



“ Amongst the broken walls and crumbling plaster I felt I was standing on the very same spot that real lives had been played out, both good times and bad, I saw little difference between a Classical city in Turkey and an abandoned railway station in Sheffield. I suppose the former would seem more appealing to the visitor than the latter, but in essence they were the same. Both are accessible and both have important human history to relate.”

Duncan J. D. Smith

# THE BEAUTY IN DECAY

Words by Paul Wild - with images by Jeremy Gibbs



Jeremy Gibbs

Sheffield; 'A town of steel'. Established once as one of England's main industrial cities, the voids of old production now sit abandoned and decaying, carefully stitched shut with plywood hoardings, faceless and unnoticed along the daily route of the modern consumer. Whilst this denies opportunities for many, it also opens up new possibilities for some. A glance beneath the hoardings of an old cutlery reveals a homeless dystopia, complete with skate park, fashioned from the plywood panels of old partition walls. An old vice factory now becomes the blank canvas for aspiring street artists and the secret location of Sheffield's most illicit raves. A disused tool depot becomes the host of realistic counter-terrorist scenarios, an armed training ground for local cadets. But there is also a new layer of society who are content with watching and documenting this process. Peeling back the layers of history, investigating a building's past functions, subsequent decay and illicit re-appropriation. Taking nothing but pictures, leaving nothing but footprints.

Journal 5seventy3 caught up with two of the most prominent, Urban Explorers at this time, celebrated for their alternative approach to the exploration of ruins and abandonments that would otherwise slip silently off the accepted map of our society.

Jeremy Gibbs (JG) is, by day, a film editor and documentarian of street art. By night, He is an influential figure in the modern Urban Explorer (Urbex) subculture. From a background in art and graphic design, Gibbs enjoyed a rich and varied career throughout the early punk era, pushing the boundaries of film, sculpture and photography. Recently Gibbs has been immersed in the creation of his new book that will be published later this June entitled , 'The Beauty in Decay.'

Famed for his high contrast and seemingly virtual photography, he approaches the exploration of derelict and forbidden man made ruins with the eye of an artist. His photographs and activities have become almost synonymous with our modern perception of the modern Urbex subculture, in which participants will navigate the boundary between licit and illicit, to catch a glimpse of the un-trodden territories that have been systematically eliminated from modern society. These explorations range from the infiltration of abandoned factories, power plants, asylums and missile silos, to the navigation of entire subterranean urban infrastructures that exist in the darkness beneath our feet.

Duncan J. D. Smith (DS) on the other hand happened on the term Urban Explorer quite independently from the subculture's rebellious practices, presenting us with an alternative view from the academic perspective of an archaeologist and historian.

DS: In my own way I was like an explorer of old, only their jungle or desert was my city, their trees my buildings, their native population my city dwellers. And so it seemed natural to call myself an 'Urban Explorer,' one who uncovers independently the layout of a city, an urban space... My mission statement is 'Uncovering the lost history of civilization through journeys off the beaten track.'

Born in Sheffield at the peak of South Yorkshire's industrial heritage, Duncan Smith was presented with a vast array of abandonments, the exploration of which would become the catalyst of an all-consuming wanderlust.

DS: I decided to continue my own exploring just beyond my own doorstep, in abandoned factories, millstone-strewn riverbeds, and ruined houses. Anywhere that man had once been and left some sort of mark. The author and traveller Antoine de Saint-Exupery summed up well my feelings at the time: "Space is not the measure of distance. A garden wall at home may enclose more secrets than the Great Wall of China." So it was that I began developing my own brand of city, or urban, exploration, which ultimately led me into mainland Europe, where I am recording my findings in an ongoing series of guidebooks.

The most noticeable difference between Gibbs and Smith is their approach to recording their experiences of exploration. The Urbex subculture is often highly insular operating in closed or moderated forums, disclosing the most sublime locations only within a tight knit circle.

JG: It's very important to keep locations within the Urbex community itself or even just the small circle that you explore with. Although there are some exceptions to the rule, for instance Beelitz Hailstratten just outside of Berlin, where Adolf Hitler recuperated after being wounded in the leg at the Battle of Somme. This is almost an Urbex tourist attraction as the owner leaves most of the buildings, there are sixty of them, open to the public. To some explorers this isn't Urban Exploring, but the architecture is absolutely breathtaking and the decay is beautiful. Because it is open to the public though it is also fast falling into disrepair with vandalism and graffiti.

This is a valid argument for the preservation of a building's untainted history and consequentially, why breaking and entering is strictly forbidden within the Urbex community. To damage the fabric of an abandoned building in order to gain access would also open it up to much more dangerous activities that thrive in blind spots off the radar of institutional society. Sheffield's abandoned works are evidence of these issues, often becoming dank syringe infested drug dens, rife with fly tipping, anarchy and crime. Perhaps it could be argued that this type of person will happen on these locations out of necessity, and certainly not from publicity on Urbex forums. It may then be the case that the thrill of Urbex comes from a more self-affirming desire to document a truly undiscovered or inaccessible location, that will ultimately enhance the reputation of the explorer.

JG: The trouble with the Urbex community, is that as soon as you put a photograph on the internet, over the next few weeks you see ten shots almost exactly the same. A photographer will travel for twenty-four-hours to get that one shot that you, or some other photographer, has inspired them to take.

In this sense Urbex may be more a process of self-actualisation, in which the photograph acts as a permanent record of a personal achievement. This can be paralleled in many ways the activities of skateboarders, BASE jumpers, and climbers, in which the skill and courage of the participant is confirmed by the recorded image. Duncan Smith outlines a different approach in which exploration is a self-less process whose documentation can directly enrich the lives of others.

DS: Urbex locations remain secret by their very nature: they are often on private or inaccessible ground, and do not feature in any guidebooks. Some may not even exist very long, as they are often to be found in derelict structures awaiting re-use or demolition. My own locations by comparison are well-known and easily accessible. I give specific directions to them in my books! However, because

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many of them are somewhat out of the way, off the usual tourist routes, and deep in the suburbs, they never attract many visitors. So you could say that such locations retain their own secrecy and mystique, by virtue of never having been developed as a traditional tourist attraction. The power of such locations to exert the feeling of having been discovered by my type of urban explorer is therefore retained, and that's exactly what I look for in any location worthy of writing about.

But, by eliminating that element of risk that emerges from exploring private or inaccessible ground, does the Urban Explorer also lose the adrenaline rush that becomes such a strong lure the further explorations.

JG: The adrenaline rush for me is 50% of the experience. If these places that we explore didn't have security, barbed wire, CCTV, hidden dangers then it would be the same as making graffiti legal, where would the fun be in that? I used to go exploring, still do sometimes, in a group of four or five people but now tend to go by myself. In a group you don't feel any danger at all, because you are surrounded by others and the whole atmosphere is dissipated. If you're by yourself you are constantly looking over your shoulder and the slightest sound sends shivers down your spine, there is no other feeling like it.



The argument however, is that an adrenalin rush of sorts is still present through Duncan's approach, but not one that comes from transgression. This could be a rush that comes not from fear, but rather, realisation.

**DS:** I personally feel that the onlooker should glean as much as possible about a particular location, so that an unusual or hidden location might in turn become a surprising and unexpected one. And in describing this newfound knowledge to others, who may themselves visit the locations, a secondary, albeit less intense adrenalin rush might be achieved. Certainly I gain considerable satisfaction from the re-telling of my own urban discoveries.

Both men urban explorers of sorts and both pioneers in the way that they represent alternative architectural experiences to others, one through his mastery of photography and artistic composition and the other through his attention to detail and grounded academic analysis. Both have different motives and different audiences, but both are intent on revealing the tragic beauty of the city through journeys off the beaten track.

**573:** The joy of urban exploring comes from experiencing a building at one moment in its very extended life. To what extent is it appropriate for Urban Explorers to alter a derelict building's history?

**JG:** In an ideal world the building would be left exactly as it was at the time of abandonment and just left for nature to take its course. This very seldom happens of course, but hopefully the building will have been documented through all stages of decay. Urban exploration can fill a void in a buildings full history, right from the time it is abandoned, till the roof lead is stolen, till the water and subsequent decay takes hold, until just the moss and ivy is holding it together.

**DS:** In many cases it is entirely appropriate for an abandoned structure to be renovated since this is the only way the building will continue to exist. Of course they lose something of their romantic character by being transformed from their ruined state to usable condition, but that's the value of explorers getting in first and recording them as ruins. Much like an archaeologist the Urban Explorer plays a small part in the ongoing history of the structure, which with any luck will continue after the explorers own demise.



Jeremy Gibbs

Jeremy Gibbs' (aka RomanyWG) book, "Beauty in Decay: The Art of Urban Exploration" will be published by Actif Communications this year.

Duncan Smith's book, "Only in Cologne: A Guide to Hidden corner, Little Known Places and Unusual Objects" will be published by Christian Brandstätter Verlag

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when you see through someone else's eyes you walk in their shoes

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