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The fragmentation of urban exploration

How an unlikely mix of media attention and marketing exploitation threatens to polarize an otherwise apolitical practice.

[Bradley L. Garrett \(/en/authors/I/I_garrett_bradley.html\)](/en/authors/I/I_garrett_bradley.html) / [Opinion \(/en/opinion.html\)](/en/opinion.html)

AUTHOR

Bradley L. Garrett

[\(/en/authors/I/I_g](/en/authors/I/I_g)

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Urban exploration can be approximately defined as a practice that seeks to reveal, through intentional infiltrations of the urban environment, areas normally veiled from view and closed to encounter. Toronto's Jeff Chapman (aka Ninjalicious, who died in 2005) was among the first urban explorers to describe and codify the practice through his zine and later book (entitled [Infiltration \(http://www.infiltration.org/zine.html\)](http://www.infiltration.org/zine.html) and [Access All Areas \(http://www.infiltration.org/aaa.html\)](http://www.infiltration.org/aaa.html), naturally), as a set of tactics for urban infiltration, utilising a range of subversive strategies. As a form of recreational trespass, urban exploration has been perceived to be on the margins of legality, routinely misunderstood, dismissed and discredited by society at large. Recent curiosity about the pursuit, however, is leading to a

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fragmentation of the "scene" at the points of intersection between mounting public interest in ruins and dereliction, corporate efforts to attempt to capitalise on that interest, and a spate of recent police crackdowns on exploration crews as more people get involved in the practice and more brazen forays into the urban environment are made.

As an urban ethnographer in the Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London, I have, since 2008, been active with an urban exploration crew (<http://www.placehacking.co.uk/>) that has been incredibly prolific in their interactions with the city and have had the rare opportunity to watch these events unfolding from the inside out. It seems to me the practice, as it has grown in popularity, has gradually become divested from those early spatio-political foundations outlined by Chapman, increasingly imbricated in the recent social interest around ruin fetishism, what Detroit resident and Wayne State instructor John Patrick Leary has, perhaps overenthusiastically, characterised as ruin porn (http://www.guernicamag.com/features/2281/leary_1_15_11/) (also see a response to that categorisation by urban explorer Ian Ference (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ian-ference/on-ruin-porn_b_816593.html)). Along with crews in New York, Paris and Minneapolis, among other places, our London crew has been actively working to dissociate urban exploration from popular perceptions that explorers primarily engage in ruin fetishism, a reading largely based, I think, on negative publicity perpetuated by a media at a loss to find a way to squeeze a profit out of the practice.

Over the past few years, urban exploration has been the subject of numerous pop-cultural speculations and attempts at corporate colonization, ranging from a new line of Converse (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoi7WEgzY7k>) shoes to amateur documentaries (<http://www.urbanexplorersfilm.com/>) to an iPhone app (<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/abandoned/id328934720?mt=8>) (hundreds of abandoned locations just \$2.99!). Most are hoping, and largely failing, to capitalise, perversely, on the current financial crisis by dressing up dereliction as something marketable and hip, especially where it can be transmuted into "art". The tropes are multitudinous—endless Flickr photos of guys in their mid-twenties venturing from their suburb to "explore" something dangerous, some husk of a building left behind in the wake of economic devastation where they "get in touch with its history".

Those of us involved in the urban exploration community seem

to now be fragmenting into camps roughly dividing those who are largely happy to play up to the latest media attempt at exploitation, self-publishing bad books and making Cafe Press t-shirts emblazoned with inside jokes that you clearly won't get unless you have photographed peeling paint in an abandoned asylum, and those who are risking bodily harm and incarceration to push the political potentialities of the practice to their breaking points, doing the types of infiltration that Chapman would have encouraged and been involved with.

A few weeks ago, within days of each other, two urban exploration crews were arrested inside urban transportation networks inspiring "terror alerts" (one in the NY Metro (<http://www.dnainfo.com/20110509/harlem/urban-explorers-arrested-after-sneaking-into-into-second-avenue-subway-tunnel>) and the other in the London Tube (<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23946092-terror-alert-at-77-tube-station-blamed-on-four-urban-explorers.do>)). Both were running the tracks to locate and photograph disused stations on what are essentially live lines. Although Howard Stern apparently found it hilariously bizarre, these arrests shouldn't suggest that the activity is new; it isn't, we've been doing this for years in cities all over the globe. We've also systematically infiltrated the water and utility networks in almost every global city, have been digging new tunnels connecting networks, and climbed the tallest under-construction skyscrapers by cover of darkness. Why? Well, that depends on who you ask.

What I argue, and what people involved with various architectural praxes may find interesting, is that urban exploration goes far beyond a "punk" subcultural practice. What urban explorers assert through action, in the words of Ninjalicious, "revives an old and long-out-of-favour legal concept called usufruct, which basically means that someone has the right to use and enjoy the property of another, provided it is not changed or damaged in any way." Many explorers are especially assertive regarding their right to venture into public architecture such as sewer networks. Predator, an avowed anarchist and explorer from the Sydney Cave Clan, even wrote a manifesto for drain exploration (<http://www.infiltration.org/observations-approach.html>). Where late modernity has buried these systems in an attempt to present a frictionless interface that is to remain unseen, unquestioned and taken for granted, urban explorers, as active participatory citizens, are asserting the right to know how these things work, where they exist and what they connect to. They are then publicising that illegally obtained, localized expert knowledge - leaking it into the public realm, so

to speak.

While corporations scratch their heads, trying to figure out how to commodify people going into the sewers and train tunnels of global cities, authority figures scramble to figure out what it is we are doing and why we are doing it, quick to arrest people found exploring the urban environment under vague anti-terrorism authority. In terms of the latter, which is perhaps more pertinent at the moment given recent events in London and New York, allow me to suggest two things. First, by treating citizens with such an active interest in the inner workings of our cities as potential terrorists, we risk radicalising a largely apolitical movement—which is what I suspect is starting to happen right now. Second, take a moment to consider the reasons why you might want to have the security breaches in your urban infrastructure located and publicized by a group of citizen enthusiasts, in contrast to, perhaps, being located and passed on, in secret, to perhaps less benign entities.

What urban explorers do may be seen as transgressive but the goal here isn't revolutionary. The kind of knowledge and experiences that urban explorers seek and find, hidden in plain sight, is exciting, empowering and ultimately has little to do with the aesthetics of decay. It also holds little to no economic promise. It's a project of localized knowledge production born of a desire to connect in a meaningful way to a world rendered increasingly mundane by commercial interests and an endless state of "heightened" security. If others choose to interpret these actions as something else entirely, we have little control over that. However, while everyone is busy attempting to colonise, regulate and reify this spatial "movement", we are going to keep decoding the spectacle night after night while the rest watch from their cubicles.

Bradley L. Garrett is a PhD candidate in Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London with a background in anthropology, archaeology and visual methods. For the past three years, Bradley has been doing ethnographic research with urban explorers in the United Kingdom. Details of his recent research, film projects and a list of current publications can be found at <http://www.placehacking.co.uk>

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