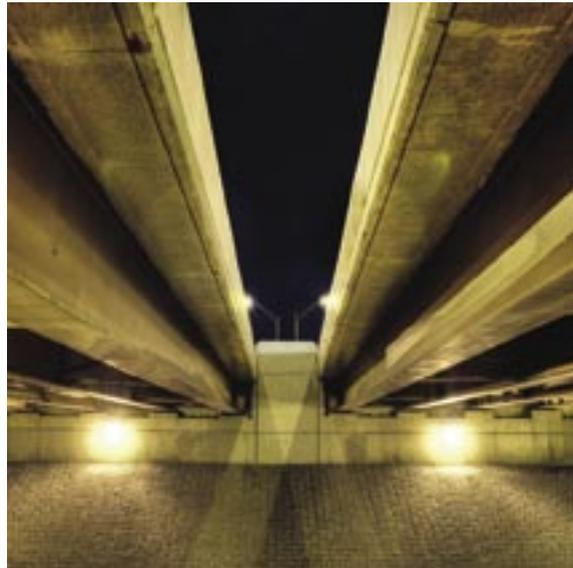


“I’ll take **TWO OR** three shots, and maybe they’ll all be out of **FOCUS**. I don’t take a photo, look at the little **SCREEN**, and take **IT AGAIN**. If it’s perfect, then it was meant to be.”



WHAT WAS IT LIKE GROWING UP NEAR PHILADELPHIA?

I grew up in New Jersey, about thirty minutes from Philadelphia. My father was a photographer and graphic designer for commercial products; my mother painted murals and *trompe l'oeil*. Both would have to come to Philadelphia for work, and if you climbed a high enough tree in Cinnaminson, New Jersey, you would have seen the William Penn statue atop City Hall in the middle of the skyline.

DESCRIBE A MEMORY THAT YOU ATTRIBUTE TO YOUR PASSION FOR PHILADELPHIA:

Being a descendant of Philadelphia’s founder, William Penn, instantly peaked interest. But it was also the stories my father told me of his love affair of the Ben Franklin Bridge that links New Jersey to Philly. His father despised the bridge for ending his ferry boat captain career.

WHEN DID YOU TAKE UP PHOTOGRAPHY?

I always loved photography, but it wasn’t until I was cleaning out my mother’s house and found my father’s old camera. I took it to Seattle with me on vacation, and even though the color was



FRAMING PHILADELPHIA

Article based on an interview with photographer Michael Penn

People perceive images in their own way,
and if an image makes someone think,
then mission accomplished.



off and the camera was in serious need of love and attention, artist friends of mine immediately complimented on my composition and subject capture.

I was looking to make a career change, and was fortunate enough to take some time off to explore this new option.

DESCRIBE YOUR STYLE. WHY DO YOU SHOOT MOSTLY AT NIGHT? WHY BLACK AND WHITE?

I love to walk, and observe the city differently every time. An intersection I've passed thousands of times may have a street light out and someone waiting to cross the street, casting a shadow on the steam rising from a manhole. I have to shoot it. I'll take two or three shots, and maybe they'll all be out of focus. I don't take a photo, look at the little screen, and take it again. If it's perfect, then it was meant to be. Whether a shot is black and white depends on my mood. I like shooting at night because the streets are less populated.

EXPLAIN THE MOMENT YOU DECIDED PHILADELPHIA WOULD BECOME YOUR MUSE:

I wouldn't call it my muse—Philadelphia is an old city, very



accessible and somewhat pedestrian friendly. It has been the subject of countless books and has been photographed over and over—yet everyone's capture of Philadelphia is unique. I've seen hundreds of images of other cities like Chicago, Seattle, and Miami, and they all look and feel the same.

WHAT DO YOU FIND SO VISUALLY INSPIRING ABOUT THE CITY?

The weather and long winter shadows make for some great images. I do not like the summer heat, and it's usually the time of year when I shoot most of my night shots.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH THROUGH YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS?

I've been told that I can make a dirty city look clean and a clean city look dirty. I don't stylize or set dress any of my shots. If a crumbled piece of newspaper manages to blow in the frame and it works, then it stays. People perceive images in their own way, and if an image makes someone think, then my mission has been accomplished.

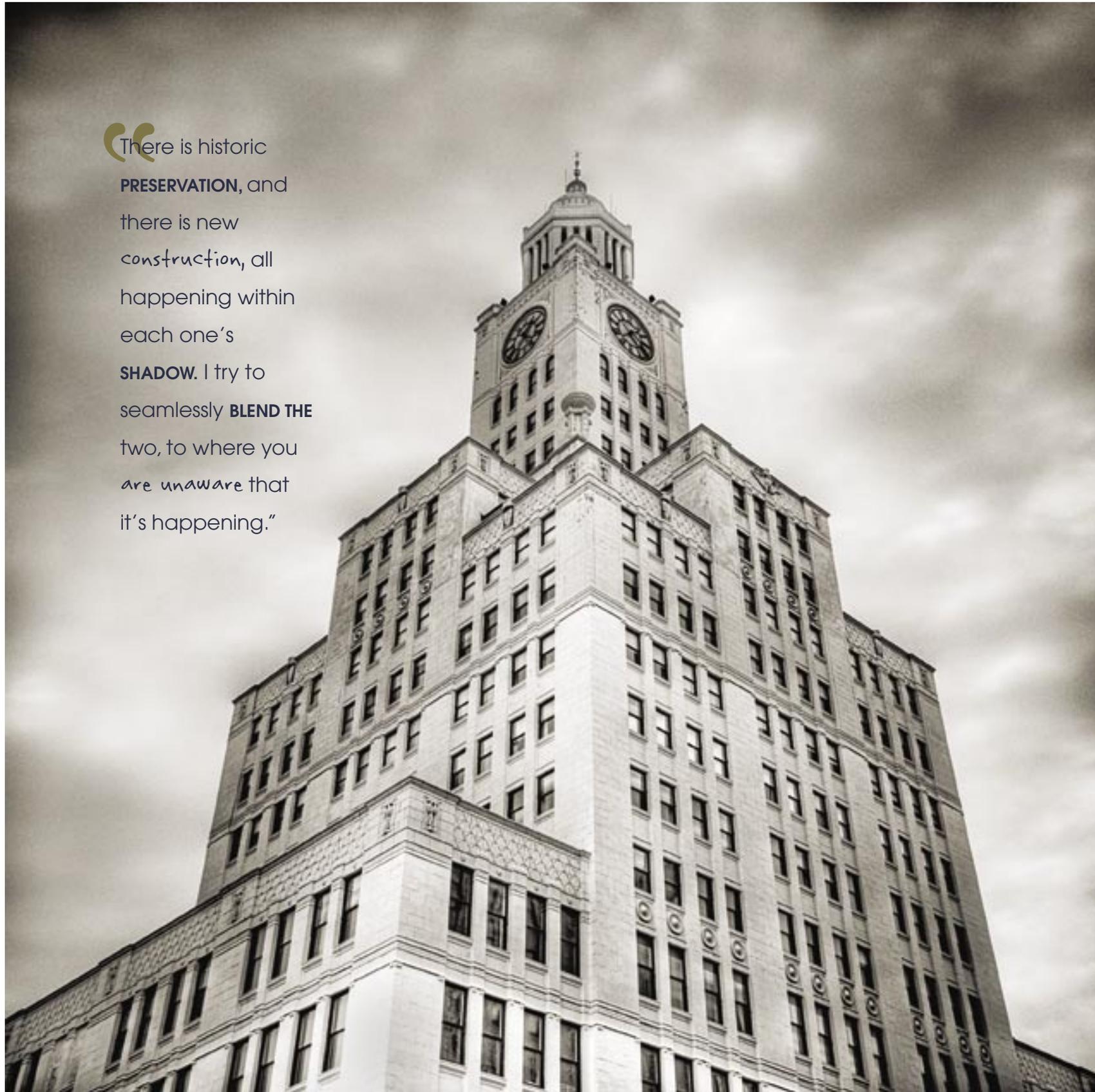
HOW DO YOU CHOOSE YOUR SUBJECTS?

It's the way a cloud is overhead or the rareness of an abandoned stretch of city sidewalk at midday. It's fog, shadow, and season. The buildings rarely do anything new, but their environment is always changing.

WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THE "SHOT IN THE DARK" COLLECTION?

I originally didn't intend for those photos to be in my artistic portfolio. Instead I was recording scenes and views that I knew would not be around for much longer, (*No Service*, 2007). Reaction to the photos forced me to rethink the series and include it in my portfolio.

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MICHAEL
PENN



I will never forget walking into the Ice Box, the huge main gallery of Philadelphia's Crane Arts building, and seeing my panorama of *Camden Versus Philly* on the back wall during a silent auction event.



HOW DO YOUR IMAGES CAPTURE THE ESSENCE OF PHILADELPHIA?

There is historic preservation, and there is new construction, all happening within each one's shadow. I try to seamlessly blend the two, to where you are unaware that it's happening.

HOW HAS THE CITY CHANGED?

It has grown, upward and outward. If I were to return to Cinnaminson and begin to climb that tree, I wouldn't have to climb far now to see the skyline some fifteen miles away.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT THE CITY THROUGH YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS?

Probably that nothing is forever.

TALK ABOUT A MOMENT WITHIN YOUR CAREER THAT YOU WILL NEVER FORGET:

I will never forget walking into the Ice Box, the huge main gallery of Philadelphia's Crane Arts building, and seeing my panorama of *Camden Versus Philly* on the back wall during a silent auction event. The moment got better when I was close enough

to see that several people were engaged in a bidding war for it. The icing on the cake was when I was approached by someone who said they were a fan of mine. A very surreal evening.

WILL YOU EVER MOVE ONTO ANOTHER CITY OR ANOTHER SUBJECT ALL TOGETHER?

I would like to move to a more eco-friendly, healthier city. There are cities where hiking and walking combine with nature so perfectly. I'd like to call a place like that home one day.

WHAT DOES PHOTOGRAPHY FULFILL FOR YOU?

It's fulfilling to have a career that you love. I love taking pictures.

TALK ABOUT YOUR LIFE OUTSIDE OF PHOTOGRAPHY:

I enjoy my anonymity. I live with my girlfriend and our cat, Cracker, in a loft apartment in Philadelphia's Old City area. I'll take any opportunity I can get to leave Center City for a day of hiking in the Wissahickon Valley. I also enjoy biking and golfing. [AL]

www.michaelpennphotography.com

