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David S. Allee

Mining the Light

by Katya Tylevich

David S. Allee opens the door to his New York City studio, and braces against a strong wind coming off the Hudson River, directly to our West. Other bodies seem to have gravitated behind the buildings in Greenwich Village, to avoid the occasional gush of puddle water and garbage in the eye. The street feels unusually deserted for it. Allee grew up in this neighbourhood. 'But of course, it's changed a lot,' he says. 'It used to be more middle class or Bohemian, almost like a small town. Now it's considered fancy.'

Do you miss what it used to be, I ask.

'I miss the seediness of it,' says Allee. 'I'm not sure I want to see that come back, but I do have nostalgia for it. I'm happy for my daughter that it is the way it is now. She's going to the same nursery school I went to, and some of the same teachers still teach there. She's probably going to go to the same elementary school I went to, also. My family still lives here; a lot of my friends from this neighbourhood still live here. It's just home.'

Up Ramp, Santa Monica, 2006, from the series White Nights

Allee's photographs of 'home' – of New York City's spaces, streets, rooms, and buildings – show the complexities and intimacies of capturing a familiar subject that refuses to sit still. 'New York excites and puzzles me. It makes me want to understand and be a part of it, more than any other city,' says Allee. Occasionally, the photographer burns out on New York, and takes his camera elsewhere. To California, to Iceland, to countless anonymous corners and angles; the traces of people in these spaces still intact, but never explicit. Formerly an urban planner, Allee seems to have an intuition for those moments when a city might open or close its eyes; he tries to avoid styling, tries to grab at what is actually in front of him at the moment he takes the photograph, whether that happens at five a.m. or after the sun's gone down. 'I'm interested in how people use spaces, why spaces were built, why they're there,' says Allee. 'I don't just look at structures as pretty things,' he says. Rather, he looks at structures just as they are.

— You come from a background in urban planning. Was photography a 'don't look back' moment, or was it a softer move?

It actually happened very naturally. Working in urban and environmental planning involved studying areas and neighbourhoods around proposed projects in a variety of ways, and a lot of it was visual: taking surveys, photographs, and so on. But there really wasn't much creativity in the job, and I felt a strong desire for creativity. So I started taking photography classes at night. I did that for many years, getting more and more serious about taking photos, but still keeping my day job. My photography had to work around my day job's schedule: I was taking pictures at night, often in industrial and transitional areas of the city I was familiar with through work. I was also spending time before work with the five a.m. shift of sandhogs, or urban miners. They were almost a thousand feet below ground, working on the city's third water tunnel. It was a project I'd come to be
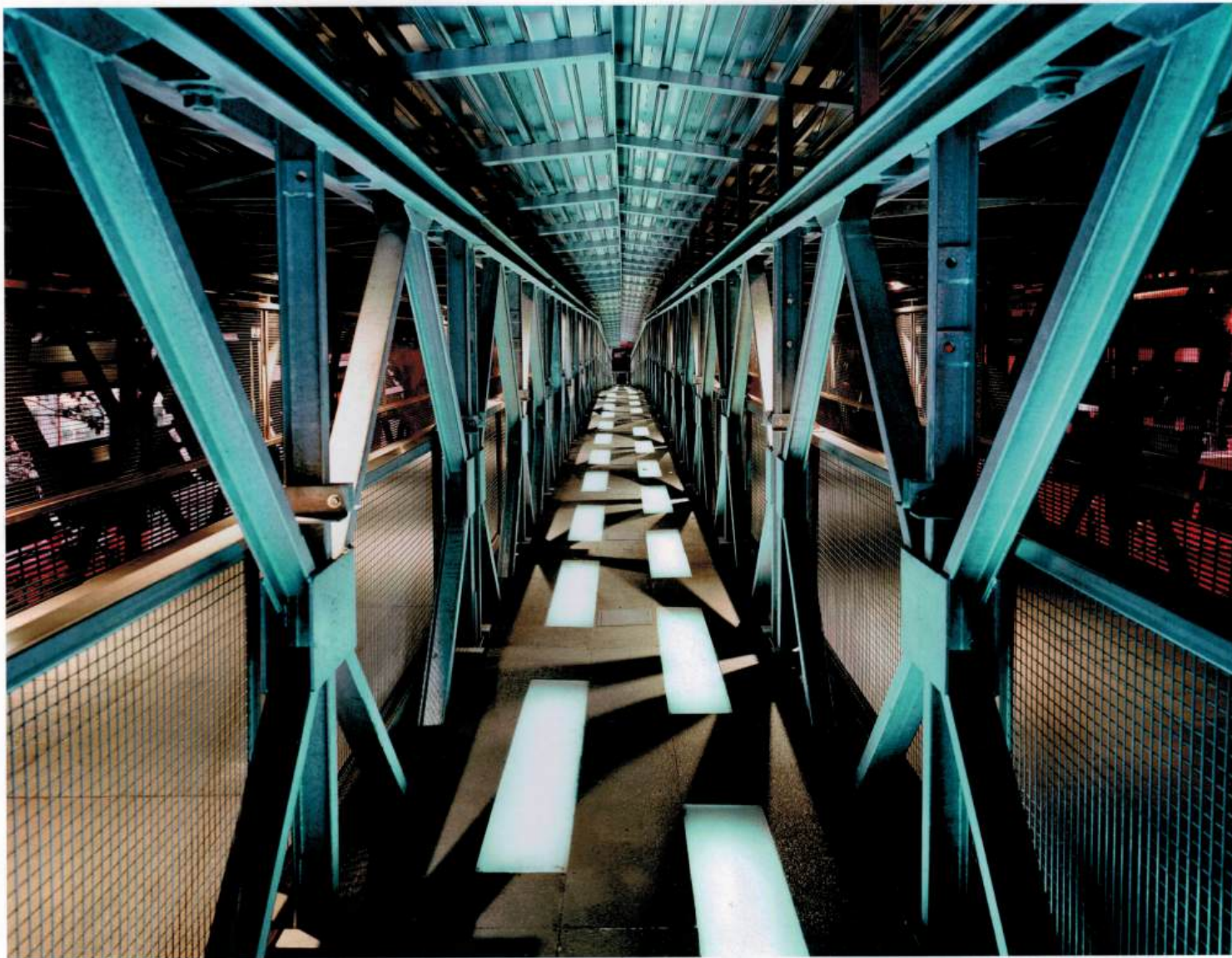
My dad told me, 'You should do what makes you happy. I did something that didn't make me happy for forty years and I regret it. Don't make that mistake'

familiar with through my planning work. Eventually, I published these sandhog photos in a photo essay in Esquire magazine. It was at this point that I began to think maybe photography should be more than a hobby for me. It was what I really loved to do. How many people get to do what they actually love as a career? So I went for it, quit my job, enrolled in graduate school, got an MFA and haven't looked back since. At least, I haven't looked back very often.

— *Why do you suppose it took you so long to quit your day job?*
I don't know. I was interested in photography even when I was young, as early as high school. In college I spent a summer in a photography program. But my parents were both professional people. My dad was a lawyer, my mom had her own company, and they were both professionals. I never thought about being an artist as a career. It was always something 'fun'; a creative outlet. It's hard to say why, though. Maybe I thought I'd be letting my parents down. Maybe I thought it just wasn't a stable enough job. In the end, I probably just wasn't sure I was talented enough or that I could actually do it. Having my photos published in Esquire changed something for me, though. That's the moment I thought, 'Well, I guess I can do this.' Also, at that point, my dad had just retired, and it was obvious he hadn't been happy as a lawyer. I was even thinking about going to law school then, but he told me, 'You should do what makes you happy. I did something that didn't make me happy for forty years and I regret it. Don't make that mistake.' I think that was very instrumental in the choices I made later.

— *You grew up in New York City. Was your decision to stay here based on work?*
It was more a lifestyle decision. Once you've lived in New York, it does seem hard to live anywhere else. There are few things I enjoy more than just walking around the city, very few. And this is the undisputed centre of all aspects of photography – art, editorial, commercial, advertising, it's all here.

— *As a subject for your photography, is the urban landscape of New York somehow more seductive than other places?*
Actually, I'm more seduced by other cities that are not familiar to me. It's hard to be seduced by something I'm so close to. But I do have this great desire to take pictures of New York and understand my relationship to this place logically, artistically, emotionally. New York obviously has a unique urban form and monumental scale that excites and puzzles me and makes me want to understand and be a part of it, more than any other city. Sometimes I do need to leave it to work, though. About five years ago, I was feeling a little burnt out on New York, so I went to California to take pictures, in an effort to get New York out of my mind. That was very good for me. For some reason, it felt like I could just take a picture anywhere in California. Considering the amount of time I spend looking for the right picture in New York, I feel like I actually get very few photos out of the city. But in California, I felt like anywhere I put my camera down, it came out well. Maybe because it was all so new and weird to me.

— *Do you ever consider moving somewhere new and weird, for good?*
I would only consider living somewhere else for a finite period of time. I'm interested in living in Europe at some point in my life, maybe for six months to a year. I don't think I could live anywhere else much longer than that. At a certain point in my mid-20s, I did consider living somewhere else and spent a month travelling across the United States, looking for the right place. I took a train across the country, then drove back, spending a certain amount of time in cities where I thought I might be able to live: Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Santa Fe, Austin, New Orleans, and a few others. But that trip only made me realize I really couldn't live anywhere other than New York. There's just something about the energy here: the ability to be able to walk everywhere your whole life rather than be dependent on a car. It's a city where there are always people. I go to other cities and think: Where is everybody? There is liter-

Stadium Light, The Bronx, 2002,
from the series Cross Lands
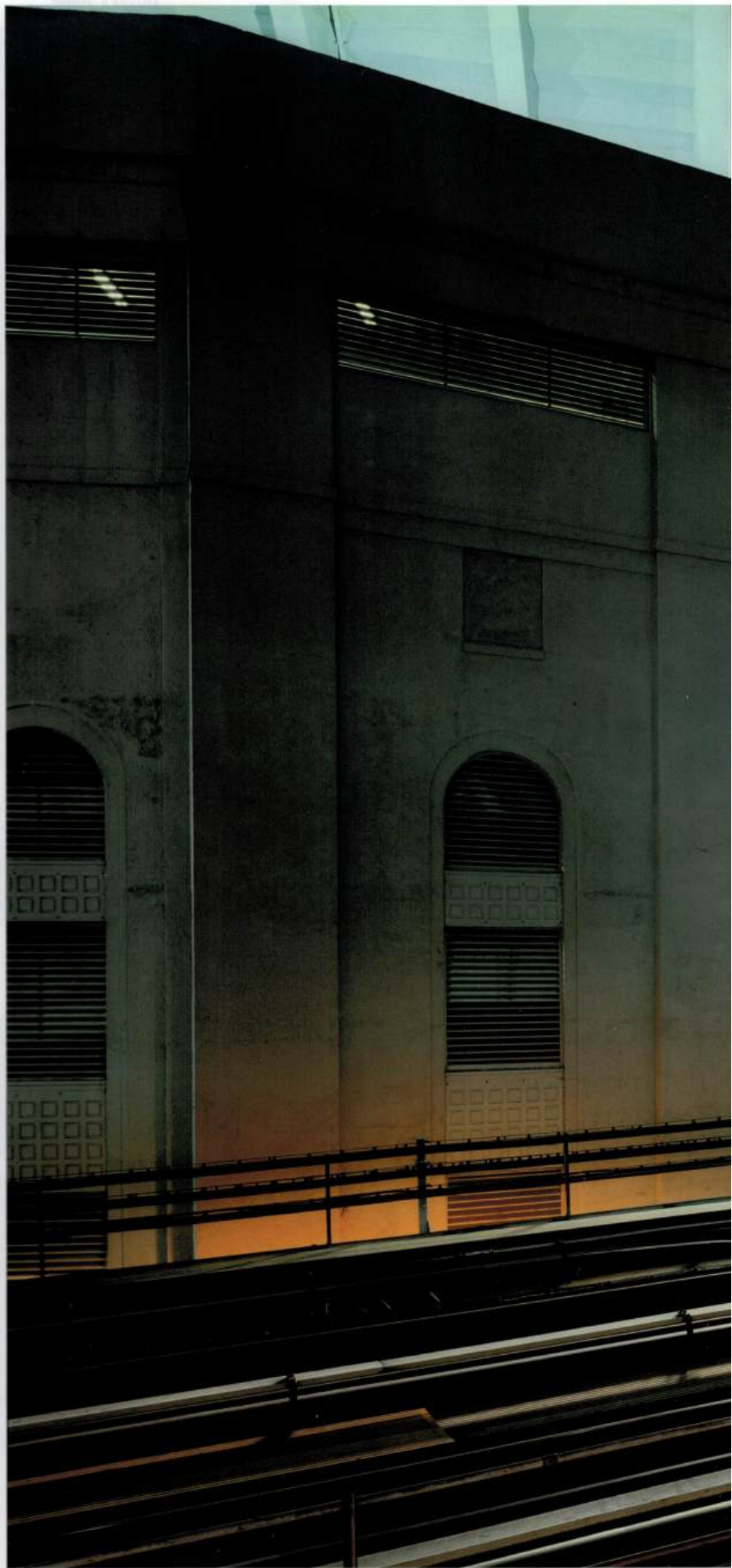
There are few things I enjoy more than just walking around the city, very few

ally nobody on the street. That doesn't feel like a city to me. I've come to the realization that, for better or worse, I'm stuck in New York.

— *During that trip across America, were you taking photos?*
Oh, I took thousands of pictures on that trip. A huge amount of pictures, and that was also part of why I took the trip, in the first place. I hadn't embraced photography as my professional career yet, but I was still learning to be a photographer and learning how to take pictures and trying to figure out what I was interested in taking pictures of. It was very helpful. After that, I got more and more serious about photography. But it wasn't until many years later that I realized I had to either really do it or give it up.

What is the process of a project for you, from inception to completion?
My process is varied. Some ideas I get from reading, some are inspired by other people's work, some by seeing a piece in the newspaper. Then I begin to investigate — I have an idea, and I try to find out whether it's going to be worthwhile, visually. Access is often a challenging part of what I do: being able to get to where I want to take the pictures. Sometimes I just drive around in my car or walk around the street and try to get ideas that way. Sometimes, like I said before, I have to leave New York entirely. So, finding the idea is one thing, and then finding the right execution for it can take months or years, sometimes. I have many different ideas that I've started but haven't been able to complete. When I am ready to complete a project, it's because all of a sudden I'm able to access the picture: I know what it looks like. I visualize the photographs before I'm actually taking them, and that's when things happen pretty quickly. A couple of months of me taking pictures all the time, and then I feel like I'm done.

But even now, I have a few projects that are a quarter of the way or halfway there, and often I find myself returning to them only years later. My latest show [Dark Day], for example, is actually a project I started in 1999. I took five pictures more than 10 years ago, but then I put them to the back of my mind. Technically, I just couldn't do what I wanted to with the project until now. These are pictures of intense reflections of the sun, and they aren't Photoshopped or anything: that's the picture. It's the result of letting as little light into the camera as possible to see into a reflection that you wouldn't normally be able to see. Something that would be blinding to you otherwise. Just in the last five or ten years, they've made cameras that are able to do what I wanted to do with the photographs in the first place. So, I was trying out different projects last year because I was on the calendar for the Morgan Lehman gallery in Chelsea, which

shows my work. I had one project that was almost done, but I wasn't excited about it, so I thought, maybe I should revisit that project I was playing around with 12 years ago. I thought I had moved on from it, but I picked it up again and it felt perfect. I spent a couple of months taking pictures, and I knew exactly where I wanted to go, what I wanted to do. And there it was: I had a show. So I can't predict it. It happens differently each time.

— *Is it also a matter of the mind-frame you're in? Does that change from project to project, or do you have a pretty consistent narrative running through your head, even if the ideas are different?*
No, I am totally affected by my state of mind. One project I've been working on now for five or six years is taking pictures of a little town in upstate New York that had an insane asylum for several generations — something like seventy-five or eighty years. It just closed down some fifteen years ago. You know how across the U.S. you have many 'factory towns' where a factory is built and everyone works there? Well, in the same way, this was an 'asylum town'. The town only exists because there was an asylum there. Now the asylum is no longer functioning, and the town has a very strange energy to it. The hospital is still just sitting there.

Of course, it's a very dark subject, because in the beginning of the last century, hospitals like this often became very destructive things, where new procedures were tested on people. They were terrible places. So, I began that project five years ago, I got far along on it, but then my daughter was born and I put it on hold for a while. When I went back to it, I found that it was very hard for me to finish it, to go take pictures of such a dark, depressing subject, because

Big Box Retail, Los Angeles, 2006, from the series Cross Lands

really, all I wanted to do was go home and lie on a pink, furry rug with my daughter. All I could think about while I was out in that town was: 'Why am I here in this depressing place?' Whereas when I didn't have a kid, I felt that yes, this is dark, but it's also very exciting.

And last year, my dad died while I was in the process of trying to figure out what I was going to do for my Morgan Lehman show; that was right when the idea from 1999 came back to me. For this project, I was wandering the city mostly, and it was the perfect thing to do right after my dad died — just walk around by myself on a bright sunny day, take my mind off things, come into a perfect state of mind between where I was and where the project I was pursuing needed to be. So my emotional state definitely plays a role in the projects that result.

— People often make a distinction between your 'architectural photography' and your 'art photography'. Do you make that distinction as well, or do you see all of your works as feeding into one another?
I do see a distinction. And just to clarify, I think of 'architectural photography' as basically treating a structure, space, or building as you might a still-life product shot. That is, removing or not capturing any elements of how it's used, or excluding any traces of its habitation. I like to think of what I do as more 'environmental photography.' Having said that, I do get commissioned and hired for commercial purposes to photograph for architects and designers, and often in these situations someone else's goals and objectives become a significant factor in my picture-taking. This is where I see a distinction: these photos are no longer what I would consider my art.

— How do you describe 'environmental photography'?
What I'm interested in is how people use spaces, why they were built, why they're there. I don't just look at structures as pretty things, which is very much what an architectural photographer does — an architectural photographer celebrates something beautiful. Whereas an environmental photographer, I think, is more interested in taking pictures that show what is really there, what is in front of you. Environmental photographers don't necessarily light buildings in some special way to make them look pretty; maybe the nature of environmental photography is more true to what this building is and how it's used. There's a minimum of styling involved. Architectural photographers, on the other hand, are always styling everything. I try not to do that.

In grad school [at the School of Visual Arts], one of my mentors was photographer Robert Polidori, whom you've probably heard of. People refer to him as an architectural photographer, but I would say 'environmental photography' is really his term. And I've heard a lot of my peers use the term, too. Maybe architectural photography is now an old fashioned way of looking at buildings and spaces.

— Very rarely, there are human figures in your photographs. Is there a considered reason that you avoid people in your work?
When there are people in the image, I find it often becomes more narrative or story-driven than I intended. It's challenging to keep those people from becoming the focus of the image. There's definitely a human element when photographing cityscapes, environments, structures, and landscapes, but I prefer to address that in a more indirect way.

— Do you think of your photographs more as 'comments' or 'observations'?
I would say both. They're comments and observations, though the comments aren't necessarily conscious or very specific. I prefer to think of my photos as ambiguous, if anything. When I'm taking pictures in New York, for example, I wonder to myself: 'What is it about this place that draws me to it all the time? Is it the scale? Is it the energy? Is it the controlled, chaotic nature of it?' It's hard to pinpoint exactly. In the same way, I want people to be a little confused when they see one of my photographs. I want them have to look and think again. To wonder if what they're seeing is actually real.

135

*Practice Tees, Staten Island, 2002,
from the series White Nights*

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