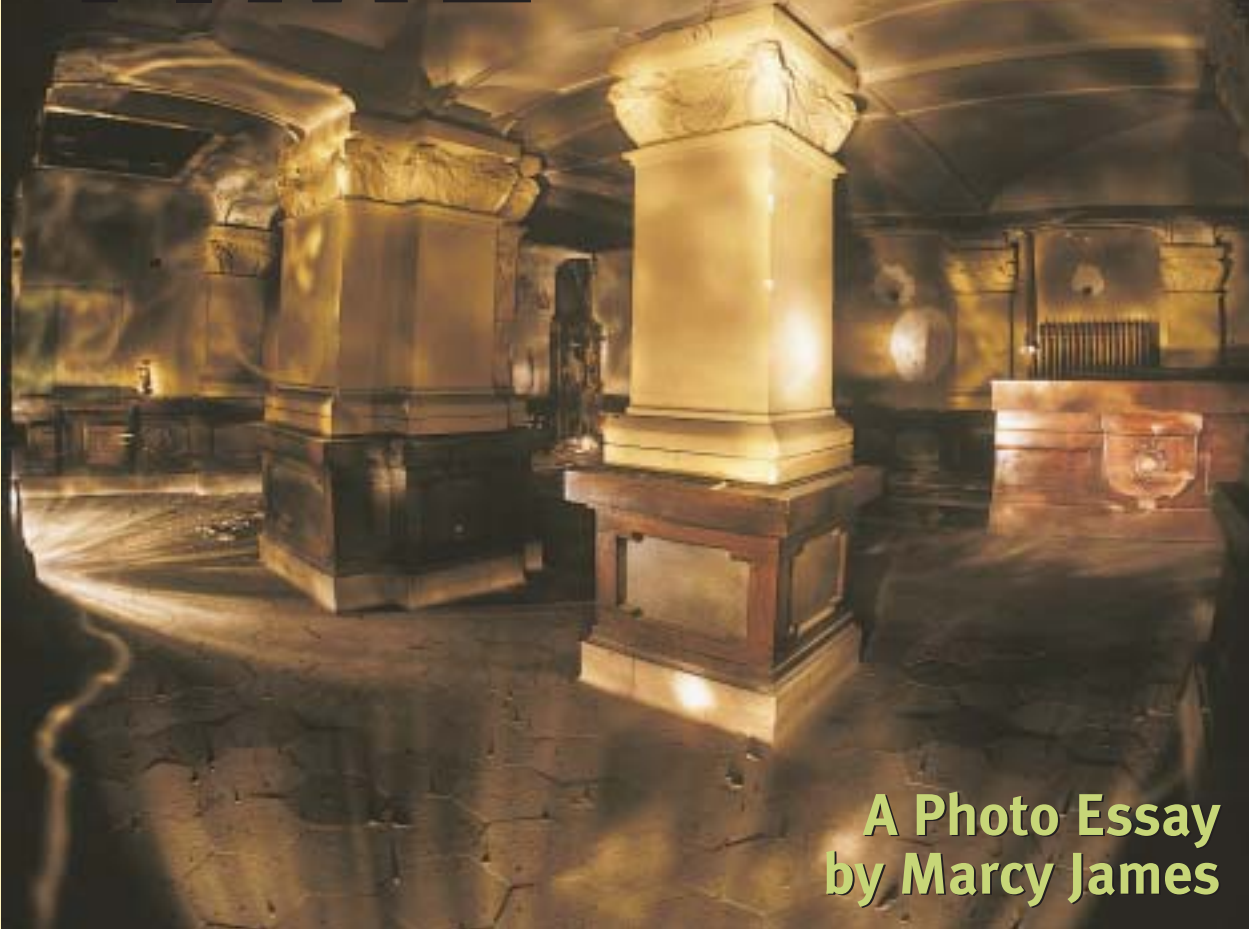


# Where **TIME** Lives



A Photo Essay  
by Marcy James

## Have you ever walked into a place where you sensed time standing still?

*“The room where  
a man lives  
is the landscape  
of his soul.”*

—Fyodor Dostoevsky

What happens to buildings that are four stories tall and half a city block long that are left to their own evolution? Just as anything else, they decay. In Butte, Montana, the abandoned buildings---I have explored 46 of them--form a loosely defined museum of ethnography and time, full of our artifacts. And these artifacts make a cohesive story, a perception of our society and of time itself.

↑ Speakeasy—La Salle Building, erected in 1912



I moved to Butte in November of 1997 to photograph the buildings. Many of them have stood vacant for decades, and the interiors are quite amazing. Butte is a museum of architectural remnants: schools, churches, boarding houses, the old courthouse, a department store, jail cells, a hospital, restaurants, an office supply store. In what was once a dental laboratory, I traced my fingers over teeth molds. I moved through rooms filled with financial histories from 1956-1963. Inside these buildings are traces of our humanity: blankets, bars of soap, brooms, ashtrays, coats, cigarette butts, linens, clocks, hangers, TV's, toys, books, teeth, lunchboxes, letters, paintings, curtains, cupboards full of food.





The experience of moving through these spaces left me awestruck by their beauty. While many may find the study of urban decay to be morbid or disheartening, I see it as a unique opportunity to appreciate the beauty and the voice of inanimate forms that are left to evolve on their own.

I didn't carry my camera for the first month of my project. Initially, it was important to experience the city without looking for angles or points of view. On my first day in a new building, I sat in every room and listened, for each building had its own form of communication. I never physically altered the objects that I came across. I found myself alone in these vast spaces for hours, in the dark, for months on end, much of the time working in extreme temperatures. It was both painful and enlightening.

From my journal:

*Stoves in hallways—glass on the tips of my shoes from ten windows crushed beneath my feet. My knees bleed from asbestos and my eyes are pierced from the cold temperatures. My toes feel like knives turning in upon themselves. My fingers feel like stone appendages and the skin on my cheekbones feels as if it has burned off.*

I paint with light. Usually flashlights. The buildings are often boarded up so the flashlights both guide my way through corridors and illuminate the space inside. The exposure times range from several minutes to a few hours. By slowing down the process of taking a photograph in combination with the relative uncertainty that comes from making pictures in the dark, I am able to reach a dialogue between myself and the spaces that I

↑ *The Mei Wah Noodle Parlor, erected in 1909*

← *Boys Bathroom: Paul Clark Children's Home*



Facing page:

↑ *Metals Bank Building, erected in 1906*

↓ *Hamilton Building, erected in 1892*



photograph that would not be possible otherwise.

I am trying to write this from inside my own abandoned boarded-up building. While my partner is sawing, staining and grouting the floor tiles, I am perched up in our loft surrounded by stuff. With all of these objects piled around me, I wonder why the individuals who inhabited the spaces that I photograph left in such a hurry, leaving behind paintings and letters stuffed into paper sacks. It is my hope that the images created in these spaces inspire a sense of reflection and wonderment in you.

**Marcy James is a photographer living in Walkerville, Montana. Readers are invited to respond to her at [buttet33@yahoo.com](mailto:buttet33@yahoo.com)**

← *Butte City Jail, erected in 1891*

↓ *Metals Bank Building, erected in 1906*

