Fresh Rot: Urban Exploration and the Preservation of Decay

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Archaeology has become increasingly aware of its tendencies towards the peripheries of public interest, as well as of non-archaeologists’ often unhelpful articulations of the past. Steps have been taken to alleviate these concerns by acknowledging the interests of diverse groups and by providing direction for their attention and education. The urban exploration community is one popular movement of non-archaeologists who experience the past in a manner not dissimilar to archaeology. However, incorporating these experiences into an archaeological mandate would negate the meaning derived from their practice, which I suggest is a positive, legitimate engagement with the past. Similarly, while their activities loosely parallel archaeology’s preservation agenda, they would not easily yield to regulation. The following examination of the urban exploration community’s engagement with the past – and particularly an invisible past – provides new directions into improving the accessibility of archaeology to a wider audience. Examples are drawn from heritage preservation literature and urban exploration resources alike.

Popular Interests
Recognizing the effect of a “self-appointed minority … denying people their active participation in history” (Shanks and Tilley 1987:25), public archaeology has emerged to reconcile the significance of academic archaeology with the diverse interests of multiple publics (Merriman 2004). The call for people to more directly engage their pasts has led to the recognition of the many perspectives that do exist, and to the broadening of archaeology’s relevance to a wider audience. Yet the conditions fostering this attempted reconciliation with public interests are neither so nobly pedagogical nor easily accomplished:

The problem with archaeology is that too often we are speaking only to ourselves or to a small audience of aficionados who share our sometimes-arcane interests. This is a problem in part because public monies… largely fund [heritage preservation and] archaeology in modern industrial states. Many archaeologists have pointed this fact out and challenged archaeologists to reach out to a general public. [McGuire and Reckner 2005:217]

Another dimension of public archaeology’s emergence is its reaction to non-archaeologists’ interpretations of the past, which may be unhelpful or destructive, politically dangerous, or downright von Dänikenian. However, as Schadla-Hall points out, nothing is easy:

…simply complaining that those who use our conclusions inappropriately are not archaeologists misses the point: if archaeology cannot examine itself in its wider context, archaeologists won’t be able to influence the ways in which archaeological data and information are used. [Schadla-Hall 2007:81]

While public archaeology’s mandate to curb these more problematic interpretive tendencies includes a heavy emphasis on education, its good intentions to foster, yet carefully control, a diverse engagement with the past may not be universally appropriate – even if the particular concern of a group is recognized as legitimate. Unsurprisingly, the emergence and the activities of one such group interested in the more recent past – the urban exploration (UE) community – has
attracted mixed reviews from archaeologists (Sørensen 2007; van Lingen 2005).

UE is the term used to describe the field activities of those fascinated with the interiors of abandoned and decaying buildings, and numerous books, art gallery installations, and websites have been devoted to the often artistic products of their labour. Although this activity includes the infiltration of the restricted areas of built environments that are still in use (e.g. sewers and drainage systems, or anything behind a “do not enter” sign), there is considerable focus on abandoned buildings – particularly on factories, warehouses, and other industrial facilities, as well as on residential areas. One of the few definitive statements emanating from the UE community describes such abandonments as:

…the best and most interactive museums of industrial archaeology and local history you’ll ever find. Those buildings that haven’t been stripped bare often house incredible old machines or technology we’ve all but forgotten today… Whereas in most parts of the city it’s easy to forget the past ever happened, in abandoned buildings you’re surrounded by the past and can’t help but feel connected to it and a part of it. [NinjaLicious 2005]

UE is not amateur archaeology. There is little explicit interpretation of the past evident in their activities, and their products appear to be primarily artistic – yet the practice shows some parallels to heritage management. The ethical philosophy behind UE is apparent in the motto of one of their flagship websites: “take only photos, leave only footprints” (http://infiltration.org). Albeit artistically motivated, that photography (and its electronic indexing) is effectively contributing to the preservation of sites that have been otherwise overlooked by historic preservation management. Moreover, through its experiential use of derelict environments, UE is a legitimate, practical engagement with the past. That said, it would be unlikely for public archaeology to subsume UE without obliterating the practice. The ironic disorder attracting the UE community to abandonments is reflected in their ethos; attempts to organize the practice or to control its places would greatly restrict the meaning of the activity. Similarly, preserving sites of interest to the UE community would effectively strip them of their experiential value as recognized by that community. These statements will be addressed after a more thorough examination of the practice of UE, its experiential nature, and the possible circumstances fostering its popularity.

**Modernity, Ruin, and Punk Antiquarianism**
Contemporary ruin has captivated people – including archaeologists – for some time. In exploring the character of modern society through its material culture, historical archaeologists have, at least since James Deetz’s (1977) attention to small things, been unapologetically concerned with the social impacts of capitalism and with the history of the illiterate. The apparent desire for a history beyond “the lives and times of great white men,” (Ascher 1974:11) is
similarly reflected in the substance of UE. The power of this direct connection with modernity’s detritus is illustrated in Robert Ascher’s (1974) account of the Ellis Island Immigration Station in New York Harbor. The reader is provided with a provocative, humanist, and even personal description of the significance of the landmark:

The buildings were standing but they were abandoned and decaying. The main processing center, where millions […] received their first impression of America, is an immense hall: the roof, stripped by thieves of salable copper, leaks badly; the peeling walls reveal layers of paint, and the Kafkaesque rat-infested corridors and rooms that line the main hall are filled with objects left behind: printed cards in many languages used in literacy tests, sea-going trunks, baby shoes, winter coats, wicker desks, and railroad tickets to destinations outside of New York City. [Ascher 1974:14]

Ascher’s moving description of architecture and artifacts reveals both the former glory and the current horror of the site, as it exists so removed from recognition. Countless people experienced those corridors, the heterodoxic uncertainty of their transition now ironically memorialized in neglect (for those able to access the site). An immeasurable, emotional history pervades the environment via those final material by-products of the immigrant processing apparatus. This confrontational imagery and sensation is very much the stuff of UE, but without a universal manifesto guiding the practice, how has the UE community systematically recognized and, through photography, so beautifully captured that which history has abandoned?

If the UE community is defined by their actions, then the impetus for those actions must reflect a collective disposition, and that disposition must be recognized when examining both the meaning of as well as the meaning derived from that action. Recognition of the aesthetics and significance of decay must have been cultivated through congruencies in socialization (cf Bourdieu 1986). In his discussion of modern ruin, Edensor (2005) hints at the results of growing up in a landscape littered with industrial ruin, with each site having restricted access and restricted history. Like Bourdieu’s (1984:2) discussion of art and music, decay and ruin are meaningful to those who have been explicitly or implicitly enculturated to identify the current and historical implications of these discards of development and progress. I believe this identification stems from the recognition and embracing of two key concepts: imbalance and decline. The first refers to the recognition of an imbalance in written history where the vast majority of people’s stories have not been recorded. This is regularly reflected in photographs of idiosyncratic personal items displayed out of any context of activity or behavior other than the haste or neglect in which they were discarded. The second concept refers to the perception of a decline in our society over the last century – particularly through recent economic downturns, fears of resource depletion, and the ever-growing dissatisfaction with state (and especially military) actions. That these concepts are
symbolically emphasized in both the acts and products of UE bespeaks a critical undercurrent to popular interest in the haunting follies of modernity. As I will discuss later, this symbolism permits the illustration of parallels between the practices of UE and current trends in critical archaeology.

Dylan Trigg’s (2006) brief examination of the UE movement provides another dimension to the motivation behind its gloomy obsession with our recent past. He describes the sense of civic pride the UE community has attached to certain sites, with the scale of value “determined by the severity of decay present in the ruin,” (Trigg 2006:182). This attitude within the UE community is comparable to the late 18th century Romanticism movement’s reaction to the ironic decadence of the industrial revolution, as was radically articulated by Piranesi’s Prison etchings (Huyssen 2006). In contemporary terms, the exoticism of urban decay replicates the Romantic aesthetic, where “the charming beauty of picturesque ruins [is replaced] with the dank, rotten, and often dangerous places of industrial and social collapse,” (Trigg 2006:182). The classical appreciation for and inspiration from the glory inherent in Romantic ruin is now substituted by a celebration of the decline inherent in industrial ruin. In this sense, UE is like punk antiquarianism, its disciples reveling in the self-destructive tendencies of our own progress.

That being said, it is not easy to summarize the full array of interests and purposes driving the activities of a group as widespread and as loosely organized as the UE community. Little has been recorded on their demographic composition (although see McRae 2008 for a start), and less evident still is any unified theoretical statement of intent. My own characterization is at best incomplete, and at worst is simply wrong. Although UE is practiced globally, what I am conveying about the principles and practice of the UE community has primarily been revealed through user-content driven websites from North America (e.g. http://www.uer.ca, http://www.infiltration.org, http://www.oblivionstate.com) which mostly pertain to industrial ruin. It is a heterogeneous group: some are acutely interested in the history and the material culture they actively document and describe, while others are experiencing the weirdness of the unknown with little overt desire for details. Still others seem to be in it for the rush of breaking the law. Even at the most uncritical level of engagement, what appears to unite most activity is a disregard of restriction.

Thus, by defining the UE community through possession of the cultural competence to appreciate the aesthetic of decay, their mass socialization may be recognized as a part of the contemporary zeitgeist. The follies of industrialism are recognized as monuments to constantly reconfigured networks of production and distribution, which ultimately self-destruct amid the final excess of capitalism (Edensor 2005:64). These artifacts of the brutal recent past challenge our notions of historic significance by defying the “canonized definitions and lists of cultural heritage sites,” (Sørensen 2007:90); they challenge
us to question the aesthetics and usefulness of the derelict (Edensor 2005:10); they challenge our conceptions of the future by evoking uncertainty and inevitability with no regard to prestige (Trigg 2006).

The photography of UE exposes the by-products and hidden history of industrialization. It captures those physical manifestations of poverty and displacement so characteristic of the “contradictions between the forces and relations of production, i.e. between capitalist organizations utilizing new technology and the social organization of the workforce,” (Palmer and Neaverson 1998:4) – the same workforce that Jesse Lemisch lamented had “been treated no more fairly by [elitist] historians than they [were] treated by their contemporaries,” (Lemisch 1970:29). The UE community connects to sites discarded by both industrialization and the historical record, where material culture is the window to what Robert Ascher decried was “what the rest of the world – outside of politics – was doing,” (Ascher 1974:11). Both their attraction to modern ruin and their provocative exploration of its invisible histories reflect their disregard of prestige.

The Current Future

UE’s documentation of recent history’s rejects filled a gap – free of charge – by addressing a component of cultural heritage that was initially missed by archaeologists. However, as applications of critical archaeology to the remains of the recent past have increased, that gap has narrowed. It is well known that experiences in the present influence interpretations of the past, and that both interpretation and research funding are controlled by social, political, and economic influences (Hodder 1986; Trigger 2006). The rise of UE probably reflects the same conditions that have prompted archaeological interest in the recent past (Buchli and Lucas 2001a; González-Ruibal 2006; González-Ruibal 2008; Harrison and Schofield 2009; Shanks, et al. 2004). This recent movement within archaeology to critically examine the “traces of rampant modernity,” (González-Ruibal 2006:177) stems from concerns about material culture and power relations (Shanks and Tilley 1987), as well as a more rigorously critical consideration of what Ascher in 1973 was already calling “the later manifestations of the now waning American industrial revolution,” (Ascher 1973:58).

Following Augé (1995), an archaeology of surmodernité (supermodernity) examines the impacts of globalization, the rising speed of communication and transportation, and the creation of non-places. Its purpose is to move beyond the multiple narratives present in every site and to “unveil what the supermodern power machine does not want to be shown,” (González-Ruibal 2008:247). Buchli has suggested that:

...the realm of the wasted beyond the constitutive outsides of social reality is where critical work needs to be done (rubbish studies, divestment studies, the disenfranchised of globalization, the “non places” ... and the general effects of late capitalist ephemerality). [Buchli 2002:17-18]

In particular, this involves a re-examination of how and why materials or places are
discarded or wasted – which is certainly nothing new (Rathje 2001) – but it is the broader picture of modernity’s destructiveness that archaeology’s sensibilities and methods are suited to examine. These include the enormous amounts of waste generated by war and conflict, as well as “major projects of social engineering (from resettlement to genocide), forced industrialization, de-industrialization, emigration and colonization,” (González-Ruibal 2006:178). The approach has lead to critical examinations of contemporary society, including: Buchli and Lucas’ (2001b) assessment of the British welfare system through the archaeology of a single mother’s escape; Zarankin and Funari’s (2008) search for what recent dictatorship had destroyed in Argentina; and González-Ruibal’s (2005) illustration of the concurrent embrace of Dystopia and Utopia in modern Galician peasant identity. The emphasis on oblivion and the forbidden is strikingly resonant of UE.

Significance
To some extent, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) has recognized the significance of modern architecture, although with parameters divergent from those of surmodernité. In their 2003 “Heritage at Risk” report, a number of 20th century buildings are afforded attention, including those no longer commercially viable, such as Brisbane’s Festival Hall (Horrigan and Buckley 2003:39), or those having suffered natural damage, such as Managua’s Old Presidential Gallery (Moncada Aguirre 2003:151). But while the overarching concerns often remain limited to state residences and middle and upper class arts and culture venues, the criteria of significance are clearly widening – although not without difficulties. A final section of the report makes special notice of the unique challenges in determining the significance of 20th century architecture. The problem of an accelerated patina of age, for example, is noted to be characteristic of a site’s authenticity (McDonald 2003:227), but unrecognized as what is otherwise valued by the UE community. More recently, Clark has pointed out the complexity in establishing significance in modern industrial architecture after “recognizing that almost everywhere has some character or value,” (Clark 2005:96). What is preserved must be carefully selected on largely financial but also practical grounds, keeping in mind that state funding is generally best suited for its proudest moments. However, English social housing projects have also been highlighted by ICOMOS (Denyer and Cresswell 2003:203-204), and the recent demolition of the Brynmawr Rubber Factory in Wales has prompted concern for the protection of post-WWII industrial architecture (Denyer and Cresswell 2003:202). These examples are limited and by no means represent a major shift in heritage management interests, but clearly history beyond grandiose state architecture (i.e. what the rest of the world was doing) is being recognized and acknowledged.

Although these properties are still standing, and preservation mandates rest on protecting the sites from disrepair and collapse, standing ruins have also been considered for conservation. Japan’s
Gunkanjima, or “Battleship Island,” located off the coast of Kyushu, was developed in the late 19th century as Japan’s first modern mining facility. Its entire workforce resided within its 6.3 hectare confines – many in the country’s first housing project (Burke-Gaffney 2002). At its peak in the mid 20th century, the island was home to well over 5000 people and had the highest population density on earth. Korean citizens recruited to work in the mines were regularly killed in the hazardous undersea shafts (Burke-Gaffney 2002). Gunkanjima was abandoned in 1974 within days of mining cessation, and since then access has been highly restricted (Cossons 2007). Its derelict high rises are still littered with personal items left over from the mass departure, composing the ghastly environment which has drawn widespread attention from both covert and permitted photographers and filmmakers interested in its testament to the dreadfulness of excess (Cossons 2007; von Hausswolff and Nordanstad 2002).

Contrary to the narratives of its former citizens (Burke-Gaffney 2002; von Hausswolff and Nordanstad 2002), the Japanese government has recently moved to consider Gunkanjima a site of national historic significance, symbolizing the country’s powerful industrial growth and development (Keinosuke, et al. 2005). Numerous issues subsequently come to mind – the most immediate of which is the interpretive processes guiding the selective production of heritage. Of interest here, however, is whether the approval and protection of Gunkanjima and similar places under historic preservation mandates – regardless of the messages conveyed – would restrict the interest and access of the UE community. More importantly, should this be of any concern? I think so. After describing what I believe to be the underlying, experiential nature of UE, I will explain why this engagement with the past would be threatened by preservation initiatives, why it would be unlikely for a public archaeology mandate to subsume UE without obliterating the practice, and what heritage management professionals may learn from UE.

**The Experiential Practice of Urban Exploration**

The very act of UE, which generally involves trespassing, is itself symbolic of the irony inherent in abandoned sites. Explorers choose to transgress these laws on the grounds that their activity is harmless. Ninjalicious (2005), a figurehead of the UE community in North America, opens his book *Access all Areas* with a statement about the importance of understanding local pertinent laws before exploring, but rejects those restrictions to access on the grounds that there is no moral offense being undertaken. On the “ethics” section of his website, he maintains that “urban exploration is free, fun and hurts no one”:

Genuine urban explorers never vandalize, steal or damage anything – we don’t even litter. We’re in it for the thrill of discovery and a few nice pictures, and probably have more respect for and appreciation of our cities’ hidden spaces than most of the people who think we’re naughty. We don’t harm the places we explore. We love the places we explore. [http://infiltration.org/ethics-
It is useful here to refer to Edensor’s (2005) discussion of the organization of space still apparent in industrial ruin, which draws heavily on the order necessary in its former operation: the separation of space for skilled and unskilled workers, the placement of machinery and guidelines for its use, and the disciplinary infrastructures controlling production targets and normative behavior of workers. Often, traces of these redundant administrative functions are still visible in written notices throughout the site. The “remaining signatures of hierarchy and authority” (Edensor 2005:67), now completely powerless, help characterize the protest against rampant capitalism inherent in the act of UE; the final, most trivial order set out in industrial ruin is the feeble restriction of access. Thus, the symbolic and legal defiance of restriction is central to UE’s ironic re-appropriation of abandoned architecture.

UE’s direct engagement with history is interesting to archaeology for two main reasons. First, the photographic products, while perhaps not always organized in the most practical manner, are useful at a basic level of documentation. Even Trigg (2006:182), a philosopher by training, recognizes the basic alignment between the ethical underpinning of UE and the preservation agenda of industrial archaeology. However, the photographs suggest more than architecture. The artistic liberty taken during that documentation helps illustrate the second interest for archaeology, which is the “remarkable hands-on approach to what may be termed a quasi-academic study of a primary phenomenological field of enquiry, namely the bodily encounter with the material world,” (Sørensen 2007:90).

Thus, in the scope of public archaeology, where “publics” are encouraged to experience the past in ways that are meaningful to them, acts of UE should be viewed as laudable. Recognizing the impacts of the accelerated rate of change in modern society, the UE community has turned to the recent past in what may be a search for identity and belonging in an increasingly globalized world (Appaduri 1996; Stolke 1995). Additionally, their engagement with the neglected past is most often undertaken locally, in the communities in which its participants reside, allowing a basic experience of history at a personal level. Local ruins may hold value as former workplaces of local residents, particularly when their disuse may have led to significant economic changes in that community. Similarly, abandoned houses provide an even deeper personal experience—bordering on voyeurism—which can be experienced in the discarded remains of family. There is little likelihood that written documentation of such places would be able to convey the processes that led to abandonment as meaningfully as acts of UE allow those events to be experienced visually, sensually. Following the archaeology of surmodernité, some things simply cannot be reduced to text (González-Ruibal 2008; Olsen 2003; Zarankin 2008).

Moreover, in our increasingly secular society, acts of UE provide more than an engagement with the past. Experiencing modern ruin constitutes an element of identity for the UE community,
evoked through an ethereal connection with the past, replete with boundaries and rules for behavior while visiting (cf Mohs 1994). The site is part of a perceived landscape in which the individual is immersed, and that experience is part of their development and maintenance of identity (Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Ingold 2000). The enculturation provided by modern ruin characterizes the dispositions and actions of the UE community. They are naturally interested in that which has shaped their environment – its global and local implications – and by extension in that which has shaped their own identities; by documenting it, they are actively recreating it, and thus reproducing themselves.

In spite of this direct, meaningful interest in the past, and in spite of the preservative documentation they carry out, UE may be incompatible with both public archaeology and historic preservation mandates. Discussions of moral justification aside, UE remains fundamentally unlawful, and despite its purists’ claims of seeking permission before entering derelict buildings, the majority of the communities’ actions are illegal. The defiant nature of UE is at odds with public archaeology, and their appreciation of decay is at odds with historic preservation. These points will be addressed below.

**Urban Exploration, Public Archaeology, and Historic Preservation**

Since the products of UE are not detrimental to archaeology, there is no reason to intervene on pedagogical grounds. However, encouraging their interest in the past would likely be met with contempt or simply disregarded, as its endorsement or legitimization by external acknowledgment (i.e. a public archaeology agenda) would change its meaning. Opening derelict buildings to the public would likely expand interest in those sites to a broader group of people, but by interpreting sites’ social and historical significance (e.g. by contextualizing sites by their position within broader networks of industrialism, or through revealing narratives of former employees), the experiential nature of UE would be lost. It is the rejection and neglect of these sites that draws the interest and appreciation from the UE community, and how the “bodily and experiential confrontation with … the materiality of ruin, desertion and decay works on the human experience of places,” (Sørensen 2007:90).

Similarly, even a minimal level of controlled public access would require careful attention to safety details, ensuring attendees are not harmed while on site, and not all areas would likely be publicly accessible – especially on larger industrial sites, which are widely favored by the UE community. Such guidance would only be alienating, as the break from control is central to the experience. Their embrace of disarray is symbolized by the irony of their harmless trespassing, by the visible breakdown in the sites’ productive ordering, and more broadly still by the uncontrollable, self-destructive, self-wasting rate of modernity. Moreover, by extending heritage preservation mandates to include the derelict buildings beloved by the UE community – thereby protecting them from further decay and destruction – their appeal to the UE community would be lost,
and their activities at those sites would probably stop. Sites must remain “rejected” to hold meaning, and stabilization would affect their symbolism as discards from modernity.

This paradoxical relationship between UE and historic preservation is perhaps best framed by the words of Clem Labine, who described preservation as un-American in his plea “to reverse the use it up and move on mentality,” (Labine 1979:18). Preservation is contrary to the basic historical concept of the frontier that shaped modern America, where resources are endless, and their use and discard is necessary for progress. UE revels in that wastefulness. The practice does not seek to bring dead or dying places back to life through restoration or stabilization: it reverses them as zombies and sets them loose online or in dramatic collections of photography to expose the unsightly outcomes of unfettered progress. It is the derelict character of sites – their non-maintenance and the inevitability of their collapse – and the unobstructed and uncontrolled experiences of those sites that attract UE.

To illustrate, the National Trust for Historic Preservation (National Trust for Historic Preservation 2003:211) describes the proposals to preserve the Hackensack Water Works of Oradell, New Jersey. This 19th century pumping station served much of northern New Jersey until its closure in 1990, and it still houses machinery that spans the technological evolution from steam to electricity. Bergen County has requested permission from the state to demolish the site, save for a few remaining fragments that would be converted into an artificial “ruin.” A separate organization, the non-profit Water Works Conservancy, has proposed a preservation and restoration plan for the entire complex that would convert the site into a series of educational and culture centers. The debate remains unresolved (http://www.hwwc.org/proposal.html). Neither solution would likely interest the UE community, who might feel insulted by the artificial ruin, and marginalized or bored by its conversion into a public facility.

Although the interests of the UE community are not likely a priority of consideration for preservation groups interested in the Hackensack Water Works, their interests could provide novel directions for the interpretive display of the complex. These issues will be explored below.

At the End of the Day… Who Cares?

Although it is a more extreme case, powerful conclusions may be drawn from Gunkanjima. Japan’s interest in the site as a historic marker of industrial prowess is certainly legitimate, but it illustrates the complexity of historic preservation agendas. Surely Gunkanjima’s captivating ruins would draw the attention of its citizens and tourists alike, but the story told may not fully reflect the suffering of its most vulnerable former inhabitants. This example highlights the risk of neglecting contributions of the otherwise unseen or unheard in history.

UE is a method of transcending the potential restrictions of interpretation and experiencing the past on an unencumbered and purely meaningful level. This should be
of interest to historic preservationists who are concerned with the ways in which people experience the past – either materially or through textual interpretations. Such consideration may provide support for interpretive minimalism of historic sites, allowing people to focus on either the minutiae around them or the overarching environmental presence. More broadly, it should be of interest to those concerned with the distance of archaeology from popular interest, and it may provoke inspiration for new means to facilitate people’s engagement with the past.

Recognizing the potential value of the photographic products of UE, perhaps a more tangible objective for heritage management professionals would be to look for ways to work with the UE community. As suggested above, this would be inherently difficult if it involved organizing or controlling their access to sites – but organizing their products might be a more realistic option. Developing a database of photography may provide a useful resource for those interested in the study of the modern built environment and the processes of decay. Furthermore, by infiltrating the UE community’s primary forum for sharing information – their numerous web pages – simple suggestions could be made that would further improve the utility of their products for such study. By instilling some notion of standardization in the photographic products of UE, the transition of decaying sites over time could be better understood. Sites are often repeatedly visited by the same or different individuals, creating multiple galleries of the same location. Of interest to archaeologists as studies of discrete site formation processes, the transition of sites through time may be better understood by encouraging more systematic photography (i.e. of the same objects or features from the same general angle and distance with each visit; cf http://invinciblecities.camden.rutgers.edu/intro.html). Historic preservationists and archaeologists alike may be similarly interested in the decay or perseverance of various materials in various atmospheric conditions. So long as such suggestions do not interfere with the primary actions of the community, they may not be rejected outright.

**Conclusion**

Without recognition of the sites attracting the UE community as historically significant, their immediate actions are by and large beyond the scope of heritage management. Although they do not contribute to the preservation of sites in the standard sense of stabilization and protection (such actions are antithetical to their concern), and although they are not likely to receive institutionalization of their activity warmly, their actions parallel archaeology in the investigation and documentation of the past. The UE community is interested in that which has shaped the modern landscape, its material residues, and, through its experience, contemporary society and their own identities. At the very least, as an art form, their creations are powerful and meaningful.

The interests of the UE community should be recognized by archaeology and heritage management professionals as a legitimate engagement with the past,
responsible for interesting and potentially useful documentary results. Is this the “pop” archaeology of surmodernité? Probably. Both subject matter and motivation are certainly similar, but without a unified statement of purpose or clearly pronounced interpretations of the products of UE, the analogy is dim. For now, their existence outside of the mandates of archaeology and heritage management is to their advantage: their primum non nocere initiative permits tolerance of their actions through neutrality or indifference, and ensures their continued ability to fill a gap – no matter how significant – in documenting the ever increasing archaeological record.

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