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

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Defining urban exploration (UE)

- In cities across the world, small groups of urban explorers are seeking out secret spaces, abandoned buildings, and other obscure, overlooked, underused, forgotten, unsafe, and disconnected built structures.

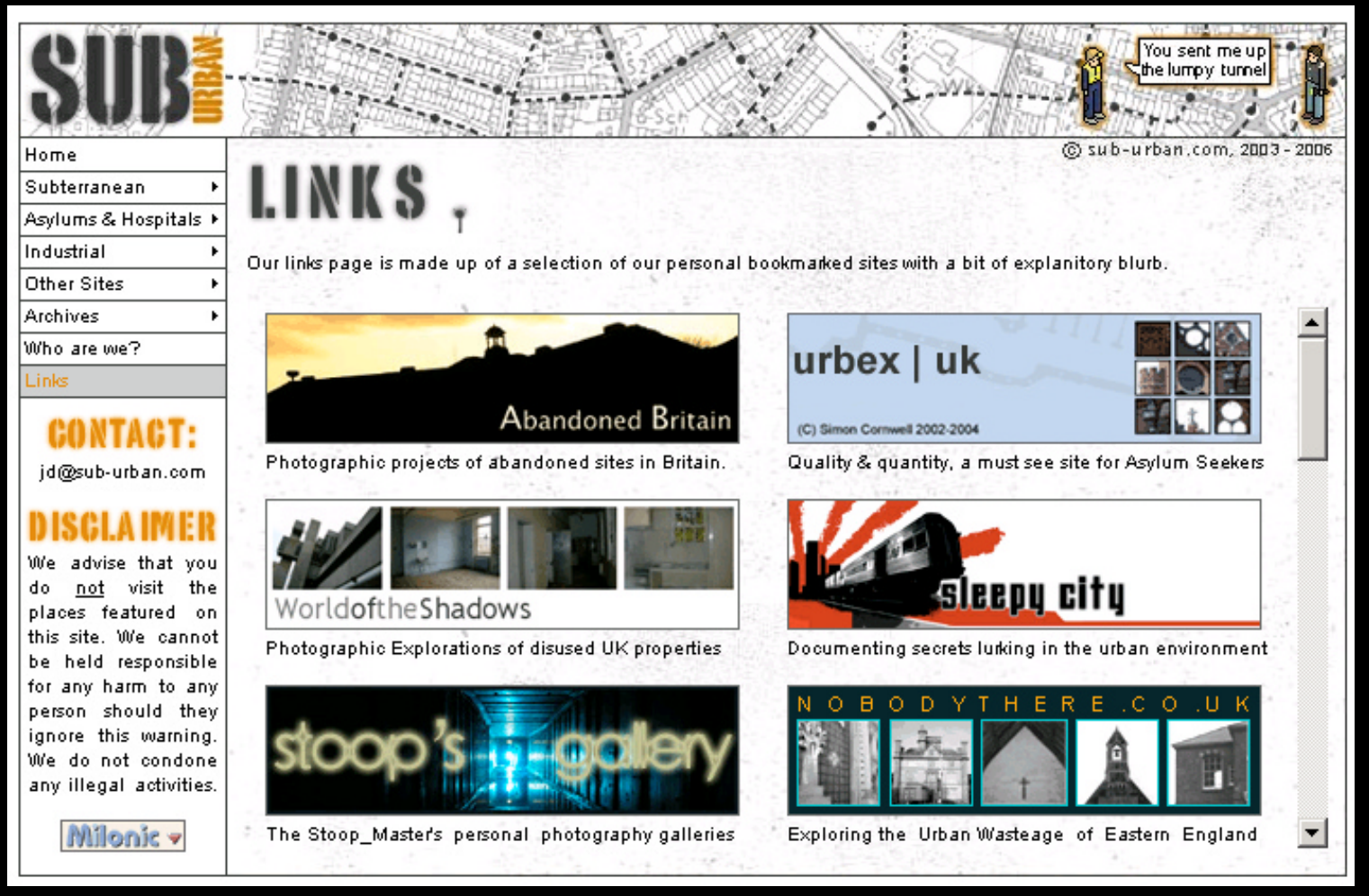
UE targets

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

UE as subculture

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

Link pages - knitting the subculture



(www.sub-urban.com)

UE socio-spatial ethos

- drawing on the sociological concept of ‘accounts’. Justifications that serve to “nullify any negative implications flowing from appearance or demeanour” (Orbuch 1997, 457)
- examined 20 explorers websites (mission logs and photographs) + some interviews in newspapers
- certain shared ideals are evident:
    1. need to document space
    2. thrill of access to forbidden space
    3. desire for authentic spaces
    4. alternative aestheticism of spaces

1. need to document spaces

- "*Exploration serves no purpose when its results remain obscure. … It was only the advent of this publishing tradition that transformed the desultory trespasses of scattered souls into a coherent movement.*", Jinx Magazine, "Psychopathology and the hidden city"

- "*My hope with the photos on this site is that they help convey some of the excitement that I find in the built environment. I hope that they convey some of the rich and layered history that exists in the places where they have been taken, and help you too take a step into the past.*", Steve Duncan, Undercity.org

- does UE provide a viable, relevant means of preservation?
- solely the importance of peer recognition for 'discoveries'

2. thrill of access to forbidden spaces

- "*alot of the buzz comes from seeing what many others cannot … UE simply would not, by definition, be exploration if the corridors down which we creep were well trodden*", Spaceminuspeople

- "*Stepping into another place left untouched by the majority of the public is the biggest attraction for us, when somewhere has fulfilled it's purpose, used, closed down and the people move on….we move in.*", Trumbernick, www.explorationstation.co.uk

- the 'right' to be curious

3. desire for authentic spaces

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

- why is it more authentic if its empty (lifeless?), decaying and abandoned? does stillness and disorderliness somehow equate to authenticity?

4. alternative aestheticism

- "*This is a lonesome alien world whose dark corners and peeling walls have gotten a hold of me and many others; this affinity for derelict structures and often dangerous excitement is the core essence of urban exploring, in my opinion.*", Mott, Opacity.us

- beauty in the experience of place, e.g. the appeal of draining: "*We like the dark, the wet, humid, earthy smell. We like the varying architecture. We like the solitude. We like the acoustics, the wildlife, the things we find, the places we come up, the comments on the walls, the maze-like quality*", Predator's approach.doc, Sydney Cave Clan

- beauty in the subtitle effects of time and nature on structures
- uncanny beauty in disorder

UE ethics

- ethical principles widely expressed in UE accounts,
- defining a kind of ‘pirate’s code’
  1. respect for places
  2. publish versus preservation
  3. freedom of access / illegality of trespass
  4. acceptability of anonymity

- ethics justify their activities and provide distinction to other users of these spaces: vandals, taggers and graffiti artists, ‘kids’, arsonists, thieves and criminals. (position of homeless is unclear)
- ethics separate ‘us’ from ‘them’
- negates the rights claims of property owners and grants moral authority against security guards

The link bit

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

Hacker ethic

- "*Hackers solve problems and build things, and they believe in freedom and voluntary mutual help. To be accepted as a hacker, you have to behave as though you have this kind of attitude yourself. And to behave as though you have the attitude, you have to really believe the attitude*" (Raymond, 2005)
- codification by Steven Levy (1984):
  - access to computers - and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works -should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the hands-on imperative
  - all information should be free
  - mistrust authority - promote decentralisation
  - hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position
  - you can create art and beauty on a computer
  - computers can change your life for the better

‘space hacking’

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

‘space hacking’

- “*Through telling new stories the unknown, undiscovered city can be laid open to critical scrutiny, to new urban practices, new urban subversions.*” (Pile 2001, 264)

1. thinking through how space becomes
2. the nature of territoriality
3. ‘spatial hauntings’
4. ‘cities without people’

1. thinking through how space becomes

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

2. the nature of territoriality & property

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

3. ‘spatial hauntings’

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

4. cities without people

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

Conclusions

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

Questions and suggestions

- these slides are available online at www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/martin/aag_space_hacking.pdf

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

- bibliography:

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