

Rising from the Ruins: The Aestheticization of Detroit's Industrial Landscape

Detroit has negotiated the transition to the post-industrial era through the artistic celebration of its ruins. These spectacles have kept Detroit an object of fascination, and have attracted travellers, explorers, scholars, and artists. Although the city has seen few physical acts of renewal, the consistent attention and proliferation of photographs depicting the 'modern ruins' act as a method of urban renewal.

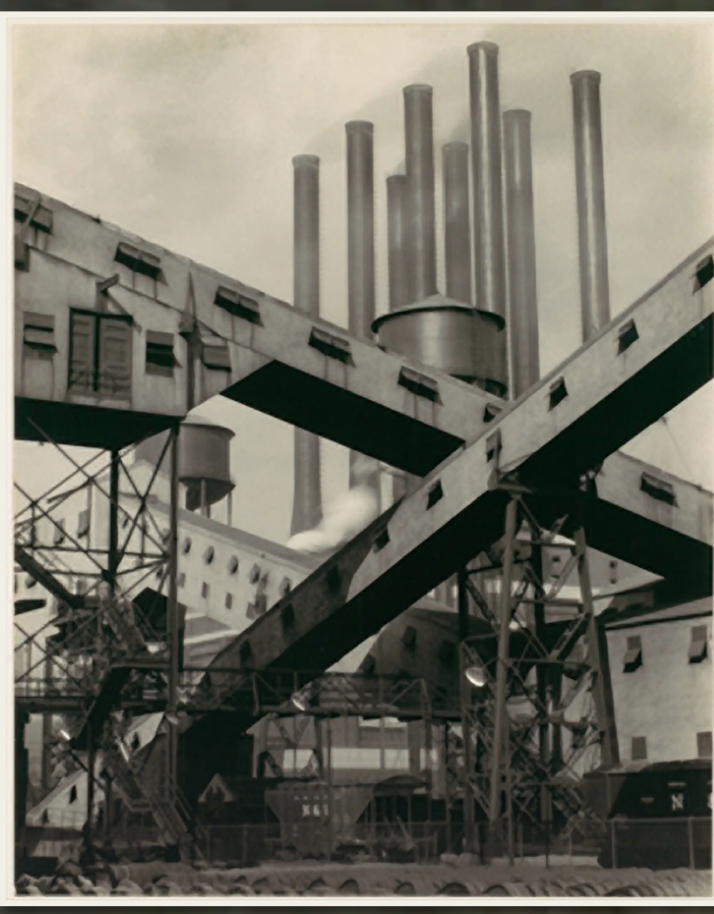


Fig. 1 Charles Sheeler, *Ford River Rouge, Criss-Crossed Conveyors*, 1927.



Fig. 6 Julia Reyes Taubman



Fig. 2 Andrew Moore, *Rolling Hall, Ford River Rouge*, 2008



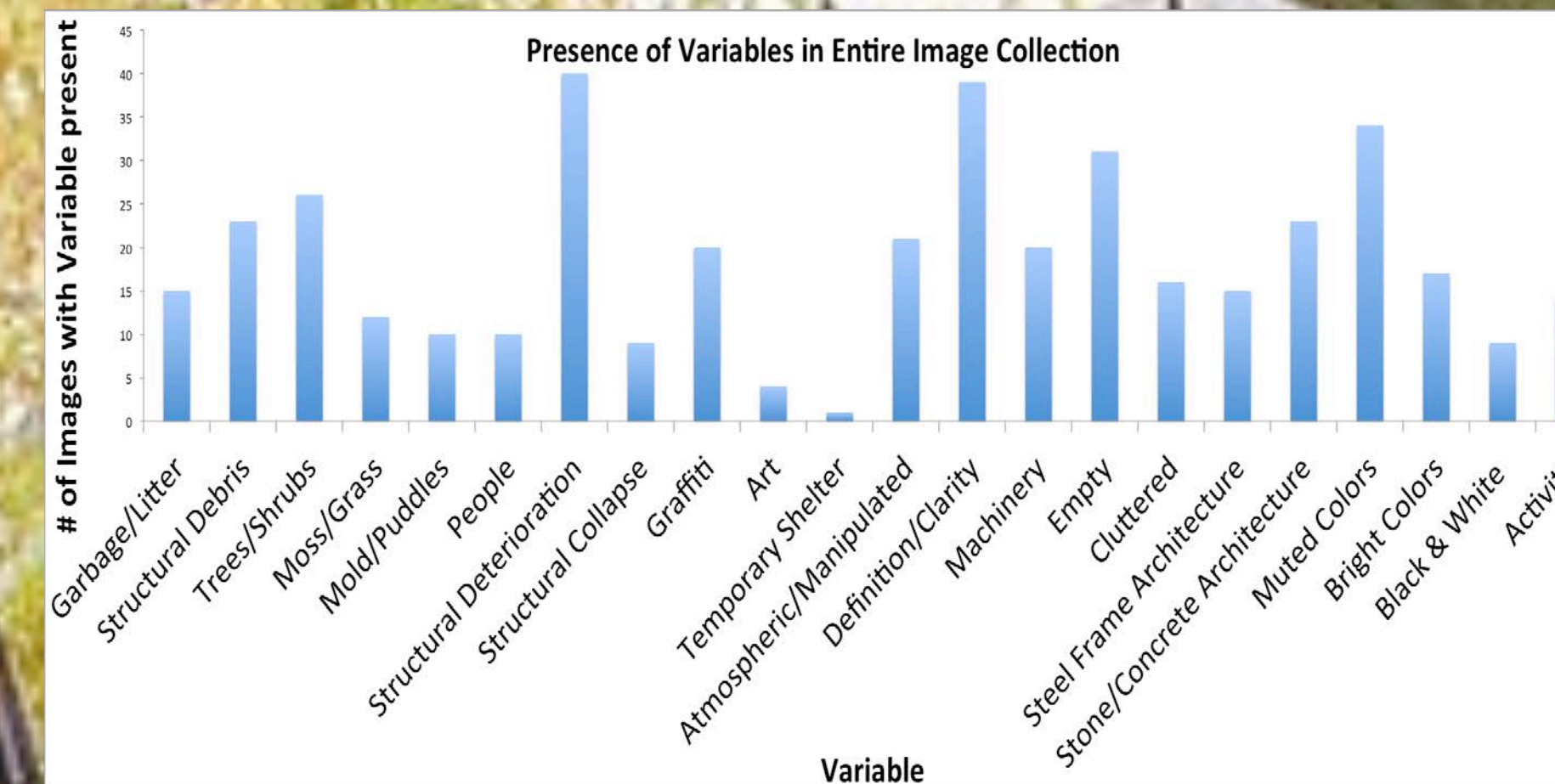
Fig. 4 Scott Hocking, *Miller Pigeons*

Background

- American cities were built around industry, and relied on production for economic success. The post-industrial era shifted the focus of (Western) cities to abstract concepts (software, research, high-education) rather than industrial production.
- Industrial cities have negotiated the transition in three ways: gentrification, a fall to decline and dereliction, or become celebrated as ruins.
- Ruins have never been thought of or accepted into the American landscape. The landscape went from untouched wilderness to dominated by factories and industry. It emphasized progress.
- Humanity has always been fascinated by ruins. It's been argued this is because the ruin is where the forces of humanity and "nature" coexist. The visitor is given utmost freedom for exploration and activities—modern ruins are not preserved or managed as classical ruins are.

Methodology

- 60 images, 10 photographs by 6 different artists (foreign and native, commercial and independent) were analyzed
- Images were chosen specifically of industrial sites (factories, railroads, warehouses, office spaces, and worker housing) to explore the state of these spaces today, and how they are being portrayed.
- Artists: Michelle Andonian, Yves Marchand & Romain Meffre, Scott Hocking, Andrew Moore, Camilo José Vergara, Julia Reyes Taubman
- Content analysis: Explored elements pertaining to three narratives
 - Picturesque Ruins
 - Post-Apocalyptic
 - Urban Reclamation



Results

- The most prominent were structural debris, emptiness, clarity/definition, muted colors, structural deterioration, trees/shrubs, and stone architecture.
- The least prominent were those that conveyed a narrative of reclamation—shelter, art, people, mold/puddles, and structural destruction.

Artist	Features
Scott Hocking	Atmospheric photographs of moments found around the city, less manipulated and more instantaneous. Photographs 'Garden of the Gods' (his art installation).
Andrew Moore	Highest presence of graffiti, focused largely on empty spaces, only artist to photograph shelter/residence.
Michelle Andonian	Focus is on industrial spaces still in use, juxtaposes workers with their machine counterparts. Black and white photographs taken journalistic style.
Yves Marchand & Romain Meffre	No people or reclamation, emphasis entirely on architecture and physical space.
Julia Reyes Taubman	Only image of residential neighborhood, didn't focus on one type of environment over another, very little use of text, similar attention to structural deterioration, photographs largely atmospheric
Camilo José Vergara	Documents buildings over time. Uses photographs as record, so there's less attention to detail and color.

Interpretation

- Shows an aestheticization of the industrial sites. Hints to an acceptance of decline. The photographs romanticize the decay, and portray the city as post-apocalyptic. There are no people, and an emptying of space.
- The coexistence of both the picturesque and the post-apocalyptic creates the "post-apocalyptic sublime".
- The industrial is eliminated, allowing the natural world to take over. The fact that trees and shrubs were most prevalent form of nature emphasizes longevity. Although nature is not always present, the images often 'naturalize' industrial spaces (ex. stalactites give the appearances of a cave, or icicles)

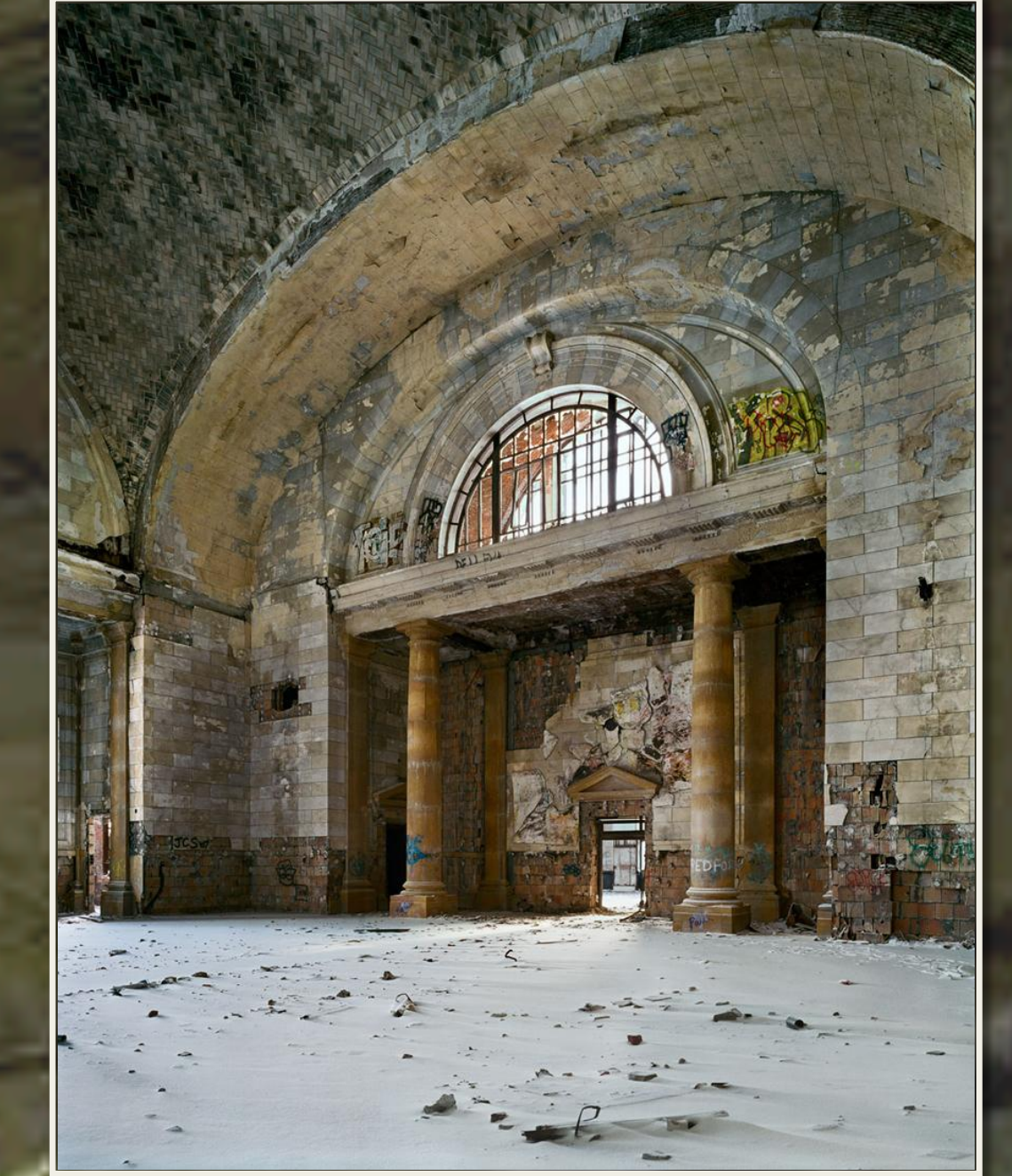


Fig. 4 Camilo José Vergara

Conclusions

- Illustrating a re-assimilation with nature. This appeals to contemporary environmentalists desires. The images evoke pre-industrial times.
- The photographs appeal to those who have distance from the ruins—those who can appreciate and find beauty in decay. Those who do live there have criticized images as 'ruin porn', an exploitation of their city and a fetishizing of urban decline.
- The 'picturesque ruins' are attracting artists from all over. They arrive with expectations.
- The artists are, essentially, creating an artistic movement around the city: they are conversing with each other, they are following a similar 'itinerary' throughout the city, and emphasizing the city's vitality in their statements of purpose.
- Images attract urban explorers and adventure tourists and have led to organized guides through the ruins (i.e. DetroitUrbEx)
- Images act to continue conversation, which is an aspect of renewal, but the subjects do not convey renewal.

References

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