



Urban Exploration Photography

A GUIDE TO CREATING AND EDITING IMAGES OF ABANDONED PLACES

Todd Sipes



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This book is dedicated to a number of people, but first and foremost to my beautiful wife for letting me sneak out before dawn so that I could find and photograph dangerous places. I love you, Jay.

To Mom, Dad, and Laurel for always supporting the crazy things I've tried throughout my life. To all my friends who have joined me on my explorations and helped me grow as a photographer: Adam Heckaman, Nick McCoy, Stefan Roumell, Jason Bodenheimer, Jesse Krieger, Amy Heiden, Quenton Hamlin, Brian Matiash, Dan Hughes, Michael Rosati, Scott Haefner, Jonathan Haeber, Stephen Freskos, Nate Johnson, Chelsea Barada, Nicky Pedroia, Gary Utley, Colby Brown, and Michael Bonocore. You are all amazing and I can't thank you enough.



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About the Author

Todd Sipes is an award-winning photographer who resides in the San Francisco Bay Area. He specializes in urban exploration and concert photography, and has explored and photographed countless abandoned structures, beginning at 10 years old while growing up in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

With a deep-seated interest in history, he earned his BA degree in American History at the University of California in Santa Cruz, and then pursued his MBA degree at the University of San Francisco. When Sipes isn't getting his hands dirty exploring, he plays drums, loves to travel, snowboards in Lake Tahoe, and spends time with his wife, Harasyn. Find out more about Sipes and his work at www.toddsipes.net.



INTRODUCTION

The term “urban exploration”—aka UrbEx and UE—sounds like it should be pretty self-explanatory. The term, however, has morphed and mutated from its literal meaning. Today, it represents a community of people who like to explore and photograph man-made structures that have been abandoned or are off-limits to the general public.

Despite varied definitions, nine times out of ten when people mention urban exploration, they are talking about entering abandoned buildings to take pictures. Other popular activities that fall under the UrbEx definition are draining (exploring drains), craning (climbing cranes), and infiltration (exploring active buildings). My expertise resides with abandoned buildings, so this book focuses on that subject matter.

About This Book

For photographers, abandoned and derelict structures provide an abundance of interesting subject matter to shoot, but they’re not for everyone. I view urban exploration as the “heavy metal” of the photography world. It’s aggressive, difficult to execute, and often misunderstood. It’s a genre that most photographers don’t attempt because most people pick up a camera and only want to take pictures of their kids, flowers, landscapes, food, etc. (ya’ know, normal stuff). It takes much more commitment to gather the extra gear, locate an abandoned building, figure out how to get inside without hurting yourself, and then take photos while battling multiple photographic variables. For me, it’s one of the few photographic

genres that gets my blood pumping, and it's certainly the only genre that will get me out of bed at 4 a.m. so that I can be ready to shoot at sunrise.

I'm writing this because I've never seen a how-to guide specifically catering to urban exploration photography. And because it's a unique genre of photography, I think it deserves its own book. Keep in mind that numerous fantastic UE photographers probably have their own tips and tricks. While this guide is purely based upon my personal experience, I think it can truly help anyone improve their UrbEx photography.

In terms of the information you'll find in this book, I'm the type of person who just likes to know the essentials on how to get from point A to point B. I don't like to dig through tons of extraneous information to get a job done. With that said, I'm going to take you through the essentials for every step along the UrbEx way.

Is there more you could learn? Absolutely. I'm going to let you decide the topics for which you want more information and seek it out for yourself instead of covering everything there is to know about every facet of photography in this book. I don't want you to become distracted or discouraged by providing too much information; I want to give you the essentials so that you can get a head start with the UE genre or fill in the gaps for specific topics if you're already a seasoned photographer.

- **Disclaimer 1:** This is not a how-to guide for urban exploration, itself. For that, there's a much more comprehensive guide called *Access All Areas* by Ninjalicious. This book covers every aspect of UE photography, so there's no point in reproducing something that's already been done so well. Instead, while I do touch upon some preparation tips, this book is all about photography. The only thing I'll reiterate is this: "Take only pictures, leave only footprints." Respecting locations means that other people get to enjoy them the same way you did. Don't steal. Don't vandalize.

- **Disclaimer 2:** I'm writing this under the assumption that you understand basic camera functions and also have a solid grasp on the exposure triangle. If you ever get confused, you can easily find more information on any of the photography terms used in this book by searching online.
- **Disclaimer 3:** Urban Exploration may entail risks of all sorts—including some which can be both illegal and lethal—and this book in no way encourages illegal or dangerous activity of any kind! Urbex can also be completely legal and safe. So take all that into account and use good judgment and caution when considering where you go to explore and shoot.

Downloadable Content

This book uses a few files in some of the tutorials and walkthroughs in the book. These files are available for you to download.

Please visit www.peachpit.com/register and follow the instructions for registering this book in order to download that additional content.

THREE

WHAT TO SHOOT

Now that we've covered how to compose and shoot your photos, let's chat about what to put in those photos. Urban exploration is a unique genre because it involves static scenes that, as a photographer, you have to make interesting. You're not shooting amazing landscapes like the Golden Gate Bridge at sunset, where the scene speaks for itself.

Your job is to capture beauty in unforgiving photographic circumstances. My experience with UrbEx has taught me that combinations of organic and synthetic elements create our scenes. It's up to you to decide how to capture these elements.





This mysterious hatch was shot in the early morning light. I consider this shot a perfect balance of organic and synthetic elements.



Shooting Organic Elements

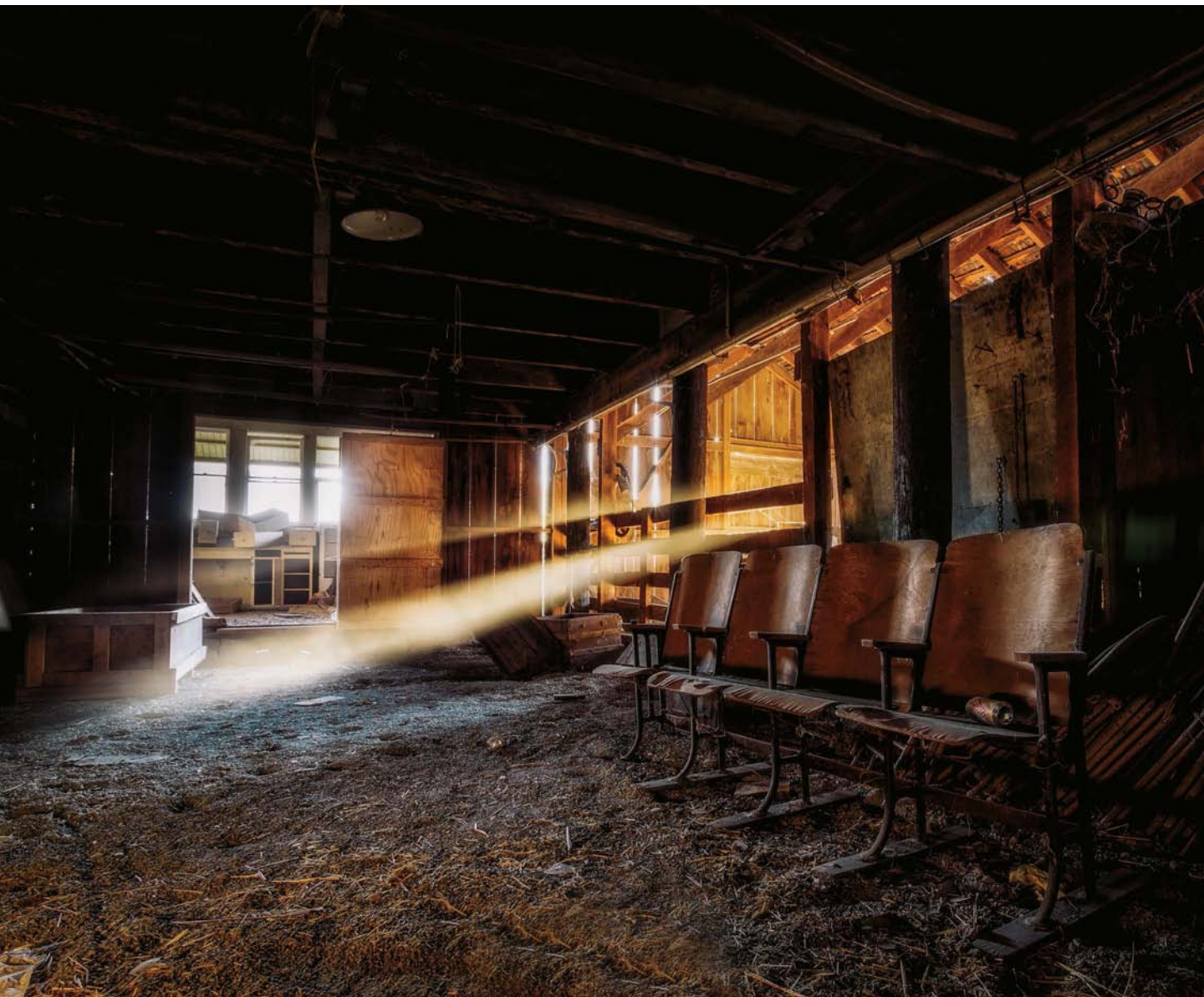
The organic elements in UrbEx photography are the most difficult to work with because they're usually out of your control. With that said, these are often the most important elements for creating a dramatic photo. Over time, abandoned places are reclaimed by nature. By timing your explorations, you can capture some dramatic scenes that truly highlight the balance between nature and your location's man-made structures.

Light Beams

Depending on the location, you can use harsh light to your advantage. Exceptionally dusty places will have natural light beams flowing through windows, collapsing ceilings, or even decaying walls. Light beams are really visible only when the light particles bounce off something in the air. If there's nothing to bounce off, you can give those particles something to bounce off! If you can see light beaming in but are having a hard time capturing light beams in-camera, here are six steps to help you:

1. Make sure you're wearing a respirator.
2. Set your camera on a 10-second timer or use a wireless trigger.
3. Run into your frame where the light beams are pouring in.
4. Kick up dirt and dust from the ground.
5. Run out of the frame.
6. Take your shot.

TIP I highly recommend that you wear a respirator because a majority of abandoned places were built during a time when asbestos was commonly used. As these buildings decay, that asbestos falls from the ceiling to the ground. The same can be said for a bunch of other nasty chemicals that you certainly don't want to be breathing. Additionally, check the floor before you start kicking around. If the floor feels unsafe to be walking on, you definitely don't want to push your luck by stomping and kicking around on it.



(above) I used the method described here to accentuate the light beams that were already visible in this abandoned barn.

(right) Sometimes you get lucky and nature does the work for you. Fog was rolling into this historic psych ward just as the sun was coming out. I didn't have to kick up dirt at all. I just set up my tripod and shot as many different angles as I could.



Overgrowth

Depending on the age of the location, there's a chance you'll have some plant life growing out of the floor, coming in the windows, or draping through the ceiling. Use that foliage to your advantage! Plants that grow naturally within a building are one of the unique aspects of UrbEx photography. The lives of natural organisms that are "reclaiming their territory" serve as a great symbolic offset to the death and decay of a man-made structure. Very few genres of photography are able to capture such a condition, especially on the grand scale of entire buildings.

How many other photographers can say they've had the opportunity to photograph plants growing out of the floor of a building?





Capturing Synthetic Elements

The synthetic elements found in abandoned places can be easier to work with than organic elements because they can sometimes be moved around and relocated for a better composition. These elements typically give viewers a better sense of how the structure was used and the types of people who used to inhabit it.

While some of the larger synthetic elements cannot be moved and may even be built into the structure, they can still serve as a great photo subject. In my personal adventures, reoccurring elements like artifacts, chairs, graffiti, windows, peeling paint, and machinery have all made excellent subjects. If you see something in an abandoned place that doesn't fit within these categories, however, shoot it! The more unique, the better!

Artifacts

Personally, I think artifacts are the most interesting things to photograph in an abandoned location. Items that were left behind and remained undisturbed since a location's closure truly tell the story of that place's history. They encourage your viewers to put themselves in the scene and understand the age of the location. Not only do I find them some of the most interesting elements of urban exploration, artifacts become more and more difficult to find as the locations get older.

When I'm exploring a structure, artifacts are the first things I look for because they help me piece together the types of activities that occurred there. Items such as calendars, small machinery, documents, clothing, furniture, and commercial goods will serve as interesting subjects for your photos.

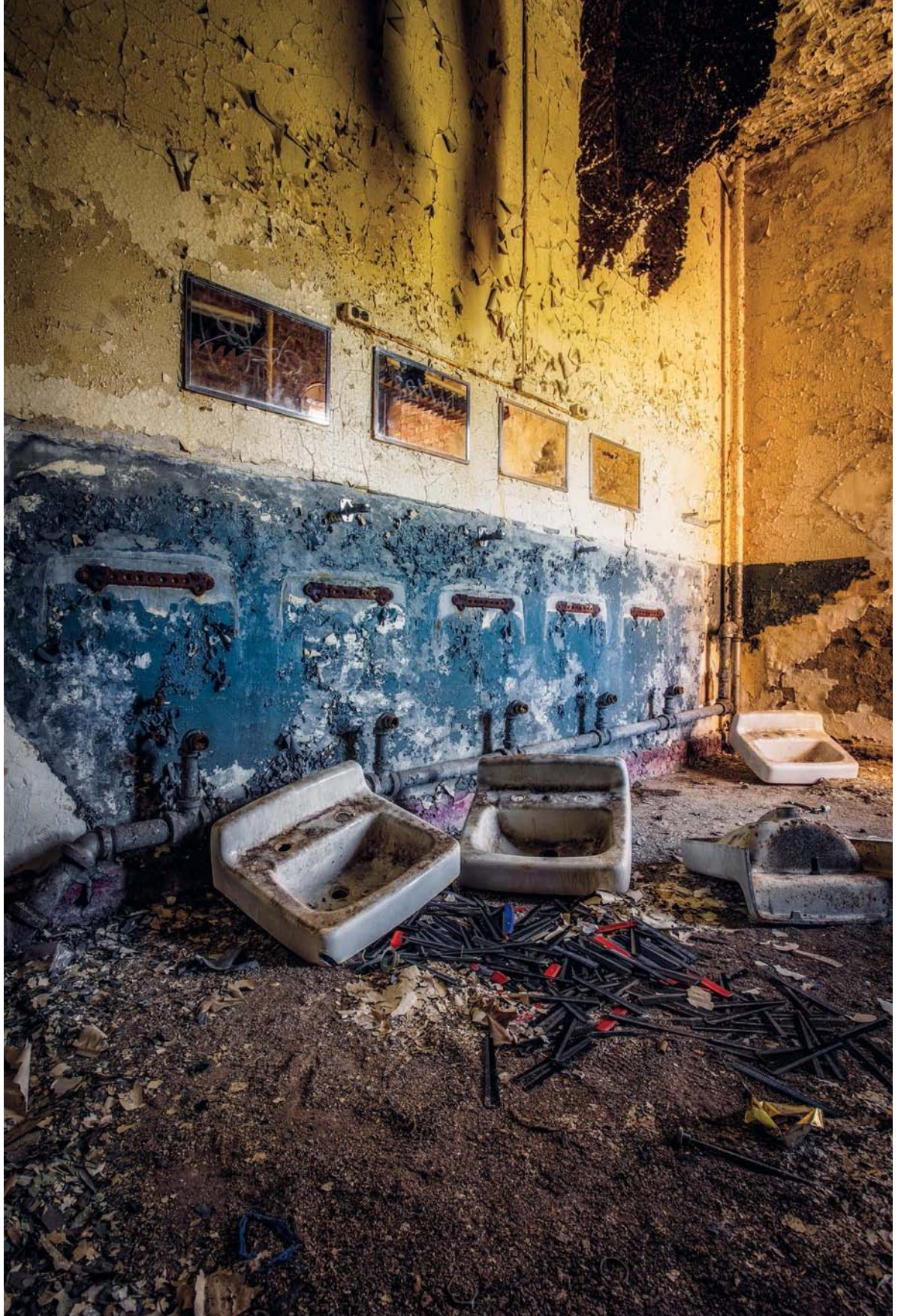
I found this bowl sitting perfectly in the hallway of an abandoned hospital. All I had to do was wait a few minutes for the sunbeam to hit it. A benefit of shooting at sunrise is that the light changes so quickly that you don't have to wait around for hours for the light to be right.





Photographs and papers in this abandoned house told an extensive story about the people who once lived here. There were even pictures dating to the 1940s depicting the construction of the house itself.

One old psychiatric hospital had a pile of combs in front of its sinks. I was told that before vandals ripped the medicine cabinets off the walls, you could even find old toothbrushes and assorted toiletries. To non-explorers, this must sound absolutely insane; but for the explorers, these items are treasure just waiting to be photographed. The basement of this place was a room that consisted of three collapsed floors' worth of artifacts. I could've spent a week there.



Chairs

Almost every time I go exploring, I find a chair sitting in an abandoned place. The location may have been completely scrapped and destroyed, but without fail, a lone chair remains. This phenomenon is so prevalent in the exploring world that there are Facebook pages and Google+ communities dedicated to it.

(below and opposite) I took the first shot in a naval administration building, the second in a military weapons facility, and the third in a water treatment plant. Chairs reside in almost every abandoned place I've visited.



Because they are so abundant, chairs serve as great counterpoints for compositions. Nothing is more boring than a big empty room. No matter how much awesome peeling paint and decay you have in your frame, it will still feel empty and bland. A chair is a great compositional element that will really round out your shot. Chairs also give the viewer an idea of when the location was in use, because chair design is usually indicative of an era. There's an unmistakable difference between a 1970s La-Z-Boy and a classroom chair from the 1990s.





Graffiti

Graffiti is a hotly debated topic within the UrbEx community. Some photographers love it because it adds character to an otherwise boring old building. Other photographers hate it because graffiti can ruin amazing historical architecture.

I subscribe to the latter opinion—most of the time. I’m a historian at heart and I hate seeing historically significant buildings marred by unintelligible scribble. Having said that, I can absolutely appreciate graffiti artists who are good at their craft. I would just prefer that they don’t further destroy property, regardless of how destroyed it was when they found it. The three ways that I use graffiti are as follows:

- **Graffiti wisdom:** Interesting quips or quotes, not just tags, *do* add to the character of a scene. They can even be the subject of your composition. I call this “graffiti wisdom.” When I run across some graffiti that makes me chuckle, I’ll take a shot of it but I always try to round out the composition with another element. Otherwise, I’m just a graffiti documentarian.
- **Texture:** Graffiti can add great texture to a scene, but pay close attention to your subject. Bright spray paint can create a horrible distraction in your overall composition. Most of it can be fixed in post-processing, but there’s no sense in giving yourself extra work, right? What you’re really looking for is graffiti that can contribute to the mood of your scene without detracting from your subject.
- **Mood:** Another use for graffiti is to serve as colorful bokeh. If you’re shooting close-up detail shots, try shooting between $f/2$ and $f/5.6$ so that the graffiti adds moody color to the room without directly competing with your subject.

Some people like to shoot big, colorful pieces of graffiti. I don’t think it leaves much room for other subjects in a photo, so I try to shoot more subdued forms of graffiti.





Windows

TIP If windows are not the focus of your composition, try to avoid having them around the edges of your shot. They can be terribly distracting because they are typically so much brighter than your subject (depending on the time of day that you're shooting). Nothing will catch your viewer's eye faster than a bright white light around the frame of your photo.

Windows can serve as great compositional elements as long as they have light coming through them. If no dramatic contrast is provided by the windows, they don't offer themselves as interesting subjects. I particularly try to use them for natural light beams. If interesting subjects are outside the windows, by all means try to capture them. If not, I suggest using windows as a counterpoint for other compositional elements.

The windows and the light coming through them are clearly the focus of this shot. Although this room in a former military administration building is interesting in a historical sense, it didn't offer much to shoot because the building had been cleared out.





The window shades in this bathroom had a slight blue tint that gave the room a great color and served as an ideal counterpoint to the pink shower curtain.

Peeling Paint

(opposite) This military facility was built in the mid-1800s, and the peeling paint is evidence of that. The level of decay provides a context for the building—otherwise, this shot would just be a broom in a basement.

In my opinion, the most interesting texture for UrbEx photos is peeling paint. It's the quintessential representation of age, wear, and decay. Peeling paint usually indicates that a place has been undisturbed for quite some time. For both photography and general interest, "the older the better" is my motto. Peeling paint not only gives viewers an idea of your location's age but also provides amazing textural design. Some people like rust and some people brickwork; I prefer peeling paint over any other texture. Rarely, it can be the lone subject in a wide-angle shot, but it can certainly serve as a great subject in a close-up detail shot.



This abandoned elementary school had great peeling paint throughout the entire building. The patterns that formed are interesting in themselves. As you can see, sometimes traditional subjects aren't necessary.





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Handwritten text in red ink, possibly "DANGER" or "STOP", on a metal plate.



Machinery

Machinery, when available, is my first choice for a compositional element. Depending on where I am, figuring out a machine's purpose is usually guesswork because I'm no engineer. Does that mean I can't take a great photo of it? Absolutely not! I've come across giant control panels, massive cranes, and other pieces of machinery that are almost too big to shoot. Almost.

It's always a challenge to understand how an old factory worked based on the machinery you find, but it's an even bigger challenge to fit these pieces of machinery into a decent composition. It may not be the size of the machinery that's the problem—it may be the very tight space you're limited to for capturing the shot. This is where a fisheye lens can really make the difference for a wide shot. At times I've had to accept defeat and settle for detail shots so that my viewers could still understand the place without any good wide shots.

These conductor controls hadn't been used in a very, very long time. In fact, wasps had taken up residence in the ceiling, so I had only one chance to nail this shot before I became a target.

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