.

Cynthia The suburbs promote a safety that you don't get anywhere else. I don't think you get that inside the Loop. I grew up Downtown in Houston House. My last year of high school we moved to the suburbs. It was a dream come true because, oh my goodness, I could go for a run at night. And it was ok. I could ride my bike to my friend's house. It was safe. In a weird way, I was more free there than I ever was Downtown. Downtown, night time, shops close. You should stay in your house.

Lisa I don't see a lot of public gathering spots in these photographs. There's a difference between the way we perceive our lives and what the darts will show. I also notice a lot of places clearly in transition.



090



012

Richmont Square is being demolished by the Menil. Has Houston always been under construction?

José This photograph of a future site for the Bridgelands development with a "you have arrived" sign speaks to that.



082



086

We also see this 1970s Houston apartment complex that looks like a Harold Farb development. There is the future, present, and past, but it is the same cycle happening over and over again.

Stephen The typologies change and the scale is different but the development pattern is the same. It is to seek whatever is the most

economically propitious landuse at the time, plopped down a typology that has somehow been crafted to work with the economics, and add whatever the stylistic elements are that make it more marketable at that time. Then you wait for it to deteriorate or, if the neighborhood remains good, for the economic cycle to roll through and replace it. If not, it persists in declining condition.

José You can see that happening now in Garden Oaks and Oak Forest. They have big lots, it is relatively close, and they have the pretty trees. Now instead of a 1,200-square-foot house, it will be a 5,000-square-foot house.

Lisa Is that different than other cities?

Stephen This is why it becomes hard to talk about Houston. Most other cities are not nearly as big as Houston in terms of their incorporated area. So the cities that have stabilized have done so by enacting new zoning and historic districts to conserve, preserve, and stabilize their shapes. They have all these mechanisms to keep them from the kind of fluidity that characterizes Houston where if you are in the right part of town then things change in a certain cycle and, if you are not, they stay in place until you hope the cycle catches up with that area.

Pick Five

The 100 photographs in this issue are presented in the order that the darts were thrown, which produced unplanned and thrilling juxtapositions. Yet, the editors were tempted to reassemble the images and pull out themes. Each person who looked at the photographs brought their own ideas to them. In the end, the editors stuck with the random order and asked the five discussants to pick five photographs, assemble them into a miniature photoessay, and explain their rationale. In the following section, see their selection and read their observations. We encourage readers to make their own photoessays and submit them to rda@rice.edu.

Lee Bay 094 064 048 091 030

As an outsider, there's something about Houston being the city of the future. At least by my eye. In Chicago, our future was 1920, 1930. Here, mid-century America is prosperous. You have the technologies of the future, oil and space. Ours was steel, which is of the present and past of the time. There's something about city of the future that is expressed in the Modernist architecture. The school, the two houses, the airport. The changes that will come with the rocket development that decade, perfected and launched within twenty-five years. There's something about that, that can inform the rest of the city. A city of the future, perhaps when it worked best, when it looked forward. This one, I just like the structure of the trees.



Lisa The classic thing to say about Austin is that it is always getting worse. Whenever you got there that was the best moment and then it goes downhill. **In Houston there is this idea that it is getting better.** Whenever you got here it was worse.

José Solís 006 099 018 085 034

I picked five images that capture a particular aspect of Houston. This one is the inner part of the Ship Channel, inside or just outside of the Loop. Unless you actually work there, you have probably never visited. There are large sections of the city that are completely unknown to most of the people who live here.

In this one, you have a shipping container port terminal right next to a cemetery that's been there for a long long time. And nobody has thought about how they are right next to each other. And that to me is another one of those things that happens all the time in Houston. Something pops up here right next to there and nobody thinks about the two things together.

Here we have the unfortunate reality of walls around much of suburban Houston. The perfect house is encased behind a safe wall that you as the outsider are not going to get in. The yield one, I picked that one because it relates to the car so much. We experience so much of the city through the car. And you experience that kind of ugliness so much. Sometimes you see pretty things from the car. The city is ugly and those kinds of conditions happen, the yield and the chain link fence and beat up asphalt, that's just the reality of the city.

The Call God, I love the photograph. If you start picking through the photograph, there are all these details in it that start popping out and they are mashed together. That's emblematic of how the city works, if you casually glance at it, you may get a first impression that is funny or interesting. It is when you start picking through, there is more to it but you have to pay attention to it. It is not pretty but it could be funny or interesting but you have to pay attention to it.

Cynthia I think I can find a common thread. If I were to title the piece, I would title it Correspondence. It all has to do with community.

Lisa I was thinking Spiritual Bleakness.



Lisa Gray 040 015 066 007 026

I was struck by what a wet city this is. But often the water is managed or out of sight. That crawfish hill has to be on a wetland, but we don't see water. In the second photo, the bayou is managed: You can see its channelized, mowed banks and the drainage pipe that feeds it. It's like the bayou that runs through my own neighborhood, mostly separated from the houses by privacy fences. It's an unnatural landscape that nobody is loving.

In the third photo, we get even more artificial. This manmade beach on the San Jacinto River: Is it a toxic area with palapas? Is it above or below the Superfund site? The fourth photo, the one of the fountain in a retention pond: It's obviously drainage turned into a suburban amenity. In the last photo, the Ship Channel is implied, but we don't see it. I think that's how most of us relate to the Ship Channel: It's out of sight, and barely on our minds.



Stephen Fox 019 011 020 012 043

My images are about the profuseness and disposability of Houston.

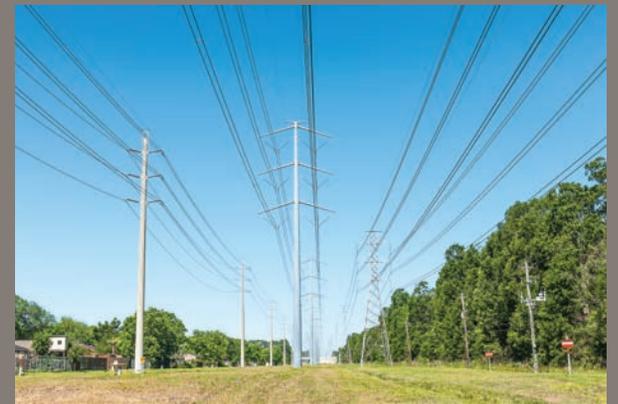
I love the photograph with this primeval Houston with trees rising out of the watery ground. The old folks house, their whole life is suddenly put on display in the front yard with no shade.

The third image, this celebration of junkiness, doing what you want because you feel like it. What good is a front yard if you can't park all your vehicles in your front yard.

The fourth is the disposability of even the most expensive infrastructure. It meets its end because of either performance failure or it is not economically performing. Everything dies in Houston in the end, and one hopes gets reborn.

And again, the eternal suburban frontier. The landscape is remade with increasing densities of infrastructure to support this bleak superstructure, whose only hope is that it too will get plowed under and turned into something better.

Also, a parable for Houston's future, it's so smug about its prosperity that it doesn't understand it is a one industry town. When oil and gas go, Houston will become Detroit.



Cynthia Dehlavi 004 087 038 082 100

Maybe a little bit obvious, but I see the corridor as being the subtle place for development to surround. The drainage ditch is Buffalo Bayou Park. Powerlines are huge divides through neighborhoods, but are also where trails and people space can exist. Rail lines, I see these spaces as intensely divisive and yet potentially unifying. They connect everything across large distances. I see the landfills as the future, the Houston hills. We will start capping landfill parks. There's one off of Almeda. Pierce Junction. They have one over there, a landfill made into a golf course. It is very profitable. You can extract methane from it even after you cap a landfill. That will be the next development, the next divisive element that becomes unifying. If you look at a map of landfills, they surround Houston. You could easily have the Houston hills. Don't you agree these are opportunist spaces? Spaces that opportunists have taken advantage of and spaces for opportunity. Ugly is opportunity. ●