

Synopsis

Brian Vanden Brink is one of America's most sought-after architectural photographers. He is also drawn to the mystery and unexpected beauty found in abandoned architecture. Here Vanden Brink captures and illuminates in stunning black and white images abandoned structures such as mills, bridges, grain elevators, churches, and storefronts--structures that once were important and useful. With text by historic preservation expert Howard Mansfield, this collection of photos grants permanence to places that may soon vanish forever.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Brian Vanden Brink's photographs of a decaying America provoke both melancholy and wonder. This is a thoughtful book that is worth keeping at hand for those times when one feels a need for introspection. Each of us likes to think that we are unique with eternal visions of our lives, but in fact our place in this world is only temporary - doomed to a certain deadly end. But men and women tend to leave monuments behind, and Vanden Brink has captured those relics with his camera -- before the relics, too, turn to dust. Vanden Brink is a professional architectural photographer whose career has focused on contemporary architectural design. As he traveled around the country on assignment for such magazines as Architectural Digest, the New York Times Magazine and Down East Magazine in Maine, however, Vanden Brink's artistic eye fell on old wrecks of homes, churches, stores, factories and bridges that were all but falling down. Fortunately, he took the time to photograph his discoveries. Vanden Brink is following a grand tradition in modern photography.

The pioneer in this genre, of course, was Eugene Atget who focused on ancien France with his 19th century photographs of ghostly structures. Andre Kertesz was also a well know chronicler of fading architecture, as was Maine native Berenice Abbott. More recently, William Christenberry captured the essence of the old south with his penetrating photographs of crumbling buildings overgrown by vines and trees. Thumbing through Vanden Brink's new book, RUIN: PHOTOGRAPHS OF A VANISHING AMERICA, one is moved by consideration of each, and every photograph, to wit: 'A weathered house in Vicksburg, Virginia demonstrates considerable architectural detail such as a bay window surrounded by decorative trim with an eyebrow window perched above -- itself surrounded by an elaborate shingle design. One has to speculate about the thought that the builder of this old house put into the design detail of this structure. Who was he? What happened to him? What happened to his dream?' In Richmond, Virginia, someone has taken the time to neatly button up a fading brick structure that also shows some fine architectural detail. One wonders whether this house is headed for rebirth rather than decay that is the fate of most of the photographs in this book..' Vanden Brink photographed a handsome home in Birmingham, Alabama that has a three grand columns holding up a formal portico with a second floor balcony. This is no ordinary house and one has to speculate on who lived there in that house with such a grand vision? What caused his vision to be left to decay?' In Limestone, Maine, Vanden Brink photographed an old weapons storage facility at Loring Air Force Base, including shots of an abandoned plutonium storage vault. Plutonium? Is the nuclear age already decaying? According to Vanden Brink's photographs, that once futuristic age has passed us by.' In Sargentville, Maine, there is a distant photograph of an abandoned farmhouse sitting in a field of boulders (with a modern day bridge in the distance). One's eye searches in vain for the network of traditional stone walls that allowed farmers to till their land. Perhaps the lack of stonewalls is why the farm was abandoned.' Near the end of the book is a spread of photographs of the Bowdoin Mill in Topsham, Maine, taken in 1997. The mill in these photographs is abandoned, but one has to note that since the photographs were taken, the Mill has been renovated, housing restaurants, medical clinics and fashionable retail establishments. So maybe decay is not always inevitable. One slight criticism about this book: one wishes that there were an index with notes about each of the photographs giving whatever history may exist about each structure. But perhaps that misses the point that too often history does not record such detail. By definition, obscurity IS vague. Vanden Brink lives in Maine, so there is a preponderance of Maine photographs in this book. But it is not a book of regional photographs. Rather the photographs in this book document a period of American history that is, at once, meaningful and transient. As the photographer notes in his introduction: "Maybe these buildings fascinate me because they represent

all of us; maybe they are symbols of our own impermanent status here on earth - metaphors of our transient lives and inability to stop the passing of time...A couple of weeks before my dad died last year, my brothers and I were helping him out of his bed to go to the bathroom. As he struggled down the hall, he said quietly, "take a good look boys, this is going to be you sooner than you think." He was right. Our lives go by so quickly and we leave behind relics of our time here and of what we thought was important. Deep down I know this earth is not my home. 'I'm just passing through,' as the old gospel song says." Vanden Brink may be passing through his time, but we are fortunate that he took the time - and had the eye - to take these photographs.

I agree with all the good comments in the other reviews and in the introductory comments of the book itself. One sense one gets from seeing or indeed visiting such ruins is a sense that for at least a brief moment the place is all yours. There are no residents to disturb or to be shooing you away. In many cases, though, of such places I know of, the owners may have abandoned the property only to build a new place a few hundred yards away. The old place could not be brought up to modern standards and amenities at any reasonable cost. One place to look for abandoned homes is in National Parks where in the park formation residents were forced off their land. One such area I am familiar with is Shenandoah National Park. The local communities nearby still have descendants of those owners exhibiting a bit of hostility to what happened. In the author's state of residence, Maine, the National Park there, Acadia, on Mt Desert Island, was created instead by gifts from generous owners, the Rockefellers being one. Another great book in the same genre just published by the University of Virginia is: *Lost Communities of Virginia* Also from

The photographs were wonderful, but had hoped for more US locations. Also, text other than the specific location would have been most welcome.

LOVE ABANDONED STUFF AND BOOKS ABOUT ABANDONED STUFF. Perfect coffee table book for me :)

The book I received is missing its book jacket which leaves a plain black binding. The book itself is lovely, with beautiful photography. I didn't notice any of the detractions mentioned in some of the other reviews. Also, some very well written additions included. If you have a soft spot in your heart for deteriorating, abandoned old buildings, you will enjoy this book.

With structural "history" like this we see what man once created but no longer has the time nor talent to! To consider these structures in decay and imagine their previous glory is a testament to the poor state of the trades of today and the ingenuity of a different time.

My wife is an amateur photographer who's interests rest in abandoned buildings and rural America. This coffee table book made a great gift as she got the best of everything in a nicely bound read. I'd recommend this title for a graduation, anniversary, or any other type of occasion.

Powerful photos! It made a wonderful and much appreciated gift.

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