

Photography, Urbex and the Post-Industrial Landscape

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Published version

ROBINSON, Andrew (2016). Photography, Urbex and the Post-Industrial Landscape. In: Back Then: A Celebration of Art and Engineering, Gripple, Savile St E, Sheffield S4 7UQ, 22nd March 2016.

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Abstract for a short paper by Andrew Robinson



As a photographer and educator, who began his career by spending Sunday afternoons exploring the industrial wastelands of Tyneside in the early 1980s, I have observed with interest the rise of the contemporary trend in Urbex photography along with the utilization of post industrial spaces as backdrops and locations for contemporary photographic production.

During the 1980s many photographer's and filmmakers sought to record the decline of our manufacturing industries utilizing traditional documentary approaches and techniques. More recently contemporary trends within photographic practice, characterised by a move away from a modernist inspired objective documentary stance, to a more interior, subjective and personal form of expression have seen abandoned and disused industrial spaces repurposed as a locus for creative production by a new generation of practitioners.

As a senior lecturer in Photography at Sheffield Hallam University I have tutored many students with interests as diverse as fashion, narrative tableaux, landscape and documentary who have appropriated the numerous disused post industrial spaces in the city as part of their art or commercial practice. A shift from the formal documentation of these sites to their appropriation as locations for alternative arts and creative production is recognized. These spaces, often richly decorated by colourful, illustrative and figurative graffiti, provide an 'off grid' location for experimentation and transgression.

This short paper will both introduce and consider a range of such work and place it in the context of historical photographic production in an attempt to identify key elements of this interesting relationship between art practice and former engineering spaces. Profusely illustrated with the work of practitioners including Chris Killip, Ian Macdonald, the Amber-Side collective, Ian Beesley, Nadav Kander, Dan Dubowitz, Clive Eggington, Ron O'Donnell, Georges Rousse and Phlegm along with a selection of student work, the paper will identify recurrent themes and approaches. Using student commentary this paper will consider the different narratives provided by such post-industrial spaces in the visual lexicon of contemporary photographers and artists.

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