Urban Exploration: a Subculture at a Glance

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As subcultures go, "urban exploration" or "urbexing" is a very materially embedded one, where community formation happens around specific physical locations, even though as a global phenomenon, it is almost entirely facilitated by the internet. In its current form its inception is attributed to Jeff Chapman, a.k.a. "Ninjalicious," who founded the zine "Infiltration: the zine about going places you're not supposed to go" and authored "Access All Areas: a user's guide to the art of urban exploration" (2005) but its roots go back to such groups as the San Francisco Suicide Club, whose members, influenced by surrealism and Dadaism, staged renegade events in abandoned spaces, and the Cacophony club, an anarchic creative urban group associated with culture-jamming, Hakim Bey's philosophy of TAZ, and infiltrating places off-limits to the public. Currently there are different branches and genres of urban exploration, based in different agendas and philosophies, and syncretic subcultures that combine "urbexing" with other pursuits. Parkour (or "free running") practitioners use abandoned spaces for training to move through urban spaces and negotiate obstacles such as buildings, fences, and walls with maximum efficiency and speed. The Untergunther is a clandestine French "team" that recently attracted media attention for restoring the 19th-century clock in the Pantheon of Paris (King 2007), works on restoring abandoned or decaying heritage objects in secrecy and anonymity. Groups such as Dark Passage and The Madagascar Institute in New York City, reclaim abandoned spaces for games, art installations, and performances, as a part of a particular philosophy of urban preservation. At this point urban exploration in all of its forms has coalesced into a global subculture that is gaining popularity, even as the members regularly emphasize the important of overexposure. What all of these subgroups share is a value system concerned with locations and material remnants that, in the mainstream capitalist value system are nothing more than negative spaces around the trajectory of economic and industrial progress. An urban explorer or "urbexer" is someone who finds and goes into abandoned buildings. The motivation for such excursions, and the frameworks within which such excursions are undertaken vary, as discussed above, but in most cases this is an illegal, or semi-legal activity, often fraught with physical risks, and one that is extremely rewarding for the people involved in this subculture.

The common denominator in all "hot spots" of urban exploration is a period of economic decay in the general vicinity. In the United States hubs of "urbexing" are areas that belong to the so-called Rust Belt, most notably Detroit, where in certain parts of the city close to 50% of properties are vacant or abandoned (as one Detroit explorer said to me in personal communication "it's kind of hard not to [go into abandoned buildings] around here. They're pretty much a part of life. I'm just glad i dont have to live in them like a lot of people around here") and Gary Indiana, originally founded as a service sector city by the United States Steel Corporation, where the downtown has turned into a virual ghosttown with the decline of the city's manufacturing base. Other examples of economically depressed areas becoming "hubs" for urban exploration include New England and old mill towns like Lowell, MA, Pennsylvania steel industry towns like Bethlehem and Allentown.

Certain branches of "urbexing" focus on specific types of locations, which themselves always encode a history of financial decline and ineffective management preceding the physical decay. For example, exploring abandoned state mental asylums is popular with New England explorers, as budget cuts and lack of funding within the mental health system in Massachusetts in the early 1990s forced a number of institutions to close. The most notable of these institutions are "Kirkbrides"--mental hospitals designed and built utilizing the philosophy of a 19th-century doctor Thomas Kirkbride, who advocated an asylum system called "Moral Treatment" and authored On the Construction, Organization and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane—an 1880 treatise on design, construction, and administration of mental hospitals that emphasized the patients' humanity and dignity, and the benefits of access to a natural environment away from urban centers for improving mental health.

Extravagant in design and expensive to manage, most of the "Kirkbrides" in New England are inactive at this point, and many are being torn down and redeveloped or turned into luxury condominiums.

Worcester State Hospital, a "Kirkbride" in Worcester, MA

On the international front, one of the richest locations for urban exploration is the former USSR territory--entire towns near the Arctic circle that were built to be centers of industrial production and mining manned by prison labor, state-funded factories that did not survive privatization, networks of

Young Pioneer summer camps and "houses of culture." The "holy grail" of urban explorers worldwide is Pripyat, the town hat housed the doomed Chernobyl nuclear station reactor 4, the culprit of the 1986 nuclear plant accident. Several companies organize tours to the area, but many explorers sneak in by themselves, and visit areas the tours do not cover, often with a Geiger counter in hand.

At the core of the subculture lies a special relationship that participants experience with physical spaces and the material infrastructure left behind by the waxes and wanes of a capitalist industrialized economy. Inherently, they create a system of value around objects that have been excised out of the economy of value. The value is attached to precisely the same factors that devalue these spaces in the mainstream economy: extravagance to the point of inefficiency, loss of use-value, severe decay. For people living in economically depressed areas, this provides an alternative relationship with their physical surroundings, when those surroundings provide something other than a narrative of economic decline. "Urbexing" is also associated with a different relationship to history in progress. Once factories, hospitals, hotels, or apartment complexes are abandoned, they are, in a sense, relegated to the past; they become dated by the very objects frequently strewn around within their abandoned walls—newspapers and journals that are decades old, long-expired bottles of medications, portraits of then-current presidents, official records from the first half of the 20th century, former patients' x-ray films, undeveloped rolls of police mugshots, et cetera. Many explorers talk about the locations they infiltrate as places "where time stands still" or "where time has stopped."

Polaroid found on the floor of a Massachusetts steam plan depicting it during its days of operation
Many explorers consider it their duty to document these pockets of time, thus creating a historical record of information that, in a lot of cases, offers a glimpse into the institutional cultures of the past, yet will never be officially archived. For many explorers this motivation is especially urgent when the places in question are slated for destruction. Although in general there are different attitudes regarding removing materials from a location, with treasure hunters who explore partially to add to their collection of interesting mementos from various places on one end of the spectrum, and explorers who subscribe to the "take only photographs, leave only footprints" attitude at the other extreme, once demolition of a location is imminent (i.e. the date has been set for the near future, or demolition has actively started), most explorers believe that it is ethical to remove objects that otherwise will be destroyed.

Railroad records in an abandoned train repair facility
The "urbex" subculture has a particular aesthetic and shared discourse, both of which frequently drawn on particular popular culture referents. American "urbexers" often invoke the film and the subsequent video game "Silent Hill," in either descriptions of locations, or (complimentary) assessments of one another's photographs.

Screenshot from "Silent Pill" Sony Pictures 2006

Russian explorers often call themselves "stalkers." The term is derived from a popular Soviet-era dystopian science fiction novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (1972) called "Roadside Picnic," which was later adapted into a cult film "Stalker" by Tarkovsky. Both the novel and the film are set in and around a mysterious forbidden "zone," where decommissioned and abandoned remnants of urban life are reclaimed by nature, and strange and dangerous objects and spaces pose danger to visitors. "Stalkers" are for-hire guides who know their way through the Zone. This discursive framework is reinforced in the cybersocial aspect of "urbexing"—many Russian "urbexers" have screen handles that are some variations on the word "stalker," or employ other allusions to the novel. The abandoned hydroelectric plant near Tallinn, Estonia, where "Stalker" was filmed in 1979 is somewhat of a pilgrimage site for explorers who find themselves in the area.

As with many subcultures, self-making is an important part of urban exploration. There are several paths to status acquisition.

"Hardcore" explorer status is difficult to achieve without a track record of visits to locations that are considered especially difficult or dangerous to access and explore, including abandoned hospitals that are located on campuses of still-active hospitals, military property. Certain locations confer the status of a "tough" explorer on someone who successfully infiltrates them. This includes unusually hazardous places, such as offshore ship graveyards, buildings that have reached a dangerous (even by an urban explorer's assessment) level of decay, or buildings that require scaling walls or crawling through poison ivy to gain access.

Certain skills, such as photography, or creative tagging also create status. Many urban explorers are amateur, professional, or semi-professional photographers, and most online "urbex" forums have a space dedicated to people sharing and critiquing photographs. Certain locations have "iconic" photographs attached to them—shots featuring specific composition from a particular angle taken over and over again by different "urbexers." Coming up with original versions, or "new takes" on these iconic subjects in specific locations—the chandelier in the now-demolished Metropolitan State Hospital (Waltham, MA) cafeteria, the theater in a particular New England abandoned mental asylum, the remnants of mailboxes in an abandoned Art Deco post office in Gary, Indiana—earns respect and status.

Chandelier, Metropolitan State Hospital cafeteria

Creative self-portraits or portraits of other explorers are welcomed and appreciated. Certain explorers, such as the explorer behind the "Opacity" website become well-known in the "urbex" circles for their distinctive style of composition and use of color.

Other ways of garnering status in the subculture consist of sharing with peers in a way that reflects awareness about own status relative to others, and the strictly observed, if not formally codified rules around exchange within the "urbex" community. Reciprocity is emphasized. "Asking for handouts"—i.e. appearing in a cyber-forum without preexisting social connections with the other members, and asking about "cool places" or asking how to get access to a particular location, is a grave, and quickly sanctioned faux pas. Discretion about shared information is expected. As long as these rules are observed, social ties within the group are constantly established and reinforced through exchanges which sometimes take form of generalized reciprocity (Sahlins 1972), where people contribute knowledge (such as maps of locations or historical information gleaned from archival research) to the shared ingroup knowledge pool, without keeping track of give-and-take, but mostly manifest as instances of balanced reciprocity (ibid.), where information about a specific location is traded for information about another specific location. Sometimes well-established individual "urbexers," or small groups of "urbexers" who explore together make "urbex"-themed trips to different cities, or states. Usually they are shown hospitality by the explorers local to that city. This hospitality often includes lodging and transportation, as well as showing the guests local abandoned sites of interest. At some later point this hospitality may be reciprocated on the guests' home turf.

The length of one's involvement in "urbexing" is also directly correlated to status, both because a long-time explorer has many opportunities to participate in the kind of reciprocity described above, and because newer explorers often never had a chance to explore locations that were legendary in the "urbex world," before they were torn down. Examples of such places include Danvers State Hospital and Metropolitan State Hospital, Byberry State Hospital in Pennsylvania, and the Ambassador Hotel on the Asbury Park Boardwalk in New Jersey. Frequently physical "souvenirs" from such locations function as markers of status and "proof" that this status was legitimately earned.

Urban exploration is an evolving and rich subculture that enables production of social identity and personhood inscribed into an alternative value system for an entire material infrastructure that has lost its use-value by the criteria of the mainstream society. Considering the relationship between the material and the social in the communities that form around exploration of abandoned buildings is a fascinating and rewarding subject for an in-depth ethnography.

References

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