

David Wharton, Center Director of Documentary Studies, Publishes Book of Photography

The small towns of the American South are local places of ordinary life. Most of them lie off the main roads, and most travelers see only the strip developments that line the roadways and fail to enter the historical center of a town. These places, consequently, have become invisible in the dominant geographic image of the American South—obscured by the fancy antebellum heirlooms, the blighted landscapes of poverty and despair, the beaches, or the gleaming towers of modern cities that hold sway over our mental maps of the region. Yet, for many residents, the small towns are at the center of things and are impregnated with the history and meaning of their lives. David Wharton entered these townscapes to make photographs of their lingering presence in the landscape and over many years of work has produced a compelling visual record of them. His photographs appear in his new book, *Small Town South*. It is the single most comprehensive modern photographic survey of small Southern towns.

Wharton's purpose, though, is not simply to provide an encyclopedic coverage of a particular kind of town landscape. Rather, he concentrates his vision on what makes these towns significant in the lives of the people who inhabit them, captures the spaces they create over time. His photographs are no elegy. These are not dead places. Wharton's photographs show them to have landscapes of personality—with many fine qualities, as well as blemishes—and to contain both aspiration and decay. Moreover, as Wharton explains in the introduction to his book, "small towns are places that are constantly changing, physically and otherwise." *Small Town South* provides a visual record of the tension that lies in the passage of time in a particular place. According to Wharton, "Photography's ability to stop the visual flow of time and preserve a scene for a thoughtful examination and contemplation is a primary source of its . . . power."

The book is filled with images that have both an artistic and documentary quality. Consider, for example, the photograph on page 95 of Opelousas, Louisiana. On the one hand, it is a beautiful image, with superior composition and light, and also simultaneously contrasts the prosperous railroad history of the town, as depicted in the mural, with just the hint of a ramshackle train station in the background, suggesting that today a rail link may no longer define the town, or even exist there at all. The relationship between past and present is left ambiguous by the picture. Many of the photographs in the book juxtapose old and new to forge the sense of passing time within a picture's scene. A variety of landscape features are used toward this end—signage, vehicles, architecture, and artifacts of abandonment or prosperity. There are few people in these photographs—just the occasional pedestrian walking by or someone passing by in a moving vehicle. Their presence is suggested, instead, by what they impart upon the landscape—homes and places of business, emblems, infrastructures, gardens and front yards, monuments, institutions, and written notices, leaving it to the viewer what to make of them. The photograph on page 111 of Abbeville, Louisiana, for instance, depicts an unadorned side of a closed building—perhaps a restaurant because four salt and pepper shakers gleam through its window from their place atop a bare counter top. The reflection in the window of the street and store frontage opposite suggests an emptiness to the town—but, still, those shakers look new and as if they are in current use. Where are the diners? It is unsettling.

Despite the unique qualities of each town portrayed in the book, in their sum is recognition of commonality. As if these towns all sprang from a single source and followed a similar trajectory to the present day. In his "Notes on the Plates," which appears after the gallery of photographs,

Wharton explains, “most of the photographs could easily be from other small Southern towns.” With this admission, Wharton introduces the contention that perhaps there exists a sort of small Southern town archetype, at least in terms of a visual character. Certainly, looking at a picture such as the one that appears on page 127 of *New Albany, Mississippi*, which portrays a downtown intersection, one could be in “Anywhere, Small Town South.” Other photographs, however, show a more particular geography: words with a clear cultural connotation, architecture that has a distinctive vernacular style, topography, public art depicting a rooted sensibility, or place names that pinpoint a specific location on the map of the South. The idea that small Southern towns simultaneously evoke singularity and conform to a general type introduces another kind of visual tension in Wharton’s photographs: is modern life creating everywhere a landscape of sameness?

As a document, *Small Town South* contains images of high artistic and technical merit. Wharton makes his photographs using negative film and medium-format cameras. He creates test prints in a wet chemical darkroom and then scans the chosen negatives for digital printing. The results are exquisite black and white prints with a high resolution and excellent tonal quality. The pictures are beautifully reproduced in the book on weighty paper that has a silky feel to it. The binding is excellent with pages lying flat when opened. Wharton’s words in the book help guide the reader toward a fuller understanding of his pictures, which he describes as a “single, long poem,” in which each of the picture galleries appears as “a stanza and the individual images as single lines within that stanza.” Viewing this book, I felt an emotional tug running through it that might be likened to a poetic narrative—evocative rather than explanatory and where much is left to the reader’s imagination, which is as it should be in such a beautiful book.

Small Town South. By David Wharton. Staunton, Virginia: George F. Thompson Publishing, 2012. 159 pages. \$50.00 cloth.

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