



# SPACES IN-BETWEEN

## Urban explorers find history and beauty in decay

BY AMANDA HAMPTON

Four stories beneath a piano store, a former hub of Boston's culture lies buried, its grandeur giving way to rot and ruin after decades of neglect.

Steinert Hall has remained untouched and unused since it was forced to close in 1942, but the allure of all spaces forgotten and off-limits has made it one of Boston's worst-kept secrets. As far as the general public is concerned, the crumbling concert hall is a piece of history accessible only through photographs, but for a few intrepid college students, it became the ultimate secret clubhouse.



"We were drawn to it. We were kids who just wanted our own space. We eventually realized that the door stayed open, moved some stuff down there—a couch, lights, side tables—and made it our own," says Gonzales. "There was an organ that still worked, and we would go down there at the end of the night and play music. It was the first year we had a sense of real freedom, and it was cool to find something and be like, we're the only ones who know about it, and it's ours."

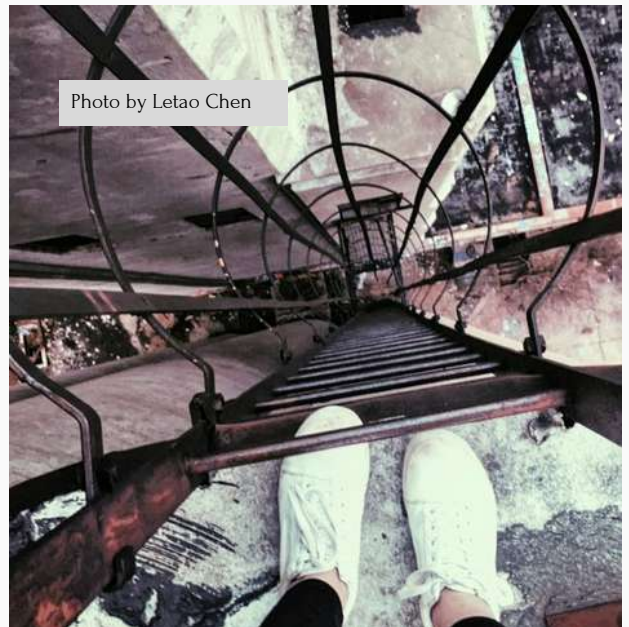


Gonzales and her friends in Steinert Hall. Same space pictured above (Today.com)

After nearly a year, the building's security finally thought it prudent to lock the side door. Although they couldn't return to their favorite hideaway, Gonzalez and her friends, who were freshmen at Boston-area colleges in 2015, frequently sought out similar spaces. At parties, they gravitated towards basements and attics. They haunted abandoned buildings back in their hometowns, chasing that same sense of excitement and ownership.

The fascination with abandoned sites is hardly limited to thrill-seeking teens, with a long and varied history that can be traced back to Renaissance painters who romanticized Greek and Roman ruins. Its modern iteration exists under the umbrella term “urban exploration,” a pastime that involves visiting and often photographing places that are abandoned, hidden, or off-limits.

The movement began as a loose-knit group as online forums, but has experienced a recent surge in popularity, thanks to popular creators like Abandoned America and The Proper People who call attention to the history and strange beauty of these sites through photos and videos.



Letao Chen, a college student from Minneapolis, began exploring abandoned sites as a way to expand her interest in photography. At 14, she became part of a community that would share locations and photos of abandoned places.

“That’s how I made the majority of my friends, and I’m still friends with those people to this day. Part of it was also just to get that cool shot. And it was also about escapism, you know, it felt like you were in a movie. It makes you feel rebellious, too—the reasons you shouldn’t do it are the reasons you want to do it,” she says.

Gonzalez and Chen sought out these places as a casual diversion, but for some, finding and exploring spaces the world has forgotten runs deeper than a hobby.

Michael Berindei and Bryan Weissman are the curators of The Proper People, a popular YouTube channel. They began documenting and posting their explorations of abandoned sites for fun in 2014, when both were freshmen in college.



“Having spent my whole life living in suburban Florida, I found myself getting really fed up with the monotony of having the entire world around me be strip malls and gated neighborhoods, and these abandoned spots really felt like another world to escape to, rare pockets of isolation from the repetitive suburban hellscape,” says Berindei.



He recalls early explorations of a derelict phosphate processing factory and an old dinner theatre that he remembered visiting as a child.

“Wandering both of these places unlocked some unique, surreal feelings, and I wanted to seek out more experiences like it,” Berindei says.

Their channel now has over a million subscribers on YouTube, and the duo has visited dozens of abandoned sites, including hospitals, factories, hotels, theatres, military bases, churches, theme parks, prisons, schools, and shopping malls.

“Any type of structure you can think of, we’ve probably been to an abandoned one of it,” says Berindei.

As their following has grown, so has their appreciation for the architecture and history of the places they explore. Their documentation has become almost solely about preservation, especially as more and more of these structures are being demolished.

“When you see these places completely neglected, it just really hits home that you’re experiencing something very special, something that might not be around for that much longer. Older architecture, particularly 1940s and earlier, is starting to feel so far removed from the buildings we see in our day-to-day lives that it almost seems unfathomable that it was even built in the first place,” Berindei says. “There’s a very specific feeling I get from quality locations, like you’re making a direct link to the past, and that’s the feeling I’ll never tire of.”

There are certainly elements of risk involved in exploring these places, which is often part of the allure. Crumbling foundations and rotting floorboards pose safety hazards, and Berindei says they’ve frequently encountered toxins like asbestos, lead paint, and mercury. Chen and her friends once had to purchase industrial gas masks before exploring a sewer tunnel.

Since trespassing is often a requirement, the biggest concern for urban explorers is the potential for legal trouble. Even for the bigshots of the community, getting sanctioned to enter these areas is usually an uphill battle or flat-out impossibility.

“We’ve gotten permission on rare occasions, but usually when we’ve tried to pursue it, it doesn’t work out. There’s just too much liability involved and nothing really in it for the property owner, if you can even find and get in contact with them,” says Berindei.



Abandoned jail by the Proper People



Sewer tunnels by Letao Chen



Abandoned sanatorium by the Proper People



Brushes with the law are a frequent occurrence for urban explorers. Berindei and Weissman have had numerous encounters with law enforcement, but only one that has resulted in a trespassing charge.

Matthew Ryan, an admin of Abandoned Massachusetts, a Facebook group of over a thousand dedicated urban explorers, says that officers and security guards are normally lenient when it's clear that people are there for the sole purpose of photographing and appreciating these locations.

"There's times where I've come out of buildings and there's a trooper and I'm just like, okay, you got me. I was just taking photos," he says. "Don't run. If you run, then you're guilty. Just be smart. The worst they'll do is write you a ticket."

Having been a part of the urban exploration community for over a decade, Ryan has borne witness to its evolution spurred by instant-gratification media culture.

"For me, it's not about the likes, it's not about the TikToks, it's not about the Youtubes. It's about taking photos of something the world never gets to see. But it's become a toxic field. People are threatening each other, people are going after each other, people are calling cops on each other. It's not even fun anymore. It's all about competition," he says.

His Facebook group, Abandoned Massachusetts, has recently implemented a rule banning members from providing or asking for the exact locations of the content they post. Those who do are swiftly removed from the group.



"It's getting ridiculous, you know, places are getting destroyed. There was this one girl that was posting and blasting the address everywhere. And a week later, that building caught on fire," Ryan says.

Berindei and Weissman have stopped posting footage of more off-the-radar locations they've explored to prevent similar occurrences.

"Today it does seem like holding onto photos and videos is something that doesn't even cross the minds of a very large portion of the community. On TikTok and Instagram especially, you see a lot of people posting photos and videos of a location the very same day they visited. Sometimes even while they're still inside," Berindei says. "The result is that the shelf-life of locations before they become smashed up and covered in graffiti has become very short. Sometimes a place can go to pristine to completely destroyed in just a couple weeks."





He says any urban explorer worth their salt must abide by the common mantra: “take nothing but photos, leave nothing but footprints.”

“The explorers who can do this with great consistency are the ones I respect the most, because not only will it keep yourself out of trouble, it’s the non-selfish thing to do for people who will come after you,” says Berindei.

Despite the risks involved and the toxicity that has followed the internet-driven expansion of the community, it’s unlikely that the fascination with decay and ruin will fade anytime soon. Whether the draw lies in the longing for freedom and ownership, the thrill of adventure, or the unique sense of reaching across time, the common thread that sustains the urban exploration community is the ability to see and feel things they can’t in the ordinary world.

