

# City Abandoned: Charting the Loss of Civic Institutions in Philadelphia by Vincent Feldman

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As Philadelphia, Pennsylvania begins to emerge after decades of population decline, corrupt politicians, crime and ingrained economic problems, some long-neglected locations have come to light now that some of the smoke has cleared. In “City Abandoned: Charting the Loss of Civic Institutions in Philadelphia,” Vincent Feldman, a photographer and Philadelphia resident, captures the schools, synagogues, hospitals and social houses that have fallen into disrepair and neglect over the years. “

In his introduction, Feldman mentions his childhood fondness for Edward Gibbon’s “The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” and the comparison is apt. The Roman Empire, once the greatest society on Earth, has lain in ruins for hundreds of years, and in Feldman’s stark black and white photographs, Philadelphia seems fallen as well, already destroyed. Once great monuments to Greek Revival and Beaux Arts architecture crumble and decompose. All the testaments to a thriving culture are allowed to rot: theaters, stations for public transit, hospitals and schools.

The photographs are divided into seven categories of abandoned buildings, including educational, government and religious buildings. There will always be a creepy factor when considering abandoned buildings, especially when the photos are in a grayish black and white. The creepy factor is upped when so many of the buildings are mental hospitals (The Philadelphia State Hospital for the Insane, 2005, Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane, 1998) or abandoned mansions turned abandoned schools in the desolate woods within Fairmount Park (Parkgate, 1994).

But there’s more anger to feel here than fear, especially when reading the history of all these lost structures. The appendix has one paragraph for each building’s story, and after reading about ten, they start to sound the same. The space was once an important space for Philadelphia citizens, but it was boarded up and vacated due to budget restrictions. A realtor purchased the space but ran out of money, and it now sits derelict while the city does nothing.

Once of the stories that stands out is that of Philadelphia County Prison at Holmseburg. The cruel history of this prison includes for medical experiments conducted on prisoners as late as 1974, conducted by recognized and respected companies and universities. The architects designed the building for six hundred inmates, but more often than not, Holmeseburg housed more than 1,200. Even more disturbing is that the prison was shut down in 1995, but when the city’s other prisons were beyond capacity, it was reopened even though it was in complete disrepair.

“City Abandoned” is a testament to what can happen when sloth and greed combine with vulnerable circumstances. It’s a rallying cry and a warning.