THE AESTHETICS OF TRESPASS: THE ART AND PRACTICE OF URBAN EXPLORATION IN THE POSTMODERN METROPOLIS

by

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ABSTRACT

Urban exploration (UE) seeks to discover, explore and document the hidden, abandoned and restricted sites in the postmodern metropolis that the majority of urban citizens never see. Urban explorers take as their mission the infiltration of sites such as abandoned factories, closed asylums, drainage systems, old subway tunnels, catacombs, and other facets of the urban landscape. Members of the UE community maintain a stringent code of ethics that aims to change nothing and leave no traces in the sites they visit. Urban explorers do not forcibly enter sites, vandalize, cause damage or remove objects during the course of their explorations. While recent mainstream media and popular culture representations of urban exploration have focused on the practice as a form of adrenaline-based “extreme sport”, this work seeks to highlight the overlooked and highly sophisticated ways in which proponents of UE reimagine the city. In a landscape littered with the broken remnants of the industrial era, urban explorers are often the only ones to investigate the ruins of (post)modernity with a sense of respect and awe. Their photographs, art and written representations of their travel through the ruined landscape serve as aide-mémoires and lasting documents of the places left to decay in the shadow of North American and Western European consumer culture. I argue that urban explorers act as postmodern artist-intellectuals in the tradition of Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel, two sociologists who I consider to be urban explorers avant la lettre. I use the themes of flânerie, urban archaeology and bricolage to discuss how the acts of observing, documenting and creating undertaken by urban explorers constitute an alternative mode of perception and way of knowing the postmodern metropolis.
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Chapter I: Exploring the Postmodern Metropolis

The sun is rising as I haul myself over an eight-foot chain link fence topped with rusty strands of barbed wire. My adrenaline surges as I look over my shoulder then drop into the shadows on the other side. One more brush with barbed wire and I'll reach my target: an abandoned industrial facility in the heart of a gentrifying Vancouver neighbourhood. The site is no longer in use, but is actively patrolled by security guards. Their job is to stop me from entering the site, but they can only do that if they notice me. My plan is to explore the site, take some pictures of decaying machinery and slip out unnoticed. I'll take nothing but a few pre-dawn photographs, and will leave nothing but footprints in the dust of the buildings. What I'm doing is called urban exploration.

Urban exploration, or UE, is a growing subcultural practice that finds practitioners in all parts of the world. Exploration is most commonly defined as the practice of “going places you’re not supposed to go” (Infiltiration.org). This catchphrase was coined by the late Ninjalicious, a well-known Toronto-based explorer and the author of Infiltration zine and website, as well as the highly successful self-published book Access All Areas: A User’s Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration (2005). One could say that urban exploration takes as its mission the discovery, infiltration and recording of travel through abandoned, restricted and hidden spaces. While both these descriptions pertain to UE, neither gives full scope to the diversity and creativity inherent in the practice of exploration. Explorers give different explanations of their pastime according to the type of exploring they do and their geographic location. For instance, the North Eastern United States boast many abandoned asylums investigated by a large number of explorers. Sydney and Melbourne have unique drainage systems below their streets, which have spawned a renowned culture of “drainers” (drain explorers) who go by the name “Cave Clan”. Moscow’s metro tunnels, infrastructure and buried Soviet bunkers
have given rise to the Diggers of the Underground Planet. Abandoned quarries and catacombs under Paris are the site of cataphile excursions. Geographic, structural and architectural elements of cities can have an influence on the type of exploring done, as can economic factors. For instance, downturns in the economy and outsourcing of jobs can result in large tracts of vacant urban buildings.

Just as exploration varies from region to region, the way explorers define and practice it varies from person to person. In my online interviews, participants eloquently described various understandings of exploration and motivations for doing it. For Jester, exploration started at a young age and is practically in his blood:

**Jester:** my parents were traveling musicians, that would stop at any abandoned/decrepit places as we traveled. so old homesteads, mills, schools, you name it

**Jester:** I was taught it as a recreation as a kid, seemed normal and that everyone must have done it. till I was about 12 or 13 when I realized nobody else's parents took them places like that

**Lisa:** when did you first come across the term "urban exploration"?

**Jester:** probably about 6 years ago I believe. i had finally started using the internet to try to find info about some exploration targets, and came across some UE sites, action squad being one that stood out

**Lisa:** what is your own definition of urban exploration?

**Jester:** to me urban exploration is exploring your environment, most especially the unused or *secret* and forgotten parts of it. I see it as strictly an unauthorized sight seeing, where nothing should ever be damaged or taken

Decoy goes beyond the definition of the physical practice of urban exploration in order to explain what it means for him:

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1 All names used are self-selected pseudonyms that the research participants use in their practice of exploration. The format of the interviews will be discussed below.
decoy: I think ninjalicous called it 'recreational trespassing' - that sums it up sort of neatly as a whole. For myself though, I would define it as the practice of going outside of the bounds of human interaction codes.

decoy: You have to respect the fact that you could run into anyone when you cross barriers like these. You're entering a highly contentious space. If you run into someone else with as little right to be there as you do, who is in control? Who is trespassing on whom?

decoy: Another way to look at Urban Exploration, is to think of it as purposely putting yourself into a heightened state of awareness of your surroundings. You have to be acutely aware of your surroundings in order to be safe. In a sense, going somewhere that is potentially dangerous is an intentional way to force yourself into a certain mindset.

decoy: however... As you mentioned earlier, it affects the way you see things... so we need to look at Urban Exploration as more than just the act of 'going where you're not supposed to go' and more as accepting a certain view of the world around you, and actively seeking to broaden and enhance that worldview by continuing to participate in the activities associated with this view.

Morthicia explains that she favours the exploration of underground spaces:

Morthicia: What kind do I do? Quarries below Paris, known as the catacombs (but catacombs are only a small portion of the actual quarries). I do quarries in the rest of France when I get a chance. All sorts of quarries, you know it could be limestone quarries, gypsum quarries, tile quarries, mines when I get the chance. Coal mines, that's the hardest to visit. Usually when you manage to visit them it's cause they have some sort of public thing that's going on.

lisa: So, mostly underground stuff?

Morthicia: Yeah, mostly underground. Not natural stuff. I'm interested in, well, I guess that's where the urban comes in, I'm interested in the industrial heritage of man. What interests me is how man built those quarries, dug the stone out, the effort that went into it. Obviously, I appreciate natural caves and stuff, but it doesn't give me the same feeling.
And finally, VTunderground also highlights the manufactured or “human-made” aspect of his interest in urban exploration: “To me, urban exploration is the act of venturing into manmade places that I've never been before, be it a utility tunnel, abandoned building, or even an active public building. Basically, 'exploring manmade stuff’”.

Urban explorers practice recreational trespass with the intent of experiencing places that the average person most often ignores, fails to notice or avoids altogether. Because trespass is technically an offence under the law in most places\(^2\), urban exploration is often conflated with other illegal practices. Therefore, it is important to be clear about what urban exploration is not. Explorers follow an ethical code that mirrors the Sierra club motto: “Take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints”. This means that urban explorers strive not to disturb the environments they pass through, leaving sites just as they found them. For this reason, such practices as tagging (graffiti), taking objects from sites, breaking and entering (rather than finding an entry point that is already open), and starting fires or disturbing squatter encampments are all violations of the ethical exploration code. While it is indeed possible to find people who claim the title “explorer” while engaging in these practices, it is important to note that the majority of members of this community strongly disapprove of these behaviours.

While the rhetoric of urban exploration is usually not expressly political in nature, there is a general disregard for laws of trespass as applied to public or abandoned spaces. Ninjalicious states:

\(^2\) Trespass is only a summary offence in Canada, usually punishable by a fine. It should be noted that trespass is not criminalized everywhere: Scotland, for instance, appears to be one of the few countries in the world in which trespass is not against the law.
While it's true that some aspects of the hobby happen to be illegal, it's important not to confuse the words "illegal" and "immoral". Laws against trespassing are like laws against being out after curfew: people get into trouble not for actually doing anything harmful, but simply because the powers that be are worried that they might. This isn't the way things should be, of course, since cities should be for citizens, but urban explorers aren't generally fighters. We don't seek to smash the state, just to ignore its advice on a subject it doesn't really know much about. When we see a sign that says "Danger: Do Not Enter", we understand that this is simply a shorthand way of saying "Leaving Protected Zone: Demonstrate Personal Accountability Beyond This Point". ("No Disclaimer", 2006)

The present study is concerned with the description of the urban exploration phenomenon and the investigation of its aesthetics. I situate the phenomenon within the larger sphere of the postindustrial metropolis, an urban landscape that has been scarred by industrial divestment and the closing of total institutions. My work aims to explore how urban explorers understand, describe and document their explorations. The purpose of the research is to explore a non-mainstream practice that has gained a massive global online presence but has not yet been given serious consideration in academic literature. In the following chapters, I use classical and contemporary sociological theory to offer a broader cultural and historical perspective on urban exploration. By using three different theoretical archetypes – what I am calling ‘flânerie’, ‘urban archaeology’ and ‘bricolage’, I attempt to articulate the importance of exploration in understanding and theorizing the contemporary urban landscape. This work aims to give voice to alternative “readings” of the postmodern city. The hypothesis that guides the research is that the artistic and
written representations of infiltration, as well as the understandings of urban explorers themselves, constitute a body of knowledge that seeks to reimagine and reinterpret the postmodern metropolis.

A significant focal point of my thesis is the aesthetic of abandoned urban space and its representation(s) in urban exploration online culture. I understand the term “aesthetics” in both its narrow and broad senses, that is as both the creation of artistic works and as the general mode of perception of the lived environment. This latter aspect of aesthetics is addressed in the discussion of UE as a mode of experience in the postmodern metropolis. With respect to the more restricted focus on aesthetics, my work includes as many examples of urban exploration photography as possible, including my own photographs.

1.1 From Squatting to Exploration: My Relationship to UE

The earliest exploring memories I have are of being a kid and finding abandoned cabins in the woods near my house in semirural Quebec. There wasn't much to see since they were just trashed party spots that the local teens used on weekends, but they had a certain aura of mystery and creepiness that kept us coming back to explore them. In my late teens, I spent some time trying to help set up an organized squatting movement in Vancouver, which didn't really come together, but did allow me to see the inside of some cool old buildings. For a brief time in 1997 we occupied an old folks home at Salisbury and Napier, before getting kicked out so that they could film "The Xfiles" there. I remember it being beautiful and creepy at the same time. It was as if the residents had been taken away in the night, leaving bits of clothing, canes and wheelchairs as the only sign that they'd lived there. Like so many abandoned spaces in Vancouver, one can walk
by there today and see the heritage-conversion luxury condos that replaced it.

I've always liked walking around the city, checking things out as I go along, and have always been drawn to marginal spaces like rail yards and abandoned buildings. In the 1990's, I came across *Infiltration* zine, but it was only in the last couple of years, due to my exposure to the online community, that I put together the idea of urban exploration as an actual practice with the type of thing I like to do in my spare time.

1.2 Urban Explorers as Theorists of the Postmodern Metropolis

Just as Benjamin and Simmel can be considered urban explorers avant la lettre, today's exploration can be seen as a way to theorize and understand the postmodern urban landscape. Many proponents of UE have developed sophisticated understandings of the pastime and are involved in the project of reinvisioning the metropolis through artistic production and alternate modes of perception.

Since there is so little academic work that deals explicitly with the urban exploration phenomenon, I have drawn extensively from information available in the public, nonacademic domain and from other explorers themselves.

My research investigates the hidden and underground practices of "real life" exploration of the postmodern/postindustrial metropolis, as well as the public/visible but largely virtual realm of the UE community. Ethnographic internet research is a relatively new form of qualitative method that has yet to become a mainstream fixture of academia. For this reason, there are ill-defined guidelines for conducting ethical research online. Internet forums such as uer.ca are public domains in which conversations are conducted amongst Internet users and available for all with web access to read and respond to. Unlike private chatrooms or email correspondence between individuals, reading through
postings in a public message forum is similar to listening in on conversations in public spaces. Posters are aware that anyone in the world can read their postings and that their views will be publicly available in archive format for varying lengths of time. All posters to uer.ca and other net forums have self-selected usernames that are carefully chosen to preserve their relative anonymity. Because anonymity is easily preserved on the internet and the format of the message forums is clearly public and not private, the use of the information (such as through the use of quotations from various chat “threads”) presented for academic purposes would seem to present little risk to forum participants. However, there are ethical concerns and issues regarding “netiquette”\(^3\) when message board data is “harvested” without the express knowledge and consent of forum participants (Sharf, 1999: 243-256). Generally, individuals involved in publicly accessible forums are aware of the fact that anyone may access their postings, view their profiles and even send them an email. However, most do not expect their words to become the focus of academic research and would not be pleased to find out that they had been studied without their knowledge. For this reason, I made sure to clearly identify myself in all communications with UE community members online and refrained from quoting internet forum participants without their consent. I applied to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) for approval to recruit participants and conduct interviews in online formats. My research was carefully designed to keep in mind issues of confidentiality and netiquette. The consent form informed participants of the issues around potential third party viewing of internet communications. For this reason, participants were encouraged to create a

\(^3\) “Netiquette” is a term developed by internet users to describe nearly universal rules of communication for online chat forums. Sharf (1999) describes netiquette as “rules of thumb, to encourage politeness, civility and enhanced understanding among (online) participants” (243-256).
new pseudonym and an anonymous email account from which to participate in the interviews. Copies of the documents involved in the BREB application are included in the appendices at the end of the thesis.

As part of my online presence, and to facilitate communications with other Internet users, I designed www.urbanexploration.ca, a simple website that describes my work and contains a link through which potential participants could reach me for more information. The site features reports and photography from my own explorations, as well as background information on me. I found urbanexploration.ca to be an invaluable link to the urban exploration community, as it serves to establish my own identity vis à vis UE and allows fellow explorers to access more information about my research. Images from the various pages on the site are included in the appendices.

Individuals chosen for participation in the study were respondents who expressed interest in taking part in email or private chat interviews (conducted in real time). Interviewees were selected on the basis of their participation in urban exploration activities and online community forums. I placed postings looking for participants on uer.ca and the Wraiths forum. Several people also mentioned I should place an advertisement for participants on www.ckzone.org, a French cataphile forum, but I decided against this in the end for reasons of practicality (as translating interviews from French to English would take a long time to do properly).

I chose to use online and email-based interviews, because I see online communication as central to the urban exploration phenomenon. Using an online interview format allowed for contact with a diverse sample of UE participants, as it was not limited by geographical boundaries. The “facelessness” of online discourse may also
have made it easier for some participants to come forward, as there was little danger that their "true" identity would be exposed. Interestingly, however, most participants did not seem too concerned about keeping their identities completely secret, and none accepted my offers to create a new pseudonym and email address from which to conduct the interview, divorced even from their online identity. Their high degree of computer literacy allowed them to assess the risks involved with the interview process and some even seemed to like the idea of having their online names given even wider circulation.

Internet-based interviews have many advantages. One aspect that I particularly appreciated about doing my research this way was the ability to talk to explorers anywhere in the world with no costs involved. There are, of course, disadvantages to interviews conducted by email and online chat. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the process is the inability to judge the other person’s reactions through body language, tone of voice and other visual and verbal cues. Since these things must therefore be inferred through context and visual cues imbedded in the text, interpretations can be inaccurate or difficult to judge. In order to convey some aspects of tone and non-verbal communication, internet users have devised simple shorthand systems for indicating humour, anger, confusion, smirking and sarcasm. ‘Emoticons’, for instance, are symbols such as © to indicate smiling, O_o to indicate surprise, shock or dismay and ;) to indicate a wink, used to convey the tone or intention of the person speaking. Abbreviations and shorthand acronyms (such as LOL for “laughing out loud”) are also used to convey sentiment. Another that has popped up more recently is the blending of HTML (or world wide web coding language) tags with emotions or tones that a person wants to convey. When one is designing a website, one can use HTML tags to shape the look of text.
Various styles and fonts have their own HTML tags. For instance, the HTML tag for italics is `<em>`. To indicate that one is finished writing in italics, one would write `</em>`, the `/` indicating ending. When someone wants to be sarcastic in web-based forums, for example, sometimes they will say their bit and then write `</sarcasm>` to show that the preceding text was meant as sarcasm. Internet chat forces discussion participants to pay attention to and clarify what the other is saying in the course of the conversation.

In order to capture the tone and character of my interactions with other urban explorers online, particularly in view of the distinctive constraints and possibilities of the medium, I have chosen to reproduce the chat or email format as it appears on the screen. Therefore, as much as possible, I have tried to reproduce chat logs as they would be seen on my computer, including net speak and emoticons, rather than edited and reformatted for the printed text. Below is an example of a chat window that conversation participants would see when engaged in an MSN chat. The person with whom a chat is being conducted, in this case Decoy, is listed in the top left of the window.

Figure 1.1 Internet Chat Window. © the author
As a conversation is happening, text fills the large blank window. A chat participant types something, hits “return” and the text appears in the window for both participants to see, with the sender’s name indicated at the beginning of the sentence. Some people write many lines of text (equivalent to a small paragraph) before hitting return, others write line by line, sending each as they finish the sentence. Sometimes “speakers” hit the return button as a way of pausing to think about what they are saying, other times it may be an indication of how their chat style mirrors more closely their speech. Quotes from the email interviews are integrated into the text, as they do not follow the chat format discussed above.

I conducted ten interviews in all, five of which were via chat, four were via email, and one was conducted over the Skype internet communication system (Skype allows internet users to chat in real time by using their computers’ built-in microphones to speak with each other). My participants were Slyv, Jester, NV, Morthicia, Relic, VTunderground, Decoy, Dowcet, Noah Vale and Lopix. In order to get a general sense of the “demographics” of my sample, I asked participants how they would define themselves. All turned out to self-identify as male, except for Morthicia, four were Canadian, four American and two European (one in France, one in Belgium). Eight respondents identified as “white” or Caucasian, one as European/North African and one specified no ethnic background. Three mentioned their sexual orientation as “straight”, while seven did not identify any particular orientation. Two indicated they are students, one identified as well educated and two noted they are professionals. The range of ages spanned from 21 to 41, with five in the 21-29 category and four in the 30-34 category. Only one participant mentioned class background, identifying as low-income, but from a
middle class background. One participant identified as politically left leaning, and another described living an “alternative lifestyle”.

For the interviews, I set up a basic list of questions that guided what I asked in chat conversations. Because online chats are similar to in-person discussions, the order and type of questions varied according to the flow of the conversation. Sometimes participants would raise interesting points not covered in the list and I would follow up with additional questions. Most chat interviews took exactly an hour, and email interview participants were asked not to spend more than 45 minutes to an hour answering the questions sent to them.

In interviewing and chatting with other explorers, I found that we shared a high degree of philosophical reflection and agreed upon articulate explanations of the pastime. In stark contrast to media representations of explorers as careless adrenaline junkies or risk takers, the people I spoke with showed a devotion to the places they explore and a desire to communicate their ways of understanding and seeing. With each discussion, I marveled more and more at the parallels between my academic concerns and what the participants brought to the interviews.

Perhaps the word I would use to characterize the interviews I conducted would be generosity. I found a large number of people willing to help me out, chat with me and do interviews. Many expressed sincere interest in seeing my project. The interviews themselves were highly articulate, open and honest. I found the desire to engage, to philosophize and to truly work hard to make me understand astonishing. Several participants contacted me after the interviews were done: one with comments on an article I had written, along with analysis and further thoughts about the things we talked
about. Two others sent me articles they thought had explained some of the “why’s of urbex” well. Slyv, of Forbidden Places, a Belgian UE site, not only granted me permission to include some of his exploration pictures but sent me high resolution copies of them. Consistently, explorers took the time and went out of their way to help me along with my project. I was often touched and delighted by these gestures of goodwill from fellow explorers. Certainly, they made me feel as though my project was accepted and even encouraged by participants, reinforcing a feeling of community and our shared sense of belonging.

1.3 Mapping the Literature of an Underground Practice

Because it combines two very common words, “urban” and “exploration”, it is not surprising that “urban exploration” has been used to describe other things beside the subculture of youth who trespass recreationally. Within academia, the term has been used in various disciplines without reference to the practice of urban exploration as it is discussed here. In English literature it is used to describe the type of writing that arises in the 19th century which chronicles the gritty/seamier side of modernizing and industrializing Western European metropolis. The works of Charles Dickens, for instance, are sometimes characterized as urban exploration literature (Choi, 2001). Another use of the term is found within cultural geography, a discipline that has ‘discovered’ and become enamoured with psychogeography and Situationist-type explorations of the urban environment, a point I return to in chapter two in relation to ‘Urban Awareness’. However, it should be noted that cultural geographers like David Pinder (2005) employ a looser interpretation of the concept of exploration, one which does not give expression to the full range and diversity of practices that fall under the
term’s meaning. Pinder’s understanding of “urban exploration” is mainly limited to the practice of psychogeography and other types of creative urban play. There is indeed a strong link between all these practices, but my use of the term UE here only encompasses a small part of what members of the urban exploration subculture actually do. While explorers make frequent use of techniques of walking and looking deeply at the urban environment, they mostly do not follow a set pattern (as required by most psychogeographic experiments and art projects) and usually enter sites simply because they provoke their interest. In the UE community, it is generally considered that exploring only the outside perimeter of locations rather than entering them is mere tourism, unless it is done as part of a broader practice known as Urban Awareness (UA), which I discuss in chapter two.

When I first started this work, I had not yet seen any indications of interest in urban exploration on the part of academics either online or in scholarly publications, with the exception of a few books on cataphilia, or, the exploration of catacombs under Paris. Nevertheless, in the last year I have received at least four requests by email from professors and grad students interested in researching exploration and wanting more information about my project. Most of the people getting in touch with me have been students pursuing Masters degrees in anthropology, history and sociology. It would seem that in the next few years there will be a number of theses coming out about urban exploration, a few of which written by students who are themselves explorers. There also seem to be a few non-explorers who are writing on the subject from the vantage point of outsiders. Media interest, which seems to have first been piqued in the late 1990’s, has
continued to grow. I have been contacted by student and professional journalists, zine writers, freelancers and a film producer regarding urban exploration and my research.

While there is little academic work specifically dealing with the subject of urban exploration, there is a rich body of literature produced by UE enthusiasts. There are two sources in particular that provide insight into the UE world. The first is a zine (an independently published magazine) called *Infiltration*, whose creator Ninjalicious is credited with having coined the term “urban exploration”. The zine, now online as well, hails from Toronto and is widely respected in the online UE community. The website posts articles and reports on UE in Toronto and around the world, and provides a code of ethics, a description of the joys of UE and links to the sites of fellow enthusiasts. Ninjalicious calls the publication “the zine about going places you’re not supposed to”. Other well known UE zines include the Cave Clan’s *Il Draino* and Reduxzero’s *5100*. During the summer of 2005, Ninjalicious self-published *Access All Areas: A User’s Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration*, an entertaining guide to the practice of exploration.

Julia Solis (2005), a highly respected urban explorer based in New York, has recently published an excellent book on her explorations of that city’s underground spaces. Richly illustrated with her own photographs and reproductions of historical documents, *New York Underground: Anatomy of a City* provides an excellent resource for thinking about those hidden and mysterious spaces that lurk behind the everyday facades of the metropolis.

Another perspective on urban exploration is offered by the online magazine calling itself *Jinx*. Covering such topics as “The Physiology of Urban Exploration” and
“New York Lockdown” (about post 9-11 security in Manhattan’s secret and abandoned spaces), the group that publishes *Jinx* seeks to report UE missions and cover topics related to the hobby. The Jinx crew styles itself on a propaganda model, mimicking Soviet-style artwork and adopting code names such as “Minister of Information”. The Jinx Project (also known as the Jinx Athenaeum Society) calls itself a “global intelligence organization, not affiliated with any government but engaged in a permanent struggle with the enemies of freedom. The project's core values are anti-totalitarianism, humanism, and unnecessary risk-taking” (2004). Two of the members of the Jinx group recently published one of the few books written about urban exploration, *Invisible Frontier: Exploring the Tunnels, Ruins and Rooftops of Hidden New York* (2003). The slim volume details twelve “missions” to explore abandoned or difficult-to-access sites.

There are quite a few books on the Parisian underground and cataphile culture, but the best (and most difficult to find) resource is Barbara Glowczewski and Jean-François Matteudi’s *La Cité des Cataphiles: Mission Anthropologique dans les Souterrains de Paris* (1983). This long out-of-print book is praised by cataphiles for its accurate representation of their culture and its non-sensationalistic style. Other books include *Paris Souterrain* by Emile Gérards (1991) and *L'Atlas du Paris Souterrain: la Doublure Sombre de la Ville Lumière* by Alain Clément and Gilles Thomas (2001). These two books are practical guides to the catacombs that are useful for background information on the Parisian underground’s history, flora and fauna, geography and culture.

While there may not be many print sources about urban exploration, there are thousands of websites put up by individuals and small groups of urban explorers. A site
that is often cited by UE enthusiasts as having gotten them interested in the pastime is Henk van Rensbergen's www.abandoned-places.com. His hobby is exploring abandoned spaces all over the globe, which is aided by his employment as a commercial airline pilot. His site concentrates almost exclusively on the aesthetic aspect of industrial decay and abandoned space, featuring photographs of places he has infiltrated all over the world. Many of the photographs are stunningly beautiful, despite the fact that they represent what is left after industry moves on.

In contrast to representations of the UE community created by members, it is interesting to see how mainstream media has discovered the sensational value of exploration stories. Playing up the danger and illegality, these stories are designed solely to titillate and frighten the 'average' media consumer. While most people can probably remember a time when they've entered an abandoned structure or ventured somewhere they weren't supposed to, these stories create a gulf of misunderstanding and fear between the mainstream public and the subculture. A particularly good example of the drive to criminalize and disparage youth culture is in the recent airing of an episode of "CSI Miami" (airdate April 10th, 2006)\(^4\) that showcased a particularly ignorant view of urban exploration. A few hours before the episode aired, explorers started chatting about it on uer.ca. Most took a humorous view of the matter, as the show seems to be widely known for its sensationalism and melodrama. As expected, in the opening scenes of the show a pair of geeky 'explorers' break down a door (literally battering it off its hinges) and proceed to comb the abandoned building for artifacts to steal and sell. Of course, the two find bodies during their exploration. The show switches to the perspective of the

\(^4\) "Free Fall" (episode 92, season 4)
investigating officers, with one of the cops spitting out “they call themselves ‘Urban Explorers’ – that’s a fancy word for pilferers”. Later in the show, another police officer looks through all the stolen goods stored by the ‘explorers”. “You know you’re just thieves, right?”, she says. Shows like these, as well as articles like the one that appeared in the May 7, 2006 Scotland edition of the News of the World tabloid, which featured the headline “Jeepers Creepers! Crazy New Club Breaks into Old Public Buildings”, create a negative image of the subculture and are designed to sell copy rather than inform the public. The way media and entertainment corporations present UE is often in striking contrast to the eloquent, artistic and sophisticated representations of exploration created by members of the community themselves.

1.4 Benjamin and Simmel: Urban Explorers Avant la Lettre

Urban exploration cannot be easily defined, nor can it be narrowly identified in terms of any one type of practice. Rather, it is more useful to discuss UE as existing on a continuum spanning divergent, yet related, modes of experience. In this examination of the UE community and its practices, I make use of three themes or theoretical archetypes that resonate through both theory and exploration. These themes, ‘flânerie’, ‘urban archaeology’ and ‘bricolage’, are inspired by the work of sociologists Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel. ‘Flânerie’ and ‘urban archaeology’ are connected to Benjamin’s work on the Parisian metropolis of the late 19th century. Bricolage is a term borrowed from Levi-Strauss’ Savage Mind, and is discussed in the context of Weinstein and Weinstein’s project of postmodernizing Simmel. Each theme provides a structure around which to base a discussion of the art and practice of urban exploration. The aim here is to highlight the ways in which Benjamin and Simmel’s theoretical explorations serve as
inspiration for the kinds of urban explorations discussed here. My work invokes theorists
Benjamin and Simmel as historical precedents and as creative models of urban
exploration before it came to be known as such. Their textual and literal explorations of
the metropolis provide a model for my own approach and serve as the late 19th
century/early 20th century antecedents of today’s urban explorers.

Benjamin’s writings centre on the metropolis as a place that is at once attractive
and repellant. The theorist deeply inhabited the two main cities in which he lived during
his lifetime, Berlin and Paris. The metropolis is a space of shadow and conflict, filled
with possibility and alienation. Gilloch’s work *Myth and Metropolis* discusses how
Benjamin’s writings are central to the study of both the city and modernity. According to
Gilloch, Benjamin saw “the great cities of modern European culture (as) both beautiful
and bestial, a source of exhilaration and hope on the one hand and of revulsion and
despair on the other” (Gilloch, 1996, 2). The text most relevant to the discussion at hand
is Benjamin’s life work, *The Arcades Project* (1999), which provides a complex
methodology for thinking and writing about the metropolis. *Illuminations* (1968) is
important here for the essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction”, which provides a theoretical discussion of photography and thus can be
related to the UE practice of documentation addressed in the third chapter. Benjamin’s
*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1973) outlines the
theorist’s understanding of flânerie through the prism of Baudelaire’s writings. Susan
is indispensable as a guide to navigating the complexities of the *Arcades Project*. 
Benjamin’s work on the modern city as a mode of experience is greatly influenced by his teacher and predecessor Georg Simmel. Both theorists experienced life as outsiders, as both were German Jews whose lives and academic careers were marred by institutional anti-Semitism. Simmel died before the Nazi party took control of Germany although his academic career was stalled and interrupted by anti-Semitic prejudice, while Benjamin died trying to escape Nazi occupied France in 1940. Both theorists were fascinated by the modern metropolis as both a space and an amalgamation of experiences. Simmel’s work is the first to deeply investigate the metropolis of modernity. His work deals with the aesthetic and psychological effects of the modern city on the individual. The task of illuminating the process of modernity and the desire to study the minutiae of the urban experience lie at the heart of Simmel and Benjamin’s respective projects.

Simmel’s concern with interaction and the phenomena of everyday life makes him one of the leaders of his time in the sociology of modernity and urban life. He investigates two central aspects of modern life: the entrenchment of a mature money economy and the development of the modern metropolis. The central thesis of his canonical essay, "The Metropolis and Mental Life", concerns the experience of modernity by the individual. Where other classical theorists put forth analyses of the process of transition from a traditional society to a modern one, Simmel is the first to examine modernity and the modern metropolis as a mode of experience. This understanding of emerging urban environments provides the historical precedent for the UE enthusiast’s desire to experience the city and recast understandings of abandoned landscapes. My research draws on “The Metropolis and Mental Life” but also on essays such as “The
Stranger" and "The Ruin", two pieces which offer perspectives on the figure of the stranger and flâneur, and on the importance and symbolic importance of ruins, respectively. *Simmel and Since: Essays on Georg Simmel’s Social Theory* (Frisby, 1992) and *Postmodernized Simmel* (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1993) are useful for their analysis of Simmel’s life and work, providing contrasting theoretical perspectives on Simmel’s sociology.
Chapter II: The Urban Explorer as Postmodern Flâneur

Urban exploration is a mode of experience, that is to say, a way of looking at and perceiving the metropolis. Central to this way of experiencing the (post)modern urban environment is the act of observation, of walking the city, looking deeply at its hidden and unnoticed facets and exploring those features that attract one’s attention. This inherent characteristic of looking/observing calls to mind the attitude of the flâneur, a figure that has received an enormous amount of critical attention in recent years. In this chapter, I investigate the concept of 19th century flânerie and elucidate how it offers a model and a precedent for the postmodern practice of urban exploration.

The term “flâneur” comes from the French verb “flâner”, literally, “to idle”, or as it is more commonly translated into English, “to stroll”. Keith Tester describes flânerie as not only “the act of strolling”, but also, importantly, as “the act of looking” (1994: 1). The flâneur is a “recurring motif in the literature, sociology and art of urban, and most especially of the metropolitan, existence” (1994: 1). The slow pace and outward gaze are important characteristics of flânerie. The flâneur’s pedestrianism allows him to make his way slowly through the city by “botanizing on the pavement” (Benjamin, 1973: 36), in other words by consuming and living off the experiences he seeks out and collects in the urban environment.

It is important to note that I consciously use the pronoun “he” throughout this chapter when discussing the flâneur of the 19th century. The historical figure of the flâneur is decidedly male, as well as being from a particular (white, relatively affluent) social position (Wolff, 1990: 34-47). I contrast this with today’s urban exploration as a postmodern flânerie that is practiced by a relatively diverse subculture that is not
exclusively constituted by any one gender, socio-economic or ethnic group, although the online community's demographics tend to reflect the relative homogeneity of the historical flâneur.

In “The Invisible Flâneuse”, Wolff (1990) highlights the underlying gendered assumptions inherent in discussions of the flâneur of the 19th century. She states that “the experience of anonymity in the city...the possibility of unmolested strolling and observation first seen by Baudelaire, and then analyzed by Walter Benjamin were entirely the experiences of men” (1990: 58). According to Wolff, to be unaccompanied and female in the cities of the 19th century was to be treated with derision, as female members of the bourgeois classes inhabited the private sphere, leaving the streets of the metropolis to the prostitutes and working class women upon which the flâneur fixed his interested gaze. Wolff argues that the public sphere in 19th century European urban centres was essentially male space (1990: 34). While lower middle class and working class women worked outside the home, the public sphere and its institutions were designed for, and governed, by men (1990: 34). Wolff states that “as the experience of ‘the modern’ occurred mainly in the public sphere, it was primarily men’s experience” (1990: 35).

Free pedestrian displacement through urban space at will, along with a multi-directional and unfettered gaze propelled by a sense of curiosity and entitlement, are each key aspects of 19th century flânerie. These characteristics served to limit its 19th century practice almost exclusively to males of a particular socio-economic and ethnic background.

The flâneur is a figure that represents a particular time in the development of Western European modernity, and he is emblematic of a specific locality, namely Paris of
the 19th century. This is not to say, as some have suggested, that the social type of the flâneur could not have existed anywhere else, only that he is most often connected with the Parisian world where he originated. Parkhurst Ferguson quotes a piece from *Le Livre des Cent-et-Un* (1832) which proclaims that “Le flâneur peut naître partout; il ne sait vivre qu’à Paris” (“The flâneur can be born anywhere; he can only live in Paris”) (1994: 22). One of the key elements in the development of Paris as the capital of flânerie is the existence of the arcades, which were the primary sites of the flâneur’s explorations. The arcades were the covered (often glass-roofed) passageways that used to be a significant element of the Parisian landscape in the years before Baron Haussmann’s restructuring of the city (which I discuss below), though they were found in other European cities such as Moscow, London and Naples, as Benjamin notes in his work. The glass coverings of the arcade allowed the flâneur to stroll at his leisure, without having to concern himself with the weather, a feature that influenced his clothing style in permitting him to dress in a manner that was not dictated by everyday necessities. The protections afforded by these passageways allowed for a degree of comfort and shelter that made space for the development of lifestyles devoted to wandering, observing and the pursuit of pleasure.

Benjamin cites the destruction of the Parisian arcades during Haussmann’s restructuring of the French capital as the end of the era of flânerie. As the streets, and particularly the covered passageways, of Paris gave rise to the flâneur, so too did the destruction of the arcades and changes to the metropolis make it impossible for the practice to continue. My argument in this chapter, however, is that Benjamin’s forecasting of the death of the flâneur was premature. The flâneur is not buried in the rubble of the arcades, paved over to enable the postmodern city to build itself upwards.
Rather, he has changed and morphed in shape and been reborn in a new guise only slightly altering his or her modus operandi in order to experience the derelict and marginal spaces of today’s metropolis. The flâneur has not simply gone underground, since the sites of curiosity and concern are just as often the surface of everyday life in the (post)modern world.

As Buck-Morss observes, “today, it is clear to any pedestrian in Paris that within public space, automobiles are the dominant and predatory species. They penetrate the city’s aura so routinely that it disintegrated faster than it can coalesce. Flâneurs, like tigers or pre-industrial tribes, are cordoned off on reservations, preserved within the artificially created environments of pedestrian streets, parks, and underground passageways” (1986: 102). It is clear that this sentiment could be generalized to most other cities, particularly those in North America. These words find an echo in the writings of prominent urban explorer Ninjalicious who states that “most of us now live in large cities where parking lots have replaced common areas, malls have replaced city squares and the only public spaces that remain are a few grudgingly conceded parkettes” (“No Disclaimer”, 2006). The main difference between these contrasting periods and sites of flânerie is that Ninjalicious, and other urban explorers, refuse to be cordoned off and constrained in their exploration of the metropolis.

The metropolitan centres that have given rise to the concept of the flâneur are also those cities that occupy a mythical status in the imagination of the urban exploration community. Paris, in particular, is both the home and birthplace of flânerie and of the formalized practice of urban exploration, according to a historic timeline maintained on Ninjalicious’ infiltration.org. In 1804, the body of Philibert Aspiazt, credited by most as
the first known cataphile, was discovered eleven years after his descent underground by candlelight (Ninjalicious, 2006). The mere mention of the Parisian catacombs is enough to interest most urban explorers. Morthicia, who maintains a popular cataphile website, cataphiles.org, says that she receives an average of two requests a week to guide strangers through the catacombs. She states that there are only a few unsealed entrances, and that the location of these is a secret. Indeed, it is against the cataphile code to reveal entrances to strangers or to list them on the internet. Despite the secrecy and difficulty of access, the catacombs capture the imagination like few other exploration sites. Just as the historical figure of the flâneur finds his pleasure in strolling through the streets of Paris, kilometres below the cobblestones, the cataphile engages in a similar pursuit of (subterranean) experiences of the city.

Much of urban exploration seems to follow in the tradition of classic flânerie of the 19th century. If today's urban explorers are to be compared to the flâneur, it is the flâneur of Benjamin's conceptualization, though the characterizations of Baudelaire and Simmel also offer compelling similarities. They seek to be freed from the tyranny of the clock and the rationalization and privatization of public urban space. Their goal is to find the hidden faces and explore the secret, mysterious surfaces of the city. Many are also amateur historians, working photographers, students and artists, engaged in a process that is also akin to the work of the sociologist. These explorers show a deep connection, a sense of respect and engagement with the spaces they explore.

2.1 The Aesthetic Practice of the Artist-Intellectual

The aesthetic dimension is essential to both modern and postmodern forms of flânerie. Baudelaire's famous essay "The Painter of Modern Life" describes modernity
as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (1964: 12). Baudelaire’s work is important here for the ways in which it situates and localizes the phenomenon of flânerie. His investigation into the flâneur as a social type arises from Edgar Allan Poe’s 1850 story “The Man in the Crowd” (Benjamin, 1973: 48-54). Baudelaire’s flâneur is the quintessential observer of Parisian modernité. While technically the flâneur could be a product of many of the capitals of Europe in the 19th century (London or Berlin, for example), there is a specific quality of the modernizing Parisian metropolis that created the conditions from which the flâneur sprang.

The flâneur, as Baudelaire’s work reminds us, is a figure intrinsically connected to art and aesthetics. The flâneur strolls the city, casting his gaze about at the wonders of the metropolis and its population, and always on the look out for an opportunity to record his findings. Just as the flâneur is an observer of metropolitan life, he is also a collector of experiences that are documented most frequently in art. Artistic representations lend themselves particularly well to the expression of flânerie. To be truly considered an accomplished flâneur, one must do more than merely stroll the urban centres of the world; one must produce accounts - written or visual - of one’s experiences. In “The Painter of Modern Life”, Baudelaire depicts the rise of the new kind of experience and aesthetic. His essay also introduces the reader to the newly developed aesthetic identity of the flâneur embodied by the commercial artist Constantin Guys, who is, for Baudelaire a quintessential Parisian observer of modern life. The flâneur spends his time exploring the modern metropolis at leisure, taking in impressions and experiences, casting his gaze towards the decadent and decaying metropolis around him. While other artists spend
their time reproducing an aesthetic of a different age, Baudelaire sees Guys as producing artwork that reflects the specific moment of 19th century modernity (1964: 12). An emblem of a type of flânerie, Guys helped to shape the aesthetics of the practice of the artist-intellectual. His sketches provide brief glimpses of the life of the city, almost anticipating the snapshot. His style is designed to capture the transitory, fleeting nature of modernity (Baudelaire, 1964: 12). Flânerie is an activity conducted in public, particularly amidst the surging throng of the urban crowd (Tester, 1994). As Baudelaire's paradigmatic man of the crowd, Guys is most at home in the throng and bustle of the metropolis, for it is here that he is able to observe modernity and find the subjects of his work. Wolff describes the figure of the artist/flâneur as being “in his element in the crowd – at the centre of the world and at the same time hidden from the world” (1990: 38). In many ways, Guys' aesthetic practice offers a precedent and a model for the art of urban exploration. While the majority of explorers do not draw or paint their explorations (nor would many have read Baudelaire's reflections on Guys), Guys' sketches are suggestive of the snapshot photographs that are so common to the practice of UE. Each practice seeks to capture a brief moment, an aesthetic aspect of the (post)modern city that would otherwise be overlooked. The quality of observation and wandering is inherent to the flâneur's production of new art forms in the 19th century and to the postmodern practice of exploration.

While the first flâneurs may have been writers and illustrators (such as Baudelaire and his “painter of modern life”, Constantin Guys), the newly developing art of photography likewise offers a compelling combination of artistic representation of flânerie. Benjamin’s work on photography and film seems to highlight the possibilities
of the medium (Gilloch, 2002: 175). Paradoxically, Tester discusses Benjamin’s view of
the development of photography as a challenge to flânerie, seeing it as part of the total
rationalization of the metropolis, which assigns to “each face...a single meaning” (1994:
14-15). While Benjamin does indeed decry the commercialism that rapidly took hold as
photography developed, his piece on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction” still assigns the potential for these “new media...to penetrate and explode
the quotidian realm” (Gilloch, 2002: 174). Tester is correct in arguing that the
development of photography and film was not without negative effect, destroying as it
did the “aura” of the traditional work of art and the artist. Benjamin uses the term “aura”
to characterize a variety of qualities of the traditional art work: the light and darkness
around a subject in the early days of portraiture, “a strange weave of space and time”, the
“individual quality of the sitter which emanates from his or her eyes”, “unbridgeable
distance”, “unexpected reciprocity” and so on (Gilloch, 2002: 177). Gilloch explains his
usage more simply as “an elusive term for that which is elusive” (2002:177). When
Tester suggests that photography destroyed the mystery and secrecy necessary for the
flâneur to explore the metropolis, he seems to be interpreting Benjamin’s critique of the
commercialization of photography and film, and the loss of “aura”, as a lament. Rather,
Benjamin’s essay seems to be struggling to define and articulate a theory of “aura”, and
in particular, its relevance to the important technological change in the reproduction of
art, rather than discussing the death of mystery and the end of flânerie as he does
elsewhere in his work on The Arcades Project, for example.

It remains to be seen whether flânerie and photography are necessarily
contradictory or complimentary ways of viewing the city aesthetically. The camera may
be a mechanical extension of the flâneur's own body, a device that allows his eye to permanently capture the world as he sees it, and indeed, capture those images and impressions that even the eye is not able to register (Gilloch, 2002: 175). Benjamin states that

Our taverns and metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (Benjamin quoted in Gilloch, 2002: 174)

The last part of this quote -“in the midst of far-flung ruins and debris...”- could almost be used as the tagline for an urban exploration website or zine. Although here Benjamin is talking about moving pictures, or film, rather than photography, it is important to note that both film and photography share an ability to capture elements of the metropolis, those transitory moments in time and everyday surfaces that go largely unnoticed in daily life. Part of the power of the medium of photography is that it allows for definitive and authoritative representation, while still lending interpretive agency to the viewer. The flâneur values experience(s) over the development of a systematized knowledge of the city and its people, just as he values art that seeks to represent the transitory images and experiences of modernity (Baudelaire, 1964: 12-15). Photography enables him to capture these fleeting scenes of modern life and to record his gaze in a material way.

Today’s urban exploration is a practice driven largely by aesthetic concerns. Like 19th century flânerie, decay is one of the main draws for the urban explorer’s eye and lens. Most urban explorers are motivated by a desire to document travels through
transgressive space via artistic and photographic representations. The urban explorers I interviewed spoke eloquently on the aesthetics of what specifically attracts them to the sites they explore and photograph. Dowcet describes the attraction of abandoned institutions:

**dowcet:** aesthetically, they tend to have things I like to photograph... peeling paint, pastel colors...

**lisa:** what is it about the aesthetic of decay that attracts you as a photographer/explorer?

**dowcet:** I think it’s mostly visual. I love a lot of abstract expressionist painting and stuff like that, and I find it easiest to take photographs with that kind of feel in places that are decaying... this certain mix of nature and human design...

**lisa:** I love that. You're the first to mention abstraction in painting...that's a good analogy

**dowcet:** A related thing about decay is there is this oppressive quality to a lot of places where everything is "nice" and "new"... I generally find that very ugly.

**lisa:** so a derelict space might, in some ways, be more 'free'

**dowcet:** right... I would definitely agree with that.

**dowcet:** The suburbs are sort of center, in my mind, of the repulsive opposite of the decay I am attracted to.

Some explorers, like Lopix, describe being drawn into exploration by an interest in photographing a particular aesthetic: “I always liked decayed buildings as the subject of my photography. I mainly got started when I lived in a small town north of Toronto. I went to college in Oshawa (where I really learned to shoot, process and print) and always noticed the crumbling farms as I drove to and from school. Soon I was stopping the car to shoot them, asking permission to wander private property. When I moved to the city, I continued, though I started going inside the buildings more. I would say it was my love of photography, as well as my favourite subjects, that really got me into ‘UE’ as is commonly accepted”.
Urban explorers investigate the hidden and decaying facets of the environment. Their attraction to the aesthetics of urban industrial and institutional decay is documented through pictures like the one below. In this shot, an ordinary, forgotten room in an abandoned building becomes the focal point of an explorer's camera.

![Infirmary](https://www.forbidden-places.be)

In this shot, Slyv captures an image of the decaying infirmary in an abandoned railway station in the Pyrenees mountains. The paint is peeling from the walls, slime mold grows on the plaster and old beds and equipment rust away. And yet, the image captures a degraded beauty, a hint of the grandeur of this once bustling transportation hub.

Capturing still images of the decaying landscape is the primary motivator for many explorers. There is also a practical aspect to the photography of urban exploration, in that it provides evidence that one has indeed been where one claims to have gone. Relic, for examples, says he takes pictures because they "(get) me some authenticity". While any sort of photograph will establish proof, it is often considered important to put as much effort into the photography as into the exploration itself. While some are mainly
preoccupied with taking snapshots that document their travels through decaying landscapes, others wish to capture the experience. Decoy states that he “want(s) people to be able to engage in these spaces through (his) work”.

Benjamin saw the development of photography not only as part of the rationalization of the metropolis but also as a revolutionary art form full of possibility. When we think back to the development of photography, we can begin to see why Benjamin would see this art form as posing a challenge to the practice of flânerie. The sheer size and ungainly weight of early photographic technology would inhibit any but the most dedicated stroller. Though the equipment would have been awkward to carry around, one aspect of the day’s technology would have fit well with the slow pace of the flâneur. The process of taking a photograph would have involved long exposure times which would have enabled the photographer to linger over the photograph, permitting a kind of deep looking akin to that of the flâneur.

While the camera would not have been a routine part of the flâneur’s daily paraphernalia in the 19th century, it can be seen as a possible vehicle for the type of investigation and recording of experiences in the city. Today’s urban explorer, on the other hand, has unparalleled access to portable recording technology (both sound and visual), as well as programs that make image sharing easy and inexpensive. A large and ever growing percentage of North American and European youth across all social classes have cell phones, many of which contain rudimentary photographic technology. Point-and-click portable cameras can be bought in disposable formats for less than ten dollars, and non-disposable ones can be purchased for not much more. The postmodern flâneur’s primary tool is the camera. Again, Constantin Guys offers an interesting comparison
here: his hastily executed sketches and prints seem to prefigure the improvised, ‘accidental’ and instant character of the snapshot. The flâneur of the 19th century is a figure preoccupied with aesthetics. Likewise, as flâneur of the late capitalist, postindustrial metropolis, the urban explorer is largely driven to explore by the desire to observe and capture a specific type of aesthetic experience.

Benjamin could not have predicted the advancements that would bring tiny digital cameras to the vast majority of people. Nevertheless, in so far as urban exploration can be considered a form of revamped and postmodernized flânerie, it must be said that integral to this practice is the use of photographic technology. Indeed, beyond the bounds of exploration-style flânerie, there has been a popular revival of the flâneur in the guise of the amateur photographer, vacationer and tourist. Artists using internet technology and psychogeographic methodologies also make use of the flâneur aesthetic, largely through the use of photographic representations of travel through urban space.

2.2 The Theorist as Flâneur

Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin are theorists of the modern, and as the figure of the flâneur is inextricably linked with the rise of a certain type of modern metropolis, their works are applicable to much of the discussion of flânerie and modern modes of experience. Benjamin discusses at length the importance of flânerie and its relationship to both Paris and the arcades. While Simmel never addressed the subject directly, his own methods of observation and writing style have often been described as a sort of theoretical flânerie. Indeed, he investigates the concept of the stranger, which shares many similarities with the figure of the flâneur.
Benjamin's work on the development of modernity in the French capital, prompted by his fleeing his native Berlin (the former focal point of his work), has much to tell us about the concurrent development of the flâneur as a social archetype. The focus of Benjamin's final oeuvre *Passagen-Werk* is the arcades ("Passagen" in German), in which this type of social space is posited as emblematic of a particular period in the history of modernité. In particular, the theorist sees the works of Baudelaire as a key element of the discussion of Paris as the "capital of the nineteenth century" and the home of flânerie. The *Passagen-Werk*, or *Arcades Project* as it is known in English, "was to be a 'materialist philosophy of history', constructed with 'the utmost concreteness' out of the historical material itself, the outdated remains of those nineteenth-century buildings, technologies, and commodities that were the precursors of his own era" (Buck-Morss, 1990: 4). The theorist hoped to use the arcades as sites that served to "bridge the gap between everyday experience and traditional academic concerns" (ibid).

Central to Benjamin's work on the arcades and the flâneur is the concept of the "dialectical image" (Rollason, 2002). The dialectical image is a model arising from his colleague Theodor W. Adorno's work which points "in two directions at once, expressing both oppression by the ideology of consumption and liberation into a utopia of plenty" (Rollason, 2002). For instance, the arcades were primarily developed for the process of buying and selling consumer goods. These spaces permitted the growth of a particular kind of consumer culture, and yet, they also made space for a utopian consciousness, in their ability to protect a "womb-like" sheltered world parallel to the harsh, dirty and chaotic elements outside. Products of an era in which glass and steel were becoming important elements of design, the arcades provided warm and dry spaces in which one
could devote oneself to pleasure. This pursuit of pleasure, Buck-Morss (1990) explains, can be seen as a form of resistance. The flâneur gathers experiences and sensations at random, putting his slow pace and his pursuit of pleasure ahead of all other preoccupations. This type of existence would have run counter to the developing ethic of industrial capitalism. It could be argued, on the one hand, that the flâneur's status allowed him to live without concern for the day-to-day grind of factory production, thus permitting him to spend his time entertaining himself with the spectacle of "commodity fetishism" found in the arcades. On the other hand, it should be recognized that the flâneur, such as Baudelaire himself, would have been making a specific aesthetic choice that limited him from participating in the acquisition of further riches. The practice of flânerie is not compatible with a life led in conformity with the Protestant work ethic, in which work is its own reward and end, driving and occupying all hours of the day and colonizing thought by night. The flâneur lives in opposition to the prevailing ethic of work, reflecting a deep ambivalence to the demands and ambitions of industrial capitalism.

Benjamin held both a critical view of and admiration for the figure of the flâneur. Inherent in flânerie is the paradoxical existence of a sort of foolish naivété, as well as an astute appraisal of the modernizing world. Indeed, Benjamin himself has often been lovingly described as a flâneur. This description arises primarily from his methodological approach, particularly in his final project that both imitates and performatively innovates the hallmarks of a flâneur's project. The Passagen-Werk, though unfinished (which makes guessing its final form, if Benjamin had lived to complete it, somewhat of a mystery) is a complex pastiche of ideas, quotations and
ephemera about the metropolis. Buck-Morss asserts that even if Benjamin had continued working on the project it would have taken a form similar to the one we know, as his digressions and fragmentary approach was integral to how he understood his subject matter (1986: 99).

The Passagen-Werk is as it would have been: a historical lexicon of the capitalist origins of modernity, a collection of concrete, factual images of urban experience. Benjamin handled these facts as if they were politically charged, capable of transmitting revolutionary energy across generations. His method was to create from them, through the formal principle of montage, constructions of print that had the power to awaken political consciousness among present-day readers.

(Buck-Morss, 1986: 99)

Indeed, Benjamin’s work prompts the reader to engage in a sort of flânerie as well. Rollason describes how the reader is invited to share the perceptual mode of the flâneur drifting through the arcade, and thus to “assimilate the book’s contents piece by piece, fragment by fragment, to be inducted en route into new forms of historical and cultural awareness by the shocks and flashes of unexpected juxtapositions and connections” (2002).

Benjamin’s work on the flâneur describes a character that belongs to history, a figure doomed to disappear just as the arcades through which he strolled disappeared from the Parisian landscape (Tester, 1994: 13). His “argument is that the rationality of capitalism and, especially, commodification and the circulation of commodities, itself defined the meaning of existence in the city so that there remained no spaces of mystery for the flâneur to observe” (Tester, 1994: 13). Benjamin sees the increasing
rationalization and entrenchment of capitalism in the metropolis as removing all traces of
secrecy and myth in the urban landscape, a process that he predicted would consign the
figure of the flâneur to become one of the ruins of modernity.

Simmel’s work, an important inspiration for Benjamin in the following
generation, was also concerned with the development of the modern metropolis and
modernity as a mode of experience. Like Benjamin, Simmel is sometimes described as a
sort of theoretical flâneur (Frisby, 1994: 84) though he never wrote specifically about
flânerie. In particular, Simmel’s brief excursis on “the stranger” (der Fremde) projects a
kind of dialectical image of the wanderer who lives both inside and outside the bounds of
normal society, and is thus akin to the flâneur. Wolff sees the stranger as a fellow “hero
of modernity” (along with the flâneur), possessing the ability to move about freely at will.
She states that “Simmel’s stranger is always a ‘potential wanderer’: ‘Although he has not
moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going’...(he and the
flâneur) thus share the possibility and the prospect of lone travel, of voluntary uprooting,
of anonymous arrival at a new place. They are, of course, all men” (1990: 39)

Unlike the Parisian flâneur, the stranger as Simmel theorizes him is often an
expressly Semitic figure. His role in the functioning of the economy is important to
German Christian society, and yet he is estranged from its mainstream values\(^5\). He is free
to wander at will (Wolff, 1990: 39) but he is also constrained by an inability or

\(^5\) Medieval anti-Semitic laws and taxes were designed to ghettoize and limit the
employment possibilities for European Jews, and keep them estranged from the
mainstream (Christian) population. Simmel discusses one such tax, the Beede, which
remained fixed for Jews while varying according to income for Christians (1950: 407).
Simmel explains that the collection of the tax was part and parcel of the “stranger” status
of Jews, which caused the dominant society to treat them as one, undifferentiated mass,
rather than as individuals (1950: 407-408).
unwillingness to settle in one place. Wolff's analysis draws little distinction between the stranger and the flâneur, and yet these terms should not be used interchangeably. The stranger moves through space, and yet he cannot be said to luxuriate in the freedom accorded to the flâneur. He is free and yet not free. Like the flâneur, he is in the crowd but not of it. This status, however, reflects less on the character of his freedom than on his estrangement from (and by) the dominant society.

The link between the stranger and the flâneur is grounded in some basic similarities that the two share. However, as discussed above, it is hardly a perfect match, as there are marked dissimilarities that do not allow for an easy comparison between the two. Perhaps a stronger parallel that can be drawn between Benjamin's work on the flâneur and Simmel's sociology of the stranger is how each exemplifies key aspects of the metropolis and mental life. The flâneur is in some ways a reaction to the increase of mental stimuli brought on by modernization. If the pace of modern life is increasingly rapid and busy and strongly concentrated on the trade and acquisition of material goods, then the snail's pace of the flâneur can be seen as an outward rejection or resistance to the demands placed on the physical and mental life of the urban dweller. In this sense, the flâneur is inevitably a kind of stranger to the dominant ethos of the city.

2.3 From Haussmann's Paris to the birth of the Postmodern Flâneur

Benjamin's Arcades Project is central to the understanding of the flâneur in the 19th century's major European cities, most particularly Paris. Viewed as a whole, the Arcades Project can itself be seen as a sort of literary reconstruction of the narrow passages and spaces of the 19th century metropolis. The sheltering arcades provided the terrain upon which the flâneur was born. However, the arcades no longer exist as they
once did. By Benjamin’s time, they were on the wane as the department store and other forms of commerce gained prominence in the popular imagination. Perhaps even more importantly, the radical changes to the Parisian landscape made by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann spelled the end of the arcades and of the old Paris.

Benjamin’s work is absorbed in the documentation and analysis of the Parisian arcades. He focuses on the flâneur as the primary denizen of the arcades, as a figure made possible by the development of such an environment. The flâneur of Benjamin’s conception is a figure both created and destroyed by the historical moment from which he springs. He embodies the quintessential experiences of the particular moment in the 19th century that marked the modernization of the metropolis. And yet, he is also doomed to be a relic of this moment, for the modernization that provoked his existence will rapidly be subsumed for new forms of spatial and social organization that make his existence (seemingly) impossible.

Paris of the 19th century no longer exists, and thus, the flâneur of the 19th century would seem to be a relic of history as well. The arcades, so central to the development of the flâneur, are mostly gone. Benjamin would say that the rationalization and reconstruction of the city made it impossible for the flâneur to continue as a social type. However, the postmodern metropolis is filled with secret passageways, hidden infrastructures and spaces that provide some of the same opportunities to the latter day flâneur. Present-day flânerie is not only possible, but widely engaged in, if in a somewhat different form than that described by Benjamin.

Public spaces in large urban centres are increasingly regulated, surveilled and shaped for commercial rather than everyday use. Concerns over rising populations of
homeless individuals and terrorism have had a large hand in shaping the look and useability of the street. Benches are narrow and have armrests that prevent people from lying down on them. Elements of the urban environment are increasingly designed to prevent individuals from sitting or loitering in downtown areas. This form of social control by design is so pervasive in some cities that websites have sprung up to document the phenomenon. For example, Transfer (a site which bills itself as "NYC’s chronicler of architecture, bad, good & otherwise") maintains an “Anti-Sit Archive” with pictures of architectural features designed to keep people from loitering or sitting in the area. Ledges, fire hydrants, planters and other practical and decorative street furnishings sport jagged metal edges and spikes to prevent anyone from using them in other ways than the building owners or city intends. Standing, strolling and looking are all discouraged, particularly in so-called high risk areas such as subways and other elements of the metropolitan infrastructure.

The urban environment threatens the very existence of Baudelaire’s conception of the flâneur. Benjamin saw the rapidly changing cityscape as spelling the end of the era of the flâneur, but he ignored the possibility of metamorphosis. The flâneur of today hardly seems to resemble that of the 19th century. Today's demands, challenges and oppressions of the urban environment are much different from those of the mid-1800's. The process of mechanization, industrialization and rationalization that was beginning to gain momentum at that time has now reached a feverish pitch, perhaps an endpoint. This makes the form the flâneur must take all the more extreme in the pursuit of a different

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6 For example, after 9-11, there was a ban placed on any non-official photography in the New York subway system. In other places, citizens are encouraged to scrutinize and report anyone seen studying or observing elements of the urban environment.
kind of experience of the city. The flâneur is not a figure suited to the needs of business and commerce, but rather goes against time, consumption and the rational ordering of space and leisure.

The postmodern flâneur is not identical to his or her 19th century counterpart. The flâneur is no longer an exclusively male figure, even though it seems that much of the exploration community is made up of male members. NV notes that the demographics of urban exploration are somewhat distorted if we consider only those who participate in the online community. He states that “I would guess the online UE community is a lot of white males in their 20's who are more interested in talking about UE than actually doing it. I don't think that is true with the "real world" community, which in some ways is made up of totally different people and a bit more diverse, at least from what I have seen” (2006). A number of interview participants echoed the sentiment that the primarily young white male demographic that populates the online community does not adequately reflect the diversity of the urban exploration community. As certain groups tend to dominate online discussion forums, the demographics of the community are most likely skewed by the overrepresentation of male explorers online.

Perhaps the strongest connection between urban exploration and flânerie comes from a related practice called Urban Awareness (UA). Urban Awareness is a term that has been coined by online UE community members to describe a practice akin to exploration, but not specifically focused on intrusions into infrastructure or buildings. Rather, the process of Urban Awareness can encompass a much larger set of practices. UA practitioners emphasize the leeway it affords them in carrying out their activities under a larger rubric that is related to exploration but goes beyond the defined boundaries of the
practice. UA is about attuning one’s attention to the minutiae of the urban environment and becoming aware of the ways in which the city works and is experienced. In some ways, the practice of UA is as much concerned with the inner world as it is with the outer. Here, perception is the key, since coming to understand the ways one experiences one’s environment is central to the pastime. The goal is in part to acquire randomized understandings of how the city works from the perspective of the individual urban citizen. For instance, someone practicing UA might decide to keep a log of the times that street lights go on and off outside one’s house over the course of many months. Someone else might make a study of the plants that tenaciously grow and thrive in the cracks of the city’s sidewalks. Decoy adopts a similar mindset in other parts of his life, finding fascination with the everyday surfaces of the lived environment by paying attention to the minute elements of his surroundings:

decoy: For example, I found myself staring at an electrical outlet today during a painting critique, just because it was catching the light and casting an interesting shadow.
decoy: I take photos of the dust-balls that collect on the white-backdrop of the photography studio... there's something so funny about dust bunnies occupying the same space as high-fashion models.

Another way of practicing UA might be to create maps of the variety of aimless walks that one can take, noting the feelings, experiences and new things that one may uncover for oneself. This last seems to be one of the most common UA practices, and is almost straight out of the 19th century account of flânerie. Situationist-influenced artists practice a similar pastime, which they call “psychogeography”, making the act of
walking and observing both an experiment and a mobile work of art and urban communication\(^7\).

If one is to consider all the practices that could be included in the larger category of urban exploration, from classic flânerie to creative bricolage, urban awareness would seem to fall near the flânerie end of the spectrum. Practitioners of UA most often adopt the modus operandi of the classic flâneur, of the aimless stroller through the cityscape. UA invokes a passionate devotion to the minutiae of urban life, a process of collection of impressions, random knowledge and disparate experiences. The experiences and information gathered are not "useful" in any practical sense of the word, just as the flâneur's observations contribute little to the day-to-day operations of life in the city. Though the knowledge and experience gathered by the urban awareness practitioner can enrich the experience of living in the metropolis, it is clear that one can get by in the urban environment without it, as most urban residents do.

In popular culture representations, the flâneur takes on an unproblematised, positive and benign aspect. The flâneur is someone who strolls at whim, taking the time to really see the city, freed from the (oppressive and ever present) imperatives of time and business. The flâneur is often an intellectual, though not necessarily of the academy. Trips to Paris are sold on the ideal of the person who takes the time to truly savour the city, seeing it by foot and thinking or writing about it in the innumerable neighbourhood cafes that dot the urban landscape. A quick web search will also reveal the link between the selling of photographic prints and the idea of the flâneur, where the term serves as a synonym for a deeper kind of looking. In the pop-cultural representation of the flâneur,

\(^7\) See, for example, http://www.psychogeography.ca/who.htm
those attributes that (post)modern North Americans have so little of and yet desire so passionately - leisure, time for oneself, time to think, accessible cities that are navigable by foot - make the flâneur an appealing and idealized personage. Practitioners of UA and psychogeography draw (unconsciously or explicitly) on this ideal.

Strolling and looking deeply is a key component of flânerie, as it is with exploration. Traversing the urban landscape with senses attuned to possibility is one of the most important ways that urban explorers find interesting features to explore. This aspect of the practice finds its expression in the exploration community in the form of reconnaissance, referred to simply as "recon" (a term borrowed from military vocabulary). Recon is an amalgamation of at times haphazard and casual investigations into the urban environment inspired by the impetus to discover potential new sites for exploration. A casual stroll through an unfamiliar neighbourhood, for instance, yielded the site of my first major exploration in a semi-active site. It was the act of walking, with eyes attuned to both unusual and mundane aspects of the urban environment, that led me to speculate about a building I passed.
As I walked by the building, I noticed a sign taped to the door. Curiosity pushed me closer, allowing me to see that the sign was dated August 2004 and was informing patients that a clinic held in the building had been moved to another hospital facility. This provided evidence that the door was no longer used, and thus that the building had probably been vacant since the date of the notice. More casual strolling in the area gave me an idea of entry points, the timing of security patrols and the layout of the building.
For anyone interested in urban exploration, all movement through urban space can be seen as a form of recon. It is often surprising what is waiting to be discovered if one only takes the time to look more deeply at one’s lived environment.

Since becoming more active in the urban exploration community, to the point of identifying myself expressly as an explorer, I have found the way I look at the city to be different than it was before. I used to think of myself as being relatively attuned to the unusual, aware of my surroundings and resistant to life-as-routine. It has only been in the last couple of years that I have started to question the ways I inhabit my city. I find that exploration has enhanced an awareness of the ways in which I turn off my brain and move through space along pre-determined patterns. Despite thinking that somehow I was
different, I’ve come to realize the degree to which I’d unthinkingly accepted the urban environment as background for my movement through space. Features of the landscape had become unseen parts of my routinized acceptance of my surroundings, and the urban landscape had become a taken-for-granted backdrop to my (relatively unvarying) daily activities. Thinking about the ways in which I go about my daily life led me to see that even walking down the street had become a mundane and monotonous task, one which I paid little attention to. Patterns, long invisible to my unquestioning mind, became obvious. Learning more about psychogeography and urban awareness, but also reading the literature of 19th century flânerie, made me think about ways in which wandering and observing closely can be acts of resistance.

When one is fully attuned to the mindset of urban exploration, the mere act of walking out one’s door becomes an experience, a project demanding full attention to one’s surroundings. Exploration made me see the process of moving through space as worthy of careful attention, and the heretofore unseen details started to jump out at me. Out of ten interviews, nine participants talked about the expanded awareness of their surroundings that urban exploration has given them and their interest in the surfaces of the everyday and what lies behind them. VTunderground talks of a fuller, more three-dimensional understanding of the city: “Instead of seeing a wall and thinking of it as being just a wall, I now try to envision what’s behind that wall. Same with street and sidewalks, now I try to envision what lies underneath”. Morthicia talks about how cataphile explorations have given her a general awareness of what lies below the streets. Even her senses have been shaped and strengthened by her practice of UE. Her eyesight is sharp in the dark and her sense of direction is very strong, both above and below
ground. Noah Vale also describes a sort of specialized knowledge that separates him from the average person:

Noah Vale...: (the) avg person would say they know that city pretty well. but urbex flips that. it says, you may know the city, but I know it *well.* its kinda a smug feeling i get when i pass a building on the train that ive explored and people are looking out at it blankly when i know whats behind the walls and what the train I’m in looks like from the roof.

Decoy describes this first hand experiencing and awareness of the hidden and forgotten aspects of the city:

decoy: Being an urban explorer, you get a sense of how certain things work the way they do. You'll find out why there are no rivers downtown anymore. You get a different perspective on the way that the city used to function. I'm sure that historians share some of this insight - but unlike history majors who are right now in the university library pouring over old documents...

decoy: I get to walk out onto the work-floor of the brickworks and stand among the machinery. Or I get to stand at the top of the grain silos of the local malting plant, and feel the old industry under my feet.

decoy: A unique peek at the way Toronto's subway system used to operate can be gained if you're gutsy enough to run through some tunnels to an abandoned station down there. Not everyone in the city knows about it, not many people care.

decoy: An Urban Explorer will be looking out the windows on a train looking for abandoned factories in the rail corridor. An Urban Explorer doesn't see a fence and a drainpipe, they see an easy way to get onto the roof of the student foodcourt to see what the view is like from up there.

Like most of my research participants, as I walk down the street, I find myself reading signs, noticing private security guards, judging the height of fences, and thinking about what is around the corner or beyond a closed door. My perception extends not only in front of me, but above (as I notice architectural details on buildings, scaffolding,
cranes, security cameras, fire escape stairwells and roofs) and below (steam coming out of grates, open excavations, tunnels and such). I also notice the people around me more and how they are going about their business. Who loiters, spends time chatting, stands around, hurries to their destination? Who else looks up and around as they walk? If nothing else, being involved in a largely online community has taught me that anyone could be a fellow explorer. Exploration is not just a hobby, something to pass the time when one is bored and unoccupied. It is a mode of experience, a way of being and living in the city that challenges the routinized acceptance of everyday life and rejects the notion that citizens are just consumers or that space can be privatized. Like the flâneur of the 19th century, the postmodern explorer is devoted to wandering and observing the urban landscape deeply.
Chapter III: The Ruin and the Urban Archeologist

The flâneur experiences the city by wandering and looking. However, there are other ways of understanding and experiencing the city that are based not on observation but in documentation and collection. Urban exploration is a way of seeing, a mode of experience and perception of one's metropolitan existence that puts these various methods into practice. From the collection and documentation of experiences to the archiving and remembering of the spaces that are forgotten in our rush to build upon the ruins of past forms of social life, urban exploration is a deep investigation into the structure and spaces of the metropolis. This investigation most often delves into the forgotten, the decaying, the abandoned. It is in these ruined sites that many explorers find the most interest and beauty. This chapter will concentrate primarily on the idea of "the ruin" in the modern/postmodern metropolis and in sociological theory. Here, we find another significant parallel between the practical experience of today's UE and the theoretical projects of Benjamin and Simmel in the late 19th century/early 20th century theoretical projects. In this chapter, the theme of documentation and collection will be discussed by considering how Benjamin's concept of the "urban archaeologist" provides a model for the exploration of (post)modern ruins.

To explicate how the practice of urban exploration can be understood as an extension of these theories, it is necessary to return to a discussion of these themes in their late 19th/early 20th century form. Benjamin is particularly useful here for structuring the central theme around a precise figure, that of the urban archaeologist, but Simmel's work on ruins is also fruitful for further analysis. Like the flâneur, the urban archaeologist explores the metropolis, with an eye to the magical and the historical. S/he
wanders at will through the urban environment, seeking experiences and things to record. However, s/he is not interested in only observing but is actively engaged in an analytical and historical project of understanding the city by piecing together its history.

The urban archaeologist, unlike the flâneur, is not particularly concerned with the individuals that populate the metropolis, but is rather interested in the artifacts that give meaning to the experience of (post)modernity. The archaeologist is an amateur, fascinated with the existence of modern ruins that add a layer of meaning to life in the metropolis. S/he is not limited to the specific historical moment in time when modernity was creating the first modern metropolises, but rather slides easily between modernity and its successor, finding relevance in each epoch.

The urban archaeologist discussed here, despite the official sounding title, is not a trained academic. The term comes from the work of Benjamin, and, in particular, the work on Benjamin done by Graham Gilloch in *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (1996). The concept of urban archeology arises from the practice of unearthing, digging, searching through remnants of the past, but differs from more formal types of archaeology in that the “ruins” one investigates can be metaphorical and phantasmagoric just as much as they can be literal and material. Indeed, Benjamin uses the term less to describe a physical process and more to discuss a metaphorical approach to the metropolis. This approach is archeological in that it is “concerned with the salvation and preservation of the objects and traces of the past that modern society threatens to destroy” (1996: 13).

The urban archaeologist is an amateur who is interested in the ruins of (post)modern society rather than in those left by ancient civilizations. The archeologist
of Benjamin’s imagination collects and documents spaces in time, memories and past actions in the metropolitan landscape, choosing to archive and preserve them not in museums or universities, but in his or her own private collections. Sometimes these collections are literal, physical collections of materials. However, most often they are collections of the mind, stored as remembrances of forgotten places. In urban exploration, these collections take the form of artistic representations of sound (recorded audioscapes), images (especially photographs), video or writings that inscribe memory. As most urban explorers follow a strict ethical code that prevents them from changing the environments they explore – they must not take objects or leave traces of their explorations – the artifacts of urban archeology mostly take the form of visual and textual documentation and recording.

The urban archeologist of Benjamin’s conception is part of the larger archetype of the urban physiognomist. Physiognomy is a practice originating in the 19th century that seeks to find out the inherent nature of a thing through the study of external characteristics. Benjamin’s urban archaeology is largely a metaphorical expression for the investigation of the layers of ruins upon which modernity and the metropolis are built (Pinder, 2000: 371). His concept of the archaeologist is bound up with larger political aims, motivated as it is by an agenda of remembering and uncovering the hidden, silenced and destroyed aspects of modern life (371). Gilloch explains that for Benjamin, the true archaeologist is no treasure hunter, though. For him or her, a shard of pottery, a broken comb, a worn-out shoe may have greater worth than the gold and silver treasures of the past. To retrieve the commonplace, the mundane and
the unremarkable is his or her task. The fragments found serve above all to illuminate the lives of those in the past who are unrecorded and unremembered in the present. It is the archaeologist who recognizes that beneath our feet are the countless bones and remains of those who have no monument, no landmark to indicate their passing. The archaeologist is concerned with the forgotten dead, those whose traces have been concealed, who are thus 'hidden' from history.

(1996: 71)

Benjamin’s urban archaeologist is involved in a project of remembrance and documentation. It cannot be said that all urban explorers share a commitment to record and preserve spaces that are left to dereliction, but this is certainly a strong motivation for many and one of the defining features of the subculture.

Just as it is important to define what is meant by the term “urban archaeologist” describing the amateur who explores the metropolis by unearthing the ruins of modernity, it is important to discuss why ruins are so prevalent and important to our understanding of the metropolis. Modernity is the process of ruination, of melting away forms of social and spatial organization and ceaselessly “piling up ruins of the past” (Gilloch, 1996: 75) in the process of constructing the new. The ruin is more than just a physical structure, it is a symbolic space that can be read as a record of the social relations and events once conducted there (Gilloch, 1996: 6). For Benjamin, the city is a text to be read, deconstructed and reimagined, and the ruins it leaves behind are the locus of this investigation (Gilloch, 1996: 7). The role of urban archeologist is to discover and document the ruin, even more it is to be its reader and interpreter (Gilloch 1996: 7).
should thus be no wonder that the most important theorists of modernity, Benjamin and Simmel, produced work in which ruins and dereliction are of central importance.

Simmel's essay on "The Ruin" (1959), first published in 1911, discusses themes of dereliction and urban space in praising the importance of the ruin in modern life. He sees the ruin as fulfilling a dialectical process of building and destruction between man-made culture (Geist) and nature's response to the human world. The main attraction of the ruin, Simmel tells us, consists of the aesthetic pleasure inherent in looking at a human artifact overrun and softened by the power of nature. Buildings take on the tones and colours of their surroundings as lichens colonize the space and moisture and the elements reshape a former site of human habitation (259-263). He states that "it is the fascination of the ruin that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature. The same forces which give a mountain its shape through weathering, erosion, faulting, and the growth of vegetation, here do their work on old walls" (261). As the work of humans is undone by the forces of nature, a new identity is revealed that creates a "characteristic unity" between the art of the building and the reclamation of nature (260). When a building is left to ruination, the destruction of the space by the forces of the natural world realize the true nature of the ruin by accessing "a tendency inherent in the deepest layer of existence of the destroyed" (263).

3.1 Documenting the Remnants

Inherent in the process of flânerie is the use of artistic media to document displacement through urban space. Urban archaeology entails another method that depends on artistic representations to do the work of collecting and recording. The urban archaeologist uses many different methods to document his or her explorations. One of
these in particular captures and reflects the nature and beauty of the ruin. This is the medium of film. Gilloch states that Benjamin saw great importance in the development of film technology:

Photography and motion pictures provide models for the depiction of the urban complex. Benjamin exhorts writers to ‘start taking photographs’ and to deploy themselves ‘at important points in the sphere of imagery’. It is film, however, which is most important for Benjamin in this visualization of the urban environment. He notes that ‘only film commands optical approaches to the essence of the city’, this is because it is able to capture the flux and movement of the urban environment, to record the spontaneous and the ephemeral. (1996: 18)

Since the 19th century, photography has been the dominant medium used to represent urban explorations. In the last few years, more attention has been turned towards other visual media, particularly documentary and art films. As in photography, changes in film technology and the widespread availability of lower priced options (as well as free and low-cost editing and broadcast software) have made the medium much more accessible to the average person. Where once one would have had to rent a crew of specially trained technicians with bulky, expensive gear and then find access to an editing studio and distribution channels, now all this can be achieved with reasonable quality by using handheld, simple devices and software that most computers can run. As for distribution, the rise of the internet has created an instant audience. Films can be shared among small groups of likeminded users or broadcast through the internet to whomever wants to download them.
Just as there are professional photographers that blend their interest in urban exploration into their work, so too are there professional filmmakers and documentarians who choose to use their professional medium to bring light to their practice of exploration. For instance, Scribble Media’s Robert Fantinatto has produced a well respected independent documentary on the fascination people feel for the ruins of industrial culture called *Echoes of Forgotten Places: Urban Exploration, Industrial Archeology and the Aesthetics of Decay*. The film uses music and narration to highlight explorations through abandoned landscapes and postmodern ruins. It also serves as an archival document, as it includes a still image gallery of the places featured in the film and a historic industrial film from 1936 about steel production (*Steel: A Symphony of Industry*). Even though many of the abandoned buildings shown in the film have now been demolished, the film acts as a way of preserving the memory of these sites. In a society consumed with the need to constantly tear down and rebuild, it is films like *Echoes of Forgotten Places* and other documents produced by urban explorers that serve as the only memory of the ruins of the past.

Ruins abound in the postmodern metropolis, indeed, they can be considered as symbolic of the ongoing shift from modernity to postmodernity in Western European and North American society. Some of the main features of this shift are the closing of total institutions, the divestment, deregulation and transnationalisation of capital as a result of the migration of multinational corporations to ever-cheaper centres of production, and the resultant loss of skilled labour and union jobs (Staples, 2000: 32-33). Other aspects of this shift include a rise in surveillance and consumer culture, as well as a nostalgic longing for the past (Staples, 2000: 33). The ruin, in this shifting paradigm, comes to
represent the profound and rapid changes occurring in the ways we live, work, learn and exist, and in the things that we leave behind as we make these changes to our societies. In physical terms, ruins are the very tangible representation of modes of production and experience that have fallen into disuse. Archaic spaces such as asylums, factories, prisons represent past ways of doing things from a time when industrial production was booming and stable, when large public (i.e. non-corporately owned) institutions dealt with our mental health and health care needs or provided places for reform and rehabilitation for those not deemed fit for normal society. The postmodern urban city has posed both an economic and ideological challenge to these types of places. We consider ourselves to be an information-based society, and increasingly reject the notion of housing our mentally ill in jail-like asylums. Prison services (in the United States primarily) are increasingly being auctioned off to private corporations, and private security surveils most of our public spaces. Factories move to places where environmental and social regulations are much less strict, leaving previously busy factories vacant in those areas where unions and labour laws mean higher costs for companies.

The changing mode of production and the reorganization of society to fit into a knowledge and service based economy have left the urban landscape littered with the rotting remains of the factories and industrial centres that once drove our society’s economic engine and expansion. The transfer of industrial production to free trade zones and other Southern economies has meant that there is a lot of vacant industrial real estate in North America and Western Europe.
Abandoned factories, asylums and other such spaces are the ruins of our time. As industry moves according to the demands of global capital, leaving whole regions with only the decaying skeletons of once vital industrial production, more and more places to explore are left behind. Cities and towns once devoted to a particular sort of resource extraction (mining for instance) or production (steel working for example) are often left barren and desolate, dying a slow death as people move to follow jobs that have shifted to other regions. Cities like Detroit, once a bustling automobile production centre, have suffered economic downturns as factories shut down and production moves to places with tax incentives, anti-union laws, and cheap workforces. In the landscape that is left in the wake of the postmodern reorganization of the economic and social life of a city the ruin stands as a potent though sometimes fleeting symbol of the shift from the modern to the postmodern metropolis. While those areas hit hardest by industrial divestment may take a long time to recover, thus leaving ruins to stand as long decaying reminders of a way of life that no longer exists, other places such as Vancouver become centres for a new kind of economy. Global mega-events like the Olympics, combined with mild weather and a favourable rating on a livability index, make cities like Vancouver highly desirable places to live.

This measure of urban attractiveness means that ruins in all but the most marginalized and criminalized communities, such as the Downtown Eastside, or DTES, stand vacant for increasingly brief amounts of time. Revitalization takes on a new meaning in this type of growing metropolis, as money and inflated real estate prices work in tandem to make even the most derelict building a potential site for condo conversions. The highly politicized Woodwards building on Hastings street in the DTES is a prime
example of a site long left to decay and subject to battles over its potential uses, as well as being a site of urban explorations by the Vancouver Exploration Group and the Wraiths. In 2002, activists and homeless people occupied the once-bustling department store that had been closed since 1994, and established an encampment demanding access to affordable housing. The protest action garnered much public attention on the potential uses of the building and put pressure on city council to turn Woodwards into social housing. Eventually, all squatters were either moved on or put up in local single-room occupancy hotels, with renewed promises to establish social housing in the building. Westbank and Peterson Group won the bid on the site and have just unveiled plans (and a waiting list for market suites) for the building. Some parts of the building will be social housing, while most of the site will be devoted to extremely expensive “market” units and the new downtown campus of Simon Fraser University. Vancouver’s “condo-king” Bob Rennie is responsible for the marketing of the project, whose motto is “Woodwards: an intellectual property”, a phrase which raises interesting symbolic connotations. The motto would seem to suggest that intellectualism is something that one can purchase, rather than a deliberate and lengthy process of accumulating and disseminating knowledge. The advertisements would seem to suggest that those who currently live in the area, and indeed those who for a time lived in Woodwards, do not belong to this exclusive vision of intellect, as they do not have the means to purchase it. “Intellectual property” or IP, is also a legal term for the copyrighted materials that individuals create. By definition, it is an exclusive property to which only certain people can have rights of use and enjoyment. In a full colour brochure advertising the development, a bold caption declares to the potential buyer that “THIS IS YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD”. Elsewhere,
the ad commands the reader to "Be bold or move to suburbia!" Over an image of a Downtown Eastside remade in the Rennie Marketing System’s image, a quote from Bob Rennie drifts over the iconic red Woodwards “W”, declaring that “the smart money gets in early”. The aim of the marketing campaign is clearly to reinvision the area in which Woodwards sits as a site just waiting for an influx of the bold and moneyed.

Figure 3.1 Be Bold or Move to Suburbia. © the author.
Most of the historic buildings in the DTES are merely decaying placeholders. The owners keep them boarded up as they slowly collapse, biding their time until the neighbourhood starts gentrifying in order to cash in on the value of the land. The Rennie Woodward’s project will usher in a wave of changes to the neighbourhood, just in time for the 2010 Olympics. While a lucky few will gain access to social housing in the
building, the tens of thousands of homeless and inadequately housed people in the city will not. Furthermore, as property prices rise with the completion of the project, nearby low-income hotels will be sold and converted to more market housing, putting yet more people on the streets. As the process of gentrification sweeps through historic neighbourhoods, much of the history of the area and the memory of its residents are lost. Often, “revitalization” means demolition or “façade preservation” in which the building is completely gutted, with only the surface shell remaining.

As North American society attempts to shift from the mode of industrial production to an information economy and service based society, abandoned and forgotten spaces are increasingly bought and ‘repurposed’ for expensive housing developments. The architectural and social history of these places is often lost or destroyed. While some factories, in Toronto’s Distillery District for example, are remade into expensive loft housing and artist galleries (using the fixtures and aesthetic of industrial production to attract a certain type of young urban professional buyer), many are simply torn down to make room for parking lots and Wal-Mart or other “big box” stores. City governments are often so happy to have buyers interested in a derelict property, especially those with massive environmental contamination of the surrounding soil and water, that they will offer tax incentives or even wave historical building status in order to facilitate the purchase. In other places, the regulations around historic buildings have enough loopholes that building owners can simply wait until the buildings have sustained too much weather damage to be successfully restored and thus gain permission to raze the building. This seems to be the fate of the Opsal Steel building in the False Creek flats area of Vancouver. While the building routinely makes it onto the
historical society's top ten list of buildings deserving protection and is listed as a class A site on the City's Heritage Register (City Vancouver, 1997), the Opsal has been suffering persistent water damage which makes it likely that it will eventually need to be torn down or substantially altered. This building has long been an interest of many local explorers, but has been seen by few as it is relatively well locked up (despite all the holes that have let in the rain and pigeons). Aside from heritage activists, many of whom practice a kind of UE but have yet to be introduced to the subculture by that name, urban explorers are often the only ones to express interest and a desire to preserve the ruins of our cities.

3.2 Tracing the Ruins of (Post)Modernity

Although the shift between modernity and postmodernity has left a landscape full of abandoned and derelict spaces, it is more than just their presence in the metropolitan environment that attracts explorers to them. Perhaps the single most attractive element for a large majority of urban explorers is the aesthetic of industrial and institutional decay as discussed in the previous chapter.

Industrial decay is interesting for many reasons. It fascinates us because it represents a mode of production and experience that is increasingly rare in North American and Western European society. Youth raised in a service and information oriented economy are likely to be curious about a past reality that they no longer share or feel part of, but which was a familiar milieu of their parents' world. With the service and information economy come new, ever more stultifying and soul-deadening options for youth in the workforce. Where once one could go to a local factory and find an entry level, unionized job that would supposedly provide a lifetime of relatively secure employment with a decent wage, young people now face the low-paid, highly unstable
service industry or equally unstable sedentary IT jobs, many of which are prone to downsizing or offshore divestment. Add to this the high rate of youth unemployment, the prevalence of “training wages” and anti-union legislation, and the ever-present threat of redundancy – which has thoroughly killed any concept of a lifelong, secure “career” – and one can see the potency of a nostalgic approach to urban industrial ruins. Industrial abandonment renders places that represent a supposedly “simpler”, more secure era all the more fascinating. This is not to say that life was actually simpler in the industrial past, only that it is easy to look backwards with fond nostalgia towards a supposedly utopian mode of experience that does not really exist in any significant way, if it ever did, for the majority of urban citizens.

The following photograph was taken by Slyv at an iron foundry in Belgium. Once one of the most industrial countries in Europe, Belgium’s recent years have seen many factory closures as industry moves to cheaper manufacturing bases in the formerly closed Eastern European countries. Grass and weed trees grow over the tracks of a once active industrial site. All is left at the factory as though work ended the day before, with only nature shaping the human-made landscape.
Figure 3.3 Abandoned Iron Foundry. © www.forbidden-places.be, by permission.
There are many reasons why people choose to spend their time exploring, but a persistent theme seems to be an interest in the secrecy and decay of the sites. There is perhaps an exception in those who consider themselves exclusively “drainers” – those who are devoted to exploring drainage systems – and those who choose to only explore active sites, but it should be said that most of my interviews and discussions have been carried out with people who identify as all-around explorers, many of whom have a tendency to favour abandoned buildings. There is such a wide variety of types of exploration that it is hard to say whether this last fact reflects more on my own interests and those of many of my participants in exploring abandoned sites or whether this points to a tendency to favour this type of exploring in the community as a whole.

Buildings that have been left to decay evoke a distinctive feeling of a certain sadness, a sense of dereliction that cannot fail to strike an explorer while exploring them. As Gilloch notes, Benjamin uses the literal and metaphorical concept of the ‘traces’ left in the ruins of modernity to describe the role of the urban archeologist:

The metropolis constitutes a frame or theatre for activity. The buildings of the city, and its interior setting in particular, form casings for action in which, or on which, human subjects leave ‘traces’, signs of their passing, markers or clues to their mode of existence. Benjamin states that ‘living means leaving traces’, and these traces left behind by the modern city dweller must be carefully preserved by the urban physiognomist, and their meaning deciphered. For Benjamin, the urban physiognomist is part archeologist, part collector and part detective. (Gilloch, 1996: 6)
Ruins provide keys to understanding the present and the past. They are full of the traces of life that have been left, often quite literally, to decay along with the building's structure itself. It is surprising how intact places are left, as though everyone just got up and left one day. Often one can find antique machinery, old paperwork, photographs, safety devices, gloves and other personal effects. For example, a site I explored as a teen held all the equipment and personal effects of the nursing home that had previously occupied the space. Wheelchairs, canes, hospitals beds and such were left lying around, as if the people that used them had just disappeared in the night. In another abandoned building, this one part of a sprawling medical complex, I found patient files, billing documents, Christmas decorations and cafeteria equipment. In figure 3.4, Slyv has photographed a packet of patient files that he discovered in an abandoned hospital. They are bundled up and left to rot with the building, all but forgotten since the hospital was closed. The first page of the bunch is dated 1987. While Slyv will leave these as he found them, the act of looking them over and taking a photograph to commemorate his moment of discovery provides a lasting memento of the lives of those who used to populate, staff and visit the hospital. The memory established in this act of documentation is a testament to the life of the building and its people that no longer exists.
<table>
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### Hématologie
- Hématocrite
- Glucose
- Sodium
- Potassium
- Chlorure

### Programme
- INN
- Urea
- Creatinine
- Ouest

### Litografie Forme
- Sodium
- Chlorure
- Phosphate

### Cholestérol
- Cholestérol total
- Triglycérides

### Vitamines
- Vitamine A
- Vitamine D
- Vitamine E

### Glucose Médicaments
- Glucose
- Insuline
- Hyperglycémie

### Bactériologie
- S. aureus
- Staphylococcus
- Streptocoque

### Divers
- CEA
- Protéines totales
- Généalogique

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Figure 3.4 Recent Archives. © www.forbidden-places.be, by permission.
Sometimes, demolition crews will hire salvage operators to go in and take this stuff away before tearing down a site. Very rarely do “non-valuable” items such as patient documents and other unsaleable things make it beyond the garbage piles that are shoveled into the demolition dumpsters. Other times, thieves will break in and steal potentially useful artifacts and anything saleable as scrap metal (this is particularly the case in old buildings where there is copper wiring, as this is a highly valuable resale item for scavengers). Following an ethical code that does not allow them to tamper with the site in any way, urban explorers are the only ones to go into an abandoned place and explore it with respectful intentions. While the average citizen and most city officials see these places as wasted space, or worse, as sites to mine for quick cash, it is the urban explorers who serve as the sole investigators and documenters of these places and their history. When a historic old factory or asylum is torn down, its history is most often lost in the rubble. For Jester, documenting this type of place is important because otherwise, people forget about important events and sites from our past. When asked why he takes photographs, he responded by saying:

**Jester...:** I want to document the memory of the place, because I've come to realize that many of these places will be gone soon and be forgotten when they shouldn't be.

**lisa:** Often explorers might be the only ones to document these places.

**Jester...:** Yes, like Woodlands Psych Hospital here, there is so little about the place online, yet it was a prominent place here for a hundred years.

**lisa:** How would you like Woodlands to be remembered?

**Jester...:** Well, I would like people to remember that some people spent most of their lives there, abused in many ways and treated as if they were second... no third class citizens, and it was ignored and swept under the rug and denied, until finally the government offered an apology.

**lisa:** And those not involved with the system have little idea about it.
Lisa: what do you think of the condo-ing of a place like that?

Jester...: I think the structures should have been refurbished to be reused, it was a waste, all in the name of the mighty dollar

3.3 The Attraction of the Ruin

When asked, most explorers describe a strong attraction to ruins, finding a high degree of beauty in these spaces. A sense of adventure, an appreciation of the aesthetics of dereliction and a desire to explore and capture through photographs and words those places that society seems to have forgotten combine to motivate urban explorers. Finding beauty and interest in ruins is central to the drive to record and preserve something of these spaces. For some, exploration has changed their perception of what is beautiful, leading them to appreciate the historical and derelict elements of the cities around them. Slyv, for example, describes a recent shift in his impression of beauty in industrial decay.

Slyv: that's a feeling that's more recent

Slyv: i mean i liked to go into places, but without noticing their beauty

Slyv: and more and more i found beauty into derelict things

Slyv: but also into technical things

Slyv: galleries, industrial architecture...

Slyv: things i did not care too much of

Lisa: do you think photography has helped with seeing beauty in derelict things/places?

Slyv: completely too

Slyv: maybe i told you i started photography very recently

Lisa: oh, i wasn't sure

Slyv: like less than 2 years ago

Slyv: and putting both of things together increased this

Lopix wrote a more extensive commentary about the attraction of visiting and documenting the ruins of our modern culture:
As many people (feel) the need to go to far away countries or to climb tall mountains, I think there is a similar drive to UE for people to find locations that they may be the first to enter in years. To stand where only the few who worked there stood, to see the inside of buildings that no one has seen for decades, that is a powerful motivator. Second is the historical aspect, to be able to see actual physical history. The Don Valley Brickworks is a great example, to go into the factory that produced the bricks that built most of Toronto, that is not something you can get in a museum or a book. To see the machinery that helped to build Toronto’s old city hall, that is a very tangible connection to our city’s history. Lastly, there is the photography aspect. To be able to bring back the images of these forgotten places, to be able to show others what you have seen – that means a lot to me. And to use the lens to document the history that you find, that helps to preserve the experiences. With the recent demolition of Whitby Psych, a lot of the only remains of that place are the pictures taken by the various explorers. Without those photographs, there would be precious little to remember it by.

NV, shares a similar interest in regarding his experiences of sites that recall a sense of history. He states that he “(gets) most excited about factories and industrial spaces/structures. It's interesting to walk through, say, an old steel mill and to imagine the manufacturing process. There is an aesthetic appeal--huge picturesque spaces with dusty light take on a church-like feel, and abandoned machinery is often more interesting than a lot of modern sculpture. The many catwalks and ladders usually found in such places provide a lot of semi-dangerous climbing fun...I don't limit myself, obviously--I'll
explore whatever I get the chance to explore. And if it's a place that isn't on 100 UE websites, all the better”.

When asked why ruins are interesting, explorers describe various motivations relating to their sense of the past and of place.

lisa: so, what do abandoned places mean to you?
SlyV: of course history
SlyV: and they're very atmospheric in most of cases
SlyV: i could spend hours checking papers
SlyV: although i never do that cause there is alot to see
SlyV: finding maps
SlyV: seeking relevant stuff

NV ties his interest in history to the forgotten and forbidden quality of these sites: “I like abandonments because they are buildings that no longer serve a function--they are obsolete, which to me is really interesting. You are free to wander and climb around these buildings as you see fit, without being restricted by whatever the building’s former function was...The fact that a space is forbidden only makes it more inviting, like you are seeing something you aren't SUPPOSED to see. If a space was open to the public, anyone could visit anytime, and thus going to that place wouldn't be a unique event. So the fact that I'm trespassing makes my visits to certain places more meaningful”. NV’s comments about ruins being free from the restrictions of their previous uses finds an echo in Gilloch: “as an object falls into a state of ruination, the pretensions which accompanied its construction crumble, and its truth is unfolded” (1992: 73).

Inherent in the phenomenal speed with which modernity and the modern metropolis developed is the process of ruination. As the city grows, buildings are pulled down and others are built upon their rubble, the “ceaseless piling up of ruins” as Gilloch
puts it (1992: 75). The process of modernization/postmodernization is a dialectic of creation and destruction. Cities are built literally, and metaphorically, upon the bones of the past. Decoy finds it interesting to watch the process of ruination and compare it to the ways in which we try to cover over the inevitable decay of our lived environments:

decoy: The human race seems hell-bent on advancement. Everything moves forwards, onwards and upwards. Even products that claim to be "old fashioned" are riding the 'retro wave' which is crashing on the shores of the future. In every public and private space, we see considerable effort being put into upkeep and maintenance - fresh paint and new granite...

decoy: In a world that is stuck in perpetual fast-forward, it's nice to take a literal step back in time, and watch something slowly fall apart.

lisa: it sort of puts the lie to the idea of linear progress

decoy: It also ties into the fact that not many people get to see this stuff. I like the idea of revealing something that is generally unseen or un-noticed.

The ruin becomes a place where the mind is at peace, protected from the intrusions of (post)modern life. It is a place where the natural world is free to rework the landscape, making a place into an amalgam of human achievement and the effects of the natural world. It is a place devoid of the vagaries of the market, not actively under anyone's control, free of advertising and away from the surging throngs and over-stimulation of the metropolis. It is an external space in which the protective mind can surrender its control, allowing the physical site to serve as a setting for an inner life. A ruin can be a dangerous and challenging space to explore, but it can also serve as a refuge, a place of respite from the intensified stimuli and constant assault on the senses of the urban experience.

The growth of modern metropolises has the effect of subduing, paving over and otherwise taming the natural elements in the city in favour of progress. When a building
is allowed to return to a state of nature, it takes on a fascination and beauty quite different from that of the time in which it saw productive use. What is the decay that people are interested in other than the manifestation of a process of reclamation by nature? Even the photographs taken from within a building, removed somewhat from the elements and the vegetative colonization of the ruin, provide evidence of this process. Fungi grows up a wall, rust streaks a leaking pipe, a layer of undisturbed dust lies over a room. Jester sees great beauty in the reclamation of a ruin by nature:

**lisa:** has ue shaped your ideas of what beauty is?

**lisa:** for instance, a lot of people talk about seeing decay as a thing of beauty.

**Jester...**: oh definitely, i see beauty in some of the strangest things, though it seems to me I always did, possibly because I was introduced to it so early in life

**lisa:** is there an example that comes to mind when you say "some of the strangest things"?

**Jester...**: I love places where nature is starting to overtake the man made structure, reclaiming the place

**Jester...**: a tree growing out of the roof of an abandoned cement plant for instance

**Jester...**: a waterfall underneath a ruined factory

Ruins remind us that cities and their structures are ultimately transitory spaces. Every thing that humanity builds will one day become a ruin, reclaimed by nature. It is only in exploring and documenting these spaces that an appreciation and understanding of the past can be formed. The task of the explorer as urban archeologist is to capture and record the hidden, secret and forgotten places upon which (post)modernity is built.

The ruin, like the city itself, has features that are both fascinating and repellent. These spaces draw us in but also frighten us, being sites that reinforce the transitory nature of the times we live in. They are sites that hold physical dangers in their state of decay for those who approach them, but they are also a sort of terror (or for some,
comfort) for those who contemplate them from afar in the knowledge that the seemingly unshakeable foundations of our society, the structures around which we build our lives, are ultimately fragile and sliding towards decay at every moment. Ruins draw us in with their beauty and history, but also have the potential for providing a deep existential angst. For Simmel, however, the ruin holds none of this terror. The ruin for him offers a profound return to nature and is a demonstration of the limits of the material world and the artistry of humankind. Ruins take on a softened, beautiful aspect, transforming themselves into a new wholeness as they decay.

Discussing the lure of the underground mysteries of her city in her book *NYC Underground: Anatomy of a City*, explorer Julia Solis describes the official attitude towards the ruins of the city:

Above ground, New York treats its abandoned structures like seeds stuck between its teeth; well-meaning forces jab at them, hoping to reintegrate them into usefulness, yet eventually they are crushed or absorbed. In losing its ruins, the city is giving up a part of its soul. (2005: 3)

Postmodernity is built on the bones of past forms of social organization and the dilapidated structures that represent former modes of production. The shift between the modern and the postmodern has left a landscape of dereliction to be explored. Urban explorers, as archaeologists working to understand and preserve a past that no longer exists, are often alone in seeing the beauty and worth in the metropolis’ ruins. The media that explorers produce serve as aide-mémoires and texts to be read critically, providing different understandings and ways of seeing the metropolis around us.
Chapter IV: Urban Exploration as Bricolage

Urban explorers record and document their explorations in the abandoned and restricted spaces of the metropolis. However, explorers are not just passive collectors of images and memory, but are also engaged in acts of artistic representation of their travels. A significant feature of UE is the representation of exploration through creative means such as writing, photography and art. Barring the (small) segment of the population motivated only by adrenaline and the thrill of breaking the law\(^8\), the majority of explorers are deeply committed to presenting alternative representations of the metropolis and to creating unconventional visions of the cities in which they live. The online communities that explorers create, the media they produce and the communal projects they undertake are all reflective of a desire to build artifacts and spaces around the practice of exploration. The process of becoming an explorer requires specialized knowledges and skills and developing an alternate understanding of how the postmodern metropolis is cobbled together. In this chapter, I use the concept of the "bricoleur" to examine the dimension of urban exploration that complements those of "flânerie" and "archaeology" above.

"Bricolage" is a term that helps us to address the methodology of urban exploration, that is, how explorers go about the act of producing out of the work of observing and collecting. Unlike flanerie and urban archaeology, which derive from the works of Benjamin and Simmel, bricolage is a concept that originates more in postmodern theoretical writings from recent years. The term was given intellectual cachet in the work of French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, although it is normally

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\(^8\) Those practicing ethical exploration distance themselves from this type of thrill seeker, particularly if they engage in break-and-enter or vandalism.
used in everyday speech to describe “a sly handyman, who accumulates a stock of items and takes from it whatever might seem to be useful to complete the job that he is presently doing” (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1993: 63). When applied to urban exploration, the outlook of the bricoleur is best described as pastiche, or an attitude of cobbling together contrasting and complementary understandings, approaches, and experiences in order to establish an understanding of postmodernity through the experience of the city.

In their piece “Georg Simmel: sociological flâneur bricoleur”, Weinstein and Weinstein set the figure of the bricoleur against that of the flâneur. This article is a response to David Frisby’s Sociological Impressionism (1981), in which the theorist interrogates whether the label of “sociological flâneur” can be attached to Georg Simmel (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1993: 54). For some commentators, Simmel is the ultimate example of the theorist as flâneur. Frisby (1994), in particular, locates the theorist’s work within the realm of flânerie. These links are largely inspired by the style in which Simmel approaches his work. Highly interpretive, at times hard to follow, “Simmel...could extract from the seemingly most insignificant details of social life the most interesting connections. In this respect, we might see Simmel as a flâneur for the intelligentsia, providing them with the most subtle analyses of all manner of social phenomena without disturbing any of them” (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1993: 58).

However, for Weinstein and Weinstein, applying the term “flâneur” to Simmel relegates him to the fringes of social theory, deriding his contributions as exhibiting a certain decadence and moral failure:

One gets the idea of what the flâneur is at the cobblestone level. To respectable opinion he is a social waste product. To the morally sensitive he is a fraud, a
tinhorn aristocrat: facetious; making sport of the city’s serious business. The term cannot help but retain these associations when it is used to characterize an artist-intellectual like Baudelaire or an intellectual-artist like Simmel. They are, of course, not really flâneurs in the strict sense, but somehow they are like flâneurs, spiritually. (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1993: 56)

Weinstein and Weinstein do not accept Frisby’s assertion that Simmel’s work is that of an academic flâneur; rather, they describe him as a “bricoleur” (1993: 64). According to their unremittingly negative view, the flâneur takes the urban scene as a spectacle, strolling through it as if it were a diorama, that is, detached from involvement with its practical concerns and purposes. In making public places into playgrounds, the flâneur takes advantage of systems of public order and control, and of production, which permit him to stroll safely and be entertained by the human comedy. He does not contribute to the maintenance or alteration of these systems, but is parasitical off them. The flâneur could not exist on a desert island or in the state of nature. He might be called a ‘surplus value’ of the city, a type made possible by industrial capitalism and inconceivable beyond the protected environment that it provides to the bourgeoisie in periods of relative stability. (1993: 59-60)

Certainly, the picture that the Weinsteins paint of the flâneur is hardly flattering. While the 19th century version of this social type may indeed be a “surplus value”, this unredeemably negative view of the flâneur denies the potential for creativity and resistance that is made possible through flâneuristic explorations and understandings of the city. By contrast, Benjamin’s investigation into the figure as social archetype
presents us with a more nuanced, and often positive, approach to dealing with the concept of the flâneur.

The Weinsteins view Frisby’s use of the term “flâneur” to describe Simmel’s work as a negative characterization. In attempting to recharacterize Simmel’s work as a sort of avant-garde postmodernism, they strive to draw a black and white distinction between what they see as the “social waste product” of flânerie and that which is useful in Simmel’s eclectic methodology. Thus, in contrast to the portrait I provide in chapter two, they employ the term “flâneur” in its most one dimensional and simplistic conception, and so fail to tease out the complexities and contrasts inherent to both the historical figure of the flâneur and to Simmel himself. As I have discussed above, the flâneur is indeed a sometimes problematic and contested figure. However, just as Simmel’s work can be mobilized on behalf of a certain version of (post)modern theory, so too can the flâneur be useful for understanding certain aspects of contemporary urban experience. If, as I have suggested along with the contributors in Tester’s collection of essays in *The Flâneur*, the flâneur is not a uniformly bourgeois character who simply parasitizes the work and culture of others, but presents a different way of reading the city, would it not be more nuanced to suggest that there are indeed valuable elements of flânerie in both Simmel’s work and in the experiences he wished to account for?

Baudelaire describes the centrality of the experience of the crowd in the life of the flâneur: “for the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite” (Baudelaire in Tester, 1994: 2). The urban explorer generally practices his or her art and hobby in the solitude of the forgotten spaces of the city. But
when in the crowd, they stand apart and are not quite of it, as their knowledge of the ins
and outs of the hidden face of the urban environment separates them from the
unsuspecting masses. As I have noted in the previous chapter, a large number of UE
enthusiasts favour the exploration of abandoned and derelict spaces. As the traditional
flâneur is a figure that seeks out the centre of the bustling metropolitan crowds, we can
see the first evidence of a break between modernist flânerie and postmodernist
exploration. The explorer often seeks the precise opposite of what entices the flâneur,
namely a solitude that comes from within the decaying ruins that dot the urban landscape
(here also we see a link with Benjamin’s concept of the urban archaeologist). On the
other hand, many explorers take active, populated sites as their targets for infiltration. To
this extent, they immerse themselves in the crowd, as they are in proximity to large
numbers of people as when they are exploring a large hotel’s crawlspace and other
nooks. However, from another perspective, they are not a part of the crowd insofar as
their specialized knowledge of the hidden facets of the public realm set them apart from
their fellow citizens. Complicating the similarities and differences between exploration
and flânerie helps us to see that the vast majority of explorers are interested in more than
one kind of urban space. Some may prefer to seek out those abandoned or remote spaces
that are devoid of other people, others tend to explore drains, subway tunnels and active
sites near to or in the midst of the urban throng if the chance arises. The approach to
urban exploration is most often characterized by a willingness to experience many forms
of exploration and a pick-and-choose approach to selecting targets. In some ways, the
mindset of the urban explorer can be understood as a form of bricolage. In gathering and
representing knowledge as a patchwork of ideas and approaches, this term allows the
urban exploration movement to be understood for its creativity and diversity in representations, ways of thinking and acquiring knowledge and practicing diverse skills. Thus I am using the concept of bricolage in both its literal and metaphoric senses. It encompasses both the act of intellectual production as well as the act of amateur artistic expression and exploration.

Urban exploration is a creative process. Explorers research, explore, photograph and share their experiences with others via pictures and stories online. Online urbex communities and websites feature debates, photographs, encyclopedias, tutorials, mapmaking and artistic representations. Much of the urban exploration subculture is driven by creative impulses and the desire to share the products of these impulses. Explorers have produced documentaries, short fiction films, art installations and zines. It is through this last medium that many explorers came to know the larger community before the widespread availability of the internet. As with other underground subcultures, urban explorers have made significant use of self-published zines to communicate with one another. Sharing photographs and exploration narratives is central to UE, and zines make space for community members' representations of travel through abandoned and restricted space. While the wide availability of internet access and website creation technology has largely supplanted print zine culture in favour of personal websites, zines remain a part of the UE community. The best-known urban exploration zine is Ninjalicious' *Infiltration*, a publication that introduced many explorers to the idea of a larger community. From 1996 to 2004, Ninjalicious and various friends and contributors published twenty four zines on subjects ranging from exploring the
Royal York Hotel in Toronto, to navigating Scottish rail tunnels, to first-time visits to the Parisian catacombs, storm drains and derelict boats.

Figure 4.1 Infiltration Zine. © www.infiltration.org, by permission.

Many people’s first exposure to the idea that UE is a pastime practiced by thousands of people around the world came from reading Infiltration. Other well known exploration zines that continue publishing to this day include 5100 which comes out of the Edmonton, Alberta exploration community and Il Draino, a prolific newsletter from Melbourne’s Cave Clan. In the cataphile community, there is a longstanding practice of hiding self-published tracts in nooks and crannies throughout the catacombs. These tracts can be similar to zines, but can also be used as short announcements of upcoming events, as ways of settling scores between cataphiles, as a forum for rants, art or ideas or as a way of introducing oneself to the community (Catacombes et Carrières de Paris, 2006). The underground climate of the catacombs is somewhat humid, thus explorers are encouraged to collect the tracts they find and bring them to exchange nights called Tractofolie, also held below ground (Catacombes et Carrières, 2006).
Certainly, it is not every explorer that documents his or her explorations, but it seems that a large percentage of those who participate in online communities have an interest in producing media related to the practice of exploration. In this way, I think that urban exploration is akin to bricolage. It seeks to create artifacts and representations that mold the solitary or small group experience of exploring into a larger virtual community. Resources and experiences are shared online in an effort to create a community of likeminded explorers.

4.1 ‘Social Engineering’

The notion of ‘social engineering’ provides perhaps the most clear evidence in support of the idea that UE is akin to bricolage. The term has been adapted from hacker jargon by Ninjalicious (2006) to describe the varying methods that can be used to convince authorities (or those given powers by the authorities) that one has the right to be in unauthorized spaces. This is an interesting and subversive appropriation of a term that is most often used in social science and politics to describe official efforts to shape social behaviour. The UE and hacker use of ‘social engineering’ inverts this traditional meaning, describing instead efforts to counteract the behaviours and actions of those in positions of authority. As a method of obtaining information in a piecemeal and opportunistic way from official sources in order to practice infiltration, social engineering is a decidedly postmodern, bricolage type practice. The social engineer uses whatever tools and skills s/he may have at hand to create an illusion capable of hiding one’s true identity and purpose. For instance, someone might put on a hard hat, carry a clipboard and enter a site during the daytime. Acting confident and looking somewhat official often has the effect of making someone seem as though he or she belongs, which creates
doubt in the mind of security or building workers. Altering one’s look can help one blend in and become invisible, even in places where he or she is not supposed to be. Social engineering is most often directed at figures of authority and surveillers. For the practitioner of ethical UE (which many in the community would regard as “true” UE), social engineering often becomes a necessary skill for ensuring access to and unfettered enjoyment of a site. While a vandal might decide to break a window or use a crowbar to get into a building, a social engineer will seek access that does not compromise the ethical code of leaving the site untouched. This often means gaining entrance to a site by using entrances that are in plain sight or that present a higher risk of detection.

The skills necessary to successfully explore wherever one wishes to go in the metropolitan environment provide further evidence of the bricolage inherent in the practice of urban exploration. Exploration necessitates an eclectic combination of physical and social skills, as well as specialized knowledges in order to successfully infiltrate spaces that are designated as off limits to the average citizen. While not all exploration can be said to be carried out with high degrees of difficulty – after all, most people have an anecdote or two about the time they wandered into an abandonment as a child – much of the UE community revolves around discussions concerning ways to take the practice to the “next level”. In other words, most frequent explorers, those that do it out of more than just a passing fancy, are dedicated to developing a skill-set that allows them to take their practice further. Beyond purely utilitarian advice about physical training, how to climb fences and walls and how to take a fall, there are sophisticated discussions of the various ways that social engineering skills can be employed to facilitate access to unauthorized spaces and to talk oneself out of trouble. These
discussions also go beyond the physical practice of UE into the realm of the philosophical. In-depth discussions of public space, trespass laws, photographic ethics and such are a feature of UE online community life.

Mapping is another form of bricolage that fosters community building. Among urban explorers, certain types of exploration sites necessitate the creation and use of maps. The paradigmatic example of this is provided by the cataphile subculture in Paris. Because the underground is so extensive and labyrinthine (various figures put the underground at between 300 and 800 kilometres of catacombs beneath the city), anyone with the desire to explore these spaces must draw and share maps that identify directions, features and exits. Mapping of the quarries and catacombs has been done in a disorganized and amateur fashion since medieval times in which miners created small cartographies to keep themselves oriented and safe below ground (Nexus, 2006). The era of exploration, a few hundred years after the end of the underground as a site of resource extraction, came hand-in-hand with mapping and cataloguing of life and landscape below Paris.

Today’s cataphile community continues this tradition of information gathering and sharing. In the summer of 2005, I came across a posting on uer.ca asking for help with the translation of a document from French to English. I volunteered to help with the translation of a trip to an abandoned train station in the Pyrenees for Slyv’s site “Forbidden Places”. In November of 2005, the original poster contacted me again, wondering if I would be interested in collaborating on a translation of the Catacombs of  

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9 The term “underground” is used here to describe the ancient gypsum and limestone mines that exist under Paris. They are also referred to as “catacombs”, because the city of Paris used some portions of these abandoned mines to store bones from overfull cemeteries, starting in the late 1700’s (Catacombes et Carrières de Paris, 2006).
Paris website dedicated to the history and mapping of the underground in Paris. The project involves a comprehensive history of the quarries and catacombs from the natural forces that shaped the rock deposits in France millennia ago to the human history of mining to the era of exploration. To this is appended a series of maps of the underground (none of which indicate identifiable entrance points) and a historical accounting of the cartographic history of the underground.

While many of the mapping projects have a practical aim, the task of explorers like Nexus goes beyond the merely utilitarian. The motivation here seems to be to create a compendium of specialized information about places that are a part of the popular imagination but remain unknown in an everyday way. Most Parisians know of the existence of the underground – Morthicia estimates that a large percentage of the city’s inhabitants have been down at least once in their lifetimes – but how many know of the rich subterranean history of the place? Because information about the underground is gathered in bits and pieces by word of mouth and experience, collating this information into a whole is by necessity a collaborative process.

The postmodern era is characterized by the rise to prominence of internet technology, an advancement that has led people to gather news, entertainment and information from a wide variety of sources, many of them unofficial or non-institutional. Postmodernity is the era of bricolage, for the postmodern citizen must learn the skill of mosaic-making in order to navigate through the complexities of today’s information age.

A major feature of the postmodern metropolis is an increase in the concentration of policing duties into the hands of private security firms and the omnipresence of surveillance technology – which is mostly visual, but sometimes auditory – in the urban
environment. It has been said that the average person is captured on surveillance cameras eight to twelve times per day in the United States, and up to three hundred times per day in the UK (Snider, 2001). Because urban exploration needs to be conducted in such a way as to avoid detection by security, explorers have a heightened sense of the extent to which we are surveilled. However, they are also keenly aware of how much of this surveillance is faulty, unmonitored or contains holes and gaps. In previous chapters, recon has been discussed as an intrinsically desirable way of seeing the city and of performing flâneuristic movement through space. But, in a more practical way, it can be considered as a specialized form of knowledge, as well as a type of youthful resistance to the entrenchment of surveillance culture. If citizens know the city better than the surveillants such as police or private security and are able to track and evade security forces, they effectively challenge the very ideology of the system. Many explorers take great delight in proving the inefficacy of security guards, cameras and alarm warnings. Some are so effective at evading security systems that they have become independent contractors hired to test these very systems and find their weak points.

A Moscow based group, the Diggers of the Underground Planet, provide an example of the ways in which explorers can come to know the city even better than city officials and police forces. First rising to prominence when their underground explorations uncovered bunkers and tunnels previously only rumoured to exist (they were built to enable Stalin to escape the city in case of attack), the Diggers reemerged in a snippet from the international media during the siege of the House of Culture theatre by Chechen guerillas in 2002. While not widely reported in mainstream media pieces, a few stories carried the news that a mysterious group calling themselves “Diggers”, headed by
Vadim Mikhailov, had aided Russian Spetsnatz, or special forces, in entering the building through the sewage tunnels below the theatre (Baker & Glasser, 2002). According to the *Washington Post*, the Diggers were brought in to show the special forces unit of the army how to access and navigate the underground below the theatre. They used this knowledge to penetrate the theatre in which 700 hostages, many of them children, were being held by Chechens with “suicide belts” (vests filled with high explosive and rigged to be detonated by the wearer) (Baker & Glasser, 2002). Even the most elite of the Russian army lacked familiarity with the underground spaces that were already well known by a small group of self-taught and amateur citizen explorers.

4.2 Collaborative Projects as Bricolage

The spaces below, in-between and behind the everyday surfaces of the city are unnoticed by most of us yet form an important structural and infrastructural background to our daily lives. As the city grows, these spaces become more and more invisible and unknown. For example, when those who built the tunnels below Moscow passed on or were forcibly moved to the gulag, the knowledge of those spaces went with them, leaving few to remember or even be aware of their existence. In this way, explorers serve as memory keepers and discoverers of the past.

Another way in which the bricolage that characterizes urban exploration has become more visible is in the community-based efforts to create a common language and in the drive to create shared resources for members of the community. For instance, uer.ca features an open encyclopedia in which anyone can contribute a definition of a term relevant to exploration. Once a definition has been entered, others can add more information or relevant outside links to supplement the existing definition. Another
feature found on uer.ca is much more controversial: the location database (or “LDB”).

So-called “trusted” or full members of the site are able to view a database that describes sites that have been explored and posted by other members. Database entries feature pictures, reports and data on hazards and security but are forbidden to depict entry points. Like the encyclopedia, the LDB is a collaborative undertaking. That is to say, once a location has been posted, other explorers can add to the entry, posting their own photos, reports and comments. Unlike the encyclopedia, the LDB is highly contested, with some explorers using and updating it regularly, and others actively campaigning for its removal. Detractors, most of whom have now been banned by the site’s administration or have recently had their accounts deleted in the past months, say that the membership system does not prevent thieves, vandals and rave party organizers from finding new locations to damage, steal from or use to stage potentially destructive parties.

Furthermore, they argue, the LDB encourages “UE tourism” where people simply find a “shopping list” of locations to explore rather than trying to find places themselves. Those who hold this view see the LDB as contrary to true purpose of exploring, as it encourages, instead, the reliance on others to supply a prepackaged experience for easy consumption.

Bricolage is an act of curiosity and experimentation. It comes from inquisitiveness, rather than from certain knowledge, and from a preference for questioning rather than answering. In some ways, it is a perfect descriptor for theorists like Simmel and Benjamin in their separation from mainstream ways of addressing city life which allowed them to be more experimental in their approach to their work and ways of understanding. For urban explorers, bricolage describes the type of skills,
knowledges and media that explorers develop and create. Their creative, cobbled-together and experiential knowledge and understanding of the metropolis is analogous to the ways in which the bricoleur accomplishes his or her tasks. The term gives full expression to the creativity and collaborative nature of urban exploration and its representations by the community.
Chapter V: Reinvisioning the Metropolis

The world, or so we are told by sociologists, has shifted from the paradigm of industrial production to a social organization based on an information economy. This is not quite true, as industrial production is still a central facet of the capitalist mode of economic organization. Rather, industry, with the aid of transnational capital and trade deregulation, has shifted to the global South in a process commonly referred to as "outsourcing". This shift has left in its wake a landscape filled with abandoned spaces and decaying industrial artifacts. They are blanks in the skyline, spaces in which economic activity is no longer conducted.

The late capitalist, and largely postindustrial metropolis is a space crisscrossed and delineated by lines of privatized space. Increasingly, even public space is treated as a locus for surreptitious surveillance, on the part of both state and corporate security forces. The urban citizen is constantly watched by a combination of private and public security cameras. Her space is limited to public spaces that are largely (especially in North American society) designed for the automobile, rather than the citizen on foot. The landscape is divided into private spaces governed by strict laws of trespass and private property. Urban explorers subvert the paradigm of private/public space, preferring to see the modern metropolis as an unexplored playground of sorts. In his online essay "No Disclaimer", Ninjalicious describes the obliviousness of most urban citizens to the possibilities inherent in the city around them:

I find it sad that most people go through life oblivious to the countless — free — wonders around them. Too many of us think the only things worth looking at in our cities and towns are those safe and sanitized attractions that require an
admission fee. It's no wonder people feel unfulfilled as they shuffle through the maze of velvet ropes on their way out through the gift shop. Urban explorers strive to actually earn their experiences, by making discoveries that allow them to get in on the secret workings of cities and structures, and to appreciate fantastic, obscure spaces that might otherwise go completely neglected. When you step away from the TV and think about it, humans are naturally curious creatures. We can't help but want to see the world around us; we're designed to explore and to play, and these instincts haven't disappeared just because most of us now live in large cities where parking lots have replaced common areas, malls have replaced city squares and the only public spaces that remain are a few grudgingly conceded parkettes. (2006)

Urban explorers seek to experience the metropolis in ways that most urban dwellers cannot imagine.

The work of the urban explorer is not only to conduct investigations into the spaces abandoned by mainstream society but also to document and disseminate the aesthetics (in both senses of the term) of abandoned and decaying spaces. As part of the restructuring of the way they experience and understand the metropolis, proponents of UE also aim to create an alternative, virtual and international public sphere. Urban explorers have established wide, loosely linked and largely anonymous virtual communities. There are online accounts of UE missions carried out all over the globe.

Central to the process of urban exploration is the dispersal of art and information through diverse webs of communication spanning a wide variety of geographic spaces and technological media. A central factor in the growth of the phenomenon is the wide
availability of high speed Internet and the increasingly international links forged by strangers in high-tech spaces. Urban explorers create virtual cities in which decay, emptiness and abandonment are central aesthetic concerns. Virtual metropolises are intimately tied to the non-virtual ones that explorers inhabit. However, they are different in their organizational structure. In stark contrast to the diffuse, non-statist and participatory nature of online urban exploration communities, the physical metropolis is made up of spaces delineated by the boundaries of private property, surveillance systems and structures of disenfranchisement.

Urban exploration communities online are largely anonymous places, where members are known only through pseudonyms. The level of secrecy both heightens the mystique of the exercise and protects members against legal sanctions. The anonymity is a chosen one, a community of faceless strangers. The lines between “real” and virtual metropolis are blurred. Membership and identity are chosen in these online spaces and one can choose the depth to which others learn about or disclose the details of one’s biography.

Another distinctive feature of urban exploration is the use of photography and other artistic media to record and represent passage through space. The photographs are eerie and beautiful, similar to how Walter Benjamin characterizes the 19th century European metropolis as both repellant and attractive (Gilloch, 1996: 2). These images reflect the inner dialectic of life in the postindustrial urban environment. The photos portray a sense of both desolation and hope. The artists turn their gaze to exclusionary and defunct elements of their lived environment and recast the significance of their surroundings. Decay is transformed into an aesthetic of beauty. The metropolis, under
the gaze of the camera, is transformed into a space that is within the control of the explorer's creative fantasy. Interestingly, urban explorers take the artifacts and decay of dilapidated industry as a subject for artistic celebration to be transmitted to a global, faceless audience. Photography is central to the process of UE. On a purely functional level, photographs of infiltrated spaces are generally shared with others, if only as a way of proving that one has indeed successfully visited the space that one claims to have explored.

As yet, there is little academic literature that has addressed the topic, though the mainstream media in various parts of the world has intermittently covered urban exploration. As UE is largely a youth-driven phenomenon that happens on the margins of the mainstream, it exists below the consciousness of most people. It is literally an underground or subterranean practice, and in many ways, members of exploration networks wish it to remain so. While sharing information and visual representations of abandoned places is central to the subculture, there is a parallel urge to keep the phenomenon secret and on the margins.

Police and security forces are periodically interested in cracking down on the activity, and the media focuses on the subversive nature of the practice. In light of the events of 9-11, much underground activity has become more self-conscious about its methods and there has even been a reconsideration of targets for infiltration. Due to the fact that the National Guard still periodically patrols the New York subway five years after the attack on the Twin Towers, there has been a decrease in exploration of sensitive spaces such as abandoned tunnels. Both explorers and the authorities have become aware of the security risks of infiltrating infrastructures, which has resulted in increased
surveillance and a desire to bring light to the dark, secret places in the metropolis wherein terrorists and other enemies of the state might lurk unseen. ‘Infiltration’ increasingly projects a fearful spectre in the public mind since September 11. The national rhetoric promotes the creation of a fortress America, impenetrable to infiltration by the “enemies of freedom”. Just as urban explorers reimagine abandoned urban spaces, there is a parallel reimagining of the city by police authorities and mass media as a response to perceived threats to public and national security.

Most North American cities are not user-friendly places, as they tend to be built for efficiency and automobile-use. Public space seems to be an afterthought, and most of us are too busy to notice how little of the city is for the use of its citizens. The daily grind of work and consumption dulls our perception, making it easy to slip into an unchallenging and routine urban existence. Because of our familiarity with the urban environment, most of us no longer see its unique elements. The city exists as a mere backdrop for our daily activities, forming an undifferentiated landscape that rarely catches the notice of our conscious minds. It is precisely this blasé existence that urban exploration agitates against.

As our cities become ever more user-unfriendly, different ways of approaching space and legality, including challenges to accepted notions of privatized public space and surveillance, are increasingly relevant and crucial. In a post-911 world, the act of looking, loitering, photographing and the like becomes “suspicious” and criminal, particularly south of the border. As people learn to accommodate themselves to the fear and paranoia that is governing public and international policy, the role of dissidents who reject restrictions on what they can and cannot do in the urban environment becomes
more important. A large culture of people dedicated to recording and documenting the lived environment is vital to keeping public spaces free. Bans on taking photos in public spaces, and initiatives like New Jersey's proposed legislation to make it illegal to photograph, videotape or take notes on power stations, sewage and drainage systems, airports, water treatment or flammable liquid storage facilities, punishable by eighteen months in prison or a $10,000 fine (Dopp, 2006), can all have the effect of stopping people from photographing and documenting their surroundings; or it can have the effect of spurring more and more people to defy unconstitutional regulation of public space. Urban explorers are at the forefront of a diffuse movement of people who reject the idea that governments, corporations and security firms can put limits on reasonable behaviour in public places. Exploring, looking deeply, photographing and creating representations of the metropolis become political and aesthetic statements in a surveillance culture. Alternative understandings and representations of the lived environment and public space are crucial to the practice of democracy.

Mainstream North American consumer culture, while ostensibly pandering to a youthful demographic, also tends to discount and commercialize youth subcultures. In the drive to make a dollar, advertisers and television producers co-opt youth movements and reduce them to their most simplistic and sensational elements. Urban exploration is a highly creative and important pastime, and yet much of the exposure that the vast majority of the mainstream population has to the hobby are sensationalized stories. It is important, therefore, that explorers have a hand in shaping the popular representations of and academic literature about UE. It is in the presentation of the eloquent and
sophisticated voices of explorers themselves that UE will come to be seen as a significant practice in the postmodern metropolis.

With this work, I aim to give voice to the representations of the pastime and the ways in which explorers can be seen as artist-intellectuals. The structuring of this work around the themes of flânerie, urban archaeology and bricolage demonstrates the parallels and connections between urban exploration and classical and contemporary sociological theory. Just as the works of Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel share crucial insights about the ways in which the metropolis has developed and is inhabited, so too do the words and media created by explorers have much to tell us about ways of living in, experiencing and understanding the postmodern urban environment.

Urban explorers reject the notion that the city and its infrastructure are off-limits to the average citizen. Explorers refuse to accept the artificial boundaries set out by no trespassing signs, shut doors and fences. Urban exploration is about doing more than just taking up space in the metropolitan environment, as its practitioners strive to go beyond the officially sanctioned routine of daily life. Central to this process is the drive to see the forgotten and ignored aspects of the urban environment, and to pay attention to the everyday beauty and ugliness of the cities we live in. Urban explorers are attracted to those spaces that the average citizen does not notice as they go about their day or settle in at home for the night. Exploration starts with the act of tuning in and paying attention to the forgotten, decaying and unseen spaces that make up our cities. To the UE community, the city is more than just a backdrop or landscape through which to go about one’s everyday business. Rather, the metropolis is a site of wonder and possibility to be explored, interpreted and shared with others.
1) Print Sources:


2) Websites, Zines and Self-published Materials:


“The Aesthetics of Trespass: The Art and Practice of Urban Exploration in the Postmodern Metropolis.”

Urban exploration (UE) is about the desire to explore hidden and restricted spaces that most people just walk by and accept as off-limits.

My name is Lisa Hale, and I’m doing a Master’s thesis on UE in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of British Columbia. UE is something I’ve gotten really interested in during the last few years. I’ve always gone places I wasn’t supposed to, but never knew that it had a name, until I found Infiltration and uer.ca.

I want to examine how urban explorers describe their explorations; what motivates them to explore; and the ways in which they participate in online communities. For this purpose, I would like to interview people online who are active urban explorers and who have also been members of UE chat rooms and message forums (uer.ca for example) for at least 6 months. I’m particularly interested in talking with people who have their own UE websites.

The interviews will last between 45 to 60 minutes and there will a shorter follow-up interview approximately one week after the initial contact. The interview process will maintain the anonymity of the people who participate in this project. The interviews will be done through email or Instant Messaging (IM) and participants will be asked to create a free email account using a pseudonym chosen by them and known only to the researcher.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Tom Kemple (tel: 604-822-3579). Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time during the project. No payment for your participation will be offered.

If you would like more info or are interested in participating, you can email me at or send me a message through uer.ca (screen name “bikepunk”).

Appendix B: Advertisement for Participants
Consent Form

Project: The Aesthetics of Trespass: The Art and Practice of Urban Exploration in the Postmodern Metropolis

Principal Investigator: Dr. Tom Kemple, Assistant Professor
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
University of British Columbia
Office phone: (604) 822-3579

Co-Investigator: Lisa Hale, M.A. Student
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
University of British Columbia
Email:

Purposes of the project:
The project is concerned with the description of the urban exploration (UE) phenomenon and the investigation of its aesthetics and medium(s) of communication. The research is part of the Co-Investigator’s Masters thesis project and will be publicly available. The thesis may be the basis of scholarly publications in the future.

The aim of the work is to examine how urban explorers describe and document their explorations, through trip reports and photos, and what motivates them to participate in online exploration communities and UE in general.

Participation:
You have been chosen for this study because of your knowledge about urban exploration and the online UE community. Your involvement would consist of being interviewed about your views and opinions on urban exploration and Internet usage. The interview will be conducted via email or MSN Messenger. The process of writing out your answers will vary, but should take no longer than 45 to 60 minutes. Follow up questions and clarifications will take no more than a half hour.

Appendix C: Consent Form
Potential benefits for participants include the chance to participate in one of the first sociological research projects about urban exploration. Another benefit of participation is the opportunity to affect the representation of urban exploration positively. So much media attention has been focused on the UE community, much of it negative. The aim of this project is to examine how urban explorers understand and explore their surroundings, and therefore is not concerned with making the practice seem like a fad.

Confidentiality:
As you know, Internet communications are susceptible to third-party viewing. For this reason, certain steps must be taken to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. You will be asked to create an account with one of the free email services such as Hotmail.com (or other free service of your choice). The account should be created using a pseudonym, by which you will be referred to in all written documents, and should contain no identifying information. You will then contact the co-investigator from the email account, and all questions will be routed through the anonymous email account. Participation in email or messenger conversations will constitute consent, therefore, your identity need not be revealed to the researcher.

Only the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator involved in the project will have access to interview notes and transcripts. All transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and in password-protected files. Transcripts will not contain respondents' identifying information.

Remuneration:
Your participation in this interview is totally voluntary; and no payment for your participation is offered.

Your rights:
We believe participation in the project to be of minimal risk. However, any public discussion of UE involves the risk of exposing your identity. For this reason, participants are reminded to avoid discussing identifying details and specific locations. The interview process has been designed to ensure confidentiality and security. Participation in the project should be no more risky than participating in online publicly accessible UE forums.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to refuse to answer any question or end the interview at any time. If you have any questions or want further information about the study, please contact Dr. Tom Kemple or Lisa Hale at [604] 822-8598. If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights, you may contact the Office of Research Services, UBC, at [604] 822-8598.

Consent
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to you.

Your participation in email or Instant Message conversations will be considered as consent to the interview process. Your identity need not be known to the researcher.