

## William F. Stern, FAIA (1947-2013)

BY BARRIE SCARDINO BRADLEY



**BILL STERN ARRIVED IN HOUSTON IN 1976 AT THE AGE of 29 with a Harvard education and a relative sophistication developed through his voracious reading, keen interest in art, and wide travels. As Herman Dyal described him: “He was all Harris tweed, bow ties, and Harvard polish.” His mother, Mary Stern, told me that he moved to Houston reluctantly, leaving New York for a promising job with S. I. Morris. She also said he embraced his new city with an intensity his family had not expected. His architectural legacy is well known, but Bill’s commitment to his adopted city went far beyond his professional life. Bill made friends easily and became an active contributor to professional and civic affairs of the city.**

The fledgling Rice Design Alliance was custom-made for Bill’s interests and activism. He quickly became a leader in RDA as it began its journey to bring a vitally needed urban dialogue to Houston. For decades he supported RDA and served in many roles including President (1983-84) and Vice President (1988). But

it was through *Cite* that Bill exerted the most influence. He hosted the initial organizational meeting in 1982 at his Barnstone-designed apartment, and for the next 30 years *Cite* was a major part of his life. In 1994 Bill received the John G. Flowers Award for Excellence in Architectural Journalism from the Texas Society of Architects for his work with *Cite*, and in 2013 he was recognized by the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

Of the early *Cite* meetings, Bruce Webb recalls, “the more we talked about Houston, the more interesting it became.” I remember the excitement of the arguments that often found Bill and Bruce, who became best friends, on opposite sides of any given question. Bill was obstinate, often obstreperous, always unyielding. He had the ability to move on but never sell out. There was so much to think about, talk about, write about, and Bill’s energy and passion provided a creative tension that somehow always brought out the best. *Cite* went on to attract and develop some of the best architectural writers and critics in the state, and dozens of talented and dedicated people have served on the editorial committee, but for many years Bill was the ringleader of the *Cite* circus.

*Cite’s* key concerns were often Bill’s issues: urban planning, preservation, transportation, architecture, and design. He was a serious art collector and an astute critic of art and architecture, and he wrote building and exhibition reviews that revealed a crisp and sometimes controversial point of view. He also introduced Houstonians to ideas and places that they might not have otherwise known, such as in “Donald Judd, The Project at Marfa” (*Cite* 20, 1988). The first feature Bill contributed to *Cite* was “The Lure of the Bungalow” (*Cite* 16, 1986), which gave special credibility to a building type prolific in Houston but often overlooked. After the article many of his friends called him “Bungalow Bill,” a moniker he met with a smile. Bill had a ready sense of humor and laughed easily, qualities that often saved him from himself.

For the fifth anniversary issue of *Cite* Bill wrote an essay “*Cite* at 5” (*Cite* 18, 1987). Here he noted that *Cite* discussions were marked by optimism about Houston and its future. Bill was a pragmatic optimist who believed that public discourse could make a difference, and through *Cite* that discourse took form and has, as Bruce has noted, become an ad hoc history of Houston. I would go farther to say that *Cite* has not just chronicled Houston’s history but affected it. Bill’s part in guiding the vision, content, and rigor with which *Cite* articles were written was considerable. He influenced all aspects of *Cite* from subjects (he championed theme issues), writers, photographs, and graphic design. And he was proud to have been a co-author of *Ephemeral City: Cite Looks at Houston* (UT Press, 2003).

Bill grew up in Cincinnati in a modern house that he loved. In “Post-War Years Remembered” (*Cite* 40, 1997), he was one of the first Houstonians to call for preservation of mid-twentieth-century modern buildings. When Houston Mod was founded in 2004, Bill became one of the group’s first Mod Masters. As deep as Bill’s involvement was in RDA and *Cite*, he found energy to teach and serve other Houston organizations. He was a board member of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and the Menil Collection. He first taught at Rice School of Architecture with Rick Keating, his boss at Skidmore Owings and Merrill where Bill worked for three years before founding his own firm, now Stern and Bucek Architects. Then, for almost 30 years, he led studios and taught architectural history at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, University of Houston.

Bill Stern’s devotion to Houston and its art and architecture was most effectively exhibited in *Cite*. For three decades his commitment was absolute. For his incredible leadership I don’t believe he was ever adequately thanked. Perhaps that was impossible. In “*Cite* at 5” he wrote, “I hope that *Cite* will always be a place of youthful idealism and that its vitality will never stagnate.” *Cite* goes on even without Bill, who never stagnated or lost his youthful idealism. Bill is gone, but *Cite* continues with the integrity, vitality, and idealism he hoped it would. Thank you, Bill.