Pinhole camera captures urban decay

The Herald-Sun
Sep 10, 2003 : 8:55 am ET

"What Helps Dodge Helps You: A Project by Brian C. Moss"

Center for Documentary Studies, through Sept. 27.

In 1986, the Dodge Steel Castings factory in Philadelphia closed after 67 years in business, leaving decayed buildings, twisted sheet metal, broken windows, a yard that became an illegal dump site, and a lot of Philadelphia history. Native Philadelphian and professional photographer, Brian Moss, has recorded those ruins by using a giant pinhole camera, made from debris on the site.

The camera, which sits on the grass outside the center, its photographs and traditionally made images and a lot of documentary material are included in the exhibition. In this meld of photography and the past, Moss uses a technically primitive photographic process to record an outdated mode of industry.

A pinhole camera, or camera obscura, is a darkened room where light enters a minute hole on one wall and on the opposite wall forms an image of what is outside the opening. The ancient Chinese understood the system by which directed light rays could capture an image, and Aristotle wrote about his observations on the same phenomenon. In the 15th century, Leonardo da Vinci described this kind of camera and the process involved. A few years later another scientist proved that substituting a lens for the pinhole allowed for decidedly clearer images and the lenseless apparatus was replaced.

Over the years, the room-size camera was reduced to an object that could be held in one hand. Today, however, despite the advanced technology of modern photography, there are a legion of photographers who have returned to the pinhole camera, and Brian Moss is one of them.

The Dodge photographs are a culmination of a series he did on urban decay, especially its impact on the social and architectural heritage of Philadelphia. By using a pinhole camera, Moss could record simply and straightforwardly what happens when an industry becomes outmoded and its buildings are left to crumble from the ravages of time.

The images are made of nine 10-foot-square pinhole photographs, with an hourlong exposure in full sun, and they are remarkable. While we stand in awe of these huge photographs, we are confronted with something we usually take for granted -- the process itself. By using a primitive camera, Moss reminds us that photography is a long understood combined application of optical and chemical phenomena.

The photographs are extraordinary in the way we are repelled by the dilapidated ruins, even as we are drawn to them as remnants of the grandeur of industry. In one, we are inside a chain link fence and close enough to touch the curling sheet metal siding, look up through the exposed steel skeleton, and step gingerly over broken cement and the littered ground. By changing the position of the camera, Moss gives us a long view, looking across a sea of discarded tires and rotting timber toward the corner of another building, decorated with graffiti, broken windows, and unkempt grass. The detail in the pictures is amazing, allowing us to make out a can of motor oil, a Burger King wrapper, and the head of a child's hobbyhorse.

As we learn some of the history of the place, the ruins seem to take on the picturesque tradition of medieval abbeys. The site lies near the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge, which can be seen in the blurred distance. It is also in the same location of the Tacony Iron and Metal Works, which had been the manufacturer of the bronze tower for the 19th century City Hall, and had closed and burned to the ground in 1914.

In an adjacent gallery there are small photographs and reproductions of newspaper clippings, which tell the story of the tower. There is William Penn's statue, which stands at the tower's pinnacle, and other statues that are at its base. They include a Native American and a Swedish man and woman as representatives of other groups that were involved in the early years of Philadelphia.

Tacony was the only factory in the country that could cast the 32-feet-tall statue of the city's founder and, ultimately, Philadelphia passed a law prohibiting any building's height to rise higher than Penn's statue. In 1986, the year Dodge closed, the height restriction was broken and buildings began to soar over the Philadelphia skyline. Moss wrote that he believes that the new tall construction was responsible for the emptying of the older buildings and changed downtown Philadelphia forever. It is not a new story. It has repeated itself across the United States.

While explanations for the demise of city centers differ from one city planner to another, the reality is that large cities will remake their downtowns into new commercial centers. Smaller ones, like Durham and Raleigh, will have to content themselves with original concepts that have little or nothing to do with big commerce or industry.

The Center for Documentary Studies of Duke University is a small gem, which keeps its doors and programs open to a public that has trouble finding it and a student population that is pushing the facilities to the limit.

Blue Greenberg's column appears each week in The Arts. She can be reached at blueg@bellsouth.net or by writing her in c/o The Herald-Sun, P.O. Box 2092, Durham, NC 27702.