Abandoned Places Photography: Tips For Shooting And Editing

Urban decay photography refers to the technique of shooting old and abandoned buildings and places.

Perhaps you've seen that eerie shot of the once-lived in home along the sea, or the haunting scene of a once-played in amusement park. In images, these places convey moods and represent memories of the past.

They encourage viewers to be brought into the world of what once was or what could have been. Just as cheery and bright images attract a particular crowd – as do the dark, somber settings of once lived in or visited places.



View from roof of 16-storied apartment house in Pripyat town, Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Zone of Alienation, Ukraine. By Milosz Maslanka

If you're going to shoot urban decay settings and explore abandoned places, here are some tips you'll find helpful for shooting and editing. Hopefully, in the end, you'll be able to capture the fleeting beauty of the abandoned and the forgotten.

Legalities and Safety

We've all seen it: that somewhat faded "no trespassing" sign that instead of deterring us – seems to entice us in.

But, when it comes to the legalities of photography in abandoned places, the most important thing you can do is follow the rules. Many buildings have visitor restrictions (and many do not).

So, do a bit of research beforehand and discover whether or not shooting at that given location is a possibility. Beyond

legal concerns, decaying and crumbling buildings can often come with safety issues, too.


A private property sign posted in front of an abandoned rural property. By Paul Tobeck

The Preparation

If you're planning to shoot abandoned places, you want to make sure you venture to your location prepared and ready to capture the environment.

Here's a list of what to bring:

tripod (as you'll most likely be shooting long exposures)
lighting equipment
flashlight
off camera flash
collapsible reflector
wide-angle lenses (to add to the sense of emptiness)

Where to Shoot

There are a variety of places you can shoot if you're considering diving into the realm of photographing abandoned places.

Try to search out old buildings:
homes
palaces
hospitals
libraries
churches
stations
factories etc


Canfranc, Spain – August 30, 2017: Abandoned railway station of Canfranc Huesca Spain. By KarSol

You can also venture to abandoned cities and towns that encapsulate that feeling of a “ghost town” and provide an assortment of old monuments and abandoned buildings.

Ghost Town, Cody, Wyoming, United States. By silky
Photojournalist Seph Lawless, for example, ventures to the most abandoned places in America – from houses to malls to theme parks – in an effort to extensively document deserted places.

In an interview with ABC News he stated, “I wanted Americans to see what was happening to their country from the comfort of their suburban homes and smart phones” – a quote that was later used by Amerkihaus Museum as a tagline for his European showcase entitled: Autopsy of America.

Picture-Taking Tips

When it comes to snapping images in abandoned places, there are a lot of elements of photography you’ll want to keep in mind.

Here are some tips to help you on your quest to capture the perfect photo.

Don’t Touch or Move Anything
Showing the places in their current state is important and crucial to conveying the right mood. You don’t want the scene to look staged, so therefore – it’s better to keep your hands off and let your lens do the work.

Abandoned school classroom with desks in Gary, Indiana – landscape photo. By Josh Cornish
Compose Carefully
With abandoned places, composition must be approached carefully and with attention to detail. You’ll want to consider aspects like leading lines, shapes, light, and points

of interest before taking your photos. What story is it that you want to tell? What mood do you want to convey? Think of these things before you shoot, as it will help your image come to life.

Make it Manual

Although there are many places where shooting in auto is just fine, abandoned places are not one of them. In order to capture the right light and the right sharpness, you'll want to shoot and focus in manual.

Abandoned buildings can have light problems, which requires a very specific approach. Manually focusing guarantees the focus will be sharp every time.



Old Abandoned Destroyed Monument – 26-03-2016 – Buzludzha, Bulgaria

Pay Attention to Framing

Showing the entire building and its surroundings just as you first saw it – is incredible. What that allows is for your audience to be drawn into the home, the museum, or the amusement park just as you were. Bring them along for your journey.



BERLIN, GERMANY – 24 MAY 2010: Abandoned factory, interior of old industry part in the old hospital complex, Beelitz, Germany. By White Tulip

Go Wide

A wide angle lens tremendously adds to the sense of emptiness in these abandoned buildings. Going wide with your lens will alter the perspective and allow you to capture more of the room and space.

The Post Processing Part

Post processing provides amazing opportunities for taking advantage of different techniques that software programs

offer.

Correct the Lighting
During the post-processing phase, you can also work to fix the lighting problems that often happen in abandoned places. Bring your exposure or brightness up – enhance your sharpness and clarity – or experiment with the HSL slider.

Try the HDR (high dynamic range) Technique
HDR photography techniques can drastically improve the look and feel of your photos – bringing forth the lightest lights and the darkest darks of the scene (which is perfect in cases of abandoned places).


Villers-la-ville, Belgium – July 30 2014: Dilapidated church in abandoned Villers Abbey, Wallonia, Belgium (with dramatic light and HDR-effect). By Sergey Dzyuba

Black and White Conversion
Converting your images of abandoned places to black and white can change the meaning, the perception and the mood. Check out Abandoned Places in Black&White Photography Photo Challenge, to see what we mean.


Industrial building interior in dark colors. By SvedOliver

Try to Crop
Cropping can help to bring out details of the subject. With cropping, you can explore the different ways that the mood of your subject can be conveyed depending upon where you choose to draw the viewer’s focus.


Old children’s carousel in an abandoned park. By Kornev Andrii

In many ways, urban decay and abandoned places photography takes both the viewers and the photographer into an entirely new and undiscovered world (which is, ironically, an old world that has been hidden or left behind).

Whether you’re capturing the setting of a home, a library, a museum – we hope these tips have given you inspiration and ideas for shooting and editing.

Time to get out there, explore, and snag some beautiful (and eerie) images.

Want to see more? See a ton of cool urban decay photos here:

https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/abandoned-places-photography/