

# SHOT TO DEATH: THE FATE OF ABANDONED PLACES IN THE HANDS OF ARTISTS

Nezaket Tekin

*Dokuz Eylül University, İzmir, Turkey*

**Abstract:** This essay discusses the use of abandoned places by photographers. I review this subject from a perspective of remembering and forgetting. Giving examples of artists, especially photographer's works whose subjects are abandoned places in Izmir and Detroit, I interpret photographs of abandoned places in the context of hauntology and ghost-metaphors.

**Keywords:** Abandoned places, photography, Izmir, Detroit, hauntology, ghost.

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is possible to see non-functional places for personal, economic or political reasons nearly everywhere such as unclaimed properties, closed factories, disused stations or places which have been damaged during the war. Some of these places have been restored and have become functional once more. But generally they start to serve different purposes. For example, the ancient Town Gas Factory in Izmir has been restored and converted to a culture center.

Demolished private properties usually have people-oriented stories. Their owners have died and there is no one to claim the house. Otherwise the house stays untouched because of various inheritance issues. There are a substantial number of abandoned Greek houses in Izmir which have been deserted by their owners and where furniture and many other objects remain. From time to time these houses are used by homeless people. Sometimes they are secretly visited by photographers, but I will come back to photographers later. Now, most of these Greek houses are being used as cafés or bars. They are much luckier than the other houses which have been left to time. However, although their structures have been strengthened, in the process they have lost their memories entirely. On the other hand, it is hard to say that houses which have nearly been demolished are helping us to recall history. They have been trapped among other buildings and totally covered by plants, and thus have now become nearly invisible. This is especially the case now that nearly a century has passed, and new generations are only looking at their town on Google Earth. Many of these buildings have been restored by

local management and some of them now serve as museums. But not one of them is for Armenians, Greeks or Levantines because there is still an ongoing discussion as to who started the Great Fire of Izmir in 1922. Personal belongings and objects disappeared with time together alongside the houses. These objects belong to someone else's memory. It is getting harder to give a meaning to what we see because as an individual and society we are losing our memory. According to Maurice Halbwachs, "Memory is alive and it only exists while it communicates, when the lines of this communication disappear or change, memories will be lost. People only recall the things that they put in the frame of common memory" (Sancar, 2010 : 42).

According to Jan Assmann, "Memories want to materialize and update figures in a specific place and a specific time...They always exist in a physical place and time even it is not geographical or historical" (Assmann, 2001 : 42). Similarly, the policy of recalling needs a place. To memorialize success and suffering, monuments and museums are made. For example, to commemorate the Jewish genocide in the Second World War, many monuments and museums have been built which transfer the history to following generations. However, focusing on a specific aspect alone and noticing only some parts of collective memory could result in weak memories becoming lost forever. For example, when the first Holocaust monument opened in Germany, lots of people criticized the fact that not all the Nazi victims were memorialized. Thus, some additions to include homosexuals and gypsies were later added (Traverso, 2009 : 52).

Susan Sontag asks "but why is there not already, in the nation's capital, which happens to be a city whose population is overwhelmingly African-American, a

Museum of the History of Slavery?" (Sontag, 2003 : 69) According to her, the U.S.A. is looking elsewhere trying to hide their evil doings, such as the slavery of Afro-Americans. They choose to commemorate the darkness which they weren't part of (Traverso, 2009 : 49).

City archives and museums are built to create urban consciousness, to make a city's cultural and historical values recognizable, and to make a connection between its past and the present. Pierre Nora criticizes: "Today private investors and governments open their doors to archivists to protect everything. But professionals know that it is an art of systematical elimination" (Nora, 2006 : 26). Can we know what isn't in the archives? Are we informed of demolished buildings or streets whose names were changed? "Archive it, and archive it again but there will always be something left" (ibid. : 26).

Monuments, ceremonies and museums are made for the sake of remembering historical and social events, but on the other hand they could make us forget events which have been left out. We see the same kind of criticism in art history. An example of someone who mentioned this problem is Ex- French Minister of Culture and writer André Malraux. In his book "The Voices of Silence" which he wrote in 1947, he criticized how Western critics had shaped our recognition of an art piece and our way of defining a masterpiece. He made these criticisms based on painting and sculpture in particular. He also criticized the fact that understanding of art was European-centered and left out other cultures' arts such as African and Asian. Photography shatters this elitist understanding. With reproducible photographic techniques many artworks have become accessible, and artworks have had the chance to meet in a "museum without walls," thus making art more democratic (Tekin, 2010 : 58).

## II. DETROIT AND TOURISM OF RUINS

Ford Motor Company opened its first factory in Detroit U.S.A. in 1903. The work force and population consequently grew. The measure of economic comfort can be understood from the structures built in Detroit, such as the ruined Spanish-Gothic interior of the United Artists Theater. This movie house was built in 1928. The city's architecture reflected its wealth and ambition: the waiting room of Michigan Central Station was designed to look like a giant Roman bathhouse; ballrooms were built in extravagantly baroque styles. Grand hotels were built in a carefree mix of gothic, art deco, Moorish and medieval styles, as well as countless baroque theaters, movie houses and ballrooms (O'Hagan, 2011).

When the economic crisis broke out in 1956, Ford's factory moved to another city. People became jobless, many of them left the city and Detroit became a ghost town. These glorious constructions became ruined one by one. With time nature deformed and decayed the structures and creating an effect that we could call "the Aesthetic of Ruins." Once more Detroit became the center of attraction for "ruin tourism". Detroit is heaven for people who are interested in industrial and urban ruin photography. This has been dubbed 'ruin porn.' Richey Piiparinen states "Enter the power of language. Because even before you get to analyze the practice of ruin photography on its own merit, you get the connotations of porn filmed over your judgment. And so the act of filming ruins becomes the act of filming filth, meaning the resultant audience is less interested in artistic quality than they are titillation. After all, it's pornographic. It says so right in the name" (Piiparinen, 2012).

The phrase 'ruin porn' has recently been defined under photojournalism. For economic reasons, photo

editors have started to send their photographers to places for short periods of time. This prompts photographers to produce facile photographic works which do not show the essence of the issue. Another term for pointing out the same problem is "parachute photography." It is a criticism of a non-sincere short cut photo essay, which is produced in a few hours. It is used especially for ruined industrial and urban places like Detroit. On the other hand photos in these places do not need to be documentary. They do not need to say "These are Ford's marks - the revenge of capitalism." Art critic Vicky Goldberg points out that these changes, depending on which medium you present them in. She adds the question, "what kind of a difference exists between ruins in Athens and ruins in Detroit?" Therefore, the kind of purpose thought out while these photos were taken gains importance.



Figure 1. Andrew Moore, National Time in Detroit, 2009

Vise Magazin's writer Thomas Morton -with his few hours' experience- sums up Detroit's dense art atmosphere with these words, "In addition to being a faulty visual metaphor, the train station has also been completely shot to death. For a derelict structure, it's kind of a happening spot. Each time I passed by I saw another group of kids with camera bags scoping out the gate. When I finally ducked in to check it out for myself, I had to wait for a lady artist from Buffalo, New York, whose shtick is taking nude portraits of herself in abandoned buildings, to put her clothes back on. Afterward I was interrupted by a musician named Deity who was making a video on the roof" (Morton, 2009).

We understand that these places are being used for every kind of creative production method. Let us see what photographers are focusing on:

Regarding the photographs of Detroit that he shot between 2008 and 2009, Andrew Moore says, "I spent three months there, and my work is really an interpretation of the city, not an illustration of a story." He emphasizes that his works should not be defined as documentary but should instead be understood as art pieces which portray surrealistic landscapes. Nature in particular, with the effect of time, has created surrealistic views in the city. Because of Andrew Moore I would like to mention two photographers. Simon Norfolk went to post-war geographies and shot photos. In these frames you can see pastoral landscapes, surrealistic impacts (visions) and traces of war. Like Moore, he also did not describe himself as a photojournalist. Nevertheless, you can see chronotope in their photos; with this we mean you can see all the layers of time and place. For this reason we can reconstruct in our memory the rise and fall of the cities such as Iraq's post-war landscape or Detroit's old opera building. My other example is one of

the few female WWII photojournalists, Lee Miller. She worked with surrealist artists in Paris for a long period of time. She also was involved in common projects with the pioneer of Surrealist photography, Man Ray. It is also possible to see a surrealistic influence in her WWII photos. For example, this picture shows the dead daughter of the Leipzig burgomaster, after she and the rest of her Nazi family committed suicide together by taking potassium cyanide pills.



Figure 2. Simon Norfolk, Former Teahouse, Afghanistan, 2003

I would like to show examples from the works of French photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre whose works were published in a book called "Ruins of Detroit" in 2010. These two photographers began taking photos in Detroit in 2005. They describe Detroit like this: "Detroit, industrial capital of the 20th Century, played a fundamental role in shaping the modern world.

The logic that created the city also destroyed it. Nowadays, unlike anywhere else, the city's ruins are not isolated details in the urban environment. They have become a natural component of the landscape. Detroit presents all archetypal buildings of an American city in a state of mummification. Its splendid decaying monuments are, no less than the Pyramids of Egypt, the Coliseum of Rome, or the Acropolis in Athens, remnants of the passing of a great Empire." Public and private living spaces such as schools, hospitals, police stations, stations, hotels, houses, etc. transformed into monuments... memory spaces. In the picture of Jane Cooper Elementary School from 2008, there are chairs in the frame. But when we look at photos from 2009 these chairs are no longer where they should be. When only four walls remain from a building, it will lose its monumental significance too, because there will be nothing left to be remembered.



**Figure 3-4.** Y.Marchand & R.Meffre, Elementary School, 2008, 2009

As an inspiration and production place for artists, Detroit hopes to contribute to its economy through art. I am referring to Işıl Eğrikavuk's article published in July this year in the *Radikal Magazine*, "Last week Detroit announced its bankruptcy and its situation has been a point of discussion since. When the effect of the crashed automobile industry and the accumulated debts were

combined it resulted in a \$18 billion debt. It is still not certain how the city will recover from this situation. The point that fired up the discussions is that the creditors suggest selling art pieces in Detroit Art Museum which is public property. According to NY Times news, the Museum which holds pieces from famous names such as Van Gogh, Caravaggio and Rembrandt could earn nearly \$2 billion from the sale. On the other hand, making a sale like this could affect other cultural centers and tourism -which are already in a bad situation- as well as the real estate market."

### III. GHOSTS OF THE TOBACCO WAREHOUSES

There are about 10 abandoned Tekel tobacco warehouses in Izmir. Tekel was established at the time of the Ottoman Empire but because of external debt it was handed over to foreign tobacco cartels. In 1925 its administration and income was taken back by the government. In 2008, for the purposes of privatization, it was sold to British American Tobacco. For this reason its buildings were sold and are currently waiting to be converted into hotels, shopping malls or police stations. Thus, these buildings without owners have become visiting places -despite the guardsman, still waiting there for some unknown reason- for the curious visitors. Many of these visitors are artists, especially photographers.

Artist Ferhat Özgür tells us his relationship with abandoned places in these words:

"I considered not having a workshop as an advantage because this situation led me to be more involved with the streets, the outdoors, flea markets, scrap dealers, abandoned demolished ruins... From the dark and dirty, unfavorable areas which have become ghettos, and from

slums, I started to deduce social phenomena with various declinations; I started to pick up the fact that this reality was identical to my reality, that this should be what I should go for" (Özgür, 2010 : 33).

The Austro-Türk Tobacco Building, which is one of the tobacco warehouses, has been used for the International Contemporary Art Triennial "Port Izmir 2," as an exhibition place. There are also plans to use it for the third Port Izmir. Necmi Sönmez, the curator of the exhibition at Port Izmir in 2010, explains how they analyze while selecting a place for exhibition in the following sentences:

"As I was bringing together the artists working with different techniques on each floor of the building, my aim was to develop a system which would highlight, first of all, the building and its characteristics. The Austro-Turkish Tobacco Building, having been designed and built by Austrian architects in years 1950-1951, had an identity which brought to attention Turkey's venture into capitalism" (Sönmez, 2010 : 18-19).

Between the years 1951 and 1994 tobacco was processed and prepared here for export to many locations from Yokohama to Buenos Aires. One of the guests from the exhibition, Anna Fasshauder, re-thought the old layout of the Tobacco warehouse with the photos that she shot in the Berlin Train station.

Another artist named Burak Bedenlier, is interested in found and used objects and the memories which they possess. In other words, he tries to make contact with the history of these objects. He exhibited objects like old stamps, receipts, and cigars among the sculptures that he had made between 2005-2010.

Photographer Süleyman Duman who also was at the exhibition found, with the help of luck, old photographic papers that had not been in production for many years.

They were monochrome papers which can only be used for prints in cyan, magenta or yellow. He printed photographs of old ruined houses on these papers. Hence the material and the subject construct a common structure: old, forgotten and pale.

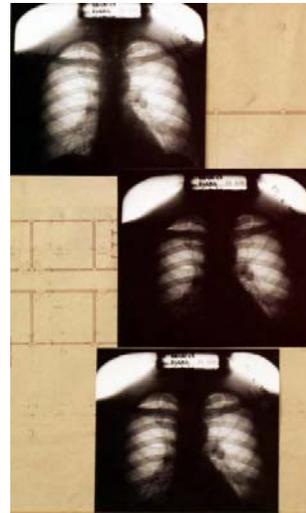


Figure 5. Ertuğ Balkan, x-ray films, Tekel, Izmir, 2010

The found objects in the Tekel warehouse remind us that people of old times once worked here. From the results of the research in the Izmir City Archive, I found some written materials and photographic traces of the Tekel Tobacco warehouse. For example, there was an article from September 1928 in a magazine called 'Resimli Ay' (Moon with Pictures). The title of the article was, "Is this the precaution to protect young girls and widows in Izmir?" The article was about how women in

the tobacco factory were being tricked and forced into prostitution. The same magazine featured another article about Tobacco warehouses in May 1929. This time they tried to draw attention to child workers in the warehouses. The article which was written by a 10-year-old girl states, "I am 10 years old and I am working in a tobacco warehouse between 8 to 10 hours every day. My mother and my father are also working here. The cigars that you smoke with joy... Well, I do not prepare them with joy." The fact that working in tobacco factories has severe negative effects on workers, especially on small children, is made clear:



**Figure 6.** Güzin Tezel, Tekel warehouse, 2010

In the year 2010, a photography exhibition called 'Bellek Araştırmaları ve Eski Tütün Deposu' (Memory Research and the Old Tobacco Warehouse) opened in Izmir. It was an exhibition that focused on Tekel tobacco warehouses. While photographing the factory, photographer and mechanical engineer Ertuğ Balkan found some x-ray films of lungs, some negative films and some

blueprints of the building. In the negative films there were photos of woman workers in the factory, piles of tobacco and some production machines. The photographer exhibited his photos and lung films using blueprints as a background. On the x-ray films there were names of the workers, years, and information about their conditions. The sad part was that the risks of illness was known to both the employer and employee. That was probably the reason for the x-ray films.

One of the other photographers that participated in this exhibition was Suzan Orhan. She exhibited a photograph in which children and young girls are seen as a group. In reality, this photo is formed from two different layers. The first layer was shot many years ago and belongs to women and child workers. Suzan Orhan merges this image with the today's evacuated image of the factory. Despite the figures being children and young people, the photo has a feel of sorrow, as the place where they should have been was not a factory, especially not a tobacco factory. This photo reminds me of the anonymous photos of Jewish people from the WWII period. Each of these photos is a memento mori, because portraits in the photos represent WWII genocide victims.

In a photo by another other participant Güzin Tezer, we observe uncanny shadows of the dark flying smoke in tobacco warehouses. Despite the lack of even a single person in the photo, we get a feeling that someone is watching us.

I believe that most of the visitors of these ruined abandoned places are photographers. Also the ghosts have either returned or never left. Sociologist Avery F. Gordon explains in his highly creative book, "A ghost situation... What kind of a situation is it? It is a haunting situation. It is the story of the ghost -seen and unseen,

dead and alive, that special blending moment of past and the future- if we decide to build earthly manners and earthly explanations.”

Ghosts are walking around the photographers to remember the dead, the gone and disappeared. In realty ghosts are the main things which attract photographers to the ruins. The reason that ruins became so attractive is that they are haunted by these ghosts.

“Ghost or ghou, disappeared, nearly invisible... or so to say; one way it tries to make itself noticeable for our highly educated eyes. Of course it does this in its own style. The way of a ghost is to haunt, and haunting is a very special way to know what happened in the past or now” (Saybaşı, 21).

Like in the found photos of Balkan and Orhan, ghosts became real through the photographers that they haunt. Things from the past -people, places, and objects- reanimated with today’s photographic record. On the other hand this time photographers will turn to the ghosts that haunt viewers. Photographers of the “Imaginary Memory Atlas” will haunt viewers through the photos that they shot and shout to them: Remember! Memento!

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