The Places Between Events: "Architectural Interest" and the Shifting Cultural Definition of America in Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places*

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It does not matter what one first notices in Stephen Shore's photograph of Kalispell, Montana (Figure 1), whether it is the bank, the light poles or the cracked pavement, because the image does not have a central subject; each detail, no matter how large or small, demands nearly equal attention. Beyond any individual observation, the viewer will notice how close to reality this photograph appears: it was properly exposed, its color is balanced, the sharp focus extends deep into the background, and its perspective is from eyelevel. The buildings, parking meters, sidewalks, and other urban forms are precisely structured to create complex visual relationships between the objects in the image. The overall scene is in no way exceptional—really, it is not even a scene at all, because that would imply that this location is in some way significant. Rather, this photograph is simply a view of an everyday place: a place between events.

Shore included the Kalispell photograph in his 1982 monograph *Uncommon Places* as one of forty-nine photographs taken on a series of road trips across North America. Critics and art historians have praised Shore's precise formalism and conceptual influences, but the content of this series has been relegated to a minor role in the scholarship. Shore deserves recognition for constructing a definition of America in line with the illustrious tradition begun by Walker Evans' 1938 *American Photographs* and Robert Frank's 1958 *The Americans*. If the road trip and the book format established by these works can be viewed as the parameters for photographically defining America, *Uncommon Places* fits into this tradition as an appropriate iteration for the 1970s by photographing the vernacular built environment. The combined effect of his thought process and his technical approach eliminate the photographer's visual interpretation of the content and when applied to the subject of the built environment, the concept of "architectural interest" provides a key to understanding architecture as cultural indicator. Evans photographed America through social observation and Frank furthered this vision through symbolism and identity, but Shore's dispassionate photographs of the built landscape construct his definition. Each image contributes a piece of significance—a limited piece, due to a lack of grandeur, symbolism, and narrative events—that accumulates importance only through the cumulative experience of the series. Shore's photographs of the built environment serve as an indicator of cultural forces and thus define America as the deliberate awareness of the places between events.

Walker Evans and Robert Frank established the tradition of photographically defining America in their series *American Photographs* (1938) and *The Americans* (1958), respectively. The relationship of these works has been well established and written about at length demonstrating that the two are worthy objects of comparison because each create a definition of America appropriate to its era created through the road trip and use the book format to communicate this end.[1] Evans defined America through social observation; he photographed plainly, but with the intent to present gritty, depressed, unseen places (Figure 2). Frank's emotional and provocative images defined America by employing mainstream objects, like the flag, to become symbols of the American identity (Figure 3). New York Times critic Philip Gefter stated, "If Walker Evans and Robert Frank established an 'on the road' tradition in photography, then Stephen Shore ranks among their natural heirs."[2] Gefter suggested the connection between these artists, but he did not elaborate on how Shore's series builds on this tradition.

"Architectural interest" is the key to understanding

Stephen Shore's role in this tradition by demonstrating how the built environment communicates cultural forces and thus defines America. In 1997 Shore wrote:

> For artists of different times, intentions and inclinations, the idea of 'architectural interest' has held a variety of meanings. Since the very beginnings of the medium, photographers have recorded buildings that were considered in some way architecturally special. This might have meant monuments of the ancient world, significant examples of fine architectural tradition, or architecture in exotic locales. At the same time, dating also from the early days of photography, there was a different, more topographic photographic approach to architecture. In this tradition, the built environment was photographed as a record of what a place looked like. Underlying this was the understanding of architecture as a visible face of forces shaping a culture.[3]

Shore was not discussing his own works, but it is useful to consider *Uncommon Places* in this way because it demonstrates that the appearance of the built environment has a direct connection to cultural definition. The nonjudgmental, balanced look of the photographs allow the viewer to engage with the built objects that occupy the frame and allow them to visually convey these forces. To the viewer the individual houses, intersections, parking lots, drive-ins, and other places Shore photographs are entirely meaningless in the Panofskian sense. The objects do not hold any specific or symbolic meaning, but "architectural interest" allows the viewer to extrapolate significance through the appearance of the buildings that occupy the frame and the overall effect of these images is a specific vision of America. Shore used a highly precise 8x10 camera and color film to ensure the photographs did not convey a subjective interpretation of the content.

Shore's conceptual foundation involved a contemporary understanding of the relationship of the individual image to the whole series, and consequently tension between form and content emerged. This thought process allowed Shore to formally arrange the objects within the frame to establish spatial relationships and create a balanced structure throughout the picture without compromising the integrity of content-based meaning. Besides this focus on arrangement, he created nearly meaningless individual photographs that do not interpret the content, or change how the content is understood based on how it was photographed, for the viewer in any way. The images are simple, structured views of the ubiquitous everyday American landscape that possess no significance for the average viewer. Shore did not have a master plan for the series; it was an organic artistic process, one that involved awareness and even pleasure: "A picture happens when something inside connects, an experience that changes as the photographer does. When the picture is there, I set out the 8 x 10 camera, walk around it, get behind it, put the hood over my head, perhaps move it over a foot, walk in front, fiddle with the lens, the aperture, the shutter speed. I enjoy the camera."[4] Any individual image is created as an independent study in Shore's abilities to create a well balanced, highly aligned photograph.

Shore began to think differently about photography after viewing Ed Ruscha's 1966 book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* because, as he later commented, it "marked a radical departure from the conventional uses of photography."[5] Ruscha, primarily known as a painter, occasionally experimented with photography, and created

several books of collections of buildings in or around Los Angeles. Alexandra Schwartz described *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* as "a near-literal record of exactly what the title promises: every single building—including cross-streets, trees, and passing traffic—on the strip…Together, they make up a strange series of specimens, laid out for display."[6] Rather than attempt to filter the subject, Ruscha presented the buildings as they appeared directly to the eye. This book instantly provided Shore with a new photographic agenda and a counterbalance to the documentary nature of Evans' *American Photographs*.[7] Now Shore began working with photography in terms of its technical and analytical abilities rather than the poetic sensibilities and stigma of social change that had dominated the medium to that point and thus began to create series where form superseded compositional precision.[8]

American Surfaces was the most significant of his conceptual series prior to *Uncommon Places* because it challenged the significance of traditional photography by introducing the snapshot into the fine art realm. Rather than photograph landmarks and friends and family members, like typical snapshots, his stated intent was, "to keep a kind of visual diary of the trip—to record every person I met, and every meal, and every bed."[9] Shot in 1972 with a 35mm Rollei and developed by a Kodak lab, the pictures are blurry, unaligned, and depict the many normal—yet somewhat odd—events, people, places, and objects that Shore experienced on this trip. In many ways the series is biographical, but it serves a greater conceptual end by challenging the emotive documentary qualities of Evans' work and whole heartedly accepting the intrinsic formal qualities of the 35mm camera—its imprecise compositions, unbalanced colors, and momentary haphazardness.

John Coplans' *Serial Imagery*, a book published in 1968, also directly influenced Shore's thought regarding the relationship of the individual photograph to the whole series. Coplans strictly defined serial imagery as "a type of repeated form or structure shared equally by each work in a group of related works made by one artist."[10] The book specifically dealt with painting, but Shore adapted its ideas to photography for both *American Surfaces* and *Uncommon Places*. The idea of serial imagery allowed Shore to create a photograph devoid of meaning or significance with the full assurance that its role in a series would allow it to possess some value through its participation in the whole. Exhibited in grids of hundreds of 3 x 5 prints in its original gallery setting, *American Surfaces* was an appropriate first attempt at constructing a definition of America because it allowed Shore to understand the ability of the series to convey a particular meaning as well as experience photographing on the road. John Szarkowski's commentary on *American Surfaces*, as he recounted in a 1979 article, profoundly affected Shore's thought process and technique, "We went through the pictures together and he said whatever came to his mind. He 'oohed' and 'aahed' at a number of pictures…Then at one point he asked, 'How accurate is your viewfinder?' This remark got me started on what I've been doing ever since. I understood that what he was asking me amounted to: 'How carefully are you framing your photographs?'"[11] Although *American Surfaces* raised important formal questions, Shore began to resurrect the role of content in his work by using a large format camera in response to Szarkowski's question.

Serial Imagery helped Shore to understand that a series of images can construct a meaning without the individual images possessing tremendous importance beyond their form or structure. Indeed, Shore's photographs deal with everyday objects and places presented as naturally and

as balanced as the equipment would allow, forcing the individual photograph to become simply a basic record of the visible world. Coplans' definition of serial imagery allows this meaningless visual document to construct a meaning when placed in relation to other similar works. In a essay accompanying the second edition of *Uncommon Places*, Stephen Schmidt Wulfen wrote, "Understood in this way, the serial principle not only changes the traditional concept of the autonomous work of art; each individual photo loses its aura and content, becoming an indexical element that makes sense only in relation to its neighbor."[12] Shore composed and structured the individual photograph with an eye towards form understanding the final series of images would effectively communicate cultural meaning, rather than any one image. Countering the Henri Cartier-Bresson "decision moment," Shore created a "suspended" moment that retained the same significance that Cartier-Bresson and Frank achieved in the individual picture.[13]

In contrast, Robert Frank's conscious display of specific common objects as symbols, like the flag and jukebox, make the individual photograph an independently meaningful artistic work (Figure 3). For Frank, meaning was attributed directly in the work through the specific archetypal objects, people, and events depicted. Tod Papageorge wrote about Frank, "All events, in fact – the rodeo, the Fourth of July picnic, Yom Kippur, the graduation, the charity ball, the highway death, the funeral – serve only as reasons to gather and for Frank to condense us into a symbol."[14] Shore, on the other hand, uses the individual photograph to study form, not content. While they both use the whole of the series to communicate his vision of America, each of Frank's individual photographs possess definitive meaning, whereas Shore's do not. Even the individual photographs of Evans' *American Photographs* with their frontal, direct perspectives and visual clarity convey meaning. Douglas Nickel wrote that any photograph in Evans' series, "has an excess of potential meaning…[it] is a book of photographs presented as autonomous images, where the necessary repression of those meanings exceeding the book's intentions is effected only through the picture's placement in a sequence of similarly presented photographs."[15] The role of the series is important for both Frank and Evans, but the individual photograph also functions as a communicator of artistic meaning unto itself. Conversely, the formalism of Shore's thought process and the realism of his technique cause his images to be devoid of meaning and can only communicate his definition of America as a series.

Where Shore's theoretical approach sought to understand the relationship of structure and meaning between the individual photograph and the series, his technical approach contributed to the balanced, natural look of his photographs by eliminating the visual artistic influence. Visual artistic influence refers to a photographer's deliberate technical decisions to create an interpretation of reality. Some typical decisions a photographer makes are whether to make color or black and white prints; what type of camera to use; how much grain should appear in the prints; how deep or shallow the field of vision should appear; how short or long the exposure should be made; and the length of the lens. The effects of these decisions create a specific interpretation of the subject within the frame of the photograph. Stephen Shore deliberately chose the combination of these elements most closely mimicked reality as possible, which eliminated his judgment upon the subject matter, ultimately allowing the built environment to indicate cultural forces.

The most fundamental difference between *Uncommon*

Places and previous fine art photography series is color, which asserted a new nonjudgmental realism in the medium. Kevin Moore asserts, "[Robert] Frank's proclamation that black and white represented 'the alternatives of hope and despair' revealed a telling assumption: monochromatic photography held inherent social purpose."[16] Prior to the 1970s photographers embraced this aspect of the medium and proclaimed its supremacy over color. A dispassionate, nonjudgmental photograph was impossible as long as photographers continued to use black and white because its very creation held meaning. By the 1970s a wave of young artists with an interest in the "everyday" began using color photography to fit these ends. At the fore, William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, as well as Joel Sternfeld, and many others experimented with color photography in the 1970s while using everyday objects as subject matter. Shore had already exhibited *American Surfaces* in 1972, but color finally broke through in 1976 when the Museum of Modern Art exhibited a selection of William Eggleston's photographs. It met heavy criticism especially after photography curator John Szarkowski's strong claims in favor of the photographs, but the trend continued to gain traction amongst this group of artists.[17] Color allowed Shore to photograph dispassionately, removing the "inherent social purpose" from the photographs, especially with an eye towards his formal interests. Color photographer Joel Sternfeld claimed, "We have never seen the world in black and white except in photographs or in film. To encounter a black and white photograph is to encounter something instantly abstract."[18] Shore wanted to recreate what the human actually saw in reality and thus naturally chose to work in color. His images are balanced in color, not over or under saturated, and capture the subtlety and nuance of light in its fullest, most natural state.

Walker Evans' images from *American Photographs* resemble those from *Uncommon Places* in the precise structure and emphasis on the built environment, but where Shore uses these elements conceptually; Evans uses them socially, most readily demonstrated by his use of black and white (Figure 2). In an essay appearing in the original edition, Lincoln Kirstein advocates for the book to be viewed as a series where sequence and the deliberate selection of photographs are significant artistic statements, principles that were not readily accepted in the 1930s. "Looked at in sequence they are overwhelming in their exhaustiveness of detail, their poetry of contrast, and, for those who wish to see it, their moral implication," he added, further supporting the social intention of the series.[19] The absence of color in Evans' work is the most significant visual indicator of social intention, especially in relation to Shore's vivid color pictures. Despite the number of details in Evans' work, the abstract qualities of black and white imbue his photographs with a social or moral purpose.

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One can properly acknowledge and discuss Shore's definition of America after understanding how he communicated this idea through an accumulation of meaning of the entirety of the series. Influential Postmodern architect Robert Venturi wrote an essay that appeared on the book jacket of *Uncommon Places*, stating:

> Stephen Shore captures the essence of the American landscape by framing particular, ordinary elements so that they reveal the universal and extraordinary. The viewpoint of his camera is never special, it is that of our own absent-minded eyes as we wander through familiar places doing ordinary things—waiting for a bus or driving on an errand. In Shore's photographs

> we discover the mislaid images that we ignored because of their very familiarity or rejected because of their banality…In Shore's art we confront what we usually do not notice, streets and facades at once well known and remote, half-remembered and half-forgotten.[20]

Venturi thus described Shore's definition of America: one where the ubiquitous corporate gas station, the cracked pavement of a downtown intersection, and suburban ranch form average everyday sights. The constant use and presence of these places in our lives normalize them in the American consciousness, which in one sense causes numbness to them, but it also reflects their tremendous functional and aesthetic importance. In an interview with Lynne Tillman, Shore said, "what architecture does is it shows in a form accessible to photography certain cultural influences."[21] Shore's technical approach to photograph as realistically as possible allows the place to illustrate these forces without his artistic interference; he simply frames the structures and objects within the frame. The raw, dispassionate attention paid to the generic, ubiquitous built landscape in *Uncommon Places* constructs his definition of America.

The transparency created by Shore's compositional balance and precise technical approach allows the buildings to be set out for display rather than filtered through a secondary artistic tone. The choices Shore made in photographing specific buildings describe the American cultural forces of the 1970s and through the appearance of the buildings in Shore's photographs—its style, its color, its degree of maintenance, and function—one can begin to understand this culture. The viewer gains a small amount of information from each picture in the series and by digesting the entire forty-nine plates, one can construct a definition of America from the appearance of the architecture.

Structure and form dictated the creation of each individual image, but as a series Shore made deliberate choices to include almost exclusively photographs of the built environment. The 1982 production of *Uncommon Places* forced Shore to reduce the hundreds, possibly thousands of exposures he made throughout the ten years he photographed the series, down to forty-nine that would ultimately be included in the book. This reduction process is essential to understanding Shore's definition of America because the majority of the images he included represent the built environment rather than portraits, interiors, or meals. The expanded second edition of *Uncommon Places* published in 2004 added one hundred plates to the series and includes these other types of subjects more than the first edition. Rather than demonstrate Shore's desire to diversify the series, this difference reflects Shore's deliberate choice to focus solely on the built environment in the 1982 edition. Rather than portraits or food, he included pictures of architecture because he recognized how these particular photographs communicated the cultural tendencies of the 1970s.

The road plays a significant role in these photographs because the vastness of the continent combined with American individualism make automobile travel an essential part of life outside of the city. Shore's photograph of La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles perhaps best reflects the car culture of the 1970s (Figure 4). The road, like architecture, is a human construction and perhaps the most significant element of the built environment in *Uncommon Places* because, as this photograph depicts, it changed the land, decided where new businesses would be erected and even how they would look. Venturi shared a similar vision of America where the focus on the car and the road affected architecture. Buildings beside highways, like this Chevron

station, used large signs either on the building itself or at the edge of the road, which to Venturi was a more honest, accurate representation of social forces influencing architecture and design. Heroic Modernist styles were the product of grandiose aesthetic and philosophical ideas that did not properly reflect American society, whereas one could learn most from vernacular architecture; and in the 1970s the most pertinent of these buildings bordered the "strip." Venturi along with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour asserted these ideas in their book *Learning From Las Vegas*, which directly challenged Modernism and ushered in the Post-modern era in architecture. Shore's nonjudgmental photographs visually capture Venturi's academic assertions because they demonstrate the way the car culture and capitalism affected architecture and the built environment as a whole.[22]

The definition of America one understands from *Uncommon Places* is an everyday America, one where the road, the suburb, and the overhead power line are constantly in our vision. Shore continued his thoughts on the advantages of photographing architecture in the Tillman interview, "It's one building next to another that was built at another time with another set of parameters, and it's on a street that I can see today—all of which has gone through exposure to time and the elements."[23] New buildings are adjunct to old buildings indicating a sense of history, the cumulative effect of hundreds of years of human society. Shore's photograph of Fort Worth, Texas from 1976 depicts three buildings: a Baroque-style church, a simple brick four-story office building, and a towering Modern glass skyscraper, which is so tall that it does not fit within the frame (Figure 5). These three buildings when presented realistically, plainly, and directly, as Shore has done, illustrate a rough history of North American architecture, but also how these vastly different buildings exist together in the present as a fragmented unity. The urban environment is not simply the history of individual buildings, but also the relationships of the buildings to one another and the city as a whole. The American city is the result of many people's different intentions and values and becomes a conglomerate of ideas manifested through architecture.

Shore is not interested in America as a political or social entity though; rather the entire North American continent is an appropriate subject, a place to be experienced through the road trip and only limited by how far one can drive. Unlike Frank or Evans, Shore does not restrict himself to the United States, but also photographs in Canada as well. Shore is not interested in the American identity as it relates to place like Frank, but rather how the built environment can indicate the nature of place and culture. Shore's definition of America is not one of social observation like Evans', but one that simply wants to pay attention to the appearance of the average American landscape; a landscape only limited by how far Shore can drive. The photograph of Gull Lake, Saskatchewan is a good example of how it was equally as possible for Shore to create photographs with interesting, complex forms in Canada as it was in the United States, making the border distinction a negligible one to him (Figure 6). In the series, the Canadian photographs fit seamlessly into the whole and communicate a greater, more universal understanding of America, one not defined by borders and politics, but rather one defined by the land, the continuity of the built environment and the forces that created them.

Uncommon Places is a fitting definition of America in the 1970s that deserves recognition within the road trip tradition established by Walker Evans and Robert Frank. The photographs span the entirety of the decade as well as

reaching throughout North America, but it is Shore's artistic abilities—his theoretical approach, technique, and selection of photographs—that make this a truly impressive and representative monograph of the decade. The influence of contemporary conceptual art demonstrates a thought process rooted in the 1970s, while his technical approach of the application of color to a documentary project is also a progressive, even radical, artistic decision. Most representative is Shore's unabashed tendency to photograph the banal, generic places of everyday life of the 1970s. Through the application of the concept of "architectural interest" the significance of the places he photographs is revealed not in individual images, but in the series as a whole. Like Venturi's ideas about vernacular architecture, Shore's places are not simply commonplaces; rather, they accrue value through the viewers' deliberate awareness of their ubiquity in the modern environment, and thus are transformed through art into uncommon places.

Endnotes

[1] Tod Papageorge, "Walker Evans and Robert Frank: An Essay on Influence," in *Core Curriculum: Writings on Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2011), 66.

[2] Philip Gefter, "Travels with Walker, Robert and Andy." *The New York Times* 4 July 2004.

[3] Stephen Shore, "Photography and Architecture," in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon, 2007), 138.

[4] Stephen Shore, *Uncommon Places* (New York: Aperture, 1982), 63.

[5] Christy Lange, "Nothing Overlooked," in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon, 2007), 47.

[6] Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010), 146.

[7] Lange, *Stephen Shore*, 47.

[8] Ibid., 48.

[9] Ibid., 59.

[10] John Coplans, *Serial Imagery* (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1968), 10.

[11] Tony Hiss, "The Framing of Stephen Shore," *American Photographer*, February 1, 1979, 35.

[12] Stephen Schmidt Wulfen, introduction to *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*, by Stephen Shore (New York: Aperture, 2004), 8.

[13] Stephen Shore, "Stephen Shore in Conversation with Lynne Tillman," in *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* (New York: Aperture, 2004), 174.

[14] Papageorge, "Walker Evans and Robert Frank," 72.

[15] Douglas R. Nickel, "American Photographs' Revisited," *American Art* (1992): 81-82.

[16] Kevin Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America* 1970-1980 (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), 8.

[17] Ibid.,10.

[18] Joel Sternfeld, "Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts, July 13, 1974," in *Stephen Shore*. London: Phaidon, 114-121. 118.

[19] Lincoln Kirstein, afterward to *American Photographs*, by Walker Evans (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 193.

[20] Shore, *Uncommon Places*, back cover.

[21] Shore, "Stephen Shore in Conversation," 182.

[22] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972).

[23] Shore, "Stephen Shore in Conversation," 182.

1.

Figure 1 Stephen Shore. "Second Street East and South Main Street, Kalispell, Montana, August 22, 1974" from *Uncommon Places*, 1982.

Figure 2 Walker Evans. "Birmingham Steel Mill and Worker's Houses, 1936" from *American Photographs*, 1938.

Figure 3 Robert Frank. "Navy Recruiting Station, Post Office – Butte, Montana" from *The Americans*, 1958.

Figure 4 Stephen Shore. "La Brea Avenue and Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975" from *Uncommon Places*, 1982.

Figure 5 Stephen Shore. "Sixth Street and Throckmorton Street, Fort Worth, Texas, June 13, 1976" from *Uncommon Places*, 1982.

Figure 6 Stephen Shore. "Proton Avenue, Gull Lake, Saskatchewan, August 17, 1974" from *Uncommon Places*, 1982.

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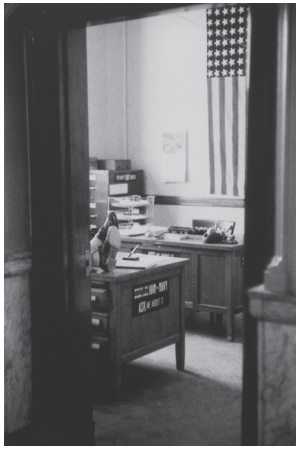

4.


Chevron
STAND
Beverly Bl
TEXACO
NO STAMPS
NO STAMPS


BUS LANE

5.


ESSO

6.