“I was overcome by a familiar awareness, that in Houston the pairing of potential and waste is perpetually unresolvable.”
The 100 photographs Paul Hester made for this 1982 edition of the Houston Post were downloaded onto my computer while it sat in one of the visiting scholar apartments in Munich’s Oskar van Miller Forum. It took a while for the files to come in. All the windows in the apartment were open, and you could sense the sun slowly going down in the late spring air. The Forum, designed by Thomas Herzog, is an architectural manifesto about how to make the sustainable city, a goal in Germany.

I'd been in Europe for a month, but when Paul's photographs appeared on the screen I was instantaneously back in Houston, where I grew up and started at Rice as a photography (then architecture) major — which is when I first met Paul. There was no mistaking where he'd been out looking, even in the low-res Instagram-like grid of the thumbnails Houston, and the extent of its impending extra-territoriality.

I was immediately disoriented by the distinct disgust and fascination anyone who knows the area feels. Paul's photographs are invariably fair-minded and inconclusive. So I was also overcome by a familiar awareness, that in Houston the pairing of potential and waste is perpetually unresolvable. The competing sensations — in Paul's images, as in the city — come at you with equal strength but not in comparable terms.

I think any rational architect or landscape architect or planner who examines Houston's constantly metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth.

But you can pour endless wishful energy into that potential long before anyone else admitted you even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly mutates of its own accord — suspects the city, uncontrollable in its metastasizing growth — where one neighborhood, even a single lot, seemingly 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suggest a photograph is truthful is by compositional artlessness, as my description of Paul’s photograph above suggests. To affect artlessness well if you’re aware of its necessity is unusually challenging, and there have only been a few masters, arguably Eugene Atget, then Walker Evans. Then artlessness splits into different trajectories.

On one side it continues to the various photographers associated with The New Topographics — Stephen Shore, Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke, the Bechers — and their vast progeny, like Candida Hofer or Bas Princen. Though this group is known for looking at constructed space with what is aptly called the passive view, the resulting photographs are always breath-takingly beautiful (and their prints are beautiful objects). So these photographers have been justly criticized for rendering waste landscape pornographically, i.e., making it desirable.

Cite, has, with a few exceptions, managed to avoid that trap in commissioning photography. Really, to photograph Houston’s mindlessness in such a way to make it fetishistically beautiful could only be justified as a matter of personal survival — how to keep yourself from going insane — rather than public ethics. Here Paul gets the real credit for establishing the house format, which, if you look through the issues, has generally been respected by other photographers who followed (if you want to see alternatives, look at Cite 39).

The other trajectory of artlessness goes in a stranger direction, one that focuses on the status of the photograph as a special kind of window, rather than a neutral window. Its workings assume we know the difference between an art photograph and just a photograph. To the self-importance of the former it introduces the urgency of the latter, both in the (apparent) lack of compositional finesse, and in the photographers’ choice of subject matter: things or events (even obscure) that need to be documented, rather than those that will make a good photograph.

The key photographers of public space in this trajectory include, among others, Ed Ruscha, Nathan Lyons, William Christenberry, Lee Friedlander, Robert Adams, Nan Goldin, the very early photographers of who mine Google Street View. All document the strange interface of the individual, the camera, and the public realm. In this second tradition Paul’s work stands out as remarkably accomplished, and conceptually remarkable.

A good, emblematic example of this is any of Paul’s many photographs taken out of car windows (Cite has shots Paul took through the rolled-down passenger window across his car that somehow manage to capture the entire building he had been assigned to photograph — drive around a block a couple of times and try that!). Two thoughts enter your head when you look at these. Some idiot risked their life to take this picture (so it must be of something important). And: that’s how I would have seen the building (or whatever the subject in question might be) — something you do not trust in the privileged view of the architectural photographer. These qualities are true of all 100 photographs here.

Two other thoughts do not enter your mind. You don’t think: this is a great photograph. And you don’t think: this is a bad photograph. You don’t think about the quality of the photograph at all. You just think about what’s in the photograph. That’s again true of all of Paul’s images, including the 100 here. Do you know how incredibly difficult that is to pull off? I do, and so I stand in awe.

When you look chronologically through Paul’s work in Cite you witness an ongoing loosening taking place in his photographs. They get less and less conventional as architectural photography, more quickly made, without pre-meditation, yet somehow more descriptive. Central to that change is the ever-increasing inclusion of and attention to people and events, as if there was no point in describing architecture and the city without also documenting its impact.

Over the same time period Paul was being hired by architects to do a lot of airless conventional architectural photography. So you have to believe the evolution is something he was and has been thinking about. Following on that observation, there’s something dark and I think appropriate to these 100 images. They are remarkably free and mature, and — to my eye at least — full of a new, quiet uncertainty.

For me the telling detail is that none of the photographs are conventionally corrected. They are riddled with small mistakes — like a corner partially obscured by something in front of the lens — that could easily have been digitally erased. At the same time these blemishes don’t distract: they are essential to the photographs.

I deeply admire the consequence. You feel that the photographs were taken by an open and essentially curious human being at a specific time in a specific place, who saw something they did not yet understand but in which they felt some tentative import, even though they were perhaps not convinced. So they picked up a camera and took a picture.

Actually, you feel like they were taken by someone here as a tourist. Which doesn’t make any sense. Paul has been looking at and thinking about Houston incisively forever. He’s the very opposite of a tourist. Paul is, instead, the perfect host, opening the city for your consideration without prejudicing your response. About this thought, he emailed me this insight, on which I’ll end, since it’s not possible to improve upon:

“I wanted the images to be representative of the whole. Not to be unusual or atypical or even special. I wanted to record the typical or even common aspect of the place. Not common as in lower class, but what the area had in common with itself.

At the same time, I hope that these pictures that come from the ordinary will be redeemed and seen as if for the first time, by a visitor, to be both of the ordinary, and simultaneously, out of the ordinary.”

Thank you, Paul.