

Ansel Adams, *Old Water Tower, San Francisco, 1961*

This large black and white print by Ansel Adams – a metre tall and 78 centimetres wide – has a monumental presence that confronts the viewer. ‘Old Water Tower, San Francisco’, 1961, shows the gabled end of a long greenhouse with a wooden water tower built into the corner closest to us. The greenhouse is glazed with rectangular panels of glass hung vertically. Through this glass, the interior can just be made out, with beams supporting the pitched roof. In this end wall, there is a door of white, horizontal wooden planks, with two glazed sections in the top half. There is no visible handle on the outside, suggesting that this is the back door of the greenhouse. To the right of the door, the base of the tower is set into the corner of the building. It is also constructed of horizontal wooden planks. The base is about four metres tall, a squarish, slightly tapering tower. A round disk of black wood rests on beams on top of the base. On this sits the upper part, the cylindrical tank containing the water. It is made of vertical planks, like a barrel, held in place by tensioned metal wires. Knots and grain in the wooden planks are visible in the bright sunshine. The shadows are crisp and short, suggesting the middle of the day; the sky is a dark grey with wisps of lighter cloud.

A paved sidewalk on the right runs away from us, alongside the greenhouse, with tall black lamp posts spaced along a deserted street. In the distance, there is a two-storey house that seems like a flat cut out, and a dim range of mountains. There is the feeling that we are on the edge of town, among old agricultural buildings that are perhaps falling out of use.

Ansel Adams is best remembered for his landscape photographs, especially the pictures he made in Yosemite Valley and California’s High Sierra mountains from the 1920s on. He wrote that this photograph produces an optical illusion: ‘the tower seems to broaden toward the top. It is actually of the same width, but the curvature of the metal bands increases as the angle of view becomes more acute.’ He warns that ‘Such effects have great aesthetic potential, but can easily

be overdone.' This photograph was made using Polaroid's "Type 55" film, which was capable of extraordinarily fine grain and remarkable tonal range. Adams was a pioneer in the production of such big prints.