

Undertaking recreational trespass: urban exploration and infiltration

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Urban exploration is a practice of researching, rediscovering and physically exploring temporary, obsolete, abandoned, derelict and infrastructural areas within built environments without permission to do so. Drawing from four years of ethnographic research with a group of urban explorers in the United Kingdom who undertook increasingly brazen forays into off-limits architecture, this paper argues that while urban exploration can be connected to earlier forms of critical spatial engagement, the movement also speaks to the current political moment in unique ways. Urban explorers are one of many groups reacting to increased surveillance and control over urban space, playfully probing boundaries and weaknesses in urban security in a search for bizarre, beautiful and unregulated areas where they can build personal relationships to places. The results of this research both complement and complicate recent work within geography around issues of surveillance, subversion, urban community building and critical engagement with cities.

Key words urban exploration; infrastructure; infiltration; recreational trespass; place hacking; ethnography

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Introduction: an ethnography of urban exploration

There is only one way to understand another culture. *Living it*. (Høeg 2005, 169 italics original)

Marc Explo and I are sat on one of those little benches inside a Paris Metro station, you know, the ones that you would never sit on under normal circumstances, wearing black and covered in grime. I have a head torch on over my hoodie. We've basically been up for 2 days and I'm a bit loopy.

On the other side of the station, there are three drunken guys lying on another bench harassing people walking by. So, they are a concern. I look at the board and there are two trains arriving, one in 2 minutes and one in 6. There are various people lingering on the platform waiting for the train in 2 minutes. The people looking at their watches and mobile phones are good; they're not paying attention, likely in a rush. However, a little girl with a balloon is staring at us very intently, her parents oblivious. She knows we're up to no good. She wants in on the secret.

Marc looks me over and whispers 'tuck that strap in on your backpack, if it gets caught and you go down, we won't make it. Remember we only have 4 minutes in-between trains'. I realise with a start that by 'won't make it', he means we will be hit by the train arriving in 6 minutes. 5 now.

The next minute is the longest of my life, I feel like I can hear the heartbeat of everyone near us, my body is tingling and shaking. I stop myself from instinctively looking at the

security camera and pull up my buff, covering my face a little more. By the time the wind is pushed in through the tunnel and the little electronic bells announce the arrival of the train, I'm sweating. I feel like everyone is staring at us. I push this awareness to the back of my mind as we get up slowly and walk toward the last doors of the train. The doors close just as we get to them and we both feign disappointment and turn to leave the platform. Except we don't. The last thing I see as Marc throws open the barrier on the end of the platform and we run into the dark passage onto the trembling tracks is the little girl staring at us out the window as the train pulls away, her face glowing red in the taillights. (Field notes, 13 September 2010, Croix Rouge disused metro station, Paris, France, Plate 1)

In his 2005 book *Access all areas*, an urban explorer who wrote under the *nom de plume* Ninjalicious described urban exploration and infiltration (more colloquially known as UrbEx or UE) as 'an interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover a world of behind-the-scenes sights' (Ninjalicious 2005, 3; also see Genosko 2009). Troy Paiva more recently depicted urban exploration as an encounter with T.O.A.D.S., temporary, obsolete, abandoned or derelict spaces (Paiva and Manaugh 2008, 9). More specifically, urban explorers recreationally trespass into derelict industrial sites, closed mental hospitals, abandoned military installations, sewer and drain networks, transportation and utility tunnels, shuttered businesses, foreclosed estates, mines, construction sites, cranes, bridges and bunkers, among other places.



Plate 1 A metro train passing through Croix Rouge disused station, Paris, France

Source: Photo by author

In this paper, I have three goals. First, I will establish urban exploration as a practice that speaks directly to past and present debates around space, place, subversion, surveillance, community and urban life within geography. Second, I will highlight the *process* of this particular research project by drawing on four years of ethnographic immersion as a practising urban explorer to emphasise the continuing value of deep ethnography within geography. Finally, as a direct result of that immersion, I seek to veer the focus from recent urban exploration accounts as dereliction tourism (for example, see Bennett 2011; Dobraszczyk 2010; Edensor 2005b; Garrett 2010 2011a; High and Lewis 2007; Lipman 2004; Trigg 2006; Veitch 2010) to discuss more political aspects of the practice, where urban exploration operates as a spatial security probe and disarmament tactic. In short I suggest, through my experiences and discussions with urban explorers, that the practice is (re)surfacing as a modern coping strategy for encountering cities that are increasingly closed, constricted and off-limits.

London has, by many accounts, become an archetype of the impenetrable fortress city (Klauser 2010). The famous ‘ring of steel’ around the financial district, justified in the wake of the 1993 IRA Bishopsgate bombing, was an early component, though now

more visibly, this shift means that the familiar security architecture of airports and international borders – checkpoints, scanners, ID cars, cordons, security zones – [have started to] materialise in the hearts of cities. (Graham 2012, np)

This has led to an increasing securitisation and militarisation of city space. This paper will describe the ways in which urban explorers countermand those securitisation efforts through recreational trespass into vital infrastructure and major construction projects, adventures disclosed to the world through textual, photographic and videographic online storytelling.

I draw my knowledge of the practice from a four-year deep ethnographic study with urban explorers in London conducted through a variation of snowball

sampling or respondent-driven sampling (Salganik and Heckathorn 2004), building a research group that eventually included over 100 project participants, all of which I trespassed with. I eventually focused my ethnography on a particular group of about two-dozen explorers, one of the most active in the city during this period, known as the London Consolidation Crew or LCC. This particular urban exploration crew, a group of constantly shifting informal membership, functioned on the fringes of the UK ‘scene’, undertaking elaborate and often dangerous explorations others would not, yet were a primary driving force behind the global image of urban exploration during this time period.

During the course of explorations with the group across eight different countries, I allowed my personal identity to be subsumed by theirs, becoming the researched as well as the researcher.¹ In the process, I often undertook actions that could be considered problematic (in a number of ways) in the context of a research project, such as in the opening anecdote. These disclosures, rather than being perceived as a case of simply ‘going native’ (Tresch 2001), I hope work to underscore the value of undertaking deep ethnography in this context. As an active member of this community, I have been able to gain insight into motivations within this often elusive and exclusive group beyond internet representations.

Despite my eventual ‘insider’ status in the global urban exploration community, where I suggest a subtle yet persistent spatial politic behind the practice, I do not claim to speak for the community as a whole, since I was embedded with what could be considered a peripheral group even within this already fringe practice. However, I would argue the politics behind the activities of *all* urban explorers, as recreational trespassers, speak volumes politically, even where they decline to comment on such actions. For readers interested in accounts of urban exploration centred around aspects of ruin exploration and alternative historical imaginations, there is a long list of literature in that vein, including some of my own (for example see Bennett 2011; Dobraszczyk 2010; Edensor 2005b; Garrett 2010 2011a; High and Lewis 2007; Lipman 2004; Trigg 2006; Veitch 2010). Although I will touch on these forms of exploration briefly in this article, my primary agenda here is to shed light on the less obvious components of the practice that could only have been learned through deep participation, moving urban exploration from the derelict urban ‘margins’ into the core of the built urban environment, quite literally.

Tightly fractured community

Urban explorers are perhaps a larger community than one might expect, though, as I have already suggested, it is problematic to view explorers as a homogenous group. There are approximately 10 000 registered users

of the urban exploration web forum 28 Days Later, the largest in the United Kingdom (Davenport 2011) and probably about 3000 active explorers in the UK (via Otter, interview), many of whom do not associate with web forums. Moving beyond the UK, Nestor (2007) reports that the most popular global urban exploration forum in the world, the Urban Exploration Resource (UER), has 18 000 registered users.² These vague enumerations highlight a potential for a social 'movement' coalescing with numbers of practitioners rapidly increasing each year (Tarrow 1994).

The visible global cohesion of the practice is relatively new, facilitated by widely available internet access and communication possibilities, like many contemporaneous movements. Explorers have constructed a formidable public image that includes a staunch 'code of ethics'. This code roughly conforms to the social expectation of contemporary eco-tourism practices that encourage 'taking only pictures and leaving only footprints' (see Straughan 2012; Waitt and Cook 2007) while trespassing. Behind this code, there is no enforcing body other than the disapproval of fellow trespassers, much like the computer hacker community. However, a contradiction lies in the fact that, as Patch, one of my project participants, pointed out to me,

The practice is based upon breaking laws and expectations, yet participants are shunned into submitting to a code of ethics that no individual ever necessarily agreed to.³

Urban explorers, like Patch, who probe the boundaries of the practice, challenge other explorers to justify the social value and political salience of accessing closed urban space. This is the edge of urban exploration, where I sought to apprehend the practice as an ethnographer. This research, building on the adventures I undertook with the LCC, revealed facets of urban exploration that, as I will show, significantly reinforce and complicate on-going conversations in geography about urban securitisation and subversion. At the same time, I am wary of pushing these arguments too obstinately – most urban explorers, as Alan Rapp argues, 'largely don't make claims beyond exercising a right to learn more about their environment' (2010, 3) through 'firsthand experiences ... denied to the rest of us' (2010, 38).

Following Rapp's acknowledgment of the importance of first-hand experience in the practice, while the motivations behind urban exploration are multitudinous, this is a community, first and foremost, built around embodied encounters with places and people. Mainstream media sensationalisation is actively discouraged within the larger community to prevent unnecessary attention that would incite authorities to 'crack down' or get locations 'sealed'. There is also little tolerance for idle speculation or armchair theorisation

in the community, with explorers constantly foregrounding the necessity of active participation above all else. As Oxygen Thief, the administrator of 28 Days Later, told me in an email, 'what happens on the forums has squat to do with exploring, it's not a true reflection of anything' (Oxygen Thief, via email). Even after years of close friendship and countless explorations together, one of my project participants called 'Gary' told me, 'what you do Bradley, it's just words, this doesn't have anything to do with anything'. My methodology then, built to satisfy both myself and my project participants, was based around *doing* urban exploration with them rather than speculating on it from a safe distance.

Bennett (2011 2012) has undertaken research with a disparate (yet overlapping) subgroup of urban explorers. His academic accounts reveal a much tamer, more taxonomic and positivistic group of (mostly) men who seek out a particular type of Cold War bunker. To better understand their motivations, Bennett undertakes what he calls 'document-based ethnography' (Bennett 2011, 425), a term I have suggested elsewhere is oxymoronic (Garrett 2011b). Through close analysis of these online accounts, Bennett paints urban explorers as a group of geeky middle-aged enthusiasts getting excited about becoming informal custodians over derelict spaces. Though Bennett is correct that most urban explorers today are primarily interested in derelict places, his lack of experiential emersion with the community under study causes him to underpoliticise a deeply political practice. Bennett's reading of urban exploration is broad and interesting but, I argue, fails to crack the surface. In many ways, Bennett's accounts of urban exploration and my own sit at opposite ends of a spectrum, leaving fertile middle ground for additional research.

Urban explorers, despite their declarations of novelty, owe a great deal to urban provocateurs of the past; urban exploration and infiltration are intimately connected to canonical critical spatial practices where embodied artistic intervention acts as a spatial critique (Rendell 2006). This would include the work of the Situationist International (Debord 2006a 2006c), various cultural jamming activities (see Barnard 2004, 119) and urban subversions (Daskalaki and Mould 2012). I also argue that emerging research on urban exploration slots tightly into seminal geographic research by Cresswell (1993 1996) on transgression as well as Bonnett and Pinder's accounts of avant-garde urban tactics (Bonnett 1993 1996; Pinder 2005 2008). At the same time, I want to make a case for urban exploration and infiltration as a necessary escalation and adaptation of those previous practices and concepts, asserting spatial freedom through action in reaction to an escalating securitisation and sanitisation of everyday life well documented by geographers (Adey 2009;

Graham 2010; Graham and Marvin 2001; Raco 2003). Urban exploration can be read as a reactionary practice working to take place back from exclusionary private and government forces, to redemocratised spaces urban inhabitants have lost control over.

As a result of the urban exploration community's decentralised power structure (for a similar description of hacker group organisation, see Coleman and Golub 2008) and well-groomed public image, often presented as a form of heroic preservationism (Romany 2010), as in Bennett's accounts, urban exploration is often political in action but not in assertion, rooted in a desire for freedom of personal choice that comes across as almost libertarian in ideology (here again we can look to Bonnett's (1989) discussion of the entanglements between situationism and the libertarian left). As the explorer Downfallen has written,

When we see a sign that says 'Do not enter', we understand that this is simply a shorthand way of saying 'leaving protected zone: demonstrate personal accountability beyond this point'. (Romany 2010, np)

Marc Explo, the explorer from the opening vignette in this article, explained to me during a trespass into the Paris Catacombs (quarries) that

I don't need anyone to tell me that I am free. I prove that I am free everyday by going wherever I want. If I want to drink wine on top of a church, I do that, if I want to throw a party underground, I do that.

This core motivation behind urban exploration has been parodied beautifully by the UE Kingz, a Stockholm urban exploration crew, who created a music video in a sewer called 'You have to choose', where they implore the viewer to 'live your life in a fishbowl ... or climb down in a manhole'.⁴ The central tenet of the UE Kingz philosophy is that no person, law or physical barrier, can stop you from going where you want to go and doing what you want to do – that choice is always yours. This precept has also been asserted by many of my project participants. It is the ultimate declaration of the right of the autonomous subject, which is itself a reflection of the neoliberal project these activities may initially appear to resist, further fracturing the notion of a homogenous urban explorer ethos. I will return to this later.

On a 2-week road trip from England to Poland where four of us (Winch, Statler, 'Gary' and myself) explored and slept in over 50 ruins and climbed a number of notable buildings including the *Palais de Justice* in Brussels at 3 am, Winch told me that he felt urban exploration, for him, redefined the notion of 'quality of life'. When I asked him to elaborate, he said,

Well, I think our generation has come to realise that you can't buy real experiences, you have to make them and experiences like these are what quality of life are about, it

has far less to do with how much stuff you own and more to do with how you choose to spend your time.

It is no coincidence that many of these adventures are based in global capital cities where everyday experiences and encounters, it has been argued, have been dulled through both sensorial overload and increased securitisation of everyday life (Philo 2012). This has taken place as

global interconnections between highly valued spaces, via extremely capable infrastructure networks, are being combined with strengthening investment in security, access control, gates, walls, CCTV and the paradoxical reinforcement of local boundaries to movement and interaction within the city. (Graham and Marvin 2001, 206)

Silent Motion tells me that

At some point you have to say 'fuck the consequences, I need to connect with this city, and if I have to work a little harder for that feeling then so be it'.

Explorers like Silent Motion seek to reprogramme controlled space through both premeditated and spontaneous recreational trespass, acted out as place-making performances that disrupt monotonous, normative urban spaces colonised by capitalist forces that encase and secure the city as a spectacle to be seen rather than negotiated. These critiques urban explorers level through their actions echo the work of Guy Debord in 1950s Paris, where he wrote that 'the modern spectacle depicts what society *could* deliver, but in doing so it rigidly separates what is *possible* from what is *permitted*' (2006b, 14, italics in original). Urban explorers offer visually seductive alternative options, verging towards disobedience softly but consistently, with little or no explanation as to why or how and no central leadership with a list of demands; where they are not offered, rights to the city are simply taken. Many explorers insist they simply chose to ignore laws that contradict a more common sense use of space – for instance, the simple notion that publicly funded space should be publicly accessible. In a manifesto for draining (sewer and drain exploration) by the Cave Clan member and avowed anarchist Predator, he writes, 'we enjoy thumbing our noses at petty bureaucrats and puerile legislators, and their half-baked attempts to stop us going to the places where we go ... places they built with our tax money' (Predator nd, 2).

In the next section I will briefly outline the history of the practice. I then turn briefly to urban explorers' recent interests in derelict space (building on the work of Edensor 2005b). Moving on to discuss some of the infrastructural infiltrations I undertook with the LCC in London, I conclude by discussing some future implications of this fast-growing and rapidly splintering practice for geographic research.

Formally informal: urban exploration as practice

UE is a crime but I won't do time. (UE Kingz⁵)

Recreational trespassing surely extends as far back as notions of spatial ownership, though many of those stories will have been lost to time. Troy Paiva writes 'urban exploration is a pastime as old as mankind [*sic*]. It's simply how we're wired' (Paiva and Manaugh 2008, 9). One of the earliest stories urban explorers like to recount comes from 1793, when a Frenchman named Philibert Aspaïrt journeyed by candlelight into the abandoned quarries underneath Paris (colloquially known as the Paris Catacombs) looking for a 'lost' wine cellar. His body was found 11 years later and a subterranean monument erected to his memory. Over 100 years after that event, one week after the opening of the New York subway system, Leidschmudel Dreispul was killed by a train while exploring the freshly-carved subterranean tunnels (Ninjalicious 2005). Of course, not all tales have such tragic endings. The stories of Livy exploring Rome's Cloaca Maxima sewer (Brick 2009) and John Hollingshead's insistence in 1862 that London 'sewers have been fruitful in furnishing antiquarian and geological discoveries' (2009 [1862], 453) reveal a long history of fascination with liminal urban spaces ripe for rediscovery.

Facilitated by the internet, the first generation of cohesive urban exploration groups coalesced from the 1970s–90s. These groups were (and are) known as the Drainiacs and the Cave Clan in Australia, the San Francisco Suicide Club, later renamed the Cacophony Society, the Jinx Crew and LTV Squad in New York City, Diggers of the Underground Planet in Russia, the Action Squad in Minneapolis, Angels of the Underground in Canada, the Berlin Underground Association in Germany and various 'Cataphile' communities in Paris, among others.

The first large-scale internet-facilitated urban explorer 'meet' was attended by about 30 individuals in Brooklyn, Spring 2002, organised by the LTV Squad, a graffiti-turned-urban-explorer-crew, followed by an even larger meet in Toronto, June 2004, where 65 people organised to go exploring together. If there ever was a moment when a global 'community' was formed, certainly the years 2000–05 were a pivotal period. Given that Ninjalicious, the first person to pen a book on urban exploration, was also from Toronto, the world's largest web forum, UER, is run from there, and the fact that the city has produced a steady stream of internationally respected urban explorers, including Michal Cook (Manaugh 2009), I think it is fair to say that Toronto has played a crucial role in the formation of the community that now exists. However, despite the increasing size and national eclecticism of these gatherings, many urban explorers still maintain indifference

toward the notion of a community beyond their group of friends.

Following on from Wershler-Henry's assertion that urban exploration is a 'postmodern version of Fodor's [travel guide]' (2005, quoted in High and Lewis 2007, 42), I suggest that attitude often suits the image that urban explorers want to project to 'outsiders', keeping casually interested observers at a distance. Despite the clear sense of community that exists, the entire movement is organised in contradiction to any grand narrative or defining motivation. Urban explorers are not calling for an organised revolution in the way space is controlled, they simply want to actively engage with their environment, as many people did when they were children, creating new 'sensuous dispositions' (Lorimer 2005, 85), porous encounters of bilateral exchange between body and city that inscribe the urban environment with new stories. Part of that exchange is also, of course, between explorers where group identities are formed in close association with the city and each other. As Marc Explo tells me, 'we want to be a part of a tribe again, where relationships matter'.

Despite the subversiveness of the practice, and the relatively soft political motivations undergrounding their actions, urban explorers clearly also enjoy capital materialism for its inevitable surplus and superfluous nature (Doel 2009). Where urban provocateurs of the past might have worked 'against the forces of development' (Pinder 2000, 368), urban subversionists such as *traceurs* and *traceuse* (parkour practitioners) (Mould 2009), street artists (Dickens 2010), BASE jumpers and urban explorers celebrate egregious capital investment and spectacle, depending on construction, change and investment to continue for the practice to flourish, often turning the spectacle against itself. As the explorer Spungletrumpet told me 'urban exploration can't possibly be over until they stop building stuff'. And as explorers have found, the rate at which 'stuff' is built is both exciting and alarming. However, before I relay those tales of infrastructure and construction infiltration, I will turn to a brief discussion of ruin exploration, perceived by many to be what urban exploration is 'about'.

Exploring the aesthetics of decay

The initial catalyst for most urban explorers to go into interstitial urban spaces is to observe (and often photograph) unimpeded material decay. David Lowenthal (1985) has written that attractions to material remains of the past are pervasive. Hell and Schönle write 25 years later that 'to be seduced by the beauty of ruins is an experience as inescapable as it is old' (2010, 2). In popular culture, ruins capture our geographic imaginations. It is no mistake that one of the most well-trod and loved ruins in London, Battersea Power Station

(see Plate 2), is the location for numerous films, including *Batman Begins* (Nolan 2005) and *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (Gilliam 2009). Edensor has written extensively on the possibilities derelict spaces offer (Edensor 2005a 2005b 2005c 2007). Once past an often well-secured boundary zone, freedom of expression is unregulated by social expectations in these places; they are transformed into derelict playgrounds. In my second ethnographic vignette, I will turn again to my field notes, when I accompanied Hydra on an exploration of Battersea Power Station, my first time into the site:

We were hiding in the bushes, covered in mud, watching the security patrol walk past on their rounds. I could hear the gravel crunching under their boots and their conversation about a football match. Beyond them, Battersea Power Station sat empty with its beautifully grim brick walls and creamy smoke stacks jutting into the slow clouds. Security turned the corner and without a word we ran, crouched low. Over the fences we went, two to get into the courtyard, one more to get into the walkway entrance. The last fence was broken and made an incredible amount of noise as we tried to get over it. We held the fence for each other, sweating and shaking, we got over quickly (if not quietly) and ran into the roofless central hall, falling into the grass, trying to suppress our laughter and excitement.

Lying there, catching our breath, staring up at the massive chimneys we would soon climb, inside one of the most iconic (yet derelict) sites of London, I felt an immense sense of freedom. Hydra turned to me and said 'should we go see what else we can find in here?' and I felt the tension release from my shoulders. I knew that I was in love with this, I never want this feeling to leave me. (Field notes, 15 May 2009, Battersea Power Station, London, UK)

It could be argued that the current burgeoning attraction to ruin exploration is a manifestation of the ongoing economic crises; urban exploration costs nothing to undertake and ruins are currently plentiful. But I think a more plausible explanation, put forward by Edensor (2007) discussing the work of Simmel, is a



Plate 2 Bonfire night fireworks from a chimney of Battersea Power Station, London, UK

Source: Photo by author

suggestion that the economic prosperity of the late 1980s and early 1990s induced a state of social neurasthenia, a dulling of the senses, as the city was smoothed under Neoliberalism for efficient flow of capital. The cracks in that constructed urban façade currently appearing due to lack of funds for maintenance and redevelopment are simply (re)stimulating embodied curiosity and creativity. Edensor writes:

More powerful sensations may be sought in places on the urban margins, in which a low level of surveillance promotes a rich and varied sensory experience. Such spaces may be sought precisely because they confound familiar forms of comfort and mundane sensual experience. (2007, 230)

Using the work of Frykman, Edensor then describes the ways in which 'the modernization of the body and the senses can be described as a process containing experience [and] discovery' (Frykman 1994, 65) that 'pacifies the body' (Sennett 1994, 15, quoted in Edensor 2007, 221). Returning to the flow of experience however (my praxis here), we find that exploration of ruins is less about condemning the culturally sterile places capitalism produces or appreciating the aesthetics of decay (Trigg 2006 2009) and more about creating a situation where we can *feel* places, unregulated by sensory filters and mediating social conditioning; 'the ruin, in short, enables individual freedom, imagination and subjectivity' (Hell and Schönle 2010, 8). Inside Battersea Power Station, for instance, great effort gets you into two expansive control rooms (designated Control Room A and Control Room B), where you can pull switches, turn dials and sit at large control panels that once distributed power all over London, now all covered in the thick dust of crumbling brick.

During 2010, after a number of 'urban camping' trips into Europe and exploration of derelict locations in and around London, my project participants became increasingly interested in possibilities for infrastructural infiltration of London's drain and utility network, cranes and skyscrapers, and eventually the London Underground (tube). As I accompanied them on these explorations and asked them to speak to me about our shared feelings and experiences, our geographical imaginations underwent a radical vertical reconfiguration (Graham and Hewitt 2012).

The rise of an infiltration crew

Public access to public works! (Predator, Sydney Cave Clan⁶)

Tim Cresswell argues that 'place, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power' (2004, 12) and 'must have some relationship to humans and the human capacity to produce and consume meaning' (2004, 7). When we returned to London from three extensive road trips into Continental Europe

exploring dereliction (see Garrett 2011a), the crew became increasingly interested in unravelling other facets of the city we were living in everyday. They decided to break from the well-trod urban explorer web forums to create a new, even more clandestine, forum where they could speak freely among friends without fear of community censorship and regulation. Group members began learning how to pick locks, use climbing equipment and began designing costumes that would render them invisible in the cityscape, even in broad daylight (such as posing as builders, water or rail workers). They then drew up plans to systematically infiltrate every under-construction skyscraper, utility, water and transportation network possible. In the process, the urban exploration 'code of ethics', their interest in ruins and my 'ethnographic distance' all started to slip. Statler noted, on a night of particular ethical murkiness, that 'there's no more rules to urban exploration for us, there's just what your personal morals fit in on any given night'.

Notable construction projects such as Heron Tower, Strata and Canary Wharf skyscrapers became nocturnal playgrounds. During renovation projects, the group also made it to the rooftops of both St Paul's Cathedral and the British Museum. London's subterranean features such as the famous sewer system built by Joseph Bazalgette (Dobraszczyk 2005), electricity and telecom tunnels were also ventured into. These vertical explorations became new points of contestation to the political underpinnings and boundaries of the practice. I argue this was an organic result of reconfiguring the way people in the group perceived space. In short, where

the ruin is invoked in a critique of the spatial organization of the modern world and of its single-minded commitment to a progress that throws too many individuals and spaces into the trash (Hell and Schönle 2010, 8)

Explorations of derelict places in the city, and the political implications of not only what space is 'open' to access, but also the significance and affordances of 'off-limits' and 'off-the-grid' space on a whole, drove the group to begin unravelling everything around them. Their gaze had been so indelibly altered that they could no longer see the city in the form presented; it was ripe for infiltration everywhere they looked. It was a 'rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity' (Lyng 2004, 371).

Some explorers were initially reluctant to undertake these spatial infiltrations. I myself was reluctant, given that my initial interest in the practice had stemmed from my desire to find moments of 'authentic' archaeological encounter, building on previous research (Garrett 2009). I also was not sure what I was doing was legal or ethical anymore in terms of my research praxis. However, the more time I spent climbing skyscrapers and sloshing through sewers (see Plate 3),



Plate 3 The author and Yaz at the Lucky Charms sewer junction, London, UK

Source: Photo by Otter, Yaz and author

committed to following the ethnography, the more my conversations with project participants convinced me of the similarities and overlaps between these seemingly disparate interstitial spaces. In one instance while climbing the scaffolding on the St-Sulpice Chapel in Paris, which was under renovation, I asked Marc Explo why he felt drawn to building and renovation sites, pointing out that this was just somebody else's work-space the majority of the week. He responded:

Bradley, a construction site is like a ruin because it's in a constant state of transition and part of the enjoyment of the experience comes from being witness to that in-between moment. It's all about getting a glimpse of places normally not seen by the majority of the city's inhabitants.

These glimpses were impossibly intoxicating, far above the skyline, peering from the edge of cranes where a slight breeze caused the jib to shake seductively hundreds of metres above the city. There was an ever-present light mist that caused camera autofocus problems as we floated in the clouds together at 3 am in silence, broken only by periodic giggles of euphoria. The secret workings of the city were also revealed from below street level where pumping bass from nightclubs, the sounds of rolling tyres over manhole lids and high heel clicks-clacks drifted down to us as we walked single file through urban cable networks and drain systems in stunned rapture, the liquid waste of our fellow urban inhabitants flowing over our fishing waders. The group excitedly revealed, night after night, the extent to which the city was interconnected, where 'buildings extend into the ground, connecting directly with a city's arterial systems of transportation, communication and resource distribution' (McRae 2008, 17). As Graham has written,

The expanding subterranean metropolitan world consumes a growing portion of urban capital to be engineered and sunk deep into the earth. It links city dwellers into giant lattices

and webs of flows which curiously are rarely studied and usually taken for granted. (2000, 271)

The group became self-made gatekeepers to intimate spatial knowledge about the urban environment most of the city's inhabitants ignored, a role both empowering and exciting. Just as ruins offered up enticing juxtapositions,

conventional accounts of the uncanny suggest that, in passing from the world above ground into that below, we are entering a new intensity of zones between the rational and irrational, nature and culture, male and female, the visible and invisible. (Gandy 1999, 34)

When entering the sewer networks, this became clear as we passed through a literal threshold (the sewer lid in the street) into a world where the only social expectations to be found were the ones we chose to bring. Explorers voiced their intention to find spaces where they could choose how to interact with the environment, experiencing the 'pleasure and excitement of being drawn out of one's secure routine to encounter the novel, the strange, the surprising' (Sandercock 2003, 403).

Intoxicated by successes, the group then began infiltrating the London Underground (tube) network and systematically explored all of the disused stations in the system over the course of two years, often climbing or abseiling down air shafts and running the no-clearance subterranean tunnels when the power to the tracks was cut after last service (see Plate 4). These explorations became as much about locating security boundaries as (re)locating sites. I asked Statler about it and he told me 'when you become obsessed with pushing these boundaries, you move from urban exploration to infiltration'. He added 'and for me, there's no going back'. Here we make an important connection, again, to the work of Tim Cresswell, who argues that

although 'out of place' is logically secondary to 'in place', it may come first existentially. That is to say, we may have to

experience geographical transgression before we realize that a boundary even existed. (1996, 22)

Once we cross those boundaries, it becomes challenging not to cross at every opportunity, as Statler pointed out, because each boundary crossing creates personal investment in places.

Infrastructural infiltration, as well as being subversive, is also a way of speaking back to forces beyond one's control, manufacturing deep investment in place. Urban explorers know and love cities inside *and* out, because in many cases they learn cities inside *then* out. Explorers *invest* through subversion, with disregard for what is socially expected or acceptable. The libertarianism behind much of the motivation is not to be mistaken for anarchism or nihilism. Again, Marc Explo makes the point when he says

I believe we are an apolitical movement. I would not like to associate, for instance, with a group who protests against the waste of empty space in prime locations. I don't think we are against the system, we're just pointing out its limits. And as soon as the authorities realise we do, the boundaries evolve, that's the game.

But the game is also often about publicly sharing stories of success online. In these situations, explorers go beyond asserting 'I did this' by intentionally implying 'you could also choose to do this' and 'the political implications of this intentionality lie not just in the transgressive action itself, but in the resistance of the status of passive citizens' (Rapp 2010, 45). Silent Motion, sitting with me on the edge of the King's Reach Tower watching the new Crossrail construction at Blackfriars, told me, 'I keep coming back because I feel so alive up here. It's more real than real life.' In another instance, atop Heron Tower in the City of London (Plate 5) he tells me

Sometimes I just desire the edge. It's not about adrenaline or ego or any of that bullshit; it just happens, as if drawn by the reins held by some deeper level of consciousness.

In the moment this photo was taken, it seemed to me that Silent Motion was issuing a challenge to those forces that turn the city into a mausoleum of sights to be seen rather than places to be experienced. Here, again, the urban exploration lineage is entangled in Surrealist experiments in Paris where David Pinder writes they sought to '[open] up the "marvellous" that they believed was buried within the everyday' just as the Situationists valorised 'sites that were out of time with the city as spectacle' containing 'hidden meanings and associations' (2000, 379).

The desire to explore for the sake of exploring, to take risks for the sake of the experience with little thought to the 'outcome' is intrinsically primal, a natural childhood trait. Urban explorers are, in one sense, rediscovering and reforging those feelings of unbridled play, staying up all night, uselessly wander-



Plate 4 Silent Motion and Keitei walking no-clearance tube tunnels, London, UK

Source: Photo by author



Plate 5 Silent Motion approaching the edge on Heron Tower, City of London, UK

Source: Photo by Silent Motion

ing, plotting and doing, all of which lead to the creation of very thick bonds between fellow explorers where ‘play represents a way to de-emphasize the importance of work and consumption and their pervasive monetary components’ (McRae 2008, i). In places largely beyond the reach of those flows, ‘the city is rendered a site of play and pleasure, surprise and critical possibility’ (Dickens 2008, 20).

These experiences bond people in an emotive embrace, tendrils of affect conjured by shared fear and excitement, experiences that have become increasingly hard to find in many modern city spaces that Guy Debord argued ‘eliminate geographical distance only to produce a new internal separation’ (2006b, 94). While urban exploration and infiltration can be described as a discovery of derelict space and hidden infrastructure (as I did in the introduction), it can also be viewed as a process that melds the zones of in-between into the fabric of the rest of the city by dulling the boundaries of impossible and possible, seen and unseen, done and not done.

Professional infiltrators: leaking spatial secrets

The Age of Discovery is not dead: it lives on through urban explorers. (Deyo and Leibowitz 2003, 146)

When places were (re)discovered by the group, the results were often put on public display to the dismay

and sometimes embarrassment of corporations/government entities. In 2011, the under-construction London 2012 Olympic stadium was infiltrated in the middle of the night, resulting in an internal security uproar, even as the public found amusement in seeing the barriers of that seemingly impenetrable monolith to nationalism and ‘security’ breached on explorer blogs.⁷ In the same year, the LCC rediscovered a mothballed nine-station, 6.5-mile long subterranean Post Office distribution network called the Mail Rail underneath London and walked the entirety of it, photographing every station and track junction. The blog postings produced from the exploration received millions of hits, crashing the web server at the Silent UK blog and appearing on Yahoo! and BBC News, among other places.⁸ In 2012, when the LCC, now including myself as a central character, announced we had snuck to the top of the Shard, the European Union’s tallest skyscraper, numerous times, and posted photos from the trips, the media storm reached previously unimaginable proportions. Many people simply found it impossible to think something like that could be accomplished in the contemporary city of paranoia. To prove this was not an isolated opportunity, we then scaled the next largest construction project at 20 Fenchurch Street (the so-called Walkie-Talkie building) right in the heart of the ‘ring of steel’, just weeks after the media frenzy. Marc Explo then hatched a plan to abseil down the side of the 160-metre building, but we were caught by site security, who were thoroughly baffled by the 200 metres of rope Marc was carrying in a large duffel bag.

Unlike political movements, such as Occupy, built largely in resistance to capitalism, urban exploration is not an attempt to build a ‘new’ grand narrative of resistance, but to subversively reimagine what already exists, complicating urban identity and imagination through a playful exchange with planning, construction, waste and decay. Graffiti writers, like urban explorers, do not tend to get involved in discussions about what should be preserved and/or constructed, what is right or wrong, legal or illegal, they simply assert that ‘everywhere is free space’ (Cresswell 1996, 47). Overlaps are also visible in the subversive playfulness of hacker groups, where hacking is a

constant arms race between those with the knowledge and power to erect barriers and those with the equal power, knowledge and especially desire, to disarm them. (Coleman and Golub 2008, 263)

Lefebvre (1991) has written that the organisation of space is never neutral, it is always entangled in complex power arrangements, and in contemporary urban environments space is coded to invoke responses predictably conducive to the acquisition and accumulation of capital. Edensor points out that

perhaps it is in the contemporary Western city that ... tensions are most evident, the site of an ongoing battle between regulatory regimes concerned with strategies of surveillance and aesthetic monitoring, and tacticians who transgress or confound them, who seek out or create realms of surprise, contingency, and misrule. (Edensor 2005a, 829–30, referencing de Certeau 1984)

Although one could see these tacticians (of whom urban explorers are one) as opposing dominant narratives in a traditional Gramscian formulation, as Alastair Bonnett writes, ‘merely to oppose social representation is to become a part of the spectacle’ (1989, 135). The nature of subversion, and the power of urban exploration, is in its subtlety. Like the Situationist *dérive*, the practice appears to be playful, comical, even pointless, yet is a public indication of possibilities for options outside the dominant framework.

Given Edensor’s suggestion that this, the here and now, is the place and time for subversion, perhaps it comes as little surprise that urban exploration emerges amidst a cluster of innovative urban interventions developed to (re)seize agency where freedoms

appear to be constantly under attack in the modern city, constantly circumscribed, constantly surveilled – often enough in the name of freedom, service and protection. (Pile 2005, 8)

Urban explorers raise awareness on what possibilities are available to urban inhabitants, even as it may serve as a (perhaps underarticulated) critique on the illusory nature of control over and security within that system. Whether or not explorers choose to vocalise it, I follow Rapp in suggesting that urban exploration, while hacking into the cracks in the urban façade seeking freedom of experience and expression, ‘is an index to assess the intensities of security, control, and surveillance in the contemporary urban environment’ (Rapp 2010, 4). From ruin exploration to increasingly elaborate infrastructural infiltrations, urban explorers are working toward goals that do not require sanctioned consent, expensive equipment or corporate sponsorship. I suggest that urban exploration is, in the framework of late capitalism, largely pointless, but in the context of vibrant social life, immensely powerful.

Conclusion: where does urban exploration end?

The ongoing wow is happening right now (Speed Levitch; *Waking Life*, Linklater 2001)

Inside a Ministry of Defence (MOD) nuclear bunker under Wiltshire, entry to which required the combined effort of nine explorers, leads from friends, stacks of maps and weeks of planning, we sat around a large table in a disused map room celebrating yet another successful exploration when Winch asked everyone, ‘so,

given all we’ve accomplished together, where do you all think urban exploration ends?’

It would be naïve, or at least premature, to assume, despite the overarching ethereal and media-dodging ethos of the community, that urban exploration has sidestepped appropriation. If we are to learn anything from the urban subversions of the past, urban exploration will inevitably be appropriated and monetised by corporate global interests. As Augé writes, the problem that confronts all artists (and activists) today ‘is the extreme flexibility of the global system, which is extraordinarily adept at appropriating all declarations of independence and every attempt at originality’ (1995, xxi). It could be that every new person that becomes involved with urban exploration, every new book published, every photograph put online, is a nail in the coffin of any potential the movement has to inspire significant social change in regard to our rights to the city and access to space. Or, more optimistically, perhaps, as Control from the LTV Squad writes, ‘as more and more people ignore those “no trespassing” signs, the more and more ridiculous they will appear’, and the social impact of these continued explorations will blossom.⁹

As I have shown, these types of activities have taken place long before urban exploration existed as a visible practice and will continue long after, but the practice, at its current rate of concretising public interest, is in danger of capitalist colonisation (see Wasik 2010). There are tens of thousands of urban explorers across the globe now, with the practice growing in popularity every day. The reason for this increasing fascination is obviously a source of interest to geographers (Bennett 2011; Edensor 2005b; Garrett 2011a) as a growing critical spatial practice (Rendell 2006), even as the ‘movement’ will surely further fracture and collapse under the weight of the increased public exposure it is receiving, not excluding publication of this article.

Perhaps, in conclusion, thinking about the way the community already presents itself as fractured, the future of urban exploration does not really matter all that much because, if, as Winch implores, the core of the movement is just about ‘friends hanging out with each other’, then people will just find different ways of doing that. My experiences with the LCC over a relatively brief period of time demonstrate these adventures are manufactured when and where they are needed. They are found not just in the artistic, transgressive and avant-garde of the past, but in the here and now, happening all around us. My time with the LCC also demonstrates that tactics will always rise to meet the challenges of opening closed space; security will never trump curiosity. In 2003, Liz and Ninjalicious wrote the following passage, which still resonates strongly:

Allowing the darkening threat of future terrorist attack or indeed of our increasingly scarce civil rights to deter our curiosity or intimidate us away from expressing our deep appreciation for the hidden and neglected bits of our urban landscapes would be the greatest crime of all. Continuing to support considerate exploration and questioning authority in productive, benevolent, and visible ways will allow us to represent ourselves as what we really are: people who love our cities, not those who wish to destroy them. (2003, 2)

Interest in exploring the liminal zones of built space, both ruins and infrastructure, creates a sense of place and a sense of community that is an increasingly rare commodity these days. I think it is clear from these stories that urban explorers, despite their disparate backgrounds, beliefs, goals and motivations, all want a past they can touch, a present they can feel and a future they can write themselves into. These desires are of course common, even if the lengths urban explorers are willing to go to find them are anything but. In the end, Silent Motion got the final word inside the MOD nuclear bunker, when he said to everyone:

The question for me isn't where urban exploration ends, it's whether at this moment we are at the top of the ladder or at the bottom of a new one...

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Notes

- 1 My life as an urban explorer has been featured on TV, radio and in newspapers across the world, many of which failed to mention I was a researcher studying the practice.
- 2 Of this group, about 20–30% are women, almost all are employed in full-time work or study, from a number of different European countries. While the community is not very ethnically diverse, it is also not overtly exclusionary. Perceiving urban exploration as a 'white, middle class pastime' (High and Lewis 2007, 63) is too simplistic.
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, direct quotes have been recorded in person (likely on video) during the course of ethnographic research (2008–11).
- 4 <http://vimeo.com/13702117> (accessed 30 November 2011).
- 5 UE Kingz, 'UE is a crime', <http://vimeo.com/15869889> (accessed 1 December 2010).

- 6 Predator, 'A sprawling manifesto on the art of drain exploring', <http://www.infiltration.org/observations-approach.html> (accessed 12 November 2010).
- 7 <http://www.adventureworldwide.net/stories/olympic-sized-ambitions> (accessed 2 January 2012).
- 8 These two posts can be found at <http://www.silentuk.com/?p=2792> and <http://www.placehacking.co.uk/2011/04/24/security-breach-london-mail-rail> (accessed 26 July 2011).
- 9 <http://ltvsquad.com/Blog/?p=2914> (accessed 8 June 2010).

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