HOUSTON ALEPH
An Exhibit of Paul Hester’s Photographs Evokes the Eternal Present

By Harbeer Sandhu

Paul Hester’s retrospective “Doing Time in Houston 1966–2011” at Architecture Center Houston—culled from his extensive archive documenting Houston’s architecture through all its transitions over the past 45 years—invites the viewer to contemplate all that has ever stood on this viscid alluvium we call home. Row houses razed to make room for rows of gated townhomes; first ring suburbs moved down to clear space for skyscrapers. Here, a saddlery turned ballet parking lot; there, a seafood market turned newspaper headquarters. Even the buildings left standing have been stripped or fused or cloaked in marble panels.

And at the center of our Ephemeral City is Market Square, which Hester has been researching and documenting since at least the 1980s. Aside from the produce stands it was named for, Market Square has been home to the Republic of Texas capital and three Houston city halls—the last city hall located there was repurposed and used as a bus depot for twenty years—before its first iteration as a public park in 1976. Hester’s documentation of Market Square calls to mind a passage from Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities:

“[T]he traveler is invited to visit the city and, at the same time, to examine some old post cards that show it as it used to be: the same identical square where, under the banner “Wrinkles in Time,” Hester has layered images in photo mash-ups of singular points in space taken from different moments in time. This digital layering is a continuous manifestation of such juxtapositions as those on his Market Square tiles dating back to 1990, two of which are displayed here.

He shows us a black and white ghost of the Shamrock Hotel towering over the parking lots that replaced it, rendered in color. We see the before and after photographs of the “Indeterminate Façade” Best Products Showroom, which was altered in 2003 to lop off the “crumbling” features that once made it singular. We see the Wilson Furniture showroom beneath Magic Island, an Art Deco Walgreen’s on Main at Elgin with the light rail going past, and the original location of the Menil Collection beside the Rice Media Center. We see St. Agnes Academy on Fannin at Isabella where a monstrous three-story apartment block now sits.

For some viewers, the bulk of these photographs may engender a sense of loss—the loss of bygone aesthetic styles and respect for history in favor of cheap, mass-produced, prefabricated dreck. For those viewers, one photograph in particular might provide a fleeting sense of just desserts: it shows a townhome, abandoned before its construction was even complete, wrapped in tattered Tyvek. The only part of this shell-of-a-townhome that retains its integrity is the strip of glossy advertisement that shows what it was supposed to have looked like, and according to Hester, that never-built building, too, was torn down

Individuals, Hester’s photographs reveal that, in the words of poet A.R. Ammons, “we are rippers and tearers and proceeders,” yet, taken cumulatively in this temporary, scaled-down version of a Houston Aleph, they capture “the stillness all the motions add.

The Aleph, thus, becomes a fitting metaphor for this collection of photographs, this retrospective, this looking back which spans 45 years yet may conceivably be viewed within five minutes. The 68 photos are grouped together by decade, but the cumulative effect of the whole exhibition subverts the very notion that such temporal groupings are of any account. Change is the only constant: motion, captured, and fixed on light-sensitive paper for decades.

You might say that each photograph is a timeless document with the “eternal present” as its true subject (except, of course, those showing indoor ashtrays and dated clothing styles), but it is the photographs of construction and demolition sites that retain the most currency.

The high contrast night-time shot of a demolition downtown in the 1980s section looks very much like it could be a depiction of the YMCA demolition just a few short weeks ago. Nearby, the gray rendering of the excavation of the Wesleyan Tower foundation (also from the 1980s), if framed just right, could be a shot of the excavation currently underway along Brays Bayou near Highway 288.

The multiplicity and simultaneity implied by the juxtaposition of these fleeting moments becomes most apparent in the final grouping where, under the banner “Wrinkles in Time,” Hester has layered images in photo mash-ups of singular points in space taken from different moments in time. This digital layering is a continuation of such juxtapositions as those on his Market Square tiles dating back to 1990, two of which are displayed here.

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A photo from Hester’s exhibit shows the ghost of the Shamrock Hotel.

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Paul Hester, PAUL HESTER’S RETROSPECTIVE “DOING TIME IN HOUSTON 1966–2011” was presented at Architecture Center Houston in fall 2012.