Health and Safety   Guidance Note

What is Urban Exploration?

Urbex is the hobby (some might say sport) of exploring derelict buildings, underground bunkers, disused hospitals, subterranean tunnels, abandoned factories and other such forgotten structures or pieces of land.

What sort of things do you see?
Well, lots of dirt, grime, liquids, goo, oil, rotten wood, hornet's nests, and other grim things but also some interesting things such as control panels, equipment, machines, pianos, graffiti, furniture and other artifacts left behind from the days when the building was in its prime.

Why would anyone do that?
I'm sure everyone's reasons differ but the key is really in the 'exploration' part of the term, we want to *explore* the world around us and unlike most people we don't see abandonment and decay as 'dangerous' or 'disgusting', we see it as 'interesting' and 'challenging'. For some it's about photography, for others it's about the excitement of seeing somewhere that most *normal* people haven't and being somewhere you're not supposed to.

You may wonder what sort of people would do such a thing, well from the web and from personal experience I've encountered college students, photographers, professionals, generally all sorts of people and everyone I've met in person has been nice and friendly too.

Hold-on a minute, isn't this illegal?
Not as far as I'm aware, I'm not a lawyer but from everything I've read and heard it's not a criminal offence to be on someone else's property but unless you have permission it could be considered as **trespass**. Now, trespass is a civil matter and if you're caught on someone's property without the appropriate permission you could be sued but in reality this is very unlikely as the benefits of doing so would be pretty limited.

This all sounds very nasty but in practice most urbexers are considerate people and are not planning to do anything wrong (at least not morally

speaking). It would be easy for people to lump together people who take part in Urban Exploration with vandals and other such scumbags but nothing could be further from the truth. We're not there to cause damage or spray graffiti (though evidence of both tends to be found on most sites); we're there to explore, observe and sometimes document the location but never to cause any trouble.

If exploring on a site with security most urbexers will avoid detection or capture but if asked to leave then they will, peacefully and politely. Additionally most urbexers would also be cooperative with the police if the need arose, I have even heard of urbexers reporting suspicious events and evidence of criminal activity directly to the police.

OK then, but is it *safe*? Obviously we're exploring abandoned buildings, sometime these are not long since abandoned or are still being maintained but in many cases they are not and have fell into ruin. Basically it's up to the individual but as long as you take precautions you should be OK, an article link specifically about safety is attached so please check this post on Urbex Safety and see the Safety Tips section of this guidance note.

So how do I get started / find out more?
Well for starters, bookmark this blog and come back from time to time as I get post more information. Over the next few weeks and months I plan to post a mixture of tips and tricks, site visits and general information about the community, if you're eager then read my urbex safety tips and remember that Google is your friend.

When beginning a project it is important to carry out detailed research and if possible obtain plans or building/location drawings. If this is not available you should plan and discuss your 'plan of attack' and any group rules or agreed actions in the event of any difficulties.

Obviously you will want to discuss what it is you are after, whether it's simply exploration or a photographic project, this will have an impact on location and time and will affect resources like taking water, food, equipment and safety. Never climb or explore structures that are not able to support your weight or likely to collapse.

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Urban Exploration Safety Tips

So you're going out to do a site visit or out for a whole day's exploring, what should you consider in terms of safety? It's easy to be complacent and let derelict buildings become normal, remember that Urban Exploration can be dangerous and take precautions.

It's not always realistic to do all of these on every explore but my top 10 tips are:

1. **Wear Gloves**
   You never know what you're going to find on a site visit, especially in the hospitals and asylums, and whatever location you're in you definitely want to avoid cuts and scrapes which could bring the risk of tetanus or other diseases.
2. **Carry a Torch**
   Light can be a problem, I personally roll with a Maglite and a head torch to make sure I can get light even when I need both hands free and as a bonus a good-sized Maglite doubles as a weapon should you encounter any dangerous animals or other unexpected miscreants.
3. **Wear a Dust Mask**
   It's not the most comfortable thing and they do get hot but wearing a dust mask will make you safer in the short term and healthier in the long term. Many abandon buildings have damp, murky air which can cause nausea and may carry diseases but the biggest worry is asbestos. Asbestos is most dangerous as a fine dust and you really need a FFP3 certified mask to make sure you're filtering out asbestos and any other airborne particulates. Disposable masks are fine and can be picked up for £3-5, they have limited lifespan but they're probably good for a coupe of visits. *(see VLE H&S Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE) Guidance Note)*
4. **Don't Explore Alone**
   It's much safer to explore an unknown environment in pairs or in a group, that way you always know that someone's got your back and if anything does happen you know you've got a friend to rely on to get you out or call for help (friends also help with map reading). It's always advisable to tell people where you're going and what time you expect to return. – *never go* alone but if you can, find an experienced urbexer to go out with you for the first few times until you feel confident with your own team.
5. **Wear Heavy Clothing**
   As I mentioned before, we need to avoid cuts and scrapes so shorts are a bad idea, denim tends to be quite hardy so jeans are a good choice. I also tend to use wellington boots as the rubber will protect

your feet and it gives you the confidence to step through puddles and other unknown substances, you can't beat a decent pair of wellies.

6. **Tread Carefully**
   I've been in quite a few places where the floorboards are rotten and it's easy to fall through, there's not a great deal you can do about this except for being careful – don't just go barreling into a room without thinking about your own safety. Light helps to see what's going on and if you've got something long with you (e.g. a tripod or trekking pole) you can probe the floor in front of you for stability.

7. **Think About Using a Safety Helmet**
   I must admit, it's not something that looks stylish but I have been to places where I thought it'd be handy and I've deliberately *not* gone into places that I think would be too dangerous without one. Like I said – it's not an essential if you're careful but if you need one, get one.

8. **Be Like the Ninja**
   You should approach all site visits with stealth in mind, this will help not only avoid detection but will also keep you safe – always keep contact to a minimum. Don't touch things unnecessarily, especially structural components, support pillars or anything that might be propping up the roof and certainly don't lean or put weight on anything unless you're sure it's structurally sound. Whatever you do, don't take anything away with you – you have no idea what has been living on/in it and you could end up taking some nasty surprise home with you.

9. **Avoid Climbing**
   Some of the least structurally sound components of a derelict or abandoned building are staircases, ladders and the roof. Don't climb unless you're 100% sure it's safe and you have real rock climbing skills and equipment (a fake plastic rock-face in a youth centre doesn't count).

10. **If You're Not Sure – TURN BACK**
    This sounds obvious but it's easy to get carried away, especially if you've made a long journey to get to a site. If you get the feeling that you shouldn't be doing something - ***don't do it!*** Evolution has handed us a brilliant instinct but it's something we can choose to ignore and that's often at out peril, don't do anything you think could get you injured or could risk your health – **it's not worth it.**

Urbex Photography Tips

Some people come to Urbex with a background in photography whilst others come just for the exploration and end up taking photos casually and it's hard to write up some tips that'll help both sets of explorers so I'll start by giving some general tips and maybe later on I'll put up some separate posts for those of us with SLRs (or with Point & Shoot cameras that offer manual controls).

1. **Control Your Flash.**
   Most Point & Shoot cameras tend to have the flash in an 'Auto' mode, if you're going to achieve good results you'll want to turn this off and make a deliberate decision about when to use the flash. If you're outdoors in bright conditions then I wouldn't bother unless there's something in the foreground you want to light up. If you're in a dark

room (and doing Urbex you will be at some point) then you'll probably want to turn it on. The upside of controlling the flash manually is that you can try different scenes with and without the flash and see what works best. Another mini-tip is that if your flash tends to come out too bright, cover 25-50% of it with your finger as you take the photo and it'll calm down the brightness (at the expense of a slight red tint).

2. **Steady the Camera.**
Keeping the camera steady will reduce the amount of blur in the photo, especially when the camera is struggling with low-light environments. If you have a tripod you're welcome to use it but I often find it to be a bit of a burden in an urbex environment, there are a couple of alternatives that will achieve the same effect (stability) but without the hassle. Check out the Joby Gorillapod, it's a small plastic tripod that can be free-standing or bent to secure your camera around fence posts, railings, furniture, etc.
Another similar idea (but for flat surfaces only) is a to use a bean-bag, this will also have the effect of steadying your camera against vibrations. If you don't want to go out and spend money one good tip is to use the timer on your camera, when you press the button to take a photo you move the camera slightly but if you set the shot up and put the camera on a 5/10 second time you won't have to worry about vibrations. Another tip to reduce camera shake is to butt your elbows into your chest or to leaning against a wall or other structure (be VERY careful doing this in a derelict building).

3. **Take a Torch.**
In low light environments your camera may struggle to focus on the objects in front of it. A good tip is to take a torch and point it at your subject, set the shot up to get the focus (usually this means keeping the button half-pressed), turn of the torch and take the shot. If you're using a flash then the light from that will take over and if you're using a long exposure then you will avoid having the torch light in the scene.

Further information and advice:
http://www.sickbritain.co.uk/