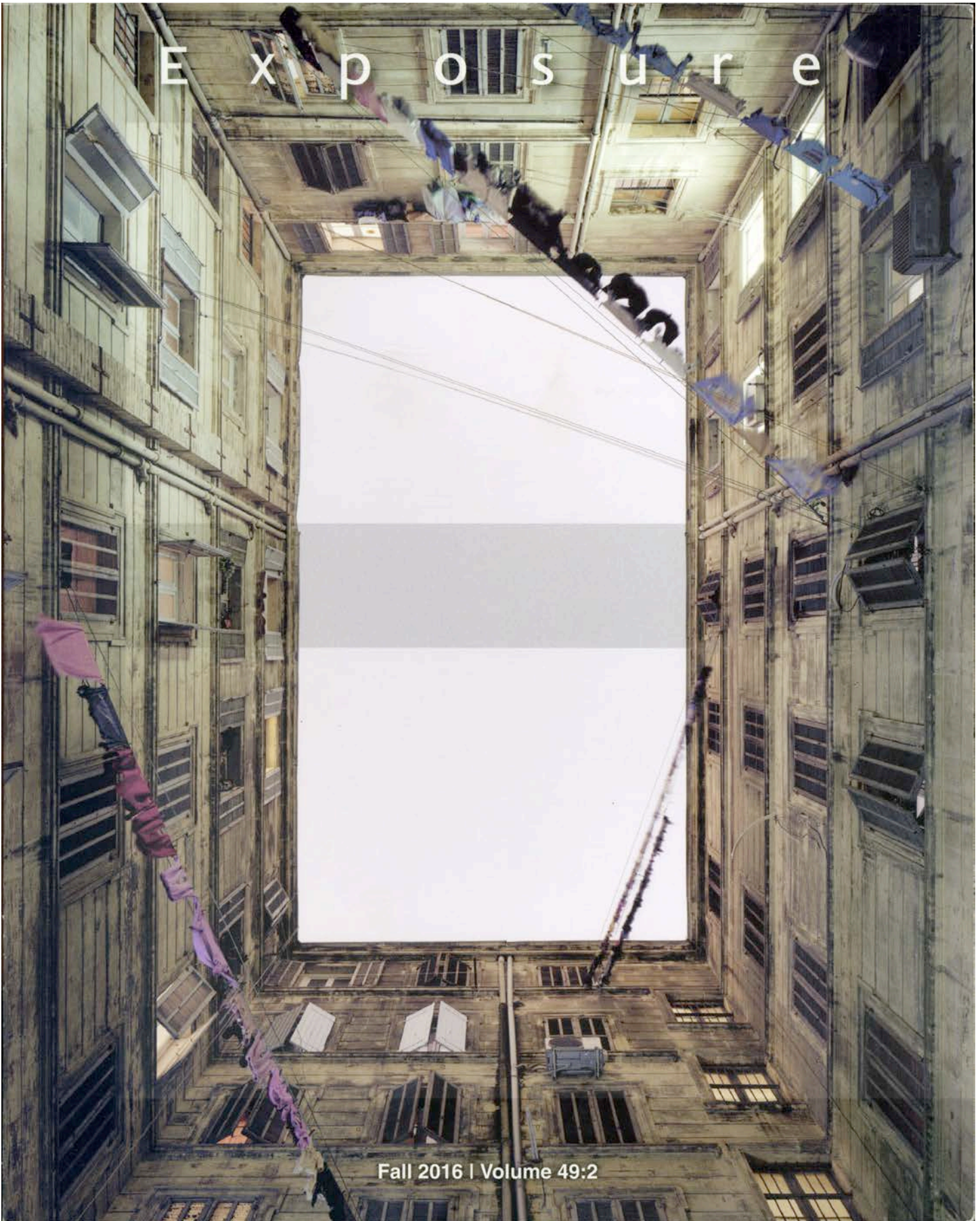


E x p o s u r e



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Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline

by Dora Apel

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The architecture, industrial infrastructure, and urban fabric of Detroit have had an extraordinary prominence in art and media culture during the past decade. Depictions of Detroit's collapsing neighborhoods and postindustrial decay are ubiquitous and popular, if also widely debated and contested, and they move with surprising ease between newspapers, magazines, artists' books, and museum exhibitions. This groundswell of attention gained strength with the global financial crises and auto industry bailouts of 2007 and 2008. It reached fever pitch in 2013, with the city's bankruptcy filing under the authority of a state-imposed emergency manager. During these years, the legendary Motor City has figured in the national news as a kind of archeological site: the abandoned home of a mythical tribe known as the middle class, on the cusp of being fully reclaimed by nature.

From one point of view—spoiler alert: it's a problematic one—there's a rebirth of sorts underway now, fueled by a wave of private investment in a few key neighborhoods and an apparent influx of young residents from more expensive metropolitan areas. (One hears constant references to Brooklyn, though the actual rate of migration from the borough is less clear.) It invites us to wonder if the moment will pass, to wonder how long the crises of this particular city will continue to stand in for the broader crises of modernity. But it also invites us to consider just how well the *image* of crisis has functioned as a branding strategy for the city, with so many broken windows and crumbling factories offered up as public

declarations of freedom and unlimited opportunity. At least for those with mobility and a bit of capital looking for a good home, this rebirth looks promising; it remains uncertain whether the revival will benefit Detroit's existing residents, who have remained in the city during decades of "white flight," or simply usher in new patterns of economic exclusion.

Dora Apel's *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* is an essential resource for anyone looking to understand the contemporary fascination with Detroit in particular, but also for those interested, more generally, in the broader economic transformations of our moment. Apel is no stranger to her subject or to its political dimensions. An art historian who teaches at Wayne State University in Detroit, Apel addresses in her work the visual culture of violence and trauma, with previous books examining lynching photography, the holocaust, and contemporary warfare. Her central premise in *Beautiful Terrible Ruins* is that "the anxiety of decline"—the fear that our economic systems have exhausted their ability to provide safety, security, or growth—"feeds an enormous appetite for ruin imagery." (9) Within this economy of images, Apel argues, "Detroit has become the preeminent example of urban decay, the global metaphor for the current state of neoliberal capitalist culture and the epicenter of the photographic genre of deindustrial ruin imagery." (3)

Apel never offers a compact definition of "ruin imagery," but it is clear that she has in mind the contemporary extension of an established historical category. If its eighteenth-century roots involved reflection upon the remains of antiquity, the contemporary version, in Apel's usage, seems to encompass nearly any image that allows us to witness destruction from a safe distance. The narrower category of "deindustrial ruin imagery," which is the real focus of the book, is somewhat easier to circumscribe. It primarily denotes representations of factories and cities—the built environments of twentieth-century industry and urbanism—as we now encounter them in an era of outsourcing, disinvestment, and population change.

Apel's primary goal is to understand the "political and cultural work" (10) that Detroit ruin imagery performs. Rather than laying down rules for photographers or emphasizing criteria for



Figure 1. Andrew Moore, *Birches growing in decayed books*, Detroit Public Schools Book Depository, 2009. From *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Damiani/Akron Art Museum, 2010). © Andrew Moore. Courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery

distinguishing “good” ruin images from “bad” ones, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins* offers a thick context, both visual and political, around a wide range of recent representations of the city’s decline. This is the book’s great strength, as well as its primary limitation. Linking projects by photographers such as Andrew Moore and Julia Reyes Taubman to eighteenth-century art theory, Internet user groups, and zombie films, as well as to the social and economic history of the region, Apel makes a compelling case for the broad national significance of Detroit ruin imagery in particular. Her assessment, at its core, is that the photographic fascination with the city’s decline feeds a mistaken belief that “Detroit’s downward spiral is either deserved or unavoidable.” (5)

First, Apel’s forays into politics and history make clear that the idea of Detroit holds at least two discrete ideas in suspension. It remains an easy shorthand for industrial modernity as a whole—thus its “unavoidable” misfortunes in a postindustrial economy—but it also stands for the trials of a black-governed and black-majority city in the era of white flight. This second

understanding frames Detroit as the nation’s internal “other,” too easily dismissed as an exceptional case, and as deserving of its fate, because of its racial difference. Against these preconceptions, the book offers a clear, unsparing (and to this regional observer, entirely accurate) summary of the corporate maneuvering and racially driven state-level politics that brought the city to its twenty-first-century condition.

Second, Apel’s forays across visual culture make clear that contemporary ruin imagery extends the logic of the sublime. Its primary function is to acknowledge our fears, particularly of forces beyond our control, while temporarily restoring our sense of mastery. And many of the images she considers, such as Andrew Moore’s photographs of urban vegetation, are indeed remarkable in capturing the advance of nature upon architecture (Figures 1 and 2). But the relevant forces behind abandoned factories are political, not natural. They are beyond our control only when we allow them to be, and they operate at local and regional scales, not just at abstract global ones. The obsession with Detroit *as ruin*, then,



Figure 2. Andrew Moore, House on Walden Street, East Side, 2008. From *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Damiani/Akron Art Museum, 2010). © Andrew Moore. Courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery

obscures the concrete political processes that abandoned and isolated the city in the postwar period and that have most recently transformed it into a laboratory for privatization, austerity, and the destruction of civic belonging. If this all seems like someone else's problem, Apel suggests, think again. In the prophetic words of longtime mayor Coleman Young, quoted in the book's conclusion: "Detroit today has always been your town tomorrow." (155)

In the strength and clarity of its political diagnosis, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins* provides an essential toolkit for thinking about the visual culture of deindustrialization. But it also leaves curious readers with opportunities for closer looking and further inquiry. To begin, the black-and-white reproductions are adequate for the development of Apel's argument—glossy color would hardly serve her purposes, after all—but readers will need to look elsewhere for a fuller sense of craft and presentation. And it's on the level of craft that the "beautiful" joins the "terrible," without doubt. Beyond

that, though, what really defines a "deindustrial ruin image"? Is it possible to photograph a damaged or decaying building without producing one? Is it subject matter, formal treatment, or use that locates a given photograph within this category? One suspects that the formal vocabulary of individual images really does matter, but also that it's not the whole story.

At several points in her book, for example, Apel turns to images from photographer Andrew Moore's 2010 book *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Damiani/Akron Art Museum, 2010). Based in New York, Moore has been a key reference in local debates about "ruin porn" (22), a phrase often invoked when Detroiters criticize the work of visiting photographers. Apel sees little value in this label, finding it overly reliant on simplistic insider/outsider distinctions, but she remains critical of Moore's focus on "reclamation by nature" (87) as a metaphor for renewal and redemption. Indeed, *Detroit Disassembled* extends Moore's



Figure 3. Scott Hocking, *The Egg and the MCTS #4718*, 2012. From the series *The Egg and the Michigan Central Train Station, 2007–2013*. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Hilberry Gallery

longstanding fascination with disappearance and change, and his interest in the effects of nature and the passage of time. Most of the book's photographs speak the visual language of architectural photography, and do so with exquisite precision (Figure 1). Moore manages his viewpoints and camera adjustments so that the formal order of his photographs always gestures toward the (original) order of the structures they depict. His pictures are always resolved and controlled at their edges, however messy the scene. This approach to photographing architecture probably shapes our assumptions and expectations. It pushes us to think about the moment of a building's construction—even more than its moment of maximum productivity—as an ideal state. Like the whole discourse of "decline" and "ruination," the language of architectural photography may encourage us to give the past more credit than it deserves. With a subject like Detroit, a city whose economic boom years came well before the civil rights era, these implicit formal biases are worth considering. Apel's book is not

organized around close readings of specific photographs, but her arguments would readily accommodate further thinking in this direction.

At the same time, there is a road-trip quality to Moore's book that cuts against the stillness and order of the individual images. The echoes of William Christenberry in the disappearing house on Brush Street provide one direct link (Figure 2), but the feeling is rooted in the layout and sequencing of the book. In the classic tradition of Walker Evans and Robert Frank, Moore favors one large or full-bleed image per spread, with a simple caption on the facing white page, punctuated by occasional spreads with facing images. The sequencing of the book is driven by visual interest, rather than the geography or chronology of Moore's subjects: photographs of particular buildings and from particular neighborhoods are scattered across the book. Compose, click, start the car, repeat. For locals resentful of the city's association with failure and decay, the nostalgia



Figure 4. Scott Hocking, *Hephaestus and the Garden of the Gods, Snow*, 2010. From the series *Garden of the Gods*, 2009–2011. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Hilberry Gallery

implicit in Moore's formal language and the transience implicit in his sequencing both reinforce his outsider status. But photography offers a long history and rich vocabulary of outsider viewpoints, and a poverty of *stable* insider ones: images that retain their intimacy after being turned loose to public circulation. What would an "insider" treatment of Detroit's deindustrialization look like?

Detroit-based artist Scott Hocking offers one approximation. In the fourth chapter of *Beautiful Terrible Ruins*, Apel juxtaposes artistic interventions in Detroit, by Hocking and others, with photographic depictions of Detroit like Moore's. Hocking has a diverse practice that spans a range of media, but he's best known for temporary, site-specific installations in abandoned buildings around the city. Working with materials found on site, like bricks, polystyrene foam, or sheet marble, Hocking typically constructs large sculptural forms and then photographs them (Figure 3).

These works foreground Hocking's extended relationship with these locations over time, often requiring months of repeated visits to complete. They also involve elements of chance and risk, since nothing guarantees Hocking's continued access to a particular place or the integrity of a work in progress from one visit to the next. Related works involve smaller interventions, like the re-positioning of a set of found televisions, with a similar attempt to record changing appearances over time (Figure 4). Once complete, Hocking's constructions are subject to the same processes of weathering and decay that affect their abandoned industrial settings. He leaves his sculptural forms to face the forces of time and nature, attempting to preserve them only in photographs.

The two works of Hocking's shown here were executed in two of Detroit's most famous ruins: the Michigan Central Station and the Packard Plant (built in 1913 and 1903 respectively),



Figure 5. Corine Vermeulen, Tiffini and her daughter Nicole, Catherine Ferguson Academy, 2011. From the series *The Walk-In Portrait Studio*, 2009–2014. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Hilberry Gallery

each an architectural and industrial landmark at the time of its completion. Hocking shares these sites not only with Moore, who has photographed both, but also with countless other artists, journalists, and tourists. This list includes Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, who first invited Moore to the city while working on their book *The Ruins of Detroit* (Cöttingen: Steidl, 2010). But Hocking asks us to think about time in a layered, more sophisticated way. The construction and eventual decay or demolition of his works invites us to consider the parallel history of the surrounding building. He asks us to think of ruination not as a single phenomenon but as a set of overlapping processes, some taking days or months and others taking years or decades. His installations partly serve to highlight the wide gap between our moment of fascination with these structures, taken as representative of contemporary Detroit, and their original moments of abandonment. As Apel notes (83–85), the Packard

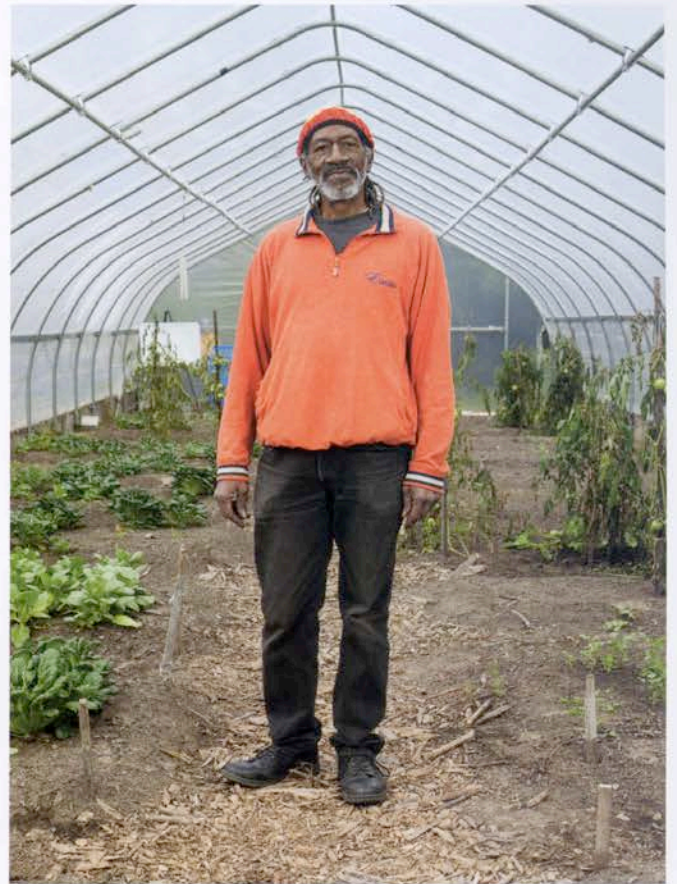


Figure 6. Corine Vermeulen, Alvin, D-Town Farm, 2013. From the series *The Walk-In Portrait Studio*, 2009–2014. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Hilberry Gallery

Plant closed in the 1950s, as competing automakers began to cut costs by seeking out non-union labor in other states. The MCS has been vacant since the late 1980s, following decades of government promotion of highway infrastructure at the expense of rail systems. Other works by Hocking, however, look much deeper into the past, toward the now-vanished Native American burial mounds that once dotted the region. Like Apel, Hocking asks us to think about longer histories and historical processes. Where Apel draws on history to underscore the urgency of contemporary politics, however, Hocking's work sometimes does the reverse, framing Detroit's recent crises as merely the latest chapter in a long process of ongoing transformation.

There are limits to the idea of Hocking as an insider, at the same time that there are potential problems with the insider/outsider distinction itself in the context of ruin imagery. Hocking

is a twenty-year resident of Detroit, and he works with a strong awareness of the city's history and contemporaneous context, but his process of assembling these temporary installations often involves a degree of "urban exploration." (The "urb-ex" phenomenon is a photographic activity highlighted in the Spring 2015 (48:1) issue of *Exposure* in Andrew Richard Schrock's and Rebecca Sittler's essay, "'Like Another World': Placing Photographic Practices of Urban Explorers"; it receives sharp critique, within Apel's book, for its emphasis on personal freedom over political or historical understanding.) By contrast, then, it's worth noting a 2006 project, *Tire Pyramid*, in which Hocking collected more than 2,000 illegally discarded tires from around Detroit, and then used them to create a temporary installation on the suburban lawn of Julia Reyes Taubman (he also paid for proper disposal). A wealthy arts patron and photographer, Taubman presents four hundred photographs from a six-year campaign of photographing the city in her book *Detroit: 138 Square Miles* (Detroit: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011). As Apel notes, the accompanying texts take great pains to differentiate Taubman's gaze from that of outsiders like Moore. It's an understandable framing strategy, given Taubman's history of remarks about damaged buildings as "monuments" worth preserving as such, without consideration of their burden on those who live around them. And yet, given that Apel's broadest political prescription in *Beautiful Terrible Ruins* is for "regional reorganization and central planning," the small links between city and suburbs seen in these projects indicate one potential avenue for both artists and viewers alike. More broadly, Apel's critical approach opens room for creative response and further reflection. Given the mass of "ruin images" already in circulation, how might we remix, re-program, or otherwise resist them? What might photographers or curators do to link this urban focus with related phenomena in suburban and rural locations, or on global scales?

As a counterpoint to the architectural focus of Apel's book, readers might begin their subsequent investigations with the work of Corine Vermeulen. One of Vermeulen's best-known projects is the *Walk-In Portrait Studio*, which ran from 2009 through 2014 (Figures 5 and 6). The project began in a small house in a residential Detroit neighborhood, where local residents were invited to trade stories for portraits, and grew to include pop-up sessions at various locations around the city. On the model of Dawoud Bey and Zoe Strauss, Vermeulen aims to work with the social connections surrounding photographs, not just the formal decisions that take place within them. One of Apel's critiques of

"Detroit ruin imagery" is its exclusion of the local population—but it has to be noted, on the one hand, that her book implicitly defines its subject as a subgenre of architectural photography, and, on the other, that photographs of the human face and human figure are as embedded in the history of violence and economic exploitation as any photographic subject. "Outsider" vocabularies are easy to find in photography. "Insider" relationships are always a work in progress.

—*Brendan Fay*

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