

Heritage views through urban exploration: the case of 'Abandoned Berlin'

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ABSTRACT

This article frames the practice of urban exploration and its interest towards abandoned places from a heritage perspective. It is argued that most urban explorers prioritise the excitement of trespassing and the creation of their own narratives over the historic importance of the sites they explore. These 'performative' explorers avoid deliberate attention that may lead to vandalism or touristification – an alternative way of 'preserving by not preserving' that celebrates decay and assumes the sites' progressive loss. To achieve this, they prefer not to disclose exact locations, creating a divergence towards a minority of practitioners who prefer to collect data on history and current state of conservation to make it public. Attention is paid to these 'communicative' explorers, whose documentation renders abandoned places visible, opening further debates about a more inclusive preservation and memorialisation. By distinguishing both heritage views, the objective of this article is to contribute to the enlargement of Heritage Studies by incorporating urban exploration as a space for reflection between loss and bottom-up preservation and interpretation.

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Introduction

Urban exploration is 'an interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover a world behind-the-scenes' (Ninjalicious 2005, 3), yet the main objective of this practice is the illegal trespass of abandoned places (Paiva 2008; RomanyWG 2010; Sipes 2013). Bradley Garrett goes further, defining urban exploration as a 'reactionary practice working to take place back from exclusionary private and government forces, to redemocratised spaces urban inhabitants have lost control over' (2014, 4). However, the growth in popularity of urban exploration, 'with numbers of practitioners rapidly increasing each year' (Garrett 2014, 3), has been exposed to academic criticism that condemns its superficiality by arguing that such a practice prioritises the adrenaline rush of illegally trespassing an abandoned place over its history and physical layout (High and Lewis 2007). Contrary to this critique, this paper argues that urban explorers are extremely sensitive towards the sites they visit, although the way heritage is addressed by this community has clear differences.

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