

CITE AT 10

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In more than ten years of admiring *Cite* (and sometimes contributing to it), it has seemed to me that this good gray magazine was generated and has been sustained by two related impulses.

In a city that had been doubling in size every generation, that had developed with neither planning nor growth controls, in which active commitment to a coherent public spatial order had disappeared nearly 50 years before, and where most criticism of buildings and public spaces was hardly distinguishable from advertising, the first impulse behind *Cite* was the urge to argue that economic and political self-interest could be enlightened by engagement with planning and design, and that the result would benefit the city economically and politically as well as aesthetically.

The second of *Cite*'s generative ideas sprang from the diffusion of structuralist linguistics into architectural theory, as well as the diffusion of such architectural theory into the hinterlands in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The postmodernist idea underlying *Cite* was that the "reality" of Houston was a purely social construction, and that to tell the city's true story it was necessary to look beneath and behind the reified facticities that constituted the public understanding of architecture. Such inspection, according to postmodern theory, could provide a way to rediscover and reestablish the shared, even archetypal, forms of building and landscape that had been lost in modernism's rupture with historical patterns.

Discovering a form for an amorphous city and matching it to a therapeutic world-historical mandate – that's a heady mix, but, I must admit, one discernible only in retrospect. Certainly no one discussed *Cite* in those terms by the time I came to work (part time) for the publication in 1982, commuting from Dallas to borrow a typewriter in the Rice Design Alliance offices or to meet in the conference room of Dyal and Babendure Architects with Stephen Fox, William F. Stern, Gordon Wittenberg, and then art director Herman Dyal.

Nevertheless, the cover story for the first issue of *Cite* made the pattern clear. "Trading Toilets: The Subterranean Zoning of Houston," by Houston architects William H. Anderson and William O. Neuhaus III, argued that new urban development was being steered to downtown and the city's suburban fringes by something other than market forces. A much-needed municipal sewage-treatment plant was behind schedule, they stated, and, as a result, the city's building officials were issuing building permits on a no-net-growth-of-toilet-connections basis in inner-city neighborhoods. The consequence, they said, was a thriving black market in sewer-connection rights acquired from defunct apartment complexes and old-age homes and a tremendous kick to fringe development when the inner-city neighborhoods of Montrose and the Heights were ripe for increased density. Anderson and Neuhaus's article was most pointedly a political critique, questioning the fairness of *de facto* city regulations. But underlying their analysis was the notion that

officials should foster greater density in the city's close-in neighborhoods.

The real story was literally underground; the crucial actors faceless bureaucrats! By implying that with less interference and more insight Houston could have its own *vieux carré*, the piece was also pure Po-Mo for sprawl city. To me the story was a grand revelation that altered my career as a writer and editor. City officials, however, if they ever saw the story, paid no notice. Peripheral development, driven by expanding roadways, cheap land, the predictable and laudable desire of people to have better living and working conditions, and a historically unique combination of chicanery and stupidity, continued well past the point when the sewer plant came on line and the city stopped restricting growth around downtown. But that's another story.

Cite, it was said in later editorial meetings, was to be the magazine of design and planning for Houston. Work continued on an expanding agenda of topics, including, in the early years, a catalogue of threatened historic buildings, Metro's feckless rail plans, the environmental impact of tall buildings, a series of articles by Houston fiction and nonfiction writers, and the plans for the Wortham Theater Center. It was only years later that I came to understand the magazine's devotion to these themes (like that of its parent organization, the Rice Design Alliance) as a natural outgrowth of the situation occupied by the architects and designers who were the mainstay of the RDA's membership and of the *Cite* editorial board. These were people trained to value coherence, history, contextuality, and creativity. They also earned their bread working for clients who, too often, wanted whatever existed of the city's history and context wiped out or counterfeited, and who, too often, characterized the dense-cored-city ideal as economically atavistic and politically senseless.

If the thought that Houston could be rationalized by professional design was alien to the majority of Houstonians in 1982 (as it arguably remains in 1993), for *Cite*'s audience it must have been a balm. Unquestionably it also represented more than a modicum of ideological self-

promotion, suggesting avenues for the expansion of billable architectural services. From the start, *Cite* was about ideas, even in its physical makeup. The magazine began as a big tabloid that had to be folded over to fit on most bookshelves. Its graphics were bold, but it was cheap to produce, with its coarsely screened black-and-white images on grainy newsprint, and it had to be, given the RDA's financial situation. The choice of format, driven by the need to keep initial costs low, was fateful. It made *Cite* pretty much useless for presenting the glossy photographs of new buildings that other architecture magazines depend on. The format also made the magazine of only marginal usefulness to advertisers, since the most profitable sorts of advertising also typically require glossiness and color, and they generally depend on an environment, supplied by the editorial content, of wish fulfillment and glamour. In the RDA, that function was apparently fulfilled by the house tours. *Cite*, for the most part, had only ideas – often the rather prickly ones espoused by Stephen Fox, Drexel Turner, Bruce Webb, Rives Taylor, and Richard Ingersoll.

It has occurred to me that the RDA is a kind of re-creation, at the middle-class economic level of most Houston architects, of the group that created Hermann Park and the elite neighborhoods around Rice University in the 1920s. The RDA's emergence has seemed to indicate a trickling down of the type of civic spirit that used to be expressed only by those with oil fortunes. In general this is a hopeful sign. True, the notion that the market has to answer not just to buyers and sellers but to history and to the future implies that those doing the judging are a cultural elite. But there is also something subversive about the idea: after all, if the market can be steered to make its results more aesthetically pleasing, then it can with considerably greater justification be steered to foster political and economic justice. And if architects have the right to suggest that there can be public oversight of the private enterprise of building and development, then other citizens even further outside the money/power loop can be permitted to tackle issues about freeways and public spaces without being dismissed as not-in-my-back-yard reactionaries. Not many such voices have been heard in *Cite* yet, but some have,

and no other publication in Houston has even created room for the possibility. *Cite's* finest moments, as in its advocacy for the people of Fourth Ward and Allen Parkway Village, have thus represented an important beginning, even if the magazine's efforts at public persuasion have had little effect.

In some ways, Houston has started to catch up with *Cite*. First there was the setback ordinance, then Houston Proud's controls on freeway clutter, and finally "Houston-style zoning," whatever that works out to mean. But by clinging to its roots – to the ideas that Houston is not a thing but our ongoing fabrication, and that the city's true story lies in structures hidden by surface events – *Cite* is still creating a necessity for itself. ■

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