

Steve Bingham captured this Salton Sea relic using a tripod-mounted Nikon D200 and 12-24mm f/4 Nikkor lens, at f/7.1 and 1/125 sec, ISO 100.

The Explorers'



Club

PHOTOGRAPHERS REVEAL THE MYSTERIES OF FORGOTTEN PLACES

By Lori Fredrickson

YOU'RE STANDING in the middle of a building in the middle of nowhere. It might be a roadside town off Route 66, an abandoned farm in the plains of North Dakota, or a factory long since shuttered. Paint flakes off walls, a discarded dress lies covered in dust, torn curtains move in the breeze. Pieces of a history paused in time, waiting for you, your camera and lens.

These are places that you can find just as easily in the Southwest as in the Northeast. They might be individual buildings or whole communities, homes or hospitals, in ghost towns or in cities or in small towns, around the world. And they can be some of your best photographic subjects.

"I had no intention of doing a long-term project, but then I found it very meaningful to look at these houses in a different way," says Eugene Richards of the images in his book, *The Blue Room* (Phaidon, 2008).

Famous for documentary photography of human-rights issues, Richards began capturing abandoned homes across rural areas of the U.S. following a *Life* magazine assignment in 1989. "They start to evoke all kinds of memories," he says. (You can find a full interview with him about this work at PopPhoto.com.)

Richards isn't the first to turn his lens on America's abandoned buildings, though he's certainly one of the most famous—adventurous photographers have been seeking them out for decades. But over the past several years, the subject of abandonment, whether expressed through

STEVE BINGHAM





images of depopulated rural areas or through the work of urban explorers, has become increasingly compelling to documentary and fine-art photographers alike.

The Time Is Right

Why? Perhaps because, with encroaching development, the lifespans of ghost towns and abandoned historic buildings have become even more fleeting.

Technology has also made it easier. GPS and satellite imaging and mapping technology, including such free online research tools as Bing's Bird's Eye View and Google Earth, allow you to find these hidden places.

And with today's DSLRs offering image stabilization as well as less noise at high ISOs, you're more likely to capture fantastic images using only available light.

For New Jersey studio photographer Tom Gilmour (www.primalstarestudios.com), taking

▲ **Many of the abandoned houses Eugene Richards explored, like this one in Ancho, NM, still contained mementos of previous tenants.**

◀ **Rana X captured the abandoned ironworks at left on public grounds—the Sterling Forest State Park in Tuxedo, NY.**

pictures of abandoned building sites offers a chance to create a memento of history. Having grown up just north of Asbury Park, as a teenager in 1997 he took up photography and began documenting the abandoned hotels and amusement park of its legendary resort town.

"My grandfather used to take me to ride on the carousel, and in my teenage years I watched as the amusements were boarded up," he says. "When I learned that Asbury Park had settled on a redevelopment plan, I began documenting what was left of the architecture as my MFA thesis project. My abandoned playground was my inspiration."

For Steve Bingham (www.dustylens.com), who captures ghost towns all over the West Coast, they're a reminder of a whole way of life. "These towns represent the pioneers," he says. "In mining towns, they had a hard and short life. But they were

the backbone of America."

Sometimes the impulse isn't so much to document what has disappeared as it is to capture the romantic nature of ruins. Troy Paiva (www.lostamerica.com), a San Francisco-based commercial photographer who uses abandoned buildings as settings for his light-painting images, explains that their shortened lifespan adds to the fascination. "They're really transitional. And as they decay, they change in different ways, too."

Getting in the Hard Way

You can find ghost towns through Internet forums (try www.ghosttowns.com), or by cross-checking older maps against modern ones to see which towns seem to have disappeared entirely.

Exploring ghost towns and any other abandoned sites that have been privately owned is considered trespassing—but if you take





Tom Gilmour shot the notorious Philadelphia State Hospital through a hole in the fence in 2006. It's since been torn down.

TOM GILMOUR

a candid and open approach, you can generally avoid trouble. “Once security guards understand that you’re going in there to photograph, not to steal or vandalize or drink—the first thing that they’ll think—they generally let you go,” says Troy Paiva, who has occasional brushes with security on his ghost-town expeditions.

But you run the risk of a ticket or trespassing charge, especially if the abandoned site is on an active property, such as a hospital or university. Do your best to get in and out of a property inconspicuously. If caught, it’s best not to run from authority—being as polite as possible is more likely to get you a slap on the wrist. “Grovel, if necessary,” Paiva advises.

Much Easier Access

Want to shoot an abandoned building without flouting the law or private property rights? Tom Gilmour says it’s not hard to gain legal access to sites such as historic churches and prisons.

“Historical societies are really excited about granting you access,” he says, “because you can help them bring attention to these places.” And, he adds, they can help you find fascinating subjects simply by adding your name to their mailing lists: “They put out preservation alerts.”

Caretakers of properties are also likely to be talked into a tour if you chat them up and express a real interest in the history. Large buildings, such as factories and prisons, have mostly been turned over to municipalities, which are less likely to grant access to photographers—unless you get a permit.

But, if you’re persistent, there’s always a chance that you’ll run across an official who’s enthusi-

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astic enough about photography or historic buildings to champion your cause and help you out.

Even intrepid urban explorers who rarely bother with permits look for opportunities to avoid a hassle. Take Rana X (www.rana-x.com), a Boston-based explorer who has documented ruins and abandoned historic structures across the U.S. and in Europe (we featured her work in “Adventures in the Forbidden Zone,” March 2007). She takes advantage of open houses and walking tours of structures that might otherwise pass unwitnessed. “There are amazing events that allow access to normally off-limit spots,” she says.

In New York City, there’s Open House New York (www.ohny.org/programs/tours.cfm), an October weekend in which the public can enter buildings such as the hospital on Ellis Island. In Washington, check out walking tours led by the D.C. Preservation League (www.dcpreservation.org/calendar.html).

Some sites have also been made into museums, such as

Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia and Waverly Hills Sanatorium in Louisville. Contact any historical or preservation society to find more.

Search Yourself

You can also find great subjects, often close to home, with just a little basic research. “Many historically impressive ruins are legal to access in state parks,” Rana X says.

You can find these by contacting parks departments, searching maps (on paper or online). For these and other abandoned structures, Google Earth and GPS are also your friend, along with Flickr and geotagging photo-sharing websites such as Panoramio and Waymarking.com. Just searching for “abandoned” in any of these sites will bring up a plethora, and once you pinpoint the relative area, Google Earth will help you uncover the exact coordinates.

Whether exploring a ghost town or abandoned factory, remember a few cardinal rules. Stay safe: Many old buildings



TROY PAIVA

A 113-sec exposure allowed Troy Paiva to capture a streaking light of traffic outside a former restaurant in the ghost town of Dunsmuir, CA. He swept the beam of an LED flashlight along the interior to illuminate it.

have rotting floors, so step carefully—also, bring a cell phone and make sure someone knows where you’re going. Many old buildings contain asbestos, so consider an asbestos mask for longer photo sessions and always wash your clothes afterward.

Don’t mess with the environment—definitely don’t take any souvenirs (this could get you into big trouble), and leave any tools handy for vandalism or burglary at home.

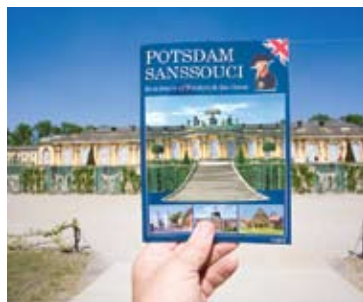
And, like all good scouts, be prepared: Download attorney Bert P. Krages’ Photographer’s Bill of Rights (www.krages.com/phoright.htm), read and memorize it, and carry a copy with you.

Such efforts are worth it because, wherever you find them, abandoned structures offer an opportunity to unravel a mystery—the hidden interiors of places that fall off of a modern map, and won’t otherwise be seen. “These [buildings] all have their own personalities,” Eugene Richards says. “With their little elemental details, they are a great presence.”



Souvenir Shots

A photographer's clever series turns kitsch into gold



Michael Hughes's 125-photo series includes (from top, left to right): Alkmaar windmills; Brandenburg Gate; Valencia Dolphinarium; copy of the David outside the Palazzo Vecchio; Buddy Holly memorial in Lubbock, TX; the Eiffel Tower; Parisian croissant; Potsdam Sanssouci; and a New York City taxi.

Michael Hughes is a professional news photographer based in Berlin. He has been working on "Souvenirs" since 1999.



LEIF ROSAS

MICHAEL HUGHES (9)

FOR MICHAEL HUGHES, inspiration came from a postcard. "I was on assignment for a newspaper 10 years ago in the Rhine Valley to photograph the Loreley rock," an outcropping where, legendarily, a siren lured sailors to their deaths. When the day dawned gray and Hughes struggled to find an interesting shot, he reached into his pocket and found a postcard given to him by his daughter.

"It had a picture of the winner of a 'Miss Loreley' competition, sitting right where I was looking," he says. When he held out the postcard, and checked the

viewfinder on his Nikon F5 with 20mm lens, it just fit. And the "Souvenirs" series was born.

The Berlin-based Hughes has shot about 125 images in 18 countries when traveling for work or pleasure. "First I find an interesting subject, then check local souvenir shops for something that works," Hughes says.

Such as? A miniature candle of the Reichstag in Berlin, an iconic red phone booth in London—or something more unusual. "I photographed my daughter's Leaning Tower-shaped ice pop in Pisa, and a keychain of the Jeff

Koons puppy sculpture at the Guggenheim Bilbao."

Now using a Canon EOS 5D and 17–40mm f/4L Canon EF lens, he sets the smallest aperture possible and shoots on autofocus. The images are for sale as 1-euro high-resolution downloads on his website, www.hughes-photography.eu, and have also been published in a short book by Fivefootsix in London.

But his project is ongoing. "You have to be open to influences around you," Hughes says. "It's nice to work in such a spontaneous way." —Lori Fredrickson