

Assaying history: creating temporal junctions through urban exploration

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Abstract. This paper discusses the role of encounters with the past in the practice of urban exploration through ethnographic research undertaken with communities of urban explorers. Urban exploration is an activity intimately connected with places that have largely reached the end of their capitalist use-life. In this paper I argue that the practice enticingly complicates understandings of places by unveiling unexpected material traces and immaterial affordances that build resilient personal attachments where the 'present' tangibly intersects with the 'past'. In the process urban exploration exposes possibilities for a cultural use-life of abandoned buildings beyond the event of abandonment, with or without formal historical interpretation.

Introduction: a life in ruins

"The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone ..."

Trevelyan (1949, page 13)

The practice of urban exploration can be roughly defined as the discovery and exploration of unseen parts of the built environment, usually with a focus on derelict places (see Deyo and Leibowitz, 2003; Garrett, 2010a; Ninjalicious, 2005; Rapp, 2010). In this paper I will draw on some insights from my ethnographic research with urban explorers in Western Europe to discuss the role of historical awareness within the practice. The research I have done thus far involves around eighty project participants exploring more than 200 distinct locations with ethnographic material collected in the form of notes, stories, photographs, and audio/visual recordings from collected explorations I have participated in, building multimodal and multilayered stories of ethnographic experience (Dicks et al, 2006; Garrett, 2010b). Although urban explorers are interested in various other liminal places such as construction cranes, rooftops, and infrastructure, I will, here, focus on ruin exploration, the departure point for most people's interest in the practice.

At the beginning of December 2009 three urban explorers from London and I were speeding down Highway A18 over the French border into Belgium as the sun set. This was the second time in three months we had been on this highway. After a year of exploring decaying architecture in and around London, our geographic imaginations inevitably expanded into other places, and our desires to move further from our experiential comfort zones became irresistible. In October we spent a long weekend in the Belgian countryside exploring derelict castles, asylums, and factories, the first time we began sleeping in ruins. Our intrepid guide on both trips was an explorer called Winch, a well-known, well-respected camera nerd in the London explorer community with a propensity for telling off-colour jokes with just the right demeanour to get everyone laughing until they cried.⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Pseudonyms are used at times in this paper for both people and places.

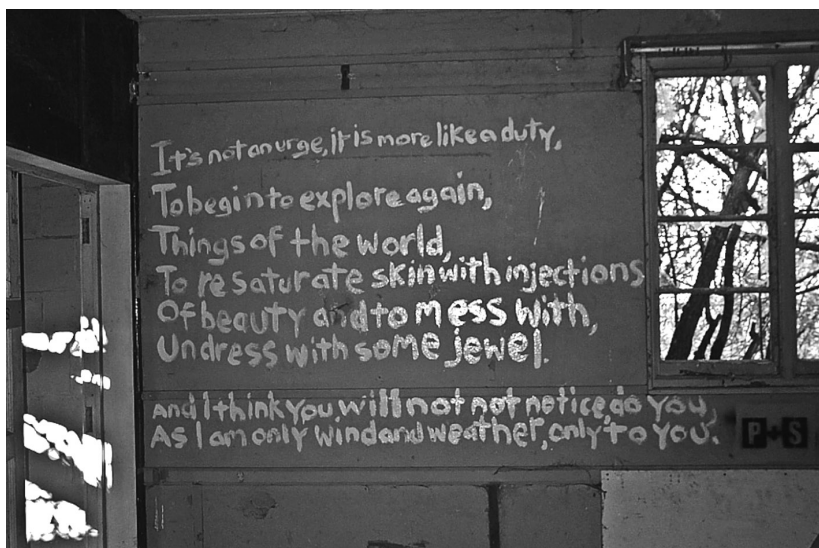


Figure 1. To begin to explore again (source: photo by Simon Cornwell, <http://www.simoncornwell.com/urbex>).

I am in the backseat, staring out at the passing landscape as we speed towards Liege in a small green sports car; Statler is behind the wheel, and the boot is overflowing with camera equipment, gas station food wrappers, and empty beer bottles. The landscape, a murky grey split by beams of orange as the sun disappears for the night, seems to contain more derelict buildings than live ones. I remind the crew that Rose Macauley once wrote, “above and under the earth [there are] far more ruined than unruined buildings” (1966, page xvii), and they all nod knowingly. After sneaking into hundreds of decaying structures together, we are all aware that each new building constructed is another building which will one day slip into ruination. These moments of liminality—the fragile points when a place seems like a look would crumble it—are what we search for.

With every derelict factory that we pass in a blur of untamed foliage, rust, and jagged metal, the energy in the car increases. Silent Motion, sitting next to me and on his first trip to the continent, starts jumping around and clapping saying, “let’s go climb that!” and “ooh, that looks old!” Winch and I are drinking Chimey that we picked up at a petrol station, and he is, as usual, scrolling around in Google Earth on his cracked Blackberry looking at an aerial view of our next location and photos on the Internet, trying to find a possible entry point into the building. He turns to us slowly and says, “So, you guys, we are staying in a hotel tonight.” Everyone looks stunned. “That closed in 1996!”, he continues, causing the entire car to erupt in a riot of laughter.

Urban explorers are fascinated primarily in the flotsam of capital. They engage in a practice intensely interested in locating sites of haunted memory, seeking interaction with the ghosts of lives lived (Maddern, 2008). When these places are located, their fragile deteriorations are captured in photos and video, “speak[ing] through photography to time itself, drawing the time before the shutter opened and the time afterwards together” [discussing Derrida’s photography (Crang and Travlou, 2001, page 173)], creating moments of temporal juxtaposition in an “illusion of control over eternity” (Reynolds, 2002, page 264) as explorers anticipate the inevitable transience of these places (DeSilvey, 2011).

These moments of encounter between the present and the past, experienced through physically exploring abandoned architecture, create flashes of confrontation with unexpected material traces that lead to emotionally charged discoveries through an embodied practice which mirrors the role of the archaeologist assaying surface material without deep excavation to analyse the character of places—a surface survey of affectation. As a practice that temporarily inhabits sites of material history, urban exploration constructs assemblages of complicated emotional and memorial attachments to abandoned places that meld pluritemporal geographic, historical, and experiential imaginations to assay history. Found material such as personal notes, clothing, toys, computers, tools, and equipment as well as buildings hidden from plain sight in the middle of the city—sometimes buried deep under the urban façade—lead to revelations that cracks in spatial and temporal structures can be exploited to build alternative associations.

Although it can be argued that this is a shallow form of historical discovery, I contend that urban exploration is rather as much about space as it is about time. In contrast to a historian working deeply on one topic or site, urban explorers have mental databases of hundreds of historical sites, connected through experiential revelation. As a case in point, the London exploration crew that I have done my work with have mapped, rediscovered, and explored the majority of London's disused underground tube stations. While no one is writing a deep history of any one of those stations, their knowledge of the interconnections, changes through time, and material qualities of that system is likely paralleled only by Transport for London workers. As Patch recently said on our web forum,

“If I'd filled my head with knowledge that's actually useful rather than endless information about the Tube, then maybe I'd have come up with an amazing idea or business model and become a millionaire by now.”

Urban exploration gives agency to places with an appreciation for the life of an architectural feature or system that continues after abandonment, with an acknowledgement that, though the capitalist use-life of all places will inevitably end, places do not ‘die’. There seems to be an assertion that there is no wasted space, no nonplaces: there are just places cared for and remembered in different ways. Where and how to interpret these postabandonment stories, regardless of who ‘owns’ them in an economic sense or whether they are ‘true’ in an empirical sense, may be guided by the people who are personally invested in those places.

In contrast to the ‘deep care’ exhibited by heritage managers, appreciation of history through urban exploration does not normally invoke a material preservation instinct. Places are experienced, enjoyed, recorded, loved, and appreciated in the present, but material remains are not prevented from continuing their mutations toward inevitable material obscurity (DeSilvey, 2006), and steps are taken, in many cases, to minimise impact to places during visitation so as not to impede decay.

Also, in contrast to ‘interpreted’ heritage, urban explorers harbour no temporal or typological constraints to an appreciation of the past. An urban explorer may find as much significance in an abandoned grocery store closed down last week as in an 18th-century castle in Belgium. Additionally, places with beautiful, amusing, disturbing, and dark histories are all given space for recognition, exploration, and documentation. I will revisit each of these concepts in turn, but let me begin by discussing the relationships between preservation and decay.

The preservation anxiety club

“Just wait until now becomes then, you’ll see how happy we were.”

Susan Sontag (1977, page 42)

At interpreted historical sites around the world we are consistently confronted with the notion that in order for people to have a sense of self, they must have a sense of the preserved past. The English Heritage website proudly proclaims that it “exists to protect and promote England’s spectacular historic environment and ensure that its past is researched and understood”.⁽²⁾ Meanwhile, on the US National Park Service website they declare their willingness to work with those “who believe in the importance of our shared heritage and its preservation”.⁽³⁾ When you visit historical sites like Dover Castle in the UK or Bodie ghost town in California, what you will encounter embodies the keywords outlined in these statements. Preservation. Research. Understanding. Heritage.

These concepts are valuable, and the research that takes place due to the motivations driving them is important but, as Doreen Massey (1994) suggests, government bodies, working in the interest of national agendas, many times motivated by profit, are often the entities that define ‘heritage’ and, as Raphael Samuel (1994, page 3) has written, history, in the hands of a professional historian, is bound to present itself as an esoteric form of knowledge.

This can, at times, incite populist reactions against what can be seen as a homogenisation of cultural identity, particularly in cases where visitors realise that representations of history presented as singular narratives are in fact deeply complicated, these complications being sidelines in order for the ‘story’ to make more sense or to avoid disturbing and dark histories. J B Jackson (1980, page 90) writes: “There is hardly an enterprising town located on the more popular tourist routes that does not have some kind of reconstructed historical environment. Some are reasonably conscientious attempts at reconstruction, some are entirely make-believe.” Preserved Spanish missions in California, for instance, say little to nothing about the murder, rape, and enslavement of indigenous people that took place within their walls (Costo and Costo, 1987).

As a result of a desire to have more personal investment in places, public reaction to state-mediated historical interpretation is, in many cases, disdain. In the course of Dydia DeLyser’s (1999, page 617) work at Bodie ghost town, she spoke with two visitors, a husband and wife. The wife told her, “‘We were just in Virginia City [Nevada] and Bodie is so much better. This isn’t commercial. Over there, every time you walk into a building, somebody’s trying to sell you something.’ Her husband concurred: ‘This is so much more authentic.’” Other visitors DeLyser later speaks to deem Bodie ‘inauthentic’ when they find that ‘modern’ materials have been used to stabilise buildings onsite. A few years later I visited Bodie and saw a young girl standing behind a rope which was preserving a room in a state of arrested decay. The girl was clearly frustrated by the barrier, and asked her father, “but who decided I can’t go in there?”

DeLyser’s work at Bodie suggests that while many people want a sense of history, some are also looking for more than a “passive past constructed through a scripted narrative” (Harris, 2010, page 47). These individuals are looking for some level of authorship over that history, whether that calls for an embodied engagement with a place (Edensor, 2007), a more interactive experience (Witmore, 2005), or an opportunity to take part in its interpretation (DeSilvey, 2007b).

⁽²⁾ <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.1664?GA>

⁽³⁾ <http://www.nps.gov/history/about.htm>

One of the places where this sort of localised history-work can take place is in modern ruins (Hell and Schönle, 2010), where interpretation can be composed at the confluence of embodied experience, imagination, and memory through unsanctioned exploration. Exploration of this nature requires a great deal of effort, but feeling a sense of place that resonates emotionally sometimes requires deep investment. Through these investments, we can build a sense of history that is as much about place as it is about time (Samuel, 1994, page viii). Urban exploration is a practice through which individuals take the opportunity to create memories of places that can sit alongside, or at times even undermine, official histories, creating a symbiotic exchange between body and place.

Gross (2000, page 77) has stressed that “particular elites, groups, or institutions have attempted to dictate which values, facts, or historical events are recalled, how this information is remembered, and the types of emotions attached to these memories”. As space becomes increasingly codified, especially in terms that ensure a profitable ‘heritage market’, people seek alternative ways to locate memorial thickness, experiences devoid of the need to empirically quantify, rationalise, or sell narratives to the next passing cultural history tourist (DeLyser, 1999).

With a recognition that history is constantly being made and remade often comes a desire to fold the past into the present, creating pluritemporal encounters, “calling forth those memories that satisfy the needs of the present” (Legg, 2007, page 458). In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud (1989) writes about a dream of standing on the Palatine Hill in Rome and imagining the city as a palimpsest, an architectural parchment on which many series of inscriptions can still be detected below the most recent text written upon it (Pensky, 2005), all available for psychological delving, regardless of their material states.

An iteration of this fragile stratigraphy is described by Caitlin DeSilvey (2007a, page 878), who invites us to “imagine a place where the past lies thickly under a layer of dust, and where the simplest act of retrieval kicks up clouds of uneasy speculation. Junk or treasure? Waste or artefact?” In DeSilvey’s world, the oneiric qualities of the fragile ruin and its irresistible material resonances excite our imaginations. This is the matter of Benjamin’s (1998) “irresistible decay” and comes through in the thoughts of urban explorer Jeremy Blakeslee:

“These places become like a drug for some reason. Places of this magnitude get you high, a combination of the history, the architecture, the light moving through, the smell of one hundred years of motor oil in the internal combustion blowing engines all over the floor like blood. And you are just another layer in the history of the place” (quoted in Rapp, 2010, page 12).

By exploring ruins of the past on our own terms and allowing them to continue their decay unimpeded, we begin to subvert “a desire to continue inhabiting imaginary identifications that are out of joint with present-day social-symbolic realities” (Steinmetz, 2010, page 299). Investment in ruins as places of alternative experiences, such as those described the groundbreaking work of Tim Edensor (1998; 2005a; 2005b; 2007), have challenged and complicated our ideas about not only what constitutes the ruin as an external imaginary (Hell and Schönle, 2010) but also what these places might contain and/or offer.

Back in Belgium, we have indeed stopped at the hotel that closed in 1996. It is called Kosmos, and at 10PM, in a light rain, we are climbing around on the tin roof hanging over a cliff on the back of the place, our shoulders piled with our sleeping bags, cameras and torches, looking for a broken window since we found the first floor of the place boarded up tighter than expected. As usual, we eventually locate a smashed-out window and climb through, the point of spatial penetration blending into the point of historical access. Inside, we find a few old vinyl couches covered



Figure 2. Rough shelter in the Kosmos Hotel (source: photo by author).

in pigeon faeces and some water-warped book shelves with a skyline view of an anonymous valley, twinkling lights mystifying us beyond the derelict pool on a lower terrace of the backyard. We set up tea lights in the old bookshelves, sipping whisky obtained on the ferry to Calais, thankful to have found shelter for the night (figure 2).

As we sit together with the wind ripping broken glass out of the twisted window frames, aurally tortured by some bit of metal getting smashed over and over again on a part of the roof we can't reach, Silent Motion tells us that never before has he felt so wrapped in the fabric of a place. Temporarily living in ruins, what the community came to call 'urban camping', folded us right into the materiality of places, uncomfortable as that sometimes was.

In the morning we walked out over the cracked tarmac of the parking lot, hitch-hiking weeds grabbing at our trouser legs, and headed to the car to speed to the next location. We briefly stopped to look back at the Kosmos Hotel and consider our night there. I asked Silent Motion if, feeling like he is now part of the fabric of the place, he would like to see it preserved in some way. He laughed and said, "hell no, that place is a shithole. Look at it!" (figure 3). I wrote in my notebook as we drove on that we are less attached to the places themselves than to the history, memory, and experiences of these places which may remain even when the material remains are eradicated. Nobody is nostalgic about the material remains of the Kosmos Hotel. We felt that both ourselves and the hotel enjoyed the experience, it was a fair exchange, and the memories began their accretions.

Urban explorers quarry material and immaterial, functional and fantastical, rational and irrational histories of places. They create myths about places that become embedded in them. The stories of a night spent sleeping on the decrepit vinyl couches in the screeching winds of a cold Belgian night become just as much a part of the place as the stories from its use-life.

Urban explorers seek to touch everyday lives in the distant and near past and to celebrate "a different past, not the past which history books describe, but a vernacular past" (Jackson, 1980, pages 94–95). In these forgotten places history is "a social form of knowledge, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands" (Samuel, 1994, page 8). Exploration, urban or not, is defined primarily by the spontaneous finding of



Figure 3. Kosmos Hotel remains (source: photo by author).

(or at least the search for) the unexpected. Assaying the “the random, the unscreened, allows you to find what you don’t know you are looking for, and you don’t know a place until it surprises you” (Solnit, 2001, page 11). If there is one thing I have learned during my research with urban explorers, it’s that surprises can exist around every corner; finding them is just a matter of adjusting where one might look.

Reimagining remembered place—the recent past

“I hear the ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry, and time one livid final flame. What’s left us then?”

James Joyce (1990, page 19)

High and Lewis (2007), in their recent condemnation of urban exploration as a shallow spectator sport practised by “white, middle class North Americans in their teens and twenties” (page 63), contend that “urban explorers are more interested in aesthetics than history” (page 55). The authors draw these conclusions in contrast to their work on industrial places in the American Midwest, where they have located previous employees of those places and recorded some of the rich personal memories connected to the industrial ruins. Although their work is fascinating, it glosses over much of what constitutes the ruin, firmly establishing ‘value’ as solely memorial rather than potentially experiential. They also singularly focus on the capital use-lives of places, largely ignoring what those material traces might mean to groups other than ex-employees.

Following from that, what of newer ruins, modern ruins, places with shallow, comical, or forgotten stories? Unlike High and Lewis, local communities, including urban explorers, do not select places only for their emotionally charged memorial value, they find excitement and intrigue in exploring ruins from all ages and in piecing together, more archaeologically than historically, the rich and entangled pasts of those places. Sites which are perhaps less historically inspiring than grand sanctioned monuments or crumbling chimneys of the industrial era, are still cared for in this way.

As Le Corbusier (1987, pages 50–51) once wrote, we piously work to preserve the Coliseum, yet we allow the locomotive to rust in the scrap heap. Today, we may revere the locomotive yet label the pile of old printers or stacks of floppy disks as ‘trash’

or 'waste' (Hawkins and Muecke, 2003). How much temporal distance is necessary to appreciate a place or the artefacts within it? For urban explorers it seems the answer is very little, in contrast to nostalgic norms normally found in historical accounts. In one instance, we explored a brewery days after its closure, and it was, by all accounts, a favourite site that the group revisited many times.

Urban explorers enjoy experiences in places from the recent past as well as the distant past. Part of this enjoyment lies in the idea that by visiting places that have been recently abandoned, we encounter artefacts of abandonment which are familiar to us and invoke spectres of unexpected (Holloway and Kneale, 2008) and involuntary memories, conjuring what Tim Edensor (2005a, page 834) calls "intersecting temporalities", where the "past becomes available to, and the same as, the present" (Crang and Travlou, 2001, page 463).

Paul Reyes worked with his father in Miami, Florida, just after the 2007 financial meltdown, cleaning out foreclosed homes where homeowners were evicted or had abandoned them. He writes,

"I can't help but read a narrative in what has been discarded. I begin to pick, sweating nearly every item we throw away, creeping among gadgets and notes and utility bills and photographs in order to decipher who lived there and how they lost it, a life partially revealed by stuff marinating in a fetid stillness. It is a guilt-ridden literary forensics, because to confront the junk is to confront the individuality being purged from the place" (2008, page 31).

Whether by human, botanical, or animal intervention, the discarding or destruction of these objects will inevitably take place. A sense of privilege and respect comes with knowing that you shared time with these things, somebody else's material memory fragments, before their materiality folded back into the earth (Bennett, 2010). This sense is often what is transmuted into the preservation instinct. Notice how in Reyes's description he does not contend that these things need to be saved, just that he is indeterminably fascinated by them. His fascination does not lead him to feel as if he has the authority to decide whether or not they are important or significant; Reyes is reluctant to take control over somebody else's past, though he feels excited to have glimpsed it.

On 15 January 2009 I was taken on my first explorations in the United Kingdom by spiky-haired urban explorer called Vanishing Days. We visited four sites that day, ranging from a Napoleonic-era fort to a World War II battery to an equestrian centre closed down in 1986, all of which he said he visited frequently. When we stopped and sat on a small crumbling brick wall in the equestrian centre to catch our breath toward the end of the day, I asked him why he came to that place when we were clearly surrounded by many more historically 'significant' sites. He told me that he loved the story of the centre. It was a story about an eccentric old millionaire who had begun building the centre and who had consistently made impossible demands for permits and strange architectural components, causing both the county council and the construction company to balk. Finally, after years of endless building and rebuilding, the millionaire was out of money. The best part about the equestrian centre, Vanishing Days tells me, is that it was open only for a few months before being shut down again.

As we entered one of the rooms of the building, careful to avoid the nails sticking out of the floor where people had been ripping the copper piping out of the planking, a wallpapered mural of a horse half-peeled off and flapping in the wind above us, we found a stack of pamphlets published by the Kent Visitors Bureau from 1985 which include the failed equestrian centre in its list of 'top ten attractions'. Vanishing Days shone a light on the pamphlet so I could film it and told me, "I just love how sad this place is. Can't you feel it?" In fact, I had felt it since we squeezed through the fence

into the grounds; it was sodden with a prevailing comical tragicness through and through. The equestrian centre is now more memory than history, given “history is posed as the story of the triumphant and the literate, whereas memory is the democratic enterprise of oral traditions, folklore, and material culture” (Legg, 2004, page 481), and while I don’t contend that the ‘official’ history of the equestrian centre, wherever it exists, is invalid, I do contend that the oral traditions and folklore that urban explorers (amongst others) have built around the site are just as important.

From abandoned cinemas to collapsing shopping malls to empty hotels, my project participants have taken me to many recent abandonments. Urban explorers are interested in both the lives lived in those places, from preconstruction to postabandonment, and in the life of the building itself. They are interested in architectural remains but realise the impossibility of detaching them from the people who lived and worked in them, an important point made by High and Lewis (2007). Explorers are actors in the constellation of myths about places, whether or not those myths are historically (in an empirical sense) verifiable. This sort of knowledge work is built on the idea that a “sense of the past, at any given point of time, is quite as much a matter of history as what happened in it” (Samuel, 1994, page 15), and these complicated historical narratives are what create deep and interesting senses of community built from the bottom up. The equestrian centre that *Vanishing Days* took me to, perhaps to the dismay of the property owner who may have seen it as a ‘failure’, is very much an integral part of the character of that community.

Tom Vanderbilt tells a story of his myths being shattered as he climbed around what he thought was a set of abandoned atomic bunkers in the American Southwest:

“As we explored the area around the bunkers, a collection of wood structures overseen by a rickety observation tower, we would occasionally find scraps of wreckage jutting out of the pale white sand. It seemed a trove of modern archaeological history, and as we climbed the tower we imagined ourselves gazing on the site the way some sentry must have once done. As I found out later, however, both the aged military surplus sitting in the sand and the observation tower were traces of not Cold War history [but] of the film *Con Air*. We could still find scatterings of weathered Hollywood paperwork in the various buildings (the tower was later removed for *another* film)” (2002, page 20).

Vanderbilt’s experience, though perhaps disappointing initially, leads him to invest his own meaning in the place, for which he is gifted back a different story. The ‘authenticity’ of the stories there are just one component of a rich assemblage, “underpinning convoluted time [that] is a dispersed, not a unifying, memory” (Crang and Travlou, 2001, page 170).

Pasts are constructed. They are constructed through experience, memory, forgetting, political agenda, spontaneous encounter, and mythmaking, each perspective and encounter just as ‘valid’ as another. When we allow places to teach us about themselves, when we give agency to places, we begin to build rich tapestries that enticingly rearrange images of our past and, as a result, satisfyingly displace our images of who we are, allowing us to give a part of ourselves to place and “when you give yourself to places, they give themselves back” (Solnit, 2001, page 13). These entanglements are subjectively constructed and appreciated, adding an ever-increasing depth to our existence, encounters, and interpretations. In these moments, individuals build history through experiences where “memory and myth intermingle, and the imaginary rubs shoulders with the real” (Samuel, 1994, page 6).

Do-it-yourself interpretation: past mastering dark histories

“Understanding the past embraces all modes of exploration.”

Lowenthal (1985, page 211)

As Karen Till (1999) writes, some places are more challenging to keep in sight and memory—some places contain a darkness that incites calls for their destruction. Other places seem culturally or socially vacant, leaving one with little to process visually. Many would seek to erase these places from memory, including those who interacted with them during their use-lives. Theo Richmond, a developer from New Hampshire, was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying, “preserve a steel mill? It killed my father. Who wants to preserve that?” (Richmond, 1973, quoted in Lowenthal, 1985, page 403). High and Lewis (2007) write about spectacles of explosive destruction of industrial spaces in the American ‘rust belt’ and adjacent Canadian factories. In April of 1988, more than 28 000 people gathered to watch the destruction of the Montreal Miron quarry smokestacks. The event, in the words of the authors, became a sort of “secular ritual” (page 32), a blast against the past to heal the wounds inflicted by the corporate entity that ran the factory until its doors were shuttered.

In California a site called Manzanar was one of the locations where the US government forcibly interned 120 000 people of Japanese ancestry during World War II (Burton et al, 1999). As a site of negative heritage, many wanted to see the place materially erased. Local community groups, however, banded together to save the site which is now run by the US National Park Service as a location that Carolyn Strange might label a place of “dark tourism” [Strange and Kempa (2003); see also Dobraszczyk (2010) on Chernobyl]. In post-Soviet Moscow, Legg discusses “the actions of the public in honouring, profaning, or even destroying statues allows them to ‘speak back’ to the state” (2004, page 484). When we encountered an 8 ft statue of Lenin at an abandoned Soviet base called Nohra in East Germany, I felt an inexplicable need to climb it. I think, looking back on what the other explorers thought was a reasonable reaction, that I desired an embodied exchange with a Cold War history that meant so much to my parents and so little to me.

As with small stories and recent histories, dark stories are often more complicated than they may appear at first glance. Meskell points out that “as a site of memory, negative heritage occupies a dual role: it can be mobilized for positive didactic purposes (eg, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, District Six) or alternatively be erased if such places cannot be culturally rehabilitated and thus resist incorporation into the national imaginary (eg, Nazi and Soviet statues and architecture)” (2002, page 58; see figure 4). This doxic view is a tired rehearsal of the Apollonian–Dionysian modernist trope. Integration or annihilation. Interpret it, or blow it up.

Urban explorers, as well as other groups, find solace in the morphing materiality of the ruin, where difficult memories are negotiated at a pace, time, and manner of one’s choosing. The gradual enfolding of space, lacking societal and cultural expectations for assimilation or obliteration, inspires a satisfying embodied slow collapse of nature and culture, of space and time.

Ruin exploration can involve “reflections about history: about the nature of the event, the meaning of the past for the present, that nature of history itself as eternal cycle, progress, apocalypse, or murderous dialectic process” (Hell and Schönle, 2010, page 1), a process that creates “a heritage with which we can continually interact, one which fuses past with present” (Lowenthal, 1985, page 410). It is in these moments, like my reaction at Nohra, where we might make the decision to leave our marks, to take more than photographs and inscribe a place with our own feelings and memories. Importantly, that is our choice of what to do in ruins.



Figure 4. The abandoned Soviet military base ‘*Vogelsang*’ near Berlin (source: photo by author).

Urban exploration writing has been described as a “postmodern version of Fodor’s [travel guide]” (Wershler-Henry, 2005, quoted in High and Lewis, 2007, page 42) for the movement’s focus on small and fractured stories (Lorimer, 2003), individual artefacts (DeSilvey, 2007a), embodied accounts (Edensor, 2007), and depictions of single experiences where “close, detailed description seems to suit the visible remnant just as photography seems to be its main medium” (Hell and Schönle, 2010, page 7). These small stories, insignificant as they might seem staged against grand narratives, gradually stretch and erode boundaries and memories and are vital to any notion of a ‘living history’ (Handler and Saxton, 2009).

The postmodern origins of the contemporary urban exploration movement are apparent in the rejection of a singular grand narrative, but also in its playful participation in history, in its willingness to interrogate its own becoming (Hell and Schönle, 2010, page 7). Places are ventured into despite (or even because of) the danger or horror of the experience; poignancies and fallacies of sites are given equal attention. The reactions to encounters with those places might appear uncouth or even dangerous, but in the absence of mediating external forces like social expectations, those reactions are more clearly visceral and organic. By the end of our trip to Europe we found ourselves encamped near Berlin, barbecuing dinner over broken doorframes from an abandoned Soviet military base, a place we never could have seen twenty years ago. The irony was lost on no one.

The materiality of ruins crumbles in our hands as we touch them and encounter “memory only in glimpses, through acts of imagination and empathetic identification” (DeSilvey, 2007a, page 892), an identification which animates these places with human blood and sweat, both *theirs* and *ours*. Dirty needles on the ground in a ruin from some secret junkie history inspire a terror that that needle has already pricked us, infected us, because part of this place is already inside us. This infectious, perilous engagement is the sort of experience that disappointed visitors to Bodie ghost town may have been searching for.

In August 2009 Marc Explo, a well-known recreational trespasser from Paris, invited me to undertake an exploration of the abandoned West Park mental hospital in Surrey. We crept through the bushes outside the site in the early morning, hunting

for a window that was not boarded up, and when we found one, we crawled through it. As soon as we did, the air thickened. We encountered stacked-up tables and chairs behind the front door, obviously intentionally placed there to keep people like us out. As we hunted from one section of the hospital to another, we began encountering more personal places and artefacts. First, we found a padded cell, which we entered and sat in for a while, a place that almost felt like it was bleeding with half-congealed horrors. Next, at a slow and respectful pace, we moved into the hospital's crèche.

Marc disappeared down a corridor as I sat down on the broken and bending floorboards, slumped in a pile of decaying toys, wondering where the children who played with them were today. Were they my age? Were they doing okay? As I stumbled across a pair of tiny shoes, I almost had a panic attack. All I could think, over and over to myself, was "whose shoes are these?" (figure 5). Soon after, I found a burned doll with mouldy skin sitting in a small chair (likely placed there by another explorer) and stopped to take a photo (figure 6). The moment burned slowly as the wind whistled through the broken panes of glass and the light in the room slowly shifted with the passing clouds above. It felt like someone had increased the existential volume of the place. Though the history here was spectral on some level and my curiosity perhaps a bit morbid, the impact of that moment was revelatory.

High and Lewis (2007, page 54) condemn urban exploration as "analogous to the sport of hunting" and, in regard to one urban exploration website, argue that explorers "say very little about the history, function and physical layout of the [buildings] being explored"; but what the authors fail to recognise is that "[memories] don't go in a particular sequence. They are just bits poking up here and there" (Christie, 1992, quoted in Lowenthal, 1985, page 208).

In their empirical rationalism, the authors seek to order the disordered, to align form and meaning in places which are in a natural state of rational uncertainty. The disordered spaces they encounter, for them symbolise a distant landscape and urban exploration, a type of sociological dark tourism, consuming without rationalising as they might prefer.

But what is dark is, of course, also socially and culturally relative. In many ways the motivations of the authors to preserve stories, details, locative information, and 'real' memories is fetishistic and rooted in a Western empirical tradition that can also



Figure 5. Shoes in West Park Asylum (source: photo by author).



Figure 6. A charred, mouldy doll in the crèche (source: photo by author).

be challenged. This Western material bias was pointed out to Carolyn Gilman, a material culture curator who was having a dispute with a Native American community over reburial of some indigenous remains. Carolyn was arguing that by reburying them, knowledge might be lost. A community member responded: “‘Why do you white people need to know all this stuff? Why can’t you just let it go?’” Carolyn writes that “listening, I had such a visceral reaction of horror, I knew we had hit on something very sacred to *my* culture. The thought of deliberately letting knowledge perish was as sacrilegious to me as the thought of keeping one’s ancestors on a museum shelf was sacrilegious to the Indians in the audience” (Gilman, quoted in Lowenthal, 1998, pages 29–30).

When demolition at West Park finally began in 2010, Patch said, “Good, now we can stop photographing that fucking place.” While the statement may imply that Patch didn’t care about the hospital, Winch later told me, as we were standing at the fence around the empty lot that used to be the Cane Hill Asylum,

“Look, these places are probably better documented photographically than most heritage sites, it’s sad but we can let them go. There will always be new places to explore, new experiences to be had. And hey, if they turn this into social housing or something, that would be great for the community too.”

Every time you log on to the urban exploration web forums, there seems to be some ‘breaking’ news about one of these derelict asylums around London being demolished. London explorers, some of whom are flippantly called ‘asylum seekers’, love these asylums for their unique histories, aesthetic, and affectual qualities, and often on weekends you can find multiple groups roaming their corridors taking pictures. The mourning process that they go through when sites are lost (Patch later said he just wanted the hospital to “die in a dignified way”) indicate the deep attachment they have to places, even if they recognise other functions they might serve. A few exploration locations have been turned into squats or brutalised by raves (see Ingham et al, 2007), but those events are mostly celebrated, an indicator toward the politics of radical freedom behind the urban explorer community (Garrett, 2011).

After the destruction of Cane Hill was complete and West Park was being demolished, I began to consider the seriousness of the urban explorer’s role as documentarian when these places disappear with little or no formal documentation. I also began to

consider, building upon my revelations inside West Park, how the anticipated transience of places effects our experiences while in them, moving our experience of the presented past into an imagined future, where these places no longer exist.

Winch, in his free time, maintains a website devoted to the Cane Hill Asylum.⁽⁴⁾ The website, which contains many archival photographs as well as Winch's own photos of the place during serial trespasses over many years documenting its slow decay, has received thousands of hits and has earned him thanks from workers and patients of the demolished asylum, who suggested to Winch that neither the NHS nor the government had much interest in preserving its memory. Recently, he was contacted by the British Library with a request to archive the site in its entirety.

With rumours swirling about the imminent destruction of West Park at the time Marc Explo and I explored it, reinforced by the loss of the Cane Hill asylum, I thought about the fact that this exploration might be my first and last visit to it. Although it was bittersweet, my awareness was heightened, creating an impetus for appreciation, an affectual poignancy which may not otherwise have been as sharp.

Anticipated transience and architectural agency

DeSilvey (2011) has used the term “anticipatory history” to discuss stretched-out stories, experiences in fragile ruins as braided strands of past, present, and future. Working linearly through these three concepts, we can first imagine that we go to ruins to read their histories. Sometimes this is actually literal. In my visits to derelict asylums, factories, power stations, and military bases, I have found countless ledgers, notepads, pamphlets, medical records, and newspapers that gave me dates, personal recollections from employees, and story fragments from people who dwelled in these places (figure 7).

Images of bodies are often conjured up in ruins, particularly by people’s jettisoned clothing and empty chairs. But these artefacts also reveal that these ghosts had minds. Notepads with logs of playtime activities in the crèche at West Park, along with the toys I found, remind us that this was a workplace for some and a site of childhood memories for others. Do these people still live? Do they think of this place?

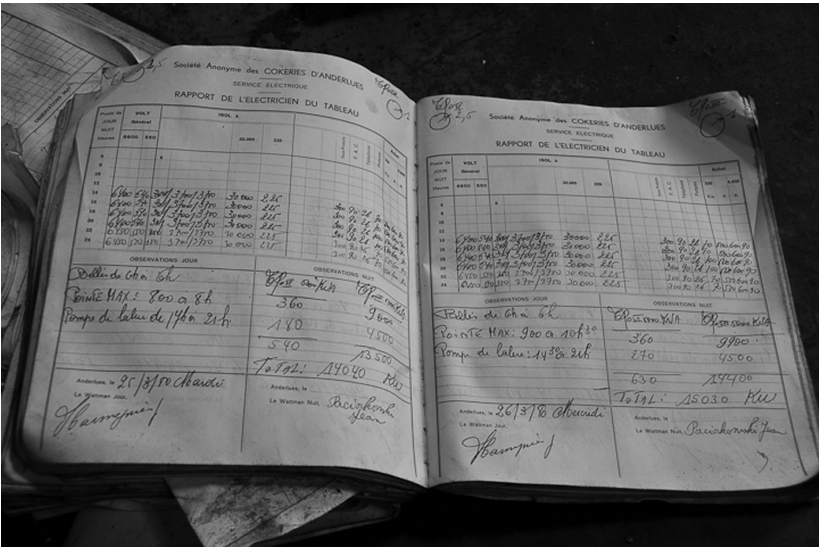


Figure 7. A work log found in Cokerie d'Anderlues in Belgium (source: photo by author).

(4) <http://www.canehill.org>

Are their memories inscribed on the walls, peeling off with the puke-coloured yellow lead paint? Would these artefacts that I am photographing be important to them? These are the affectual qualities of the materiality that Reyes described earlier, the need to pull meaning out of 'stuff'. I have come to understand, through DeSilvey's meditation on anticipatory history, in combination with my experiences with urban explorers, that "memory materialises in the body, in movement, it ceases to be pure memory: it is lived in the present" (Game, 1991, page 97).

In this informed present we might begin to think about our experiences, not in contrast to but interwoven with these residual emotions and fleeting memories. We go to these places to attempt to read the inscriptions, to have bodily encounters which challenge or reconfigure our conception of everyday experience and to eventually begin writing ourselves into places by photographing them/ourselves in them. But we can also imagine the tendrils of emotion that we leave behind, the shared moments of fear and excitement that are left floating in corners like twisting smoke in a room full of stagnant air. A security guard on site at West Park told Scott Cadman, another of my project participants, upon "catching him" in the ruin that "every time he enters the asylum, he says a prayer" (Godwin, 2010). This everyday ritual goes beyond the materiality of the site, though it also reinforces the agency of place by reifying its ability to relay meaning in the present with or without human interpretation or even knowledge of the formal histories of the location.

Part of our enjoyment of these places is clearly a regard for their mutable qualities: every time we go back to a place in decay, it is different (figures 8 and 9). The *how* is many times unknown. An explorer moved an old typewriter a centimetre to get better lighting on it for a photo, some youth tagged the walls up, a group of kids had a party here, a security guard put up a new board on a window, a fox dragged the outside in, the rain finally saturated the roof beams to add enough weight to collapse them.

We get glimpses of nature doing its slow but relentless work: ivy creeping through the windows, mould taking down the walls, trees pushing through the floorboards, rain slowly picking at the roof tiles. Our excitement registers when we see these changes; we imagine a future memory forgotten, anticipate the inevitable transience of existence—not just ours but the building's—leaving us "haunted by the threatening aura of ruins, by their oppressive interlocking of past and present, nature and culture, death and life" (Huyssen, 2010). Anticipating transience gives us an image of ourselves written into this decaying future memory, a glimpse of our footprints in the dust as we muse about what would have been missed if we hadn't been brave enough to take that first step into the 'unknown'.

This is what I argue urban exploration can teach those who look after interpreted historical spaces and managed heritage sites dutifully maintained in a state of arrested decay—something is missing where we cannot anticipate the transience, where material and memorial trajectory is regulated.

We cannot see ourselves written into their futures because we are not 'allowed' to inscribe them. The act of preservation of a ruin, if the intention is to preserve the aesthetics of decay (Trigg, 2006), is ultimately self-defeating because the essence of that decay is lost with the effort to stall it (Roth, 1997).

We can't dance with arrested decay because it's a corpse. We also can't save every place and preservation is not always the best option. Ruins appreciated for their beauty in the present, combined with a feel for their role in an ephemeral past, activate places because they are recognised as living, breathing sites of memory and human experience. Arrested decay is misinterpreted love for ruins when it becomes nostalgic for a cryogenically frozen past. An embodied, living history begins not with the site but with the visitor.



Figure 8. Whittingham Asylum, December 2007 (source: photo by Winch, <http://www.thewinch.net/tpdel>)



Figure 9. Whittingham Asylum, July 2009 (source: photo by Winch, <http://www.thewinch.net>).

High and Lewis (2007), in *Corporate Wasteland*, correctly recognise that the distance that leads to ‘tourism’ begins with the body in place, with sensory experience (Edensor, 1998), and that memories can also be built from the present, but then go on to separate the present from the past, situating the liminal zone of crossing at the border of the ruin, contending that “to enter an abandoned site is, in some small way, to cross an imaginative divide separating the perceived post-industrial present from the industrial past” (High and Lewis, 2007, page 58).

When I asked Winch about this distinction as we walked though the abandoned Soviet military base *Vogelsang* in East Germany at the tail end of our seven-day urban camping road trip, he recognised the liminal boundary of the ruin as a place of imposed spatial distinction but refuted the temporal divide asserted by High and Lewis.

He told me that a building's closed life, its afterlife, was just as much a part of its history as its open life or working life and that these phases both contradict and complement each other.

Winch's proposition interestingly gives the architecture agency and recognises that the building, although it has a human history, continues that history after the point of abandonment, with or without our presence, the presence of homeless people, drug users, graffiti artists, geocachers, squatters, film crews, security guards, or troupes of children looking for imaginative play spaces, though these components almost always *do* exist. Winch's primary distinction between the phases of a building are based on its use value in terms of capital function and recreational function, both of which are overlapping, neither of which is prioritised or necessary for the building's life or significance. We may appreciate, ignore, despise, or even destroy the ruin, but the ruin continues, with or without us (Weisman, 2007).

The urban exploration community protects the fragile derelict materiality of sites by not disclosing their locations so that these mutations can continue, so those secret histories continue to be revealed in whispers and through spontaneous embodied discovery, acting as safekeepers of extraordinary affects in a world rendered increasingly mundane.

The continual exploration, discovery, and rediscovery of the urban environment betray the fact that material culture is a renewal resource (Holtorf, 2005). Urban explorers constantly rework this resource by assaying histories in new and unexpected ways that inspire a past open to rewrite and contestation where "all time—past, present and future—coexists simultaneously" (Borges, 1971, page 189).

Temporal junctions: the past in the present

"You should create your own icons and way of life, because nostalgia isn't glamorous ... live your life now."

Marilyn Monroe (press conference, Hollywood, 1956)

"The past is not dead, it is not even past yet."

William Faulkner (1951, act 1, scene III)

In this paper I have shown that urban explorers are interested in quarrying spontaneous finds through embodied experiences of derelict and abandoned places to create enticing embodied temporal juxtapositions. I have shown that urban explorers are aware that "each time we enter a new place, we become one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity" (Lippard, 1997, pages 5–6) and are prepared to care for historical sites and to let them disappear. Again, I am not arguing that one view of the past is more important or more significant than another. What I want to argue is that there is a place, a need, and a desire for embodied experiences of the past, dreams of alternative pasts, for localised historical interpretation and for unregulated decay because "a ruin can point much more powerfully than a restored building to its historical and social genesis" (Steinmetz, 2010, page 317) and because unregulated experiences in ruins tell us as much about ourselves as about the places we explore.

I hope I have shown in this paper, through my experiences with the urban exploration community, that in those explorations stories of places are constructed through interaction with the materiality, myths, and dreams of places experienced—on personal, sensual terms, folded into the multiple narratives of our lives, the lives of those who have come before us and the lives of those human, nonhuman, ghostly, and architectural entities also involved with those sites of memory. Regardless of the eventual fates of the places themselves, by understanding places on terms of our choosing, we have the opportunity to construct rich, lively, ever-morphing narrative

encounters that collectively begin to complicate and transform the ways in which we respond to urban space and our understandings of the values of places.

Ruins may be decaying, but they are not dead: they are places filled with possibilities for wondrous adventure, inspiring visions, quiet moments, peripatetic playfulness, and artistic potential. We could, of course, take this sense of aesthetics, these small stories, these dark memories and fold them into a larger narrative about the historical significance of these places. But I would also suggest, in closing, that we reconsider the possibility that ruins have agency beyond representation and human engagements: they are sites for performative events, encounters between beings, places where material and immaterial, human and animal, animate and inanimate begin to fall away. Although they might be partially subterranean, trapped in some measure and protected in an archaeological soil matrix, in many cases they're not; they sit on the earth, exposed to weathering elements that constantly assault them and mark their surfaces with smoothness and striations that cannot be artificially produced. As these assaults begin to morph them, their narratives of capital 'progress' begin to peel back to reveal a skeleton of rust, cogs, switches, dials, utility tunnels, circuit boards, and mouldy pieces of paper outlining modes of production, things to remember, forgotten photographs, and festering memories, indicating an iterative architectural formulation has begun yet again. When we pass through these places, we tap into those multiple mutabilities, revealing the slipperiness of our own existence as much as theirs.

This slippage between signifier and signified is where Jacques Derrida (1981) sees us finding meaning, in the complicated intersections between what we expect and what we find. Nowhere is this truer than in ruins. Exploring ruins reveals a different temporal pace and scale that challenges us to increase our awareness, concentration, and participation. Through these explorations, we enter an intensely emotional courtship with place. The meaning built through those courtships is something that shouldn't be underestimated, it festers and ferments into a geography of love (Wylie, 2009) folded right back into the fabric to be discovered and rediscovered.

Urban exploration experiences pasts in what might be unexpected ways. As I have shown, the practice is interested in small stories and local, immaterial, fantastic, and whimsical histories. It does not exclude dark pasts and does not (usually) shy away from destruction and loss of the places that these stories are found in. Most importantly, though, I hope to have shown that urban explorers, far from being naive, superficial spectators, are temporal alchemists, churning the past, present, and to some extent the future into new and exciting forms that I believe we can all learn from.

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