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In the Belly of the Bean

Braving third rails, speeding trains, Canadian `zines, bad pseudonyms and potential zombie attacks to get a look at subterranean Boston Julia Reischel

I'm standing at the very edge of the subway platform staring into the pit.

Before tonight, I've never really noticed that the third rail, the one that carries 600 volts of body-scorching death, isn't labeled. But then again, before tonight I've never researched the legal penalties for trespassing, or hung around T stations for hours in disguise, either. Tonight, it seems crazy – evil even – to not paint the damn thing bright, neon yellow. With little flashing lights.

I had gone through the looking glass, into a world that "urban explorers" risk injury and arrest to visit on a regular basis. Though I'd seen this T station a million times before, through the eyes of an explorer it was suddenly mysterious, seductive ... and creepy.

First of all, there were the zombies.

"Yeah," a onetime Harvard Square pit rat had told me, "the time I was in there, the zombie people almost got me. I was walking along, and then I saw these zombie people. I was so freaked out I just turned around and ran. I ended up crawling out of an emergency exit into the street."

The chance of meeting zombies is the kind of risk you run in the world of urban exploration. "Urban explorers" are a loose-knit community of people, joined almost exclusively by the internet, who share a common passion: the love of going places you're not supposed to go.

The hobby, called "Urbex" (or "UE" for short), is the practice of exploring sites not designed for public usage. They can be anywhere, from abandoned insane asylums, derelict factories and the rooftops of occupied buildings to sewers, storm drains and subway tunnels.

Urban exploration has existed for decades all over the world, first as the isolated acts of individuals but more recently as an organized phenomenon. The Cave Clan was founded in '86 to consolidate explorations across Australia. In '90, Moscow became home to a group called Diggers of the Underground Planet. New York City is home to Jinx, a group that has published a "magazine of Worldwide Urban Adventure" since '97. In Toronto, another `zine called Infiltration has offered "a mix of the practice and theory of urban exploration" since '96.

Since the advent of the internet, interest in the hobby has exploded. Urban exploration websites and web

rings have multiplied, pulling explorers into an interconnected worldwide community.

Today, there's an Urban Exploration Resource website; a detailed entry for "urban exploration" in the free, editable, online encyclopedia Wikipedia; an "urban exploration" category on the Yahoo directory; and even an UE convention that was held in Toronto last June. There are a few published UE books: Invisible New York: The Hidden Infrastructure of the City; Dunkle Welten, a German-language guide to Berlin's underground, and Jinx's Invisible Frontier: Exploring the Tunnels, Ruins, and Rooftops of Hidden New York.

UE has played a peripheral role in national and international affairs as well. In '02, a member of the Russian UE group led Russian police into the Moscow Theatre through a secret entrance to rescue 922 hostages being held by Chechen rebels. That same year, a man who had been in touch with a Chicago UE group was arrested for storing cyanide in the steam tunnels of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The authorities have taken an interest in the hobby. After the Madrid, Spain, bombings in '03, explorers noticed "a lot of military traffic" on their websites. "Different defense agencies," said one explorer. "At least the government is doing its job."

Though the public and law enforcement might think otherwise, urban exploration is not about vandalism, sabotage, thievery or breaking-and-entering. Most UE websites insist – and most explorers will tell you – that urban exploration is a combination of harmless thrill-seeking, historical tourism and art. According to Jinx Magazine, the hobby is "a harmless form of group tourism." Infiltration calls it a hobby that "allows the curious-minded to discover behind-the-scenes sights and have a lot of free fun."

"Genuine urban explorers never vandalize, steal or damage anything – we don't even litter," writes Ninjalicious, the founder of Infiltration. "We're in it for the thrill of discovery and a few nice pictures, and probably have more respect for and appreciation of our [city's] hidden spaces than most of the people who think we're naughty."

"I'm primarily an observer of things most people don't bother to see," says a Boston urban explorer who goes by the pseudonym Squashrot. "My philosophy is that everything is there to look at. As long as one keeps to simple trespass and stays away from breaking-and-entering and vandalism, the consequences aren't all that serious. And if one gets hurt, it is no one else's fault."

* * *

As anyone who looks at the historical murals on the walls of the T knows, the MBTA is the oldest subway system in America. As such, it's been renovated more times than anybody besides George Sanborn, the reference librarian at the State Transportation Library, cares to count.

"Most of these lines were not built from point A to point B," says Sanborn. "They were built in segments."

For example, the Red Line originally ended at Harvard Square, which was built as the terminal station in 12. In the '70s, a decision was made to extend the line to Alewife, which required that the trains take a sharp turn to the Northwest. An entirely new Harvard Square station had to be built on the new alignment, leaving T officials with an old, now-useless T station on their hands.

So they just bricked it up and left it there.

"The T was built with a certain panache," said Squashrot. "It was built to be there forever."

Sanborn says the T's policy of not demolishing old subway stations arises out of practicality. "They may come back – they may use them again," he said. "If you have something growing, you should keep it. You never know."

Much of the T's old infrastructure remains in the system today, underneath new platforms and behind flimsy fake walls. There are five abandoned stations and dozens of partial abandonments: Boylston Street, Harvard Square, Broadway, Maverick and Court Street. Once, the curious were even allowed to go on tours led by George Sanborn and other Boston-area transit history groups. "I used to take students on tours all over the T's abandoned stations," said Sanborn. "I was told after 9/11 to forget it."

Today, the only attention the T pays to its abandoned stations is to hawk them to filmmakers at the rate of \$125 per hour.

"We continue to find innovative ways to generate funds," said Lydia Rivera, a spokeswoman for the perennially cash-strapped T. "People used to call and ask for tours," she said. "We'd say, 'OK, we'll take you down. But the official who takes you down needs to be paid.'"

* * *

Shawn Dufour is Boston's leading – and perhaps only – MBTA urban explorer. Though he retired from active T exploration a few years ago, during the peak of his activity in the mid '90s, he knew Boston's subway tunnels like the back of his hand.

"The first time I rode the Green Line," he said, "I was just pressed up against the glass."

That was '94. By '96, the year Dufour considers the peak of his career, he had crawled along the ceilings of tunnels from one station to another, had squeezed himself under trains to hide from passing conductors and had stood with his back flat against tunnel walls, inches away from idling subway cars containing passengers who, if they had looked, would've been staring straight into his eyes.

"I could've reached out and touched them," he said. "I can't tell you how many times I thought to myself, 'You have no idea I'm taking your picture right now.'"

It's easy to dismiss Dufour as a thrill-seeker until you see his website, <http://www.abandonedsubwaytunnels.com/>, where he posts and sells black-and-white photographs taken during his many urban adventures. Then you realize he's also an artist and, to some degree, a historian.

"I feel good knowing that I've preserved a little bit of history with my photographs," said Dufour. "My ultimate job would be to work for the Smithsonian as a photographer, getting to travel to ruins and [taking] pictures of them before they disappear."

The increased security after 9/11 and the Madrid train bombings, however, as well as a kind of T ennui, made Dufour stop his subway explorations.

"Things are very different now with security cameras and even police detailed in the stations. I stopped

because I felt like I had captured everything that was worth capturing when I weighed it against the risk," he said. "I had done all there was to do."

Like Dufour, most Boston urban explorers have stopped exploring the T and Boston's other ruins. Ironically, having moved to the less risky territory of abandoned buildings in Boston's outskirts, Boston's urban exploration scene is now decidedly suburban.

"The T is such a risk now, far beyond what it used to be," one anonymous explorer told me. "It's crawling with security down there."

* * *

To their chagrin, it's easy to make urban explorers look bad. Two weeks ago, the Boston Globe published an article ("Getting Caught in the Past") that portrayed urban exploration as a kind of extreme sport for kleptos. Local explorers, including Dufour, saw themselves characterized as petty thieves who trawl construction sites for "souvenirs" and indulge in "an adolescent compulsion they never grew out of."

"The Globe article really focused on the negative aspects of UE," said Dufour. "I was asked, 'Do [you] go to these places and find these artifacts to sell on eBay?' I started laughing and said, 'I don't know how sound a business model that is.'"

A photograph of Dufour in his backyard with his collection of industrial signs accompanied the article. "Me posing with my 'spoils,'" he said ruefully. "Most of those signs aren't even from places I've explored."

That perception notwithstanding, Urban Explorers adhere, by and large, to a strict code of ethics. Primary among these is secrecy – talking about a particular entrance or hidden place makes it a lot less hidden. Another, borrowed from the credo of backwoods hikers, frowns upon taking souvenirs – take only pictures, leave only footprints. A group called Frozen Crystal Underground writes on its website that "vandalism, theft, or other property abuse" take urban exploration "over the edge of justifiability and on into 'Unethical Land.'"

As for the inevitable fact that they almost always break one law – "No Trespassing" – the UE community considers this an unavoidable but morally permissive breach of societal norms.

"While it's true that some aspects of the hobby happen to be illegal, it's important not to confuse the words 'illegal' and 'immoral,'" writes Ninjalicious in Infiltration. "Laws against trespassing are like laws against being out after curfew: People get into trouble not for actually doing anything harmful but simply because the powers that be are worried they might."

There's a legal defense for this attitude toward trespassing: It's called "usufruct." The term means "the right to use and enjoy the profits and advantages of something belonging to another as long as the property is not damaged or altered in any way." Though usufruct isn't recognized in many American jurisdictions, it's still honored in many legal systems and has become a UE rallying cry.

* * *

Usufruct, as a word and a shaky legal defense, is very much on my mind as I stand in Harvard Square station. The place is empty save for an old guy who's smoking, brazenly, right in front of a "No Smoking"

sign, and I'm waiting for my moment. "You're feeling that adrenaline rush," Dufour told me, "and in the back of your mind, you're waiting for someone to shout 'Hey you!' But when the moment comes, you just go."

My moment comes, and I'm off. I transform from a forgettable bystander into a fast-moving shadow. I only look suspicious for about 10 seconds – the critical time it takes me to get out of sight. For those 10 seconds, though, I'm in plain view. And running through my head is all the information I could find about the perils of subway exploration, none of it very encouraging.

The 10 seconds pass, but my heart is pounding, and my hands are shaking so badly I can't even turn on my camera. I'm now in a cavernous tunnel standing on the platform of what Sanborn told me was the original Harvard T station, abandoned in the '70s. There's a constant soft hum of low, echoey noise – dripping, occasional rumbles.

The old station stretches around me. The walls still bear red paint and white tile, though several places are covered with graffiti, a sign that I'm hardly the first person to come here. "X-mas '95" says one tag. High up on the ceiling, I can just make out a sign. "Harvard – To Buses" it reads dimly.

Everything is covered in grime and thick dust. There's a walled-off area – maybe once a seating alcove – the floor of which is ankle-deep in empty soda bottles.

There's a staircase, still edged in yellow, which leads to a sealed opening. A doorway leads to a large room now apparently used as a storage area – old bicycles and industrial odds and ends lean against the walls. I see a large slab propped up in a corner, and as I walk closer I realize that it's a huge relief map of Harvard Square covered in dust.

I hear a low rumble of a train on the edge of hearing. My heart starts pounding again, and I wade into the pitch-dark soda-bottle alcove and crouch. There's only two feet of platform between the tracks and me, and I feel the air in the tunnel begin to move – and then roar.

Deafeningly, the train passes my hiding space. I feel bold and decide to put my camera up on the ledge to photograph the passengers rushing by. All I can think is, "You have no idea I'm taking a picture of you right now."

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