

Exposing the secret city: Urban exploration as 'space hacking'



Martin Dodge

Geography, School of Environment and Development,
University of Manchester

Geography Departmental Seminar, 22nd February 2006

Outline of the talk

- defining urban exploration
- examining the accounts of explorers to delineate the ethos and ethics
- drawing links to computer hacking ethos
- defining the concept of 'space hacking'
- consider the value of 'space hacking' for thinking about the production of city spaces

Defining urban exploration (UE)

- In cities across the world, small groups of urban explorers are seeking out secret spaces, abandoned buildings, and other obscure, overlooked, underused, forgotten, unsafe, and disconnected built structures.
- infiltration
- urban spelunking
- urban adventure
- “extreme historians” (Wilson, 2003)
- “off-limits tourism” (Brown, 2001)
- “recreational trespassers”

UE targets

- diversity of focus between different UE, but major areas of interest are:
 - drains
 - abandoned buildings and sites, esp. large institutional ones like hospitals, asylums, churches
 - tunnels - utility and transportation
 - rooftops, bridges and highpoints in the city
 - decaying industrial infrastructures
 - old bunkers, cold war silos - military bases
 - infiltrating live buildings and un-abandoned sites
 - out of bounds access to unusual places
 - mines

UE as subculture

- complex and diverse groups and individuals, but noticeable UE identity
- participants refer to 'urban exploration' as a community
- Importance of the Web for forging a subcultural identity from scattered and isolated individuals
- consumption of UE as 'weird hobby' in media
- emergence into mainstream
- publicity is a double-edged sword

Link pages - knitting the subculture

SUB URBAN

Home
Subterranean ▶
Asylums & Hospitals ▶
Industrial ▶
Other Sites ▶
Archives ▶
Who are we?
Links

CONTACT:
jd@sub-urban.com

DISCLAIMER
We advise that you do not visit the places featured on this site. We cannot be held responsible for any harm to any person should they ignore this warning. We do not condone any illegal activities.

Milonic

LINKS

Our links page is made up of a selection of our personal bookmarked sites with a bit of explanatory blurb.

Abandoned Britain
Photographic projects of abandoned sites in Britain.

urbex | uk
(C) Simon Cornwell 2002-2004
Quality & quantity, a must see site for Asylum Seekers

WorldoftheShadows
Photographic Explorations of disused UK properties

sleepy city
Documenting secrets lurking in the urban environment

stoop's gallery
The Stoop_Master's personal photography galleries

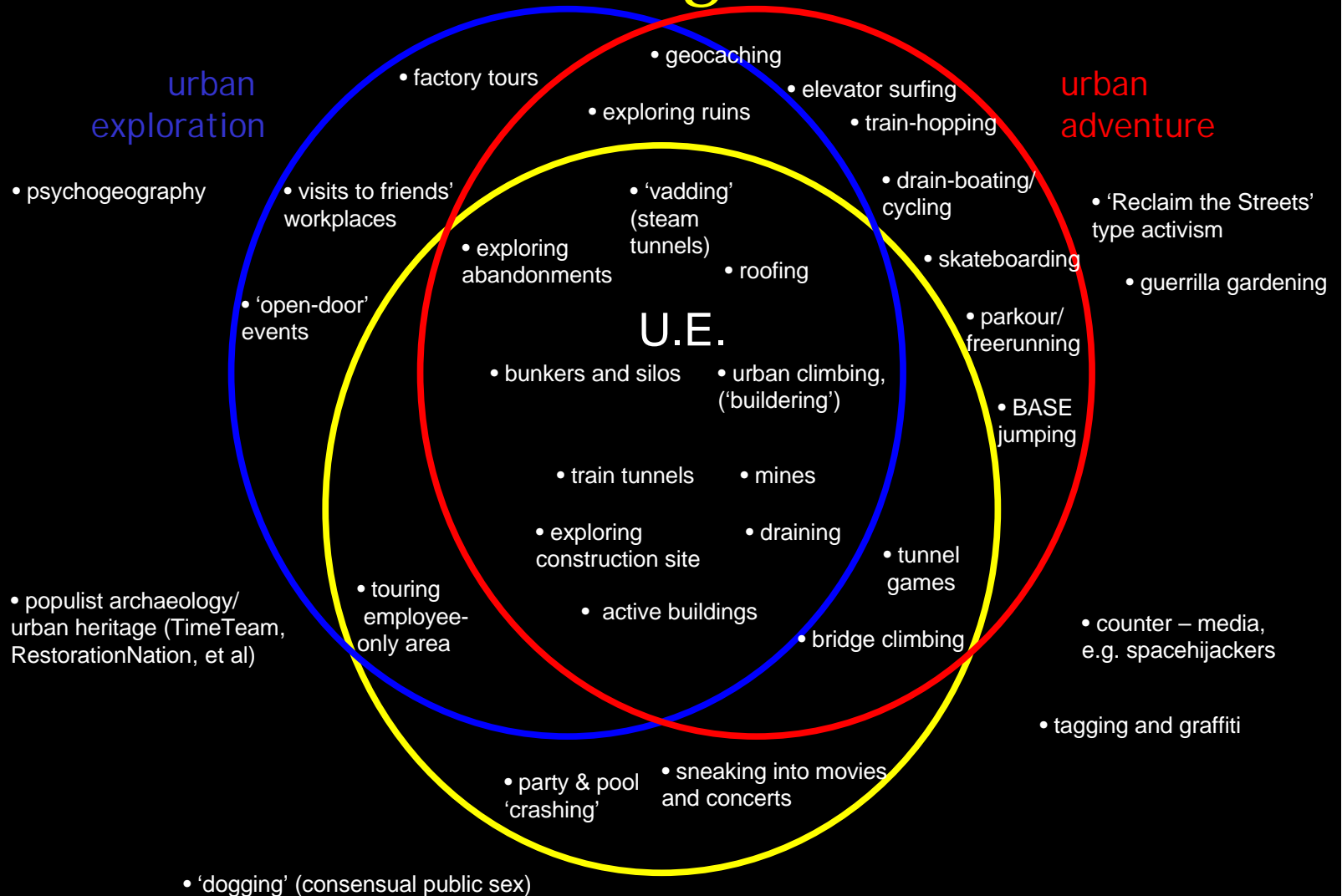
NOBODYTHERE.CO.UK
Exploring the Urban Wasteage of Eastern England

© sub-urban.com, 2003 - 2006

You sent me up the lumpy tunnel

(www.sub-urban.com)

Situating UE



Infiltration

(Source: adapted from Ninjalicious 2005, 5, with additions.)

Methodology, data sources

- sociological concept of 'accounts'
- Scott and Lyman (1968) define a (verbal) 'account' to be "a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior"
 - 2 types - excuses and justifications
 - justifications (tactics of neutralisation: denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of the condemners, appeal to loyalties; other tactics include seeking compassion through 'sad tales' and justification by right to self-fulfilment)
- examined 20 explorers websites (mission logs and photographs) + some interviews in newspapers as my empirical 'accounts'
- are important - "represent ways in which people organize views of themselves, of others, and of their social worlds" (Orbuch 1997, 455). Publishing these 'accounts' is a tactic in the presentation of self (Goffman); a means to "nullify any negative implications flowing from appearance or demeanour" (Orbuch 1997, 457)
- problematic nature of Web-based 'accounts', likely to be unrepresentative in one sense, but also valid in this context

- Home
- Subterranean ▶
- Asylums & Hospitals ▶
- Industrial ▶
- Other Sites ▶
- Archives ▶
- Who are we?
- Links

WHO ARE WE ?

CONTACT:
jd@sub-urban.com

DISCLAIMER
We advise that you do not visit the places featured on this site. We cannot be held responsible for any harm to any person should they ignore this warning. We do not condone any illegal activities.



We are an Urban Exploration collective of two! The Stoop_Master & Jondoe. We have formerly had other friends along on explorations with us, but none of them really grasped the idea and so we're happy to keep numbers low! Occasionally we will join forces with other UE groups, www.nobodythere.co.uk in particular, but most often explorations involve just us two.

We got into UE as a result of a mutual interest in draining (the exploration of storm drains and culverts). Although we have since embraced other UE disciplines, subterranean locations, particularly drains, will always be our first interest and passion

Our visits are fuelled by our interest in photography, film making, architecture, climbing, industrial & Victorian history, urban decay, plain old childlike curiosity and a desire to know why, where and how?

JD, 2005.



Sub-urban's 'Account': reasons (capturing visuals, history, curiosity); the problem: "none of them really grasped the idea"
Note, the 'Disclaimer'; anonymity - use of pseudonyms + no faces shown

Accounts - justification

[S-P] S P A C E M I N U S P E O P L E [S-P]

Welcome to [S-P]. The purpose of our site is to display accounts and photographs of various Urban Exploration sessions and experiences we get into. We're not really here to try and define what UE is all about, convert the unbelievers, or to try and make sense of it all. In truth, we're not even sure why we do it. All we're prepared to admit, is that we have an unhealthy fascination with abandoned buildings and such, and an even healthier fascination with getting in to them and having a good nose round. Derelict environments can be amazingly atmospheric and make for very provocative photography (one of the long term goals of this site). We hope you enjoy the accounts and photographs as much as we've enjoyed those from many of the excellent UE sites we've come across.

DISCLAIMER: Despite the apparent lunacy of clambering around potentially hazardous structures – we are quite sane, and take as many precautions as we can. Vandalism is not on our agenda. We visit these sites to document the reclamation of an environment by time and nature, for the benefit of those so inclined. Not only for common decency, but for our own safety, we do not damage the sites we visit in any way. If you're considering visiting a particular site, then please consider this and understand that there are risks enough, from authority types, structural fatigue, asbestos and chemicals etc, without acting like a porkrocket and damaging or stealing property. And just because you visited our site, that doesn't make it our fault if you get into bother. Repeat after me: [S-P] did not influence me in any way, shape or form. Nor do I hold them responsible for an act of my own volition. They are truly wonderful people and do not deserve to be persecuted by a generation that believes it's always someone else's fault, I understand that I should accept responsibility for my own actions because I have full control of my life. Ahem... OK, maybe we went too far, but you get the picture yeah?

--- Groobs

[Go to: URBAN EXPLORATION](#)

(www.sminusp.co.uk)

UE socio-spatial ethos

- from the accounts certain shared ideals are evident:
 1. need to document space
 2. thrill of access to forbidden space
 3. desire for authentic spaces
 4. alternative aestheticism of spaces

1. need to document spaces

- *"Exploration serves no purpose when its results remain obscure. ... It was only the advent of this publishing tradition that transformed the desultory trespasses of scattered souls into a coherent movement."* , Jinx Magazine, "Psychopathology and the hidden city"
- *"My hope with the photos on this site is that they help convey some of the excitement that I find in the built environment. I hope that they convey some of the rich and layered history that exists in the places where they have been taken, and help you too take a step into the past."* , Steve Duncan, Undercity.org
- does UE provide a viable, relevant means of preservation?
- solely the importance of peer recognition for 'discoveries'

2. thrill of access to forbidden spaces

- *"alot of the buzz comes from seeing what many others cannot ... UE simply would not, by definition, be exploration if the corridors down which we creep were well trodden" , Spaceminuspeople*
- *"Stepping into another place left untouched by the majority of the public is the biggest attraction for us, when somewhere has fulfilled it's purpose, used, closed down and the people move on....we move in." , Trumbernick, www.explorationstation.co.uk*
- the 'right' to be curious

3. desire for authentic spaces

- *"Most people think the only things worth looking at in our cities and towns are those safe, sanitized attractions that require an admission fee. Rather than passively consuming entertainment, urban explorers strive to actually create authentic experiences by making discoveries that allow them to participate in the secret workings of cities and structures."* , Ninjalicious, Access All Areas
- *"I was never particularly interested in museums or in 'preserved' or 'reconstructed' artifacts or building. What I like about going into inaccessible places is the sense that I'm seeing authentic things - experiencing historical artifacts directly -- instead of have the mediated experience of reading about places or seeing things in a museum."* , Steve Duncan, Undercity.org
- why is it more authentic if its empty (lifeless?), decaying and abandoned? does stillness and disorderliness somehow equate to authenticity?

4. alternative aestheticism

- *" This is a lonesome alien world whose dark corners and peeling walls have gotten a hold of me and many others; this affinity for derelict structures and often dangerous excitement is the core essence of urban exploring, in my opinion." , Mott, Opacity.us*
- beauty in the experience of place, e.g. the appeal of draining:
" We like the dark, the wet, humid, earthy smell. We like the varying architecture. We like the solitude. We like the acoustics, the wildlife, the things we find, the places we come up, the comments on the walls, the maze-like quality" , Predator's approach.doc, Sydney Cave Clan
- beauty in the subtle effects of time and nature on structures
- uncanny beauty in disorder

UE ethics

- ethical principles widely expressed in UE accounts,
- defining a kind of 'pirate's code'
 1. respect for places
 2. publish versus preservation
 3. freedom of access / illegality of trespass
 4. acceptability of anonymity
- ethics justify their activities and provide distinction to other users of these spaces: vandals, taggers and graffiti artists, 'kids', arsonists, thieves and criminals. (position of homeless is unclear)
- ethics separate 'us' from 'them'
- negates the rights claims of property owners and grants moral authority against security guards

1. respect for places

- *"What gives UE its higher moral ground than that of plain old mischief and vandalism is this anti-damage approach. Oh, and the pictures."*, Section 61
- *"You don't need to take any souvenirs to make both the experience and the site your own; if anything, you diminish your ownership of the place by defacing it or taking away a piece of it."*, Ninjalicious, Access All Areas
- *"If you really can't suppress your instinct to mark your territory, please just wait until you get home and then urinate on your furniture until you get that weird evolutionary misfire out of your system."*, Ninjalicious, Access All Areas
- the spirit of UE parallels ethical stance of eco-tourism: "take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints"
- some debate about the tagging of discoveries, esp. drains

2. publish versus preservation

- the necessity to publish brings risks as well as rewards of peer recognition
- *" We will no longer publish location details, other than the name of the establishment itself, and we will endeavour to discourage further visits from other interested parties." , spaceminuspeople*
- publicity can breed popularity for a site. Copycats and undesirables who don't respect the place
- revealing a discovery risks destroying the very essence of the discovery
- encouraging unprepared and stupid people to risk their lives
- invites scrutiny from law enforcement and greater security by property owners

3. freedom and illegality

- *" part of finding exploration sites involves casting off a certain restrained mindset ... and realizing that many of your boundaries are self-imposed, voluntary and, ultimately, illusory." , Ninjalicious, Access All Areas*
- being free in the city. seeking free access in both senses
 - free as in speech, and free as in beer
- willingness to ignore 'no entry signs' and psychological conventions not to open doors marked private
- a need to justify trespassing
- curiosity is not a crime. Ninj (quoted in Stevenson, 2000) explains the reaction when caught by security guards: *" You explain to them that you're just curious. Of course, they never believe you. They can't fathom that the reason you open that door was because you wanted to see what was behind it."*

4. acceptability of anonymity

- pseudonyms and blurred faces



(www.sub-urban.com)

The link bit

- one way to conceptualise UE, and its geographical practices and imaginings, is to draw on computer hacking and the more established ethics of hackers
- to think about UE as 'space hacking'

Computer hacking

- *"Hackers solve problems and build things, and they believe in freedom and voluntary mutual help. To be accepted as a hacker, you have to behave as though you have this kind of attitude yourself. And to behave as though you have the attitude, you have to really believe the attitude"* (Raymond, 2005)
- diversity of hacker 'attitudes':
 - pranks and clever, inventive actions
 - breaking into computer networks, cracking software
 - open source software writers
 - revealing hidden architectures
 - questioning authority and received wisdom

Hacker ethic

- codification of by Steven Levy (1984):
- access to computers - and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works -should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the hands-on imperative
- all information should be free
- mistrust authority - promote decentralisation
- hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position
- you can create art and beauty on a computer
- computers can change your life for the better

'space hacking'

- how far are the ethos, ethics and practices of 'hackers' analogous to urban explorers?
- can urban explorers be seen as 'space hackers'?
- commonality in the ethos
 - play, inventiveness, producing space
 - bending, breaking the rules
 - open sourcing knowledge
 - resisting authority

'space hacking'

- *"Through telling new stories the unknown, undiscovered city can be laid open to critical scrutiny, to new urban practices, new urban subversions."* (Pile 2001, 264)
1. thinking through how space becomes
 2. the nature of territoriality
 3. 'spatial hauntings'
 4. 'cities without people'
 5. 'exploration' as method

1. thinking through how space becomes



- thinking of UE as beckoning particular spaces into being through embodied practices of 'space hacking'
- the space is performed through spatial practices - by sneaking in, climbing a fence, clambering down a drain, the search for good vantage points and the composition of photographs
- the spatial production is different for bored security guards patrolling, for vandals looking for things to break, for owners monitoring the space as properties on a spreadsheet

2. the nature of territoriality & property



- thinking about how cities are produced as 'property' (spatial fixity) and imagining an urban 'right-to-roam' (spatial mobility)?
- thinking about the ethics around the illegality of UE performance might provide insights in what counts as public space and how boundaries of place in cities are demarcated and policed
- highlighting the extent of normative regulation of space and yet also the fragility of much territorialization (just ignore the 'keep-out' sign and hop over the fence, thus transforming private space, in the moment, into a place of exploration)

3. 'spatial hauntings'

- UE as a way to think through memory, legacy and authenticity
- the experience of place as opposed to written histories/testimonies, as a way complementing other representations
- experiencing and then capturing in photographs the layers of memories in a place (memorialisation)
- thinking about the uncanny nature of spaces, the psychogeographies of the city



4. cities without people

- nearly all UE is of 'empty' space - functional or abandoned spaces
- 'space hacking' produces 'cities without people'
- one UE 'account' is called 'spaceminuspeople'
- this reveals the fragility of built structures and the ability of nature to break down orderliness of cities
- perhaps a way of thinking post-human urbanity?
what happens to space when people stop caring in the normative sense; when entropy runs unchecked



5. 'exploration' as method



"No one explores cities if geographers do not.", William Bunge, (1973, 335)

- can expeditionary practices open up ways of knowing that capture (at least partially) the fragmentary nature of places, the unknowing permeating through city, that other methods fail to capture
- research becoming risky, finding things out becomes fun. UE as 'post-method' method, working without permission, without risk assessments, without ethical approval
- expeditions to study the non-obvious urbanity
- *"not just the recreation land, but the blighted land; not just the affluent, but the poor; not just the beautiful, but the ugly"* (Bunge 1977, 35)

Conclusions

- computer hacking provides a way of thinking about UE
- UE seems to provide an interesting set of spatial practices through which to explore a range of geographic issues such as
 - production of space, territoriality and property, memory and place, geographic knowledge
- on-going research is seeking to flesh out these ideas

Questions and suggestions

- photograph credits. Many thanks to Siologen (<http://siologen.net>), Jondoe (www.sub-urban.com)

- bibliography:

- Brown J, 2003, "Online and underground" *Salon.com*, January 16, <<http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2001/01/16/infiltration/>>
- Marsden R, 2005, "Asylum seekers", *The Independent*, July 4, page 37
- Ninjalicious, 2005 *Access All Areas: A User's Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration*(Infilpress, Canada)
- Orbuch T L, 1997, "People's accounts count: The sociology of accounts" *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 455-478
- Pile S, 2001, "The un(known) city... or, an urban geography of what lies buried below the surface" in Borden I, Kerr J, Rendell J, Pivaro A (eds), *The Unknown City: Contesting Architectural and Social Space* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA) 262-278
- Scott M B, Lyman S M, 1968, "Accounts" *American Sociological Review* 33(1) 46-62
- Wilson H, 2003, "Pipe down" *The Guardian*, The Guide section , July 5, pages 8-10