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American Ruins



Synopsis

The deterioration of the American inner city stands in stark contrast to the prosperity characteristic of the United States for much of the twentieth century. Skyscrapers that once defined the modern era stand derelict and abandoned. Massive industrial manufactories lie rusting, their cavernous interiors dark. Formerly vibrant theaters shed bricks and terra-cotta ornaments. These desolate fragments of America's cityscapes are the legacy of decades of proud investment in the urban realm followed by decades of devastating neglect. Photographer and sociologist Camilo José Vergara has spent years documenting the decline of the built environment in New York City; Newark and Camden, New Jersey; Philadelphia; Baltimore; Chicago; Gary, Indiana; Detroit; and Los Angeles. His photographic sequences "images of the same sites taken over the course of many years" show once-sturdy structures as ghostly ruins and then as empty lots or flimsy new buildings. Grand civic edifices "the Michigan Central Railroad Station in Detroit, the Essex County Jail in New Jersey, the Camden Free Public Library" have become empty, roofless shells, dusted with snow in the winter and filled with stray plant and animal life in the summer. Monumental commercial and industrial buildings such as RCA Victor's "Nipper" Building in Camden and the Packard Automobile Plant in Detroit bear broken windows and rubble-strewn interiors. At once a scathing critique of national indifference to the plight of the inner city and a meditation on the aesthetic impact of desolate and neglected buildings, *American Ruins* stands as a witness to a vanishing era of the American city.

Book Information

Hardcover: 224 pages

Publisher: The Monacelli Press (December 6, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1580930565

ISBN-13: 978-1580930567

Product Dimensions: 9.4 x 1 x 11.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.3 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (11 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

This is a fascinating book of documentary photography. The author is entranced by abandoned structures. His viewpoint of these tragic, yet often eerily beautiful buildings is made clear by a quotation he provides from a play by Fernando Pessoa, i.e. he fantasizes about the life that went on in them when they were alive. These are pictures from a graveyard, and we, as readers, are attending a memorial service, with Mr. Vergara providing a well-written eulogy. When first leafing through the book I immediately thought of Jacob Riis, the turn of the century photographer who photographed the New York slums. This thought also occurred to someone providing a review on the dust jacket of the book. I ended up revoking this comparison, however. Mr. Vergara's task here is not to provide social commentary. For the most part he simply loves these buildings. I feel that he would not even care to see many of them restored, but envisions leaving them in a state of arrested decay, like the large ghost town of Bodie in California. Recently, in a series of articles on corporate welfare, Time magazine remarked on the fact that wealthy corporations often easily abandoned obsolete sites, showing no concern over the blight they caused in the community. So here we see derelicts owned by RCA, a company that could afford to tear them down or restore them for community use. My point is that this book may raise many thoughts regarding American community problems, but Mr. Vergara is not here to deal with these issues. And that is really OK, too, as the book is wonderful just as sort of an archaeological document. My one disappointment is that the book covers only a few cities: New York, Detroit, Chicago, Gary, Camden, and the South Bronx. For a sequel I would suggest that Mr.

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