

The Perfect Host
by David Heymann

“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 100th issue of *Cite* 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 very 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 entropy and consumption, will ultimately prove to be almost entirely resistant to the flatteries of progressive thought.

But you can pour endless wishful energy into that *almost*. Some central aspect of Houston, really of its character more than its fact, seems perversely correct. The thinking goes: the waste is somehow relative, because — aside from the fact that no one should have built here in the first place — *you're freer here than anywhere else*. And despite the troubling math of that logic, Houston's magnetic potential, and its bottomless well of work, seems to draw in people of every stripe from around the world.

That Houston is rapidly becoming the most diverse city in the U.S. is of course held up as proof of that potential's validity. Houston walks the walk. It also *pours* the walk, in reinforced concrete, at a rate so rapid the control joints will be fully compromised by ferocious weedlings before this edition makes it to press. At least Houston has the grace to boast: we do not care if, when, how, or why you walk on it, or with whom. It is, in the words of the L.A. Times, "*nothing less than the story of the American city of the future.*" [Note 1]

To its credit, the RDA stubbornly committed to this potential long before anyone else admitted you could call it *potential*. In publishing *Cite* the RDA chose to make public its commitment to understanding Houston's duality — its wrongness and rightness, each of which seems to be the key to the other. And if the slippery *rightness* side of the equation has yet to be fully co-opted by anything like a true manifesto, *Cite* (and its many contributors) has certainly been tireless in trying.

A mighty struggle to be sure. To my mind the many things Houston is now doing well — all that biking along those beautiful bayous for example — are in part a direct consequence of the RDA's long years of keeping Houstonians properly watered and fertilized. Congratulations, RDA, on your steadfastness, the seriousness of your purpose, for the consistency and quality of your journal, and on reaching this milestone.

●●●

Paul, too, deserves some of the accolades. His photography has been central to *Cite's* identity from

the start. Paul's first credited photographs, of buildings along Main Street, appear in *Cite* 2 in November 1982. By *Cite* 3 he has become the journal's go-to photographer: his work appears in all four main articles, one of which is his own photographic essay on Hermann Park (featuring the bracketed side by side views Paul often favors).

From then on his photographs — and, starting in *Cite* 30, photographs made in collaboration with Lisa Hardaway — appear in, and regularly on the cover of, every edition of *Cite* up to number 70 in the summer of 2006 (all except for *Cite* 67, which has photographs by Paul's son Eric Hester, a talented photographer in his own right). That's a run of almost 24 years. Around number 70 the format of the journal changes dramatically: Paul's, and Paul and Lisa's photographs still appear, but now primarily as photo-essays.

In my visual memory of *Cite*, I see Paul's way of seeing. His direct and default influence on the formation of the journal's identity and direction is hard to overestimate. It follows in part from the editorial spirit of the journal's founders. In an email exchange Paul wrote: "Drexel Turner, Bruce Webb, and Bill Stern... were very responsive if I brought back pictures that contradicted the original approach, or added to it. They accepted the photographs as reliable evidence."

The sheer number of images Paul began providing and has provided for every part of the journal is staggering. Though he was given assignments — sometimes just in the form of a street address — articles often formed up around images he'd already made, or proposed making. Clearly there was synchronicity in the way *Cite* and Paul were seeing Houston from the start.

Cite's critical content about Houston consists of articles about what Houston *should* be, what Houston *was*, and what Houston *is*. Over the years the frequency of should articles seems to diminish in favor of *was* and *is*. The reasons for this undoubtedly include the passing of a generation of Modernist firebrands (all honored in *Cite*). But I suspect the dawning awareness that Houston, *while still* succeeding, refuses to behave by the predictable tropes of architecture and planning led to a kind of awestruck humility on the part of the journal's conscientious observers.

After all, if you're trying to be rational, and you're confronted by an immensity you discover you do not understand and cannot predict, you can hardly be *for* or *against* it. At best you can try to observe and describe it honestly, hoping to get some handle on its essentials. And here is where, and why, Paul Hester was the ideal first photographer of Houston for *Cite*. Has there ever been a photographer more willing to ponder endless banality without judgment, in order to ensure we understand it correctly?

●●●

By way of example, in *Cite* 3 there is a marvelous bald photograph Paul made of Venturi Scott Brown Associate's Park Regency Terrace, with Philip Johnson's Transco Tower in the distance. The photograph is clear enough as architectural reporting. You understand massing, layout, scale, orientation, and also the architect's intent: Venturi and Scott Brown's play and pleasure with language, Johnson's concern for iconic presence.

But this isn't a traditional architectural photograph. The framing isn't true to the horizon (it's tilted very slightly right) a destabilizing incorrectness that helps your eye find the Transco building. The framing is also not square to the buildings in plan (it's rotated very slightly left). This additional impropriety subtly shifts the subject from the buildings as objects to the uncertain space between their masses, and the relationship the new buildings establish to their mute

neighbors. It's like a classroom snapshot on that awkward first day of school.

Taken in the normal light of day, not the *magic hour*, we see the relative imprecision of the construction (though it's no more shoddy than we expect). Adjacent to the buildings, still splattered with construction dirt (or is that already mildew?) are desultory plantings. Crossing the top are the invariable power lines so many photographers work to hide but Paul, like the superb cartoonist R. Crumb, insists on acknowledging. Though these cables are crucial to the photograph's composition, they — remarkably — provide human scale (cover them and you'll see).

Any professional architectural photographer would correct these mistakes without thinking. But then you'd have as yet uncertain architecture in an ugly photograph, one that you wouldn't trust because of a strange phenomenon: we don't trust ugly photographs. Instead you believe what you see in the photograph — actually you believe it's what you *would see if you went there*, a quality true of all of Paul's work.

Paul's brilliantly casual image isn't of *architecture*. Nothing is working in the way the architects said — which you can readily assess by reading John Kaliski's accompanying article heroically trying to prove the architects' justifications — though you sense that *something* is working. I think that something working is the city itself. The key for me is the Transco Tower: cut off at mid height, unflattering as architecture, but perfect to the photograph and its ability to describe one of Houston's infinite potentials.

A story about those potentials. My mom used to love driving around Houston exploring its endless surprise. As she got older she would sometimes get confused, then lost. When that happened she'd scan the flat horizon for Transco, and use it like the lighthouse Johnson half-jokingly suggested the building could be to navigate home. There's your wrongness and rightness, synthesized as only Houston can. All of that possibility — and all of Paul's outsized ability and fairness — are already documented in this photograph.

●●●

I think of Paul as a rarity. He may not admit it, but I think he quietly holds on to the belief that a photograph's purpose is to serve its subject by trying to be truthful about it. Counter-intuitively — since truth telling would seem photography's birthright — doing that is *really* hard. The insidious degree to which most photographs define rather than describe reality is widely recognized, and powerful photographic theory argues it's impossible for a photograph to tell any reliable truth at all.

Perhaps for this reason the belief in documentary truthfulness is neither shared nor professed by many critical photographers today (and certainly not by architectural photographers, who are hired to make buildings look good, even if they don't, or worse, aren't). We think of this development in photography as recent perhaps because the primary literature dates to the end of the Modern. In fact, the problem of a photograph's veracity has been perceived and debated since the invention of the medium.

If after-Modern critical photography has dealt with the dilemma absolutely, by *not even trying or pretending to*, pre-Modern photography dealt with it relativistically, by getting the closest possible approximation. An interesting example of this was the generally accepted proscription against the use of wide-angle lenses in the early photography of buildings. Their obvious distortion, early theorists argued — and we're talking end of the 19th century here — misled the viewer.

But apparent truthfulness resides in more than just optics. One (already long-recognized) way to



Park Regency Terrace, Venturi Scott Brown Associates, photographed for *Cite 3* (Fall 1983) by Paul Hester.

Note 1
How Houston has become the most diverse place in America
 By Brittny Mejia / Photography by Gary Coronado
Los Angeles Times
 May 9, 2017

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 photo-

graphs of Thomas Struth, and today that group of photographers 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 think-

ing 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.