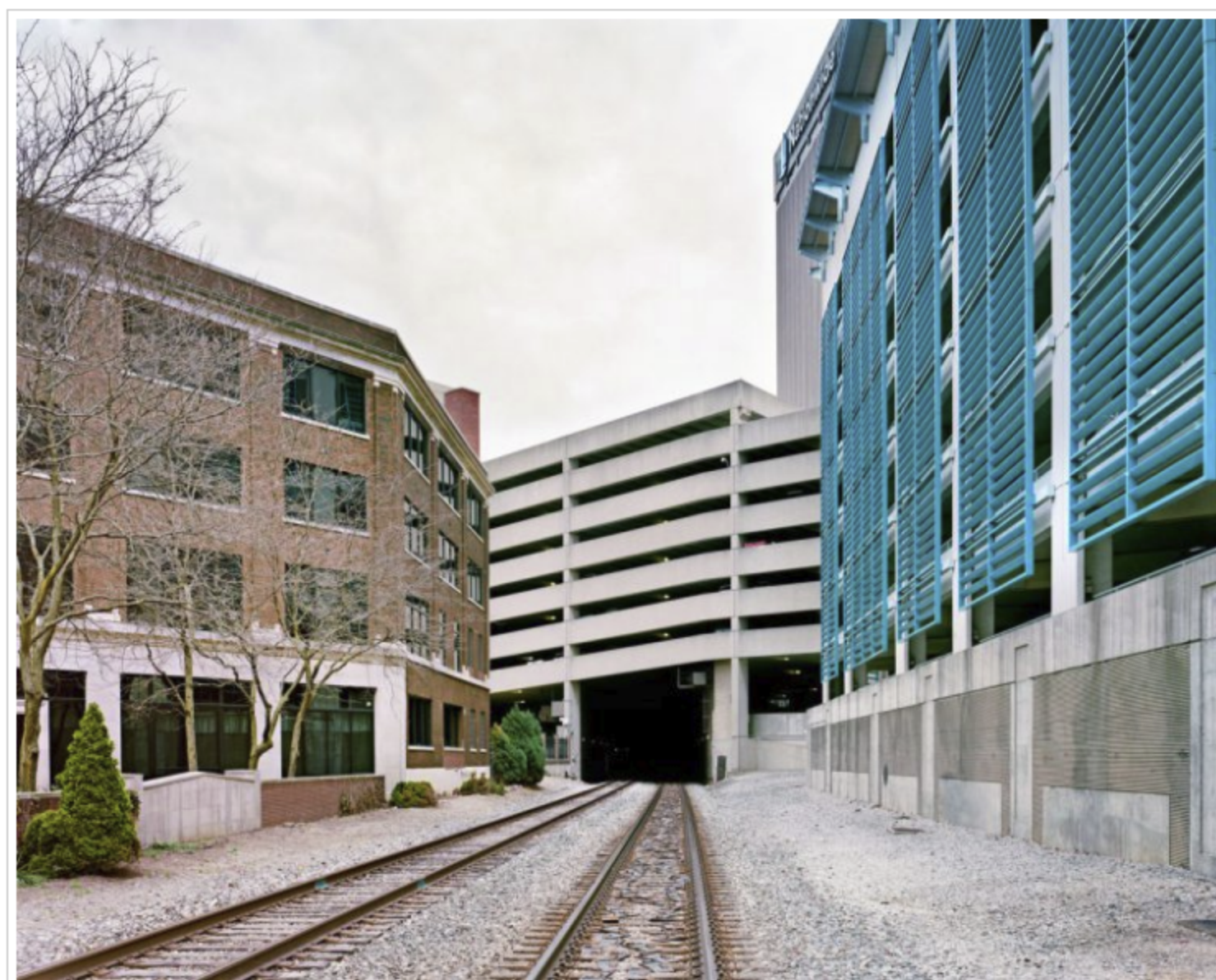


## LANDSCAPE // BISECTED: AMERICAN RAILROADS // A PHOTO ESSAY BY JOHN SANDERSON

© June 13, 2017 Image in Place, Nonfiction 1

The railroad today is not what it was imagined to be at the height of its reach across the American landscape. In 1915, over 250,000 track miles stretched throughout the continent, more than double today's mileage. It was hard not to find a place connected with rail. In completing public works projects such as [Grand Central Terminal](#), railroad riches were beyond compare. Built with intent and distinction to last hundreds of years, by the late 1960s many grand structures were forlorn and most railroads—especially in the industrial Northeast—were going under. The aspirationalism underpinning construction of the transcontinental railroad, or the sleek design of streamliners in the 1930s, was by the mid twentieth century displaced with shifting economic networks favoring suburbia over central business districts and, by extension, the rail network.

In Columbus, Ohio I found several locations which suggest a rather organic development of a mid-sized city around long-established rail lines. Cutting through the downtown district, these tracks have been covered up by local streets and a parking lot. Sections of the city have been elevated above the existing transportation network. The city's large and distinguished Union Station is long gone, demolished in 1977 to make way for a convention center and more space for parking. This seems symbolic considering the demise of the passenger train in this country.



To photograph a landscape bisected with railroad is to accept the formal problem of using the tracks as a gestural element within the frame. Coursing through urban and rural landscapes, I set out to examine how the tracks exist as a narrative force within a picture, while also looking to locations describing our collective history. As a photographer, the challenge here is to find a combination of rail and location which are reconciled on a visual level. *Steelways Shipyard*, near my home in New York and along the Hudson River,

is an example.

This image is a composite of four 4" x 5" film transparencies stitched together to create a unified image. Using the large format view camera's shift movements allowed me to retain the same camera position while exposing each negative. I was influenced by Andreas Gursky's image *Paris, Montparnasse* in allowing the building edges to leave the frame. The raking sunlight across the window array creates a gradient from highlights to shadows, and the Steelways sign shows this building to be still in use, despite its ostensibly condemned look. The carefully maintained and aligned railroad bed shows this to be a busy rail corridor. In contrast to Columbus, this structure was built parallel with the right of way, which seems more harmonious.

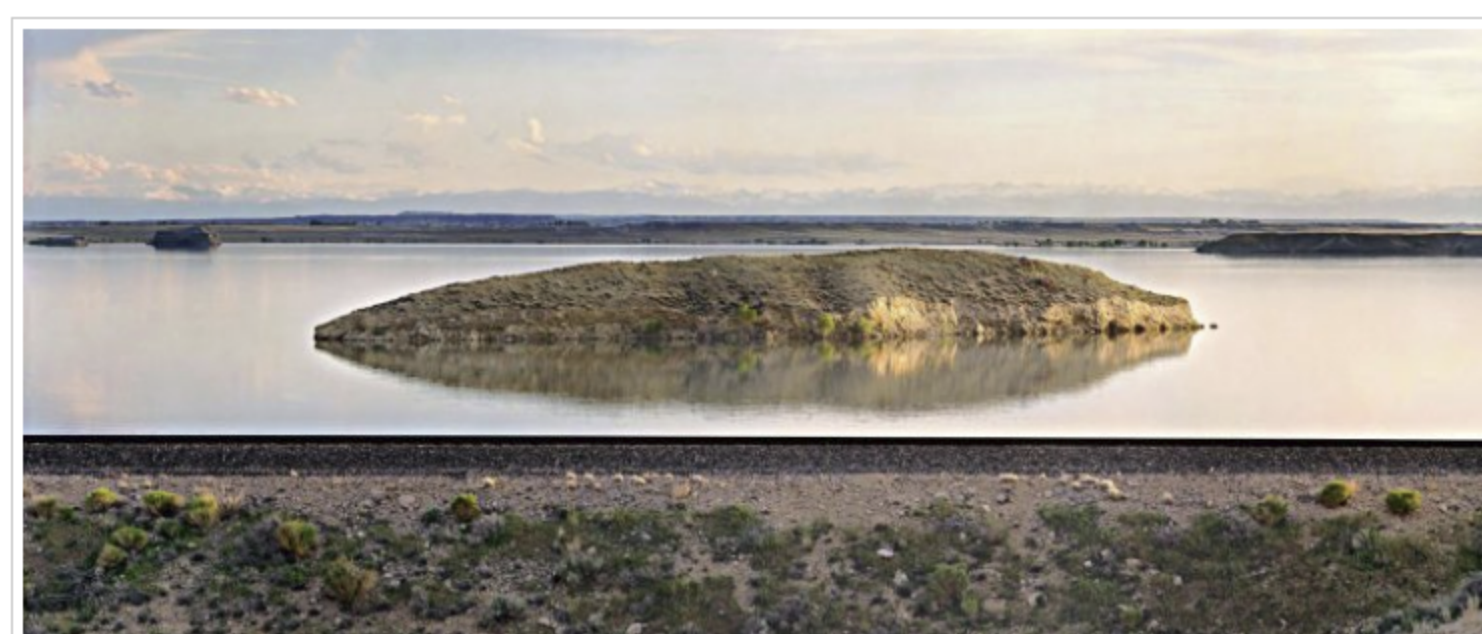


Like many Americans, I grew up traveling. From our home in New York City, the variety of landscapes in Pennsylvania were a frequent destination on weekend road trips. Distinct in my memory are cool autumn days exploring the desolate but extant railyards in Scranton, a former industrial town which served as a hub for anthracite coal mining in the region. By the time I was walking through it in the late 1980s, any semblance of activity had vanished. Yet the rails remained, like a primordial current through the landscape. This stuck with me, and when I began to revisit the railroad as an artist, my focus became the landscape as something *independent* of its intended use.

In researching this project, I looked farther back than 20th century photography, to the years from 1860 to 1900. Much to my surprise I found a place within a tradition of photographers who pictured the same subject. Early photography developed along with the railroad. In the mid-19th century, [Carleton Watkins](#) and [William Henry Jackson](#) and later, around 1900, [William H. Rau](#) all created a prolific number of pictures documenting the rapidly expanding United States. Interestingly, their subject was often the rail lines and infrastructure itself. The conquering of the vast American landscape by rail was, at the time, the most industrious feat—more so than the locomotives themselves.

It is here where focus shifts from the train to the surroundings. Within this development, the track's gesture supplies visual momentum in each picture. In contrast to the emptiness in these earlier photographs, today's landscape acknowledges the existence and bears witness to a rapid transition away from bustling industrial and metropolitan corridors. Yet if we envision a view from 1850, devoid of any buildings along the tracks, with a view from today, the surrounding landscape's transformation becomes strikingly apparent.

This became clearer as I ventured into the states of Wyoming, the Dakotas and Montana in search of images for this project. Because the landscapes there contain less built environment, my attention drifted more towards finding structure within rural architecture and the natural environment. Yet the hand of man remained evident even in ostensibly natural landscapes. In the image *Boysen Reservoir, Wyoming* we see what appears to be an island in the midground with the Central Rocky Mountains and the continental divide in the far ground. This is an entirely flooded landscape, capped with the Boysen Dam along the Wind River about two miles north of where this image was taken.



In *Metropolitan Corridor*, [John R. Stilgoe](#) analyzes the railroad environment

from the urban to suburban, natural to industrial. Throughout, the text maintains the popular image of the railroad in the American mindset. The visual equivalence of Stilgoe's writing in my own work allowed me to see the subject in a new way. Stilgoe maintains the idea of the railroad as a continuous thread connecting every element of American life. He notes this entrenchment from urban centers, where the rails brought passengers and commerce, to the farmland where boys and their fathers stood by the tracks to watch the 5:45 departing from town. I realized to a large extent what I was pursuing visually was what *The Metropolitan Corridor* examined literarily. Instead of displacing central business districts and small towns, as many interstate highways have, the railroad is intimately entwined with place.

One picture which embodies this is *Park Avenue Tunnel Cut*. Growing up in New York City, I'd often pass by this location but never thought to picture it until I began the railroad landscapes project. Architectural styles from the 19th century tenement buildings to 20th century residential towers stand in contrast to the rail bed and stone trench, constructed in the 1860s by the **New York Central Railroad** (now **MTA Metro North**) to carry trains from its terminal in the center of Manhattan, Grand Central. This section remains one of the busiest in the nation for commuter traffic.

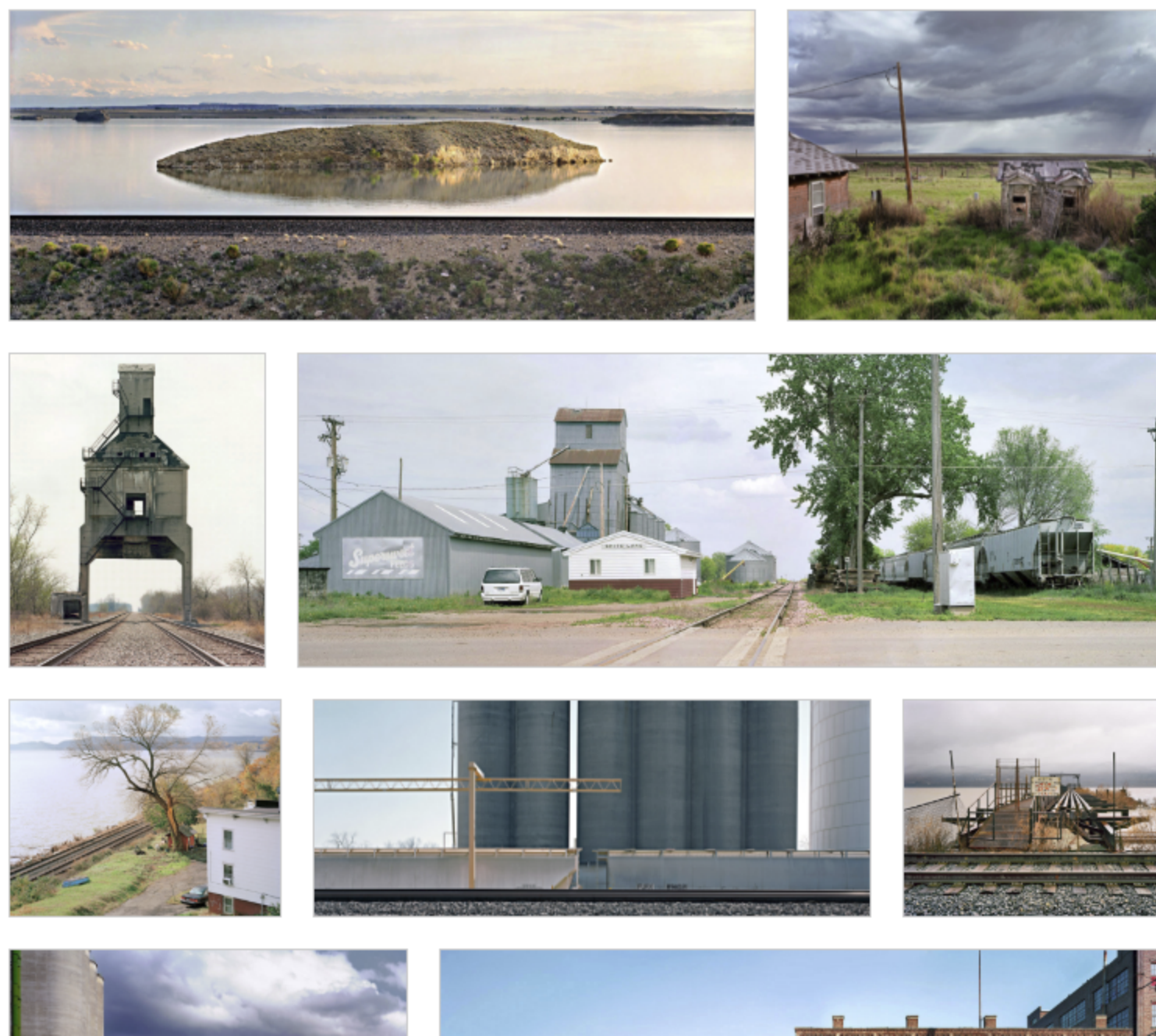


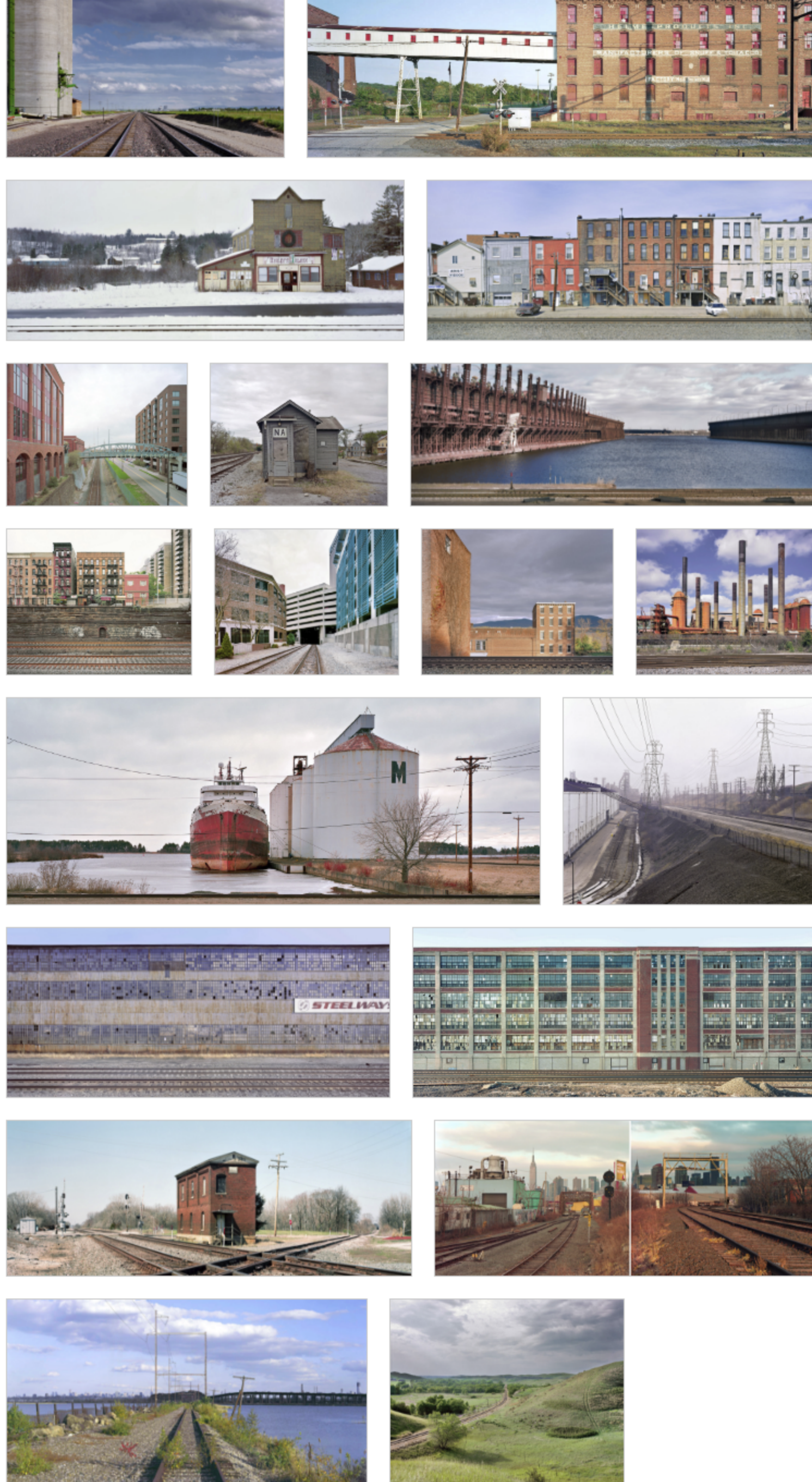
At its richest the **Pennsylvania Railroad** declared itself “the Standard Railroad of the World.” In 1968 it was going broke and in a desperate attempt to stave off collapse, merged with New York Central to form **Penn-Central Corporation**. The marriage of once-bitter lasted only a few years. The rise, fall, and resurgence of railroads across the country have relegated certain routes to abandonment, while others carry more traffic than ever. Despite this dramatic arc of changing economies and bankrupt corporations, the railroad landscape continues to be an avenue to picture our greatest ambitions, gains, and losses.

## Landscape // Bisected

Gallery by John Sanderson

Images in this gallery may not be copied or otherwise used without express written consent of the artist. Click image to view in larger size or to begin slideshow:





**John Sanderson** is a photographer and father of twin boys based out of New York. His work explores the social geography of the United States through architecture and landscape. Most recently, the New York Transit Museum commissioned Sanderson to re-photograph historic views of the NYC Subway for an upcoming exhibit at Grand Central Terminal in Summer 2017. Limited edition prints are available. See more at [www.john-sanderson.com](http://www.john-sanderson.com).

All photographs by John Sanderson.

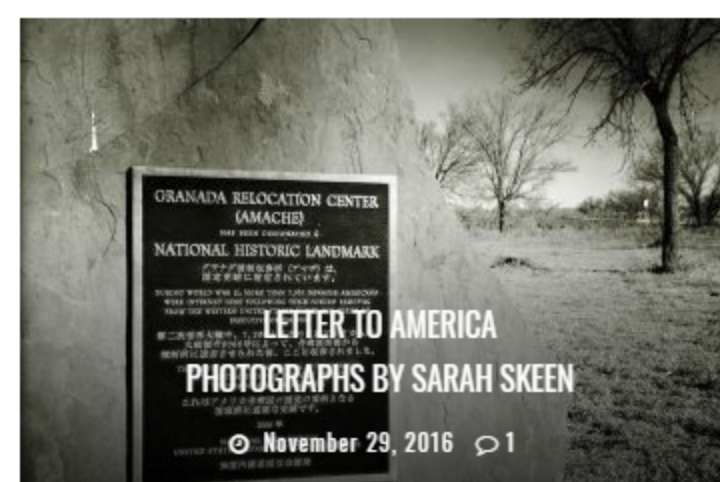
Print PDF

Share this:



- Alabama
- architecture
- Carleton Watkins
- commerce
- geography
- history
- Indiana
- John R. Stilgoe
- John Sanderson
- landscape
- landscape photography
- memory
- Michigan
- Montana
- New Jersey
- New York
- New York City
- North Dakota
- Ohio
- Pennsylvania
- photography
- railroads
- South Dakota
- speed
- train
- transit
- West Virginia
- William H. Rau
- William Henry Jackson
- Wisconsin
- Wyoming

#### RELATED POSTS





### Irving A. Mortensen

June 13, 2017

Excellent... I've been following/friends with John on FB for several years now. This prose/photo essay is excellent and covers much of the wonderful work he has been doing. Thanks for publishing this lovely piece of work.

#### MASTHEAD

**Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built + Natural Environments**

ISSN 1932-9474

© Copyright 1997-2018 Terrain Publishing. All rights reserved. Copyrights for contributions are held by the respective author/artist.

[» About Terrain.org](#)

[» Contact Us](#)

#### SUBSCRIBE TO TERRAIN.ORG

Sign up to receive Terrain.org weekly updates:

Subscribe

[View more information.](#)

#### RECENT COMMENTS



Peter Shepherd → Letter to America by Blas Falconer



Kevin Miller → Letter to America by Blas Falconer



Julia Kennedy → Two Poems by Eugene Marckx

© Copyright 1997-2018 Terrain Publishing.