

# Fringe History

They call it Creeping, Infiltration, Draining, Urban Caving, Vadding, Trolling, Building Hacking, Reality Hacking, Urban Spelunking...But is it “history”?

by Gordon Bond

Garden State Legacy #1, September 2008. ©Copyright 2008. All rights reserved.

Slowly decaying in an Oxford, NJ field is what may be the state's last example of a “round barn.” If you do a Google.com search on “round barn” and “Oxford,” all but one of the relevant hits about it come from a seventeen year old from Bloomfield named Justin Gurbisz. On his website, [www.VacantNewJersey.com](http://www.VacantNewJersey.com), may be found an interesting little history of this uncommon architectural form along with the pictures he took in February of 2007, both inside and out, recording what may very well be only a memory with the next strong wind. The only other mention comes from Preservation New Jersey who included it among their 2002 list of most endangered barns.

Yet history, per se, isn't really one of Justin's interests - at least not according to his MySpace.com page. Still, his site includes some rather interesting and little-known New Jersey ruins with all but forgotten histories all their own. He's an example of a controversial hobby that sometimes flirts with mainstream, albeit decidedly amateur, history.

The best respected of their number went by the name “Ninjalicious.” They will enter into places that are, technically, illegal to be in. They're mostly young and, truth be told, easy to dismiss as frivolous thrill seeking kids who get off on spooky old buildings and the macabre. Yet, as in Gurbisz's case, these self-styled “urban explorers” do sometimes create a valuable record of modern ruins.

Urban exploration goes by many names and has its roots in the basic curiosity of our human nature - what lies behind that door? Down that hall? Behind that sign that sternly commands, “Do Not Enter”? Its history is as old as the advent of the urban landscape itself. Parisian Philibert Aspaire's curiosity about the catacombs lying beneath the city led him to explore them by candlelight in 1793. Some view him as the original “cataphile” - and also as urban exploration's earliest known casualty. Evidently he became lost and his body not recovered until some eleven years later. He was still clutching the keys to the exit, that, though mere feet away, had apparently eluded him in the blackness.

But urban exploration can also encompass another aspect of our nature that draws a vicarious thrill from breaking the rules and the lure of the forbidden. A faction of urban explorers pursue their hobby with a strict code of self-imposed ethics - don't vandalize, leave things as you find them, don't intentionally damage anything. Trespassing, however, is not always high on the list of sins to avoid. Indeed, in order to explore the hidden passages of even long-abandoned buildings, it is sometimes necessary to ignore warning signs and perhaps jimmy a window or two. And this is the murky side of urban exploration - the part that sometimes breaks the law and creates the greatest divergence with mainstream forms of historic documentation.

Beyond adventure, curiosity and the thrill of being “bad” there is also the appeal of the aesthetic and the artistic. The patina of decay is often a favorite subject of artistic photographers - a rusting old car, left forlorn in a field, for example, has a character the gleaming new model in the showroom doesn't. Then there's the surreal experience of walking through abandoned, decrepit buildings, paint peeling from the walls and the only happy color coming from the graffiti taggings. If the proverbial walls could only talk!

So what exactly do urban explorers do? And does it have any relevance to the mainstream historical community?

## Defining Urban Exploration

Urban exploration is something of a catch-all term for a variety of activities, making any hard and fast definition elusive. That there is anything about “UE” that even approaches a discipline is largely credited to one man, the late Jeff Chapman of Toronto, Canada. Reflecting the legally dodgy element of the hobby, Chapman adopted the colorful pseudonym “Ninjalicious” and launched the website [www.infiltration.org](http://www.infiltration.org) as well as a print publication *Infiltration*, self-described as “the zine about going places you're not supposed to go.” In 2005 (the same year he passed away of cancer, unrelated to his UE activities) he even published an entire book on the subject, “Access All Areas, a user's guide to the art of urban exploration” offers an unflinching and unapologetic look at both the fun and the dangers of the UE world.

Chapman's definition of urban exploration gave it the more solid context of ethics, dragging it into the view of mainstream

popular culture. But he certainly wasn't the first to attempt to bring a sense of organization to the activity. In 1959, a "Signals and Power" subcommittee of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Tech Model Railroad Club held semi-systematic excursions into the steam tunnels and onto the rooftops of various buildings on the MIT campus - a practice they called "hacking" long before the term became associated with computers.

In 1968, citizens of Paris, inspired by tales of the catacombs used by the French resistance during World War II, followed in the spirit of Aspairet by not only exploring their depths but communicating with one another in printed newsletters under pseudonyms. The San Francisco "Suicide Club" included "fringe exploration" as among its activities in 1977 (eventually becoming the Cacophony Society). In 1986, Australia's Cave Clan expanded their traditional spelunking activities to include storm drains and other manmade "caves."

The internet, of course, has been a tremendous boon to the hobby, networking likeminded explorers all over the world. Digital photography has allowed images of hidden places to be shared via websites and blogs. It was only a matter of time until mainstream culture took notice and, slowly, UE has begun to define itself as a more specific set of activities.

According to Chapman's book, "Speaking broadly, urban exploration consists of seeking out, visiting and documenting interesting human-made spaces, most typically abandoned buildings, construction sites, active buildings, stormwater drains, utility tunnels and transit tunnels, though with lots of other possibilities on top of those basics. The areas explorers are interested in are usually neglected by or off-limits to the general public, though there are some exceptions to this, and it's certainly not the case that urban exploration always involves trespassing."

In her capacity as a professional architectural historian and preservationist, Stephanie Hoagland, got to climb up into the famed arch at Washington Square Park in Manhattan. Though people once used to have parties in and atop the structure, these days, very few ever get to see the inside or the view of the park it offers - and her job has allowed her perfectly legitimate and legal access to many otherwise off-limits corners and vistas of buildings throughout the city. While perhaps stretching the definition for hardcore urban explorers, by this criterion, her experience could arguably fall under the UE category. As Ninjilicious put it, "exploring isn't synonymous with recreational trespassing."

There is, of course, overlap with other activities, which don't fall anywhere near to "doing history." Sneaking into a theater is considered "infiltration" - which can be an aspect of UE - but the goal is to see a free movie, not to explore or document the space itself. Playing hide and seek in an abandoned building is considered "urban adventure," - again part of UE - but the primary purpose is to have a cool place to play, not specifically to explore the building for its own sake. Some seek the challenge of accessing "behind the scenes" areas of actively occupied buildings - going through those "authorized personnel only" doors. Obviously, this can't be considered doing history.

There is, however, a form of UE which can be described as entering places for the primary purpose of seeing, exploring and documenting those places - and that includes seeking out and understanding the place's history for context. It is this definition which produces what might arguably be considered legitimate historical records like that of the "round barn."

Jeff Chapman is considered to be responsible for this emerging maturity and it shouldn't be any wonder. His partner and co-publisher, Liz Clayton, told me, "In real life he edited a history magazine in Canada."

Nevertheless, it's urban explorations "bad boy" side that can be both its appeal and its repulsion.

## Trespass

Urban exploration in this context doesn't always mean breaking the law, but it can. That some do indeed trespass has given the hobby a bad name and may be one of the major reasons it is dismissed by many in both the amateur and professional history worlds - even by those who are fascinated by the very same kinds of structures.

Chapman spelled out his ethical philosophy on his website, "I don't think there is anything wrong with urban exploration, at least not the type described here and on 95 percent of the other sites on the Internet, and I can't pretend I do. 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...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."

Chapman couldn't bring himself to put the kinds of "for entertainment only; don't try this at home" style disclaimers found on other sites to be on the safe side. "So, no disclaimer," he stated, "Not for your entertainment only. Please do try

this at home.”

Chapman was right that many urban explorers can really care about the places they explore. Justin Gurbisz does include the standard disclaimer on his site, but he is also protective of the places he has documented. “Please note, some location names have been altered to protect the identity and well-being of the owners, and yourself,” he also added. “Some town names are also undisclosed for safety reasons and for the well-being of the structure photographed.”

“I am very willing to give out any history that I know about the locations posted on Vacant New Jersey,” he warns on the contact page, “However, please do not e-mail asking for directions, you will not get a response.”

“Some places I document, I would have no problem giving up information about,” he told me, “[but with] other structures I would be more hesitant, just because I would hate to see the information be obtained by the wrong people.”

And, while some may not want to admit it, perfectly respectable historians have been known to bend the trespassing rules. “The argument for the other side is of course if the explorers did not ignore ‘no trespassing’ and ‘keep out’ signs, then a great deal of history would be permanently lost” concedes Kevin Olsen, a member of the Society for Industrial Archaeology (SIA) “I recall Jim Ransome stating that if he paid attention to the ‘no trespassing’ signs, his ‘Vanishing Ironworks of the Ramapos’ could never have been written.”

Though they would not speak on the record, at least two respected members of the historical community admitted to having used such methods to secure documentation of endangered buildings. It was a matter of weighing the ethics of breaking the law or risking the loss of one last chance to document buildings quite literally under imminent threat of the wrecking ball.

Breaking the rules, however, can also have the effect of ruining it for everyone else. “Railroad enthusiast groups are often at odds with urban explorers” Olsen explained, “since the presence of the latter in subway tunnels gives all visitors a bad name and makes it harder for the legitimate groups to get permission to enter.”

“The railroad historical societies I belong to, The National Railway Historical Society and the The Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc. are careful about not trespassing and don’t encourage others to do so,” comments rail historian and author Joel Rosenbaum. “If there is an abandoned station or interesting Right of Way they try to get it preserved and restored. Some structures and rights of way are beyond economic and architectural restoration. The closer scrutiny of photographers photographing transportation after 9/11 and some arrests and confiscation of film and cameras has lead rail history buffs to be careful what and where they photograph and explore. While rules have eased, some overzealous security agencies don’t always follow the newer laxer guidelines. Those who trespass hurt the rail preservationists.”

Regardless of how well-intentioned some urban explorers may be at heart, however, “No Trespassing” signs are often put up for more than just territorial reinforcement. Abandoned buildings can be full of all sorts of serious dangers, from breathing in asbestos to falling through a structurally unsound floor to running afoul of anyone also trespassing for more illicit purposes.

“ANY glorification of ‘urban exploration’ would be exceptionally inappropriate,” warns the SIA’s Vice President, Jay McCauley (the emphasis is his). “They are breaking the law, period. They are visiting sites that contain unknown hazards, and should something happen to them, their rescuers would also face dangers. Old industrial sites probably contain hazardous materials, such as asbestos, chemical residues, etc. that could be brought out and expose innocent bystanders, family members, etc. It takes huge amounts of effort to make these sites safe for the public.”

McCauley has little use for urban explorers and no qualms about calling it as he sees it. “I think the notion of some ‘higher code’ for these criminals is extremely suspect. In my limited exposure to this activity, I didn’t see any evidence of the kind of professional research our members engage in. When the activity starts with dangerous criminal trespass, and the criminals have no formal training or experience in the study of industrial archeology or related disciplines, I find it very hard to assign them noble intent.”

Which brings up the salient point. Criminality aside for the moment (after all, not all urban exploration involves trespassing), is there any historic merit to what these folks are doing?

## **But Is It History?**

Professional architectural historians like Stephanie Hoagland are often called upon to make the case for the historic significance of a structure. They draw from a broad range of resources to find clues as to what a building looked like at a given period or the cultural context of how it was used. Hoagland mines such diverse sources as the Historic American Buildings Survey and Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Sanborn Insurance Maps, postcards, newspaper clippings, blueprints, personal photographs and letters - pretty much anything where they might find a critical clue in piecing together the historical narrative of the life of a building.

“These are interesting” comments Hoagland as she scrolls through Justin Gurbisz’s VacantNewJersey.com. The roughly hewn beams revealed in one of his pictures of another barn catches an eye trained to notice such details. Pictures showing the ruins of a mansion remind her of a project her firm is working on where they’re tasked with stabilizing similar ruins. Even if no photos exist of a building, having images of similar structures from the same period can be useful in making educated guesses. “Pictures are always useful!”

Nevertheless, the main divide between urban exploration and mainstream historical exploration (aside from the sometimes trespass issues) seems to be very much akin to that which sometimes manifests itself between the professional and the amateur - between those who went to school for it and the dedicated hobbyist.

Not that there isn’t fruitful cooperations between these two worlds. But for those who have devoted a lifetime to what they see as a serious, respectable discipline, it’s understandably difficult to suffer even well-meaning amateurs when the survival of artifacts and their accurate interpretation is at stake. Now throw the occasional law-breaking into the mix and nicknames like “Ninjalicious” and you can see why some have a hard time treating urban exploration with respect - particularly when “doing history” isn’t always their primary motivation.

“Some of it is just for the spooky value,” comments Rosenbaum. “But personally I feel some of these people are violating the law and just doing it on a dare. [They are] endangering themselves and perhaps others who may try to follow up on the articles.”

“[Some] explorers just enjoy exploring for the thrill, and history is not their main priority” admitted Gurbisz. “However, other explorers I have met, do seemed to be interested in the history of the places they explore.”

“While ‘Urban Explorers’ do take pictures and write about what they see,” Kevin Olsen concludes, “they do not publish in legitimate archaeological or historical journals. Nor do they deposit copies of their work in public archives. So no, they are not legitimate historical entities, however valuable their contributions may theoretically be.”

“Taking a few poorly lit pictures and posting them to a blog is not archeology or historical research by any stretch of the imagination,” asserts Jay McCauley.

The Society for Industrial Archeology’s President and Preservation Chair for the Roebling Chapter that covers the New York metropolitan area, Mary Habstritt, defined the situation this way, “I would say that the essential difference between urban explorers and industrial archeologists is the desire of archeologists, both amateur and professional, to decipher industrial remnants. Our thrill comes from puzzling out what once happened at a factory site -what did they make? how did they do it? what equipment did they use? how did materials move through the plant? Urban explorers get a thrill from visiting not just abandoned, but forbidden places. We do not sanction trespassing.”

“Ultimately” Olsen concludes, “the solution is to find a way to get legitimate archeologists, architects, urban geographers, and civil engineering historians into these sites.”

So what about it? Is urban exploration a type of historical research? The answer would seem to be no. “Doing history” isn’t a large enough component or motivation for what they do, even by amateur historian standards. Indeed, when UEs do include historic backgrounds, they usually glean it from the existing professional sources rather than from original scholarship.

Nevertheless, mainstream historians shouldn’t dismiss the urban explorer community too quickly. As people like Justin Gurbisz here in NJ demonstrate, while not the prime motivator, history does factor into what a certain set of them do. The value of this can be demonstrated by the example “round barn” in Oxford cited at the beginning of this article.

Preservation New Jersey identified it as the Pfaff barn, built in 1933 - something Gurbisz didn’t have in his history on his website. Nevertheless, while other pictures of it may exist, in terms of ready accessibility for both professional and amateur historians - or anyone else, for that matter - his series of images are wonderful. In addition to overall pictures, there are also the kinds of detail shots that architectural historians love. A search of the HABS/HAER drawings didn’t even turn up anything on this barn. Considering its dilapidated condition, it is very possible that someday soon, barn history aficionados will rely on the pictures of a teenage urban explorer from NJ if they want to know what it looked like.

## Common Ground

“If explorers were given the chance to add to legitimate history journals, I think some would quickly take advantage of the opportunity” speculates Gurbisz. “I’d say it is a fair guess that quite a few explorers would seize the opportunity to help preserve history in a legitimate fashion.”

It could be argued that rather than reject urban exploration as a whole, the mainstream history community might be better

served if it acknowledged and encouraged those in their numbers who demonstrate a true respect for the historical contexts of the spaces they explore.

Obviously, this wouldn't apply to all UE hobbyists. While trespassing in this context, as criminal activities go, is minor compared to the lesser motives of others (vandalism, thieving, illicit activities like drug use or prostitution), law-breaking certainly isn't something the history community should be seen encouraging. Eschewing such shady methods would allow for the backing of legitimate organizations. That, in turn, would impart a respectability to some urban explorers that might enable them to gain better access to sites. And, perhaps it would be that air of respectability that would keep at arm's length those who do urban exploration solely for the thrill of being bad.

"[H]ow many journal editors would worry about the Department of Homeland [Security] showing up in their ivory towers with pointed questions?" asks Kevin Olsen. "If the explorers confine their explorations and articles about a ghost towns and abandoned tugboats, then no problem. However if they start to write about water supply systems, railroads, transit systems, and shipyards, then I think things will get very interesting."

"I don't see any reason why the two approaches to appreciation shouldn't be able to coexist in the world." Liz Clayton told me. "I imagine 'real' historians think that urban explorers have the potential of 'ruining it for everybody' by possibly getting injured within or causing damage to a site, and that conversely the urban explorers would fear the so-called 'legitimate' (cough) historians would be so overprotective of sites that they might make them permanently inaccessible to the reverent but curious."

Oleson certainly benefited from such a cross-pollination of sorts. "My wife and I had for one of our first dates been on a hike through the Newark City Subway and on another occasion crawled into Jim Lee's Morris Canal turbine tailrace tunnel."

Urban exploration defies any one-size-fits-all definition. To dismiss them *all* seems unfair and to deny some of the motivations that animate perfectly respectable mainstream historians.

The Eastern State Penitentiary museum over in Philadelphia provides safe, guided tours and displays that explore the penitentiary system in western society. But anyone who has been there can attest to a visceral, emotional effect of those abandoned corridors, paint peeling, with their rows of debris-filled cells that goes beyond historical scholarship. The New York Tenement Museum will be opening floors of "stabilized ruins" where the peeling layers of wallpaper speak more to the generations who lived there than any restoration could.

Perhaps the divide doesn't have to be all that great.

As Mary Habstritt put it, "we are alike in finding the beauty in these places and feeling the loss when they are gone."