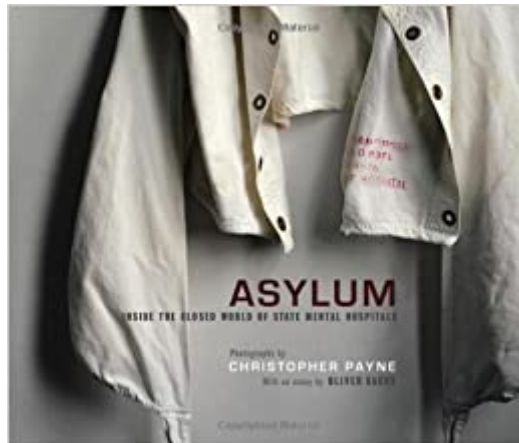


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# Asylum: Inside The Closed World Of State Mental Hospitals (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

For more than half the nation's history, vast mental hospitals were a prominent feature of the American landscape. From the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth, over 250 institutions for the insane were built throughout the United States; by 1948, they housed more than a half million patients. The blueprint for these hospitals was set by Pennsylvania hospital superintendant Thomas Story Kirkbride: a central administration building flanked symmetrically by pavilions and surrounded by lavish grounds with pastoral vistas. Kirkbride and others believed that well-designed buildings and grounds, a peaceful environment, a regimen of fresh air, and places for work, exercise, and cultural activities would heal mental illness. But in the second half of the twentieth century, after the introduction of psychotropic drugs and policy shifts toward community-based care, patient populations declined dramatically, leaving many of these beautiful, massive buildings -- and the patients who lived in them -- neglected and abandoned. Architect and photographer Christopher Payne spent six years documenting the decay of state mental hospitals like these, visiting seventy institutions in thirty states. Through his lens we see splendid, palatial exteriors (some designed by such prominent architects as H. H. Richardson and Samuel Sloan) and crumbling interiors -- chairs stacked against walls with peeling paint in a grand hallway; brightly colored toothbrushes still hanging on a rack; stacks of suitcases, never packed for the trip home. Accompanying Payne's striking and powerful photographs is an essay by Oliver Sacks (who described his own experience working at a state mental hospital in his book *Awakenings*). Sacks pays tribute to Payne's photographs and to the lives once lived in these places, "where one could be both mad and safe."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Asylum: Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals contains sadly beautiful photographs by Christopher Payne and a masterful essay by Oliver Sacks that reminds us that state hospitals were not always places of neglect and abuse but also of true asylum -- of refuge from the stresses of life. The book presents us with a world of abandoned buildings, forgotten ashes, and derailed futures. It packs a powerful punch. (Elyn R. Saks, author of *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness*, and Professor, USC Law School) Asylum is a haunting, beautiful book of lost dreams and lost minds. It is a reminder that society's ideals deteriorate more rapidly than the structures built to facilitate them. Asylums for the insane, which started with high intentions, usually ended in horror and neglect. Oliver Sacks has written a deeply moving elegy for the lives of those who lived, and often died at these asylums and Christopher Payne has captured the soul of the asylums themselves through his extraordinary photographs. I cannot imagine forgetting this book: it has evoked sadness, awe, and shame. (Kay Redfield Jamison, Professor of Psychiatry, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and author of *An Unquiet Mind*) The book will appeal to historians or scholars of material culture as well as to the medical personnel, photography lovers, and citizens familiar with the lore and lure of asylums. (Jane Simonsen *The Annals of Iowa*) Astoundingly beautiful work on a subject that rarely gets the attention. (Aaron Britt Dwell) Beautifully researched, exquisitely photographed and expertly composed and edited... Extraordinary. (Frieze) Christopher Payne's photographs perfectly match his subjects: they are strong, yet understated and dignified -- a fitting tribute to the talented architects who built these asylums and the troubled people they sheltered. It's impossible to look at this wonderful book without imagining the people who lived in these formidable structures, and wondering about their lives and what happened to them. (Henry Horenstein, photographer)... Asylum is of enormous value, as a record of how such places looked in their final years. More than that, and despite its dismal subject matter, it makes for a remarkable and endlessly fascinating book, one that can be recommended with enthusiasm to both the architectural historian and the general reader. (Times Literary Supplement)

Christopher Payne is a photographer and practicing architect in New York City and the author of *New York's Forgotten Substations: The Power Behind the Subway*. The late Oliver Sacks was a neurologist and the author of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, *Awakenings*, *Musicophilia*,

and other books.

At first glance this seems like a picture book of creepy old "nut houses", "looney bins", or whatever vernacular you choose. Sure you can take that and walk away and be correct in a sense. But if you choose to dig deeper you find much more. In the later half of the 19th century when mental asylums were coming into use, these grand structures were seen as a symbol of civic pride and stature much the same way a university or a state of the art hospital is considered. These were looked at as humanely treating those who were before chained to walls or thrown into jails with no treatment whatsoever for the cause of their disorder. While the best of intentions were behind their construction, they fell far short of their expectations. This book photographs these haunting and dilapidated places that have almost become likenesses of the very minds they were built to treat. Here the book is sectioned off very well between photographs of the outer facades, the regular wards, the work areas where the hospitals employed for a time the very patients as part of their therapy, operating and treatment rooms, and the morgues. Not something for every coffee take. But for the curious of the strange and unique, this book is some real heavy material. Highly recommend!

An excellent photographic essay on a history and aspect of medical science that far too many people would rather avoid looking into. So much so, that my mom won't even look at this book. I value history. I value human rights. I also feel strongly that photography and visual media are the best ways to communicate history, as well as document social and political issues. We owe a lot to the urban explorer who is willing to tackle these issues and bring such work to the table for discussion. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mr. Payne found almost every hospital he spoke with in regards to this project was happy to open its doors to him. Many people in the profession are frustrated by the politics and lack of understanding when it comes to mental illness. This book matters because it investigates this problem by making it accessible to everyone.

As a photographer who has an unquenchable appetite for history and urban exploring in old ruins, Asylum, is a photography-nerd's dream come true. The pictures are hauntingly beautiful in a tragic way. While there is not a narrative that will give you stories of any individual patient, the beauty of this book is the photography. It enables one to create an image in their head and only imagine what life must have been like for those left to live and often die in state-run mental hospitals. I cannot recommend it highly enough for those who are interested in the subject matter. These are easily some of the most stunning photos I've ever seen in the urban

exploring/abandoned world realm. It's been a fantastic conversation starter and coffee table piece for me.

If you want a big creepy photo essay coffee table book that might actually be picked up and looked at this is it. You won't find this book on just any old coffee table. Nah you have to be just a bit on the cutting edge side to dare putting this on your coffee table. The writing is ok not great but ok. The writing does not give much insight to the buildings and areas shown just enough to be useful not much more. However the strength of this book is not the writing its the pictures. The pictures are right out of the movie snake pit or one flew over the coo coo's nest. You can almost hear the somber "Medication Time" music playing as hordes of lobotomized, electroshocked inmates amble up to a half door as some well meaning sadistic hatchet chinned crone dispenses medication with all the love and caring of Nurse Rachett. The other awesome thing about the pictures in this book is the sheer beauty of the architecture. The buildings are magnificent and it is so sad that they are largely being destroyed or neglected. I drool over the abject beauty of some of these old hospitals especially the large ones. I wish I had tons of money because, I would love to convert some of these buildings into condos or apartments. They are in such idealic locations in many cases because; mental patients like prisoners were often kept out of sight and out of mind of the general "normal" populations. You look at some of these hospitals and think of all the suffering patients endured as doctors tried to cure them of madness using the most barbaric methods imaginable. Ice water shock baths, insulin therapy, electro shock, lobotomy to name just a few tortures inflicted on the mentally disturbed all in hopes of shocking the poor devils back into sanity. These were hospitals in name only what they really were are warehouses for the involuntary containment sick minds. The pictures are so crisp clear and compelling you can almost smell the faint aroma of urine, feces cleaning solution and alcohol that seems omnipresent in such institutions. You look at the peeling paint old radiators ancient medical equipment and you can hear the plaintive yelps of people unwillingly being lead to "treatment!" Some of the institutions have an Addams Family quality about them. Others look just like the human warehouses for insane minds they were designed to be. This book with its big empty decaying former mental institutions makes you think about the plight of the mentally ill today and that is not a bad thing. These institutions now dead and rotting away unseen makes you think about their former residents asking where are they now. Unfortunately those we once locked away as mental ill in hospitals shown in this book and many others we now know as "Homeless People!" Many but not all of the "Homeless People" rampaging our urban streets are the mentally ill who would have in earlier times filled the walls of these old hospitals to the

bursting point. Now the mental ill are FREE of their mental hospital prisons. Yes thanks to deinstitutionalization and psychiatric wonder drugs mental patients formerly locked away in huge mental hospital prisons are free to litter our urban landscape. Free to sit in dark dank alley ways muttering to themselves, off medication because; drug side effects often make them vulnerable to street predators. The community help proposed to help deinstitutionalized mental patients never materialized so sick minds roam the streets in search of food, drug, drink and home, hope lost full of despair. These huge mental hospitals were prisons of the mind with their horrific stories that set the stage for the story we witness today whenever we see a mental patient homeless ill fed, ill clothed and lost to the mean streets. This book of pictures of evils past is a direct connection to evils present if one bothers to think about the real meaning of all the empty hallways, bed chambers and medical bays. Oh yes with deinstitutionalization life for the mental patient changed profoundly as all these rotting hulks of former mental hospitals attest but upon witnessing the results of the homeless but mentally ill who are legion on our streets was this change for the better. The real message of this book begs us to think about those who once called these places home are they better off for having been set FREE! That answer is yours to ponder after looking through this book!

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