



A long way down: Paul Hester's 1999 photo of Pennzoil Place (1976, Philip Johnson) and Republic Bank (1983, Johnson).

## Photo Developments

Every picture tells a story. But sometimes the story changes.

ON SEPTEMBER 11, *Cite* photographer Paul Hester was in Monterrey, where he shot many of the photos you see in this issue. He was supposed to fly home the next day, and his show, "Philip Johnson & Texas: Photographs by Paul Hester" was scheduled to open September 14 in the Williams Tower Gallery.

The terrorist attacks changed those plans. Hester's flight, like all flights in U.S. airspace, was canceled, and the U.S.-Mexico border was closed. After an extra day in Monterrey, Hester caught a bus to San Antonio, where his wife and business partner, Lisa Hardaway, picked him up.

They were in no hurry to arrive at the gallery. Williams Tower, easily Houston's most iconic skyscraper, canceled all its public events, including Hester's opening.

Just as well, Hester thought; the show seemed out of sync with the times. Many of the photos were of skyscrapers, including Williams Tower itself. In mid-September, it was impossible to consider those photos, or Williams Tower, without thinking of the World Trade Center. Johnson's skyscrapers once served as emblems of Texan boldness. Suddenly, like all skyscrapers, they looked vulnerable. Like targets.

In the months that have passed, daily life has regained its old shape. After Williams Tower again opened to public events, Hester's show had a closing party. The show then moved to a new venue, the gallery at the University of Houston College of Architecture.

But it remains impossible to view Hester's photos in a pre-terrorist state of mind. The skyscrapers haven't regained their old swagger; you still feel protective of them. Oddly, they also seem brave — and thoroughly different from the World Trade Center. It's gone, but Johnson's buildings still exist. Merely by surviving, they serve as steel-and-glass assertions that civilization will continue.

— Lisa Gray

## Blight Fighters

The Quality of Life Coalition aims to make Houston less ugly

"HOUSTON IS UGLY," pronounced *The Economist* this June. The article, "The Blob That Ate East Texas," was otherwise surprisingly flattering; it held that Houston could become one of the great cities of the 21st century. But still, the three-word criticism stings. *The Economist* has a point.

A year-old umbrella group, the Quality of Life Coalition, has assigned itself the big job of fighting blight. The group plans to funnel the disparate and dispersed energy for city beautification into a single, potent force for change.

Envisioned as an "organization of organizations," the coalition aims to "mobilize both the public and government to fund and materially change how Houston looks

and lives" and "capitalize on our most inspiring natural advantages: trees, bayous, and the 'can do' attitude of a unique populace."

The coalition focuses its efforts on four principal areas:

- **Trees and Landscaping.** The group hopes to improve the appearance of major thoroughfares, especially those that serve as conduits for visitors, such as freeways to and from the airports. (No matter how beautiful some parts of Houston may be, a visitor's first impression is often formed on I-45.) Additionally, the coalition will attempt to improve enforcement of existing ordinances (such as tree protection and planting), and to expand ordinances to include public sector projects. (The City of Houston and Harris County are currently exempt from the tree and landscaping ordinances that apply to private sector developments.)

- **Parks and Bayous.** The coalition contends that Houston needs more parks, and calls for full implementation of the city's Parks & Recreation Master Plan, to the tune of \$520 million (\$400 million from city bonds and \$120 million from private donations). The group wants to see that Houston obtains its "fair share" of state and federal grant money, and to encourage the creation of a canoe trail system.

- **Billboards and Signage.** Regarding what some call Houston's "signage puke," the coalition seeks better enforcement of current city ordinances, and it will address the thorny legal and political problems of billboards on interstate highways.

- **Litter and Graffiti.** The group hopes to expand the City of Houston's Clean Neighborhood Program, a beautification effort, to include all 88 "super-neighborhoods." The group also hopes to address abandoned and neglected lots, and to compare Houston's ordinances with those of competing cities.

While none of these initiatives is controversial (outside of billboard companies), the goals have not, as yet, been made to happen. So why does the coalition believe it could succeed where others have failed?

Supporters claim that for the first time, the group unites a critical mass of Houstonians to focus on those four initiatives. The coalition's 49 member groups include a wide variety of organizations, ranging from the Greater Houston Partnership to the Houston Canoe Club, as well as long-time laborers in this field such as Trees for Houston and The Park People. The Quality of Life Coalition's leadership includes business heavyweights such as Charles McMahan and Richard Weekley. And the group, unlike many organizations of organizations, appears to be focused, driven, and well-funded.

So perhaps the cynics will be wrong this time. We'll know for sure if *The Economist* ever publishes an article titled "Beauty and the Blob." — Leo Linbeck III

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"Signage puke": The new coalition opposes it.