An interview with photographer Andrew Moore, author of Detroit Disassembled

Tim Tower
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Tim Tower of the WSWS recently spoke to photographer Andrew Moore, whose *Detroit Disassembled* reveals the devastation of the city as "a multi-facetted metaphor of America."

Tim Tower: You were born in 1957. When did you start taking pictures?

Andrew Moore: I must have been about 12. I was always interested in photography. At Princeton I met Emmet Gowin, a terrific photographer and teacher there. He had studied with Harry Callahan and many others. I was about 18 or 19, and I studied with him for three years. But it wasn't until I was in my 40s, some twenty-odd years later that I finally figured out how to make good pictures.

I feel that the project in Detroit is a culmination of my work. A lot of things came together for me there. I have always been interested in architecture and history. Even though I have shot in a lot of foreign countries, it was great to be photographing in America, in this point in time, at this point in history, and really dealing with the way things are in this country.

I am not really a documentary photographer. I am not trying to document decay, I am looking for places that are meaningful. One of the themes of the book is the recycling of man by nature. I did not show up in Detroit with that theme in mind. But it was something that struck me almost from the beginning. It is something that people will have to consider when it comes to right-sizing cities.

TT: That is a loaded term, "right-sizing." We can come back to it.

AM: That term came after the book, but I have heard it used in relation to many places. The work is not about right-sizing the city. The work is about Detroit as a multi-faceted metaphor of America, present, past and, perhaps, even future.

TT: I wanted to ask you about the book's structure. A number of places appear, disappear and come back: the book depository, the train station and the Packard plant, for example. How did you decide on that?

AM: I had a very experienced picture editor Alice Rose George help me with the picture flow. I think it is very difficult for a photographer to structure his own work in a way that communicates to other people.

The first picture is of the train station because that is the icon of the city. The sequence was basically the past of industrial relics, the kind of modern-day life of Detroit and then ending with portraits, people in the environment, and this nature theme weaving in and then closing the book. So it starts with industry and ends with the conquest by nature of the city. That's the loose structure of the book. I love some of the spreads and the dialogue between pictures, but those are moments within that flow.

TT: Pick one out, if you would. Explain one of those moments that comes to mind.

AM: There is a spread at the end of the book—a picture of an iced-over alleyway. There is a wheelbarrow stuck in the ice. The last worker has parked his wheelbarrow and left, and everything is filled in with ice now. You have these claustrophobic walls that even seem to be bending in. And yet these black trunks of trees somehow seem to have survived and are growing amidst all that stuff.

And then on the other side, you have a picture of a mummified cat that was in a library. The cat has died peacefully, but still probably starved to death in the library.

TT: In one passage you write, "My photographic interests have always lain at the busy intersections of history, particularly those locations where multiple tangents of time overlap and tangle. In other places I have photographed, such as Cuba and Russia, these meanderings of time create a densely layered, historical narrative. In Detroit, the forward motion of time appears to have been thrown spectacularly into reverse." Are you referring to the destruction of these factories and the lives that were based on them?

AM: Detroit was a city that was assembled very quickly, and now it is unraveling at pretty much the same speed. "The busy intersections of history" refers to places like Russia where the czarist church was turned into a soap factory during the Soviet period, and now has been restored into a kind of youth center. That is the layering of history in the reuse of spaces.

By contrast, in Detroit, you don't have the reuse of spaces. They are withering away, and what is replacing them is pheasants and trees and the growth of moss. In a way, man's progress has been thrown in reverse; but nature's progress is marching forward.

TT: Let me ask you about the term "right-sizing" as it applies

to Detroit. I remember a discussion with some architects and students about designing for New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In one case a student had been encouraged to approach the problem of the destruction of the city as if it were no more serious than the stretching of a rubber band, or the expansion and contraction of a ball of rubber bands. However, the situation in that city is not a game. The lives of tens of thousands of people were at stake.

The same is true in Detroit. As you say, it is a symbol of our country, our entire social system. When the mayor talks about "right-sizing," he approaches the population with a crass brutality which is being deliberately obscured by that term. What they are proposing …

AM: …cutting off city services and forcing people to move. And it's always about moving poor people, and generally, poor, black people. Those are the only people who get moved. Maybe some judge will say it's constitutional to cut off people's water and gas and force them to move. I don't know. I think it is very coercive—an extreme measure. It may be efficient, but I don't know if it's ethical or legal.

TT: There is a war going on in America. It is being fought by one side. And the other side…

AM: …hasn't even gotten to the battlefield.

TT: Yes. Your book plays a role in that. It is a wake-up call.

AM: Most people in America have no idea what Detroit looks like. Even people who live in the suburbs of Detroit might say, 'You just photographed the bad parts,' or 'We only lock our car doors when we go downtown.'

When you really get into what is there, the hospitals and the schools and the libraries and the waste and the corruption, it's hard to take—the waste in particular.

The most disturbing part of photographing Detroit was certainly the schools—not just Cass Tech, which was the flagship of corruption and waste. But in so many of these elementary schools and middle schools, the books and the computers were just left.

I had a hard time. Even making pictures in those spaces was hard.

TT: We talk to teachers all the time. There is a carve-up taking place. This is the model for education in America. They are down-sizing, "right-sizing," the school system with a meat cleaver.

AM: To literally build a new Cass Tech next to the old one and not even move a test tube 500 feet to the new building—I don't understand that.

There is a beautiful print shop with lead type and a photography lab—all just left there. That I don't understand. Every school that we went into was the same story. Things just left. It was mind-boggling.

TT: The school book depository by the train station…

AM: It was originally the postal warehouse, which makes sense because the trains would come in with all the mail and the packages, and then there was an underground conveyor belt between the train station and that warehouse. They brought all the mail there. When the post office gave it up sometime in the 1960s, the public school system took it over and made it into their warehouse. There are books, report cards, art paper, toys, crayons, everything that you would need to run a school. Mountains of it.

TT: Today teachers in the public schools in Detroit—you may not be aware of this—regularly purchase paper, pencils, crayons so that their students will have something to write with; and they are frequently the ones who are blamed, and even fired, when students who are suffering in terrible conditions do not perform well in mandated tests.

AM: I don't understand a system that breeds so much wastefulness. I am a registered Democrat. But after this work in Detroit, I am disgusted by the corruption of our system. I have never felt more despairing of political solutions. I am disappointed in Obama. I feel that the left is totally scattered and needs to be energized and even radicalized. It's all rigged for the rich, the tax structure, everything.

I do not think the work is political. It may indirectly be political. But I am not a crusader. The book is not a polemic. It is a call to arms, but not a crusade.

TT: Return, if you would, to the way you got into the project. You were speaking to photographers in France, and they suggested coming to Detroit to photograph theaters.

AM: They were urban explorers. They said, "Come to Detroit."

TT: You began as a photographer, but with an interest in history. You want to understand what you are photographing. You were not on a soapbox for a particular program; and yet, you were moved by this and repulsed by the system that created it.

AM: Yes, I agree with that. It's a contradiction. This is a lifelong struggle for artists. Is it art for art's sake, or is art supposed to improve social conditions? I think those are irreconcilable aims. But I feel that the collision of those two things makes very interesting work.

TT: This is the topic of another piece, but I will say that I think that authentic artistic work inevitably comes into conflict with contemporary life.

AM: I agree. And I think that that is where the richness comes from, that conflict. I couldn't agree more.