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When does the camera show a place? The answer might seem to be: whenever we've pointed it at one. In the real world, "place" suggests some special qualities, perhaps a relationship between buildings, and a relatively unchanging character. If we go back to a place we once knew and it has not changed, it's still the same place.

But in photographs what gives a sense of place is a reference to change (and sometimes to loss) and to time passing. Take a photograph that does not give that sense of change, and the subject of the picture will be seen as simply design, not place. Evidence of the passage of time, time that may be seen as carrying the place with it or leaving it in its wake, will be accompanied by an inevitably more disinterested view of structures. The place, not the success of the design of its components, will have become the point.

Though photography is not as much the architect's medium as pencil or pen-and-ink once were, there is a belief in the architectural world that a symbiotic relationship exists between the two media (and a confidence that one can judge a work of architecture from a photograph). In a standard architectural photograph, a photographer speaks on an architect's behalf, taking the pictures the latter would take if he were as skilled at using a camera as wielding a pencil (or computer mouse), and could say in photographs how his buildings were well designed and a gain to the community. Showing that is the occupation of the architectural photographer.

One of the other long-time occupations of American photographers has been describing their country and its parts as places. In this, there has been a tension, not between place and design, but between two approaches to describing America. One is based on a cross-country drive and was especially in evidence in the years after the World War II (one thinks of Robert Frank's book *The Americans*). The other concentrates on a locale as especially significant and characteristic of a region (or of the entire country). It is not uncommon for a photographer to shift from one approach to the other: thus, Berenice Abbott, who began her work in America with *Changing New York*, ended with a project to photograph Route One.

Neither approach has held much attraction for professional architectural photographers. In this respect, Timothy Hursley, whose photographs appear in this issue, is an anomaly: over the years, partly by chance and partly by choice, he has gone out of his way to photograph sets of buildings as places rather than simply designs.

Based in Arkansas, Hursley often has long distances to drive to jobs. With an eye open for photographs other than those he has been commissioned to make, he often takes back roads rather than highways. Generally, he finds such

drives interesting, but aimless. "Zeroing in on a subject," he says, "is far more productive." In this regard, commissioned work in the 1990s took him repeatedly to the Rural Studio in Alabama; and over a longer period, it took him to within driving distance of Nye County, Nevada. Two projects developed from these places — one emphasizing signs of adaptation with use, the other showing changes over time.

The first of these projects grew out of a magazine assignment to photograph completed work at Samuel Mockbee's Rural Studio, the extension of Auburn University which has won worldwide attention for its students' efforts to design and build houses and other structures for the poor of Hale County, Alabama. Hursley's work here eventually continued as an assignment to illustrate a book on the studio, published by Princeton Architectural Press. Simultaneously, and continuing into the present, he made a point of photographing, in pictures not shown in the book, the houses that client families inhabited before they moved into their new structures. Eventually, Hursley also found himself rephotographing the Rural Studio buildings as they changed with use, and he continued this work even after publication of the book (indeed, only two of the pictures reproduced here appeared in it).

Hursley initially worked on the pictures in the second project from 1985 to 1990. With a book contract, he recently resumed work on them. They show the rebuilding of brothels in Nye County as a reflection of business decisions and changes in fashion. During the late 1980s these buildings were modest motel-like structures, but today they have been transformed into something closer to convention centers — an occasional tree providing the only sense of continuity.

Recently, I accompanied Tim to Hale County, Alabama, where he talked about his work both there and in Nye County. The pictures which we publish here are from these two projects. Separate photo essays, they describe two communities in particular counties in different states. One tells of rural poverty; the other of a business that is legal in Nevada, but (as gambling used to be) illegal in the other 49 states.

—Cervin Robinson



Bryant (Hay Bale) House, Mason's Bend, 1994.





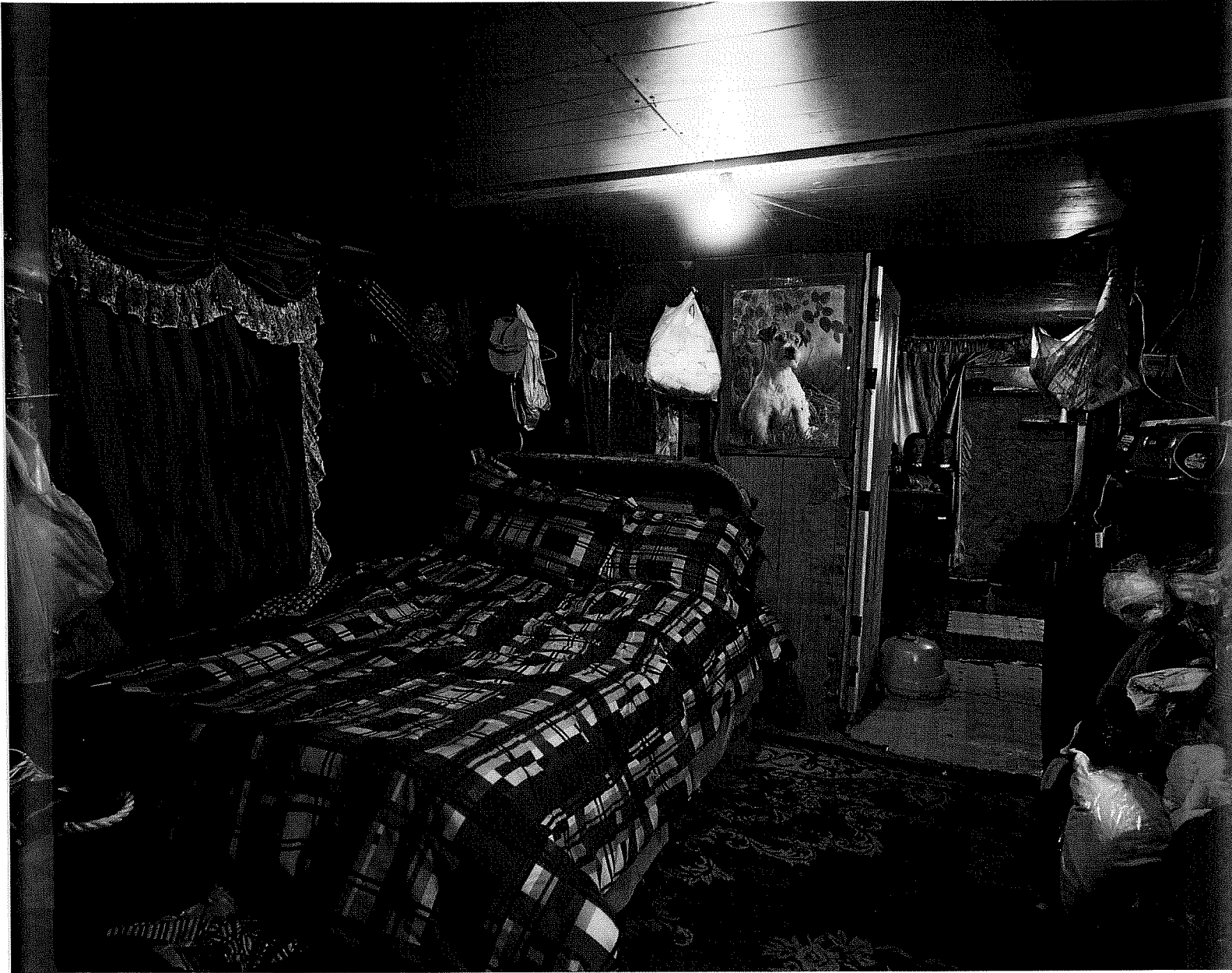
Opposite top: Living room, Bryant (Hay Bale) House, Mason's Bend, 1994.

Opposite bottom: Shephard and Alberta Bryant and a granddaughter in their living room, Hay Bale House, 2002.

Above: Bedroom, Bryant (Hay Bale) House, Mason's Bend, 2000



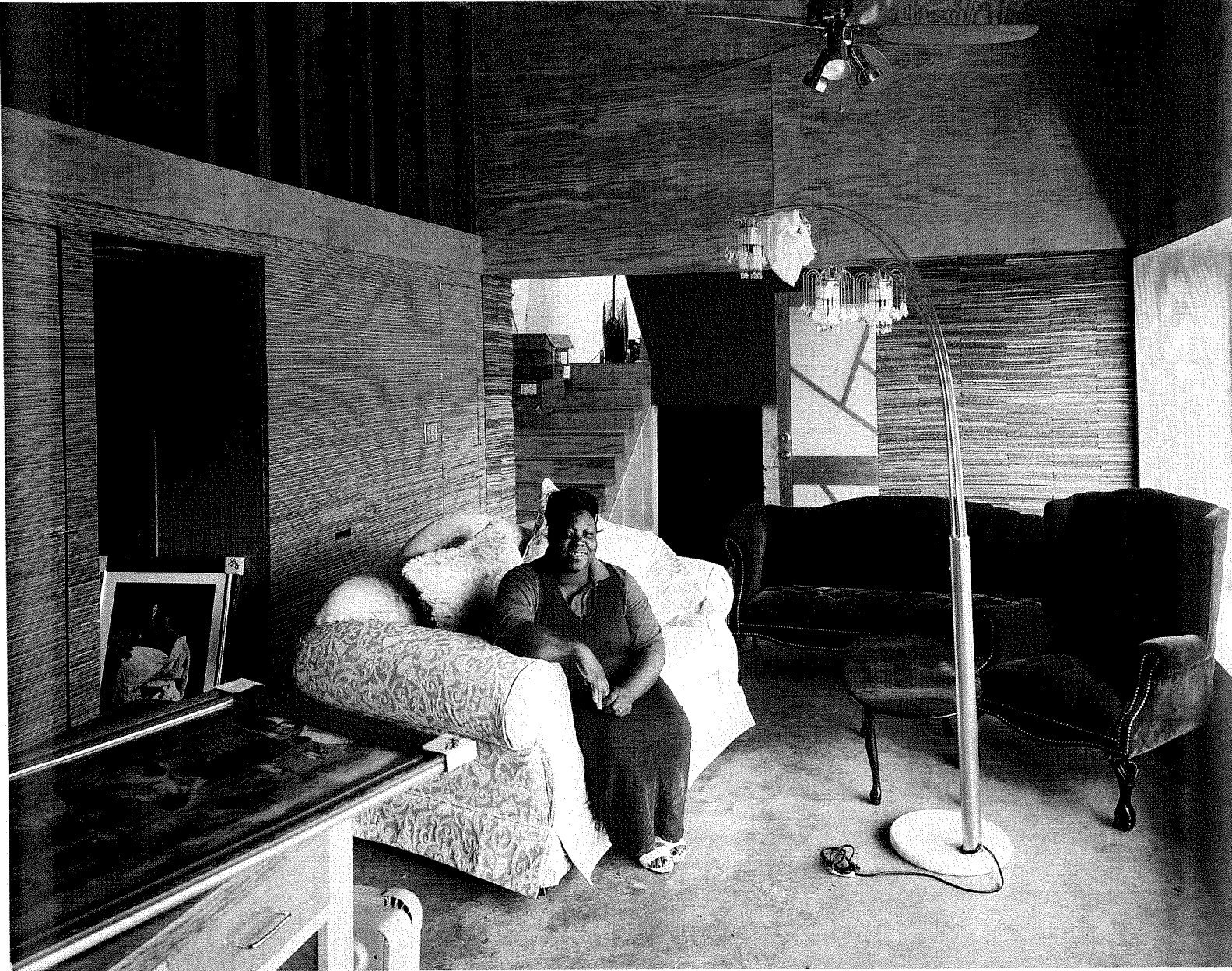
Lucy Harris's old house, Mason's Bend, 2001.



Lucy Harris's old house, Mason's Bend, 2001.



Lucy's (Carpet) House, Mason's Bend, 2002.



Lucy Harris in her Carpet House, Mason's Bend, 2002.

H: *Architectural Record* commissioned my first work at the Rural Studio. But I had already worked with Sam Mockbee on at least two other projects, houses for private clients. At the Rural Studio the first house I did was the Hay Bale House. The building was just finished but they were well moved into it. Right away it was evident that we should involve the people [who lived in the house], and that was the way I photographed it; there wasn't really any prodding from Mockbee.

R: Did he have any suggestions?

H: He had already worked with me in the past, and he had never been one to suggest. Actually, he did make a suggestion last year, that I photograph the Newbern Baseball Club without people as well [as with them]. He wanted to get some photographs of its sculptural quality. As I arrived in town Sunday for a game and shot the game, the place was trashed with some five hundred people showing up, so I told Sam, we can shoot it tomorrow morning, but you have to come up with someone to clean the field, and I heard that he and Jay Sanders and another student cleaned the field that night so I could shoot it empty the next morning.

The first three visits to the Rural Studio as I remember were assigned. The second year I came and photographed the "Tire Chapel," and that was a magazine assignment, and in 1997 the Butterfly House. So after those first three projects and a number of portraits that I did of Sambo and the students, we began to publish these photographs as a group. And then Sam was sick. He was out and he didn't come back to the studio for about a year and a half. When he came back he phoned me up that he was at the Rural Studio — and this must have been about two years later — and at that point I went on my own to see the new work that had been developed —

the student "Pods" [cottages for second-year students], the Hero Children's Center, and the Goat House. I just shot those on my own.

R: When did you start rephotographing buildings?

H: In late 2000 I went back to shoot the Mason's Bend Community Center and was blown away by it. That was the third structure at Mason's Bend. *Architectural Record* asked me if they could be the first to run those photographs, but I was on my way to take them anyway. And that's when I noticed the changes. It had been three years since I'd photographed the Butterfly [Harris] house, and I hadn't been back to the Hay Bale [Bryant] house in about six years. Right away when I drove in I saw the Butterfly House had not only changed in color and looked weathered but all the vegetation had grown up around it, and I was shocked by that. But I hadn't started photographing Harris's place yet because I was starting at the Community Center.

And then I had either run into some bad weather or such, or I had done what I could with the light that I had, and I went over to the Hay Bale house. I went in there and it was apparent to me that I should do new pictures. I started doing portraits of the Bryants, I started photographing the changes. When I'd started doing the first Rural Studio pictures, well, there just weren't that many interior opportunities, or so I thought. But later at Hay Bale I was interested in the bedroom . . . the couple's bedroom. I guess it had to do in part with, you know, the people becoming more important than the architecture. I think everybody at the Rural Studio at that point knew what I was doing out there and agreed with that approach. That's why the focus changed.

So that was the end of a two- or three-day trip. I went back home, but

I had reason to come back again, I still wasn't satisfied with what I had on the Community Center. I came back about a week and a half later, and Mr. Harris of the Butterfly House had chopped down all his vegetation! It was fall and he had chopped it all down, and I hadn't photographed it, all the growth that was around his house! So that was always in the back of my mind, that I needed to keep a watch on Harris's house. So by the time I came back after this trip I had already begun taking new photographs, I had already done shots inside the Harris's house. I was really enthusiastic about returning to these particular two houses. And then I signed on a contract with the Princeton Architectural Press, so we had a book going.

R: You talk about the balance between design and use . . .

H: I'm very interested in what the students have done, but what interests me even more is to include the people and their belongings. I'm interested in the home now and the architecture has melted away.

R: Today you asked a child to ride his bike into a picture.

H: Right, I wasn't going to wait any longer so I guess I was looking there and I said wow, there's just more information if I have the child in there. And so I had to say to myself, do I shoot this, I've got as much context as I possibly can, I've got the old car, the road, and the trailer, but the kid's standing next to us, and I go, well, I'd like you in it too.

R: You have a reputation for including people in pictures when other photographers might not.

H: Well, I think that when I'm doing public spaces people are really important unless maybe the composition is very good and the light is, say, the main thing. It seems to me that there would be situations where you're

totally missing the assignment if you don't capture the people. It may not matter so much to architects; they'd be interested in their design first. But if you decided you would introduce people, you know they would leave it up to you. An architect may suggest you take a school at a certain time because there won't be any people around because they're on vacation. I would think that was a bad idea; I'd rather have the option to work while school was going on.

R: Do you include people because they explain the architecture in some way?

H: Well, I guess you might make a faster read of a space if you saw some people in it. But, you know, they help date the photograph. I guess I've come to like other photographs that are dated. The dress style, hair style, furniture can do that. They show economic status too.

In the year 2001 I might have made four or five more trips, and every trip I was back out at Mason's Bend getting photographs of those two houses mostly.

R: What was Mockbee's response to your photographing the changes?

H: Well, he did have a comment once. He was looking at the photographs I was doing, because I showed them to him as I worked. When he was here, we would get together at the end of the day and I would hand over all my Polaroids, so he knew what I was developing. Seeing the changes, he said "Boy, this makes the early photographs look a bit vanilla." So, he was enjoying it.

R: In your view, what do the Alabama and Nevada photographs have in common? How do you see the two sets as making a pair?

H: Well, when I first saw the Nevada buildings I'd been photographing too many residences where the pictures were about the architect or interior

designer not about the people in a house. Maybe the architect hadn't chosen the furniture and said: let's do it before they move any furniture in . . . There were too many buildings designed less for use than to say something about the designer. In Nevada it was my editorial instincts that took me to Nye County, where the buildings turned out to have a less finished and packaged quality, and I liked that. That's also the thing I've liked about the buildings at Mason's Bend. I had the same sensibility in doing the Nevada photographs back in the 80s as I do taking the Rural Studio interiors today.

R: You expect to have a book of your Nevada pictures published. How did that project come about?

H: I was working on assignment at the new airport and heard while I was out there that brothels existed in Nye County. I was shooting for *House and Garden* at the time and my instincts said get on out there, and as soon as I saw it I thought, wow, this would make . . . Well, we went out to the Chicken Ranch and that was all gated and I got refused there, but next door there was a new building setting up, and the manager liked the idea of having anybody interested, because basically he needed the exposure. He let me in, so I showed him my photographs in *House and Garden* — I was carrying the magazine — and they let me in. And right away I started doing the interiors. There weren't any women in the photographs. I actually returned there and saw the place grow. Eventually when I told the owner of the Chicken Ranch that I was out to photograph the architecture of the brothels he went along with it.

R: How many did you photograph in the late 80s?

H: I think I've been in and out of near twenty or so. Some were abandoned.

I had a guidebook that didn't have any photographs, but it showed where they were. I think you can still buy it. We wrote letters and phoned them that we were coming.

R: You had a picture of a very big room with sofas on the sides . . .

H: That was the Mustang Ranch, where there is a big bar and a big room. I think when they actually have a customer, the women available come up and stand in a line, they do a line up.

R: You're going back now. How many years since you've been there?

H: It's been twelve years.

R: The Rural Studio buildings change with use. How have the Nye County buildings changed?

H: Well, there have been changes. The Chicken ranch has gone from a penitentiary look to a Victorian one. They've softened their image.

Sherry's has gone from what was a pair of trailers to attempting to be a resort. They're talking about adding a golf course now, and they seem to be the talk of the industry. There were always some abandoned buildings, and there still are. It's still the same place.

R: Do you think your work in Alabama and Nevada will have an effect on your commissioned work for architects?

H: I was just thinking back, the answer is yes for Alabama: I was shooting a Herman Miller interior in Atlanta, and the architect said, he actually asked me to "go and shoot some of those interiors for us like you did such a beautiful job at the Rural Studio." My clients were asking for it. Which is great. It frees you up.

Overleaf top left: Chicken Ranch, exterior, 1986.

Overleaf bottom left: Chicken Ranch, exterior, 2002.

Overleaf top right: Sheri's Ranch, exterior, 1987.

Overleaf bottom right: Sheri's Ranch, exterior, 2002.







Sheri's Ranch, interior, 2002.

