

Heritage Views through Urban Exploration: The Case of ‘Abandoned Berlin’

Pablo Arboleda¹

This research was developed while the author was a student of the World Heritage Studies - International Master Programme at Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg, Germany. Currently, he is a doctoral candidate at Bauhaus University Weimar, Institute for European Urban Studies, Belvederer Allee 5, 99425 Weimar, Germany.

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 prioritize 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.

Keywords: urban exploration; abandoned places; entropic and alternative heritage; heritage awareness; documentation and communication; Berlin

Introduction

Urban exploration is ‘an interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover a world behind-the-scenes’ (Nijalicious 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

¹ Email: pablo.arboleda@uni-weimar.de

working to take place back from exclusionary private and government forces, to redemocratise 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 prioritizes 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.

Literature review

The paper documents how most practitioners appreciate the experimental – or performative – component of exploring abandoned places over traditional heritage considerations that focus on a top-down decoded sense of classical beauty, material conservation and the glorification of a common identity (Waterton et al. 2006; Harvey 2008; Harrison 2013). It is argued that these 'performative' explorers establish an intimate relation with abandoned places that allows them to construct their own narratives, fitting with discourses on meaning-making through embodied actions (Crouch 2002; Tuan 2003). Aligned with this, it is particularly relevant the notion of 'heritage as experience' (Smith 2006), where heritage is not a building but what is experienced at such building. Yet, in order to maintain such level of intimacy and sense of personal belonging, performative explorers opt for keeping locations a secret as an exclusionary way to protect the places from eventual vandalism and touristification. This represents a case of 'entropic heritage' (DeSilvey 2005) and 'alternative heritage' (Merrill 2014), where secrecy respectively seeks progressive ruination and lack of attention by the greater public and institutions as the ideal fate to maintain the authenticity of the sites.

The decision whether to publicize or not the exact locations creates an internal rift in the urban exploration community, causing tensions and frictions. A minority of practitioners opt for documenting abandoned places with images and historical information in order to communicate this data to the rest of the society. Without renouncing to the performative component, their practice goes beyond it, bringing to the concept of heritage the idea of 'communicative action' (Dicks 2000; Harrison 2004). In Harrison's words, 'culture is produced and reproduced by a desire to communicate with

others' (2004, 14) and yet, these 'communicative' explorers also produce heritage when contributing to open public debates about inclusive preservation and interpretation. The permanent relation between communication and heritage awareness (Di Giovine 2009; Kearney 2009; Nyaupane and Timothy 2010; Shen 2010), serves to present communicative explorers as heritage activists once abandoned places have been neglected by official institutions. Such a transparent and democratic communicative approach pursues the objective of rendering abandoned places visible, bringing them closer to the idea of engaging heritage as a 'Common Good' (Seal 2012).

The theoretical background used in this article puts existing literature on urban exploration under a heritage framework. Attention is paid to the contributions made by Bradley Garrett, an American researcher who accomplished five years of ethnographical investigation within a London-based urban exploration crew. His broad analysis of the urban exploration's idiosyncrasy (2013), together with specific studies on subjective approaches to re-discover temporality and memory (2011a; 2011b; 2011c; 2014), serve as a source of inspiration throughout this piece. It is worth mentioning that Garrett's research has been strongly criticized due to the masculine nature of urban exploration, and consequently, the dominant masculinist approach within his findings (Bennett, 2013; Mott and Roberts, 2013). Even if Garrett and Hawkins (2013) reject any sort of implicit gender discrimination, the question of how urban exploration – as eminently male practice – may generate a heritage discourse that excludes women remains open for future debates. In any case, the final objective of this article is to demonstrate that a wide range of topics involving urban exploration, which have been mainly studied from cultural geography, are also susceptible to be re-formulated, contrasted and complemented within heritage studies – something that it is evident throughout the article in its scope for deliberately relating urban exploration literature with heritage contributions. Finally, the fact of identifying two different kinds of urban exploration in regard to their heritage assumptions allows for claims for a more malleable meaning of heritage that is able to incorporate contemporary and transgressive practices mediating between *positive* loss and emerging debates on bottom-up preservation and interpretation (Robertson 2012).

Method

The city of Berlin is chosen due to the political, social and economic changes that it underwent in its recent history, making available a large amount of abandoned places

(Apicella et al. 2013). Their lack of function and peculiar decayed aesthetics contribute the city's status as a hotspot for urban explorers. Within this context, a semi-structured interview with Berlin-based explorer Nathan Wright was conducted. Wright runs a meeting point for explorers in this city, the Cozmic Gallery Photo Club located in Kreuzberg, and he fits the profile of performative explorer who considers that publicizing abandoned places is a way of endangering them. In contrast to his opinions, another semi-structured interview was conducted with the well-known urban explorer Ciarán Fahey, reaching the point of accompanying him in some of his infiltrations². He fits into the definition of communicative explorer, being the author of the website 'Abandoned Berlin', where, since 2010, a whole set of Berlin's abandoned sites have been put on the map. His website is visited by an average of 4,000 people every day and has been considered by the British newspaper *'The Guardian'* as one of the best city blogs around the world by its recently launched 'Cities' site. Moreover, in February 2015, the editorial group 'Bebraverlag' published a book with Fahey's pictures, experiences and collected historical information on abandoned places in Berlin. The dichotomy expressed by both subjects provides two very different approaches within the urban exploration practice regarding secrecy and its subsequent heritage implications such as the suitability of available information, the possibility of potential conservation or the importance of inclusive interpretation.

Last but not least, since the urban exploration scene mostly uses new communication technologies to interact (Garrett 2014), on-line investigation has been carried out in search of comments and opinions in the 'Abandoned Berlin' website. Under the name of 'document-based ethnography', Bennett (2011) has demonstrated the reliability of this method for its capacity to measure practitioners and ordinary people's response to the public exposure of urban exploration and abandoned buildings – something that, extrapolated to this article, allows to delve into the heritage debates that such public visibility entails. Garrett (2011a) criticizes this method when it is solely implemented without empirical participant observation, a critique that is not applicable to the present research due to the infiltrations I accomplished together with Ciarán Fahey and punctual individual trespassings I made in over 20 abandoned properties in Berlin.

² The author declares that he counts with the permission to identify the two interviewees by name.

Performative exploration: preserving through ‘laissez-faire’

Luke Bennett indicates that many urban explorers are concerned with the ‘performance of the act’, meaning that they ‘enjoy the uncertain legality of their practice and relish the “cat and mouse” game of gaining access and evading the attention of site owners or their security guards’ (2011, 426). This feature is certainly present as urban explorer Nathan Wright confirms: ‘Once I know I’m done I walk out and the security guy comes to say “Hey you!!!” but I say “It’s fine, I’m leaving...”’ But I do enjoy avoiding the security guard, it’s a lot of fun’ (Personal communication, May 7, 2014). However, High and Lewis have condemned the superficiality behind this performative approach to the extent of comparing urban exploration as ‘analogous to the sport of hunting [while explorers] say very little about the history, function and physical layout of the [buildings] being explored’ (2007, 54). This indicates that most explorers pay more attention to the practice’s transgressive nature than the sites where it takes place, a feature that Garrett assumes by acknowledging that ‘urban exploration appreciates history in different ways and does not offer the promise of preservation’ (2013, 33).

Yet, performative exploration celebrates the institutional neglect towards abandoned places, which allows practitioners to create an intimate process with the city where they learn how to ‘feel’ places by the use of ‘individual freedom, imagination and subjectivity’ (Garrett 2014, 6). This approach should not be trivialized since, even if it does not pursue a traditional and decoded interpretation of the sites they explore, it puts the possibility of constructing ones’ own narratives on the table – ‘rather than waiting for those narratives and experiences to be offered’ (Garrett 2013, 4). Therefore, considering the ‘experience’ as an inherent part of critical approaches to heritage (Smith 2006) in which authentic meanings are created through body encounters (Crouch 2002; Tuan 2003), the performative component in urban exploration is not only a new way of visiting heritage, but rather urban exploration is – in itself – a way of making heritage where abandoned places acquire a relevant status for explorers in opposition to the neglected and decayed state of the buildings consented by political authorities’ inaction. It is then not surprising that, although urban exploration has been presented as a sort of tourism (Fraser 2012), for practitioners, it seems evident that ‘you can’t buy real experiences’ (Garrett 2014, 4) and something actually requiring admission and ‘labelled an “experience” is pretty much guaranteed to be exactly the opposite’ (Ninjalicious 2004,

27). Yet, aligned with how Smith suggests that the simple act of managing and conserving ‘become things that are *done to* sites and places, but are not seen as organically part of the meaning-making process of heritage itself’ (2006, 94), performative explorers reject any sort of official guidance that may ostensibly threaten the authenticity of their experience. Hence, they cannot be presented as traditional ‘heritage protectors’, but rather as committed embodied actors whose personal engagement stands over an experience that, otherwise, would be artificially imposed.

As a matter of fact, urban explorers prioritizing the performative approach give life to the ‘laissez-faire’ phenomenon, a perspective that contemplates letting the places go while avoiding the ‘temptation to interfere in their destiny’ (Lang 2008, 223). In line with this, Bradley Garrett refers to an explorer whom he asked whether he would like to see the abandoned Belgian hotel where they were spending the night preserved in some way. According to Garrett, the explorer laughed and said ‘Hell no, that place is a shithole. Look at it!’ (2011b, 1053). In a similar way, Nathan Wright asserts that, back in Berlin, there used to be:

over a million Soviet troops, once they moved, what are you going to do with these buildings? They cost too much to run, they cost too much to repair, it would cost too much to install electricity and heating. For what purpose? Just to keep it? To do what? [...] They are just disappearing. I think it’s better to leave them as they are, to rot. Nature likes these buildings, wild animals live in there, they are making their home... Nature takes everything back and that is where buildings come from: bricks are made from clay and cement comes from earth. (Personal communication, May 7, 2014)

Due to the derelict state of abandoned buildings, this ‘laissez-faire’ perspective allows the expansion of invasive wild vegetation which advocates the redefinition of landscape (Torres 2004; Jorgensen and Tylecote 2007; Martin 2014). This is something that, for Wright, has a higher value in the comparative dimension between natural decay and human destruction. According to him, the actual ruin in *Beelitz Military Hospital* (Fig. 1), where Adolf Hitler and Erich Honecker were treated in 1916 and 1990 respectively, is a major example:

You have a whole bunch of tree branches growing from the floor. And the building is still there... such a solid structure! Although I wouldn’t advise walking through that forest because the roots have gone through and it’s slowly coming away but nature is really fighting. The building is still standing, it came through all, so I think something stays there for a long time, while for other things life comes and goes. (Personal communication, May 7, 2014)

Fig. 1. Beelitz Military Hospital

Source: Author

As seen, far from being perceived as a negative condition, for the majority of urban explorers the progressive and natural decay is a cultural asset which deserves to be passively maintained – or, preserved by not being preserved – in order to make visible how our society does not escape from the passing of time. In heritage terms, Caitlin deSilvey (2005) calls this fully non-interventionist approach ‘entropic heritage’, where it is preferable to let structures ‘melt instead of remaining frozen’, and consequently, letting the places go is an option that does not necessarily correlate with the traditional interest that puts heritage preservation over decay. She documents the difficulty of adopting such a radical view by heritage institutions and local people, although she acknowledges that lighter touches that attempt to ‘arrest’ or ‘manage’ decay are usually encountered. Aligned with this, in the context of the graffiti subculture, Sam Merrill’s (2014) discussion of ‘alternative heritage’ refers to erasure of graffiti as an integral part of the heritage practice. Here, the assumption of disappearance is always present and this entails a sort of alternative authenticity that would be threatened if it encountered institutional management and protection. Similarly, for performative explorers, on-going decay, including the disappearance of abandoned places, is an assumed and accepted possibility that could not be maintained if there was deliberate mainstream attention and if traditional conservation policies were implemented. Therefore, these explorers opt for not revealing the exact location of the sites and consequently, urban exploration remains an exclusionary practice (McRae 2008), while abandoned places remain as *alternative* sites outside of traditional heritage regulations.

It is entirely the point about the secrecy around a sites’ exact location that creates a rift between performative explorers and those practitioners who prefer to make further information about abandoned places accessible to the public. Tensions and frictions are then encountered, exemplified in Nathan Wrights’ words when he asserts that ‘not everyone deserves to go to these [abandoned] places, not everyone has the right to do everything’ (Personal communication, May 7, 2014) – a statement that undoubtedly rises

a strong contradiction within urban exploration as a practice that claims rights to the city (Pinder 2005).

Secrecy: The rift between performative and communicative explorers

Publicizing the infiltrations, and the exact locations where they take place, is not always well-received by the majority of urban explorers. Indeed, it is not difficult to find comments made by self-proclaimed 'real' explorers that complain about Ciarán Fahey's communicative approach in his website 'Abandoned Berlin'. The following was written by an anonymous reader in a post entitled '*Zombie Insanatorium: Waldhaus Buch*', one of the sanatoriums where the Nazi regime carried out its euthanasia programme:

First of all, I must say some words about the way you publish those sensitive locations... we were in there some years ago... a few times and it is hard to see those fu**in [*sic*] new graffitis and distortion ever since [...] please think about deleting the details and maps for your locations, it is really enough to share your photos, don't you think? What is your personal advantage of this? We love this location very much and we always try to avoid all those vandals there, of course also on all other abandoned places... we do not need an urbex tourism!

Nathan Wright reinforces this view by stating:

I don't like publicly giving away where the locations are because within a shorter period of time, if you display where they are and if it's a really good location, it can be vandalized. For example, there is a [derelict Soviet] hospital in Jüterbog, [located 65 km. away from Berlin], that has the surgical lights and operation stuff, and everything is getting ruined and rusty – but naturally. People think they are doing a good thing by putting the geo-coordinates and pictures of these on the internet [...] And then people go there and take the material remains to sell them on the internet, or selling them to clients, and that annoys me. (Personal communication, May 7, 2014)

However, Ciarán Fahey justifies his communicative approach in a claim that suggests he is one of the exceptions within a more hermetic scene:

I started the blog in a format where I write the exact location, how to find it, how to get in, etc. I did it because I thought it was a shame to have these abandoned places with nobody experiencing them, such a waste, so I decided it was better to share this information [...] I had discussions with people asking me to stop publishing addresses. It's usually due to fears of vandalism if more people are aware of these places. So they actually care for the places and I can appreciate that. Then, I thought about it for a while and realized that the places

would get vandalized anyway. Most of the places I wrote about were already vandalized before I wrote about them, and then you get more comments from people who say ‘the whole world is going to know, you are going to have tours coming here, etc.’ It’s not that they don’t want the places publicized, it’s that they don’t want them to become tourist attractions. Like *Teufelsberg* [one of the West’s largest spy stations during the Cold War] or *Spreepark* [a derelict fun park that in GDR’s times hosted 1.7 million visitors per year] are now tourist attractions. Both have tours. But this has more to do with Berlin than anything to do with urban exploration. (Personal communication, April 25, 2014)

The position put forward by the anonymous commentator and Nathan Wright is one which is usually found among urban explorers: ‘Mainstream media sensationalisation is actively discouraged within the larger community to prevent unnecessary attention’ (Garrett 2014, 3) – the issue that is often at the heart of concerns about protecting sites against potential vandalism and radical touristification. In the context of Berlin, the majority of practitioners criticize Fahey’s approach, arguing that a sense of local belonging is threatened by those ‘just chasing clicks to seek revenue for their websites’ (Stonington 2014). Fahey responds with an ironic statement – ‘I don’t remember signing up for any “rules” to break’ – to finally acknowledge that ‘in a game with no rules, every rule is broken’ (as quoted in Stonington 2014). This is aligned with urban explorer Moses Gates’ words reported by Garrett: ‘[urban exploration] is a community of people who by their inherent nature break rules and expectations. Expecting them to then follow the rules of a community is patently absurd’ (2013, 15).

In any case, it is remarkable how just by taking a look at many of the comments in the ‘Abandoned Berlin’ website, the other side of the coin is rendered visible. Ordinary people beyond the urban exploration scene mostly express gratitude for revealing abandoned places, making evident a generally positive reception by the rest of society. Here are only a few random examples of the comments that readers have been writing on the website since 2010:

I went in today. It was a really sunny day so it was nice but I expect it to be sexier during early mornings. Even some fog could give more feeling to the pics. Thanks for your posts! The blog is great! A lot of info!

We were there yesterday. There was no problem at all: we could go in very easily and then looking around with no fear of the neighbours..... There were two other groups there. The place was really nice! Thanks for the tip!

Another great article. Thank you so much for this site, the frequent updates and the guides too. This is seriously my number one website ever.

This acclamation has been highlighted by Luke Bennett as a potential fracture point within the urban exploration community that leads to a competitive dimension as ‘imperial “scientific” explorers of the 19th century did’ (2011, 428). In this sense, the notion of being ‘the first’ increases the rift between performative and communicative explorers. This is something that Bradley Garrett experienced when he wrote an entry in his personal blog about an abandoned place in England that was particularly difficult to enter. Later, an urban explorer expressed his strong criticism towards this Garrett’s post:

You make it sound like you are pioneers. Many of us have been in and out of here for years. The only difference is the rest of us haven’t crowed about it in a way that ensures increased security (and probably official interest). Well done you pretentious prat. Place-hacked? Well yes, hacked, damaged, ruined. (quoted in Garrett 2013, 72)

Although Ciarán Fahey prefers to allocate this pioneer experience into a sharing and healthier level – ‘I tell people where the places are so they can go and experience them on their own and gather their own impressions from them (personal communication, April 25, 2014) – he is concerned with the fact that it is always better to leave certain information unsaid so everyone can fully enjoy urban exploration. In his entry ‘*Submarine Bunker Lager Koralle*’, a bunker used by the Soviet army to store rockets, one of the readers posted a comment that included a GPS map indicating the exact location of the hatch entrance. Fahey decided to remove such comment because, as he immediately explained in another comment:

you gotta leave some exploring for people to do! Part of the fun of this exploration is the exploration itself. If everybody just provides GPS coordinates and pinpoints every location directly, then half – if not most – the fun is gone. It’s about the hunt, finding these places, it’s about discovery, uncovering mysteries and finding shit out!

Several remarkable aspects arouse from Fahey’s previous statements. On one hand, as a communicative explorer, he *also* enjoys the physical excitement of illegally trespassing abandoned places. This is demonstrated by the slogan of his website: ‘IF IT’S VERBOTEN IT’S GOT TO BE FUN’, (‘verboten’ is the German word for ‘forbidden’).

On the other, far from conceiving his information tips as a given path to be followed, he *also* perceives urban exploration as a practice where one has to experience abandoned places on his own, leaving space to construct his own narratives. As mentioned above, these two aspects identify performative exploration, but they are *also* applicable to communicative exploration. The clear difference between both approaches relies on making abandoned places public or not, where communicative exploration stands out is for its aim to present urban exploration as an inclusive practice. This makes the work of communicative explorers even more significant because they do not only engage in illegal action, but they also work against the grain in many performative exploration circles, stirring rules up internally.

By spreading the voice, communicative exploration puts larger claims in terms of preservation on the table. Here, the ‘laissez-faire’ perspective is acknowledged but not accepted, and explorers ‘gather evidence before decay of the physical place eliminates the history that it embodies’ (Bennett 2011, 424). In the case of Berlin, the decayed aesthetics in abandoned places, which gives the alternative atmosphere to the city (Girot 2004; Bader and Schoneberg 2012; Untiks 2012), is threatened by gentrification (Levine 2004; Drissel 2011; Balicka 2013), or commodification (Colomb 2012). Consequently, communicative explorers – rather than celebrating the neglect towards abandoned places – perceive their imminent loss as a cultural tragedy: ‘It’s a race against the clock, trying to document [the sites] before the next stage in their evolution. It’s only a matter of time before the buildings look like all the others’ (Fahey, personal communication, April 25, 2014).

Communicative exploration: Heritage awareness and documentation

Within heritage studies, the term ‘heritage awareness’ has become a reiterative idea during the last years. It plays an important role in heritage as a factor of sustainable human development among the changing processes attached to current globalisation (Cottbus Declaration 2012). Moreover, a large amount of academic contributions place ‘communication’ as a core strategy to raise the awareness of heritage sites (Di Giovine 2009; Kearney 2009; Nyaupane and Timothy 2010; Shen 2010). According to this terminology, communicative exploration is a major example of heritage awareness since communication is a necessary factor for its purpose of outreach. Communicative

explorers have access to abandoned buildings, with the possibility to change their fate by inviting the rest of the society to experience them too and aligning them with the idea of heritage as a 'Common Good' – in which a cultural value belongs equally to everyone (Seal, 2012). As Michael Cook writes:

I think that there is immense social value to be gleaned from revealing and rediscovering infrastructure and other places that we've been made and induced to ignore... our cities are more productive, more democratic, more sustainable, and more secure when we are collectively aware of and understand the infrastructure that serves us. (quoted in Garrett, 2011a, 3)

Ciarán Fahey clearly states that making sites visible is an essential part of his duty. In his posts, he reiterates that the information collected should be publicly acknowledged, accessible and shared. For instance, in reference to the former *Soviet Military Administration Headquarters* located in Berlin's neighbourhood of Karlhorst, he mentions in his post '*Soviet Swansong*':

Please share this with the world, so others may get a taste of Berlin's fascinating past before it's lost forever. The ongoing gentrification of this great city is shameless and it won't be long before there's nothing worth exploring at all.

Or, in the entry '*Olympic Effort for an Abandoned Village*', concerning the *Olympic Village* built for the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin:

This guide is designed to help others get to and enjoy a wonderful site before it's too late. They're still in the process of restoration, so I guess it won't be long before they're charging people in and all the fun's gone out of it.

McRae (2008) points out how the data collected by urban explorers is valuable and useful. According to him, the recounting of history and spatial conditions are relevant and important, and instead of playing them down for having been collected in an illegal way, they have to be interpreted as added knowledge in the understanding of cities. It is not difficult to condemn urban exploration for not having an immediate practical utility, however, it can also be viewed from a perspective where documentation has a value in itself so that urban imagery can also be studied through embodied experiences and not only in theoretical assumptions (Garrett, 2011c).

In this sense, McRae (2008) writes about the urban explorer Reduxzero, whose pictures and essays on *Edmonton Stockyards* in Canada are essential to understanding a neglected complex that was later consumed by a massive fire. He also provides the

example of explorer CopySix, whose work was viewed as environmental activism when his photo display of a polluted site resulted in its cleaning by authorities. In addition to this, Garrett (2011b) refers to urban explorer Winch, who maintains a website on the *Cane Hill Asylum*, an abandoned hospital in London. In the website, pictures of the on-going decay that is taking place after its abandonment can be found, complemented by the gratitude from former workers and patients who complain that official institutions have no intention of preserving the memory of this site. The British Library has now contacted Winch to archive all the documentation he had publicized. Communicative explorers witness changes in the city and those transformation processes would be forgotten if this practice was not present.

Just recently, the German Embassy in France contacted Ciarán Fahey in order to ask for his permission to translate some of his posts and publish them. Moreover, the editorial group 'Bebraverlag', whose focus is on contemporary history in Berlin and Brandenburg, asked Fahey to compile pictures and updated posts for a book. The book was finally published in February 2015 under the name '*Abandoned Berlin*' and it was officially presented in the GDR museum in Berlin. Paradoxically, high-level institutions such as an Embassy and a museum consider Fahey's information relevant, even if it was collected through an illegal practice. This makes the line between law and social acceptance blurred, or as Fahey poses: 'I know what I'm doing is illegal but that adds to the fun, and I feel what I'm doing is for a good cause because I'm documenting a part of history' (personal communication, April 25, 2014). After several years of urban exploration in Berlin and its surroundings, Fahey demonstrates self-confidence in the work he does when accepting the challenge of established institutions that 'leads one to question whether they truly consider [urban explorers'] activities transgressive and legally edgy' (McRae 2008, 114), while trusting in the purpose of heritage awareness behind them.

The truth is that today, many abandoned buildings are better documented than some traditional heritage sites (Garrett 2013). For example, if a person is interested in knowing about the history and original material qualities of the *Garbáty Factory* (Fig. 2), a cigar factory run by a Jewish family prosecuted by the Nazis, Fahey's testimony and graphic data are one of the main sources of information before it was converted into luxurious lofts. Here is the transcription of the some comments provided in that particular entry entitled '*Garbáty's Abandoned Cigarette Factory*':

Anonymous: There used to be parties in this building, at least in the courtyard in the summer. I guess it would have been in 2003 or 4...

Anonymous: This location is 'over'! They make some lofts inside...

Irish Berliner: I know - it's a shame. You need to move quickly to enjoy these wonders before they're ruined by modern banalities.

Anonymous: IT'S PASSED - from now on, there are people living there inside, you cannot visit it anymore. REST IN PEACE.

AJB: Thank you very much for this report. My great-grandfather worked in this factory from roughly 1906 to 1926, and I've been trying to reconstruct his experience for a book. I visited the factory a few years ago, but never made it inside. This was very helpful. I have some great stories from inside this factory if you would like to hear them.

Irish Berliner: Hey AJB, would love to hear your stories man. Get in touch!

This forum reveals many of the concerns that both communicative urban explorers and the rest of the society share. It tells about gentrification and renovation processes, alternative uses before this happened, and it demonstrates Fahey's interest – aka Irish Berliner – in sharing his information so everyone can enjoy a certain site. Furthermore, it opens a new dimension that is extremely relevant in order to perceive communicative explorers as responsible in raising heritage awareness: the notion of people, memory and their relation with the space and place.

Being in an abandoned building can lead to a person thinking about how inhabiting the site might have been, and it raises questions such as: 'Where they happy? Where they sad? Where did they go?' (Fahey 2014, 7). In fact, during the last few years, it has been evident that people should be at the core of memorialisation and interpretation in order to democratise the meaning of heritage by giving voice to its actors (Harrison and Schofield 2010; Smith et al. 2011; Claval 2012). Such empowerment is driven by the intrinsic communicative character of heritage (Dicks 2000; Harrison 2004), that allows the recovery of memories by bringing them to the present. Communication in urban exploration's documentation is then established at two levels: from actors to explorers and from explorers to the rest of the society, demonstrating the common desire for sharing stories where explorers act as engaged mediators.

Hence, similarly to Winch and the human stories behind *Cane Hill Asylum*, Ciarán Fahey had some opportunities to contact people who worked or lived in the buildings he visits. His trespassing in *Teufelsberg* (Fig. 3), caused an American veteran to contact him

with, what he later described in an entry called '*A Teufelsberg Tale*'. Regarding this enriching experience, Fahey mentions:

For me that was the most important, the most interesting part of the *Teufelsberg* story, talking to this person who was directly involved and getting information from him. I actually get quite a few comments and emails from people who formerly worked there. Veterans still feel a huge connection to the place – even if it's 20 years since it was abandoned. It shows how special these sites are. These people are concerned about *Teufelsberg*. They feel it's just being allowed to fall, getting trashed, with graffiti everywhere – some of the street art is actually good but I'm sure the veterans wouldn't see it that way. They put a lot of work into it. They were at the front line in the Cold War so it must be disappointing for them to see how the city is ignoring *Teufelsberg* now. It's almost a betrayal. (personal communication, April 25, 2014)

Fig. 2. Garbáty Factory (renovated)

Source: Author

Fig. 3. Teufelsberg

Source: Author

Since the 1989 reunification, political authorities in Berlin have perceived abandoned places as a burden that makes the city's landscape unappealing while restricting its development (Sheridan 2007). The potential preservation of sites has often been deliberately neglected with the objective of creating a new white-washed image of Berlin (Colomb 2012). On the other hand, it is evident how communicative exploration, due to its capacity to document, contributes to raising heritage awareness by making buildings and their stories available. In this sense, it is not surprising that urban exploration has been usually presented as a sort of 'archaeological engagement' for its 'investigation into the remains of the past [...] creating a window for reflection and contemplation' (Sorensen 2007, 90-91). This parallelism is established to the extent of considering urban exploration as an amateur practice committed to the 'broadening of archaeology's relevance to a wider audience' (Rowdower 2011, 1). Therefore, in the context of abandoned places, the contribution of communicative explorers as heritage activists – or, as heritage Robin Hoods in Seal's sense (2012) – is particularly significant since they informally replace the role of heritage institutions in the compilation of historic data and graphic archives while giving voice to people's concerns. This makes the whole process in which communicative exploration is embedded a demonstration of bottom-up approaches to heritage or 'heritage from below' (Robertson 2012).

Conclusion

It is possible to understand the main features of urban exploration within the existing frameworks of critical heritage studies. Indeed, the practices of urban exploration can broaden the range of heritage practices and this paper points to the utility of further research into the practices of urban exploration and its meaning for individuals and communities. Urban exploration is a transgressive practice that is focused on a common interest in abandoned places, it is also undoubtedly fractured around the practice of disclosing the location of sites. The majority of practitioners prefer to limit their engagement with a 'performative' level, meaning that their main goal is to simply enjoy the experience of illegally trespassing while constructing their own narratives and, therefore, they reject *any* sort of conservation and management policies and practices. These explorers care about the sites, and the fact that they do not make public the exact locations where their adventures take place has to be understood as a way to avoid vandalism or touristification – something that ultimately reinforces their sense of personal belonging. On one hand, DeSilvey's 'entropic heritage' (2005) is applicable here because these explorers value a 'laissez-faire' approach to heritage preservation. They do not consider progressive and natural decay and eventual disappearance of places as something negative but rather as a positive cultural attribute. On the other hand, Merrill's 'alternative heritage' (2014) explains explorers' decisions to reject official attention, allowing them to accept the loss of abandoned places as a paradoxical way to preserve their authenticity. In any case, it is clear that, in relating performative exploration to these non-interventionist theories, the practice strengthens its *experimental* character while emerging as an additional view against traditional heritage approaches.

Tensions are found between performative explorers and a minority of practitioners whose approach is rather 'communicative'. Communicative explorers *also* enjoy the performative aspect of exploration, however, they pursue public visibility so that abandoned places remain available for everyone, highlighting communicative exploration's inclusive spirit. Here, urban exploration is not an end in itself, it is rather a practice that engages with the society, spreading a critical voice about the way the city is witnessing its dereliction, and anticipating or denouncing potential threats to its heritage. Communicative explorers offer a new dimension of heritage as 'communicative action' (Dicks 2000; Harrison 2004). By acting as unofficial heritage activists, they are dismissed

by performative explorers as well as denounced by authorities, however, they are actually recognized by certain high-level institutions and ordinary people that appreciate their collected data. In heritage terms, this is an undeniable proof of raising awareness, which incorporates into the imagery of our cities what is otherwise being neglected by official institutions.

By digging into the two heritage views expressed in this article, it has been demonstrated how urban exploration, as a contemporary and transgressive practice, can contribute to enriching debates in heritage studies. In order to accommodate urban exploration's ambivalence within this field, heritage discourses should progressively consider loss as one *positive* end, while at the same time, they should support the continuing debate on bottom-up preservation and interpretation.

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Notes on contributor

Pablo Arboleda is an architect graduated at the School of Architecture of Granada (Spain). He has a Master Degree in World Heritage Studies from Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg (Germany), where he graduated with a thesis on abandoned buildings in Berlin and the subculture of urban exploration studied from a heritage perspective. He is currently a Ph.D. Candidate at Bauhaus University Weimar (Germany), where he investigates the phenomenon of unfinished public works in Sicily

from different angles involving critical geography, contemporary archaeology, urban sociology and artistic approaches.

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