From urban exploration to ruin tourism: a geographical analysis of contemporary ruins as new frontiers for urban tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite the increasing academic interest for urban ruins and evolutions of urban tourism, research on ruin tourism as an emergent form of urban tourism practice is still lacking. Drawing on existing works on urban exploration, the purpose of this paper is to provide a first geographical insight into ruin tourism and its spatial implications in terms of imaginaries, practices and regulation of urban space.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on an urban and cultural geography approach, the research is based on a mix of empirical methodologies. Participant observation of organized ruin tours as well as formal and informal interviews with participants, organizers, institutional actors and inhabitants have been conducted during fieldwork completed in Berlin and Detroit. This paper also draws on the analysis of additional data provided by online material, especially official websites of tour organizers, forum threads and comments posted on different websites.

Findings – The research shows that ruin tourism can be analyzed as a new practice of urban tourism based on the reappropriation and commodification of alternative practices developing in marginalized urban areas. The paper provides evidence of ruin tourism’s contribution to the normalization of urban space through tourism conquest of new urban territories. It also shows that the practice fosters contested material and symbolic appropriations of place.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to current research on alternative tourism practices in marginalized urban areas as well as on tourist appropriation of liminal spaces. It provides a first analysis of ruin tourism and underscores its potential as a geographical object for the investigation of a wide range of urban issues.

Keywords Urban tourism, Berlin, Detroit, Ruin tourism, Ruins, Urban exploration

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with the development of “ruin tourism” as an emergent form of tourism practiced in urban spaces, as well as with its spatial implications in terms of imaginaries, practices and regulation of space. We understand ruin tourism as a tourism practice focusing on the exploration of modern ruins taking place within the frame of organized tours and inspired by urban exploration (hereafter referred to as “urbex”). Its characteristics, however, differ from those of urbex in many respects. It fits into recent research in geography and social sciences on urban tourism and its changing forms and spatial features, and especially current contributions on the development of tourism in ordinary spaces and on the touristic inversion of a “geographical stigma” (Goffman, 1963). Particularly important also are the recent works on urban exploration (Garrett, 2012, 2014; Fraser, 2012; Robinson, 2015), which provide a basis for understanding ruin tourism. Drawing on a geographical approach and based on fieldworks completed in Berlin and Detroit in 2017, this paper aims to analyze the link between urban exploration and ruin tourism with regard to the notion of spatial normalization. It also seeks to propose a first insight into ruin tourism as a spatial practice and into issues raised in the cities in which it takes place. Data used to this end cover field observations as well as empirical analysis of three ruin tours.

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offered in Berlin (Beelitzer Heilstätten run by Go2Know) and Detroit (Detroit Urbex Tour run by Motor City Photography Workshops). This paper also draws on the analysis of a range of online material. It will first present an overview of existing research on urban tourism, modern ruins and urban exploration. It will then be argued that ruin tourism developing upon the existing basis of urbex illustrates tourism appropriation of underground and alternative practices and spaces turned into tourism commodities. The article will eventually discuss spatial issues raised by ruin tourism in two different urban contexts and outline several lines of research requiring further investigation.

2. Urban tourism, modern ruins and urban exploration: an overview of current research

2.1 Expansion of tourism practices, temporalities and spaces: toward a tourism of the ordinary

Recent research in urban tourism has highlighted the continuing expansion and diversification of tourism in terms of practices and spaces, but also temporalities and involved actors, especially in metropolitan contexts. This can be understood simultaneously as cause and consequence of two interconnected processes. On the one hand, numerous contributions outline the diversification and individualization of tourism practices toward more alternative products (Maitland and Newman, 2004; Novy and Huning, 2008; Equipe Mit, 2011; Gravari-Barbas and Delaplace, 2015) marketed and consumed by renewed actors on both offer and demand sides (Fainstein et al., 2003). This leads to an increasing valorization of so-called ordinary spaces or even urban margins as touristic attractions, contributing to the production of “new urban territories of tourism” (Gravari-Barbas and Delaplace, 2015, p. 2). On the other hand, limits between tourism and daily life tend to be more difficult to assess (Urry, 1995), thus challenging binaries on which traditional understandings of tourism rely. This has led to various proposals for referring to these changes, be it “post-tourism” (Feifer, 1985; Urry, 1995; Viard, 2000, 2006), “new tourism” (Poon, 1989, 1994) or “tourism off the beaten track” (Maitland and Newman, 2004; Gravari-Barbas and Delaplace, 2015). It also results in growing attention for “the overlap and interplay of varying mobility flows and place consumption practices” (Novy, 2017) and the way it impacts our understanding of (urban) tourism. All these evolutions in urban tourism set the context for an increasing importance of new spatial practices developing in areas that were not integrated to tourism ecumene so far.

2.2 Modern ruins from wastelands to valuable alternative spaces

Among ordinary and marginal urban spaces recently arousing tourism interest, modern ruins are of particular relevance to us. A growing body of literature reveals an increasing academic and social attention for that kind of spaces, not only in the field of tourism but also for a wide range of disciplines and approaches dealing with urban space (Edensor, 2005; Hell and Schönle, 2010; DeSilvey and Edensor, 2012).

Though a ruins’ marginal status seems to be consensual, the question of whether or not they relate to ordinary spaces may be discussed. Tim Edensor (2005) outlines their specificity within the city: he characterizes them as “spaces of defamiliarization” and “uncanny space[s] amidst a familiar realm” (2005, p. 25), thus highlighting the fact that modern ruins are largely left out of spaces of daily experience. Keeping this in mind, we nonetheless propose here to understand them as ordinary spaces as opposed to the touristic extraordinary, since they do not belong to places staged and marketed as exceptional (and as such worthy of tourist attention) but are rather part of a non-spectacular urban landscape. Although ruins are widely considered as “spaces of waste […] saturated with negativity” (Edensor, p. 7), Edensor posits that they actually are valuable in several respects, one of them being that they allow for “a wide range of practices” (Edensor, p. 21) and interpretations of the city to develop. As locations stimulating alternative appropriations of the city, they constitute a challenge to an overwhelmingly controlled, staged and regulated urban space. Among those practices of modern ruins, urban exploration has raised a growing academic interest in recent years.
2.3 Urban exploration: tourism, beyond tourism or anti-tourism?

Garrett describes urban exploration as "a practice of researching, rediscovering and physically exploring temporary, obsolete, abandoned, derelict and infrastructural areas within built environments without permission to do so" (2014, p. 1) in which the search for these areas proves to be as important as their exploration. Urbex relies on the discovery of places by oneself, so that localizations are kept secret: one has to be able to find the place in order to get a chance to explore it. Even though it is not always asserted by urban explorers, the practice also entails a political dimension. Garrett suggests that “urban explorers are one of many groups reacting to increased surveillance and control over urban space by undertaking embodied urban interventions in the city that undermine clean spatio/temporal narratives” (2012, p. ix). Urbex must indeed be analyzed in the context of contemporary capitalist production of urban space in which the city is increasingly designed as a spectacle to be passively gazed upon rather than a political construction in which citizens are allowed to take part (Edensor, 2005; Garrett, 2012, 2014). It can thus be seen as a de facto affirmation of a right to the city working to re-democratize urban spaces (Garrett, 2014) and to “challeng[e] and deconstruc[t] the imprint of power on the city” (Edensor, 2005, p. 4).

Although not exclusively, urban ruins appear to be particularly prized spots of practice for urban explorers, who value those depreciated spaces but also contribute to change the society’s perspective on abandoned spaces. Artistic and especially photographic productions (see e.g. Vergara, 1999, 2016; Marchand and Meffre, 2010: Fahey, 2015) often seem to participate in turning urban ruins into attractive spaces celebrated for the strange beauty their decay conveys and for the forgotten memories they bring to light. The “geographical stigma” (Goffman, 1963) associated with ruins as wastelands is overcome to a certain extent, as a number of recent public exhibitions dedicated to photography of modern ruins also testify[1].

This echoes the considerations on spatial expansion of urban tourism to ordinary and a marginal urban area mentioned above and questions the nature of urban exploration: is it, as a practice valorizing this particular type of spaces, a new practice of urban tourism? Several contributions have tried to determine whether urban exploration can be understood as such. Edensor posits that “exploring a ruin is a kind of anti-tourism” (2005, p. 95) because of the apparent contradiction between spatial experiences allowed by exploration on the one hand and (tourism) place consumption on the other hand. Whereas the latter is supposed to be “exemplary of the normative ways in which people interact with urban space” (ibid, p. 95), urban exploration allows for encounters with places contrasting with the “increasingly themed, staged, aestheticized, disciplined, highly regulated, smooth, homogeneous” spaces of tourism (ibid., p. 95). Other scholars, however, argue that urban exploration shares commonalities with tourism. Fraser (2012) outlines the similarities between this practice, disaster tourism and adventure tourism: the importance of the visual component, engagement in risk-taking activities and search for an “authentic” experience of space, all speak for a convergence between urban exploration and tourism. Pointing out the contradiction between urbex’s “unsanctioned and unguided engagement with spaces” and the tourism practice of “commodified sites” (2012, p. 142), she does not posit that urbex is a form of tourism but rather proposes to speak of “a participant generated consumption of the esthetic and experience of modern ruins” (ibid, p. 142). Synthesizing multiple contributions on urban exploration and tourism, Robinson (2015) similarly notices shared characteristics as well as points of differentiation. Identified commonalities include some of those outlined by Fraser: the role of photography, the search for special experiences and for authenticity, the nature of the activity in the case of dark and adventure tourism, as well as the type of visited sites and the notion of embodiment, are applicable to urbex and to some forms of tourism (heritage tourism, dark tourism, eco-tourism). But Robinson also insists on the different kinds of spatial engagement and experiences offered by urbex on the one hand and tourism on the other hand. He concludes that urban exploration is both “beyond tourism” and “a form of tourist activity that is anti-tourist by its very nature” (2015, p. 160), thus opening research perspectives to address this paradox.

We suggest that approaches relying on a strict binary opposing staged and commodified space of tourism on the one hand to unregulated ruins offering possibilities for unconstrained spatial experiences on the other hand might not have fully taken into account the deep changes occurring in urban tourism, especially regarding conceptions of what is or is not attractive for tourists. Recent research has given evidences of a blurring of conceptual but also spatial boundaries...
between tourist and non-tourist practices and urban spaces, as well as of the pervasiveness of dynamics of place consumption now reaching areas not previously concerned. Instead of opposing tourism spaces and modern ruins, it seems that we should acknowledge that the latter may also be taken over by tourism and its modes of spatial regulation. Decay may precisely become the sight which tourists come to gaze upon, and therefore modern ruins themselves can be turned into commodified sites for tourism consumption. Modalities, extent and consequences of this possible appropriation of modern ruins by tourism remain yet to be analyzed.

Therefore, this paper does not aim at determining whether urban exploration should be considered as a form of tourism or not. Drawing on existing contributions on this point and assuming that urbex and tourism are distinct activities, we instead posit that urban exploration has inspired a new tourism practice focused on the exploration of modern ruins with important consequences on their status within the city. While references to urban exploration in the practice of ruin tourism aim at creating a sense of a deeply alternative and trendy practice, we argue that ruin tourism contributes to normalizing urban exploration and its spaces. The following section will explore this idea based on initial research findings.

3. From urban exploration to ruin tourism: toward normalization of alternative practices and spaces

We posit here the distinction between urban exploration as the autonomous and unguided search for and exploration of liminal spaces (Ninjalicious, 2005; Garrett, 2012, 2014), and ruin tourism as supervised exploration within the frame of organized tours. Based on existing literature on urban exploration on the one hand and on personal fieldworks focusing on ruin tours on the other hand, we aim at proposing criteria of differentiation between both practices, allowing for a finer definition of ruin tourism and its specific relationship with urban space. It will be argued that even though ruin tourism draws on urbex to develop as an alternative tourism practice, it relies on touristification and commodification processes which eventually result in a normalization of urban exploration and explored places.

3.1 Fieldworks and data

Ideas developed in this paper constitute the output of two fieldworks completed in Berlin (Germany) and Detroit (USA) in the spring and summer of 2017 as part of ongoing PhD research in Geography. The methodology is based on participant observation in organized ruin tours as well as formal and informal interviews with participants, organizers, institutional actors and inhabitants. Additional data are provided by online material, especially official websites of tour organizers and forum threads and comments posted on different websites[2]. Discourse analysis applied to these data provides valuable insights into tour organizers’ and visitors’ motivations and relationship to urban space, but also into material and symbolic conflicts arising from ruin tourism in the city.

Three participant observations have been completed on three different ruin tours proposed by two organizers (Go2Know in Berlin and Motor City Photography Workshops in Detroit – hereafter referred to as MCPW) (see Table I for an overview of their characteristics). The analysis also draws on the online content available for Fototouren Berlin (FTB), another ruin tours organizer whose tours we could not attend yet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
<th>Overview of observed tours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name and organizer of the tour</td>
<td>“The Old Surgery Ward” Go2Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Berlin’s outskirts (Beelitz)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>1 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate number of participants</td>
<td>40-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legality of locations access</td>
<td>Legal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of tour</td>
<td>Guided tour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price of tour</td>
<td>10€</td>
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Go2know: official tours in a former urban exploration hotspot

Founded in 2010, Go2know is a Berlin-based firm offering legal tours in about ten derelict locations in and around Berlin. Both tours we followed took place at Beelitzer Heilstätten, a former nineteenth-century sanatorium turned into a Soviet military hospital after World War II located in Beelitz, a town about 45 km southwest of Berlin’s city center. The complex has become a well-known urban exploration spot after having been left vacant since 1994 and is now being gradually redeveloped. Both tours were run in German, although guides were able to answer questions in English if asked to.

The first one (“The Old Surgery Ward”) is a one-hour guided tour through one of the many buildings composing the complex. Run on a regular basis, it takes place three times a day every Saturday and Sunday. On the day we took part in the tour, there were about 40 to 50 visitors composed of a very diverse audience in terms of age profile (see Plate 1). The majority of people were in their 40s, some of them older, a few couples, one person with a child and a group of young women. This contrasted with only three tripod-photographers, accounting for a rather large public target not restricted to amateur photographers. The relatively low price of the visit (10 euros, about 12 US dollars) also speaks for this idea. After being given security advice, visitors had the choice to explore on their own or to follow the guide for a guided tour of the building. While few of us chose the autonomous way, the large majority of visitors decided to stay with the guide.

The second (“Whitney-Houston House”) is a four-hour photo tour through one of the men’s pavilions, nicknamed “Whitney-Houston House.” This tour runs less frequently, taking place about once a month. The focus of the tour, as well as its price (45 euros, about 52 US dollars), explains its smaller audience – about ten people attended the tour on the day we did, and attendees mainly came from Berlin and the surrounding region. Mostly equipped with cameras and tripods, visitors clearly appeared to be more driven by photographic interest than those attending “The Old Surgery Ward” tour. After providing a brief introduction to the building’s history, our guide offered additional details for interested visitors but most of them directly headed up to explore the site on their own. The guide then spent most of the four hours waiting in the main room with a book, being available for questions, but not playing an active role in the organization of the visit.

MCPW: touring the ruins of Motor City

MCPW has been offering tours through Detroit’s abandoned areas since 2011. They take a different form from those of Go2know, as a tour includes three to five locations, subject to change depending on access possibilities and building conditions. On the day we attended, we visited the former American Motor Corporation Headquarters, Rewarding Faith Church, Brady Elementary School, the nearby WDTR-FM Detroit radio station and Continental Motor Plant. Participants gathered at MCPW studio in the suburbs of Detroit then headed up for a bus tour, often extending beyond the planned four hours. Focus and price of the tour (75 US dollars) are quite similar to Go2know’s offer: although the guide provides a brief introduction to each place’s history, the tours clearly focus on giving visitors the opportunity to explore and photograph derelict buildings. The attendees were accordingly limited; about ten people took part in the tour (see Plate 2). It is interesting to notice the diversity of the attendees’ geographical origins in comparison to Go2know’s tour: two people came from a nearby city in the suburbs and another one grew up in Detroit before moving out to Missouri, while a couple came from California and a second one from Germany. In terms of age profile, most of the attendees were in their 30 to 50s, while only two people seemed to be younger.

Some preliminary remarks must be made. First, we focus here on ruin tours, drawing on the hypothesis that they are the main and most visible form of ruin tourism and thus allow for a relevant analysis of the practice. In other words, we understand here “ruin tourism” in the restricted sense of ruin exploration taking place within the frame of organized tours. However, the question of a possible form of ruin tourism based on individual initiative and not happening within
the frame of a tour must be raised. This questions the idea of a continuum of practices between urbex and (ruin) tourism. Second, we refer here to participants in ruin tours as “ruin tourists” for ease of reference, although a finer distinction should be made between different types of visitor, some of them being locals.

3.2 Ruin tourism and urban exploration: a common ground

Ruin tourism can be understood as a form of reappropriation of several characteristics of urban exploration. A first evident commonality lies in the type of places in which both practices take place. Urbex and ruin tourism indeed value modern ruins, although it must be reminded that urban explorers also consider infrastructural areas such as sewers, construction sites or subway tunnels as relevant for their practice (Garrett, 2012). The way ruin tour organizers advertise their offer is clearly based on the specificity of visited places. Go2Know and FTB use similar terms to refer to them: lost, secret, abandoned, forgotten and hidden places. All of them outline the functional and symbolic disinvestment that defines modern ruins and that sharply contrasts with traditional tourist attractions saturated with social significance. The attractiveness and exceptionality of ruins then lies in the possibility to (re)discover places that have fallen out of social space and consciousness, hence the connection with an “exploration” aiming at revealing unknown areas. Beelitzer Heilstätten near Berlin, as well as places visited with MCPW in Detroit all correspond to this definition. Appeal for modern ruins also lies in their transitory nature which creates a sense of urgency. Go2Know’s website underscores the fact that “few of these forgotten places still remain,” while FTB uses Paul Cézanne’s quote as an epigraph: “You have to hurry up if you want to see something, everything disappears.” Sites explored during the tours confirm these statements, as does the currently redeveloped Beelitzer Heilstätten area. Some of the buildings already have a new function, as the second men’s pavilion turned into a clinic, or will soon have one, as the women’s sanatorium meant to become a residence for artists (Böttger et al., 2016). Other buildings, however, are still waiting for a project to be launched and
are thus available for ruin tours understood as “a transitional process” (Arboleda, 2017) between abandonment and redevelopment. In the same way, many places explored in Detroit as part of the MCPW tours over the course of past years have been boarded up to prevent intrusions, such as Saint Agnes Church, or torn down such as the Eastown Theater which was demolished in 2015. This makes urban ruins even more desirable as the temporality of their existence and accessibility is very short. All of this strongly echoes the idea of a current shift in the approach of modern ruins.

Another similarity can be found in the importance of photography for ruin tourism as well as for urban exploration. If photography is according to Garrett (2012) the “primary medium of the practice” of urbex (p. 49 emphasis added), it seems to be the primary goal for ruin tourism. Tours proposed by Go2know, FTB and MCPW are all advertised as photo tours designed for amateur photographers, and allowing the capture of unconventional esthetics. Visitors always picture tourism attractions (Urry, 1990), but we argue that the originality here lies in the fact that photography becomes the main purpose of the visit of a particular location instead of being a secondary aspect of a visit motivated by another goal (for example historical interest). Photo tours thus reveal a conception of modern ruins focused on the esthetic dimension of space rather than on its historical or cultural significance. The relatively limited amount of historical and contextual information delivered during the tours also speaks for this interpretation. Elaborating on Urry’s analysis of the tourist gaze, Fraser outlines the connection between urbex and (ruin) tourism based on the visual dimension of both practices when emphasizing that “the visual component of (urbex), souveniring images of decay from abandoned locations, becomes consumption of place in a touristic sense – the images generated by the explorer are the productions of a visitor’s gaze, and thus a ‘tourist activity’” (2012, p. 141). Field observations confirm this hypothesis. Tess and Jim[3], one of the couples attending the MCPW tour in Detroit, told us that they explicitly came to Detroit to shoot abandoned buildings after seeing pictures of the city’s ruins that made them want
to come and see them themselves. It was the only and main purpose of their coming to the city, where they stayed only one day and one night. The husband being a professional photographer, they actually planned to publish a book about Detroit’s ruins. This importance of photography in ruin tourism also involves a form of staging visited places. At some point, Tess and another visitor found a closed book on the floor of the abandoned school, opened it and carefully arranged it so that it would make for a better picture (see Plate 3). This kind of material rearranging for esthetic purposes in explored places has been frequently observed during the tours. It highlights the importance for visitors to take pictures matching a certain idea of ruin esthetics, even though it involves an artificial reordering of objects found on site. Based on literature and field observations, photography thus appears to be a shared feature of urbex and ruin tourism.

Also interesting is the fact that ruin tour organizers explicitly refer to urbex when promoting their activities. MCPW thus proposes a “Detroit Urbex Tour” while Go2Know identifies urban explorers as a core target audience alongside photographers. FTB also explicitly connects its tours to the practice of urban exploration, though ambiguously, as we argue below. In addition to this, conditions of practice are presented as comparable to those of urban exploration to a certain extent, as far as entering unmaintained buildings presents specific dangers. Go2Know’s website thus specifies that “this site is an abandoned place […] you enter the area and building at your own risk during the photo tour. Go2know assumes no liability in case of accident or injury.” All participants of Go2Know and MCPW tours are required to sign a liability waiver form, even mentioning the risk of death during the tour in the case of MCPW. If this legal precaution mainly aims at protecting ruin tour organizers, it also contributes to the staging of an alternative tourism practice contrasting with smooth and highly regulated traditional tourism activities. We suggest that these references to urbex intend to give the visitor the sense of his own uniqueness and to make him feel like he is more than a normal tourist when exploring liminal spaces such as modern ruins. The underpinning idea is that venturing into this specific kind of space turns one into an urban adventurer able to get off the beaten track. Many online comments on MCPW’s tour outline this dimension: “not your mama’s tour,” “definitely not your normal tour,” “not for the dainty” or...
“not for the faint of heart” are some of the reviews one can read on MCPW’s page on Tripadvisor. In that sense, it can be argued that taking part in a ruin tour contributes to a search for social distinction satisfied through spatial practice. The increasing visibility and trendiness of urban exploration in recent years explains why ruin tourism explicitly refers to it when promoting a tourism product in which attractiveness is based on the access to areas that are otherwise (supposedly) difficult to find and/or to access.

We have pointed out some features that ruin tourism shares with urban exploration, forming a common ground for both practices. Several arguments, however, invite us to acknowledge a fundamental difference that lies in their respective relationships to urban space. These accounts for a gradual progression of tourism that conquers former frontiers in terms of spaces and practices: the development of ruin tourism in modern ruins can be analyzed as a modality of the normative reappropriation of urban margins through commodification of alternative practices taking place in these spaces.

3.3 From unregulated to re-regulated urban spaces: ruin tourism as a normative reappropriation of modern ruins?

Although ruin tourism values the same type of locations as urban exploration, a first criterion of differentiation lies in the fact that it is a mediated spatial practice. While urban exploration mainly relies on the search for, and access to, modern ruins by oneself (Ninjalicious, 2005; Garrett, 2012), ruin tours are based on the initial provision of necessary information and material conditions for entering locations by tour organizers. Many visitors commenting online highlight this aspect when expressing their enthusiasm about places they would never have been able to find on their own[4]. The existence of an intermediate actor external to the community of visitors appears to be a significant difference with urbex. If a certain form of mediation can also be found in the latter, it relies on exchanges of information inside of the community of urban explorers. Mediation in the case of ruin tourism goes together with the introduction of a market dimension in ruins exploration, which becomes a tourism product marketed, sold and consumed as such. Ruin tour organizers thus operate as ordinary service providers within the tourism industry. As Go2know’s “Whitney-Houston House” tour illustrates, the real service people pay for is the legal access to the building and not the (limited) informative content of the visit: the guide waits for visitors to come back from their exploration for the most part of the tour’s duration. This stands in strong opposition to the understanding of modern ruins as spaces “by definition absent of the kind of material consumption that generates a commodification of place” (Fraser, 2012, p. 141). Particularly interesting in that sense is Edensor’s analysis of ruin exploration. When characterizing the practice as “a kind of anti-tourism,” he points out that “there are no obvious spectacles around which to organize a tour […] there is nothing to buy and nothing conforms to the staged esthetics of tourist space. These experiences cannot be inserted into a pre-arranged vocabulary or classified as ‘exotic’ or ‘typical’” (2005, p. 95). We argue that ruin tourism challenges the understanding of modern ruins in that it opens the possibility for a commodification of that type of space, which we understand as a second criterion of differentiation between urbex and ruin tourism. Even if this seems to remain largely marginal today as not all urban ruins are concerned, some of them are, however, integrated into urban tourism areas. Beelitzer Heilstätten is an example, as well as the former American spy station on the Teufelsberg in Berlin, where tours have been run for several years and are now advertised on the website of Berlin’s official promotional organization for tourism. Ruin tours thus contribute to tourism appropriation of new urban territories.

A related distinctive feature of ruin tourism lies in the paradox of what can be called a guided exploration. Urban exploration is about asserting one’s freedom of movement within an increasingly controlled urban space and experiencing modern ruins and other types of locations without being subject to anyone else’s control (Edensor, 2005; Garrett, 2012, 2014). Exploring urban ruins as part of an organized tour necessarily differs from urbex on that point. Although tour organizers particularly emphasize the freedom for visitors to explore on their own, the context of the tour and the presence of a guide involve an orientation, if not a control, of their spatial practice. Taking part in a ruin tour implies that one should at least conform to its planned duration, respect access restrictions in certain areas (see Plate 4) and accept to share the location with other...
visitors whose presence might be perceived as a constraint for one’s own experience. Arboleda (2017) outlines the fact that “opposed to urban exploration’s perspective, freedom in this sense is rather related to the notion of knowing that you are not doing something illegal, and there is no need to keep an eye on any security guard” (p. 45). Interestingly, the orientation of the practice by the guides is particularly noticeable in its creative dimension. Tour organizers as well as visitors outline the fact that guides point out the best subjects and shots to be taken. Instead of finding out by themselves what is worth being photographed – with the understanding that what is worth being photographed depends on the person taking the picture – visitors are offered pre-identified subjects. We suggest that it contributes to a standardized production of spatial images reproducing predetermined representations of space and of modern ruins. This echoes Urry’s (1990) analysis of how the tourist gaze is socially constructed and determined. More generally, mediation of urban ruin exploration within the framework of ruin tourism modifies the conditions of the practice. This invites us to moderate, in the case of ruin tourism, the idea of a highly personal, direct and unmediated experience of urban space through modern ruins. Our argument does not aim at disqualifying all possibility of personally significant experience for the visitor while on a ruin tour, but to point out the difference between urban exploration and ruin tourism in that respect. This has also much to do with the experience of spatial transgression in both practices, which we will now discuss.

Urban exploration essentially involves trespassing into forbidden areas and physically engaging with non-secured spaces (Edensor, 2005; Garrett, 2012), thus involving risk taking and the possibility of suffering physical injuries as well as being prosecuted. Illegality is an important feature of the practice that highlights its political dimension, consisting in “reprogramming[ing] controlled space through both premeditated and spontaneous recreational trespass, acted out as placemaking performances that disrupt monotonous, normative urban spaces colonized by capitalist forces that encase and secure the city as a spectacle to be seen rather than negotiated” (Garrett, 2014, p. 4). Things seem to be different for ruin tourism. In terms of legal status, situations differ among the three tours analyzed thus far. In Beelitz, ruin tours explicitly take place within the context of the progressive redevelopment of the area. All buildings of the complex have
been secured, so that it is now pretty difficult to enter if not as part of an authorized photo tour. Go2know thus has an agreement with owners allowing the firm to offer legal tours inside of the buildings. This is more generally the case in Berlin for tours proposed by Go2know and FTB. Berlin’s ruin tour organizers explicitly point out the difference their offer presents with urbex in terms of legality. FTB indicates that “as urban exploration entails some problems and dangers (penal liability, trespassing, risk of collapse), we here propose our own tours or our partners’ tours” while Go2know states that “entering the area and buildings is strictly forbidden outside of authorized photo tours, photo walks and guided tours,” sometimes even pointing out that “the area is very well guarded” to discourage potential trespassers. Contrasting with the effective transgression of urban exploration, ruin tourism in Berlin offers a symbolic transgression of dominant social representations (urban ruins as spaces of waste and danger) more than a real transgression of legality. Go2know’s website interestingly states that “it feels like doing something not allowed” (our emphasis): visitors enjoy the simulacra of a forbidden spatial practice but not its reality. The situation of MCPW in Detroit is different, in that tours are not subject to preliminary agreements with locations’ owners and essentially take advantage of the huge amount of abandoned and unwatched buildings in the city. Therefore, taking part in MCPW’s tours means trespassing. The geographical context is also different in that Detroit has suffered a bad reputation fueled by images of advanced urban decay, crime and poverty for decades. This can explain the particular emphasis on safety expressed by many online comments of visitors although they know that they are legally trespassing and entering potentially dangerous buildings. While urban exploration implies actual transgression of legal norms that regulate urban space, we suggest that ruin tourism is based on a controlled and partly staged transgression developed within the legal frame in the case of Berlin, and smoothed by a permanent sense of safety in the case of Detroit. This all manifests the radical difference between urbex and ruin tourism in terms of political meaning and implications.

Drawing on these analyses, we argue that ruin tourism challenges the understanding of modern ruins as unregulated spaces allowing for alternative interpretations and practices of urban space. Although shared characteristics between ruin tourism and urban exploration have been underscored, both practices fundamentally differ on the nature of relationship to urban space that they involve. This relationship to space can be defined through criteria of differentiation identified in this section: ruin tourism appears to be a mediated and guided exploration of modern ruins relying on a form of commodification of places where it takes place and thus deprived of urban exploration’s political and transgressive dimension. While urban exploration involves subversively challenging the controlled and regulated urban space produced by capitalism, ruin tourism is exemplary of an integration of marginal areas into territories of urban tourism based on touristification and commodification of alternative spaces and practices. By introducing a market dimension in ruin exploration and reconfiguring the conditions of the practice – and thus of the visitor’s engagement with space – ruin tourism crucially modifies the characteristics of the practice of urban exploration that inspired it. This challenges the permanence of the alternative dimension, echoing Enzensberger’s (1958/1996) well-known words “the tourist destroys what he seeks by finding it.” Ruin tourism thus raises issues regarding our understanding of modern ruins as marginal and alternative urban spaces, but also reveals conflicts over urban spatialities at a larger scale, which will be discussed in the next section.

4. Ruin tourism and the city: revealing conflicts over urban spatialities

While ruin tourism is primarily concerned with modern ruins, it can be understood as an interesting prism for the analysis of urban spatial dynamics on a broader scale. We will first outline raised issues about imaginaries of the city and urban attractiveness, then discuss the idea of ruin tourism as a practice catalyzing conflicting interpretations and uses of urban space.

4.1 Urban ruins, city imaginaries and urban attractiveness

The first aspect to be taken into account is the role urban ruins play in the construction of spatial imaginaries related to a city. Situations in Berlin and Detroit are very contrasted in this respect. Berlin has become one of the trendiest metropolises in Western Europe since German reunification in 1990. The city has seen a dramatic increase in tourism over past decades,
reaching a total of more than 31 million overnight stays and 12 million visitors in 2016, and is the third urban destination in Europe after London and Paris (Senatsverwaltung für Wirtschaft, Energie und Betriebe, 2017). At the same time, the many urban ruins that mostly remained from the GDR period are increasingly redeveloped or torn down due to growing pressure on urban land. In the context of a trendy and attractive city, urban ruins are essentially perceived by visitors as interesting alternative spots to explore. Some of the most iconic examples are the old Eisfabrik in Kreuzberg until its securing in 2014, the former amusement park Spreepark in Treptow or the Teufelsberg in Charlottenburg, where guided tours have been run for several years. It contributes to collective imaginaries of Berlin as a dynamic and alternative city where ruins have a positive meaning instead of being perceived as spaces of waste and danger. The situation in Detroit is very different. After decades of urban crisis and shrinking (Sugrue, 1996/2014), the city filed for bankruptcy in 2013 and has received intense international media attention for its extensive economic and social downfall and its desolated urban landscape. The amount of ruined space in Detroit is by no means comparable to Berlin’s: in 2012, one third of the city was constituted by vacant land (Detroit Works, 2012). Ruins in Detroit are therefore a negative symbol of the city’s struggles much more than trendy alternative spots for visitors, even if also increasingly considered as potentialities for urban revitalization (Paddeu, 2016). This is all the more true since an important part of ruined buildings in Detroit are housing units, highlighting the dramatic social consequences of the crisis for Detroit’s inhabitants. According to this imaginary based on the abandonment and failure of the city, Tess and Jim came to Detroit only to get a glimpse of its ruins. Tess asked me at some point of the tour if I had seen a lot of crime since my arrival in Detroit, thus revealing how the important ruinscape is mentally linked to assumptions about the city’s characteristics, identity and dangerous nature. Contrasting this, Mustafa, a resident of Detroit’s “Banglatown,” regretted that the city is well known for its ruins and related issues while outsiders largely ignore all the positive things also happening in Detroit. Urban ruins thus have a significantly different meaning in Berlin and Detroit urban imaginaries. While supporting the city’s alternative image in the German capital, they play as a spatial stigma in Detroit. Ruin tourism therefore develops in contrasted geographical contexts in both cities.

Since spatial imaginaries present a crucial importance for a city’s attractiveness, institutional actors in Berlin and Detroit do not have the same approach to ruin tourism. Dietrich Kalkum, in charge of tourism by the Senate Department for Economics, Energy and Public Enterprises, and Sönke Schneidewind, Head of the Department “Culture and Internal Marketing” by Berlin’s official promotional organization for tourism and conventions “VisitBerlin,” both expressed a relative indifference to ruin tourism[5]. The latter seems to be considered as neither an activity to be particularly promoted nor a problematic form of tourism practice in the city. This can be explained by its marginal importance in terms of visitor numbers and incomes, but also by the fact that urban ruins play a rather positive role in the city’s imaginaries. Therefore, their valorization through ruin tours is not considered to be challenging the city’s image. This is not the case in Detroit. Michael O’Callaghan, executive vice-president of the promotional organization for Metro Detroit “Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau” (DMCVB), openly expressed his opposition to ruin tourism. Highlighting vacant space rather than Detroit’s attractive places and taking advantage of the importance of ruins in the city’s imaginaries, ruin tourism is therefore criticized for fueling negative images of the city that institutional actors precisely aim at transforming. Imaginaries based on urban crisis and decay clearly conflict with narratives of “the comeback city” promoted by political and economical actors in Detroit, although it must be noticed that MCPW tours also include descriptions of current changes and revitalization projects for the city. As Michael O’Callaghan outlines, “this is not the story [DMCVB] want[s] to sell”[6]. A key issue here is the question of attractiveness: while ruin tourism is not identified as a threat for Berlin’s capacity to attract visitors, new residents and investors, it is perceived as a significant obstacle in Detroit. Therefore, it cannot be integrated to any strategy of appeal in Detroit.

4.2 Ruin tourism as a mirror of antagonistic interpretations of the city

Ruin tourism expresses a series of material and symbolic conflicts over urban space, its uses and its representations. This is much more the case in Detroit than in Berlin, where urban ruins often are conflicting issues of urban planning but do not crystallize as many social, economical and racial issues embedded in the production of urban space.
In both cities, some people voice their opposition to a spatial practice perceived as commodification and exploitation of ruins and of the urban issues they embody. In Beelitz, Ilse Keller [7], an independent guide also offering tours of the complex, expressed her disagreement over the way Go2know stages the area. While her own guided tours focus on history, heritage and current redevelopment of the area, Go2know’s photo tours highlight in her opinion material decay with an explicit perspective of profit, as she outlines that “there is much money to be made with ruins” [8]. The firm’s co-founder assumes this focus (Arboleda, 2017) while our guide during “Whitney-Houston House” tour explicitly advised visitors to take an additional tour with Ilse Keller to get more in-depth insights if interested in the complex’s history. In her view nonetheless, ruin tourism is understood as a subversion of the cultural value of heritage. In the same way, many people in Detroit experience it as exploitation of the city’s painful history and of its social consequences in the last decades. This was a central point in many informal talks with Detroiter, also reported by several newspaper articles [9]. First, ruin tourism is perceived as a way of making money off the city’s difficulties without having any significant positive impact in return. It does not benefit residents of visited neighborhoods when taking place within the frame of a photo tour: people get off the bus, explore and take pictures, then get back in the bus and drive away. Second, decontextualized aestheticization of ruins highlights the effect but not the causes of the city’s present situation (Tegtmeyer, 2015; Paddeu, 2016). In other words, it contributes to a reification of decay instead of questioning the conditions of its production and related social, racial, political and economical issues. During MCPW tour, Tess repeatedly expressed her enthusiasm toward esthetics of ruins with numerous “this is so cool” and “that’s a great shot”, seemingly not conscious of the painful socio-economic processes that produced such an urban landscape. When asked about how she thought residents could react to our taking a tour in their ruined daily environment (see Plate 5), she appeared confident about the fact that they would not care or would even be satisfied with people becoming aware of Detroit’s situation. This is obviously not the view of many Detroiter who regret an “exploitation of [their] city’s history” as a former municipal employee told us.

Plate 5 MCPW tour visitors in front of abandoned houses in Detroit’s West Side Source: Personal photography (2017)
temporarily consumed space, on the other hand. While modern ruins are meant by visitors to be visited and gazed upon for a short time, they are part of an everyday material and symbolic environment bound to a sense of loss, danger and marginalization for part of Detroit’s residents. One of our local interviewees underscores the conflict between different meanings and values attributed to modern ruins in Detroit: “the difference with Stonehenge for example is that memories are still connected to the place. People live here with what remains, they try to make it through. Tourists come then leave, but people here have to cope with it.” Contrasted uses and representations of ruined areas in Detroit express wider oppositions between insiders and outsiders, inhabitants and visitors at different scales[10], as well as socio-economic and racial lines of division. Ruin tourism therefore accounts for perpetuated inequalities in the production of urban space in Detroit, which past and current modalities have recently been analyzed by many scholars (see e.g. Dewar, 2006; Sugrue, 1996/2014; Dewar et al., 2015; and Kinney, 2016).

Modern ruins thus play a contrasted role in city’s imaginaries depending on the geographical context. While potentially contributing to Berlin’s attractiveness as an alternative destination, ruins remain a stigma in Detroit. This explains the different positions of institutional actors regarding ruin tourism in both cities. Beyond issues raised about the cities’ image, the practice also appears to be a fruitful object to address questions related to urban uses and representations and the tensions and conflicts they potentially contribute to fuel.

5. Conclusion

Urban tourism has been increasingly addressed within tourism studies in recent decades. Particularly noticeable are the contributions on the renewal of its forms in terms of practices and imaginaries as well as the spatial implications of these changes for cities all over the world. Development of a tourism “off the beaten track” leads to a diversification of tourism practices and spaces making way for alternative products. We argue that ruin tourism fits into these recent evolutions of urban tourism and contributes to building new cultures of urban tourism. As a practice developing in marginal urban spaces upon the base of urban exploration, ruin tourism questions the nature of alternative practices and spaces of urban tourism, as well as the ways in which it contributes to urban changes by appropriating new territories. It also appears as a fruitful research object to address urban spatialities of tourism. Fueled by wider urban dynamics as well as contributing to them, ruin tourism thus questions the production of urban space at a larger scale and opens perspectives requiring further investigation that we aim to address in-depth over the course of this ongoing research.

Notes


3. All participants’ names have been changed for anonymity reasons.

4. A related point is the profile of urbex and ruin tourism publics, which is very likely to constitute another point of divergence. However, although it is worth mentioning, we will not discuss this point in this paper as it has not been possible to collect sufficient and reliable data on ruin tourists’ profiles during the fieldworks completed thus far.


7. Name has been changed for anonymity reasons.

9. See, for example, Stamm (2013), Abbey-Lambertz (2013) and Stamm (2014).

10. It would be simplistic to oppose Detroit to the rest of the country. Differences also operate at a finer scale, between the municipality of Detroit and the suburbs within Metro Detroit but also between different areas of the municipality itself.

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Further reading


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