The Schindler house was once the cutting edge—a beacon of modern innovation. Now it is empty, a tourist spot, a shell and an echo of the past. All of its glory is gone now, but it still embodies the progress of that time. It preserves within its walls the knowledge of a society, the awareness of once was. Candida Hofer's photograph of one of its rooms uses this one example of a preserved past to expand on the broader concept of the human need to grope for and reclaim one's heritage. This photograph does not comment on a specific moment in history nor applies only to a certain society. Instead it bridges the gap across all times and cultures and addresses the awakening that human beings experience when they realize that they have allowed their heritage and their old systems of belief to pass away without an accurate recording of those times. Through Hofer's photographic manipulation of a structure that has undergone the passages of time, she comments on the human dilemma of how to preserve the past once it has slipped beyond reach.

Hofer set up her camera so that the lighting in the photograph has three sources: It slants through the slits in the walls, between the cracks up above, and from the direction of the observer. Because of this, the room is washed in an encompassing light. The corners are illuminated, and it is as if someone threw back the curtains to let in a light by which one can observe the condition of the room. This is a moment of revelation. The starkness and abandonment is laid bare with no shadows in which to hide. In a sense this light is an awakening, a realization that one comes to after one has allowed the room to go by unused and unnoticed. The enlightenment of this room matches the enlightenment of the human mind when it discovers that it has thoroughly neglected to capture the essence of the past. Instead there is only an empty shell that leaves little clues as to what once happened there.

Hofer also manipulates her camera to capture the cool blues in the cement and a more purple tinted red in the wood. She uses this coloring specifically to evoke a certain mood. These hues embody an image of
clarity, like the winter ice shining in the sharp but distant sun. This clarity allows the viewer to also note the calm and sedimentary feel that cool colors suggest. This lessens the activity level of the photograph which enhances the feeling of disuse. Looking at the room one can almost feel the chill creep up from the smooth cement into one's feet and through the spine and lower neck. The chill that permeates this photograph makes one think of empty spaces seldom visited, barren and untouchable. In the same way old ideas, customs, traditions, and cultures pass beyond the warmth of human presence to become cold and impervious to the attentions of a modern world.

While the light exposes many key aspects of the room, it raises an important question: What is the function of this space? At first glance, the room seems to lack in any designated purpose. The walls are a bare, unyielding concrete. An unfinished roof hovers over a smooth floor, seemingly unfit for comfortable human living. The cement walls and the limited amount of windows make it seem almost like some sort of storage facility. It is a place for old equipment, furniture, and memories. This one interpretation is appropriate because it parallels the idea that this room embodies discarded, ancient, and unused histories. Ideas that were innovative during their times have now lost their applicability and must be stored away, only to be inspected at a later date and to marvel that this was once considered the cutting edge. But nonetheless, the room is completely unlabeled, and it leaves only vague clues as to its purpose. The uncertainty surrounding this edifice reflects upon the impossibility of ever truly knowing what it was like in past times. One will never know the emotions the room held as different people passed through it, or the value the place had to the owner. It is perhaps this barrier that drives most humans on a frantic quest to reclaim what was lost. It is human nature to want to be certain about where one comes from.

The room has a sturdy build. The walls are solid and seemingly impenetrable. This room could still be put to use since it is structurally sound. What prevents that from happening? Despite its functionality, this room has lost the people that would occupy its space. It has been cleaned up and left, preserved for all to see but not to participate in. The emptiness suggests that the room has lost its reverence. It is no longer needed. Even though it is abandoned, the room is miraculously preserved. The floor is spotless and even reflects the light from the windows. The only wear on the building is a small crack in the floor. The unsoiled room augments the
disuse of the place. If people were walking through it, living their lives and using the space to their advantage, then the room would inevitably have signs of their comings and goings. Preservation and abandonment is one approach that humans have towards their past. They tend to analog the events and cultures of the past and then shelve them without a backwards glance. But they do not realize that they have not captured the real essence of their history which is the people and the emotions of passing through daily life. Just like the room is devoid of this key element, this approach to history is stale and empty. It only leaves a shell and a structure that tells the facts without a story.

Another approach society has towards their past is to preserve it with the hope that in the future posterity will begin the renovation process to recapture what was lost. In the photograph, the exposed wood of the roof could be an indicator that the room is being added to or repaired. Contrasted against the cement—a seemingly timeless material—the wood is younger, fresher. There is even a tentative wire reaching across a beam, ready to bring new life to the room. But despite these hopeful additions, the room remains abandoned. If the past is not captured in the moment, then after it fades away there will be no way to restore it to its original feeling. It is like trying to take a picture of a family in a room after they have already left. One may capture the details of what they left behind, but one will never capture the loving smiles or the gentle exchanges that were made. Preserving the room is not the same as capturing the moment.

A key element to Hofer's photograph is the idea of passing time. During the viewing experience of this piece, one can perceive three distinct time periods. First, there is the past. This is represented in the photograph by the absence of people. Human beings can never really be in the past. They always have a forward motion through time and are constantly changing. The absence of people suggests that all human beings have moved beyond the photograph. They have passed through. On the other hand the building remains. This building is constant. Its sturdiness defies the motions of time, and it remains fixed in the past during that last moment when it was completed. Second, there is the present which is felt directly though the viewer looking at the photograph. They will always be the preset time to which the subject matter of the photograph is talking. And finally, there is the physical photograph itself which crosses through both times since it existed on film with Hofer's first interaction with the building, and it continues to exist in the present as it is viewed.
The gap in time is felt as the viewer looks into the photograph and a vague reflection on the glass frame. During this time the viewer is invited into the photograph, but can never make that literal step into the photograph's personal time and space. Only the echo of a human is seen in the covering glass, ensuring a distinct separation between the past, the time of the building, and the present when the viewer first encounters the piece. This distinction plays an important role in the significance of the piece. One can never truly visit the mindset of a past culture but can only observe the details of the picture that presents itself, always inhibited by being in the present. It is only through the medium of the physical photograph that one can begin to make any connection at all.

Each moment passes with the tick of the clock. Time rushes by, and it usually goes unnoticed. But occasionally there are moments in one's life when one is awakened by the exposing light of awareness to the fading past. Then, that individual will scramble to reclaim what was lost, only to find it beyond hope of reclamation. The feeling was lost the moment it came, and all that is left is the remains like the empty room of the Schindler house in Hofer's photograph. Although one cannot recapture a past human moment, one can preserve the product of that moment along with the environment that fostered it. Through these chronicles, the human experience will be recorded, and the culture, accomplishments, and knowledge of society will be preserved.