

GRAIN, POWER, TIME

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During a visit to Buffalo several years ago, the French poet Dominique Fourcade saw the huge grain and concrete elevators along Buffalo's river and lakefront. Awed by their size and beauty, he exclaimed to his guide, the poet Susan Howe, "The American Chartres!"

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Through much of Spring 2006, I photographed the destruction of the H-O Oats elevator on Perry Street in downtown Buffalo. The Seneca Nation of Indians brought in a huge wrecking crane that spent months slamming a heavy steel plate into the sides of the elevator, which turned out to be stronger than anyone had thought. But the steel plate finally won out over the concrete and rebar, and in the place the elevator and its connecting buildings had stood the Senecas began to build what they said would be a grand gambling casino.

Then, because of shifting economic conditions and a federal lawsuit filed by citizens' groups opposed to the casino in the heart of town, the grand casino project ground to a halt. In a two-story building on the Michigan Avenue end of the property, gamblers

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now yank the arms or push the buttons on 800 electronic slot machines. There are only a few table games.

The huge steel I-beam skeleton of the casino that was not built stood rusting and useless for four years, a neighborhood and city eyesore. It rose high enough so travelers on the downtown extension of the New York State Thruway couldn't help but see it. The structure eventually deteriorated so much it had to be cut apart, torn down, and hauled away. A parking ramp now occupies the space where H-O Oats elevator and the steel frame built to replace it once were.

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These images of Buffalo's grain elevators grew out of a project I started in 2009 and thought to call "Post-Industrial Buffalo." It was my notion to photograph repurposed and derelict sites from Buffalo's great industrial age.

I did that for about a year, and then I realized the images I liked the most, and the sites I was more and more drawn to, were the grain elevators.

I had by that time lived in Buffalo forty-two years, but during that time the elevators had been nothing more than large structures at the periphery of my field of vision when I was driving along I-190, heading south and then west, out of town, or coming home via the same route.

The only exception was the demolition of H-O Oats, but I did that only because I was part of one of the community groups opposing construction of a gambling joint adjacent to one of Buffalo's poorest neighborhoods, not because I saw the elevators as spectacular architectural monuments.

But as I spent more time with these elevators, I couldn't stop looking at them. Through much of 2010, I photographed them from the periphery—from large and small boats on the Buffalo River and Ship Canal, and from surrounding roads. Then Rick Smith gave me total access to the group of elevators he owns on Childs Street: American, Perot, Perot Malting, and Marine A, as well as the Russell-Miller/American Flour Mill and the Peavy office building. His main man on the ground there, Jim Watkins, guided me through those spaces, as did an architect and UB colleague, Kerry Traynor. I was able to work inside and outside, from both the work floors and the roof. Later,

Carl Paladino gave me access to Cargill Electric Annex, which sits on the same piece of land.

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The most recent image in this book was taken in April 2015, showing the shadows on the Standard Elevator (page 19). I've taken well over 12,000 photos of the elevators. The images are not repetitive because they change as the sun moves across the sky and through the seasons. The lighting is never the same, so the geometrical configurations, shadows, and colors are always in flux.

My favorite examples of this are the two photographs of curved shadows on the Standard Elevator: each of the sets of curves is different; they are made by the sun and straight wire and pipe and the circular surfaces of the vertical cylinders (pages 19 and 20).

The elevators look different in winter light and summer light, different when the light from below is coming off summer's blue-green water on the river and lake and winter's gray-white snow and ice. They look different if you see them from a small aluminum boat close to the water surface or from two fathoms higher from the upper deck of the *Miss Buffalo* on one of her frequent waterfront tours. They look different out the port window of a plane approaching Buffalo Airport from the southwest, coming across southern Ontario and Lake Erie. They look different driving or walking along South Street, Ganson Street, Ohio Street, Childs Street, or Fuhrmann Boulevard.

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Buffalo is known for its architectural masterpieces: parks and parkways by Frederick Law Olmsted, buildings by H.H. Richardson, Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan, E.B. Green, Stanford White, and others. Almost all that work was done by those artists in their maturity, when their styles already had influence elsewhere. The elevators were designed and built by people whose names are known only to architectural historians.

But the elevators are the Buffalo structures that had a profound influence on international architecture. Modernist architects such as Le Corbusier and Erich

Mendelsohn (who visited and photographed the Buffalo elevators in 1924) were inspired by their simplicity and pure functionality of their design. Like the great cathedrals of Europe, they are huge machines with a single function. The cathedrals were machines designed to put the individual in closer context with divinity; the elevators were machines designed to move grain from one transportation mode to another. Each one of them is a single machine.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Buffalo's grain and concrete elevators gave visual proof of Buffalo's central place in American and international commerce. Now, most of those elevators are derelict—architectural monuments to an industrial past that will never come again.

They are also magnificent pieces of Buffalo's current urban landscape—and that is what these photographs are about. They are about the visual present, not the imagined past.

Because of the Erie Canal, which was completed in 1825, Buffalo went from a small village at the beginning of the nineteenth century to one of the richest cities in America at the end of it. Because of the confluence of the waterways and the technology of the grain elevator, Buffalo was the world's largest grain port through the second half of the nineteenth century. Shipping across the Great Lakes from the west could connect to the world via the Erie Canal, which had its Western terminus in Buffalo. Raw materials moved east and processed goods moved west, and Buffalo was the hinge that made it all work. The inexhaustible nearby power source at Niagara Falls turned Buffalo into a major manufacturing center as well. Huge steel mills were built here because the ore could be shipped in cheaply (water remains the least expensive way to move goods) and the mills could be powered cheaply. Hundreds of smaller manufacturing industries that could profit from easy access to heavy metal appeared, making the city even richer.

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Grain elevators—the 70- to 140-foot tall structures along the Buffalo River, Buffalo's City Ship Canal, and the southern tip of Lake Erie—were invented in Buffalo in 1842–1843 by Joseph Dart, a merchant, and Robert Dunbar, an engineer. The problem they set out to

solve was twofold. It involved the huge quantities of grain transshipped through Buffalo across the Great Lakes from the west and along the Erie Canal to the east. Grain arrived in huge ships, but it left Buffalo in small canal barges; the longer grain remained in storage, the more susceptible it was to vermin and rot. How could the merchants and brokers manage that traffic differential, and how could they be sure that the oldest grain went out first? The solution invented by Dart and Dunbar centered on a device called the “marine leg,” which drew grain from the large lake ships and carried it to the tops of the “marine towers.” Grain being processed at mills in Buffalo or shipped east would then be drawn from the bottom in whatever quantities were required at the moment. The oldest grain went out first.

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It was transportation that made Buffalo great, and it was transportation that brought Buffalo low. The Erie Canal was crippled by railroads, which were a far more expensive way to move goods than the lakes and canals, but railroads got things where they were going far more quickly. In America, velocity has always trumped cost. The railroads, in turn, were nearly killed off by paved highways, which could be set almost anywhere and weren't dependent on flatland routes. Buffalo survived as a connector when the trains and trucks began to make the Erie Canal obsolete, but the Welland Ship Canal (1932) and St. Lawrence Seaway (1959) that cut a waterway from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean ended the utility of the Erie Canal for good. It also ended Buffalo's time as a major inland port and center of manufacturing.

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Rick Smith's and Carl Paladino's elevators sit on the Buffalo River (on older maps, it was Buffalo Creek; somewhere in there it got upgraded). They are directly opposite the Standard Elevator, and just about halfway between the two other sets of elevators still standing: Concrete Central and Cargill Superior toward the head of the river, and the

group around the General Mills plant (where they make Cheerios), near where the River spills into Lake Erie: Kellogg and Agway/GLF on the River itself, and the General Mills complex and Great Northern on the Buffalo Ship Canal, which runs parallel and close to the Buffalo River.

One elevator—Saskatchewan/Cargill Pool—is south of all the others and is on Buffalo’s Outer Harbor, separated from Lake Erie only by a thin rock wall. It is the only elevator on the Lake itself.

The only elevators still handling grain are Standard, Lake and Rail, General Mills, and Great Northern. They’re only busy now and then. St. Mary’s-Kellogg is now a cement elevator. Saskatchewan is used to store small boats during the winter.

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The way Rick Smith tells it, he’d wanted to buy only a slice of that land to cut a road for trucks exiting his factory, Rigidized Metals, which abuts on the property further around a bend on Ohio Street. The owner wouldn’t sell him the slice or give him an easement, but offered him the whole place for a price so low he couldn’t resist. Rick sold one of the elevators on the site—Lake and Rail—and thought about using the others to go into the ethanol business.

Then the bottom dropped out of the ethanol market, so Rick’s property sat derelict for several years, save for vandals who tried to tear off the copper along American Elevator’s roof, or graffiti artists, who hit Marine A and American Elevator hard but for some reason didn’t bother with Perot or the Malting Elevator. Rick hired Jim Watkins to be caretaker of the place for several summers, and then hired him to be there year-round. Jim now lives in a former tool shed between Marine A and the Peavey office building. His constant companion is Champ, a pit-bull who barks at you until you get within reaching distance, at which point his tail wags and he licks your hand. Jim knows the interiors of the elevators better than anybody.

A lot of art events go on at the site now: poetry readings, filming, music, and more. Marine A, which has a row of silos open at the bottom, has astonishing hang time and reverb, so musicians love it. Rick named the place Silo City, and the name caught on. Further down the river, the Connecting Terminal is now the scene of a continuing

light show, and what's left of Agway-GLF has been coated in plastic so it looks like a six-pack of beer.

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In March 2012, the Russian writer Yevgeny Yevtushenko came to town to perform his famous poem “Babi Yar,” as part of the Buffalo Philharmonic’s presentation of Dmitri Shostakovich’s *Symphony No. 13*. He also gave a reading and met with students at University at Buffalo. His guide around the university was Tanya Shilina-Conte, a lecturer in the Department of Media Study. Tanya had moved to Buffalo from Moscow only a few years earlier.

Yevtushenko told Tanya he wanted to see the grain elevators. Tanya called me, and one afternoon she, Diane Christian, and I took Yevtushenko down to Silo City. He loved the place. When we were in Marine A, I demonstrated the various hang times by clapping my hands in the center and at the edge of a few of the cylinders. We all did that for a while, and then we walked over to Perot.

Perot has a ceiling and cones that cover the cylinders, so it doesn’t have the hang time of Marine A, but it has a lovely reverberation nonetheless.

Yevtushenko started reciting poems in Russian, savoring the sound. Except for Tanya, none of the rest of us—Diane, Rick Smith, Jim Watkins, and two former students of mine who happened to be there working on a film—understood a word he said. It didn’t matter. Every time he stopped, we’d all urge him to do another. He has a big voice, and it filled that very large concrete space. It remains one of my favorite poetry readings ever.

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A friend who has been working on a film at Silo City recently said, “I love your pictures, but there aren’t any people in them.”

She’s almost right. Kerry Traynor appears peripherally in some of the images, as do Jim Watkins and Diane Christian (a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor.) My

dog, Emily Rose, appears in several: I often took her along when I was working alone or working with Kerry in places we didn't know well. When I'm photographing I'm not paying attention to anything coming up behind me; it is not only the camera that is in total focus. When I started this work, Kerry and I would often find things that suggested people had been hanging out in the dark places. I could always count on Emily Rose to watch my back, which is why you see her in several of these images.

But—save for two times—other than Kerry, Jim, Diane, Rick Smith, and a guy Rick had doing some cleanup work, I never saw anybody down there. A mile from City Hall, and we never saw anyone outside our small group, or people we brought down to look at what we were up to. (Nothing human: we saw deer, geese, wild turkeys, and ducks all the time.)

The first exception was when Kerry and I were working on the top floor of American Elevator; we were looking out toward Lake Erie and saw a car pull into the gravel lot far below us. It wasn't a car we knew. A guy got out and started walking toward where we were. There was only one way out of where we were, a back-and-forth steel stairway maybe fifteen stories up. We didn't want to get caught up there, so we started down. He was, of course, coming up.

We met about halfway down. He turned out to be a Canadian photography student who had heard about the elevators and thought he'd come in for a look. He continued up; we continued down.

He could have been a villain, but he was just a curious kid. A totally innocent encounter.

It's a curious thing, being just about alone in huge spaces like that. You never know if casual encounters will be interesting or troublesome. That time, I had my Nikon strap wrapped around my wrist, ready to use the camera as a defensive weapon. Afterward, the rest of the way down that rusty steel stairway, I felt silly.

The other time was a Saturday afternoon when Kerry and I were prowling around the back of the Russell-Miller Flour Mill, adjacent to the American Elevator. It was a flat space, clearly where a building had once stood. We were trying to figure it all out when we saw, through the alley, a Buffalo police car pull up. A policewoman got out and came down the alley, her gun drawn. She kept looking at Emily Rose. "Is that dog dangerous?" she said.

“If you put your gun away she’s not,” I said.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“We have total permission from the owner to be here whenever we like,” Kerry said, “and we’re both UB professors. Call the owner, Rick Smith, to check. If you don’t have his number, I’ll give it to you.” The cop holstered her Glock, Emily Rose went back to chasing the geese, and that was the end of that.

Other than the times I just told you about, I never saw any people in Silo City before Rick Smith gave it that name and it became an arts center. Concrete Central and Cargill Superior were totally isolated: you had to ignore a bunch of Do Not Trespass signs to get close to them, or approach them from the river. They’re still like that, only more seriously patrolled now. The General Mills plant is harder to get to now. Fences are up everywhere down there that weren’t there when I first started shooting photos.

As far as Silo City goes, I got in there to take photos just before it got cleaned up and civilized, when the place was what it was like after the grain outfits abandoned it.