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Urban Adventures and Autopsies

Experience and Exploration in Recent Ruins



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Abstract

This ethnographic study takes a phenomenological approach to examining the experiences of urban explorers in Sweden. Data collection took place in Skåne and Stockholm between October 2025 and February 2026, using the qualitative methods of semistructured interviews and participant observation. Urban exploration encompasses a wide range of practices; this thesis centers around its core aspect of visiting abandoned places. The hobby's practitioners, called urban explorers, are a loosely connected group of diverse individuals, typically organized through online spaces around a common interest for places, photography, and abandonment. This study attempts to productively engage with the concept of experience by examining the social, historical, and material processes that inform the reflective and pre-reflective experiences of urban explorers. It finds that urban exploration affords experiences that are emotional, evocative, transformative, and unique to everyday Swedish life. These experiences are constituted by environments that have distinctive qualities in terms of materiality, affordances, aesthetics, temporality, legality, and sociality, in interaction with the evolving movements, perception, physicality, feelings, and presuppositions of urban explorers.

Key words: urban exploration, social anthropology, phenomenology, experience, abandonment, temporality, embodiment.

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1. Introduction: Opening the Doors to Abandonment

Have you noticed the abandoned house at the edge of town? Perhaps you've heard a story about it being haunted, about the fate of its owners, or how it's a hub for illicit activity. Maybe you've felt drawn to it and paid it a visit. Peered through the dark windows, stood at the door, or even stepped inside. Then again, it's possible that it has escaped your awareness altogether. Entering abandoned buildings is the principal activity of so-called *urban explorers*; a diverse group of loosely connected individuals that infiltrate, navigate, investigate, and reflect on abandoned places. Their specific interests vary. Some visit mostly residential houses while others stick to old industrial buildings. Some climb and dive while others mostly walk and observe. Many pursue photography; while some use extensive camera equipment others make due with their phone. My decision to conduct a study about urban exploration stemmed from a fascination I've always had with abandoned places. Although, prior to going into my fieldwork, I had never actually entered an abandoned building. As soon as I did, something in me changed. The disregarding of laws and downprioritization of safety that I've adopted in my exploring is entirely new to me.

Urban exploration established itself in the later 20th century. Multiple interviewees in this study attribute its beginnings to the city of Detroit, Michigan, where abandonment was plentiful at the time. In the contemporary Swedish context, vacant residential houses are the most plentiful kind of abandoned locations you come by, but the country also has a good amount of old mines and farms. Abandoned factory buildings are also common exploration sites. In these cases, the type of factory depends on what kind of industry used to flourish in that part of the country. Industrial sites are sometimes thought to be declining in number, as the out of use structures that used to house national industry are being demolished. Some urban explorers take their exploring abroad, where they seek out unique sites like castles, catacombs, and older wartime ruins. Some urban explorers are quite content visiting places that have only been vacant for a decade or so, but most of the time the urban explorers in this study prefer abandonment originating from the previous century. Pre-industrial and ancient ruins are not the main targets of urban explorers. Today, online spaces like social media and websites are the principal organizing forums for urban explorer communities.

With this study I've attempted to analyze what makes urban exploration what it is, centering on how the practice *feels* and why explorers go about things the way they do. True to myself and others is the powerful, unique, addictive, and almost intoxicating experience that urban exploration provides. Urban explorers frequently employ the term '*experience*' when speaking about urban exploring, both when discussing why they do it and when describing what it entails. This study is an ethnographic exploration of experience through the medium of urban exploration, which is conceptualized as a certain kind of activity defined by a set of variable but distinct practices centered around visiting, navigating, and recording abandoned places. With help from phenomenological anthropology, this essay poses the following main research question and accompanying subquestions:

How do urban explorers make sense of their experiences in abandoned places, and what kinds of material and socio-historical processes inform these experiences?

How do urban explorers perceive and record abandoned places and their experiences in them?

How do urban explorers grapple with the different temporal and mnemonic dimensions of abandoned places?

What does abandonment and ruination mean, and how do urban explorers make sense of them?

In terms of wider purpose, according to cultural geographer Andreas Back, abandonment is an under-researched topic in Sweden. He thinks that by researching abandonment we can be better equipped to address national issues related to housing (personal communication, January 20th, 2026). Abandonment easily escapes our awareness, but that does not mean it doesn't have things to teach us. Additionally, because urban exploration is so profoundly meaningful to many of its practitioners, it is my sincerest hope that urban explorers will find this thesis resonant, interesting, and enjoyable. As a concluding remark, from here on I will be mainly referring to urban explorers as simply 'explorers,' and to the practice of urban exploration using the abbreviations 'urbex' or 'UE.'

The structure of the thesis is as follows. First, I outline the previous research that has informed this study, focusing on ethnographic studies of urban exploration and contemporary ruins. Then, I describe the theoretical framework that helped me understand and analyze my empirical material. I use phenomenology to explain the concept of experience, emphasizing the significance of emotion, temporality, embodiment, materiality, and environment in lived experience. The next chapter introduces my main interlocutors and describes my methods of interviewing, participant observation, and photography. It concludes with a discussion of some ethical and moral quandaries I was met with during my fieldwork.

In the first ethnographic chapter I discuss some aspects of temporal and emotional organization of awareness in urbex. I propose that remembering, focus, and openness shape explorers' consciousness, and that risk, excitement, suspense, and presence are prominent facets of explorers' emotional states. I also briefly discuss some different ways explorers relate to their emotions depending on the nature of their reflections on them. In the subsequent chapter, urbex is described as it relates to knowledge. First, I explain how it is learnt and embodied by transforming the explorer's perception and behaviour; second, I discuss how material manifestations of the past can give access to personal and societal stories, as well as how explorers think these stories should be handled; and third, I posit that urbex is grounded in curiosity and asking questions, even when answers aren't easy to come by. The final ethnographic chapter deals with the relationships between explorers and their sites. Initially, I discuss the sensuously distinct character of abandoned places, which is constituted by their material and social qualities. Then, I describe how explorers assign importance to their sites, and how they impose requirements of care in the shape of maintenance and consideration of places. Lastly, I problematize abandonment by discussing its reasons, ambiguity, and volatility, as well as how it questions common assumptions about what is considered *built* and what is thought of as *nature*.

2. Previous Research: Exploration & Ruination

In this chapter I describe some of the current research on urban exploration, explaining what has already been done on the topic and what might still be missing. Anthropologically, urbex has been characterized as countercultural due to its valuing of abandoned places, which otherwise often go unappreciated on their own terms (Davidov 2016). At the same time, while motivations behind UE can be understood as transgressive, boiling the practice down to transgression is considered academically insufficient by some (Bennett 2011). The second type of research explored below borrows from anthropology, cultural geography, and archeology, and primarily concerns the sites where explorations take place. Understanding abandoned places and modern ruins is important because these locations imply a unique set of material, physical, and temporal circumstances, and also because many explorers are preoccupied with these kinds of places and objects. Ultimately, these areas of research point toward a need for more examination of the immediate, emplaced, and embodied experience of UE.

2.1 Urban Exploration

Anthropological, ethnographic research on urban exploration has been conducted by Veronica Davidov (2016), who discusses UE in reference to postindustrialism. She describes the typical explorer as practically dressed and well equipped, and the character of their community as a devoted, diversely motivated *subculture* (or collection of subcultures) that is organized around interest in physical locations via mediation over the internet (p. 148, 151-152). Status in urbex communities can be acquired by having visited numerous locations, particularly those that are difficult to access. Showing skill or novelty in photography is another way of achieving status. Furthermore, explorers are rewarded for observing codes of conduct in online spaces, such as not publicly asking others to disclose their explored locations (p. 160-161).

Davidov (2016) writes that prior to being demolished or reappropriated, postindustrial sites are urban spaces in transition. These places are marked by disuse and abandonment and indicative of socioeconomic change. She claims that urban explorers are committed to the *existence value* in these places, which she contrasts to *utilitarian* or *heritage value*, described as the dominant societal alignment. Furthermore, she states that due to its organization around alternative systems of value, the UE subculture can be considered countercultural; an argument she supports further

by mentioning explorers' pursuit of marginalized knowledge. Explorers enjoy hidden parts of history, and are therefore less enticed by museums or formal heritage sites. Understood in this way, urbex seemingly rejects capitalist notions of use-value and industrial progress. Explorers in Davidov's study are hostile to development projects of abandoned sites because they consider demolition destructive of history for the purpose of profit. Preservation is less frowned upon, though it can be thought to sterilize authentic environments (p. 156). Notably, Davidov states that the foundations of UE lie in explorers' experience of their relationships with materially assembled physical places.

Legal and cultural geographer Luke Bennett (2011) questions how transgression and emancipation are centered in academic descriptions of urbex. He asserts further that understanding urban exploration requires consideration of actual practice, or how and why explorers do what they do. Urbex is often theorized as resistance when it concerns treading where one is not allowed, subverting the rules of the city, and unearthing hidden knowledge, Bennet writes (p. 422-423). He contests this characterization by conducting a document analysis of online forums pertaining to a particular kind of explorers, namely what he calls "bunkerologists," explorers interested in abandoned cold war bunkers. In online posts, explorers appear far more interested in documentation and preservation than in politics. Bennett explains that while some explorers seem to enjoy the dangerous and less legal aspects of their practice, singling out transgression makes for an impoverished understanding of urbex. He claims that the main motivations for urbex are threefold; first: "*the joy of knowledge*," connected to expertise and status; second: "*memorialization and/or conservation of heritage*," related to protection and veneration of places; and third: "*communing with the spirit of the place*," highlighting the importance of sensations and feelings.

2.2 Modern Ruins

Ruin Memories (2014a) edited by archeologists Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen, with contributions from anthropologists, archeologists, historians, artists, cultural geographers, and philosophers, is a thorough exploration of ruins, ruination, and abandonment. Many of the accounts in the volume have ethnographic approaches. In particular, multiple authors engage directly with abandoned places of the contemporary past. In so doing, they offer evocative

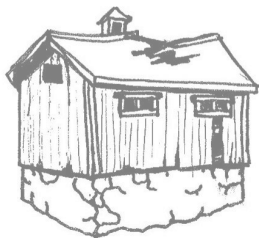
first-hand descriptions and intimate perspectives on the materiality, affect, and power contained in ruins. Furthermore, the book develops perspectives on materiality that apply phenomenological insights in environments of ruination and abandonment.

Despite often hindering everyday activities, abandoned places are not strictly determined by resistance and lack. Derelict places are not necessarily dead places, and frequently they provide myriad opportunities for engagement. In her chapter in *Ruin Memories*, Joanne Hudson (2014) discusses some of the unique affordances of ruins. In contrast to activities in ordered urban environments, ‘informal’ places like abandoned buildings afford a range of subversive, creative, and diverse practices. For one, a ‘formally’ unoccupied place may serve as shelter for unhoused people, particularly if it’s unsurveilled and out of the way of other citizens (p. 194-195). More playful activities like sex, drug use, and smashing or rearranging objects in one’s surroundings are also common to these types of locations. Moreover, derelict places can be appropriated by creatives, photographers, and explorers, who enjoy their unique material conditions, illicit allure, affordance of privacy, and historical weight. Overall, Hudson states that places of ruin contrast the uniformity, rigidity, and social control which often defines regulated urban environments.

Cultural geographers Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor (2012) map emerging trends of academic interest in ruins, particularly those of the newer variety (typically constructed during the 20th century). DeSilvey and Edensor identify three main trends in studies of ruins and ruination. First, ones that deal with ruins in relation to economic and political orders. These scholars claim that ruins hold critical potential because they can expose cracks in dominant narratives (p. 468-469). However, others assert the inverse can also be true, because in some cases ruins provoke nostalgia or regressive denial (p. 270). The second category of ruin scholarship discusses ruins, temporality and memory. These scholars discuss how ruins are marked by multiple temporalities, which allows for diverse and alternative ways of engaging with the past, especially via materially mediated sensual experience (p. 471-473). The third branch of ruin studies concerns the lived environment and urban spaces. Ruins can be seen to contrast regulated cityscapes in their resistance to order and management. Scholars adhering to this category claim that due to their ill-defined purpose, ruins may be appropriated by all manner of creative, transgressive, playful, or opportunistic citydwellers (p. 474-476). Hudson (2014) exemplifies this perspective. Furthermore, some academics highlight the way ruins challenge the

nature/culture divide, as non-human animal and plant life move in and transform built environments (DeSilvey & Edensor 2012: 477). According to DeSilvey and Edensor, consideration of the sensual and evocative power and of the living presence of ruins is missing from current research (p. 467).

DeSilvey and Edensor also argue that contemporary ruin-fervor can at times be guilty of romanticization or sensationalism (p. 478). Modern ruins are frequently depicted in photography. Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen (2014b) explain that ruin photography sparks unease among archeologists, who critique what they perceive as fetishization or trivialization of ruination. The term ‘ruin porn’ describes ruin photography as an exploitative and superficial way to depict complex history and tragic decay. Supposedly, ruin photography presents highly selective, contextually and analytically thin material that aestheticizes ruination and trauma, and therefore it lacks truth and critical efficacy. Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014b) claim there’s a general distrust of the image in academia. Their point is not to deny that aestheticization occurs, but to question the negative and reductive conception of aestheticizing processes. Aesthetics can be equated to immediate experience on phenomenological grounds, according to Pétursdóttir and Olsen, and therefore it should not be shunned, but rather approached as a specific way of encountering objects. Furthermore, they see photography not simply as *representative*, but also *interactive*, and promote the use of photos in academic works, especially in those with a focus on materiality.



3. Theoretical Framework: Putting Experience In its Place

In this chapter I describe the theoretical concepts that have helped me understand the experience of UE. I begin by problematizing ‘experience’ and ‘perception’ by outlining some of the ways these nebulous terms have been theorized by phenomenologically informed anthropologists. Then, I outline a few central pillars of experience that are particularly relevant to urbex. The first is emotion, which I see as important in shaping the moment-to-moment attention and motivations of urban explorers. The second is temporality. In this part I discuss how the past and the future can manifest in present experience, particularly in relation to modern ruins. In the later analysis, I use these theories to explain the special ways explorers remember history and perceive time.

The third pillar is embodiment, which stands as a foundational part of all human experience and perception. In UE, embodiment becomes especially prominent due to the practice’s physicality, practicality, perilousness, and transformative potential. The fourth and final pillar is environment and situatedness. The practice of urbex occurs in particular environments that I conceptualize as modern ruins, which possess the quality of being abandoned. In the later ethnographic chapters I interpret what explorers mean when they speak of abandonment, what kinds of affect abandoned places can invoke, and what unique opportunities present themselves in ruins.

3.1 Experience & Perception

My theoretical framework is significantly informed by phenomenological anthropology. *Experience* and *perception* are central to my analysis. Below, I explain these concepts and present a phenomenological outline that considers the roles of reflection, awareness, and subjectivity in experience. I theorize and contrast pre-reflective/pre-objective and reflective/objective modes of consciousness, and introduce the concept of *conditions of experience*. Finally, I discuss *emotions*, particularly those emerging in pre-reflective thought. I conceive of emotions as essentially embodied, intersubjective, and important in understanding human motivation.

“Phenomenology is the scientific study of experience,” writes Micheal Jackson in *Things as They are* (1996 :2). However, *experience* is a slippery notion. The anthropologist Jason Throop (2003) reviews some emerging critique of the concept in social sciences around the turn of the century.

Despite its central role in anthropology, experience has been taken for granted and underexamined in the discipline, Throop writes. According to him, some scholars have championed rejection, or at the very least reexamination, of experience in the social sciences, on the grounds that the concept is supposedly Western-centric, reductive, subjectivist, and/or totalizing (p. 220-222). Throop addresses the criticism and ends up with a complex, multiplicitous, sometimes contradictory interpretation, which nonetheless resists the common negative characterizations of experience. Experience, it seems, can be fluid or fixed, indeterminate or defined, fragmentary or unitary, incoherent or coherent, internal or external. How do we make sense of this?

An answer can be found by turning to phenomenological insights, Throop (2003) claims. According to some phenomenological models, consciousness can be understood as consisting of two parts; the first being a fluctuating foreground which makes up immediate awareness, and the second being a fuzzy periphery that carries both mnemonic residue and future-oriented anticipation. *Pre-objective* experience is the immediate, unstructured, unconceptualized ground for later concretization. In pre-objective or pre-reflective experience, subject and object have yet to diverge; the initially unstructured flow of experience becomes objectified only when it is reflected upon. Importantly, the moment to moment flux of consciousness is not immune to prior experience, but influenced by patterns from the past as it takes in the present. Building on phenomenological thinkers, Throop proposes a model of experience based on *organization of attention*. The model encompasses reflective and pre-reflective mutations of experience, and stresses that coherence does not necessarily require reflection, nor does reflection necessarily produce coherence. Likewise, disjunction does not only occur in the flow of pre-reflection, nor will reflection always dispel it.

In Jackson's (1996) writing we find that some of the criticism levied against the concept of experience can be directed toward phenomenology itself. According to its detractors, a phenomenological approach is subjectivist, inwardly oriented, and isolates people from the world and from history (p. 23-24). Yet, Jackson defends the importance of the subject, without which the impersonal systems of society would have nowhere to take hold or manifest (p. 22-23). Experience according to Jackson's phenomenology is neither a transcendent, private, isolated affair, nor a passive recipient of worldly or societal rules (p. 24). Anthropologists Kalpana Ram

and Christopher Houston (2015) try to pin down a phenomenologically practical definition of subjectivity by questioning the primacy of will, reflection, choice, and conscious understanding that they find ingrained in the concept (p. 8). “Phenomenology is an investigation of how humans perceive, experience, and comprehend the sociable, materially assembled world that they inherit at infancy and in which they dwell,” Ram and Houston write in their introduction to *Phenomenology in Anthropology* (p. 1). To them, experience remains central, pointedly theorized as inclusive of things that escape active attention (p. 4).

Experience as established by Throop and Jackson does not emerge within an inner vacuum of the human mind, nor is it exclusively determined by structural factors imposed by an external world. Ram and Houston (2015) explain that supposed immediate, pre-reflective experience can be diversely influenced and mediated by multiple factors. They base their notion of *perception* on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, understanding it as a field of relations with a foreground at the attention of consciousness and an unfocused background forming the supporting framework for what is perceived (p. 8-9). *Phenomenological modifications* describing different ways of relating to experience—often based on degrees of reflection or objectification—is a common theme in phenomenology (Desjarlais & Throop 2011: 88). Importantly, Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the blurry edges, which as opposed to being part of the conscious realm are *constitutive* of consciousness. In other words, these backgrounds form the *horizons* of conscious experience and perception (Ram & Houston 2015: 10). According to Ram and Houston, Exploring the limits of conscious awareness is crucial, though exposing the complete entirety of the determinants of consciousness is not necessary, desirable, nor likely even possible (p. 11).

Jarrett Zigon and Jason Throop (2021) write that phenomenological anthropologists concern themselves with *conditions of experience*. According to them: “Phenomenology set the stage for rethinking the very foundation of human existence as one that is above all relational, temporal, embodied, and situated” (p. 1). Phenomenology does not imply mere description of personal experiences, rather it calls for consideration of the structuring backgrounds that condition experience. In this section I’ve laid the groundwork for an understanding of experience that addresses its modalities and promotes contemplation of its shadowy background. In the following, I will discuss some of Zigon and Throop’s (2021) phenomenological facets of human existence, primarily temporality, embodiment, and situatedness.

Emotion

Kalpana Ram (2015) describes the ways in which phenomenology gives emotions methodological importance in anthropological science. She writes that it is through emotion that the significance of the world is revealed. Emotions, in Ram's sense, don't need to be consciously recognized or understood. Rather, they form a crucial part of pre-reflective experience in the general field of perception (p. 34-35). Emotions direct perception because they decide importance; what matters and what's important are emotionally determined facets of existence. Again, they need not be consciously decided, as humans can perceive foulness, wonder, or any number of other feelings without concrete reflection (p. 37-38). Following Merleau-Ponty, Ram describes how even before the world is thematized or reflected upon, it is *lived* (p. 33). Emotions form a crucial component in this living existence. However, studying obscure emotions requires bringing them out of the shadows. Ram suggests that anthropologists can achieve this by observing situations where ordinary experience is disrupted. Severe examples are things like loss of limb or debilitating illness, where the otherwise unconsciously supportive body becomes explicit in its new constitution. Moreover, Ram borrows the concept of *mood* from Heidegger; locating emotions interpersonally and in the background of awareness (p. 37-38).

Elaboration on interpersonal emotions can be found in Ola Sigurdson's (2023) explanation of *atmospheres*. Atmospheres do not arise or exist in isolation, but are necessarily constituted by place, material, body, *and* mind. A possible consequence of separating the mind from the world is that emotions are assumed to be strictly internal, and the environment is seen as unimportant and bereft of meaning (p. 24-25, 50-51). Sigurdson emphasizes the affective power of atmospheres, and states that they can take hold of us without our consent or conscious acknowledgement. He illustrates this point using the example of entering a sports arena during a big game, and promptly being swept up in anticipation and revelry. Often, atmospheres hide from our active awareness. According to Sigurdson, they become most visible in situations when we are out of tune with them, like if we enter a bustling ballroom and experience a heightened sense of social ineptitude or exclusion (p. 34-36). Bearing atmospheres in mind allows a greater understanding of the relationality of emotions and the role of environment in their constitution.

3.2 Temporality

History and memory play elemental roles in experience. In this section, focusing on how the past is evoked in the present, I discuss remembering practices and materializations of history, before examining the unique depictions of the past presented by *ruins* and *ruination*. A crucial point of Throop's (2003) is that temporal orientations structure experience, in that recollection, engagement, and anticipation each significantly and dynamically impact experience to different degrees and in different ways. Phenomenologists often reckon with how past, present, and future play in experience; how it's structured by the past and oriented toward the future through mnemonic and anticipatory processes. Momentary focus can be seen as directed by arrays of *retention* and *protention* into the past and future, while simultaneously being guided by more enduring *recollections* and *expectations* (ibid.). Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000), referencing Merleau-Ponty, points out that humans cannot isolate themselves from the passage of time in order to observe it externally. He also explains that the present is not a separate temporal unit, but a gathering point of future and past perceived in each moment (p. 243). Regarding the past, phenomenologists don't typically inquire into the actualities of former events, rather they look into how history shapes current experience (Jackson 1996: 38). In other words, phenomenology pays particular attention to how the past is engaged in the present (Ram & Houston 2015: 18).

Ingold (2000) states that the Western conception of time often separates it from social lives by favoring the demands of production over the natural rhythms of practical activity. In typical everyday experience, time and tasks are indivisible; rather than time being external to activity, time is always constituted by and related to it. This can be exemplified by observing understandings of time in pre-industrial societies, Ingold claims (p. 406-408). Further, he argues there's significant coalescence of themes in the academic fields of archeology and social anthropology. One such unifying aspect is a shared attention to the temporal character of human lives. Archaeologists attend to stories of human life told by the landscape, Ingold states. He compares the act of *remembering* to engaging with the past through perception of the landscape (p. 235). In a similar vein, Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen (2014a) discuss archeology of the contemporary past. Traditionally, archeology has been exclusively concerned with the distant past, but this conviction recently changed, allowing archeological inquiry into much more recent events (p. 20-21).

The historical concern of urban exploring is touched on by anthropologist and historian Shannon Lee Dawdy (2010), who states that some urban explorers fashion themselves as industrial archeologists, who find satisfaction in their ability to see what others neglect in contemporary ruins (p. 767). Dawdy claims there's an impending *archeological turn* in the social sciences, arriving with an increasing interest in materiality, temporality, and ruins. 'Ruins of modernity' are a defining characteristic of urban landscapes (p. 762). She states that modernity as a temporal ideology promotes progressive time, and that this proposed framework is a trap both archeology and anthropology often fall into. Related to, but distinct from, its insistence on linear time, modernity also champions 'ruptures' in time that delineate the modern era from the ancient era, and antiquity from prehistory. According to Dawdy, these assumptions restrict scientific understanding and critical efficacy.

Material Memories

Often, where *memory* is concerned, it is conceived as purposeful recollection, sometimes aided by material manifestations of past events (Pétursdóttir & Olsen 2014a: 8-9). Commemoration becomes especially pressing in modernity, where the present is perceived as being detached from a foregone past; ever-disappearing through time and only accessible via its material remains (p. 9). Furthermore, Pétursdóttir and Olsen contest the modernist conception of memory and remembering. For one, they claim that remembering need not be a voluntary act. Moreover, they assert that memory is not a mere projection of human consciousness or subjectivity upon the material world. Instead, memory can be a joint, interactive process—a dialogue between objects and people (p. 9-10).

A particular quirk of archeology of the recent past may be that it highlights *ruination* as a process as opposed to *ruin* as a fixed state. According to Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014a), ancient ruins are often seen as passive and inert—supposedly final in their present condition—while modern ruins are more active, decaying in real time before our eyes (p. 7). Pétursdóttir and Olsen state that ruination may cause a decrease in an object's mnemonic capabilities through material degradation, but that it can also provide opportunities for obscure kinds of remembering. For instance, the typical, taken for granted functions of a building are often invisible to the people immersed in its current workings. Through disruption and destruction, hidden innards are revealed, and things normally subsumed in routine suddenly stand out (p. 11-12).

3.3 Embodiment

This section gives embodiment a central role in experience, locating the body neither firmly in *biology* or in *culture*, but instead considering it as an existential center for perception. Thereafter I discuss how actions, intents, and engagements in an environment both create and are constituted by practical, embodied knowledge.

Embodiment is a central pillar of phenomenological anthropology (Desjarlais & Throop 2011: 89). Merleau-Ponty has been particularly important in the development of phenomenological theories of embodiment. Refuting the mind-world/body dualism of René Descartes, Merleau-Ponty championed a philosophy that sees the body not as a machine executing orders from a transcendent mind, but as an essential, integrated part of human existence, consciousness, meaning, and *being* (Jackson 1996: 30-32, Ingold 2000: 209-210). Ram and Houston (2015) state that the body was Merleau-Ponty's chief example of a constitutive horizon of experience (p. 12). The body often escapes our conscious notice, though it is absolutely necessary for our existence. It is ever-present, yet obscured. The body can, however, make itself acutely known, particularly in moments of harm, illness, or injury (Jackson *ibid.* Csordas 1994: 8, Ram 2015: 36).

Thomas J. Csordas (1994) describes a shift in the scientific literature concerning the body occurring during the last few decades of the 1900s. In Csordas' conception of embodiment, the body emerges as something other than a theme, topic, or object of analysis; it is not simply *parts* and *fluids*, an *instrument* of human action, a collection of *symbols*, or a *text* inscribed by society, but also "the existential ground of culture and self" (p. 6). Just like Merleau-Ponty, Csordas sees the body not as a mere object (though it can be objectified), but as a fundamental site of perception. Ingold (2000) Emphasizes the total immersion of the organism (existentially mind *and* body) in its environment. Accordingly, in Ingold's understanding, embodiment as process is synonymous with acquisition and development of situated practical knowledge.

Practical Knowledge

Jackson (1996) emphasizes how knowledge is not strictly theoretical, but often practical. Competence is knowledge, action is an expression of knowledge, and through action knowledge is developed (p. 34). Ingold (2000) promotes the idea that knowledge and meaning are constituted through practical engagements. He opposes what he calls the *building*

perspective—the assumption that humans must mentally construct the world before engaging with it—with the *dwelling perspective*, which supposes that humans are inevitably, existentially immersed in their environment. According to the building perspective, perception takes in raw, chaotic sensory input, and proceeds to organize these data into durable, collective representations, which in turn direct human action (p. 195-198). In contrast, the dwelling perspective presents an inherently active human being; one which learns by *moving* in an environment. Here, perception is continual, directed, engaged, and crucial in shaping knowledge. Perception gives way to practical information about the activity with which one is currently engaged, and, importantly, perception is also adjusted and honed according to the practical requirements of the current activity. Ingold, referencing James J. Gibson, states that perception in practical activity defines the *affordances* of the current environment (p. 205-206). An emphasis on movement and practicality in knowledge creation sets the groundwork for a science that does not privilege words and concepts over acts and expressions (Jackson 1996: 34).

3.4 Ruined Environments

This section deals mainly with the situated quality of human experience. First, I theorize the meaning of *environment*, and the centrality of movement and practical engagement in its constitution. Then, I consider material things through a phenomenological lens. I explain what *abandonment* and *ruination* can mean to people and objects by discussing how, on the one hand, abandoned or ruined places can be appreciated for what they are, and on the other, how redevelopment, repurposing, and preservation strategies try to bring a sense of meaning back to out of use things. The term ‘landscape’ as Ingold (2000) describes it is dynamic, centers an embodied perceiver, and is defined by material and immaterial relations (p. 238-239). The qualities of landscapes are dependent on the experiences they afford, which, in turn, are determined by material circumstances, sensory awareness, and practical engagements (p. 238). Meaning is not inscribed in the landscape, rather the landscape and its dwellers (human and otherwise), *act together*. Ingold uses the example of gait and footprints to illustrate his point: “If we recognise a man’s gait in the pattern of his footprints, it is not because the gait preceded the footprints and was ‘inscribed’ in them, but because both the gait and the prints arose within the movement of the man’s walking” (p. 246). I incorporate this conception of landscape in my understanding of environment.

Abandonment

Archaeologists commonly see their sites as abandoned, Þóra Pétursdóttir (2014) writes. She states that though abandoned places are their bread and butter, archeologists often fail to engage with abandonment itself by understanding it only as corruption of the past under study, and an obstacle to surpass in order to access the pre-abandoned state of things (p. 338). Pétursdóttir explains that a possible reason for the general unconcern with abandoned things is that they lack human involvements, which complicates analysis made with a human focus. However, even within object-centered approaches, emphasis is commonly placed on usefulness and functionality. When things no longer serve a function they can be considered abandoned, at which point they're often seen as meaningless, static, and even disturbing. Only when re-contextualized can the abandoned regain their significance (p. 239-340).

Pétursdóttir makes an effort to engage with abandonment on its own terms, seeing things as they *are*, not for what they *are not* or what they *have been*. She describes her approach as phenomenological, attending to immediate experience, affect, and the world as it presents itself (2014: 345-346). By approaching abandonment in this way, Pétursdóttir wants to reframe it and question the focus on absence, loss, and failure that the concept typically implies. Rather than abandonment only marking termination, she understands it as a continuation of a new set of processes which call for reflection in their own right. Following Heidegger, Pétursdóttir presents two modes of being in regard to things. The first is practical, everyday, and useful; these objects become invisible to consciousness in their coherence with human action. The second mode occurs when normal function is disrupted. When things enter this state they are made visible because they hinder everyday proceedings. However, this two-part model leaves little room for considering strangeness in and of itself, Pétursdóttir states. She adds another Heideggerian mode of engaging with things that leaves open possibilities for otherness and mystery; a less reflective state of awareness that *waits* rather than reaches (p. 347).

Nonetheless, absence and abandonment often go hand in hand. However, absence must not always be negatively characterized. Absences are experienced in myriad ways, material absence significantly impacts experiences of the material world, and absence and presence are existentially dependent on each other. These are central claims in *An Anthropology of Absence* (2010) edited by Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, and Tim Flohr Sørensen. The volume follows the

academic legacy of material culture studies by prioritizing *presence* over *meaning*, and attending to lived experience and the sensuous qualities of objects. Bille et al. state that absence can highlight what's present if expectations are disturbed (p. 5). Furthermore, they describe how absence can produce presence, for example in how encountering absence (like losing your keys) can communicate a potent sense of a lost thing (p. 13). This echoes a general theme in many of the writings previously discussed, namely how disruptions and limitations can bring obscured things to the fore in experience.

Buildings and Ruins

Ingold's (2000) dwelling perspective frames buildings in a particular way. For one, it resists the notion that the built environment is mere manifestation of human thought onto the material world. This is the claim of the building perspective, which assumes people construct the world internally before engaging with their surroundings. But to build is also to dwell. Building, as well as envisioning, inevitably take place in the world, not apart from it (p. 230-231). Regarding houses, Ingold explains they are not static but continually maintained, decorated, repaired, and reconstructed. Houses also have non-human inhabitants, pets and vermin alike. Ingold concludes that the degree of human involvement in the generation of form is the main determiner of what people consider *built* (p. 233). *Ruins* are a contentious issue. Often, they are seen as useless and disturbing (Pétursdóttir 2014). In the case of modern ruins, they can be considered immature, not old enough to be proper heritage. They are also *fast*, decaying at a disorderly, inappropriate rate (Pétursdóttir & Olsen 2014a: 6). Dawdy (2010) cautions against seeing cities only as designed, planned, and built, as opposed to lived. She finds a critical edge in ruins, where the past, present, and future are evoked simultaneously. On the one hand, ruins prompt contemplation on what was, what is, and what can be; and on the other, they expose the lived and living qualities of urban landscapes. This allows for new temporal orientations that question the temporal ideology of modernity ingrained in anthropological and archeological thought, according to her.

4. Method: Ethnography & Exploration

In this section I describe my research methods, namely interviews, participant observation, and photography. I present my key informants and explain how I've gathered my data through various personal and locational encounters. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of some ethical considerations and complications, focusing on questions of confidentiality, legality, and safety.

4.1 Interviews

During my fieldwork, I was in contact with fourteen urban explorers, five of whom were women, nine of whom were men. I conducted a semistructured interview with each, whereof four in person, seven over the phone, and three in writing. Interview durations ranged from forty minutes to an hour and a half. Six interviews were recorded and later transcribed. In addition to interviews I had multiple unstructured conversations while exploring with three of my interlocutors. My interviewees had differing levels of confidence in referring to themselves as urban explorers. Most had no trouble doing so. Typically, these people were around middle age, participated to some extent in online spaces dedicated to UE, and had visited multiple locations over the course of years. The younger group, consisting of three individuals in their twenties, were less likely to assertively identify as urban explorers, on account of not considering themselves sufficiently experienced. These explorers were less organized and had been to fewer places than their older counterparts.

The main reason for choosing to do over-the-phone interviews was geographic. Urban explorers are spread out across the country, and because I could not travel to meet everyone, phone calls allowed me to interview many more explorers than I'd otherwise have been able to. The convenience of speaking over the phone may have been preferred by some of my interviewees as well, because a call is less time-consuming than a physical meeting, and because its implied social detachment may be conducive to vulnerability. Despite the limitations, I found all phone calls productive and engaging. The three textual interviews included a set of ten open-ended questions. For one interviewee I sent a series of follow-up questions after receiving the initial responses. Doing interviews over text made for a markedly different experience to a physical conversation. For one, all direct expressions of face, body, and voice were missing. For this

reason, communication over text was particularly well suited for preserving anonymity, which was an especially prominent concern for one of my interviewees. The other main distinctive aspect of interviewing over text was the temporal character of the conversations. The usual question-answer format of interviewing was replaced by block segments of multiple questions and answers spaced apart by hours or even days. I conducted textual interviews because some interviewees preferred them; they felt the least personal and most informationally thin, but they were valuable and interesting nonetheless.

Beside explorers, I spoke with a few other actors to broaden my perspective. One of these is photographer and artist Staffan Ehde, who captures abandoned places and objects in his work, some of which he's posted to online UE spaces which is how I discovered him. We spoke on the phone and had some further conversation over email. Another contact was Andreas Back, assistant professor of cultural geography at Umeå University. Back was as of 2026 conducting a research project about the extent and distribution of Sweden's vacant homes. We spoke on a video call, discussing the character of abandonment in the country. Lastly, in order to better understand the circumstances around abandonment, I sent eight letters to various owners of properties I visited. In the letters I explained that I was writing a thesis and that I had a curiosity for vacant buildings. I asked the owners about their property's history, and why it was currently out of use. In total, three owners got back to me. One of the people who replied set up a video call meeting during which we spoke in length about the owner's relationship to his property.

All interviews revolved around the interviewees' experiences of, and perspectives on, UE. Multiple recurring themes emerged from the interview material. As my fieldwork progressed, I tried to catch these themes and elaborate on them through my questioning. My approach was abductive, moving back and forth between theory and data. I read academic literature continually throughout the fieldwork process, digging further into concepts that resonated. My lines of inquiry were thus guided both by emerging themes and theoretical insights.

Main Characters

Three urban explorers have been particularly involved in my work, each deserving a proper introduction. First, there's Mikael; a man in his 60s who runs a website where he posts about abandoned places and his explorations. The site is impressive, covering myriad locations with

intriguing accounts of history and striking photography. I wrote to Mikael in October via the email listed on his website, after which we set up a meeting over coffee in Lund. Mikael was my first contact, therefore I also asked him some very basic questions about UE over email before meeting. Reliability and helpfulness are key terms for Mikael, as he continued responding, guiding, and assisting me from day one. In Mikael's company I explored an abandoned quarry and a half-demolished multipurpose stadium in Skåne.

Second, there's Nora, a woman in her 40s. I discovered Nora through an interview she had done about her urban exploring and photography. From there I found her Facebook page with videos and photos from her explorations. I reached out via Facebook Messenger and after switching to writing via email we soon agreed to a phone call. Over the phone I learned about Nora's interest in the old, the creepy, and the art of photography. A little over a week later we met up in Stockholm on a mission to a wooded area filled with derelict vacation houses. From Nora I learned the importance of safety in urban exploration, and of what actual risks the hobby implies. Nora was not the first explorer I contacted, but our exploration was the first joint venture I conducted.

Lastly, I present Theo. Theo is the youngest of my interlocutors at 21 years old. I reached him via a mutual close friend who gave me his telephone number. I messaged him asking to meet up, and on an afternoon in late November we sat down for coffee in central Stockholm. His relationship to urban exploration differed from my two other close contacts, in that he was less experienced, having visited fewer sites and followed a more unstructured explorative method. Furthermore, Theo isn't a public person who posts his explorations for an audience. He does, however—much like Mikael and Nora—have an interest in photography. At a later date me and Theo had a full day of exploring together across two municipalities in Stockholm county.

Finally, the thesis you're reading is not autoethnographic, but my personal experiences will have a place in the discussion. Knowledge is produced and communicated by and through people. Therefore reflexivity, which requires the researcher to interrogate their role in knowledge creation, is crucial. I aim to highlight some of the aspects of my personal experience that have shaped the work throughout. My lone explorations, making up roughly half of the total, have been important methods for data collection. Analysing myself, in my body, in the world, has been crucial in learning about UE. What's more, exploring helped me relate to my interlocutors,

providing common ground for discussion and guiding my questioning. Additionally, doing urban exploration was a social asset in conversations with explorers, who often expressed curiosity regarding my entry into the hobby and about places I'd visited.

4.2 Explorations

I conducted twelve excursions covering 46 distinct locations, totaling an estimated 36 hours. Explorations took place from early November 2025 to mid February 2026 in various places around Skåne and Stockholm county. On four excursions I was in the company of self-described urban explorers, on six I was alone, on one I was joined by my older brother, and on another I brought a friend. For one of the four joint excursions I was a part of a larger group of photographers led by a guide. My exploring has primarily covered residential sites. This type makes up 30 locations of the total 46, but I also visited places formerly dedicated to military, industry, commerce, transport, and entertainment. Exploring with others served as my method of participant observation. By joining urban explorers I attempted to learn about what they do by way of listening, looking, asking, feeling, and moving. Via participation I studied how explorations manifest, as opposed to only acquiring information through conversational descriptions. I elaborate further on my excursions in the coming ethnographic chapters. Finally, I asked Nora, Theo, and Mikael for written accounts of their experiences from a recent exploration. I gave only loose direction, instructing them to decide for themselves what they considered worth a mention. In these post-exploration logs, I received further insight into the personal thoughts and feelings that can emerge while exploring.

4.3 Photography

During explorations I was always equipped with a digital camera. Photography is an immense part of the practice of urban exploration, as nearly all of my interlocutors claimed photography was a central part of the hobby. Carrying a camera had important implications for my data collection. For one, reviewing photographs became a way to ‘revisit’ locations; to remember what a place looked like, what things were there, and how it felt like to be on site. Sometimes, my camera functioned as a tool. For instance, when I was unable to reach my head to a window or past a corner I could reach out my arm, camera in hand, to still get a look. Additionally, because photography was such an important part of urban exploration for the people I spoke to, putting myself in that same role allowed me to better understand the perspectives of explorers. Looking is important in UE. When you carry a camera, you consider how you might visually capture your surroundings; thinking of how certain objects, architecture, colours, contrasts or compositions could make for an interesting or beautiful image. Additionally, you must locate yourself in a position where your idea aligns with your camera’s view.

Urban explorers frequently publish their photos online, such as on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. On these sites people post pictures and recordings of places they’ve explored, sometimes with brief accompanying text about history, or a quippy, evocative, or cryptic title or description. Two explorers promoted their Instagram pages to me, each with hundreds of followers. Two others have followings in the thousands on Facebook. In only one case I encountered did the majority of photos on a page include a human being; most of the time places were depicted without human presence. Some images showed exteriors, often entire buildings, sometimes from aerial shots taken with a drone. Others displayed interiors, like hallways, staircases, and rooms, as well as close-range, focused shots of specific objects on scene.

4.4 Challenges & Ethical Considerations

Below, I discuss the ethical quandaries of my study. I detail some emic perspectives on ethics and explain a few of the risks inherent to urbex. As a note on general considerations, all interviewees have been given pseudonyms, and all recorded interviews were taped with consent and only listened to by myself. Most material is not particularly sensitive, though when it is I’ve made sure to double check for informed consent on its inclusion.

Code of Conduct

For many urban explorers, maintaining secrecy around specific locations is incredibly important, something I discuss further in the later ethnographic chapters. The main motivation for confidentiality regarding explored locations is preventing exposure of sites to destructive forces. Facilitating destruction of abandoned places would put me in a terrible position in the eyes of my interlocutors. My one exception is *Malmö Stadion*. Since I was there in an authorized manner, and because it was a well protected site that will likely be mostly rubble by the time my thesis is finished, I have no qualms giving it away. In other regard, I have followed the general UE code of conduct of not taking or breaking things on site, summarized by the common motto *take nothing but photos, leave nothing but footprints*.

Legality: Photographer or Criminal?

The legalities of urban exploration are somewhat unclear. Not necessarily in terms of what is stated in the Swedish law, but in how the law is interpreted by urban explorers, as well as how it's enforced by the Swedish authorities. According to the Swedish criminal code, entering or remaining in another person's residence without the owner's permission is an act of *hemfridsbrott*¹, punishable by fine or up to a year of imprisonment (*Brottsbalken* 4:6 § 1). If someone illicitly enters or remains in a place not considered a residence, the crime instead falls under *olaga intrång*², with the same legal punishment (*Brottsbalken* 4:6 § 2). Destroying or defiling property while being somewhere illegally is a more severe crime, raising imprisonment time to up to three years with a minimum of six months (*Brottsbalken* 4:6 § 3). Abandoned buildings usually have owners, therefore entering them without permission is illegal. The urban explorers I spoke with were scattered in their understandings of the law and of 'right' and 'wrong.' Some were quite clear in stating that what they do is wrong because the law says so. More often, explorers excused their behavior by referring to arguments such as: no one cares about the property; I do not break in, steal, or vandalize; I harm no one; I am not a troublemaker—I am a photographer. Asking for explicit permission before visiting a place was not uncommon, though no one I spoke with deemed it an absolute rule.

¹ "Domestic disturbance."

² "Unlawful intrusion."

Most explorers I spoke with had rarely if ever gotten into trouble with the law. Spats, however, were a bit more common, though simply explaining themselves and their purpose has typically sufficed in solving disagreements. Going into my fieldwork, I wasn't aware of the specifics of the law, nor did I know to what degree crimes of urban exploration were prosecuted. Before conducting any exploring on my own I asked my first contacts about legal risks, upon which I was reassured that these dangers were minimal.

Safety: Precarious Places

Urban exploration carries very real risks of bodily harm. Many of my interlocutors described scares of crashing through floors or falling in some capacity. A few had stories of real injuries, some had acquaintances that were severely harmed while exploring, and though none told me of deaths in their close social circles, I was sometimes made aware of cases of death in the broader urbex community. Decaying floors and ceilings are a main concern, but mold, asbestos, exposed nails, shards of glass, water, wild animals (and their excrements), unfriendly plantlife, and unpredictable persons are some additional hazards urban explorers often face. Furthermore, urbex is a physical undertaking that requires substantial movement such as climbing, crouching, crawling, and walking long distances. When returning from explorations I was often exhausted. By instruction of Nora I made it a habit to check ceilings and floors ahead of my steps as well as I could.

Another safety issue was brought to my attention when I was discussing my fieldwork plans with friends. With a joking tone but real concern they questioned my intent to visit remote, isolated locations in the company of strangers. In the end I decided to share my phone's location with a friend or family member before excursions, so that someone I trusted would know where I was. Sharing my phone's location inadvertently exposed the sites I was visiting, but I was sure the people I shared my location with would not take note of my movements to any significant degree, as they only had interest in protecting my safety.



5. Experiencing Exploration Through Emotions & Time

Multiple explorers describe UE as an adventure; magical and full of wonder, with unexpected turns and curious encounters. Mikael speaks of *upplevelsemaximering*³, an encompassing term that exposes a desire for intensely stimulating experiences, typically in reference to practical activities where you do something yourself, preferably containing a degree of physicality and indeterminacy. In this chapter I discuss two central pillars of the UE experience, namely its temporal and emotional aspects. In the first section I explain the ongoing temporal reorientation of consciousness in abandoned places. In the second section I emphasize the role of emotion in exploration, explain how emotional states can affect an explorer's perception, and discuss the role of transgression in the emotional experience of *spänning*. Some of my observations go in line with Bennett's (2011) epistemic explorer strategy "*communing with the spirit of the place.*" Particularly noteworthy is Bennett's mention of explorers seeking deep and open experiences (p. 428). However, in contrast to Bennett's characterization of communing with a place as a way to make meaning or discover knowledge, I approach sensation, perception, and experience for what they are, not for how they supposedly serve some greater search for meaning.

³ "Experience maximation."

5.1 Organization of Awareness

Urban exploration highlights the temporal dynamics of consciousness. The practice foregrounds the past, concentrates the present, and agitates the future. As noted by Dawdy (2012) and DeSilvey and Edensor (2012), modern ruins might be uniquely equipped to evoke multifaceted temporalities, especially via sensual experience. Depending on the broader context and specific mental and physical circumstances of a given exploration, awareness flows and shifts between different temporal orientations. These processes significantly structure the experience of UE. In the following sections, I first discuss how explorers remember personal histories by experientially travelling through time, and how they can re-live and crystallize their experiences through retrospective reflection. Then, I consider how explorers direct and experience their moment-to-moment perception. I explain how they emphasize attention, presence, and focus, and how urbex accentuates the body in experience. Finally, I discuss how explorers anticipate their uncertain reality; how they plan, and how their expectations influence their experiences.

Histories and Memories

Theo states that urbex satisfies a “historical interest and desire to feel close to history that you don’t get in the same way from books or even museums.” Many explorers describe incredible moments where they felt like they stepped into a time capsule/machine when they entered an intact place where things appeared to have been left untouched since the beginning of the location’s abandonment. Mikael tells of a factory with a workplace overall thrown to the side on the last day of operations; Fredrik, an explorer with a fondness for more physical kinds of exploring describes a pickaxe in an old mine: “like someone put it down just a moment ago;” and Falk, an explorer who cares greatly about their anonymity, states there are moments where “time almost ceases—when you stand in a room where nothing’s happened for decades but it feels like someone was just there.” She describes abandonment as “a gray area between past and present.” Urbex thus allows for a unique experience of suspension between temporalities, where the past is perceptually gathered in the present. This process is potentially afforded by the particular temporal nature of modern ruins. Moreover, it illustrates Ingold’s (2000) claim that in experience, life and activity constitute time, as opposed to the external passing of it. When explorers encounter rooms that are long unaffected by the practical activities that evidently took

place there at some point, it becomes easier to access that final event than it is to grasp the abstract passage of time between past and present.

Other objects in the environment evoke personal recollection, having you relate to the environment and point out personally resonant things. My brother was particularly prone to call attention to old technology, and at one point some old ice hockey gear piqued his interest. These objects relate to his life and hobbies. Like Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014a) explain, remembering must not necessarily be controlled by volition. In UE, you are provoked to remember your own life and to attempt to remember the lives of others. In other words, a sense of the past can take hold of you without warning in an encounter with something evocative.



My brother, intrigued by an old computer.

Photography can address an apparent imperative to remember the places you've explored. Explorers often describe their photos as a collection of memories, and remembering where

you've been is the most common stated purpose of photography for those that don't post their images online. Because explorers rarely if ever take any physical objects from their sites, and because abandoned places are precarious in nature, photographs become an important way to bring places with you that might not be around for much longer, and from which you have no other mementos. Viewing photos can also invoke memories of your past experiences on a site. For instance, Henry, an energetic explorer who likes to explore with his wife, says he can reexperience the thrill of an exploration by viewing photos he took of the place. Moreover, you can change your perspective on the past by revisiting your photos. The calm and attentive explorer Annika explains that images sometimes capture things you don't see in the moment, which allows her to discover things she missed on site by examining her photographs. Photographs thus present opportunities for retrospective reflection on your experiences.

In conclusion, we find two distinct types of memory work in urbex. The first is pre-reflective and evocative. Here, explorers can find themselves perceptually thrown back in time, or have otherwise emphatically relatable experiences. The second is retrospective, thinking back on your experiences on site and remembering what it was like. This process is often aided by photographs, which many collect with the distinct goal of preserving your memories. Explorers' particular way of unearthing history, as described in the opening paragraph of this section, is part of a general historical interest that will be further discussed in chapter six.

Moments

The immediate experience of UE is defined by presence and immersion. This is how I described my state of mind during my first joint excursion in my fieldnotes: "under the expedition I felt mostly curious and focused. I was in a steady state of concentration. Searching? Or wandering?" At the time, I struggled to resolve the simultaneous experience of depth and indeterminacy that urbex implies. Focus is a common descriptor of the UE experience, but toward what is it directed? *Searching* implies narrowing your attention toward a specific object. In UE, rather than enclosing experience, focus describes an open, attentive orientation toward your surroundings. To Pétursdóttir (2014), this may be an example of the waiting awareness that allows one to perceive strangeness.

For Fredrik, urbex creates inner balance. Similarly, Falk describes UE as a way to be more present in the world. Furthermore, she states: “On site there’s both focus and pulse. You have to be observant, read your surroundings, and at times make quick decisions.” Her example highlights the dynamic, *raw*, moment-to-moment experience of UE. Annika says she’s focused on photography, discovery, and the experience while exploring. This alignment implies presence in both body and environment; thoroughness and interest guiding your perception, openness to the odd as well as the ordinary, and attention to your emerging thoughts and emotions. In the periphery of consciousness is a wakefulness. Muffled sounds emanate from outside, softly reminding you of the world on the other side. The beam of your flashlight plays with shadows and shapes in the corner of your eyes, suggesting figures and colors for closer inspection. Disparate things call for your attention, more or less forcefully pulling you toward various points of interest.

Many explorers describe getting caught on certain sights, smells, and sounds while exploring. Sometimes you’re strongly attracted toward something on site. Both Annika and the empathetic and enthusiastic explorer Morgan describe instances where their curiosity was piqued by a certain object, causing intense motivation to approach and photograph the thing. In Morgan’s case, early in his exploring, he once lost track of where he was putting his feet:

I was photographing an abandoned house, and there was a barn, there by the house. And I went up to the second story, and walked around and took photos. Stunning! Old, really nice bikes, old horse sleds, and I was all wow! Wow! And so I walked there, and I didn’t think about where I was walking—I wanted to catch on camera—and then, bang! The floor collapsed under me.

Although UE often promotes presence, it appears that sometimes some things can be obscured in your perception. In Morgan’s example, he became narrowly intent on the curious objects in his surroundings, and strongly motivated by his amazement and desires. He describes the event as a near-death experience; crashing through the floor, a beam stopped his fall in a rather unpleasant fashion. Further down he saw concrete and metal rods. Had he fallen all the way he suspected he might not be alive today. In UE, you’re not infrequently reminded of your physicality. Sites are not maintained for corporeal comfort, therefore climbing, crawling, crouching, and bracing are common activities to many urban explorers. Henry explained how he had to take a break from

exploring due to hip-problems, and heart issues have hampered Mikael's pursuits. Annika and her friend once crossed the same floor but due to her friend being heavier than her he fell through while she did not.

In UE, not being aware of your surroundings is associated with mortal danger. Fredrik states that it's usually when you stop focusing that accidents happen. He's much more likely to bump his head on the way out than he is to injure himself roping down a mineshaft. When he's in a difficult situation he drops everything else to be present in the moment. Falk states she enjoys "when everything else disappears, when you have to fully trust your body, judgement and senses." Changing circumstances during explorations sometimes cause shifts in your priorities and focus. A startling sound like something falling, a swarm of bats, or the wind playing tricks may cause sudden paranoia; what if someone or something has it out for you? An accident or suspicions of encroaching danger can make you switch gears from exploring to escaping, though different explorers express different responses to peril.

The embodied nature of experience is brought to light in UE because the practice demands consideration of physicality and constitution. Being present while exploring means being present in your body and in the situation at hand. In order to have a fulfilling experience while staying safe, you must know both your surroundings and yourself. Morgan's story illustrates how the body can disappear in perception, and how it often reminds itself rudely if ignored in a precarious environment. Especially in the face of danger or physical challenge, the body becomes centered in its corporeality, physicality, limitations, and vulnerability. Jackson (1996), Csordas (1994), and Ram (2015) all point out that harm can increase visibility of the body to perception. Because UE demands movement and risk, explorers are frequently made aware of their embodied existence.

Anticipations

Going into an exploration you'll likely have a set of expectations regarding what you'll face on site. Some explorers say they see a photo of a place and become enticed to visit the location, asking themselves *how do I get there?* Via photography, online documents, and maps, you can get a decent idea of the possible challenges and opportunities of a specific location. Linus, one of my younger interviewees, has only done spontaneous exploration. Similarly, my other two

younger collaborators Sabine and Theo have conducted more spontaneous explorations than planned excursions. Being ill prepared often leads to less extensive exploring. Theo illustrates this with a story of how he happened upon an abandoned industrial building after having walked for miles. He was curious and wanted to see more, but in the end his exhaustion and aching feet prevented further adventuring. If you're attempting more elaborate ventures, like Fredrik does, you need extensive (and expensive) equipment like climbing gear, a wetsuit, a respirator, and more. Part of why Falk does research on a place before visiting is that she wants to understand the risks she might face. To her, preparation is important because it allows her to act calmly in precarious situations while exploring. Anticipating what lies ahead can thus greatly impact your experience on site, because material and mental preparation generates greater affordances while exploring.

However, in UE there's always an element of uncertainty. A place you've seen in photos might have changed since the time of capture. Things may have been moved, decay or vandalism might have escalated, construction work might have begun, or, in the worst case, the place may have burned down or been completely demolished. If expectations are not met, disappointment follows. Morgan described how he once travelled far down an offroad only to end up at a hunting shack, making the whole trip a waste. To Annika, Morgan, and Nora, encountering vandalism causes disappointment. Although, in general, Nora says that at the end of the day she's rarely unhappy with an exploration. Most explorers seem to make the best out of every excursion, not one of my contacts have expressed explicit regret about an exploration. What's more, part of the appeal of urbex lies in its unpredictability. As Linus puts it:

It feels like the allure is rooted in that too—that you don't really know what's going to happen, what story you'll take with you. There's something about it... I know exactly what I'll get if I go to the cinema. [In UE], I don't.

You never know *exactly* what you'll find or what'll happen on site, which, to many, is crucial to their enjoyment. For instance, Mikael is adamant that a degree of uncertainty is good, and Sabine says she likes asking what'll come next, and what's around the corner. Many explorers' approach to the future is open and inquisitive. Because explorers never know *exactly* what awaits them, they have to continuously reevaluate their situation. In the short term, you have to find a path to proceed. Sometimes, this is simple, but other times you have to bypass caved in ceilings, locked

doors, and overgrown wildlife. In the long term, you have enduring expectations of the scope of your exploration. These, too, sometimes need to be reconsidered as you take in your ever-evolving situation.

5.2 Exploring Emotions

When describing the qualities of a location, explorers often speak about their *feelings* in the place. To many explorers, UE provides an intense and distinctive emotional experience. For instance, the articulate explorer Eda explains that urbex puts her in an emotional state that is wholly unique. The most common adjective used to describe emotions in UE is ‘*spännande*.’ Generally speaking, when people describe something as *spännande*, they understand it as pleasantly stimulating. The noun ‘*spänning*’ describes something that is *spännande*. The Swedish term has multiple interpretations; it can be translated as ‘tension,’ ‘suspense,’ ‘excitement,’ ‘thrill,’ or ‘unease.’ In UE, *spänning* is employed to describe moments of curiosity, anticipation, and thrill. A place and an exploration are typically good when they are *spännande*. *Spänning* can also be a stated goal of urban exploration. Both Falk and Mikael were quick to name *spänning* as a principal driving force. Urban exploration provides interesting opportunities to interrogate emotions, firstly because of their significance to the experience, and secondly because the practice puts people in situations that contrast everyday life and society. As Ram (2015) points out, it can be productive to investigate emotions where normality is disrupted.

Below, I discuss two general categories of emotion encapsulated by *spänning*. The first is excitement and thrill related to risk and awe. In this section I explain how explorers engage with danger and how they either seek or caution against adrenaline. Then, I turn to tension and suspense, discussing how *presences* and creepiness inform the experience of UE. Here I posit that abandoned places can feel haunted, regardless of whether or not one believes in spirits, and that discomfort doesn’t need to be a bad thing. Lastly, I consider the emotional charge of transgression, and how many but not all explorers want to defy the rules. Throughout, I touch on how emotions interact with each other, and how similar feelings can cause varying responses.

Risk and Rush

Urban exploration is risky in terms of social, economic, and physical safety. Entering private property without consent is punishable by fine or imprisonment, neighbours or owners can be upset by your presence, and, as discussed in the Methods chapter, in abandoned places, hazards to health are plentiful. Every explorer has their own understanding of what constitutes reasonable risk taking. Mikael, Nora, and Henry all spoke of making judgment calls and setting limits. The risks can, however, be very much a part of overall enjoyment to some explorers. Eda explains that UE “gives an enormous adrenaline rush without too big of a risk, or at least [the risk] feels controlled.” To Theo, the distinguishing aspect of a good versus bad sense of risk is whether or not you have authority over a situation. You may *want* to feel like your life is in danger, even when that isn’t actually the case. I had my most thrilling UE experience when Mikael and I visited the quarry. After scouting around the factory building we had only encountered one single sizable opening. The hole was square, maybe a little over two-by-two meters, and framed by steel beams that ran inside the structure at an upward angle from where we stood. Mikael explained that the passage used to house a conveyor belt. The reason we had passed it by earlier was that it had seemed like an opening to nothing but a metal framework suspended over a huge drop to the quarry floor. What I’d missed, and what Mikael had discovered, was that by the side of the opening against the outer wall was a ledge that connected to a walkway further in.



The quarry opening, ledge, and walkway.

Mikael wasted no time shuffling along the ledge onto the passage. I stopped before the opening to consider the situation. On the one hand, I really wanted to see more and commit to the exploration; on the other, both ledge and walkway were worn, and falling to the quarry floor would mean certain death. After pausing to make a judgement call I ultimately decided I wanted to proceed. Had Mikael not gone first, proving that the ledge was stable and that the passageway could carry his weight, I wouldn't have dared. The walkway had thick railings and a grated base. At its far side was an elevator shaft. Tens of meters below was stone and rock. Inching forward I heard dripping all around, indicating our location below sea level, even at the quarry's upper section. By the end of the walkway, the metal below my feet had loosened from its frame. Shifting and groaning slightly at my weight, the grating told me it would someday release entirely, fully relinquishing its duty as support. The thrill was unimaginable.



Mikael braving the walkway before me.

Sometimes explorers refer to a sense of magic, awe, or ‘wow moments,’ when describing encounters with something truly special, often an intact location of significant size. Multiple explorers like Nora and Henry compare urbex to a drug, and others say it can cause a high or a rush. Fredrik says he’s replaced the bad coping habits of his past with the new addiction of UE. Though some explorers enjoy *just being* in an abandoned place, others like Fredrik, Mikael, and Falk are more into a challenge. Dangerous locations require ample preparation, investment, and dedication, according to Fredrik. As he describes it, you *will* hurt yourself if you’re not prepared. Falk emphasizes the need for presence, bravery, and respect in UE, and Mikael adheres to a risk-reward model, where more interesting locations beget greater risk-taking. In general, hidden or hard to access places are more exciting to him. Some explorers like Eda prefer a balance of not too difficult, not too easy.

The explorer Leonard, who likes to play with light in his photography, doesn't think any image is worth offering your life for. But, explorers sometimes accept higher risk when they believe they'll be able to capture a good image. In contrast to the time Morgan fell in the barn due to being unaware of his surroundings, sometimes he knowingly puts himself at risk for the sake of a photo:

There was an abandoned house I was photographing where pretty much the entire second story had collapsed. So from where I was on the bottom floor I saw the upper floor from beneath, hanging down. And there I saw a really old, nice couch, and I felt: I wanna take a picture of that! So I crawled in under there and, like, had I sneezed the whole thing would've collapsed. [...] Many times you really... Take the risk just because you want a good picture. Like, I know what can happen but I want a good picture.

Though a few explorers explicitly want an adrenaline rush, Fredrik says that adrenaline junkies are some of the last people he would bring on a treacherous exploration. Being jacked up on adrenaline is dangerous, he thinks, because it can cause a lack of focus. According to Fredrik, you don't have the luxury of becoming afraid when something happens, instead you have to sharpen your resolve. "If I'm afraid then I'm defeated," he states. Due to panic, Nora has run out from a location without being careful on more than one occasion, something she says should never ever happen. As illustrated previously by Morgan's fall, narrowing the sense of your surroundings can be incredibly dangerous. On the other hand, Fredrik wouldn't want to explore with someone who claims to not be afraid of anything either, because respect and knowledge of risks is crucial. Most explorers stress being cautious but not afraid. Thus, being struck with excitement while exploring can be an incredible experience, though you should always keep your wits about you.

Furthermore, there's a pattern in UE where explorers speak of both excitement *and* calm in relation to their experience. To Fredrik, Falk, Nora, and Eda, urbex can be a way to find stillness and calm. This is because abandoned sites are relatively quiet and isolated compared to the bustle of urban rooms and places; in combination with the explorers' state of presence and focus. This is the condition of *just being* in urbex. As noted above, exploring can also be intense and exciting. Sometimes, the same people that find relaxation in UE also seek exaltation. I call this conundrum *The Thrill/Chill Dichotomy*. The obvious solution is that some things conjure calm

while other things cause excitement. Sometimes, this explanation is sufficient, but in a few cases, the same thing that might give rise to a thrilling response for one person creates a focused calm for another. The concrete situation, then, is one determining factor of how emotions work in UE, but another important aspect is how the individual relates to their circumstances and emotions. Notably, this doesn't appear to require a reflective process. Rather, the explorer's predisposition can cause a specific response before they intellectualize their emotional state.

Suspense and Spirits

Between thrill and calm is a third pillar of the urbex experience, namely a thread of tension that coils, pulls, and provokes. Henry says he's nervous all the time during explorations. He describes his lone visit to an abandoned mental asylum as a particularly nerve-wracking experience. Often, explorers enjoy a bit of nerves. Some seek out the creeping feeling of suspense, like Theo, who tries to scare himself by looking for creepy things. At the end of our all-day joint excursion we came upon some skeletal remains from a large animal scattered around an old bunker. By then, our daylight was well and truly spent. In his post-exploration log, Theo describes how the bones and darkness satisfied his desire for experiencing creepiness. Some explorers speak of detecting *presences*. Often, something lingers in the air or is forged in the foundations of abandoned buildings. The way Morgan puts it:

You go into these old houses and you get a certain feeling, that's how it is. There's no denying it. In every house I've been to I've had a certain feeling. I've sensed certain smells inside... But nothing that you can, like... Touch directly.

Morgan and a few others believe in spirits. He attributes the sense of presence he describes to remaining souls in the places he visits. However, an explorer must not believe in ghosts in order to perceive presence. Linus says a place can feel *haunted*, though he'd never embrace the belief there are actual spirits at play. Sabine and her partner discussed an instance where they happened upon an abandoned house. They agreed the place carried a presence that could be experienced as spiritual in nature, though neither believes in ghosts. As opposed to spirits, Sabine attributes the origin and nature of the suspense in UE to reflective anticipation:

I think [the unease] stems from the feeling itself. Which is founded upon the external, on the fear that there is something else, too. Like, I think it's the fear that there's something else that drives you to think there's something else.

What also differed between Sabine and her partner was the product of the uneasy feeling; how they understood it and how it motivated their actions. Despite both feeling unsettled in abandoned places, Sabine finds this feeling stimulating while her partner thinks it's offputting. "In the unease there's *spänning*," Sabine says. Clearly, *spänning* is not only about curiosity, but also regards a degree of tension. Both Sabine and her partner feel some kind of presence, and both consider it eerie in some way, but Sabine finds a degree of enjoyment in the discomfort. A place that promotes a degree of unease is therefore desirable to Sabine, as appears to be the case for many explorers. During one of my lone excursions I spotted a very odd house in the forest. It had white facades, and from where I was approaching it I couldn't see any windows or doors. I had been drawn to the spot by a cabin right beside the white house. I'd seen the cabin first, but my interest was diverted the second I became aware of its strange companion. The house's unusual appearance stirred something in me. It was eerie but fascinating. I took a picture.



The white house without windows from the front.

The hole in the insulation intrigued me further. Wanting to get a better look, I stepped closer. A sudden thud stopped me in my tracks. It came from inside the white walls, I was certain. I'd made it close to the opening, yet I could only perceive darkness past the insulation. I became acutely aware of how near the hole I was, and of the sound of blood rushing in my ears as my heart raced. I tensed up, hardening my muscles and stopping my breath. What I was afraid of? An animal? A person? A ghost? None of these things usually scare me. I have little faith in spirits. If it was an animal it was likely small and just as scared as myself, and if it was a person we should be able to talk it out. As I waited in silence, breath returning, I could almost convince myself I'd imagined the noise. Coming out of paralysis, I backed away from the house. With distance, my sense of safety slowly returned. I wanted to walk around the structure to see if it had any other openings. To my bewilderment, neither side had any windows or doors.



The white house without windows from the rear.

Returning to the front, I plucked up the courage to approach the opening once more. Still, I could only see black. Quickly, I reached inside the hole with my camera, snapping a few pictures. While inside, my hand felt hot. My gut was telling me to retract it before something grabbed hold of me. I pulled my hand back in a hurry, just careful enough to not touch the insulation. The images I managed were blurry, only one gave an idea of the interior space. In hindsight I spotted what looked like an opening in the floor at the bottom right of the photo. Maybe I could've entered the house through there? Most likely, I wouldn't have dared, even if I'd noticed it at the time. The event brought my body sharply into focus. I sensed my heart, hand, lungs, and muscles. Clearly, I wasn't in any real danger, but the sense of it is rarely far away in isolated and unpredictable places.



The white house without windows' interior.

On my final lone excursion I visited a large yellow villa. I spent hours inside looking at furniture, letters, books, and other belongings. This is what I wrote in my fieldnotes after the exploration: “The sorrow was palpable. I suppose I don’t actually know that the previous inhabitants have died, but that’s what it felt like. [...] The presence of the individuals that once lived and loved there was so very tangible.” Sabine’s partner thinks the room itself is the primary cause of the emerging affect. She says the fact a site is abandoned is what creates the place’s atmosphere. Morgan described an instance at an abandoned site where he was suddenly overtaken by a terrible sadness, causing him to weep at the scene. He wasn’t sure where the feeling was coming from, but it affected him severely. Similarly, when other explorers speak of their emotional state on an excursion, they sometimes report being suddenly grasped by forces that are palpable but hard to pin down. As Sigurdson (2023) and Ram (2015) remind us, atmospheres and moods can affect people without their consent or understanding. In UE, confounding emotions often come in

the shape of presences, sadness, or fascination. As an aside regarding fascination, it's sometimes able to dispel fearfulness at an encounter with a curious target. In general, curiosity is associated with comfortable excitement or focus, and fear is connected to desirable suspense or undesirable panic.

Transgression

Apart from eeriness, tension can also arise because of perceived transgression. The fact that UE implies doing something you're not allowed to do is described as *spännande* by nearly every explorer. In contrast, Sabine's partner claims she's a rule-follower. To her, urbex feels wrong because she understands it as transgressive: "It's deviant. Also from, like, if I'm in a city I know how to act and navigate and that. But this feels more 'no rules'. [...] Because then it's like... I can't just walk about and... Mess around." As she describes it, in abandoned places the rules of urban life are disturbed, which, to her, is frightening. Linus paints the extreme case of a person who's scared away from abandoned places as a law-abiding, rule-loving political moderate. Breaking the rules a little is appealing to many explorers, therefore committing an infraction by entering someone's property without consent can be exciting. One example is Theo, who on our joint excursion excitedly entered a questionably abandoned shed, and later pulled on a padlock to check if it could be removed. In his post-exploration log, Theo explains that a sense of trespass increases *spänning* to him. Furthermore, abandoned environments present something outside the norm, according to Linus. Sabine noted that houses aren't usually empty, and that it's fascinating to take part in the unusual circumstances of abandonment. She explains that UE "is a flight from boredom—from everyday life where everything is obvious. [Where] what you do is so restricted." Theo, states something similar when asked what makes urbex *spännande*: "the way we live now is so safe all the time, and so surveilled. To be outside that." Mikael thinks we live in a world that is too comfortable. He enjoys taking his life in his own hands, outside what he perceives as an oppressively overprotective society.

However, the escapism of UE can also have less emphasis on subversion, and more on simply taking a break. For example, Nora uses UE to get away from the stressors of everyday life. The possibility of getting caught by the law is tantalizing to Mikael, who believes it could make a good story. Likewise, Linus thinks police involvement can give way to social capital. But to many others, legal repercussions either aren't much considered, or they cause anxiety. Generally

speaking, negative accounts of nerves come in relation to legal and human conflict. Not wanting to upset owners or neighbours, or face legal repercussions are common (though not ubiquitous) concerns. Some explorers also worry about encounters with unhoused people that sometimes reside in abandoned places, as they are considered unpredictable due to associations with drug use. Fear of injury more often occurs in moments of accidents than in a trepidatory fashion.

Treading outside the bounds of civil society by doing urban exploration exposes you to the dangers of the wilderness and to punishment for your transgressions. Sometimes this begets a sense of freedom and personal control, but other times it presents obstacles to enjoyment. In my own experience, I noted a disparity between excitement and anxiety when Mikael and I explored the abandoned quarry. Crossing the ledge and braving the walkway gave me immense satisfaction. Afterwards, as we were wandering about the quarry floor, a distant voice began yelling at us. Neither one of us could make out much of what the voice was saying, nor could we locate the individual. We were certain only of one thing: that the voice had mentioned calling the police. Mikael remained calm, and in the end we exited the site without interference from law enforcement, but for a while I was keenly aware and afraid of the possible consequences of my actions. The event didn't evoke quite the same magnitude of emotion that I'd felt on the walkway, but it certainly caused worry, so much so that I quickened my step and wanted to leave at once.

The incident in the quarry shifted my focus from exploring to escaping. In a similar vein, both Nora and Sabine reported instances where they had followed an urge to flee. The protracted suspense of expecting a scare can be pleasurable according to some. Although, depending on the nature of the scare and the degree and duration of tension, suspense can sometimes (albeit rarely) escalate to panic. As Ram (2015) explains, emotions motivate behaviour. If a situation feels dangerous, even when specific threats are unclear, fear can impact the proceedings of an exploration. However, what specifically causes any specific emotion and how someone reacts to it is variable. The difference between how Sabine and her partner relate to discomfort in UE highlights how similar emotions can cause different responses depending on how they are received. Someone who associates transgression with deviancy and danger over freedom and *spänning* is more likely to be repelled by urban exploration than someone with the opposite approach.

The fact that abandoned places are understood to be unregulated by civilization, and that they are thought to subvert societal structures like surveillance and comfort, makes them appealing to explorers seeking freedom and experiences outside the ordinary. This is evocative of Hudson's (2014) and Desilvey and Edensor's (2012) explanations of the unique affordances of informal places. Although, bearing in mind Bennett's (2011) advice, we should take caution to not overemphasize transgression in relation to UE. I believe transgression is central to the UE experience, though more often than not it isn't the main driving force for the explorers in this study. As a note, I'd argue Bennet conflates resistance and transgression somewhat in his article. It's important to recognize that explorers can enjoy the forbidden-ness of trespassing without relating their behaviour to any socio-political ideology or to resisting normative social constraints or the law. On the other hand, the simple fact that abandoned places are *different* often make them appealing enough, without requiring forbidden-ness. Ultimately, urbex as described by my interlocutors is more a practice of *curiosity* than of *rebellion*.





6. The Pursuit of Knowledge

Urbex promotes curiosity and hands-on learning. Furthermore, the process of exploration changes the explorer as they hone their practice. Initially, this chapter deals with practical and social knowledge as they are invoked and embodied in UE. Following this, I address some of the explorers' perspectives on historical knowledge, in terms of what aspects of personal and collective pasts are believed to be accessible from material remains, how lived experience can produce knowledge, and what we ought to do with historical knowledge after it is unearthed. Like Bennett (2011) observes, many explorers seem to desire documentation and preservation. Lastly, I discuss the role of curiosity in urbex from the perspective of explorers' fascination with puzzles, mystery, and creating their own adventure.

6.1 Practice

Practical knowledge is valued, crucial, and inevitable in urbex. In this section I describe how UE is learnt and embodied. First, I explain how different practical lessons manifest and what effects they cause. Then, I consider some ways that praxis and perception adapt through engagements with abandoned environments. Lastly, I discuss some of the social dynamics among urban explorers, explaining the advantages and disadvantages of socializing in the hobby.

Both Fredrik and Nora describe UE as a *lifestyle*. Additionally, Nora says UE changed her life and opened up the world. Many explorers explain that as you latch onto urbex, urbex latches onto you. In his post-exploration log, Theo writes:

Getting into places you're not allowed to becomes easier every time. Getting past the first fence was pretty exciting, you sensed that you were doing something forbidden. But after a few explorations the feeling becomes more obvious.

His statement highlights something I experienced myself, namely a gradual but quick adjustment to the process of illegal entry. In UE, the new explorer learns fast by acquiring practical knowledge through concrete engagements in the environment. Some lessons are tentative, others more forceful. While travelling on the bus to my first excursion, I spotted a run-down building by the side of the road. When I later approached it, I found the door ajar. Stepping inside I was met with near complete darkness, as the light from the front door could only penetrate a few meters inside a large room with a low ceiling. I made out nothing but a few shelves and a mirror on the opposing wall with the help of my camera and my phone. In that moment I learned a valuable—and in retrospect obvious—practical lesson: day or night, always bring a flashlight. Other typical tools in urbex include: food and water, durable clothes, boots, gloves, and first aid, though you must also pack light so that you are mobile. To someone who does more elaborate exploring like Fredrik, other kinds of gear are necessary, and to those who put stock in their photography, camera equipment is brought along. When I asked Nora and Mikael about equipment they explained that explorers often assemble their standard pack over time. Inside you keep your necessities on standby so that it becomes easy to pick up your stuff and go.

Being knowledgeable about praxis is explicitly valued by explorers. Morgan begrudges how commenters on online posts about UE question and complain without really knowing what they're talking about. They point out a trimmed lawn, living potted plants, or lack of dust as evidence that indicates a place isn't actually abandoned, without considering that grass doesn't grow tall in *Norrland*, that potted plants can be plastic, or that dust is a product of human waste. These people clearly don't understand the practice, yet they feel entitled to sit at home and police the activities of explorers, according to Morgan. Fredrik states that in places that are difficult to access, everyone involved must be knowledgeable, not just theoretically, but practically through physicality and experience.

Some lessons are instant and frightful. Multiple explorers told stories of *almost-injuries* where they were very nearly seriously harmed. In the preceding chapter I told the story of how Morgan fell in a barn. He described the event as a learning experience; nowadays he always checks the structural integrity of floors before he steps on them. Looking and feeling for soft spots where you're walking is a very typical safety measure among urban explorers. Henry once stepped into an old bus and crashed straight through the rusted floor, coming very close to ripping his legs apart on the exposed metal. The incident taught him to be more careful in the future. Although, as stressed in the previous chapter, a sense of risk does not necessarily increase a sense of fear. In fact, sometimes it has the opposite effect. In many instances, exposure and habit seem to instead reduce fearfulness. For example, a few years ago Annika began descending old mines. Initially, she had some fear, but by now she says that feeling is entirely dispelled. Concern about being caught can also decrease with greater experience, something both Theo and myself attest to.

Abandoned places resist everyday urban activities and question presuppositions about how buildings function. Usually, there's no electric light, something most Swedish people are accustomed to. Light can not be taken for granted in abandoned places, especially because your safety relies on being able to spot possible hazards. Hazards that, as previously mentioned, are numerous, and which you typically wouldn't expect to encounter in a built environment (I never find myself questioning the integrity of floors or ceilings in habited buildings, for instance). Through UE you learn to recognize signs of danger like soft floorboards, crumbling ceilings, and security personnel by looking, feeling, and listening. Navigating through bushes, balancing on ledges, hopping through windows, climbing over or crawling under fences, and feeling the door handle on a building you don't know, are a few common explorer undertakings that may be unusual to the average citydweller. Recurring challenges in urbex often revolve around *getting in*. Another lesson imparted to me by my explorer contacts and by experience: often there's an entrance *somewhere*—always look around before giving up.

By learning urbex through practical engagement, explorers discover and develop abilities, opportunities, and limits in their surroundings. In other words, affordances in the environment are defined through the explorers' active participation and perception. The decreased fear that comes with experience may have to do with the fact that explorers improve their ability to make informed decisions regarding risks. And, having developed reliable habits they may be able to

better understand how to handle novel or difficult situations. Like Ingold (2000) notes, perception itself is also shaped by practice. Henry says that since he began urban exploring he's started seeing abandoned places wherever he goes. I experienced the same thing. In November, after a busy few days of exploration, I wrote: "I have started seeing abandonment everywhere—it's more common than you think, and your 'eye' evolves with UE." Nora, too, spoke of something similar. She also mentioned that she sometimes picks up an *urbex-smell* while out and about. Perceiving signs of abandonment can thus become somewhat of a compulsion, as abandoned places catch your attention even when you're not on the lookout for sites.

UE has a distinctly transformative aspect. Odd acts feel increasingly comfortable as you do them—the first time I opened the door to an abandoned house my hand was shaking, now I try doors by routine. Furthermore, it is clearly an embodied practice. Recall that Ingold (2000) describes the process of embodiment as developing situated practical knowledge. Recognizing the *urbex-smell*, spotting a broken window, and feeling locked doors, all happen more or less unconsciously. Knowing what to look for fronts those things in perception, and knowing what to do can make you act before you purposefully decide to. Many explorers describe being *pulled* toward abandoned places or things. Morgan calls *urbex* a *disease* and a *poison*, and Nora has referred to it as an illness on multiple occasions. Apparently, UE can infect you, change your perception, and compel you to explore. I pointed out to Morgan that calling UE a disease gives it quite a negative connotation. He said that depends how you look at it, but that to him, *urbex* is a source of joy, not a debilitation. Nora, though finding great satisfaction in UE, also sometimes struggles with it:

I wish I had a normal interest, but I cannot be as passionate about anything else the way I'm passionate about this. Urbex is not an interest, it's a drug, or a lifestyle. [...] If I found anything else I was as passionate about I'd stop.

Embodiment in UE thus implies a change in perception that affects the way explorers move, look, act, think, and feel. Practical knowledge is highly valued because it increases safety, increases opportunities in the environment, and is socially beneficial. *Knowing* UE is most often seen as positive, but because the knowledge is so powerful, and because it permeates immediate experience with or without your consent, it can also at times run counter to your volition.

Sociality

Urbex presents several interesting social dynamics. Some aspects of the practice are distinctly pro-social. A frequently stated advantage of having a social network is that you can find sites via your connections. Other benefits include lowering costs by carpooling or sharing living expenses during travel. Moreover, multiple explorers state that longer trips are much more fun with company. Safety is another social issue, in part because you can share insight amongst yourselves while exploring, and in part because if you're alone you have no one to help you if something goes wrong. Fredrik says that in caves you have to be at least three people that all know what they're doing in order to be even minimally safe. In many ways, explorers are thus dependent on each other to discover and navigate their sites. They also owe something to burglars and vandals, who pave the path to entry by breaking locks or smashing windows.

Many social interactions between explorers occur online. Some of the explorers in this study pursue social media in order to connect with others and receive recognition and appreciation for their work. Henry, Nora, Morgan, and Fredrik all appreciate *likes* and positive comments on their online posts. What's more, publishing your photography can be a way to communicate the beauty of abandoned places to the public. However, some explorers have little to no interest in UE's social dimension. These explorers state that they don't do UE for the social aspect, that they have few urbex-friends, and that the friends they do have through UE are mere acquaintances. However, many still always explore with company.

What's more, according to Nora, social integration in online urbex groups is complicated by general uncharitability and paranoia. Annika, Henry, Leonard, and Nora all claim there is widespread negativity in online urbex communities. Part of this negativity is constituted by people who persistently question whether places are actually abandoned, or who criticize the activities of explorers with reference to the law or to morality. Another aspect is in-group suspicion and jealousy. Annika describes an instance where a group broke down due to increasing suspicion that their common map was being exposed to people who weren't supposed to have knowledge of it. Most explorers have some personal guidelines they follow when deciding whether or not to share a location with someone else. Some are very restrictive, like Morgan, who says he *never* reveals a site's location to anyone, except with two good friends whom he knows well. Others are more lenient, but in general, there has to be a degree of trust

between explorers before they feel safe to share. The concern with revealing locations is that they will be exposed to so called ‘wrong folk’ who’ll go there and steal, defile, or destroy. Publicly asking for disclosure of locations in online groups is a serious taboo.

Part of why some explorers want to keep abandoned places intact is for the sake of other explorers that might visit in the future. This grants efforts at secrecy a social goal. On the other hand, explorers sometimes compete within the community. Being the first person to visit a site can raise an explorer’s status, and having extensive access to interesting sites provides greater opportunities for future excursions and gives an edge in producing unique photography. Importantly, none of the explorers in this study claimed to be strongly motivated by competition or *being the first*, though several mentioned that these types of people exist. Nora described an instance where a prominent figure in the community treated her poorly in order to acquire locations from her. Because the individual was well known, she assumed they wouldn’t do anything untoward, but her trust based on their status instead gave them leverage to take advantage of her. One interviewee is a dedicated follower of Nora. When asked what makes her special, he said it’s because she’s *been everywhere* and because her photos are impressive. Bennett (2011) emphasizes the role of competition in explorers’ pursuit of knowledge, and though I’ve found some corresponding indications in my own material, I do not assign as much importance to competition as a driving force as he does. Because Bennett’s study is an analysis of online communities, all his informants are necessarily entwined in urbex-based social networks. My focus is on the real-life experience of UE, and several of my interviewees are not particularly engaged in online groups, yet they are still intensely motivated to explore, despite not partaking in any kind of competition.

Urban explorers sometimes arrange big meet-ups, but generally speaking this kind of exploration seems rare. Many explorers go alone or have a single companion on their excursions. The explorer Nils, a composed and social man, regrets the fact he has no one to explore with. Nora, though she often lacks company, thinks being alone can be frightening. Although, going alone can also be desired. For example, Nora says she likes feeling alone in the world. She doesn’t unpack the apparent paradox of desiring both company and alone-ness, but it seems to be a question of circumstance; if she’s in a location she finds scary she’s less inclined to want to be alone. Being a good urbex-partner can imply a number of things. Eda states a good partner in UE

must be willing to take the risks required for getting into places, Falk explains that a good partner is calm, reliable, and good under stress, and Leonard thinks a good partner is patient and interested in photography. To Nora and Fredrik, trust is crucial, in part because UE can be dangerous, emphasized by the fact you're outside the protective bounds of everyday society. Falk states that explorers have each others' safety in their hands. She adds that it's important no one on an exploration is out to impress.

Nora says that in UE, the desire to impress or satisfy others can sometimes make you feel pressured to do things you otherwise wouldn't have done. I experienced a bit of this in the quarry when Mikael found the ledge. As I stopped behind him, part of me felt coerced to follow because I didn't want to disappoint. Another force egging me on was academic pressure; if I wanted to be a good ethnographer I had to commit. After my compulsions had settled I reminded myself that my hesitation wasn't unwarranted, because I was faced with a potentially dangerous undertaking. If something had gone wrong on the ledge or passageway I could've very well been met with a lethal fall. The event communicated to me how social pressures can promote reckless behaviour. In UE, trust must be placed in your companions as well as your own intuition and boundaries.

At times, certain abandoned places become widely known among explorers. Nora calls it the *urbex-bus* when explorers frequently flow through a location. High traffic on a site can be beneficial in that efficient pathways are established for you to follow, and that you can navigate the places with intention due to them being well documented. On the other hand, a stream of constant explorers can be a disturbance to neighbours, according to Nora. Not wanting to disturb neighbours or upset owners are relatively common concerns among the explorers in this study. No one intends to be a nuisance or a fright to anyone. Fredrik speaks on responsibility, and how you doing something dangerous on someone else's property can put the owner in a bad position. What's more, being discovered or apprehended can also be embarrassing, according to Nils. My friend who I explored with noted that encounters in abandoned places lack the normal social script for casual, everyday encounters with strangers in urban environments, which makes them uncertain and uncomfortable.

6.2 Personal & Societal Stories

A common exercise among urban explorers is fantasizing about previous inhabitants or workers of the places they visit. Who were they? What were their lives like? Why did they leave? Certain objects may be more likely to prompt this type of reflection, such as clothing, tools, calendars, and letters. Other times explorers visit places with some degree of already established historical narratives. This is the first topic in this section, where I explain how some explorers are concerned with documenting the pre-abandoned past in an effort to preserve knowledge for posterity. I then turn to more personal stories communicated by what people leave behind, before concluding with a discussion of abandonment as a fruitful ground for examining societal change.

Documentation of History

Fredrik states that the many subgenres of UE generally have a common interest in wanting to take part in the past. Of the explorers I spoke with, all assign some degree of significance to history in their exploring, though some are significantly less interested than others. Many stressed how some locations provoke greater historical prodding than others. Explorers often like when places have historical associations. Knowing that a historical figure has stood where you are standing can be appealing, like when Nils marvelled at an abandoned *folkpark*⁴ he visited, where multiple celebrities had performed in the past. Or when Fredrik explored a cave where Carl Linnaeus documented plant life hundreds of years ago. Typically, age is desirable to urban explorers. Most prefer old (but not ancient) sites. The boundaries for what constitutes *old* versus *recent* abandoned sites isn't clear-cut, but the majority of explorers in this study mainly spoke about places constructed during the 20th century. If the site was abandoned after the turn of the 21st century it might be considered newer.

Sabine thinks that many people, particularly younger ones, have little interest in things that don't directly impact them. She says that tradition and history are important because they shape the present day. Marginalized knowledge is especially intriguing to many explorers. Wanting to preserve this kind of information before it falls into obscurity is a priority to some. Falk explains:

⁴ A certain kind of public park in Sweden.

I think it's important to preserve Sweden's more hidden history. There's an incredible amount of places that once served an important function, but that later have been filled in, closed, or forgotten.

Morgan also finds it important to preserve hidden history. The tale of a house, a property, disappears quickly, he says. Saving these stories through photos and written records is important to him. With permission from the municipality, Morgan has documented an old school and a retirement home for posterity before the sites were demolished. Leonard states that his photos of a lit up abandoned factory were so appreciated that the local heritage association contacted him asking if they could use them in their documentation about the building. In cases like these, explorers see their work as beneficial to society. Abandoned buildings are not formal heritage sites, yet they communicate something of value about a shared past. Perhaps they even do so more authentically than formal historical places.

Explorers typically assume that the sites they explore are honest in their presentation. If a place is vandalized or doctored its storytelling becomes muddled, which is one reason why vandalism is undesirable. This also implies a separation between human activity that occurred prior to and after abandonment. As Sabine says about recent litter and scattered clothing: “it is not the same history” (as in pre-abandonment). Many explorers move things around as little as possible to preserve the state of things on a site. However, Annika cleans up litter, and can move things in order to get a better photo. Henry says he’d never stage an image. Neither would Morgan, who says “I know that many do that. That they move stuff for a better picture, and no. I photograph the way it is.” Leonard put lights in the old abandoned factory intending to create an illusion of the place being operational once again: “It was a really awesome feeling to stand there and see how there was life in the factory one last time.” When Annika cleans and Leonard lights, there’s a sense of wanting to capture some *original* image of the place. In these cases, authenticity of the past is privileged over authenticity to the present condition. Bennett (2011) notes something similar in his study, namely that bunkerologists search for the pre-existing state of things on their sites (p. 431). Human interventions in the afterlives of abandoned sites are thus seen as disturbances, rather than information explorers typically want to engage with. The operational word here is *human* intervention, as *natural* transformation is seen in another light. I discuss this issue at greater length in chapter seven.

Meeting the Absent

There's a general assumption among urban explorers that you can tell things about people and their lives from the objects they left behind. "Houses live longer than people do," Nora says. Therefore, buildings can tell the stories of the dead, who cannot themselves communicate directly with the living. According to Linus, you can tell very intimate things about someone from their belongings. In abandoned houses you can find personal letters, clothes, art, books, food, medicine, and any number of other things that might indicate what kind of person lived there; what they liked to do, their tastes and struggles. In some ways material objects may be more honest than people themselves, Linus says, because they tell only the narrative of what they are, not of what someone who might be trying to impress you or maintain a certain image explains them to be. What's more, by navigating an environment you can imagine everyday movements and approximate a routine. Linus describes exploring an abandoned home as "a meeting with the absent." Thus, a person need not be present in order for the explorer to feel in contact with them. It appears that as Bille et. al. (2010) claim, the vacuum of the missing can pull them sharply into focus. Therefore, in abandoned places, people can be experientially present though they are positivistically absent.

Although, you can never know *everything* about a person in their absence. As Sabine puts it: "you can construct an individual but you cannot *know* anything about the person." To Sabine, urbex is better at identifying general things about how people might have lived in a certain time period. Dawdy's (2010) comparison of urban explorers to archeologists is prescient. Bennett (2011) performs a similar analogy, stating that bunkerologists have an archeological focus that "seeks to excavate—in order to preserve—the places, artifacts, and cultural context in which these places once operated" (p. 432). Pétursdóttir (2014) explicitly conducts an archeological study through the medium of UE. Of course, there are significant methodological differences between urbex and archaeology, perhaps the most obvious being that explorers tend to avoid moving objects and influencing the environment on site.

Examining Societal Patterns and Wounds

Some explorers are especially keen on using urbex as a way to experience and communicate structural change. This is the main motivation for the explorer Allan, who's a professor in economic history. Both Allan and Mikael have authored books on the subject of industrial and

economic restructuring in reference to what these processes *left behind*, namely, abandoned places. This brand of explorer finds that by investigating abandoned public places, industry, and commerce, they can trace socioeconomic patterns. A factory is constructed and operational for a number of years when business is booming, and it falls into ruin when the economy shifts. There's an argument to be made that these historically inclined explorers promote alternative narratives by exposing what Dawdy (2010) calls *ruins of modernity*. In derelict factories and dying towns the destructive effects of globalized capitalism are laid bare, and the illusion of constant societal progress is dispelled. Mikael says that in his childhood, modern equaled good. Today we've realized that this view was short sighted; "only the modern can become unmodern," he states. Explorers like Allan and Mikael thus advance a temporal alignment that emphasizes change over progress, which, if we follow Dawdy, lends critical potential to UE.

However, as Desilvey and Edensor (2012) note, modern ruins can also provoke regressive admiration and nostalgia. Abandoned places can serve as cultural touchstones, according to Nils. He states that compounds that used to be a town's pride and joy now stand in ruin, indicative of past glory. Nils doesn't appear critical of this kind of downfall, rather he sees it as inevitable:

Here around [home town] there are old glassworks. And you go in, I think that's cozy. Like you see how the 'glass kingdom' was at its mightiest maybe in the fifties or sixties and then it's only been downhill. [...] And when you were younger you went to these places and everyone was so proud, and now everything's all left and vacant, it's a cozy feeling. [...] It's nostalgic. Of course you can think it's tragic that it's decaying and that people are moving away, but that's just the way the world works. It's always been that way, and there'll probably come a time when people move from [home town] too. Because they've built something else somewhere else.

Nils is particularly interested in nostalgia, though a few other explorers mentioned that urbex can sometimes be nostalgic or melancholic. Nora says she tends to conflate emotional and historic worth. Because immediate experience is so central to UE, it often takes precedence over other aims. However, recall that preconceptions inform experience; if you go into an exploration with a historical interest you'll feel more satisfied if you encounter what you perceive to be historical things. *Dark history*, often found in old mental asylums, hospitals, and prisons, is particularly interesting to many explorers. Annika thinks tragedy can be exciting:

With abandoned houses it's like—well, people used to live there. It's their stuff that remains... And you can tell if someone lived there that wasn't doing well mentally. And if there were kids there. And if it was a long time ago since anyone lived there. [...] It feels really tragic. But you're all—I mean you get excited, at the same time as there's tragedy... But... I mean it's fascinating, it really is.

As explained by Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014b), finding beauty in tragedy can be considered distasteful in that it supposedly romanticizes suffering. Additionally, they discuss how academics typically prioritize *making sense* over *sensing*, adhering to the belief that sensuality is fetishistic and intellectually useless. However, according to Pétursdóttir and Olsen, aesthetic appreciation is not necessarily devoid of critical potential. Rather than understanding aesthetics as a romanticizing veil over reality, Pétursdóttir and Olsen argue that aesthetics capture something of the immediate encounter with things, allowing for indeterminate and corporeal experiences. Returning to the explorer/archeologist comparison, if we concede to Pétursdóttir and Olsen's argument, it appears that academics might have something to learn from ruin photographers.

Explorers thus desire some sense of proximity to their locations. They don't want to feel too close, however, because then the *spänning* of novelty and strangeness is lost. Perceived otherness in UE is created through time, darkness, decay, and other kinds of abnormality to present day urban society or personal experience. In sum, urbex appears to be about both closeness and distance, nostalgia and eeriness, recognition and wonder. Are emotional and historical kinds of information opposed? Phenomenologists like Jackson (1996) are adamant that theoretical knowledge on its own is scientifically insufficient. Experiences of history in the present are therefore not unscientific, but can tell something meaningful about the past. Ultimately, urbex is grounded in experience, but posits that experience and knowledge are not inherently in conflict with each other.

6.3 Curiosity

Fascination and intrigue are central components of the experience of UE. In the following, explorers' hunger for discovery and mystery are elaborated on by explaining their processes of research and investigation, and their habit of asking questions for the sake of asking.

Discovery

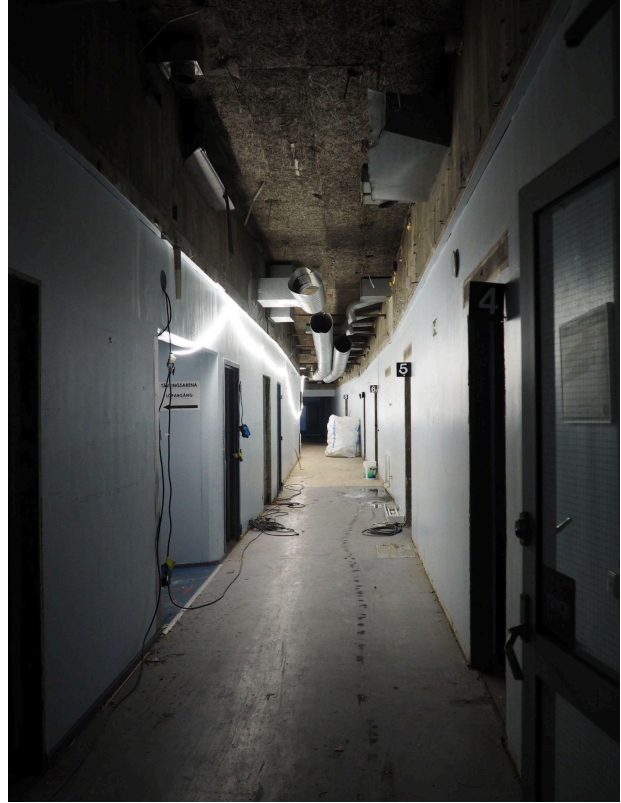
Doing research is an important aspect of UE. Many explorers enjoy researching the sites they visit, both before and after explorations take place. The extent of this research varies between people and locations, but looking up ownership and scouting on Google maps are two common activities. Explorers may also dig into a place's original purpose, who resided and operated there, and when and how it was abandoned. Often, explorers also like the process of searching for locations. Many enjoy maps and floorplans, online documents, and descriptions of retired train routes. Explorers sometimes describe their pursuits as *detective work*. It begins with searching for a site and researching it, and continues on-site, as explorers start unearthing personal and structural histories through the artifacts they find. Theo says it's like finding clues to a puzzle.

Many explorers have a *do it yourself* attitude. Mikael says he wants to discover for himself. As he describes it, tourist locations do not provide the same satisfaction as urbex because they limit your movements and hand you ready-made narratives. Theo says: "I like to explore the less touristy places. And [urbex] is as far from touristy as you can get." Mikael was quite unhappy with our visit to *Malmö Stadion*. The building is currently (as of early 2026) under demolition. Our excursion was in the company of Mikael's friend and frequent co-explorer, as well as Mikael's book publisher, and a decently sized group of other photographers. When we arrived at the stadium, we waited outside a fence to be let in. Eventually, we entered the property's office spaces where we had to equip protective gear and sign an attendance list. By the time of our visit, the demolition was already well underway. After being led by a construction worker up the slippery entrance to the stands, we looked out over the stadium's opposing Northern side, where much of the structure had been torn down. Our guide expected the demolition to be completed by the summer of 2026. The structure was large, angular, and in declining condition, with flaking paint and filthy concrete. We explored in a somewhat rushed fashion, only seeing a small part of the building, and being kept in close line with the group. To Mikael, the experience was entirely lacking in *spänning*.



Catching up with the group from the shadows in Malmö Stadion.

At the stadium, I frequently found myself wanting to diverge from the group. For one, I wanted to separate myself from the chatter of the crowd, as it distracted me from the focused experience of exploration. And for two, I was constantly drawn toward and intrigued by open doors, staircases, and hallways where we weren't allowed to go. I couldn't escape the thought that there was *so much* left to explore elsewhere, just around the corner. At times, I almost became irritated with our guide when he reminded us to stay close and keep up. I wanted to go my own way, do my own thing, and see more than he was allowing us.



Often, I was tempted to go out of bounds inside Malmö Stadion.

Another aspect of discovery in UE is the desire to see something novel. In her post-exploration log, Nora wrote: “we see things not many others see. There is nothing else that is as *spännande*.” Nora says she experiences a kind of *wanderlust*. Nearly all explorers I spoke to are intrigued by seeing what, and going where, others don’t. And, although multiple explorers have some sites they like to revisit, none are satisfied with exclusively exploring repeat locations. Relatedly, the inherent uncertainty of UE means you always inevitably come upon unexpected things, even at familiar locations. As discussed in chapter five, this is a significant part of the hobby’s appeal. Notably, explorers’ purposefully open mode of perception is not only a boon to their experience, but also a tool in their investigatory work.

Mystery

Urban explorers often seem to find a great deal of satisfaction in asking questions over finding answers. The fact that sites present incomplete histories is appealing to some. Sabine, Theo, and Linus all spoke about the charm of partial knowledge. Sabine says it’s *trying* to understand that interests her, and Annika says she’s fascinated by *traces*. Part of why explorers don’t want obvious answers is that they enjoy the process of conducting their own research, as discussed above. But the ultimate goal of urbex doesn’t necessarily appear to be ‘solving’ the case of each location.

Staffan Ehde explains that he finds it easier to communicate a place’s past through his photos if he knows the details of its history, but that those kinds of images tend to be less fascinating to his audience. Not knowing may therefore be an asset to create intrigue in imagery. Theo says he sometimes researches a place after he’s visited it, but that the lingering inquisitive desire from questions raised on site may itself be more satisfying than any actual answers he later comes across. A place being perceived to have history is important to many explorers, but perhaps a part of why this is so is that these types of places raise more questions to ponder, rather than that they provide lots of answers. Of course, many explorers have a distinct interest in what they see as ‘actual history,’ but exclusively considering this perspective misses the experiential focus at the core of UE. Recall Pétursdóttir’s (2014) discussion of experiencing the strange in itself by limiting reflection in consciousness. In conclusion, it appears that wondering in itself is part of the *spänning* that urbex implies.



7. Veneration of Place

In this chapter I approach the question of abandonment, asking how explorers experience and understand it, as well as what they believe should be done with it. I begin by unpacking the sensuous character of abandoned places and objects by looking at material and environmental qualities that impact the experience of UE. Then, I discuss how explorers characterize vandalism and demolition, concluding that they promote respect and care for places, and that they hold property owners and developers to certain related standards. Similarly to Bennett (2011), I've found that veneration and conservation of place are common values among explorers. Lastly, I tackle abandonment head-on, explaining and problematizing its reasons and what it looks like. I wrap up by discussing the volatility of ruination and questioning the common dichotomy of buildings versus nature.

7.1 Standing In a Ruined Place

Keeping in mind environments, objects, and surroundings is crucial to understanding the experience of UE. Importantly, following many of the scholars who are central to my analysis, I do not conceptualize the subjective mind and the material world as separate entities, but as existentially and unavoidably interlinked in the whole of human experience. In this section I discuss how the experience of urbex is affected by degradation, emplacement, and location type.

Damage, Age, and Decay

Many explorers express an interest in material things. Some, like Theo, find it difficult to explain specifically why certain objects draw their attention. Others, like Nora and Sabine, say they get particularly attached to *old* objects. Henry and Annika say they often get stuck on material details. Henry adds that every piece of stuff has its own history, and Mikael finds that some objects *anchor history*, which makes the past more immediately tangible. To Mikael, new, mass-produced objects can feel soulless, therefore he prefers fixing old stuff rather than replacing it. As will be elaborated in the following section, explorers often detest stealing. They rationalize this opinion with reference to the law, but theft also seems to have a distinctly affective dimension. Explorers sometimes speak of objects as if they exert a force, like when something *pulls* them in, or forcefully evokes particular thoughts or feelings within them. Additionally, objects in abandoned places are perceived to carry a charge which opposes any instinct to take them. For explorers that are less concerned with legal repercussions or moral imperatives, it may be enough that it simply *feels wrong* to steal things. The knowledge that the stuff isn't yours is not just a *fact* but a *feeling*, perhaps strengthened because the explorer is there to *sense* rather than to loot.

Intact locations are often considered particularly good sites. Eda says intact places have more *personality*, and Sabine says it's easier to construct a place's history when it has a lot of stuff remaining. The process of looking into what happened somewhere is thus assisted by remaining artifacts. As noted in chapter six, explorers want to be prompted to ask questions by the environment. In this sense, each object at an exploration site provides another clue to the past. Additionally, the sensation of stepping into the past as described in chapter five is always correlated with preserved material conditions. On the other hand, the explorers in this study are nearly universally drawn to decay, and, if a site is perceived to be very recently abandoned it's often considered less interesting. Age was described as an attractive quality by most explorers I spoke to, and being able to tell that abandoned objects and buildings have *lived* was always considered desirable. Modern ruins thus perform a balancing act between being *too* pristine and *too* degraded, although the type and timing of present damage is essential. As Bille et al. (2010) explain, wear and tear on things like tools and clothing can be empathically evocative of past activity (p. 12-13). Because explorers want to get a sense of the past, traces from it are desirable,

while obfuscating damage can be a disturbance. At the same time, the unique fascination of abandonment finds purchase in decay, therefore not every place must be potent with history in order to be interesting. Eda states: “There must be enough decay for it to truly look abandoned. If it was just to see old things I might as well go to a museum.”



Inside a fairly intact, two-story villa with a strong sense of personality.

Seeing and Being in Abandoned Places

Urban explorers often want to see things *in real life*. No one I spoke with thinks viewing photographs of abandoned buildings is equivalent to a visit. Two illustrative examples are when Annika says she likes to see things *live* and that capturing a feeling emanating from an object in a photo isn't always possible, and when Allan explained that urbex is much more fun than a what he called a “boring doctoral thesis,” because in UE you can see structural change *for real*. Both Nils and Annika said that looking at pictures can create a desire to go and capture your own image of the same thing. There's a sense that a photograph is a recreation of someone else's vision, and though it can be fascinating and beautiful, it cannot communicate the experience of

UE in a meaningful way. What's more, some explorers mention how rooms and objects can convey things that words can not. Nora employed the example of extermination camps, and how the physical presence of uncountable numbers of shoes cannot be experienced through words. Bille et al. (2010: 9) also use the example of holocaust memorials in illustrating how piles of victims' belongings conjure more than concrete, cognized meaning, or a mere sense of proximity to the absent. Additionally, DeSilvey and Edensor (2012) state that ruins are well suited for messy and difficult to rationalize forms of experience.

The experience of UE has some unique sensory qualities. Darkness, quiet, and the smell of damp envelopes the explorer in a particular atmosphere. Notably, there's a prescient sensory distinction between being *outside* versus *inside* abandoned places. Explorers are often preoccupied with how to *get in*. Typically, there's an initial threshold at a property line, often in the shape of a fence that can be circumvented, climbed over, or crawled under. Next, you meet with the walls of a building. At worst, you can't find an entrance or even see anything through boarded up or otherwise blocked windows. Accordingly, entering is a common challenge in UE. My friend and I visited a silo and a store on the same excursion. The silo had no penetrable openings at ground level, but on its facade was a tall, skinny ladder leading all the way to the roof. We entertained the idea of climbing the ladder, but ultimately decided against it on account of safety and the risk of being seen. I had a similar occurrence on a lone excursion, where an open window on a second story tempted me toward a nearby ladder laying on the lawn. Once again, I didn't end up doing the climb, but the desire to *get in* distinguished itself as a powerful thing. My friend found our exploration in the store more satisfying than the silo, because we could enter it and look around the entire place. She said it felt like we hadn't *conquered* the silo. Even when immersed in interior environments, explorers often have a degree of awareness of the outside, so that they can tell whether someone is coming to scold or apprehend them. The moment of entry has been a prominent source of excitement for me on my explorations, and the moment of exit has often arrived with a sense of something like relief, or a dispelling of tension. When you are inside, the feeling that you are doing something forbidden intensifies, and getting out can thus provide a sense of having gotten away with things.

Because many explorers try to keep their impact on the physical environment on locations minimal, the act of looking becomes a primary explorative method. It is not simply a question of

the sense of sight, but of your manner of perceiving; directing your gaze, angling your flashlight, getting your eye caught on something peculiar or exciting. Many explorers are fascinated by the aesthetics of rot, rust, mold, and degradation. They find these things visually pleasing, beautiful, and creatively inspiring. As urged by Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014b), we can see this aestheticization not as fetishistic, but as a way to directly engage with the pre-linguistic, affective encounter with ruins. In conclusion, the environments of abandoned places are saturated with stillness, beauty, melancholia, and indeterminacy. The sensing explorer is embodied and emplaced, their experience dependent on the interrelated qualities of their surroundings in play with their active perception.

More and Less Private Places

Urban explorers visit all kinds of places. A non-exhaustive list of sites mentioned by explorers in this study are: residential houses, vacation homes, mansions, military bunkers, factories, laboratories, hospitals, schools, prisons, farms, silos, mines, quarries, office buildings, amusement parks, gas stations, power plants, and public parks; among other things not classed as buildings like bridges, train tracks, and cars. Some explorers are anything but picky. Annika, for instance, says she likes *everything* that's been left behind. Others are more selective. In simplified terms, there appears to be a divide between explorers that visit abandoned homes and those who avoid them. To Mikael and Allan, abandoned homes convey personal human tragedy which is not their point of interest in urbex. Furthermore, Mikael considers the home a private sphere which he doesn't like digging into. Nils says nothing of a sense of tragedy, but instead states: "all [residential] houses look about the same." Another thing that can make houses less interesting to explorers is their generally smaller scale when compared to other kinds of sites.

Generally, homes are experienced as more intimate than other sites. To some explorers, this makes them uncomfortable to explore. However, the personal nature of homes can also be part of their appeal. Nora, for example, is especially interested in personal stories, though she's not unbothered by human tragedy. Both her and Annika describe a conflicting set of emotions where encounters with tragedy are simultaneously understood as sad and exalting. I myself have at times found urbex to be incredibly emotionally taxing. In January, I wrote to Nora:

Despite all the spänning and fun, I've often felt a strange sadness during my excursions. It hits me after a long day as darkness falls and the cold is biting my nose. All of a sudden the usual sense of spänning is transformed into a nagging discomfort. [...] I feel like someone who indulges in another's misfortune; and I feel haunted, like the places' tragedy has stuck to me. In these moments I never want to explore again.

In this account I describe something similar to Nora's earlier comment in chapter 6.1 about quitting urbex. Importantly, both her and I still explore to the present day. In both our cases, exhaustion and the heat of the moment exacerbated our negative responses. Nora later stated that she's doubtful she would ever actually stop doing UE. Like many others, I've found melancholia less potent in empty or industrial sites. The emotional and transformative effects of urbex thus appear to be in part dependent on location type. As a note, military locations distinguish themselves as especially precarious to explore. Multiple explorers in this study avoid military sites altogether due to the very real risk that you might get into serious trouble if a place turns out to be covertly in use. The repercussions of urbex therefore escalate when questions of national security are on the table.

7.2 Politics of Place

Many explorers report that they sometimes *fall in love with* particular places. This is indicative of how explorers sometimes form strong emotional attachments to their sites. In a similar regard, according to most explorers nearly *all* places are deserving of care and respect. In this section I explain which interventions in abandonment are considered acceptable and which are not. I do this in relation to explorers' moral code, their personal connections to places, and their understandings of societal utility.

Respect and Vandalism

Nearly every explorer in this study considers destruction of abandoned places sad and frustrating. Accounts are numerous. Morgan's story below is illustrative of just how devastating some explorers find vandalism:

The house was completely untouched. The sun parlor you entered through had these small glass panes with different colors and it was so incredibly beautiful. The interior

was completely untouched. Two years later my friends were up here [...] and when we approached I saw scribbles on the house, and I thought no no no no no no. Then we got closer and I saw that not a single glass pane was intact... And I was all no no no no no. And we went inside and I saw how they had rummaged around, thrown stuff everywhere, and things were missing... And like, I took it so hard. I told my friends they could go in and take pictures if they wanted to but I had to go outside and sit down. I couldn't be in there. So I went outside and just cried my eyes out.

Destruction is often described as widespread and pernicious. ‘Wrong folk’ that visit abandoned places commit immoral and harmful acts, and are unquestionably distinct from urban explorers. Stealing, spray-painting, smashing or breaking things, littering, and lighting stuff on fire, are serious and unfortunately common misdeeds that wrong folk commit. As a note, though many explorers find ‘scribbles’ defiling, graffiti isn’t always described this way. Mikael thinks well crafted art with intent and effort can be nice, and Theo enjoys looking at graffiti. How an artistic work is crafted, where it is placed, and what it depicts thus has some impact on the opinions of explorers.



Graffiti inside an abandoned house.

Many explorers emphasize *respect* in their practice. Often, this means respecting the material integrity of a place, or ‘*miljöerna*⁵’ as they are. Morgan wants to be respectful toward previous lives lived and remaining spirits on a site, therefore he always makes it a point to thank the people of the past while exploring. Blurring out license plates and portraits in your publicly posted photography is a common way to respect the privacy of previous inhabitants. The sense of past that explorers sometimes find can also impact their attitude and behaviour. Fredrik explained that he was extra careful not to disturb things in an old mental hospital out of respect for the strife of the people who used to live there. If a place is perceived to carry a strong emotional or historic charge, stress on respect often increases. Being respectful in UE thus implies both careful behaviour and an attentive mindset.

Respect for owners is also very common, though sometimes quite complex. Stealing or breaking things is frowned upon in part because *it’s not your stuff*, but if you receive consent from the owner to take something, many think it’s alright to do so. When explorers have received permission to take objects from a site they often frame this as a way of saving things for posterity. Owners are thus afforded the right to their belongings, even if they don’t use them. Sometimes, explorers get in contact with owners before exploring their property, however, many explorers feel entitled to enter and navigate abandoned places without proper permission. Often, they have no moral qualms with what they do because they don’t consider it wrong to enter and look around. Annika states that owners revoke their right to control entry when they *don’t care* about their property:

You shouldn’t [steal]. It’s like, someone else owns it. [...] But on the other hand I think that I have every right to enter houses that no one cares about. I think they have exhausted [the right] that you’re not allowed to be there.

Explorers further justify their practices in how they frame the law. They typically don’t call for changing the laws as written, but instead emphasize the way the law is (or rather *is not*) enforced. Nothing substantial has ever come of the crimes committed by urban explorers in this study, and on the rare occasion the police have gotten involved, the cases have been dismissed without much issue. Morgan has an interesting account of a time when he happened upon a group of thieves in the act of taking things from a place he was about to explore. He explains how he

⁵ Roughly: “the environments.”

blocked the road with his car and called the police who showed up and thanked him enthusiastically. Apparently, some acts are right and some are wrong in abandoned places. At the center stands respect, care, and impact. Explorers feel they neither mean nor do harm, therefore they are justified in what they do. When asked if he's ever afraid of getting into trouble with the law, Nils says no, adding:

If you're really picky you could interpret the law in such a way that it's not legal to enter. It's called olaga intrång⁶ and if someone happens to live there it's hemfridsbrott⁷ which is really serious. But the way I see it, if there's a house and half the roof has fallen in, then no one is going to get angry with me if I go there.

Utility and Demolition

In contrast to vandalism stands demolition. Nora and Annika describe demolishment of beloved sites as tragic. Many explorers agree, though most also consider intervening in abandonment to be a societal necessity to some degree. Some think that because abandoned places are unsafe and sometimes polluted, tearing them down can promote the health of both the environment and of people, especially children. Taking down the old in favor of the new can also be considered an understandable or even inevitable motivation for demolition. For instance, if a city is in need of more housing but short on space, replacing unused structures with residential buildings is often seen as reasonable and ultimately good, if still personally sad. Additionally, what is made of the site post-demolition is important. Annika explains:

If you take Fredriksberg's paper mill. Which stood as a kind of... Monument of the past. And it was one of those favorite sites you've been to many, many times. That was really tragic. Now it's just a gravel court. [...] It feels pretty meaningless.

Sometimes explorers express regret that they didn't make it to a certain location before it was demolished. Speaking for myself, I just about missed multiple abandoned buildings in the neighborhood where I live in the city of Lund. The thought irks me every time I pass the sites. To Nils, demolition is only really sad if he's not had the opportunity to visit the place and photograph it first, and Morgan thinks places should be sufficiently documented using

⁶ "Unlawful intrusion."

⁷ "Domestic disturbance."

photographs and recorded information before being torn down. Demolition, then, is seen as problematic partly because it deprives explorers of experiencing a place, and partly because it erases the history contained there; however, demolition can also be seen as productive and okay if it is motivated by the perceived needs of society.



A week earlier, this hole in the fence was open and demolition had not yet begun in earnest⁸. As of May 2026, nothing remains of the building on the site.

Like Davidov's (2016) informants, the explorers in this study usually prefer renovation to demolition. Although, they don't typically mention any major gripes with economic interests, as long as abandoned structures are taken into consideration. In other words, renovating an abandoned place for commercial purposes may be accepted or even encouraged, but buying and using land with a house on it and letting the house rot is frowned upon. Morgan thinks it's good when an abandoned home is renovated instead of continuing its decay: "[It's nice] that someone

⁸ The sign in the image reads: "Warning. Demolition, asbestos. Access prohibited for unauthorized persons."

wants to take it on and fix it up. And that it gets to live on,” he says. Accordingly, Davidov’s argument that UE is countercultural stands in the sense that these explorers appreciate abandonment for what it is, rather than how it can be appropriated for utilitarian or economic purposes. However, as explained above, explorers often acknowledge utilitarian values as well.

Caring For and About Places

According to multiple explorers, the proper thing to do when you can’t take care of your property is to sell it. And, though they are intrigued by abandonment, it isn’t always seen in a positive light. In fact, abandonment is often characterized as sad. This is particularly true on social media, where posts about abandoned places—especially residential houses—are often flooded with comments about how tragic it is that the sites are left to rot. Related to respecting a place is *caring* about (and for) it. Explorers often say that *no one cares* about the sites they visit. This is exemplified by the quotes from Annika and Nils in the previous section. Explorers usually think it’s sad when places are uncared for. Leonard states: “melancholia can often arise when you see in pictures from the past how loved a home used to be. And that it is now left to its fate.”

Care, in turn, is associated with maintenance and upkeep. Determining whether someone cares about a place can therefore be done by analysing its material state. Speaking about a site he explored, Morgan said: “You could see that no one cared—it was overgrown, the windows were broken, and stuff like that.” In other words, explorers feel that if you *care about* a place, you *take care of* it by tending to its built form. Accordingly, the sadness associated with abandonment seems to have more to do with the implications of decay than decay itself. To some explorers, decay communicates absence of care, which goes against their personal convictions related to respect and care of places. Thus, in urbex, the ‘living’ and social qualities of buildings are highlighted. Buildings depend on us as much as we depend on them; so called ‘abandoned’ sites are places where the relationships between people and buildings are disturbed.

7.3 Diagnosing Abandonment

When discussing urbex it’s essential to not lose track of the fact that explorers are interested in *abandonment itself*. And, though abandonment can be considered tragic, it is also often seen as beautiful and valuable in its own right. Defining abandonment proves no simple task, however.

In this section I grapple with the diverse reasons behind abandonment, as well as the myriad ways it can be expressed and defined. Then, I explain that explorers appreciate the erratic process of *natural* decay, which they oppose to *unnatural* human engagements.

Reasons to Abandon

When considering abandoned properties one may be left confused or even frustrated. Indeed, I have often been met by exasperated expressions from people who just *don't understand* how someone could leave a perfectly good building or valuable piece of property to rot. This subsection is a digression from my main subject of inquiry, which nonetheless provides important context for my analysis. Two frequent explanations offered by explorers as to why residential houses become abandoned are: issues with inheritance like lack of heirs or family disputes, and people buying property for the land as opposed to any structures on it. For industrial sites, both demolition and renovation can be very expensive, especially if sanitation is required, making neglect the cheapest strategy. Some explorers go easy on owners of abandoned properties because they understand that reasons for abandonment are infinitely complex and varied. To distance herself from the implications of conscious choice implicit in the term 'abandonment,' Nora prefers calling her sites 'forgotten'⁹ as opposed to 'abandoned'¹⁰. Although, as she explains, the places are rarely if ever *actually* forgotten; if you contact an owner they'll never say they forgot their property exists.

My explorations in a Stockholm municipality highlighted how local politics can have a significant role in abandonment. In the late 1990s, my parents bought a muddy field in the relatively uninhabited area of a Stockholm suburb. Soon, they would have their family home constructed on the site. To my parents, as to many others residing in the area, closeness to nature was an attractive aspect of the locality. Over the course of my childhood in the 2000s, much changed. Gravel roads were paved with asphalt, water and electricity were relaid, and housing began replacing fields and woodland. The houses already present—spread out and hidden among the pines—soon stood out next to white, boxy, 21st century architecture. Many of these older houses are empty today. Along a particular stretch of road stand three large abandoned properties side by side. The Eastern-most property consists of a cabin, a storage shed, some foundations

⁹ 'Bortglömda' in Swedish.

¹⁰ 'Övergivna' in Swedish.

from a house, and a square, excavated pit. Speaking to my family, I learned that in 2016 the main building on the site was destroyed in a house fire. Later, I managed to get in contact with the owner of the property who could tell me about the place's history and explain the local politics of the early 2000s. Apparently, development plans have been repeatedly delayed in the locality, which has long hindered construction projects. I've had this confirmed by another owner of an abandoned house in the area as well. Owners being geographically distant from their property, and sudden ruptures in personal lives causing a shift in priorities or economic opportunities, are two apparent reasons why houses in the municipality stand empty.

But, the overall emerging narrative from speaking with my family and with the owner of the burned down house is that people began moving away when the area started being developed for increased residential capacity. In one abandoned house I found an old newspaper with an article about local people protesting the municipality's plans. In the article, concern is expressed that living expenses will increase, that the environment will change for the worse, and that the municipality's money would be better spent elsewhere. Like Allan, Mikael, and other explorers claim, abandonment can apparently tell stories of societal change. In our conversation, professor Andreas Back characterized abandonment as a largely rural issue (personal communication, January 20th, 2026). Despite being called *urban* explorers, many explorers I spoke with conduct a significant amount of their excursions in rural areas. According to Back, rural Sweden is neglected in the country's politics, causing a greater extent of residential abandonment due to things like high cost of construction and development. Theo notes how in larger cities like Stockholm, abandoned buildings may be handled more quickly than in the suburbs, because authorities want to use every centimeter of valuable city space. Overall, it seems that abandonment exists *everywhere* to some extent, but that its character and prevalence is in part dependent on local and national patterns of society.



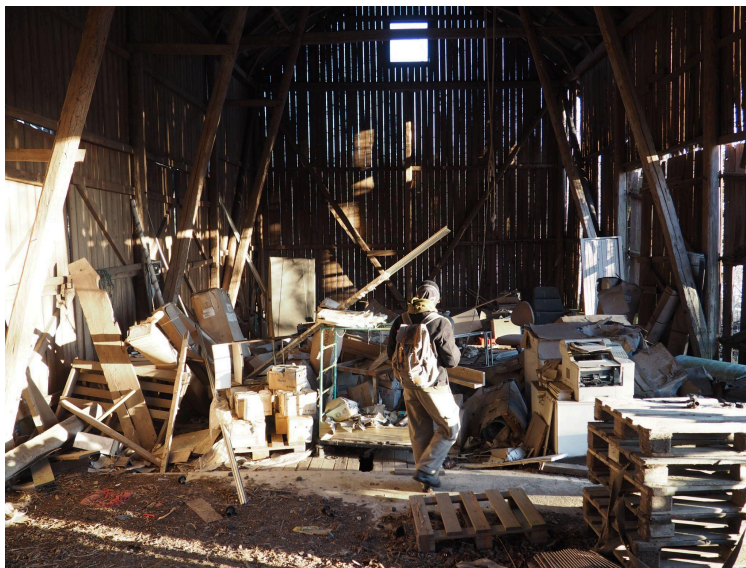
A cabin somewhere in a Stockholm suburb, showing multiple symptoms of abandonment. I found my point of entry through the broken window via the chair on the right side of the image.

Symptoms of Abandonment

When explorers look for sites, if they have the privilege of discovering a location via online posts, they can be reassured that the place is at the very least *abandoned enough* for other explorers. If you're physically scouting for potential sites, you have to make the judgement call yourself. It begins with a visual analysis of exterior qualities, where indicators include: flaking paint, stained facades, dark or covered up windows, overgrown vegetation, and absence of cars, shoeprints, and tiretracks. Most telling are breaches of skin like broken windows, open doors, and caved in roofs or walls. At a closer look you can scrutinize internal signs like extensive emptiness or excessive clutter, outdated furniture and technology, lack of electricity and water, dead potted plants, and various kinds of filth like dirt, dust, and mold. Suggestions at an afterlife like graffiti, beercans, vegetation, cigarette butts, and birds- and waspsnest, are additional clues.



Emptiness.



Clutter.

According to Back, abandonment is a spectrum. For the purposes of his study, he believes a possible way to determine whether a place is abandoned is to look at trash collection and electricity usage. However, he doesn't find this distinction unproblematic, as some places can stand empty for years on end and still have the electricity on and pay for waste disposal (personal communication, January 20th, 2026). As many explorers are quick to point out, there's no certain way to know whether a place is abandoned even when the signs are there, because abandonment isn't a clear-cut thing. However, abandonment is often seen as a strict requirement for a site to be

considered for exploration. Annika says exploring something that isn't abandoned wouldn't feel right at all, and Nils says he likes when places are abandoned *for real*. Sometimes abandonment is defined in terms of absence of human lives, like when explorers emphasize stillness, or when Theo says: "I want it to feel really abandoned. That there's been life here, but now there's no life here. Preferably, it's dead." However, abandonment is not as simple as absence of people. Firstly, explorers themselves occupy the places during their visits. Secondly, as previously discussed, people are often presenced by their absence in UE. And thirdly, even if a place stands vacant for most of the time, if people are planning to return there it often isn't considered abandoned. Mikael illustrates this point using the example of fancy vacation homes that are unoccupied for a majority of the year. Furthermore, Eda says if someplace is highly surveilled it's hardly abandoned, even if no one lives or works at the site.

Lack of *purpose* or *function* is another common attribute associated with abandonment. For instance, Eda states she's interested in "things that used to serve a function, but that are now abandoned," and Falk states: "for me, the interest [in urbex] grew from a curiosity for places that have lost their function but still carry a presence." Urban explorers typically visit places that have been, but are no longer, in operation. If the site is a house, no one lives there, if it's a factory, production has ceased, and if it's a bunker, it's exempt from any military duties. Of course, old places can be reappropriated to serve a new task, for example as housing or venue space. Notably, the purpose and activities of urbex itself cannot easily *un-abandon* a site, though increased UE-traffic can change the character of a place. We can recognize the association between abandonment and loss of function from Pétursdóttir (2014). As she explains, appreciating things that don't serve a purpose is an unusual (albeit productive) alignment.

Purpose, much like vacancy, is not so simple that it can be switched on or off. When Nils says he likes *real* abandoned buildings, he states they should not just be *out of use*. No one might be residing in a house, but it can still serve as long term storage for the owner. Regarding factory buildings, they can be gradually taken out of action, and are frequently partially reappropriated to serve a new industry. And, military sites can be on standby for wartime long after they've been initially dismissed. Furthermore, buildings can sometimes be for sale for long durations of time, is being on the market enough of a purpose to dispel abandonment?

Stockholm's retired outer defence line called *Korvlinjen*¹¹ is a long stretch of military fortifications constructed prior to the first world war. Travelling alongside the fortifications you find them crumbling, covered in graffiti, and accompanied by informational signs posted by the municipalities. The structures remain largely unconserved and have no admissions fee; militarily, they are functionally useless, but they do serve a purpose as historical attractions. Despite this, the fortifications are considered suitable sites to some urban explorers. The degree of *formal* and *original* purpose attributed to modern ruins thus seems to be a factor in their extent of abandonment, as is their amount of tourist attendance. I didn't encounter any tourists interested in the fortifications during my excursions, but I feel if I did, my exploring would've felt much less like urbex.



Inside some of Korvlinjen's enclosed fortifications.

¹¹ Lit. 'the sausage line.'

In contrast to the perspective of Eda, surveillance is less of an issue to Mikael, who's happy to circumvent cameras to explore an interesting location. Apparent in their many differences of opinion is that explorers are not in complete agreement regarding what makes a site *truly* abandoned. Preferences among explorers differ, therefore what constitutes *abandoned enough* has no singular answer. Ultimately, abandonment is a diagnosis explorers make based on a myriad of factors such as vacancy, decay, function, and nonconformancy with normative expectations of built form. The understanding of what constitutes sufficient symptoms to make a diagnosis varies between explorers, though everyone makes an abandoned/not-abandoned distinction, and nearly exclusively conducts explorations in places they consider firmly abandoned.

Ruination and the Process of Unbuilding

The dynamics of decay reveal how explorers are interested in ruination (as process) over (static) ruins. Ancient ruins are not the main targets of urban explorers, perhaps because of their perceived passivity. The precarity of abandonment is highlighted by many explorers. Mikael says that urban explorers exploit a window of opportunity between abandonment and demolition, and Nora stresses the unpredictability and non-linearity of decay. A place can stand for many decades without much change, only to suddenly have its degradation escalate seemingly overnight. Observing and documenting the process of decay is a point of interest to some explorers, who like to revisit sites and compare photos from different time periods.

As previously discussed, lack of care is one way to characterize abandonment. Though, for one, you cannot confidently know how much an owner thinks about, or has affection for their property by only looking at it. Additionally, sites are not entirely uncared about because explorers themselves care about them. However, explorers do not feel entitled to take care of abandoned places because they do not own them. Owners are seen as responsible for care which is equated with maintenance. So, ultimately, it appears that material neglect is the principal indicator of abandonment. But lack of maintenance is not evident by itself, rather this lack is made visible by other transformative processes taking hold of the place. If these transformations are human-made, like graffiti, litter, or theft, they are looked down upon, but if they are considered *natural* they are desirable.



Animal life.



Animal death.

Theo associates abandonment with unregulated plant growth. Thus, when he says he likes when an abandoned place is *dead*, he does not refer to total absence of life. Non-human inhabitants, especially wasps and birds, are everywhere in abandoned buildings. Eda states she likes sites “where nature slowly but inevitably takes back what man has built. [...] When ivy and ferns have started ’moving in.’” Explorers frequently mention nature *reclaiming* or *returning* to places.

‘Natural’ processes are always seen in a positive light, sharply opposed to ‘unnatural’ acts of vandalism. This celebration of natural decay can have multiple reasons; many explorers describe themselves as interested in nature, some echo romantic ideals of beauty in the natural world, and a few mention the climate crisis and how abandonment makes it evident that nature will prevail when humans are gone.

Ingold (2000) states that it is common to oppose (artificial) architecture to (natural) nature. Many explorers make this separation when they contrast natural to unnatural objects and interventions. A house, a factory, and a car are considered built. These built objects are the targets of urban exploration; you cannot do urbex in a primeval forest with non-built trees, stones, creeks, and bushes. While operational, a built place is maintained by humans, who continually fend off nature’s transformative attempts. After abandonment, building processes cease, allowing nature to begin its work in earnest. At this point, there’s a sense the place is becoming *unbuilt* or more nature-like, which it can only do appropriately at the behest of plant- and animal life, fungi, and weather, as opposed to through ‘artificial’ human involvements like vandalism. At some point, the place becomes degraded to such an extent that it becomes unsuitable for urbex. This is when it is seen as empty of human life. Thus, ideal locations have some remaining (pre-abandoned) human presence, while being actively transformed by processes of non-human interventions.



At what point can we say that a building has died?



Does a building need walls?

Ingold's problematization of what it means for something to be built challenges the dichotomy between nature and architecture. Rather than considering buildings as designs imposed on natural reality, Ingold explains that "the forms of buildings arise as a kind of crystallisation of human activity within an environment" (p. 231). Ingold's position that the degree to which we find something is *built* rather than *natural* is dependent on the perceived degree of human influence in its form is reflected in accounts from urban explorers. Despite making a nature/building distinction, explorers remain aware of the living qualities of buildings. As emphasized by both Dawdy (2010) and Ingold (2000), buildings are both living and lived in. Urban explorers understand for one: that buildings shape and are shaped by the lives they interact with, and for two: that buildings require human upkeep to maintain their constitution.

We can understand ruination as a process of material degradation, and abandonment as lack of maintenance, formal purpose, and human interaction. Unbuilding, for its part, is a dynamic and *productive* process which cannot be conducted by humans, but can only be undertaken by non-human actors and forces when human interventions cease. It is both material and social, as the relations that constitute a place's form withdraw from human actions and intentions. To many urban explorers, a site is more appropriate and appealing when it is being unbuilt. Thus, if we want to move away from seeing urban explorers' sites for what they lack, for their tragedy, or for their insufficiencies, instead of speaking about their abandonment or ruination, we can speak of their unbuilding.

8. Conclusion: Reflections On the Exploration

In UE, certain facets of experience stand out. Primarily, the practice highlights the embodied, temporal, and situated conditions of human experience. Firstly, the kinds of experience that emerge through urbex are temporally unique, which reveals how different temporal orientations of consciousness can structure experience. UE can evoke empathic relations to the past, create moments of embodied and disembodied awareness in the present, and promote an open and cautious alignment toward the future. Secondly, urbex can be transformative, as it embeds itself in the embodied perception of its practitioners through practical engagements in specific environments. Thus, UE teaches practical lessons and shapes the thoughts, movements, and senses of explorers, with or without their awareness. Accordingly, UE demonstrates that perception in an environment is an embodied process which manifests in the shape of practical knowledge. The experience of urbex can also be notably emotionally impactful and fulfilling. Its emotions center around *spänning*, which encompasses both excitement and suspense. Emotions primarily arise from precarity, uncertainty, danger, transgression, and a sense of presence. In UE, emotions urge explorers to look, to listen, to stop, to flee, to act, and to question, often at a moment's notice. Therefore, the practice exemplifies how perception can be guided, and actions motivated, through emotional processes, both before and after they are intellectualized.

Part of how explorers form an understanding of their experiences stems from their view of history. Similarly to archeologists, some urban explorers feel they are able to access history through its material remains. Stories told by places can be either personal or collective, therefore they can communicate information regarding both intimate lives and societal patterns. Documenting history is a priority to some explorers. They consider this a worthwhile endeavor because they presuppose the importance of preserving the past, particularly its more hidden (but still presently impactful) aspects. Notably, even when less interested in 'actual' history, explorers enjoy being prompted to ask questions by material traces on their sites, most often in relation to what the places' pasts might have been like. Materially altering an abandoned place is seen as destructive of the story the place is telling, which is one reason why explorers are careful in their interactions with their sites. Another reason vandalism is looked down upon is that it goes against explorers' values related to care and respect for places. To urban explorers, venerating a place means mainly three things. One: being open to its atmosphere and allowing it to affect you.

Two: respecting its material integrity. And three: considering its past and present human relations. This alignment serves to heighten the experience of urbex by promoting intense engagement with places, and by amplifying the importance and impact of exploration sites.

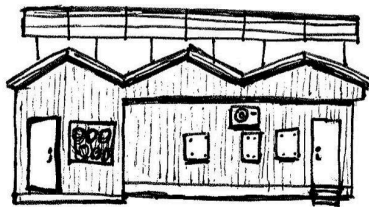
Moreover, urban explorers concern themselves with abandonment; a dynamic process that can affect buildings and which implies decay, lack of human intervention, and unclear human purpose. Because they find abandonment aesthetically pleasing, intriguing, and evocative, explorers consider it valuable in its own right. Sometimes, this opinion conflicts with a belief that combating abandonment can be good for society. Thus, the situated features of experience are emphasized in UE. Environments, objects, and material qualities and absences, in interaction with the movements and orientations of explorers, are fundamental to the experience of urbex in terms of what explorers sense, feel, do, and consider. Importantly, explorers locate themselves and their practices in both place *and* time. Abandoned places are, in part, appreciated for their present qualities; though their current condition is understood to be ever-changing, which forms part of their appeal. In relation to the past, explorers appear to assume that places can hold on to certain events in time, that these events are constituted by the actions and experiences of the people that were located there and then, and that they can access embodied traces of those events in their exploring. Generally speaking, the moment at which an exploration takes place has to occur in spatio-temporal proximity to an object that was once built, and which is currently perceived either as a materially anchored freeze frame of the past, or to be actively undergoing a process of *unbuilding*, which is defined by non-human alterations of built form.

Urbex proves particularly interesting in studying experience because it affords unique variations of it. In UE, you visit places you wouldn't otherwise go to, and do things you don't normally do. This is possible because abandoned places operate under different conditions to other built environments. These conditions are partly material, as ruination and abandonment breed hazards, restructure built form, and generate particular aesthetics; and partly social, as the normative urban qualities of surveillance, comfort, safety, and linear time are contested. Furthermore, because urbex implies disruptions of everyday experience, it can highlight things that are taken for granted in the life of a *Medelsvensson*¹²; more specifically what buildings look like, how they function, and how people interact with them.

¹² The generalized, stereotypical, statistically average, middle class Swede.

The practice of urbex as the explorers in this study approach it offers some critical and alternative perspectives. Most obviously, explorers knowingly break the law by entering other people's property without permission. Every now and again, they express feeling morally conflicted at this, but they often mitigate any sense of wrongdoing by minimizing law enforcement's concern with their infractions, and by refraining from activities they see as more harmful than looking and taking pictures, such as theft and vandalism. In terms of critique, explorers often explicitly oppose the *use and discard* mentality that they sometimes find in contemporary Swedish society. Relatedly, explorers promote an alternative material alignment that doesn't fully equate lack of function to lack of value. Moreover, explorers privilege learning about history via close, in-person contact, as opposed to exclusively seeking history that is textually described in books or reconstructed and curated in exhibits. Through this they suggest the subversive insights that practical, empathetic knowledge can be on par with theoretical knowledge, and that the foregone past can in some ways be experienced in the present.

In conclusion, the experience of urban exploration is constituted by a heightened sense of time, emotional impact, practical learning, open-ended curiosity, caring about and respecting places, appreciating abandonment, and desiring something novel. Some foundational conditions of experience that stand out in urbex are temporality, embodiment, and situatedness. Explorers make sense of their experiences by adopting open attentiveness, attaching history to materiality, assigning value to places, and relating what they see and do to normative society. Their understandings of, and interactions with, their sites are shaped by their feelings, values, and beliefs relating to history, abandonment, and built form.



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