# Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints

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*Introduction*

Places which have lost their original purpose and have been left to their own after use do not enjoy much acceptance in a society which focuses on economic profit and performance. These so-called "abandoned places" – for which, in German-speaking countries, the term "Lost Places" is used – include abandoned factories and residential buildings, former military sites (e.g. air raid shelters) or public facilities (e.g. hospitals), but also sewage systems. In contrast to the general notion, these places can neither be described as useless nor as dead spaces. As they have become unpoliced and are no longer regularly cleansed, abandoned places are urban nature reserves for plants and animals finding nesting spaces, food sources and territories. In addition to that, there are a lot of functions which abandoned places fulfil in today's society: e.g. accommodation for homeless people, adventurous playground for children or sites for sports like skateboarding or climbing (Edensor 2005).

For the past few years abandoned places have been increasingly visited by people, so-called "urban explorers", who feel attracted to their special atmosphere. "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints" is the motto of this leisure activity called "urban exploration". In a master thesis, emphasis is laid on the analysis of the motives of the urban explorers. They are characterised, and an attempt has been made to analyse what kind of abandoned places they prefer to visit and why they practise this hobby.

*Method*

Dealing with this topic is mainly characterised by two aspects. On the one hand, not much research in this leisure activity has been done so far as it has existed in the present form for a short time only. On the other hand, research with the help of conventional empirical methods (e.g. questionnaire) is complicated due to the low societal acceptance towards the hobby and the refusal of too much publicity within the urban exploration scene. An important aspect of urban exploration is the sharing of adventures with an online community by posting stories and photos of the abandoned places on the internet. Therefore, besides a literature research, an online content analysis of 222 comments posted on four appropriate German websites dedicated to this subject ("rottenplaces", "hidden-places", "fotocommunity", "Urbexers Against Vandalism") was carried out in the course of this study.

The content analysis of already existing online communication shows several advantages:

- You can expect a higher willingness by the probands to reveal personal information within the online community and therefore more open and honest communication contents than with other research techniques (Taddicken and Bund 2010) – which seems to be very important in the case of the present topic. In order to prevent thoughts, opinions or statements from being influenced by an interviewer, there was no intervention into the communication process either (Mühlbacher, Füller and Jawecki 2007, cited in Taddicken and Bund 2010).

- Due to the communication in written form it is reproducibly documented and can be used for content analysis without having specifically been collected (Taddicken and Bund 2010).

- The data are available in the form of digital text modules and can therefore easily be extracted, which considerably reduces time spent on analysis (Taddicken and Bund 2010).

## *Results*

The analyses of both the literature and the online comments show similar results: urban explorers are mainly male, under 30 years old and prefer to visit industrial ruins. These diverse "playgrounds" attract urban explorers, who mostly belong to the middle class and therefore in their everyday life usually frequent places completely different to abandoned factories (High and Lewis 2007).

As can be seen in Table 1, urban explorers are primarily fascinated by immersing into an authentic past (67%) and by the beauty of decay (31,1%), which they try to preserve for the future with the help of their documentation (mainly consisting of photos predominantly taken by ambitious amateurs or professional photographers). The mutations of an abandoned place between their visits – caused by fauna and flora, other visitors or weathering – are part of the enjoyment of these places and contribute to anticipate the inevitable transience of existence. This is in contrast to managed heritage sites, which are maintained in a state of arrested decay and cannot be recognised as living sites of memory (Garrett 2011).

Table 1: Distribution of urban explorers according to motives on the basis of an online content analysis (n=106, up to 3 entries possible)

| Motive | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Interest in history, documentation | 71 | 67 |
| Otherness | 10 | 9,4 |
| Atmosphere | 24 | 22,6 |
| Thrill | 23 | 21,7 |
| Decay | 33 | 31,1 |

Another reason for the increasing attractiveness of abandoned places where apart from urban exploration also other leisure activities take place (e.g. geocaching) is the lack of unregulated urban areas as space is more and more divided up into functional spaces, turned into private property and surveyed to guard against inappropriate uses. This rather risky leisure activity therefore also serves

to escape the increasingly regulated urban space and to experience the thrill of the forbidden and unexpected (Edensor 2005).

As the present study shows, urban exploration can be described as a reasonable – in the context of e.g. history research or documentation – and life-enhancing leisure activity carried out on sites, which represent important urban nature reserves. Due to the fact that most urban explorers post their adventures on the internet, monitoring of this increasingly popular activity can easily take place with the help of online content analyses.

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