

Chris Mottalini: after you left, they took it apart

Lest you are confused by these photo booth portraits of [Chris Mottalini](#), the dude is not an ax-murderer, or a contemporary of [Johnny Cash](#). Though he does have a lyrical knack for naming his photo projects-- *winter city; the mistake by the lake; after you left, they took it apart*. In any case, Mottalini has been making some great work. I first [came upon](#) his pictures when several of his Buffalo bus-stop shelters (*the mistake by the lake*) were chose for AP24, and I've since become enthralled with his survey of doomed Paul Rudolph houses, and his recordings of some of the demolitions. I was appalled last week at [that New Canaan lady](#) who's thinking about knocking down her Philip Johnson house, and these strike a similar nerve. Mottalini is a great sport and answered all of my questions, including the one about a sandwich.

How did you get started shooting the Paul Rudolph houses (how many are there), and what has the journey of photographing them been like? How did you gain access? Have you been present at any of the demolitions?

I photographed my first Paul Rudolph house at the very end of 2006. I actually happened upon the project pretty much completely by chance; A friend of a friend worked for the Paul Rudolph Foundation and needed some photos of a Rudolph house in Westport, CT, which was about to be demolished. To be honest, I knew very little about Rudolph and Modernist architecture when I first set foot inside of the Westport house. I was instantly hooked and fascinated, though, and I've probably thought about Paul Rudolph and his work every day since.

Rudolph completed over 100 projects in his lifetime, from Texas to Singapore, but the Westport house is my absolute favorite. Even though it no longer exists, my pictures at least serve as a sort of photographic preservation. I was present (and sort of wish that I was not) at the demolition....the street was blocked by the overly aggressive owners and the cops, but I managed to catch a few glimpses of the garage and the front of the house as they were being caved in. A McMansion is currently being built on the site.

Over the past year I photographed thirteen Rudolph projects, including the demolished homes in Westport, CT; Westerly, RI; and Siesta Key, FL. Many were iconic projects and the existence of one of them was unknown even to the Paul Rudolph Foundation. Once I realized that I was obsessed with documenting these houses, I was able to gain access through the Paul Rudolph Foundation (even still, though, I was ejected by cops from the property of the Westport, CT house). The experience of just being able to wander through these amazing, vanished homes all by myself and to have that privilege because I take pictures, was fantastic.

How long will your project continue? What has your experience been with the foundation?

Seriously, the project will probably continue as long as I am taking pictures. Even now, several other Rudolph projects are slated for demolition and, unless some type of preservation-based legislation specific to mid-century homes is put in place, it won't stop and will only get worse. Can't stop the progress, apparently.

The Pennsylvania house is the secret, never photographed project the Rudolph Foundation didn't even know about. Apparently, the husband did a lot of the stonework by himself and his wife told me a story about him doing the work on their bedroom, in the dead of winter, while she read the entirety of Anna Karenina aloud from their bed.

Your recent series "mistake by the lake" was featured in AP24. How does Buffalo figure into your work, and why do you think you're attracted to compiling photographs of similar structures? Is architectural history a specific interest of yours?

I completed "The Mistake by the Lake" this winter, and it's my first and only project about my hometown of Buffalo. It's a photographic record of the strange and amazing assortment of school bus stop shelters which dot the greater-Buffalo landscape. Parents build these shelters in order to protect their children from the brutal winters, though I've never actually seen them being utilized. I guess I needed to be away from that area for a while, because over the fifteen years I lived there, I don't think I ever once noticed a single school bus stop shelter. They just blended into the background. It took my living in Colorado, Sweden and finally New York to finally notice them.

I'm really drawn to photo projects based on repetition. I like documenting things to excess. There's something about shooting a ton of similar structures...I like the repetition and the simplicity and I like how it allows for the slight differences in each picture to really become noticeable. The whole project was basically an exercise in repetition, in that I just drove around every day, for months, just looking for bus shelters. Some days I would find ten shelters and some days none.

I've always been interested in architecture and structures but-- until recently, only superficially. This past year, because of my recent projects, I've realized how much I like documenting these houses, buildings and weird shelters. I set out to make portraits of architecture and I really think it's better that I not know as much as I could about architecture and architectural photography. It keeps things a bit more mysterious that way.

You shoot digitally, and in 35 mm format, which is not typical of architectural photography. How does it serve your purpose to be fast and loose with the imagery? It somehow seems fitting, with the danger these houses are in. The images seem more fleeting to me.

I do shoot digital 35mm format (Canon 1DS Mark 111) and I really love it when it comes to architecture and structures. I like using the same format, same camera, even the same lens for every picture I take. I hate tripods, I'm not really all that interested in the traditional process, and I love being able to just roam freely around the houses. It feels more adventurous and emotional to me. A little sneaky, too. I'm mostly interested in spontaneity (which is what I feel is missing from most architectural photography) and being able to shoot quickly.

What other projects are you working on?

In keeping with my Scandinavian and architectural fascinations, my next project will be about Leif Erikson's Viking settlement in Newfoundland. It'll be cold there, too, so that's a plus. Otherwise, I've been shooting a bunch of assignments, I'm trying to find a good home for "The Mistake by the Lake" and I'm also putting together a collection of photos I found of Hasidic Jews engaged in recreational activities and basically living it up. They're really beautiful.

I hear there's a sandwich named after you. Discuss.

That's my legacy you're talking about. I used to work at Red Bamboo (a vegetarian/vegan restaurant) in the West Village. One day the owner was trying to cheat me out of something and I told him that he owed me and that I wanted him to name a sandwich after me. So, "The Mottalini" was born. I didn't design it, or anything, but I did have the pleasure of hearing about fifty people-per-day totally butcher the pronunciation of my last name. Glad I don't work there anymore.

Source: <http://blog.photoshelter.com/2008/05/chris-mottalini-after-you-left-it-they-took-it-apa.html>

Additional information on the Fullham Residence, Newtown, PA from Chris Mottalini

I first heard about the Fullham house in Newtown, PA, when they telephoned the Rudolph Foundation after having seen an article in the Times about the demolition of the Westport, CT house. They were contemplating having to finally move from the house and were concerned that it might fall into the wrong hands. The Foundation then contacted me and I was the extremely lucky one-and-only photographer to ever photograph that house. It was completed in 1959 and the couple requested that Rudolph not publicize any info about it, which is the reason why even the Foundation was unaware of its existence.

Source: Email from Chris Mottalini to Bruce Barnes, June, 2, 2008