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On the cover
Doug DuBois, Roisin, Russell Heights, Cobh, Ireland, 2010, archival inkjet print, dimensions variable. From the series My Last Day at Seventeen

Read more about Doug DuBois’s photographic exploration of youth in Ireland beginning on page 26.
Focus
Boreal Collective and Community Building 4
Laurence Butet-Roch
A Garden of Contradictions 14
Holly Markovitz Goldstein

View
The End of Youth: Doug DuBois’s 26
My Last Day at Seventeen
Tom Griggs
Anita Bunn’s Ambient Series 34
Dion Johnson

Consider
“Like Another World”: 38
Placing Photographic Practices of Urban Explorers
Andrew Richard Schroock and Rebecca Sittler

Learn
Service Learning: Teaching Students More 44
Matthew Albritton

Discover
The Photobook: A History, Volumes 1, 2, and 3 52
Reviewed by Michael Dawson
Consider

“Like Another World”: Placing Photographic Practices of Urban Explorers

Andrew Richard Schrock and Rebecca Sittler

Urban exploration (UrbEx) is a recently evolved phenomenon involving the reconnaissance and photography of structures that are off-limits or in disrepair. Previously small, loose-knit, offline groups devoted to this phenomenon coalesced as a movement in the last decade through vibrant online communities increasingly focused on the communal act of photography. This movement has provoked questions about the shifting relationships between photography and the production, critique, and distribution of urban exploration experiences and images. Here we review the history of urban exploration and examine issues facing one of the longest running online communities devoted to UrbEx, the Urban Explorer’s Resource (www.uer.ca).

Started in 2002, the online Urban Explorer’s Resource (UER) houses an archive of UrbEx’s transition from a primarily offline to a primarily online phenomenon. Unlike other popular image sharing sites, it also contains forums that focus on critiquing images, exchanging photographic tutorials, establishing guidelines for explorers, and developing an encyclopedia of UrbEx terms. UER members teach each other principles of design, trade technical tips, discuss published work, and share advice on both exploring and photography. In this sense, they align with and extend practices of previous amateur photography groups or camera clubs. UER forums suggest that many urban explorers are self-reflective, conscientious, and aesthetically aware image-makers instead of simply sensation-seeking intruders. Furthermore, through online communities, users continue to adjust and reify a collective ethical code that emphasizes the preservation of these fragile, neglected, and abject places.

The natural allure of exploring forbidden places maintains a historic appeal, attracting spelunkers to hidden caves and curious college students to secret tunnels. The first phase of what became known
as urban exploration started in 1995 when Jeff Chapman, who, under the pseudonym Ninjalicious, started to self-publish the “zine” *Infiltration*¹ (Figure 1). Chapman is widely credited with coining the term “urban exploration” and positioning it as an international movement. *Infiltration* primarily featured written narratives because the inexpensive black-and-white photocopies had limited image resolution. Within the pages of the magazine urban explorers could talk freely about nearly getting caught in forbidden structures, passing through restricted areas, and subverting the regulations of vacated urban spaces. Urban exploration is also referred to as “place hacking,” a term recently popularized in Bradley Garrett’s book *Explore Everything*. As was argued in defense of computer hacking, urban explorers such as Garrett justify the legal gray area of their practice through claims that their intrusions are harmless, even educational.² This early period in UrbEx’s history sparked a range of parallel publications, culminating in 2005 with the publication of Chapman’s book *Access All Areas*, and his tragic death from liver cancer at an early age.³

Online communities for urban explorers became increasingly important after September 11, 2001. A post-9/11 crackdown on urban intrusion (for frivolity, mayhem, or otherwise) led to highly visible locations being increasingly policed. At this point, the Internet had already become a common place in many western societies for individuals to communally and anonymously interact and collaborate. Urban explorers, many of whom were middle-class, educated, and had access to computers, recognized the potential of online communication to cohere a virtual community to support offline activities of transgression.

A 1994 post in the newsgroup alt.college.tunnels by Eric Bagai titled “The First Hackers,” positioned place hackers as akin to technical hacker culture’s interest in fulfilling curiosity.⁴ Both *Infiltration* and a similar (now defunct) ‘zine *Jinx* had a web presence soon after their first print copies were distributed. The use of social media became both an extension of the founders’ initial intentions for publicizing the UrbEx movement even as it created new problems in the physical spaces they visited. UER users wanted to continue to share photographs and experiences with others while preserving the integrity of the sites for future explorers. However, new crops of visitors, drawn by the flood of online interest, were less respectful. UER members complained that “local kids, taggers, scrappers and vandals” learned of locations online, visiting them to party or remove objects.⁵ For example, the globe in *Globe and Boat* (Figure 2) disappeared, which to the photographer, Tunnelbug, destroyed the sanctity of the place and privacy of the family that used to live there. “Exploration carries its consequences,” mused Tunnelbug, at least thankful he was able to capture “a beautiful story, of a beautiful place.”⁶

The UER community continues to respond to these issues by establishing forum rules, moderating user posts, and limiting forum access to new users. A code originally popularized by *Access All Areas* includes the requirement not to damage sites, remove items, or violate locked doors. In addition, explorers are asked not to disclose the geographic coordinates or directions on how to find a place unless the physical site has been destroyed or is already well known to the general public. The first uer.ca forum rule is “don’t reveal entry details publically,” encouraging secrecy regarding points of entry (or POEs) to an abandonment.⁷ This need for control can be seen as a paradoxical consequence of the radical accessibility of the Internet and urban exploration social media sites both driving use and abuse.

The increasing online attention not only affected offline conditions, but it has also had an impact on the trajectory of urban exploration practices. The camera became more than just part of an explorer’s travel kit as the sharing of images surpassed the sharing of tales of exploration. Photography itself became a central motivation to visit locations and the medium of choice used to convey a sense of place. As user Captain Slow illustrates in a post titled “How to: Post an effective write-up,” “Write ups are nearly useless without pictures. It doesn’t matter if all you have is a
cell phone camera or a $10,000 Canon, take some pictures if you want to share. Pictures are really the only way the rest of us have to relate to your trip."^8

This growing emphasis on photography created a split within the UrbEx community. Participants retained a vestigial hacker impulse in unintended uses of spaces, but they often disagreed about the best way to share these experiences. Some users saw images as a way of giving other forum participants a virtual “tour” of the space, with a logical progression and highlights of odd or compelling characteristics documenting the exploration. Still more moved towards nostalgic and dramatic portrayals of the aesthetics of ruins and decay. Their attention shifted to lesser-known spaces with a semiotic looseness that could be easily re-appropriated and taken out of context. They sought out a larger audience for their work by heightening visual qualities and projected narratives, downplaying the usual linear narrative of exploration. Sociologist John Urry, who coined the term “tourist gaze,” describes the relationship between people and places as tapping into fantastic desires, saying, “places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures.”^9

To attain desired effects, these aesthetically driven participants brokered advanced technical know-how through online forums, image critiques, shared resources, and tips. Currently, many users employ high-resolution DSLRs as well as HDR, ultra-wide-angle lenses, portable lighting, and other available tools to exaggerate characteristics of the spaces and increase the range of reproducibility. Detail in windows for interior shots is a particular obsession, as are sharpness and exposure. Post-processing and Photoshop filters intensify depictions of texturally rich surfaces with peeling paint, decaying carpet, and creeping mold.

A “critique forum” was set up in 2005 for the increasingly large number of participants who consider their images “art” and wanted a forum to solicit criticism. Evolving guidelines surrounding the purpose and ideal format of the critique urge contributors to ground constructive criticism in observation rather than opinion, while encouraging participants to be open to feedback.¹⁰

Photographic norms within this forum are common to an introductory level photography course or camera club. Advice often includes aligning straight lines with the edge of the frame, paying attention to careful composition, or creating proximity to the main subject. Improving awareness of the frame, exposure, focus, and the use of lenses and optics. In addition, assumptions about art
and elitism play out within the critique forum, and prescriptions of aesthetic taste are both performed and rallied against. Clichés emerge and generalized rhetoric is borrowed from art circles. Some users contribute “redemption posts,” where a user returns with improved images at a later date based on lessons learned. New users are referred to the work of veteran users, older threads, and online tutorials to improve their photographs.

Other photographers incorporate techniques from cinema, such as turning cavernous spaces and hallways into Kubrickian homages with one-point perspective and utilizing empty spaces as backgrounds for imagined narratives. Light creates particularly dramatic effects, often overshadowing meaning given to figures and objects. The subject of these photographs becomes less a record of unauthorized intrusion or document of urban decay and more a reflection on the passage of time itself. Photographers select interiors that appear to recede into nearly infinite space, marking their fascination with the poetics of decay. In Swirled, texture and surface details are regularly over-emphasized as if increasing contrast will make each piece of peeling paint and speck of dust speak to their past lives (Figure 3).

Social historian Petr Gibas observes that “explorers seek at different and various diverse places still the same nostalgic-and-sublime experience and this quest leads them to particular experiential, emotional and visual framing of the world.” Despite what some might consider their “radical” practices, urban explorers’ photography less resembles a postmodern deconstruction or a search for universal visual language. Rather, it is a grammar reflecting the community and tools in which taste is defined and moderated, always in flux with the materiality of urban space. In the words of French philosopher and social scientist Michel de Certeau, “space is a practiced place.”

Online forums have created a set of commonalities and aesthetic clichés that users both mock and indulge in. Scavenger hunt threads on UER ask users to post images with readily accessible themes or subjects. For example, photographs of “nature taking over again,” where natural elements creep back into built environments; “portraits left behind,” featuring images of previous inhabitants; and dramatic “empty chairs,” suggesting a human presence while also serving as a prop for exploring environmental effects (Figure 4). Common themes emerge as users try to convey their encounters with the sublime qualities of these spaces: metaphoric references to ghosts, spirits, and haunting are encouraged through dramatic light and camera tricks.

For a new generation of aesthetically driven urban explorers, UER and other image sharing sites enabled a grammar for a romanticized affect surrounding the passage of time. Increasingly aestheticized and atmospheric images were often coupled with textual descriptions decrying the ways in which these beautiful places had gone to waste or become subject to mismanagement.

Postmodern theorist Jacques Derrida, writing on Jean-François Bonhomme’s photographs of Athens’s ruins, muses that his camera captured three Athenses: the fabled city, the present one of aging technology, and the future Athens that is already a thing of the “past.” Aesthetically driven explorers use photography to collapse time and space, mythologizing the past through nostalgic visual tropes, expressing the qualified obsolescence of outmoded and abandoned structures, and constructing post-apocalyptic and performative narratives for the camera (Figure 5).

As urban explorers became increasingly engaged with technical and aesthetic languages, they also began to assert directorial control by performing within the spaces they photographed. Within a UER thread titled “Super Rad Portraits,” explorers act out what they
Imagine to be the lives of previous inhabitants, stage imagined post-apocalyptic narratives, and picture themselves amongst the rubble. *Fukushima Failure* shows a dramatic reimagining in which participants hide their faces with masks to act out possible post-apocalyptic futures (Figure 6). These performances are personalized, imaginative, and even troubled, populating empty rooms with the imagination of each photographer. Urban explorers physically perform within the frame, merging their own identity with that of the place through the now-ubiquitous “selfie” (Figure 7).

In “A Berlin Chronicle,” photography theorist Walter Benjamin muses that cities such as Paris complicate subject/object distinctions of photographer and city.14 “I tell myself it had to be in Paris, where the walls and quays, the places to pause, the collections and the rubbish… teach a language so singular that our relations to people attain, in the solitude encompassing us in our immersion in that world of things, the depths of a sleep in which the dream image waits to show the people their true faces.”15 He revels in the disjunctions and juxtapositions in urban locales, which he believed enabled *flâneurs* to dream. In a similar way, the hollowing-out of urban centers activated the imagination of urban explorers through a rich set of photographic practices and codes shared through online communities. For Benjamin, photographs were woven into place by memory. By comparison, a new generation of urban explorers has effectively freed images from a connection to place, using abandoned architecture to construct alternative histories and aesthetic reimaginings.

The experience of viewing photographs feels like “another world,” as a member of UER puts it, because place is treated as an impulse or feeling. Neglected spaces that inspired awe for earlier generations are treated as floating signifiers to enact a detached nostalgia through collective play and reimagining. In *Industrial Ruins*, British cultural historian Tim Edensor similarly argues that these marginal spaces are richer with potential meaning than everyday urban spaces.16 He proposes that the disordered materiality of ruins cannot be confined within a single narrative of the past. Rather, they encourage playful encounters that open possibilities for alternative histories that privilege personal resonance over historical accuracy. However, urban explorers’ use of modern ruins, like Edensor’s valorization of polysemy, can also reflect an uncomfortable cultural amnesia about history.
Urban exploration photographs paradoxically distort our connection with the past even as they are driven by a sense of connection or yearning for it. A fascination with ruins has also recently appeared in museum and gallery exhibitions. This past spring the Tate Modern hosted a transhistorical exhibition titled Ruin Lust, inspired by ruins in art as both a subject and a set of metaphoric gestures. The exhibition description proposed that “perhaps in the work of contemporary artists we can find new uses for ruins and new dreams among the rubble.”17

The interplay of these visually spectacular “dreams” with traditional art worlds and popular media is beginning to engender intense dialogue among new and veteran UER users. Do these increasingly aesthetic dimensions of UrbEx imagery discount the central transgressive elements that built the UrbEx community in the first place? Is it possible to popularize urban exploration while protecting the sites that make it possible? Do these detached re-imaginings negate the possibility for social engagement or cultural commentary? Could the popularity of these highly aestheticized images be used to advocate for preservation of these sites? Does an image’s desired status as “art” prevent it from effectively communicating in other ways?

Images of these abandonments travel farther online than before, disaggregating a relationship between the explorer, the UrbEx community, and viewers. They accumulate in massive numbers, ready to be voraciously consumed. The resulting anxiety is captured by the term “ruins porn,” which assumes that with diminishing aesthetic restraint or lack of “redemptive” or text-based context, there is little opportunity to engage critically.18 At worst, the term is a pejorative of photography itself—images exist only to be viewed and discarded. However, thoughtful and multifaceted UrbEx community debates concerning ethical standards and photographic practices and the increasing range of imagery made by urban explorers can complicate or serve as a counterpoint to the stance that photographs’ sole purpose is consumption. The unfolding debates from within the UrbEx community speak to explorers’ increasing understanding of the complexities of photographic practice and the way in which it can reflect, shift, or distort the values of a community of image-makers.

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1. A “zine” is a low-cost magazine, often photocopied, that is produced by fans of a particular topic.
10. -MisfitStyle-, “FORUM RULES – ALL READ.”