

# Ninjalicious 1973-2005

Sad and unexpected news for the urban exploration community: Ninjalicious the founder and editor of Infiltration, 'the zine about places you're not supposed to go', has died at the age of 31 of cancer. Infiltration was the first significant piece of writing that I encountered on the subject of exploring derelict, abandoned or otherwise inaccessible places in an urban context. It was something of a revelation for me since I had so far assumed the interest in urban decay to be sufficiently underground so as to be non-existent. Infiltration and Ninjalicious provided an entrance into this (then) incipient world of ruin and dereliction. It was co-ordinated and above all else well written. Have a look at the accounts for yourself. No surprise that he became instrumental in defining the foundation of urban exploration so much so that he became synonymous with the term.

Since it might be of some interest, here is a conversation I had with him a few years ago when I was researching my own book on urban decay. I think it gives a nice overview of Ninjalicious' take on urban exploration and urban exploration in general. If I remember, we began talking about aliases'.

Ninjalicious:

I suspect the widespread use of aliases stems from the general desire to keep one's name from being associated with trespassing. There is a mystique about it, I suppose, but personally I'd much rather just go by my real name all the time if I thought I could get away with it. Aliases are a real hassle sometimes.

Dylan:

Trespassing is obviously quite different to exploring since there's no real intention other than 'entering'. But I assume that when you explore a site, - a building, a tunnel, or whatever - then there's something that particularly please you, an aspect that is perhaps common to all locations of exploration? Is this so?

N:

I think the common element that draws me to each of these places -- from abandoned buildings to utility corridors to storm drains -- is the feeling that I've earned myself a glimpse of something authentic, not designed for public consumption. It's the thrill of getting to peek behind the scenes and see the real situation.

D:

Is it that they are hidden that makes them real or that what you actually find is in someway more authentic? Obviously, going behind the scenes allows you a vantage point that most people don't get to see. What about the everyday? Does it falter by comparison?

N:

I wouldn't necessarily say that the fact that they're hidden makes these sorts of places more authentic; several of them are hidden in plain sight, and it's just that no one ever notices them, because it never occurs to most people to climb up a ladder to wiggle through some bars and find out what's on the other side.

I wouldn't say urban exploration has made my regular life feel banal, but yeah, occasionally, I'll be walking down the street in the crowd and I'll picture the scene from under the street looking up or from atop a skyscraper looking down and feel a little frustrated by the lack of adventurousness.

D:

So, it's interesting to note that both the higher points of the city and the lower points lend themselves to exploration. Is there a difference when exploring say, a tunnel and the roof of a skyscraper? For instance, it is easy to associate gloominess with dank cellars but a sense of freedom with heights. This is a connection Bachelard made.

N:

It makes sense, but I can also see explorers taking the opposite view. When you're standing atop a skyscraper, the roof is probably not that large, so there probably isn't really that much more for you to see, and you can't really move from that roof to another roof. Looking around the dank cellars, on the other hand, you never know when you'll come across another connected building or another connected tunnel system, so it seems like there are a lot more possibilities and, in a way, more freedom.

D:

Let's talk decay. The majority of buildings or sites you explore are either derelict or 'barred'. For the most part this entails a negative presence. What implications does this have, if any? Or is the active site structurally the same as the inactive one?

N:

I probably actually explore more active sites than inactive sites, just because Toronto doesn't have a great wealth of abandoned sites. Decay is just one of the sights I appreciate when exploring. I love beautiful buildings, so I hate to see them fall apart, but there is no denying that the whole tragic process of decay is breathtaking to behold. There's a powerful sense of entropy, particularly when you see nature struggling to reclaim an artificial area as its turf. Nature's efforts always look pitiful at first -- a mushroom or two vs. a gigantic 20-storey brick train station -- but you know that eventually nature will win.

D:

Indeed, and no doubt this conjunction between the artificial and the organic invokes a sense of the uncanny. For me, the presence of decay creates a distortion in time. Even when nature is vehemently reclaiming the artificial as its own, there seems to be a collapse in any kind of linear notion of time. You mention that decay is a 'tragic process' and I wonder if this has anything to do with mutability and a sense of loss?

N:

Absolutely. While many aspects of life are probably much better today than they were in the past, cities and buildings have really gone downhill, at least here in North America. No one takes the time or effort to make really inspiring edifices anymore, and it makes

me sad to see so many of the buildings that could serve as positive role models for modern architects just sitting unappreciated and occasionally vandalized until they eventually collapse.

D:

I agree and this seems particularly true of a city like Detroit where derelict buildings stand beside a host of faceless skyscrapers. In the case of the Michigan Central Station, this is wholly evident. Nevertheless, were such a building converted or restored then surely the desire to explore it would be quietened. Does this leave you feeling ambivalent towards urban decay, in that it both provides the appeal but equally dissolves the very thing you seek to explore?

N:

Yeah, exactly: standing at the top of Michigan Central Station looking at the Renaissance Centre you really can't help but ask yourself what on earth happened. I think I'd be willing to give up my private galleries of decay for the good of civic architecture and the future of the city. Besides that, I don't know if my desire to explore buildings like the MCS would be dampened if they were somehow put back into use. It would depend how sensitively the renovations were conducted and what the new use was, I suppose. Obviously it would be a crime against humanity if it were to become a casino, but I wouldn't be against it being turned into public offices or a hotel or something like that, provided they didn't destroy its character in the process.

D:

Yes, this always the delicate thing - conversion, restoration, or decline. The balance between being either overly nostalgic or dismissive of the past. Since 9/11 there is perhaps a greater propensity to look ahead, to be stoic when confronted with both human tragedy and architectural ruin. Do you think that derelict sites are in some way seen as symbols of regression or failure, and as such dismissed on account of their pernicious overtones? To put it another way, most people who are unfamiliar with UE might regard it as a kind negative aesthetic. Do you agree?

N:

I think that's how it has been, traditionally, but I think this is changing, probably just because people who live in towns made entirely of sloppy junk buildings can't help but notice the amount of beauty and character that these old abandoned buildings still exude, even beneath all the dirt and decay. Here in Toronto, an abandoned Victorian-era brewery complex was recently reopened as a "distillery district" full of bars, restaurants and museums, and it's becoming pretty popular, in spite of still seeming just a little gloomy, in a Jack-the-Ripper's London kind of way. If this spot wakes a few hundred people up to the fact that most of the places they live and work are phony and awful, and makes them hold architects and city planners to higher standards, then I think losing one of my old exploration playgrounds will have been totally worthwhile.

D:

So you think in fact that the aesthetics of decay is developing as people tire of their sterile

environment - that they in turn desire the really real? Despite their low profile, are Urban Explorers to be regarded in some sense as opening this kind of authenticity up?

N:

I wouldn't say what people are looking for is the beauty of decay so much as the beauty of authenticity, of which decay is a component. I'm not sure if urban explorers have the answers to the problems with cities, but I think urban explorers can help draw people's attention to what's good and bad in architecture and design. Certainly going exploring is a good way to get people intimate with places and thus start to care about them. Explorers really do seem to develop a stronger bond with their surroundings. Explorers who are really talented photographers or writers may be able to pass this vibe along even to those who don't necessarily go exploring themselves. As one well-known explorer among many, I would like to do my part to help urban exploration move from being a merely benign social force to a positive social force. Other people, like Julia Solis, are already way ahead of me in this regard.

D:

Solis has written fictional books which deal with matters of decay, and so too Jinx who recently published their *Invisible Frontiers*. Is there a danger that UE can become monopolized by personal ambition or otherwise become a novelty for the curious outsider. On the other matter, you mention that urban explorers can help draw people's attention to what's good and bad in architecture and design - does this imply that there is an aesthetic ideal that rises above mere exploration?

N:

I once feared that someone would start an "International Explorer Club", with rules and memberships and all that, but fortunately I think explorers are too independent minded to go for anything like that. So, I don't think anyone's personal ambition is going to be a problem for the hobby. In the past I've worried that urban exploration would somehow be co-opted by the mainstream, perhaps as a regular feature in some awful magazine like *Maxim*, but it seems that the illegality of the hobby has done good things in terms of keeping the mainstream away.

I think there are certain aesthetics that appeal to explorers fairly universally, even outside the context of exploration. I don't think I'm in a position to impart my values on anyone, but certainly I'd like to show and tell the world about things I think are wonderful. *Infiltration* is a fanzine, after all.

D:

*Infiltration* is a fanzine but is surely bound to a broader context which in some sense reflects the shape of culture. I myself find it hard to conceive of Urban Exploration emerging in a time in history which isn't attuned to a sense of decline. And indeed the pleasure we take in urban ruins seems to suggest a kind of voyeuristic glimpse into decline, not only architecturally but culturally too.

N:

I think the main cultural trends that have caused the idea of urban exploration to resonate with a lot of people are the increasing absence of public spaces and the increasing absence of real places. I suppose some people might view the way our cities have evolved over the last few decades as progress, but I think the vast majority would agree that cities have gone downhill, and that the people who live in them are worse off because of it.

D:

It's been a genuine pleasure talking to you. Is there anything you want to add or say by way of a conclusion?

N:

Nice talking to you, too. I have no terribly profound conclusion, so I'll go with the old standby: Go in drains.

D:

Or indeed in trousers.

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