Cite is Dead.
Long Live Cite!

Raj Mankad
Ochsner, who worked for METRO at the time, his identity kept secret all these years, Jeffrey information from a “Deep Throat” inside source. As his jumping-off point to discuss the building, the Menil, Reynar Banham used that very quote and not be beholden to anyone.”

Stephen Fox. “Newspapers [here] did not seem to be interested in having an architectural critic,” says Bruce Webb. “After a while, we started not talking to several founders for perspective. The big question here would be: Why even go to the expense and trouble of making a print publication these days? I have to be: Why even go to the expense and trouble of making a print publication these days?”

Cite Summer 2017

Back in 1987, for the fifth anniversary issue of Cite, Drexel Turner and a crew built a mock-newsstand kiosk in Downtown Houston and hung up all the past issues, then photographed it for the Cite 18 cover. I had always thought that image was collaged together by someone with terrific cutting and gluing skills. But now I see that I built a fake newsstand, a play at the hyperreal, plus a nose thumbing at “mainstream media” that is still relevant today. The situation in Houston, with its ongoing lack of a dedicated architecture critic at its newspaper, presaged the media collapse the rest of the country is facing now. And for that reason, Rice Design Alliance and Cite are national models for cities that no longer have those traditional journalistic venues for discourse on building design. Just before his untimely death in 2010, critic David Dillon wrote as much after losing his position at the Dallas Morning News. Nonprofit media groups, like the Texas Tribune and the Solutions Journalism Network, are starting to proliferate 35 years after the founding of Cite. Last year, the Philadelphia Inquirer was donated to the nonprofit Philadelphia Foundation.

The at the end of that fifth anniversary issue, William Stern expressed his astonishment that Cite had lasted so long, praising “all the writers, editors, photographers, designers, and staff without whose contributions there would be no Cite.” He went on to declare that “the most revealing observation to be made about Cite contributors is their relative youth. Indeed, their average age is probably 35, and in the first years their average age was probably closer to 30.” He added his hope that “Cite will always be a place of youthful idealism and that its vitality will never stagnate.” Although it took a painful decision by the Rice Design Alliance board in 2008 to institute term limits, the editorial committee is once again quite young. Two of our editorial committee members are younger than Cite itself. And the vitality of the publication continues. For instance, the notable improvements we have seen to Houston’s public realm and parks in recent years only make me ache for more architecture information. By embracing the larger media landscape, Cite is increasingly breaking out of its niche. As we are bombarded with information, much of it distorted, Cite’s committed, researched, thoughtful, optimistic voices stand apart, even on a screen.

Which brings us back to the question that 100 asks. Why are you holding this paper object and reading these print words? Cite will continue in print but only twice a year. Like LPs, print magazines like this one are in a quasi-golden age. They are deliberately inefficient. The object does not talk back. No email notification pops up at the top right corner of the page. No hyperlinks send readers in wild forays across the web. Cite’s deadness is its appeal. As graphic designer Herman Dyal, the issue’s guest editor and the magazine’s original designer, says, it’s like you are hitting the pause button. There is a time for meditation. And what this issue asks is that you meditate on time itself.

With Linda Sylvan as the managing editor, from Cite 5 (1984) to Cite 32 (1993), and then as the executive director/publisher, subsequent issues settled in to focus on the business of the built environment, preservation, education, land-use regulations, and sustainability. Lessons from other cities, reviews, urbanism, environmental challenges, and socioeconomics. To this day, Cite cycles through these same topics, often with the humor and amazement of those early writers, even as everything else about the publication constantly changes.

Cite has evolved by incubating and spinning off other platforms. Several books started as Cite articles, including See-Through Years by Joel Warren Barna. Ephemeral City: Cite Looks at Houston featured the drawings of William, William, and Drexel Turner; and Houston Here and Gone by Steven Strom. Houston Mod monographs by Ben Koush emerged from the publication as well. Christof Spieler’s blog, Intermodality, grew out of his writing about transit for Cite and led directly to his appointment to the METRO board. After writing for Cite and serving on its editorial committee, Larry Albert launched Swamp.com from his frustration with the journal’s lack of a digital presence at the time. These blogs, especially Swampolt, fundamentally changed the pace of design discourse in Houston.

Then Cite went digital in 2008 when I began as editor. The digital publication now absorbs as much time and funding as our print format, and reaches more people. Cite’s impact on the city’s principal newspaper followed a similar print-to-digital course. Former Cite managing editor Lisa Gray went to the Houston Chronicle, where she wrote a column from 2007 to 2014 that brought together perspectives, and sources into the mainstream. Since then she has brought in Allyn West, once a writer for Swampolt and now Cite, to help her in producing the Gray Matters online section of the Houston Chronicle, which picks up digital content from Cite on a near-weekly basis, including building reviews.

The next frontier is likely the gamification of Cite as more architectural discourse takes place online. For example, digital scavenger hunts. The boundary between the fun of doing and the discovery of design discourse in Houston has dissolved. People sharing selfies in front of buildings preserved, and public spaces perceived.

The publication had an immediate impact on local and national discourse. The inaugural issue included a review of the Renzo Piano plans for the Menil by Fox, who wondered if the building “was overwhelmedly non-monumental.” Soon after, in his own Art in America review of the Menil, Reynar Banham used that very quote as his jumping-off point to discuss the building. The second issue of Cite, arguing strongly against plans for elevated rail down Main Street, relied on information from a “Deep Throat” inside source. He has been our only source for secret all these years. Jeffrey Ochsner, who worked for METRO at the time, provided the leak.

100 IS A SCARY NUMBER with two big owl eyes staring back at you. The big question here would have to be: Why even go to the expense and trouble of making a print publication these days? I talked to several Cite founders for perspective.

They first met in 1982 around the dining table in William F. Stern’s townhouse, designed by Howard Barnstone. We do not have a photo of their first meeting, but as a send-up of that scene, it’s hard to know exactly who was there. But Stern, Anne Schlumberger, Barrie Scardino Brad- ley, Herman Dyal, Stephen Fox, Karl Killian, W. O. Neuhaus, Drexel Turner, Gordon Wittenberg, and Bruce Webb were among them. O. Jack Mitchel, the founding editor of Houston Modern Architecture and Elizabeth Griffen, the executive director of Rice Design Alliance, supported Cite with funding and space. Griffen sold the first ads.

Barrie Bradley was the only one who had a computer, an Apple IIe. She and the first managing editor, Joel Warren Barna, used it to edit text, though the page layout under Herman Dyal’s direction still involved glue and Exacto blades. They modeled Cite after Skyline: The Architecture of Houston and Southeast Texas, the accessible shrink-wrap to Opinions, both of which were designed by Massimo Vignelli and published by Peter Eisenman’s Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies out of New York. Bradley had a stack of Skyline back issues and had contacted the journal’s editor, Suzanne Stephens. But the Houston crew, mostly in their 20s and 30s, were more playful in their editorial and graphic design approach.

“We thought this place needed a good scolding,” says Bruce Webb. “After a while, we started not hating it as much. It was sort of cathartic.” For 40 years, Ann Holmes covered architecture, adding the field to her duties as the chief arts contributor and graphic design approach.