Display of Ruins

A Collection of Essays in Reaction to Objects from the Yale University Art Gallery

Produced by the Ghost Town seminar
at the Yale School of Architecture with
Professor Elihu Rubin

Table of Contents

3	Preface
4	The Old Closes and Streets of Glasgow
6	Industriebauten (Industrial Buildings)
8	School of Pieter Bruegel the Elder
10	The Disappearance of Darkness
12	Ypres
14	Mount St. Helens, Nine Years
16	Methodist Church, Magopa
18	Ventersdrop district, Transvaal
20	Boys Playing at an Abandoned Building, NYC
22	Rovine d’una Galleria di Statue nella Villa Adriana a Tivoli
24	Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific
26	Second St. East and South Main St.
28	Abandoned Uranium Refinery

Preface

One of the recurring themes in the Ghost Town seminar at the Yale School of Architecture is our enduring fascination with ruins and how representations of abandonment, neglect, and disrepair tend to become depoliticized over time. Complicated narratives around the causes of ruination are subsumed by their often alluring aesthetics; and indulging in this aesthetic fascination emerges as a distinct privilege enjoyed by those who are distant—physically, temporally, socially—from the very real fallout of economic withdrawal, political violence, social upheaval, and physical destruction. In this group of essays produced by the Ghost Town seminar students, we attempt to reinvigorate images of ruination with these knotty, nuanced narratives.

Glasgow "slums" on the verge of destruction in the name of "Improvement." Disused industrial relics documented as found sculpture. A delicate sixteenth century watercolor exploring the visual penumbras and informal uses of Roman ruins. Large format photographs of the spaces abandoned by the obsolescence of film itself. Ruins of war; ruins of dispossession; playfulness amongst ruins; the quietude of desolation; remnants of colonial hubris—all of these are contained in this collection, and all the images are drawn from the remarkable collection held at the Yale University Art Gallery. We are immensely grateful to the YUAG and especially to Paulina Choh, the Marcia Brady Tucker Fellow in Photography, for helping us curate this list and for facilitating our visit to the Duffy Study Room.

- Elihu Rubin

Thomas Annan
Plate 6: Close, No. 65 High Street. The tenements leaning in contributed to the claustrophobic nature of the closes.
ca. 1868-71

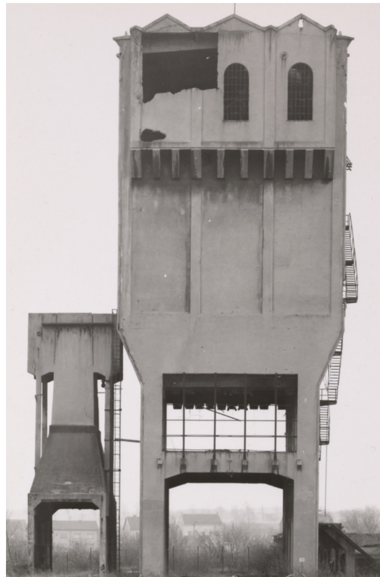
By the mid-nineteenth century, Glasgow's population had grown rapidly, from around 100,000 in 1811 to nearly 300,000 by the 1840s. This dramatic increase resulted from displaced agricultural workers migrating from the Highlands alongside large numbers of Irish immigrants fleeing the Great Famine. At this time, the working class made up approximately 78% of Glasgow's population, and the expansion of British industry depended heavily on this surplus labor force. The result was the concentration of poverty within densely populated urban slums, where inadequate sanitation, overcrowding, and unregulated construction created public health and safety issues. This explosive growth placed severe social, infrastructural, and spatial pressures on the city.

In response to deteriorating living conditions, repeated outbreaks of disease, and unsuccessful attempts to regulate the number of people who could legally occupy a dwelling, the City Improvement Trust was established in 1865. The following year, the City Improvement Act granted the Trust decisive power, not to rehabilitate existing housing conditions, but to clear overcrowded districts and redevelop the city center. Framed as sanitary and civic reform, this strategy effectively eradicated entire neighborhoods in the oldest districts of Glasgow while displacing thousands of residents, shifting the issue rather than resolving the underlying social problems. Slum clearance began in 1871.

Prior to this destruction, Thomas Annan, a Scottish photographer and skilled craftsman, who was interested in new technologies within the technique and production of photography, was commissioned by the City Improvement Trust in 1866 to document the old districts and slum conditions within the streets and closes before their demolition. It is a common and interesting phenomenon that, on the brink of destruction, there emerges a desire to record what is about to disappear. Such acts of documentation serve multiple functions, including the preservation of memory, framing historical narratives, and, particularly in Glasgow's case, legitimizing demolition by providing visual evidence of spaces deemed uninhabitable. Photography operates simultaneously as an archive and as an instrument of authority. Annan's work on the Glasgow slums, exists in three editions across time and evolving technologies, including: albumen prints (1871), carbon prints (1878), and photogravures (1900), drawn from the photographs made between 1867 and 1899.

Annan faced significant technical challenges in photographing these environments. Using the wet collodion process, which was the most light-sensitive technology available at the time, he worked in dark, narrow streets that required long exposure times. The absence of artificial flash made interior photography impossible, so inhabitants appear only outdoors. As a result, most images seem deserted, or only occupied only by the occasional blurred figures. The photographs convey a sense of emptiness, stillness, and isolation, which is an atmosphere that does not accurately correspond to the density and reality of these overcrowded streets. Yet this aesthetic operates in a few interesting ways. First, the atmosphere of emptiness reinforces the impression of obsolescence uninhabitability; had the streets been shown as full of life and activity, the displacement of their residents would have been more visibly apparent and could have faced more pushback. Second, the desolation and eeriness intensify the emotional impact of the images, rendering the memory of these spaces as haunting and ghostly in a way that foreshadows their coming erasure.

Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher
Kühlturm, ca. 1950, Zeche, "Victoria Mathias," Essen, Ruhrgebiet (Cooling tower, ca. 1950, "Victoria Mathias," Essen, Ruhr District), from the portfolio Industriebauten (Industrial Buildings), 1963



Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher
Silo für Kokskohle, ca. 1920, Kokerei Escheveiler Reserve, bei Aachen (Silo for Coking Coal, ca. 1920, Coking Plant of Escheveiler Reserve, Aachen), from Industriebauten (Industrial Buildings), 1965

As if subjects sitting still for a portrait, the Cooling Tower and Coal Bunker—in the Hilla and Bernd Becher's untitled photographs of post-industrial Germany—are frozen in time. The careful symmetry, frontal view, and close cropping to the frame render these subjects immobile and immortalized. By centering the figures in a photograph, the viewer traces their figure endearingly but at a distance. The subjects maintain a human quality despite this detached formality. The viewer does not witness what these machines once did—not in action—but rather what they are now. Their useful years long gone, their material presence captured by the Becher's in that moment.

Industriebauten (Industrial Buildings)
Julia Edwards

The Becher's gaze does not drift away from the figure of the industrial equipment to the landscape. In fact, the portrait orientation of the photograph confirms their interest in the subject, not the context beyond. The persistence of this choice is reinforced by the serial nature of their work. In this case, we have two portraits, one from Essen and the other from Aachen. The two photographs demonstrate an artistic consistency (even if you weren't familiar with the Becher's body of work and their taxonomic obsession with abandoned industrial equipment). The peripheral hints to context leave questions unanswered, but maybe the Becher's simply weren't asking them. The denial of orientation to the wider landscape becomes a provocation to look closer by heightening the viewer's awareness of immediate surroundings.

The Cooling Tower and Coal Bunker were once part of a larger landscape of industrial buildings and equipment that has since waned. Neither of the sites pictured here in Essen or Aachen remain today. Perhaps anticipating this fate, the choice to photograph the singular figure abstracts it from the industrial process of movement, transformation, extraction—making it inert. The Becher's were documenting the sites as they found them, but the compositional and artistic choices made reinforce their eventual fates.

Hilla and Bernd Becher's photography required taking their Volkswagen van, large format camera, and young child in tow across Germany, their native country. Driving to capture their subjects, they would often wait for a cloud or overcast day to diffuse the light. This atmospheric consistency added to the serial quality of their photographs too. The intimacy and patience of their work is visible: a care for the subject, a desire to see the ruin for what it is.

Their objective to immortalize industrial detritus with photography was uncomplicated but radical at the time. Their legacy documents the abandoned, and now, in many cases, demolished industrial buildings of the 19 th and early 20 th century. Their art has been heralded as ushering in a new era of photography, perhaps corroborated by their unconventional claim that they "deal with objects, not motifs." The couple combined their interests and skills from a wide range of disciplines. For instance, their meditations on photography was influenced by catalogs in biology text books. The careful cataloging of buildings-as-sculpture has influenced artists for generations since.

Camilo José Vergara's work comes to mind, on the theme of ruination and persistent documentation. The Becher's fascination, perhaps obsession, with these industrial artifacts located across the German countryside insinuates their own bodies in space as much as the 'subject' of the photograph. Much like Vergara, their work is the result of their curiosities, but the Becher's imagery is more formally rigorous than the spontaneous documentarian's. The catalog of industrial buildings contains an unsentimental humanity, devoid of figures but charged with a personification of the inanimate object. On the other hand, Vergara's photographs often express the human subject—an insistence of life despite the circumstances. One could say the respective German and American milieu are legible in their work. Generalizations aside, the view of the world through a lens is personal.

Artist
Roman Ruins, school of: Pieter Bruegel the Elder
(Flemish, ca. 1525–1569)

In this intimate and unassuming watercolor from the 17th century, two small-hatted figures stand in the foreground, side by side, their backs to the viewer. One leans against his stick and the other raises a hand, gesturing to the immense and dilapidated Roman structure before them. A third figure in the middle of the composition is depicted smaller, deeper in space, amid the vestiges of this mysteriously dilapidated architecture. The narrative implied through these characters, perusing the ruins with their walking sticks, is one of curiosity and exploration as they wade through the racines of time.

This piece from the school of Bruegel the Elder, can be located within the lineage and legacy of allegorical art works made by Bruegel in 16th century Antwerp, approximately 50 years . Bruegel produced at least three paintings of the Tower of Babel and was highly influenced by both the biblical narrative and thematic associations with the notion of the ancient ruin . Bruegel's paintings and this watercolor study both visualize classical grandeur and monumental architecture in decay to contemplate themes of hubris, temporal change and the passing of time.

In The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Walter Benjamin writes: "allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things." For Benjamin, the ruin is the site where history physically merges into its setting; not as an image of eternal life but rather of irresistible decay. Ruins materialize the dialectic of natural history — the simultaneous becoming of nature and history, a fragmentary object that reflects the nature of time's passage. Wherein ruins figure the historical-material dimension of decay, allegory signifies an ever-changing, transient philosophical tension. In "Roman Ruin," the walking figures, minute against monumental collapse and decay, display a juxtaposition between historical matter and the fleeting span of a single human life – two simultaneous lifecycles for the viewer to confront.

This almost 400-year-old artwork evidences a longstanding interest in the modern notion of the 'ghost-town'. The enduring allure to visit and document sites like these reveal a nostalgic desire that is deeply embedded in our human engagement with the conditions of time and mortality. As discussed by Georg Simmel ("The Ruin") in relation to the architectural ruin, "its object fuses the contrast of present and past into one united form," and that "the fascination of the ruin is that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature." Similarly, Alois Riegl ("The Modern Cult of Monuments") discusses "the fundamental aesthetic principle of our time based on age value" as a framework for understanding our desire to engage with artefacts from the past, explaining our pull towards ghost towns and their material remnants (or documentation of these remnants). Observing this delicately rendered work on paper, time appears sedimented in the object itself: the ancient ruin within the seventeenth-century image, as well as our present encounterghost image of a long-gone architectural structure.

School of Pieter Bruegel the Elder
Sonia Rosa Kahn

Robert Burley
Archives Room, Building 9, Kodak Canada, Toronto, from the portfolio The Disappearance of Darkness

Robert Burley's photographs document a vanishing; not of people, but of the industrial infrastructure that once sustained analog photography. Shot between 2005 and 2010, his series captures the demolition and abandonment of film-manufacturing facilities and darkrooms operated by corporations like Kodak, Agfa, and Ilford. The images are large-format, unflinching, and elegiac: empty processing corridors, collapsed factory floors, the architectural remains of a century-old industry rendered suddenly obsolete by the rise of digital technology. Burley, himself a photographer working through this transition, occupies the dual position of witness and subject: someone who both observed the industry's collapse and participated in the new practices that hastened it.

What makes Burley's work resonate within the Ghost Town framework is not only the physical abandonment it depicts, but the deeper obsolescence it signals; one that leaves behind a peculiar kind of residue. The darkroom did not simply close. Instead, it migrated.

This migration is registered through a peculiar linguistic device, skeuomorphism. A skeuomorph is a design element that retains the visual form or terminology of an older technology even after its original functional reason for existing has disappeared. Think of the camera "shutter click" sound on a phone that has no shutter; or the trash can icon on a desktop that was never a physical bin (or, my favorite, the floppy disk icon that people use to save their work, even if they have never touched such a device in their lives). In this way, skeuomorphism is the linguistic equivalent of the abandoned façades of the ghost towns of the American West: the shell of a former practice persists, stripped of the living activity that once gave it meaning.

Adobe's Lightroom uses this device explicitly, starting, of course, with the title of the software itself. Now the dominant software that replaced the physical darkroom for millions of photographers worldwide, it is a direct and deliberate reference to the space it rendered obsolete. But the skeuomorphism runs deeper than a single product name. The entire vocabulary of digital photo editing is haunted by its analog origins: dodging and burning, masking, exposure. These terms once described hours of physical labor in a red-lit haze: hands guiding cardstock shapes on sticks between enlarger and photosensitive paper to coax light onto the image with careful, practiced precision. Photo developers would keep their eyes fixed on ticking timers, transferring prints between chemical baths at exact intervals, risking over- or under-exposure with every second of inattention! These techniques demanded spatial and temporal intuition, chemical knowledge, and embodied skill accumulated over hours of practice.

In their digital successors, the nomenclature persists while the spatial, bodily, and material associations evaporate entirely. To "mask" a layer in Photoshop bears no trace of the darkroom floor where that technique was born. The word floats free of its origin, a signifier without its referent. This is the skeuomorph as ghost: a preserved façade over a barren interior. The word "darkroom" haunts software interfaces the way a painted-over storefront haunts a strip mall. It is a palimpsest, legible only to those who remember what it once covered, and increasingly illegible to those who never knew the original space at all. Are digital skeuomorphs a form of "arrested decay?"

Burley's photography series thus captures something broader than industrial decline. They document the way shifts in technology restructure not just practice but place: the built environment reorganized, emptied, and eventually demolished around functions that no longer exist. This mirrors the lamentations we often make over the loss of Main Street, USA, where the cobbler and the general store disappeared functionally before they disappeared spatially, displaced by consumer logics that valued rapid replacement over incremental repair. The space outlived the practice briefly, then followed it into darkness.

In both cases—the darkroom and the main street—only language remains, faithfully naming what is no longer there, long after the thing itself is gone.

Olive Edis
Ypres Cloth Hall in Belgium
1919

This gelatin silver (bromide) print, mounted and signed by British photographer Olive Edis, records the Belgian town of Ypres immediately after the First World War. Commissioned by the Imperial War Museum, Edis was tasked not with photographing combat but with documenting its aftermath. As Britain's first official female war photographer, her role was evidentiary: to produce images that could stand as records of damage, reconstruction needs, and historical fact. The photograph therefore emerges from a bureaucratic and archival impulse rather than an explicitly artistic one. It was intended to function as documentation—circulated through institutional collections, exhibitions, and reports—yet its visual structure exceeds mere record.

Formally, the image presents a street framed by civic architecture reduced to hollowed shells. Walls remain standing, fenestration is still legible, and the spatial order of the town can be read, but interiors have been gutted and roofs erased. The photograph is notably devoid of figures. No workers clear debris, no residents traverse the street, and no military presence anchors the scene to a specific narrative of victory or defeat. The camera is positioned at eye level, neither dramatizing the destruction through extreme perspective nor aestheticizing it through pictorial effects. The tonal range is restrained; surfaces appear matte, quiet, almost administrative. This compositional neutrality reinforces the sense that the photograph is observing rather than interpreting.

Yet the absence of people becomes the image's most charged element. Ypres appears not spectacularly destroyed but functionally suspended. Buildings remain upright, but they no longer serve habitation, commerce, or governance. The town is technically intact while socially evacuated. Rather than depicting a climactic moment of violence, Edis captures what follows catastrophe: a condition of vacancy. The photograph records architecture that persists after its purposes have withdrawn.

This quality situates the work within what might be called a "ghost town" logic. Unlike ruins shaped slowly by weathering or abandonment over decades, Ypres represents a sudden transition from urban life to infrastructural afterlife. The street is recognizable as a street, yet it no longer organizes movement or exchange. The image occupies a temporal middle ground—human intention has receded, but natural reclamation has not yet begun. In this suspended interval, the city feels paused rather than ended.

The photograph resonates strongly with Georg Simmel's notion of the ruin as a site where the balance between human construction and natural forces becomes visible. However, Edis captures a moment before nature fully intervenes. These structures have not softened into romantic decay; they remain rigid, waiting. The result ? An is an unsettling calm. War is registered not as an explosive

In this sense, Edis's Ypres is neither memorial nor propaganda. It does not instruct viewers how to mourn or commemorate. Instead, it asks them to confront a quieter transformation: how urban environments absorb catastrophe through stillness, vacancy, and endurance. The image becomes a prototype for the modern ghost town—one created not by mythic disappearance, but by the slow normalization of absence in spaces built to sustain life.

Frank Gohlke
Mount St. Helens, Nine Years, 1981-1990 (Portfolio), 2013
Pre-eruption clearcut after burning of slash. Sixteen miles northwest of Mount St. Helens, 1982; Revegetation on old clearcut after burning of slash. Sixteen miles northwest of Mount St. Helens, 1984; Previous site buried by construction of road to Johnston Ridge Observatory, 1990,

The triptych of photographs, taken two2 and four4 years apart, depicts the landscape surrounding around Mount St Saint Helens volcano, located about 160 miles south of Seattle, WashingtonA. Its 1980 eruption, followed by blasts of ash and landslides, left vast, enduring scars on its surrounding landscape. The magnitude and desolation drew numerous American landscape photographers at the time, Frank Gohlke among them. Born in 1942 in Wichita Falls, Texas, Gohlke spent nearly 10 years documenting the landscape around St Helens, from both the air and the ground, depicting the scale of destruction but as well as the also its aftermath of the eruption and the area's slow regeneration. His sustained engagement resists the single, catastrophic image; the act of return allows to document the dynamism of the site rather than pursuing a vision of pure desolation and collapse.

The triptych illustrates various forestry techniques implemented across the Mount St Saint Helens landscape. Gohlke begins the series with by documenting a "clear cut," a strategy that cuts removes down all of the trees in the an area in order to stimulate the understory growth, which an operation in scale oftenthat simulates a large-scale disaster event. The sense of disaster on in the image is accentuated by the fallen trees; their numerous charred bodies suggest an event of nonsupra-human magnitude (hence the clarification in the caption: the clear cut occurred before the St Mount Saint Helens eruption, but its scope may be mistaken for one). Historically, controlled burns were practiced by Native American communities as a form of ecological stewardship; yet the scale of modern extraction transforms cyclical maintenance into industrial erasure, the effects of which are felt both in urban environments and natural environments onesalike. Here, the catastrophe becomes not an isolated event, but a systematic condition of industrial extraction. American historian William Cronon notes in his writing the strong link between natural (?) landscapes and the boom-and-bust cycles of nowadays today's ghost towns. Is; in the this initial photograph, the background, emptied of vertical growth, makes the landscape read as a ghost town itself.

Followed by the burning of slash, the harvesting debris is then removed to prevent wildfires and clear the land for replanting. With As the llarge trees no longer hindering the access to sunlight access and the ash nourisheings the ground, the understory species begin to grow and make w, making way for a regenerated forest. The cyclical nature of the destruction and regeneration suggests the that these two phases are as inseparable parts. As Georg Simmel observed, destruction may be understood not as a tragic intrusion but as the unfolding of a tendency inherent within life itself. Across Gohlke's triptychs, ruin and regrowth suggest a story of continuity; here, growth is welcomed rather than is taken as a signal of decay. The ghost town begins to repopulate but with former inhabitants, and new ecologies emerge.

The last image, however, puts marks an abrupt end to the regeneration process. The asphalt surface, leading to the Johnston Ridge Observatory, constructed in 1992 along the State Highway 504, is impermeable, unlike the soil; it terminates both the photographic series and as well as the possible renewal of the forest. Built in the blast zone to commemorate volcanologist David A. Johnston, who lost his life in the eruption, the observatory was closed again in 2023 due to the damage from a landslide. Here, Gohlke's landscape is never merely a backdrop. It became the subject, a terrain where natural cataclysm, industrial processes, and collective memory converged, leaving behind a landscape oscillating on the threshold between absence and return.

David Goldblatt
Magopa, the Methodist Church, 21 October 1986
1986

The remnants of a stone building appears as the sole focus in this image. The closely cropped view and high horizon line give the impression that the entire landscape is made of rubble. This partial corner of a church is all that was left after the forced removal and destruction of buildings in the South African Bakwena Ba Mogopa community.

The image evokes a sense of instability. Mounds of broken stone have tumbled over each other, such that you can hardly distinguish the building pieces from the ground. Framed just off-center, the remaining fragment of the church appears loose at its edges, as if it too could come crumbling down in time.

Instability is a common theme in the context of ghost towns. In Magopa, instability during and after the forced removal was driven by social and political forces within the community and state order. According to the South African History Archive, the Magopa people were a closely knit agricultural community, thriving with schools, clinics, and shops. While the community was quite unified and supportive of one another, there came a time when the community faced corruption in their leadership and the state took advantage of the conflict to further divide and challenge the Magopa people, ultimately taking their land.1

In his larger project, the photographer David Goldblatt has brought attention to the injustice and complex social relations and behaviors in South Africa during Apartheid. Goldblatt often captures intimate moments with his subjects, with people as well as the buildings and landscapes that form their everyday contexts. An exhibition publication of Goldblatt's work, titled No Ulterior Motive, describes how the artist addresses desolate sites that show the remnants of human activity. "In many of his photographs, people are not present at all. Such images—of a partially destroyed storefront, imposing church architecture, an asbestos-polluted landscape—speak to how humans mark the land with their values and beliefs."2

The ruins of the Methodist Church have a human quality. The pain and violence that was enacted on this building is understood in relation to the people who worshipped here. In effect, the church fragment stands in for the people who are not present in the scene. Shown in unison with Goldblatt's other photograph, Luke Kgatitsoe in his house…, the Methodist Church and Kgatitsoe are like echoes of each other, solitary figures in a landscape of desolation.

Methodist Church, Magopa
Whitney O'Reardon

David Goldblatt
Luke Kgatitsoe at His House, Magopa, Ventersdorp District, Western Transvaal
21 October 1986

The Magopa community was comprised of 600 inhabitants, mostly Black farmers, and on February 14, 1984, at 3am, the Apartheid South African government forced their removal from the country's northwest province. They were displaced so that White property owners could control the land for grazing. This piece of land was called a "Black Spot"—Black-owned property surrounded by White owners—which made it a target. This photograph was taken in 1986, two years after the fact, and one of the former residents, Luke Kgatitsoe, has returned to sit in the rubble of his former home.

This photograph is a silver gelatin print on fiber-based paper, a technique for black and white photography known for its tonal range, drawing out many shades of grey with low contrast. The rubble and the land behind Mr. Kgatitsoe extend from the middle ground to the background of the photograph. The horizon line is high in the image, only a sliver of the sky appears at the top of the image—this formal move highlights the land and devastation that was left behind in the forceful removal of the Magopa people.

The maker of the image, David Goldblatt, is a well known South African photographer. He is Jewish and of Latvian and Lithuanian descent who left for South Africa to flee persecution in Europe during World War II. He entered the South African landscape as an outsider and made it his mission to document and critique apartheid in his work. Goldblatt never wanted his photographs to appear to have an editorial quality. He believed that he was shooting in a very matter-of-fact, objective way which leaves the role of judgement to the viewer. There is much discussion regarding Goldblatt's role in the documentation of apartheid landscapes; he claims of solely being an observer of his surroundings and nothing else. Whether or not this is true, the discussion itself is based upon major Ghost Town themes. The relationship between the author and their "ghost landscapes" and how the author chooses to portray their landscape is very significant.

What I find notable about the photograph is the staging of it. Goldblatt returned to this site of traumatic displacement with one of the victims for the photograph. With this information, there seems to be an editorial or framed quality to it. We do not know how Goldblatt settled on this specific site for a photograph or how he got in contact with Mr. Kgatitsoe in the foreground, but he may have been aware of the Magopa community's story. He may have set up this image in front of the rubble because he had a sense of how emotionally powerful it would be. The staging of this photograph may not be the most journalistically "accurate" depiction of events, since he is two years late to the scene, but he does depict an impactful story. It is the message of the image and in Goldblatt's production of the photograph that reveals the severity of this displacement story.

Ventersdrop district, Transvaal

Hima Gobburu

Jerome Liebling
Boys Playing at Abandoned Building, New York City
1949, printed 2001

In Boys Playing at an Abandoned Building, New York City, photographer Jerome Liebling captures a moment of childhood improvisation set against a backdrop of urban neglect. The black-and-white photo captures several boys gathered at the edge of a deteriorating building in Brooklyn, its broken windows and boarded-up entry signal disuse. Their bodies lean, climb, and hover at the entry, visually connecting play to ruin. The contrast between the children playing and the dark surface beyond bring to light the tension between urban vitality and decay.

Liebling's photographic style favors clarity. The textures of brick, dust, and wood dramatize the site's abandonment. However, the photograph resists framing the space purely as a site of loss. The boys' presence transforms it into a temporary playground, suggesting that even disused urban environments are available for reinterpretation.

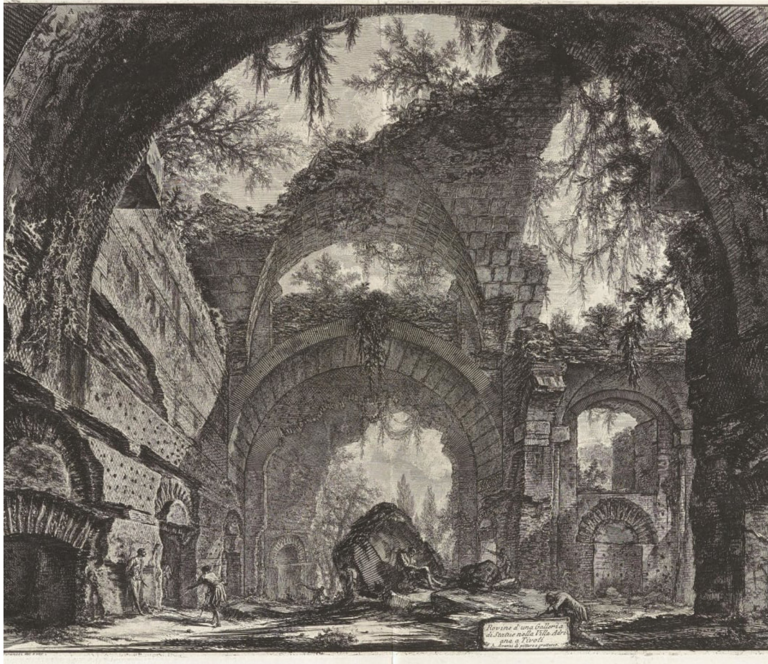
This image was captured in 1949, when American documentary photographers frequently turned their attention to working-class neighborhoods and overlooked urban spaces. Liebling, who was former military, was associated with socially engaged photography. His work circulated in magazines, exhibitions, and teaching contexts, contributing to a broader documentary tradition that included social reform photography and postwar humanist photojournalism.

Captured in his own home neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, the abandoned building represented the cycles of urban obsolescence and disuse he was witnessing. In its dormant phase, the building stands as a remnant of a prior economic or social moment; its original function has been erased but its physical presence remains imposing and offers itself as a blank canvas to be appropriated by the neighborhood children. While these structures often feel like they are no longer integrated into the living city, the moment captured Liebling's photograph suggest that they may have important roles, if informal and interim, yet to play in everyday life.

Ultimately, Boys Playing at an Abandoned Building captures a moment when the past survives materially, is being preserved for future use, but is reinhabited socially, turning a ruin into a living play landscape in this case. Liebling shows that 'ghost-towns' can exist within a city, hidden in plain sight wherever structures outlive their original purposes.

Boys Playing at an Abandoned Building, NYC

Luryn Hendrickson



Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Rovine d'una Galleria di Statue nella Villa Adriana a Tivoli (Ruins of a gallery of statues at Hadrian's villa), 1770

The Ruins of a Sculpture Gallery at Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli is a 1770 etching and engraving by Piranesi depicting the ruins of Hadrian's Villa, an extensive imperial complex built in the 2nd century CE near Tivoli. By Piranesi's time, the villa had long fallen into ruin and functioned as an archaeological site and stone quarry for marble and other artefacts that were dispersed throughout Rome and beyond. The stone fragments, however, were only part of the material culture being disseminated from this site, which also included images like those created by Piranesi for a global audience.

Rovine d'una Galleria di Statue nella Villa Adriana a Tivoli

Karolina Ochoa-Montes

Piranesi worked in 18th century Rome, when the city was a major stop on the Grand Tour. Young European elites, predominately male, traveled throughout the continent to study antiquity and acquire classical works. Travelers eventually returned home with crates full of books, paintings, decorative objects and scientific instruments to visually display the status that accrued to those who undertook the journey. For even more definitive proof of having had the experience of the Grand Tour, a painting of the young traveler would have been commissioned, set against a Roman ruin (yes, the original "selfie"). And for those with lesser means, a collection of etchings by Piranesi would offer a more accessible way to bring their travels home. The prints circulated widely over time, allowing a broader audience to experience the magnitude of the ruin, both in scale and cultural weight.

This drawing is an interior view of a sculpture gallery at the villa. The image is composed of a long barrel vault that recedes towards a faint line of trees. Large sections of the vault are broken, displaying the thickness of the dark masonry against an abundance of light filtering into the space. Small figures inhabit the space below, once again emphasizing the grandiose scale of the architecture. They rest, crawl, lean, and crouch through the debris in the gallery. While the building is drawn in a state of physical ruin, it is not in complete abandonment; it remains, at least to some extent, inhabited. The ground is covered in rubble and larger fragments of the collapsed roof. Both structure and ornament are fractured, and overgrown vegetation has invaded the space.

Piranesi's knowledge of Roman design and construction was extensive, and thus expressing the building as a ruin was highly intentional. He believed the image of a ruin was more evocative and powerful, positioning Roman architecture as something characteristically monumental, experimental and materially dynamic, in contrast the idealized serenity of Greek classicism that was prevalent at the time. This context matters for understanding the drawing; Piranesi doesn't show the villa in its original state. Instead, he emphasizes scale, time, and the material presence of the ruin. In doing so, he sought to reinforce Rome's architectural prowess even in a state of collapse.

Mark Ruwedel
Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific #30, from the series
Westward the Course of the Empire
2005

Between 1994 and 2006, Mark Ruwedel, an American landscape photographer, photographed more than 130 abandoned railway lines across the western United States and Canada, tracing the residual landforms alongside skeletal tracks. His black-and-white series, Westward the Course of the Empire, comprises more than 70 prints that document the unprecedented wave of industrial ambition that swept across the western frontier in the 1860s.

By the end of the Civil War in 1865, the United States had 35,085 miles of functioning railroad track; within just eight years, that total had doubled. Yet with the rise of the automobile and the rapid expansion of the highway system in the twentieth century, rail transportation entered a period of steep decline, leading to the collapse of many rail service companies and leaving vast stretches of infrastructure abandoned across the landscape. The cuts, tunnels, grades, and trestles captured in these photographs reveal both the ambition and the struggle to assert power over the land: monuments to a technological triumph once celebrated on terrain long regarded as hostile. By borrowing the title from the 1861 mural in the U.S. Capitol, Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way, which symbolized the United States as the destination for western exploration, Ruwedel constructs a continuous narrative, one that shifts from national passion, adventure, and triumph to lingering memory, commemoration, and quiet aftermath.

While many other photographs in the series dwell on quieter, more modest traces of the railroad network, such as a single pair of rail lines threading through a mountain valley, the print Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific #30 captures a far more monumental scene. In this image, three monolithic railroad piers rise from the vast plain, framing another rail line that quietly passes beneath them. The carefully constructed perspective dramatically exaggerates the scale of the piers, rendering them almost temple-like in their monumentality. Through this visual distortion, the structures appear to expand in sequence, amplifying the force of human intervention and asserting the weight of engineered form against the open landscape.

A tension emerges from the contrast between these artificial structures and the expansive natural backdrop. Yet, over time, a quiet harmony takes shape, as the two become fused into a newly constituted landscape, one produced collectively by human ambition and geography. Aware of such physical interventions as a kind of palimpsest, Ruwedel presents the railroad ruins both as liminal spaces marked by faded aspirations and as enduring statements: evidence that this ambition has been absorbed so deeply into the national narrative that it resists erasure.

Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific

Yixing (Cindy) Liu

Stephen Shore
2nd Street East and South Main Street, Kalispell, Montana,
August 22, 1974

Stephen Shore is an American photographer whose work has received widespread praise and admiration in the decades following his precocious debut at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) at the age of 14 and his one-man show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at 24[1]. Departing from the street photography of New York City and intimate portraits of the City's residents featured in his early career, Shore headed west on a multi-year cross-country road trip to explore small American towns through documentary style portraits. Culminating in the monograph Uncommon Places (1982), Shore documented vernacular suburban and semi-rural landscapes between 1972 and 1979[2], in which this photograph is featured.

Second St. East and South Main St. Kalispell, Montana 8/22/74 was created two years into his travels, during which he sought to capture the mundanity of everyday life through a diary format, including "[all the] meals I ate, people I met, televisions I watched, motel rooms I slept in, toilets I used, as well as the towns I would drive through, and, through this visual diary and series of repeated subjects, build a kind of cultural picture of the country at the time"[3]. The Yale University Art Gallery and the MoMA both hold prints of Second St. East and South Main St. Kalispell, Montana 8/22/74.

Yale's print was accessioned in 1975, while the MoMA holds two versions off view that were printed in 1992 and 2013[4]. Shore's work from the 1970's, including Uncommon Places, was featured in a large retrospective at MoMA between 2017-2018 in context of his contribution to the rise in popularity of color photography[5].

Compared to Shore's typical POV style of photography, his work in Uncommon Places experiments with effacement of his presence while maintaining a sense of a natural "screenshot of [his] field of vision"[6]. This purposeful detachment catalogs visual evidence of cultural forces that cumulatively epitomize American society in the 1970s[7]. Shore's recollection of everyday experiences is addressed with an equilibrium that balances nostalgia and fine art formality in a way that contributes to the formation of the "New Topographic" aesthetic[8]. Featuring a deadpan focus on post WW2 era suburban sprawl, strip malls, and industrial modernization, the aesthetic seeks to expose the homogenization of human altered landscapes[5]. Compared to preceding American ghost town tourism-based visualizations, which tend to feature more emotional narratives, like the ruins portrayed by Muriel Wolle[9], both styles depict the environmental and social impact of modernization as communicated by outsiders that elicit heartful reminiscence of the rises and falls of a simpler time[10]. The endurance of the human spirit, through small town motifs and rural citizens, and what they leave behind, as in ghost town relics, demonstrate the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth that characterize the cultural memory of American progress and our fraught relationship with the cycles of obsolescence.

As for Kalispell, Montana, Shore captures the town on the eve of major changes. The construction of the first of three major shopping malls was then being planned; and new strip-mining operations and coal-fired power plants were having garnered Federal support. Just one year after Shore's photo was taken, the town's commercial district was transformed from a collection of family businesses and small-scale farms to a regional business hub of national corporations and interstate commerce. The original mall that brought Kalispell into its chain-story era closed its doors less than 30 years after it opened[11]. In 2025, various local organizations joined forces to transform downtown Kalispell back into a vibrant community hub[12]. As with the mining towns of the boom-and-bust era, Kalispell's urban development represents a lack of long-term sustainability in ventures pertaining to urban planning and economic development. As is necessary for successful sustainability in practice, contextual appropriateness, cultural relevance, diversification of resources, and promotion of wellbeing is neglected in monopolistic commercial development in a way that echoes the short-sightedness and economic limitations of a single-resource mining town. After all, the arid desolation depicted in the warm colored photograph is not dissimilar to the filter palate of the conventional western film. These similarities of context and representation position this photograph as a modern take on the tourist methodology and artistic communication regarding the setting sun of both the self-sufficient small American town and the wild old west.

Joel Sternfeld

Abandoned Uranium Refinery near Tuba City, Arizona, Navajo Nation 1982

An Evening in July, 2001, Looking East at Sunset

Joel Sternfeld's 1982 photograph depicts the Uranium Refinery in Tuba City in its a disheveled state of abandonment and dereliction. The photographer seems to stands on at an elevated spotvantage point, most likely a street, looking into the vast landscape.

With the foreground completely empty, our eye is immediately drawn to the abandoned factory structure in the middle ground. Unusually low in the composition of the picture—sitting beneath the horizon line / failing to pierce the horizon line—, the refinery appears small next to the a thunderstorm blooming in the background. Sternfeld leaves us with a feeling of the natural sublime, slowly fading out the industrial activity that once defined Tuba City.

In its heyday between 1956 and 1966, the refinery consumed 796,489 tons of uranium ore from nearby mines and produced almost five million pounds of fuel for the nation. Its decline came with the opening expansion of the international energy market, slowly leading to the steady downfall of industrial activity in rural areas like Tuba City, which were planned mainly around extraction and productionmaterials processing. The motive behind this image can be seen in Sternfeld's general interest in the changing national character of the United States. He explores the identity of ordinary Americans and focuses especially on rural parts of the country, where economic shifts leave visible marks on the landscape.

Sternfeld's photographic practice, emerging in the late 1970s and 1980s, is closely linked to the use of large-format color photography. At a time when color was still not fully accepted within serious documentary traditions, he embraced it the medium to reveal the subtle tones and contradictions of the American environment. His images appear calm while containing embodying deeper social and political tensions in its motive. He Sternfeld allows the landscape itself to speak, embedding human histories within seemingly ordinary scenes. His work can be seen in the broader context of photographers such as William Eggleston, Paul Outerbridge Jr., or Walker Evans, who depicted contemporary life in the United States and revealed both its aspirations and contradictionsincongruities.

His Sternfeld's work on the abandoned Uranium Refinery tells the story of the ghost town in its most traditional sense. Set in the American West, the promise of profit through material extraction opened the door for the development of Tuba City as a mining town. The site experienced extreme capital-intensive interventions but also investment before its an inevitable decline, caused by external economic forces that rendered the once-profitable business undesirable. While Tuba City as a settlement survived the migration of capital, the abandoned refinery remaineds as a memorial to former glory days that slowly fade away, as nature once again begins began to triumph eclipse over the ruins of its former adversary. In this narration of rural Arizona, one might find Tuba in a future road trip guide for industrial Western Ghost Towns.

Display of Ruins

Produced by the Ghost Town seminar at the Yale School of Architecture with Professor Elihu Rubin

Pamphlet designed by Zeid Omeish