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A Conversation with Andrew Garn - April 2006 - Via telephone conversation Friday June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006, e-mail correspondence and based on observations from numerous studio visits between 1995-2006.

*M* Unlike your last documentary portfolio **Bethlehem Steel** (PA) which took 4 years to photograph and was in the development of closing, **Magnitogorsk** (Russia) a fully operational steel mill was a difficult project to document for lack of on-site accessibility, language barrier and geographical location. How would you compare both projects?

AG: Magnitogorsk was like going to Bethlehem Steel 50 years earlier because you had a fully operational plant, similar as far as set up and machinery whereas Bethlehem Steel had mostly closed.

*M* Both portfolios illustrate industrial sites, structures and landscapes. Why this particular interest?

AG: The purity of form. The fact that the main purpose of the buildings was functional and in their function they are beautiful, spare and pure.

*M* On a technical note what type of camera do you use for location photography?

AG: A Sinar Standard 4 x 5 mostly, tri-x film rated at ASA200. I also use a Hasselblad medium format for detail shots.

*M* **42<sup>nd</sup> Street** (1981-1988), **Homeless in Las Vegas** (1988-1989), **Chinatown** (1990-1992) are poignant depictions of the unglamorous realities of city life. Runaways, sex-workers, street preachers, illicit sweatshops, unsanitary underground food-processing plants, homeless and landless people. All conditions you would be especially conscious of as a native New Yorker. You have also documented the devastation of **Hurricane Andrew** (1992). Important social, urban and to a certain extend

*environmental issues are addressed in your photographs. How do you explain this recurrent theme?*

AG: I guess I am interested in the underbelly subject, what is swept-under the-rug, that which is not necessarily covered in the media. That is what I find most mysterious about society.

 You were at the World Trade Center on the morning of **September 11<sup>th</sup>** and later at night went on-site to photograph the tragedy. Can you share your recollection of the events of that day/night?

AG: Words can't describe it. It was hyper-real like I had seen it before in a movie. Perhaps the most shocking was the broiling clouds of debris that chased people from the street as the buildings collapsed. Going there (later at night) the sheer vastness of the devastation, the spread of personal items, computers, parts of people, shoes everywhere.

 Let's talk about your latest documentary project, **The Architecture of Incarceration**. When did you start this project and so far what aspect have you found the most fascinating?

AG: It began fall 2001 after I received a grant from the New York State Council for the Arts, . It's hard to pick out one thing-I imagine I am intrigued by the way humans can design structures to detain other human beings in a "humane way". I am also interested in how people adapt to small spaces and decorate them. It is human nature to make the best of any situation and decorate the nest. I focused on this especially at Sing-Sing where there are rows and rows of identical cells.

 You started your career with the intent of being a filmmaker. Why the shift to still photography?

AG: I felt in order to do film projects you needed clumps of money and it became about fund raising. Documentary photography is something you could do on your own with less money and was just as powerful.

 What is evident in your documentary body of work is the lack of artifice, "make-up" or staging in your depiction or portraiture of people,

places or inanimate objects. There is no irony in this choice, one rather feels a deep sense of naturalism, at times poetry and often empathy for the reality you chose as subject matter. I'm thinking also of unpublished works of yours, for example the elderly surgically-enhanced "coquette" ladies of Madison avenue which through your lens are treated with the same respect as the severely handicapped children exiled in the mountains of Mexico. Joy of life as opposed to the obvious desperation of humanity is, at last, celebrated. Would you care to comment?

AG: I think you're right.

 Thank you Mr. Garn.