

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT BURLEY: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF DARKNESS

The end of Photography Drive: A city landmark, and an industry, fade out.

ALEX BOZIKOVIC - August 25, 2007

They called it "Kodak Heights." For thousands of Kodak Canada employees, the company's manufacturing and processing complex at Black Creek and Eglinton was a world unto itself. Starting a century ago, the plant's massive works churned out film for cameras across the country and the continent - at its high point, more than 350 kilometres of 35-mm film every day. And those on the inside didn't lack for anything: The plant had its own theatre groups, fire department and generating station.

But when digital photography made a sudden assault on the film business, the shutter fell quickly; in 2004, Kodak Canada announced the closing of the 55-hectare plant, shocking the community in Mount Dennis. (The new owner, Metrus Properties, has been demolishing the complex since last year, and will announce redevelopment plans this fall.) When Toronto artist Robert Burley started coming to the plant in 2005 to document its end, he discovered a strong sense of disbelief among the employees. "I met ... people who had worked there 20 or 30 years, and whose parents had worked there before them," he says.

"It was shocking that these materials that had been produced for so long were no longer in demand; it was amazing that this touchstone in their lives was disappearing."

Kodak film was also a touchstone for Mr. Burley, a long-time architectural photographer whose artwork has focused on natural and artificial landscapes. As he began a book-length project, *The Disappearance of Darkness*, about the end of film photography, he saw an opportunity to explore the plant for the first time. Film manufacturing has taken place in the dark, both literally - the works closed off from damaging rays by "light locks" - and figuratively. "The photography business has always been very proprietary," Mr. Burley explains. "There are lots of secret patents and secret recipes." Kodak had to stop making one kind of film, he learned, after the one employee who knew the recipe died.

But what's left of the company's history is now in good hands: Mr. Burley, who is also a professor of photographic preservation and collections management at Ryerson University, is overseeing the preservation of Kodak Canada's archives. And Mr. Burley's large-format photographs - which will be shown in January, 2008, at the Stephen Bulger Gallery - speak eloquently to the end, and to the power, of the medium.