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Urban Exploring – City – Heritage – Identity

Abstract: This article presents the urban exploring movement, which, in spite of being regarded as quite controversial, is gaining more and more popularity in Poland as well as all over the world. It is an urban cultural movement operating on the border of legality, which is often mistaken for vandalism.¹ If one were to consider the phenomenon from the perspective of culture studies, it should be seen in broader terms, with all its positive aspects. Urban explorers document their work with the use of photographs, historical descriptions and maps of places which are usually not taken into account by people and authorities responsible for heritage. The explorers facilitate the act of preservation of cultural and historical memory and popularization of heritage, which is usually beyond the reach of tourists. It, however, presents a more complete picture of humans and their civilization as well as the history of a given place.

Key words: urban exploring, city, heritage, identity

Forgotten heritage

What is the general meaning of the term heritage? Referring to UNESCO guidelines, “heritage” comprises all objects, buildings, places, and all kinds of other manifestations of human activity, which are characterized by an “outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science” or by an “outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.”² The encyclopedia, in turn, suggests that it

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² *UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, 16 November 1972 r., Art. 1.

is simply a movable or immovable property acquired as an inheritance³ or the right to the possession or transfer of something by inheriting.⁴

Heritage is therefore everything that we have received from our ancestors. The cultural perspective requires an expansion of this inheritance by adding the intangible part of the legacy – oral traditions and expression, traditional performing arts, rituals and festivals and traditional craftsmanship,⁵ which often affect us stronger than items and buildings. It should be noted that these two types of heritage are, in fact, inseparable. What, for example, would be the significant role of the Warsaw Water Filters without their history and legendary personalities like Starynkiewicz and Lindley?⁶ Especially intangible heritage is prone to be lost and forgotten if there is no memory of it to be preserved. If we forget – it will disappear without any chance to be retrieved.

One of the statements identifying the message of the Konferencja Naukowa Dziedzictwo Kulturowe Europy – mity, stereotypy, tożsamość (International conference: Cultural Heritage of Europe, myths, stereotypes and identity) claims that with the moment of our birth we become immersed in a specific heritage. During the process of growing up and creating our own history, we can deny, reject, and not accept it, but we are never able to be entirely free from it.⁷ Indeed, it is impossible not to agree with this statement. Being raised in a certain environment we first absorb from our immediate surroundings by listening to family stories, practicing traditional rituals, and learning history at school. Other important sources of memory are as follows: memorabilia, houses and estates, photographs and images, as well as the legends repeated by our grandparents. Our historical consciousness evolves with age and broadens our perspective on the scope of heritage. We develop a feeling of belonging to a particular place, region, state, or nation. But while thinking about “my heritage,” “my country” or “my city,” do we accept the entire history it carries? Its widespread and far-reaching past?

However unaware of it, we do present a selective approach to what is considered heritage. We often only notice the newly renovated historical monuments covered in tourist guides as main landmarks of the area we reside in.

³ “Dziedzictwo,” in: *Encyklopedia Gazety Wyborczej*, Vol. 4, Kraków 2005, p. 354.

⁴ “Dziedzictwo,” in: E. Sobol (ed.), *Ilustrowany słownik języka polskiego*, Warszawa 1999, p. 179.

⁵ R. Towse, *Ekonomia kultury. Kompendium*, transl. H. Dębowski, K.L. Pogorzelski, Ł.M. Skrok, Warszawa 2011, p. 272.

⁶ *Warszawskie Filtry Pomnikiem Historii*, <http://www.mpwik.com.pl/o-firmie/filtry-pomnikamiem-historii> [accessed on: 4 November 2013].

⁷ *Opis Konferencji Naukowej „Dziedzictwo kulturowe Europy – mity, stereotypy, tożsamość”*, <http://www.kultura.uj.edu.pl/index.php/7-aktualnoci/1366-konferencja-naukowa-dziedzictwo-kulturowe-europy-mity-stereotypy-tozsamosc-polska-rumunia-ukraina-bialorus-kra-kow-15-05-17-05-2013> [accessed on: 10 May 2013].

They include churches, palaces and castles, cloisters, villas and mansions where aristocracy used to dwell in, as well as gathering places for intelligentsia. What, on the other hand, is not likely to be noticed and considered a part of heritage? The objects which do not bear explicit monument qualities or are considered difficult in historical sense. Moreover, due to purely practical reasons we tend to miss the monuments located away from the main routes and parking lots. The remains of fortifications, factories and industrial plants, mines, bunkers, canals and other facilities of the city's "backstage" are usually ignored or even denied as part of the area's history. They seem not attractive enough to be viewed as important elements of heritage, let alone to protect or restore them.

Objects of forgotten heritage tend to be located in areas known as urban wasteland, the particularly degraded parts of the city. When writing about industrial regions in the context of revitalization, Prof. Krzysztof Skalski, draws attention to one important detail – that the objects we tend to ignore are often more related to our daily lives than we think. You can come across unused industrial areas, and urban fallow lands, straying directly from the main street leading from the center of a town toward the peripheral boulevards. The fortifications of large cities, and military barracks already proved to be anachronistic and not quite effective during World War I. The enormous railway areas are no longer needed today. The former metallurgical works, coking plants, and post-mining areas remain idle.⁸

It is not possible to protect and preserve every item considered a part of heritage, but we ought to remember about the less attractive backstage that triggered the development of urban areas or whole regions in a more substantial way than a picturesque palace.

It should therefore be our duty to try to preserve the memory of these places, at least by basic photographic documentation and written descriptions.

What significance can a nineteenth-century tram depot have for a historic city? Are the old gasworks or factories able to compete with a medieval market place and the Wawel Castle? Doctor Łukasz Gawęł, PhD poses these questions, somewhat ironically, in one of his texts devoted to Krakow. In a real world, they will probably never be able to win this competition, but we also cannot protect the cultural heritage of an area, eliminating an entire era of its existence⁹ namely the nineteenth-century industrial monuments.

In Poland, a country strongly marked by wars and conflicts, history did not always allow the inhabitants to leave an entire and intact inheritance to

⁸ K. Skalski, "Przedmowa," in: K. Skalski, Ł. Gawęł (eds.), *Od hałdy do kultury*, Kraków 2012, p. 9.

⁹ Ł. Gawęł, "Zabytki techniki w Krakowie – zapomniane dziedzictwo," in: E. Orzechowski, Ł. Gawęł (eds.), *Zarządzanie. Kultura – media – dziedzictwo*, Kraków 2012, p. 175.

their successors. There are many places merely marked by a few bricks or a part of a meadow denoting a place of a no longer existing dwelling. There are many such stories in Polish history, for example the Klucznik's one,¹⁰ or another, described by Filip Springer – the fate of a town called Miedzianka (more to be found in the book under the same title).¹¹ History is sometimes strange, surprising, and embarrassing, however, we cannot be justified in our limited and ignorant perception and the selective treatment of inheritance is given to us only to preserve.

Urban exploring – definition

Why do I consider urban exploring an important component in the discussion about heritage? It is a movement which fits into the trend of cultural guerrilla activities practiced by inhabitants of cities and urban areas. The movement is about exploring the human habitat from the perspective of places which remain hidden from a more widespread audience or which are simply being ignored by it. These may be abandoned churches, monasteries and cemeteries; channels, catacombs and tunnels; shafts and mines; hospitals and sanatoriums; boarding schools; factories and industrial plants; airports and abandoned vessels; amusement parks and resorts; bunkers, fortifications, military facilities and abandoned palaces as well as private houses and villas.¹² In short – the movement focuses on everything which is no more, for various reasons, of any interest to the general public.

The idea of exploring and penetrating the invisible and inaccessible areas of the city is not new. It dates back to the late eighteenth century when many people, mainly artists and thinkers, went down to the catacombs in Paris¹³ for contemplative and cognitive purposes. There is a renowned story of a man named Philibert Aspart, who in 1793 went down to the catacombs without a map and got lost. His body was eventually found eleven years later.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Klucznik (Kleuschmitz)*, <http://www.niemodlin.org/index.php?id=227&L=0> [accessed on: 2 November 2013].

¹¹ F. Springer, *Nie ma miasteczka. Dlaczego Miedzianka musiała zniknąć?*, <http://www.polityka.pl/spoleczenstwo/reportaze/303896,1,dlaczego-miedzianka-musiala-zniknac.read> [accessed on: 2 November 2013].

¹² *What is urban exploration?*, <http://www.forbidden-places.net/why.php#.UcVzrPmpUrk> [accessed on: 22 June 2013].

¹³ *Urban exploration timeline*, <http://www.infiltration.org/history-timeline.html> [accessed on: 21 June 2013].

¹⁴ M. Gates, *Hidden Cities. A Memoire of Urban Exploration*, New York 2013, p. 48.

The reasons for the popularity of the movement today must be sought not only in the fascination for urbanization and industry, but also in a romantic interest in abandoned places, which form a dramatic stage for still undiscovered secrets. Certainly, some of the urban exploring activists also pursue their professional interests. Apart from photographers who look for unique themes, also the architects and urban planners plunge into the depths of the city to understand its origins, and be able to analyze the changes it has undergone over the decades. They look to be inspired for future projects derived from original ideas and concepts.

Urban exploring is also known by the terms urbex, UE, infiltration and rarely is the term translated into foreign languages (e.g. in Polish *infiltracja*). In addition, there are many specific varieties of urban exploring which are practiced by a small group of explorers specialized in the following fields: caving (penetration of caves), wreck diving, tunnel hacking or roof hacking. Moreover, it is an interesting fact that roof and tunnel hacking are an unwritten tradition among the students of the elite MIT, dating back to the 1980s.¹⁵

The star of the roof hacking section is Vadim Makhorov, whose photographic masterpieces circulated the whole world. He became famous for a series of photos taken from the roofs of well-known tourist attractions – the peaks of the Giza pyramids, the towers of Cologne Cathedral and Barcelona's Sagrada Familia, the tops of skyscrapers at Alexanderplatz in Berlin and in the ones in the center of Warsaw.¹⁶ Makhorov's activities often bordered the impossible. Another interesting fact is that recently he has acquired the support of sponsors co-financing his expeditions in exchange for a picture with, for example, brand name footwear at the city skyline seen from an illegal viewing platform.

Destinations and objectives

The objectives of exploration depend on the geographic area and history of the region. Individual countries have different types of places to be explored and a specific exploration culture, which is described in more detail by Moses Gates in his book *Hidden cities. A memoir of urban exploration*.

Analyzing the materials provided by explorers, it is easy to realize that the United Kingdom is famous for abandoned sanatoriums and asylums, as

¹⁵ *Interesting Hacks To Fascinate People*, <http://hacks.mit.edu/> [accessed on: 1 November 2013].

¹⁶ W. Machorow, *Eurotrip 2013*, <http://dedmaxopka.livejournal.com/71558.html> [accessed on: 1 November 2013].

well as for neo-gothic or Victorian mansions. In the United States, in turn, many farms and so called “ghost towns” can be found, usually left over from the times of the gold rush. Russia and Germany on the other hand are rich in remains of military infrastructure – bunkers, tunnels, military bases, barracks etc., originating not only in the times of the two World Wars, but also in the Cold War period (e.g. Teufelsberg in Berlin¹⁷). In virtually every country there is at least one unique abandoned object that accelerates the rate of photographers and explorers pulse – from the islands of Japan (e.g. Island Gunkanjima / Hashim¹⁸) to the states of the USA (e.g. North Brother Island, New York¹⁹).

Regardless of the continent, metropolises are popular destinations for explorers, as a large number of underground tunnels, skyscrapers and bridges is fascinating and attractive for them. Gates points out that cities, such as New York, are relatively young, so the nature of the explored objects will be different from the one seen in Europe. The author mentions Rome and Paris, homes to hundreds or thousands years-old networks of underground tunnels, aqueducts, tunnels, catacombs, and ossuaries, etc. Studying and analyzing these sites poses a major challenge even for professional archaeologists and urban historians.²⁰

What is the Polish attitude to urban exploring? David Rapalski, a Polish explorer of American origin, states that the explorers in the United States usually penetrate channels and defunct metro stations, however he personally prefers factories and houses. He is of the opinion that abandoned buildings can be read like books, because they tell stories about the history of the place and about the people who used to live and work there.²¹

Warsaw, a city with a complicated history and rich past, has its own silent witnesses of history. They are, for example, apartment buildings in the borough of Mokotów, where the people working for the Soviet embassy used to live. Explorers may see fully equipped apartments there, with outdated wall closets, dishes neatly arranged in cabinets, and even books still on the shelves.²² The object, however, still belongs to the Russian Federation and is officially closed and guarded. One of the explorers’ beloved places were, the

¹⁷ *Teufelsberg – Diabelska Góra*, <http://berlin-vel.pl/teufelsberg-diabelska-gora> [accessed on: 4 November 2013].

¹⁸ *Opuszczona wyspa Gunkanjima (Hashima)*, <http://www.forgotten.pl/miejsce.php?id=572> [accessed on: 1 November 2013].

¹⁹ W. Ellis, *Abandoned NYC: Getting Lost On North Brother Island*, <http://untappedcities.com/2013/10/21/abandoned-nyc-getting-lost-on-north-brother-island-photos/> [accessed on: 21 October 2013].

²⁰ M. Gates, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

²¹ M. Stelmach, “Załoga Urex,” in: *Polityka* 2013, No. 38 (2925), p. 117.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

no longer existing, Rosa Luxemburg's lamp manufacturing facilities located in Wola district.²³

Explorers visit places that are usually not mentioned in guidebooks, but which reveal a lot about the past of the area. Urban exploring is a growing pastime among those who prefer challenges to museums and those dark, gloomy and dismal sites to beautiful landscapes. Experts say, that where the average tourist sees only an abandoned, daunting building, an urban explorer will detect a distinctive object of unique value within the urban landscape.²⁴ The destinations unveil the secrets of the former residents and their lives. The left behind pieces of furniture, appliances and books tell a lot about how people once lived, whether they were wealthy, what they were interested in – it is a kind of an urban open-air museum, others say.²⁵

The concept of an “urban open-air museum” sounds intriguing, and could form the basis for a further analysis. Historical open-air villages do not only present the church and the house of the mayor, but also exhibit poor peasants' huts, stables, barns and mills. What would it be like in terms of cities and urbanism? Valuable heritage is not only the cathedral and the town hall – it may also be a power station and water conduit.

In recent years there is even a visible increase of interest in such areas as apartment buildings estates, which have usually been seen as the source of social pathologies. Often being characteristic works of architecture (examples described in more detail by Philip Springer in his book *Żle urodzone* [Born wrong]) and large habitats for human beings, they cannot just be ignored.

In the introduction to the *Przewodnik po warszawskich blokowiskach* (Guide to Warsaw Housing Projects) Jarosław Trybuś highlights that the indictment of the apartment buildings is long: they are ugly, inhuman, you may get lost between them, and they are dangerous to be near. However, thousands of people found their place to live there. They cannot be ignored since they are everywhere. Even in the city center. Trybuś tries to convince the reader that they are worth to look at, appreciate their diversity and get to know their history. We should see the life that goes on there in spite of their bleak outlook, see their concealed charm, and start liking them.²⁶

If we cannot accept the still inhabited housing projects, how can we cope with the abandoned and dilapidated buildings?

²³ T. Urzykowski, *Koszary, fabryka, willa i piramida. Wyburzone w 2011*, http://warszawa.gazeta.pl/warszawa/56,34862,10905068,Koszary_fabryka_willa_i_piramida_Wyburzone_w_2011.html [accessed on: 8 January 2012].

²⁴ A. Połajewska, *Urbex. Nowy trend w turystyce czy sport dla dziwaków?*, http://podroze.gazeta.pl/podroze/56,114158,10463941,Urbex_Nowy_trend_w_turystyce_czy_sport_dla_dziwakow_.html [accessed on: 20 May 2013].

²⁵ M. Stelmach, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

²⁶ J. Trybuś, *Przewodnik po warszawskich blokowiskach*, Warszawa 2011, p. 5.

The safety of the explorer, the safety of the object

The urban exploring movement is of great controversy, mainly because it is associated with negative behaviors such as vandalism. Besides, it operates on the edge of law, because many of the penetrated facilities are officially closed to the public and located on private land. In many cases penetrating them is therefore an illegal activity, done at the explorer's own risk.

In his book, Moses Gates shares many different adventures that happened to him during the expeditions. He recounts artistic projects conducted in various locations in the backrooms of cities (e.g. a gallery of street art and contemporary art located in New York's subway tunnels) and the people he met during his numerous trips. However, for those interested in history of art, heritage, architecture, etc. it may be shocking when he reveals how simply security systems of the finest works of world architecture can be circumvented. It is unbelievable to the reader how easy it is to get to the top of a world-class monument such as the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral and meet a gargoyle eye to eye.

In this place it should be emphasized that urban exploring bases on a code of conduct clearly distinguishing it from vandalism, although from the perspective of law the difference is not significant. The overriding principle is "take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints."²⁷ Photography is the explorer's essential tool, his only trophy. He is not allowed to violate the object, to interfere in any way with its appearance, or take a souvenir. Analyzing individual internet profiles and blogs, it becomes obvious that some of the explorers, beyond the criteria of searching for yet undiscovered places, are guided by aesthetics. Their aim is to find the most unusual theme, most beautiful elements of the existing interior, and obtain extraordinary visual effects.

Exposing an attractive place does not only mean a certain risk for its explorer, but also for the object itself. Explorers noted that sharing an exact description of, for example, a palace in which, despite of the passage of time, ornaments and woodwork are preserved, can be disadvantageous for the place itself, mainly due to the undesired intervention on the part of the homeless people, vandals, etc. Therefore, the location of the objects is often described only in an enigmatic way.²⁸ Moreover, an increasing number of explorers decide not to publish their photos and obtained information at all since they are criticized or even threatened for their activity. Over the past year, several blogs and web portals closed to the great regret of their fans, who attributed high merit to them.

²⁷ *Urbex FAQs*, <http://www.urbanxphotography.co.uk/urbex-faqs> [accessed on: 21 June 2013].

²⁸ *Eksploracyjni.com – Abandoned Palace „ef”*, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.552574538126317.1073741872.481099848607120&type=1> [accessed on: 22 June 2013].

Legal exploration

Urban exploring has already entered the mass culture. In 2005 the book *Access All Areas: a User's Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration* was published, written by the spiritual leader of the movement, known by the pseudonym Ninjalicious.²⁹ In addition, more and more photo albums are being created, films, TV programs, and documentaries produced (e.g. *Zalane piwnice niedoszłej Elektrociepłowni Pruszków II w Mosznej* [*Flooded basements in the abortive Pruszków II Power Plant in Moszna*]³⁰). Discovery Channel produced a series named *Urban explorers* in which starred Steve Duncan, an urban historian. In personal life he is a friend and companion of Moses Gates.³¹

Due to the increasing interest in the subject, commercial initiatives are being created in the attempt to legalize the phenomenon of urban exploring. The most renowned example of a legal, but paid exploration is the Ukrainian Zona, the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Choosing from a wide range of trips proposed by travel agencies, which willingly add such extraordinary places to their destinations catalogue, you may visit the city of Pripjat. At this point Strefa Zero should be introduced, a group of enthusiasts from the Warsaw University of Technology, who in collaboration with experts from the Polish Nuclear Society and Institute for Nuclear Problems organize trips and meetings to the Zona.³² The so-called catastrophic tourism, however, is often criticized for ethical reasons.³³

An interesting initiative was founded in Berlin – Berliner Unterwelten e.V., which offers guided tours in an organized and safe manner around the underground of the city. The visitor can select from several different routes, and also visit an underground museum. Thanks to the activities of the association, the bunkers and other parts of the world underground the German capital became monuments.³⁴

There were also some initiatives undertaken in Poland. In May 2013, for example, a tour around the former base of the counterintelligence in Wilga

²⁹ *Access All Areas: a user's guide to the art of urban exploration*, http://books.google.pl/books/about/Access_All_Areas.html?id=Wn7wj_W-ODgC&redir_esc=y [accessed on: 22 June 2013].

³⁰ *Zalane piwnice niedoszłej Elektrociepłowni Pruszków II w Mosznej*, http://www.e-przemek.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=195:zalane-piwnice-niedoszlej-elektrociepowni-pruszkow-ii-w-mosznej [accessed on: 21 June 2013].

³¹ *Urban explorers*, <http://press.discovery.com/emea/wrld/programs/urban-explorers/> [accessed on: 16 September 2013].

³² *Strefa Zero ogólnie*, <http://strefazero.org/index.php?id=6> [accessed on: 2 October 2013].

³³ M. Pierzchała, *Świat. Mieszkańcy Nowego Orleanu nie chcą „katastroficznich turystów”*, <http://motovoyager.net/2012/10/swiat-mieszkanicy-nowego-orleanu-nie-chca-katastroficznich-turystow/> [accessed on: 20 October 2013].

³⁴ *Berliner Unterwelten e.V.*, <http://berliner-unterwelten.de/> [accessed on: 15 May 2013].

was organized with the consent of the district office in Garwolin.³⁵ And during the Night of Museums in Warsaw visitors could take a guided tour around the facilities and underground of the capital's main railway station, Dworzec Centralny. There are also various formal and informal organizations, associations, and meetings of explorers (also expeditions to various places such as those organized by *Warszawska Turystyka Ekstremalna/Warsaw Extreme Tourism*³⁶). In June 2013 the exhibition *Wystawa zdjęć z miejsc zapomnianych (Photographs of Forgotten Places)* was presented in Centrum Zarządzania Światem club in Warsaw.³⁷

The organization Trzecia Strona Wisły created a map of Unwanted Monuments in Warsaw. In collaboration with other users, they mark little-known buildings in the capital; mostly forts and former military facilities.³⁸ The map is a helpful and interesting guide for self-exploration, especially since some objects, such as Fort Bema, are open to the public and secure. Fort Bema became known for the street art project "Gallery 40/40." Artists are allowed inside the old fort and are encouraged to paint and decorate the rooms. After some time the gallery is painted over to allow the creation of a new collection of graffiti.³⁹ Due to this variability, the project motivates visitors to keep coming back to see what has changed.

Practical issues

Explorers move alone or in small groups, which is much safer. Apart from the previously mentioned fact of illegality and the related obstacles such as alarms, security systems, watchdogs, police and security interventions during the expedition, there are many other potential hazards. Mainly the poor state of objects that threaten to collapse, and the fact that they are mostly unsecured. Furthermore, damaged electrical installations as well as chemicals and asbestos formerly used in the construction of industrial spaces may be dangerous to life and health. Underground, flood and rapidly rising water levels

³⁵ *Zwiedzanie byleż siedziby kontrwywiadu w Wildze*, <https://www.facebook.com/events/157644694413164/> [accessed on: 15 May 2013].

³⁶ *Warszawska Turystyka Ekstremalna*, <http://wte.bloog.pl/?smoybbtticid=611968> [accessed on: 1 November 2013].

³⁷ *Wystawa zdjęć z miejsc zapomnianych*, <https://www.facebook.com/events/439377546158875/> [accessed on: 16 June 2013].

³⁸ *Niechciane Zabytki Warszawy*, <http://zapomnianemazowsze.blogspot.com/2013/04/niechciane-zabytki-mapa.html> [accessed on: 22 June 2013].

³⁹ *Projekt Forty Forty*, <http://40bema.blogspot.com/> [accessed on: 1 November 2013].

represent unexpected dangers. The explorer also runs the risk of getting lost, hypothermia and in extreme cases death by starvation.

What does an exploration act look like? An explorer from a Polish team explains, that the first step is meticulous preparation – searching websites and forums where explorers exchange experiences and recommend destinations to penetrate. Then explorers usually read about the site, watch topographic maps (e.g. geoportal.gov.pl) and photos, if available, to make it easier to identify the spot, possibly ask people who were there before. Sometimes they explore places spotted “on the road.”⁴⁰ Another explorer admits that the preparations largely depend on the place: whether it is accessible, if it is secure, has a general alarm system and so on. Sometimes explorers visit the place several times to check the area before they finally enter the object. In general, the preparations are based on internet information, just a small percentage of sites was discovered by accident. The explorers use various sources to gather information: forums, blogs, and follow the “press,” because sometimes an article in a newspaper is a signal, that the object is now abandoned and waiting to be explored, he says.⁴¹

The motivations that guide exploration groups are quite interesting. One member of the Double Penetration Urban Exploring Team describes his adventure with urban exploring as an unusual way of spending free time, which is both interesting and exciting, and never boring. He admits having always been interested in abandoned places. Overall, he and his colleagues began to explore quite spontaneously, it was kind of message “hey, want to see an abandoned, and apparently haunted hospital?” sent to a few best friends, and so it began, he says. The place which is special for them is Zofiówka in Otwock. It was the place of their first tour and now they try to visit it at least once a year and every time it impresses them with something new – a hidden corridor or a previously unnoticed coal chute through which they found a new basement level. They do it because of the adventure, certainly not for the audience. The relationship they developed to these places is also interesting. One of the explorers confides that, really, every place they visited has been neglected and wasted and deserves a better fate. The group focuses mostly on different types of fortifications. Understanding the purpose for which the object was created, analyzing its history and architecture helps them with the penetration of the object, and makes the exploration safer.⁴² A member from K.G.B. adds that as a child he liked roaming the vacants and so it is still like that today. There are plenty of places in the country, which, with a little financing, could continue to serve their practical purposes, he says. The best example is the

⁴⁰ Correspondence with Double Penetration Urban Exploration Team. Date: 28 May 2013.

⁴¹ Correspondence with K.G.B. Date: 28 May 2013.

⁴² Correspondence with Double Penetration Urban Exploration Team. Date: 28 May 2013.

former health resort Kozubnik. Currently it is being revitalized. But for how many years it was in disorder, left at the mercy of weather and vandals, with nobody caring for it?⁴³

Explorers do not only share experiences on forums, but almost all of them create galleries of their photos on blogs (e.g. Urbex.net.pl, stalkerteam.pl, opuszczone.com, opuszczone.net, Polska poza mapą [Poland off the map], forgotten.pl, undercity.org) or fanpages on Facebook (e.g. Abandoned asylums, Urban Exploring Adventures).

When comparing the activity of Polish explorers to those from other countries, there is one significant difference. On foreign profiles and websites the silhouette of the explorer can rarely be seen in the pictures. Except for, of course, people who have become celebrities in this field, such as Moses Gates and Steve Duncan. “Normal” explorers, if they are visible in the pictures, are wearing balaclavas or gas masks preventing the identification of the person. Among Polish explorers, however, it is widespread to pose without any element of camouflage. It is also quite common that they tag each other in the internet with names and surnames. This reflects a relatively high feeling of impunity.

Urban exploring and heritage

Why is the urban exploring movement, in my opinion, worth remarking, and how is it related to heritage? Explorers often work hard on the process of reporting. In addition to the extensive photographic material from places that are disregarded by historians and officials, explorers usually provide their galleries with historical descriptions (e.g. Opuszczone.net), complete maps and create kind of databases about the history of different places. History is not only about great events, but also about the life of individuals, about entrepreneurs and their enterprises. It includes the development of techniques that allowed, for example, the construction of water supply and sewage systems, as well as their contributions to the development of cities. It also refers to numerous bunkers and military facilities, which are not mentioned in school textbooks etc. Few people realize that, for example, near Warsaw in a small village named Rusiec, there are remnants of the 63rd missile squadron,⁴⁴ or

⁴³ Correspondence with K.G.B. Date: 28 May 2013.

⁴⁴ 63. *Dywizjon raketowy w Ruścu*, <http://www.opuszczone.net/63-dywizjon-raketowy-rusiec> [accessed on: 22 June 2013].

that Poland has its own ghost town – Pstrąże.⁴⁵ How did these places come into being? Why were these small and little-known towns used for in military infrastructure? What contributed to their downfall? Explorers try to find answers to such questions and by doing so prevent their oblivion.

Urban exploring in principle, will never be an active form of heritage protection. By definition, it is a movement reserved for enthusiasts characterized by certain traits, both physical and mental, that motivate them to seek traces of the past on the border of legality. Besides, certain bodies and institutions are in charge of the protection and management of monuments, and are supposed to fulfill their responsibility.

However, I suggest looking at urban exploration from a broader perspective. Should not culture managers and people involved in heritage also be interested in the less known and less aesthetic, local “landmarks”? Maybe it is worth to take a look around our own area and discover the remains of great history of the world and Europe? It might also be worthwhile to weave those threads into programs of history lessons in primary schools and in the activities of local organizations. The findings could easily be exploited as tourist attractions or used for field history lessons for schools and cultural centers in the region. Maybe urban exploring is one way to rebuild or enrich local identity. We should accept and adopt those elements of the past, which we ignore in everyday life or which we previously did not even know existed.

Urban exploring activists are determined to save the objects they visit from oblivion,⁴⁶ knowing that the process of forgetting and fallible human memory are the biggest enemies of heritage and monuments. As long as we remember them, there is a chance for their preservation, even in a non-material form of stories to be re-told. Therefore we ought to appreciate the work of urban explorers and take into account the potential of our cities. We ought to prevent the distortion of testimonies promoting local history and the elements of our identity. It is our duty to pass the heritage on to the next generation in line.

⁴⁵ 2010 *Pstrąże (Pstransse)*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYLT9F2JXq4> [accessed on: 19 June 2013].

⁴⁶ M.M. Drews, *Urban exploration czyli internetowa społeczność odkrywców*, <http://antyweb.pl/urban-exploration-czyli-internetowa-spolcznosc-odkrywcow/> [accessed on: 16 May 2013].

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