Identity and Ruins: Personal Integration and Urban Disintegration Understood Through a Touristic Lens

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Introduction

In the 1970s, scholars of the (natural and built) environment tended to explore the deep connections between personal identity and the landscape, defined as "the arrangement in physical space of artefacts and activity,"[1] with reference to relatively stable and traditional phenomena such as family, religion, and social structures. While it was acknowledged that humans engage in relational processes with their environment(s) and that individual and social identity can alter as a result of changes in the physical setting in which it was acted out, the normative dimensions of human interactions with spaces and the consensus meanings associated with what James S. Duncan, Jr called "very public landscapes" received disproportionate attention.[2] This contrasted sharply with the radical approach adopted by scholars of tourism in the very same decade. For example, Dean MacCannell deconstructed the physical environments that tourists interacted with in terms of artificially constructed "attractions" and "staged authenticity,"[3] and Erik Cohen connected tourism to religious journeys and pilgrimage through his development of a five-dimension typology of 'tourist experiences,' which distinguished tourists in terms of their relationship with a 'centre.' Fascinatingly, Cohen's typology turned on the degree to which personal identity was determined by adherence to a centre, and the issue of whether that centre was the centre of the tourist's own society, and the extent to which "modern man … [is] normally a conformist."[4] These pioneering observations of MacCannell and Cohen have grown in relevance as the social sciences have strongly asserted the primacy of the self in Western late

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[1] James S. Duncan, Jr, 'Landscape and the Communication of Social Identity,' in *The Mutual Interaction of People and Their Built Environment*, ed. Amos Rapaport (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1976), p. 391.

[2] Duncan, Jr, 'Landscape and the Communication of Social Identity,' p. 396.

[3] Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999[1976]).

[4] Erik Cohen, 'A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,' *Sociology*, vol. 13 (1979), p. 181.

modernity, and the decline of traditional institutions as authorities for personal identity, religion, spirituality, and as sources from which the self is constructed.

This article explores the affect that travelling to and being among urban ruins had on gay male experience and identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century city. Along with other places on the margins of regulated space, urban ruins operate as points of transition, passages from Enlightenment rationality to Romantic myth, portals revealing the magic that exists at the interstices of ordered space. In this article, we suggest that the affective and sensual feelings and memories conjured up by ruins acted as a catalyst for the creation of alternative ways of being for gay men that contrasted with the constrained ways of being that prevailed across a majority of the ordered, everyday spaces of the late twentieth century Western city. Thus journeying into ruined spaces became a type of secular pilgrimage, where 'pilgrimage' is understood in Justine Digance's terms as a journey "redolent with meaning" for the individual,[5] who undertakes it to experience transformation. According to Victor Turner, pilgrimage is best understood as a rite of passage, in which the pilgrim separates from his or her community and enters a liminoid phase in which there is the experience of sacredness and of *communitas*, a special camaraderie that is felt among groups of pilgrims.[6] Upon re-integration into the community, the pilgrim (like the initiate) manifests a changed status due to the ritual process. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, religiosity and spirituality have been de-coupled from religious institutions, just as sexuality has been liberated from the imposed order of socially-assumed heteronormativity, and ritual has become individualised and focused on the achievement of an authentic self, through activities which may include sport, shopping, and participation in dance and musical subcultures, among other phenomena. Thus, it is asserted that journeying to urban ruins constitutes a relationship with an alternative 'centre,' and that Cohen's phenomenological classification of tourists can be used as a lens through which to analyse such sexual 'pilgrims.'

In this deregulated and secular context, the actualisation of the sexual self can be understood as a religio-spiritual quest; a vital element of which is

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[5] Justine Digance, 'Religious and Secular Pilgrimage: Journeys Redolent with Meaning,' in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, eds Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 46.

[6] Victor Turner, 'The Centre Out There: Pilgrim's Goal,' *History of Religions*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1972), pp. 191-192.

ritual and the transformation resulting from it.[7] This radical re-thinking of religion and the spiritual is the result of three interrelated processes that have affected Western cultures from the mid-nineteenth century onward. These are: secularisation, the shift from communalism to individualism, and the emergence and ultimate dominance of consumer capitalism.[8] These processes altered the religious context of the West by creating a marketplace where adherence or non-adherence depends on personal taste and inclination (rather than on family or community allegiance), where the self is the locus of meaning and authority, and where consumption of products and experiences is a prime site of both identity-formation and meaning-making. This article focuses on: the ways in which sexuality has been intricately interwoven into the processes of modern urbanisation; the ways in which gay men utilised real decaying urban ruins as a means of enabling and affirming anti-normative identities and sexual practices; and how gay men utilise and negotiate material ruins within their own culture. Erik Cohen's five-part typology of touristic modes, and Dean MacCannell's reflections on travel and authenticity, are utilised to interpret the subject matter. The case study data includes autobiographical essays of gay men's accounts of their experiences among ruined urban districts of New York,[9] archival research of the planning, regulatory and social history of New York, and semi-structured, conversational interviews with gay men and urban planners conducted in late 2006.[10]

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[7] Jason Prior and Carole M. Cusack, 'Ritual, Liminality and Transformation: Secular Spirituality in Sydney's Gay Bathhouses,' *Australian Geographer*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2008), pp. 271-281.

[8] Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 10-26.

[9] For decaying industrial sites and neighbourhoods in New York, see Andrew Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' in *The Christopher Street Reader*, eds Michael Denney, Charles Ortleb, and Thomas Steele (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1983), pp. 67-74.

[10] The interviews for New York were conducted via email and telephone. See *Interview with Kevin Valentine* (pseud.) (New York: 10 November, 2006); *Interview with Daan Bian* (pseud.) (New York: 15 November, 2006); *Interview with Todd Neal* (pseud.) (New York: 10 November, 2006); *Interview with Ronald O'Byrne* (pseud.) (New York: 12 November, 2006); *Interview with Stephen O'Dougherty* (New York: 20 November, 2006); *Interview with Paul Ralston* (pseud.) (New York: 21 November, 2006); *Interview with Kelly Teesdale* (pseud.) (New York: 22 November, 2006); *Interview with Jacob Moore* (pseud.) (New York: 24 November, 2006); *Interview with Madison Lopez* (pseud.) (New York: 24 November, 2006); *Interview with Daniel Martinez* (pseud.) (New York: 23 November, 2006); *Interview with Ethan Walker* (pseud.) (New York: 14 November, 2006); *Interview with Ragna Kau* (pseud.) (New York: 12 November, 2006); and *Interview with Brian Perez* (pseud.) (New York: 12 November, 2006).

Urban Planning and Heteronormative Sexuality

Over the last few decades a broad literature has emerged which explores how heterosexual identification is normative in contemporary Western societies, while gay sexualities are non-normative.[11] This literature also analyses how this binary has been mapped onto material urban spaces, creating normative ways to imagine and experience everyday spaces in the city.[12] Michel Foucault, amongst others, has provided us with critical insights into how heteronormativity has operated as an important tool within the ordering of the spaces of modern Western capitalist society and the city. Foucault noted that a "great [secular] sexual sermon" that privileged a particular heteronormative structure made a "forceful entry" into every corner of the modern city.[13] The design of neighbourhoods, homes, workplaces, commercial and leisure spaces, all reflected this. They both presumed and reproduced, among other things, a heterosexualised exchange of physical, emotional, and material values.[14] Through these analyses of the city, scholars have drawn attention to the way in which sexuality has been intricately interwoven into the processes of urbanisation.

What is apparent about this plethora of scholarly work is that the majority focuses on what might be called the everyday lived space of the city; generally well-ordered, clean spaces with particular purposes and usages, ranging from the home, the office, the factory, the bar and restaurant, among others. These are spaces which create a certain spatial homogeneity within the city, which is maintained through regular daily activity, routines and habits, and by a raft of regulatory regimes, including policing, planning regulations and zoning, all of which are underpinned by sexual normativity. These spaces are generally understood to be natural and inevitable, without origin or future

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[11] Gail Hawkes and John Scott, 'Sex and Society,' in *Perspectives in Human Sexuality*, eds Gail Hawkes and John Scott (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 3-20; Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1997); Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

[12] Gill Valentine, '(Hetero)sexing Space: Lesbian Perceptions and Experiences of Everyday Spaces,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 11 (1993), pp. 395-413; David Bell and Gill Valentine (eds), *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 99-113.

[13] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London and New York: Penguin Group, 1990), pp. 7, 41.

[14] Lawrence Knopp, 'Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis,' in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, eds David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 149-161.

direction. The chief characteristic of everyday life is recurrence,[15] a recurrence that is supported by both bureaucratic systems (planning and policing), and economic systems. To order and maintain these everyday lived spaces, both individuals and bureaucracies make and enforce decisions about what objects and buildings are obsolete or waste.[16] As buildings or places fall into ruination, they become sites of occupation and colonisation that avoid many, but not all, of the regulatory processes of ordered territorialisation that occur within everyday lived spaces.

Some decried these spaces in ruination for the disorder they represent in the city. Here we argue that for others – gay men – these spaces in the process of ruination offered a counterpoint to the way everyday order and consumption held sway over the city. Urban ruins are testimony to the fact that the modern city can never be a seamlessly regulated realm. Walter Benjamin has noted that it is at the point of ruination of everyday living spaces that we become most aware of the way in which these spaces have been caught within particular collective dreams, some greyer than others, that have been imposed from different angles through a strange mix of technology, routine, habit, regulation, and desire (or wish fulfilment).[17] John Tagg has observed that spectacular urban regimes "are never coherent, exhaustive or closed in the ways they are fantasised as being."[18] Thus urban ruins offer room for spontaneous, creative appropriation and informal uses that would otherwise have trouble finding a place in the more ordered spaces of the city, and thus become an ideal place for a certain resistance to emerge, a place potentially open to alternative ways of experiencing the city, and by extension, the self.

It can be demonstrated that alternative groups forged urban networks of sociability and solidarity, and that they played a major role in transforming the urban landscape of cities through the creation of a growing material presence involving gay environs, institutions, festivals and parades, and monuments. Just as heteronormativity was coined to describe the way in which heterosexual norms underlie broader urban spaces, the notion of homonormativity has

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[15] Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: Allen, 1971), p. 18.

[16] See, for example, Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, 'Introduction: Cultural Economies of Waste,' in *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, eds Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (Lanham, MD: Rowen and Littlefield, 2003).

[17] Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999). See also D. Massey, 'Places and our Pasts,' *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 39 (1995), pp. 182-192.

[18] John Tagg, 'The City Which is Not One,' in *Re-presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st Century Metropolis*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 181.

recently gained wider usage to explain the way in which emerging gay urban terrains are becoming increasingly subject to norms.[19] It is here argued that in ruins, the transforming materiality, its deregulation and decay, provide a realm in which sexual performances are cajoled into unfamiliar enactions that coerce encounters with unfamiliar things and their affordances. As Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke assert, this sort of 'waste,' this rejected and neglected matter, "can touch the most visceral registers of the self – it can trigger responses and affects that remind us of the body's intensities and multiplicities,"[20] disturbing and intruding upon the controlled body. At first somewhat disturbing, this confrontation with the materiality of excess matter offers opportunities to engage sexually with the material world in a more playful, sensual fashion than is usually afforded in the clean and regulated context of much urban space, providing opportunities for sexual experience and experimentation.

Ruins also provide exemplary sites for memory when compared to other urban spaces that are designed to facilitate remembering (such as heritage sites, museums, monuments, and so on). In the late twentieth century a proliferation of inscriptions of queer remembering were manifest in Western cities through festivals, plaques, and monuments. Moreover, these sites served as venues for a range of collective enactments, ranging from countercultural celebrations and memorialisations of AIDS, to touristic rituals celebrating the history of gay cultures.[21] Yet ruins are different to these recognised gay spaces, in that decaying buildings extinguish and reveal successive histories as layers peel away and things fall out from their hiding places, creating a particularly dense and disorganised temporal collage. When considering the touristic attraction of ruins, MacCannell quotes Georg Simmel's contention that "archaeological ruins … reveal the contest between nature and culture, and [are] proof that the cultural object (the ruin) can resist the ravages of nature"; his own conclusion is that "the ruin is emblematic of all tourist attractions which are subject to physical and informational deterioration."[22] In contrast to the purified, 'dust free,' and smooth spatial order maintained within other parts of the city, ruins,

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[19] Lisa Duggan, 'The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,' in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 175-194.

[20] Hawkins and Muecke, 'Introduction: Cultural Economics of Waste,' p. xiv.

[21] Christopher Reed, 'Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment,' *Art Journal*, vol. 55, no. 4 (1996), pp. 64-67; Mark Graham, 'Follow the Yellow Brick Road: An Anthropological Outing in Queer Space,' *Ethnos*, vol. 63, no. 1 (1998), pp. 102-132; Kevin Markwell, 'Mardi Gras Tourism and the Construction of Sydney as an International Gay and Lesbian City,' *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, vol. 8, nos. 1-2 (2002), pp. 81-99.

[22] MacCannell, *The Tourist*, p. 116.

like other spaces on the disorderly urban margins, are haunted by the neglected, disposed of, and the repressed, which threaten to emerge from these secluded places to haunt the select organisation of the memorable and the normative in the more regulated spaces of the city.[23]

The Affordance of Ruins

The focus of this article is a case study of the experiences of gay men within derelict neighbourhoods and rotting piers in the Lower West and Lower East sides of Manhattan during the 1970s and 1980s. This case study builds on the three themes prefaced above: the potential that ruins provide in relation to more ordered and regulated urban spaces; the way in which confrontation with their materiality promotes possibilities that are distinct from the more regulated and streamlined everyday spaces of the city; and the way in which their blurred boundaries and excess matter allows memory to exist in multiple, vague, and more imaginative senses. The experiences discussed are drawn from a range of data including an autobiographical narrative and a series of in-depth interviews. We briefly examine the planning and regulatory zoning framework of New York, and make reference to this framework in combination with broader economic and social processes that led to the emergence of these derelict neighbourhoods. This is followed by a discussion of how these 'ruins' temporarily provided opportunities for a form of gay 'being' in the late twentieth century, a 'type' of gay subjectivity haunted and threatened by the prospects of gentrification. To conclude, the implications of travelling to derelict districts, in terms of sexual and spiritual pilgrimage, and the transformative effect of urban disintegration on personal integration, are evaluated.

In 1927, Edward H. H. Simmons, the President of the New York Stock Exchange, noted that New York, to the newcomer "arriving by ocean liner," was one of the most impressive sights that had "ever been created solely by the industry and imagination of man," which gave the observer from a distance "the impression of possessing some inner unity and consistency." Yet he noted that when they came to "tread the crowded streets of the metropolis, this unity of New York City constantly eluded [them]."[24] The 1916 zoning of New York

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[23] David Sibley, 'Purification of Space,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 6 (1988), pp. 409-421; John Law, *Organising Modernity: Social Order and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[24] Edward H. H. Simmons, quoted in Keith D. Revell, *Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898-1938* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 1.

ushered in the building boom of the 1920s, and established the physical characteristics of most neighbourhoods, including the familiar uniform streetscape of Broadway, Central Park West, Park Avenue, Ocean Parkways, and the grand Concourse. At this time, faith in the practice of urban planning was widespread. For example, researchers such as Robert Murray Haig thought it possible that planners could one day specify exactly "where things belong" in the vast metropolitan region, utilising a "scientific basis for zoning" for the good of all.[25] At the same time that planners and urbanisation "looked down on their 'object' [the city with its block plan] … buildings and neighbourhoods from far above and afar," the city centre – Manhattan – began to lose residents, a process that would continue throughout the twentieth century spurred on by processes of suburbanisation, and the emergence of the post-industrial city.[26]

By the 1970s and 1980s the population of Manhattan had dramatically declined, leaving vast residential parts of the city derelict. Abandoned industrial buildings and deserted docks rendered the Lower West side a residential wasteland after the decline of industry in the second half of the twentieth century. In an attempt to facilitate 'healthier' neighbourhoods, the rezoning of 1961 created exclusive use districts. Whilst the old ordinance allowed a mix of uses within most areas, the new ordinance sought to separate residential districts from commercial and industrial areas.[27] This rezoning had the affect of compounding the state of decay within many parts of Manhattan. Whilst the planner looked from above, residents within the city began to unofficially convert these declining neighbourhoods and industrial buildings into residences. In contrast to the more gentrified parts of the city, these decaying neighbourhoods were noted for the way in which they attracted a broad range of people who were marginal to the economically prosperous and mainstream society of the time.

Photo-journalist and New York resident Allen Tannenbaum has argued that in the 1970s, Manhattan neighbourhoods south of Times Square, including Greenwich Village, the East Village, and the Lower East Side, "looked like European cities which had been bombed during World War Two." He noted that:

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[25] Robert Murray Haig, 'Towards an Understanding of the Metropolis, I,' *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 40 (1926), p. 182.

[26] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 182. See also Robert Murray Haig and Roswell C. McCrea, *Major Economic Factors in Metropolitan Growth and Arrangement* (New York: Regional Planning of New York and its Environs, 1927).

[27] See *The Zoning Game: How New York Takes Shape*, Pamphlet accompanying an Exhibition at The Urban Center, New York, 19 October–13 November, 1981. Presented by The Municipal Art Society of New York.

> [T]he area of loft buildings below Houston Street was called 'Hell's Hundred Acres' because of all the fires that occurred in these run-down buildings. The Washington Market, formerly the central food market for the city near the Hudson River, had moved to the South Bronx due to a government decision, and many of the loft buildings in what is now called Tribeca were also empty. The piers that once were the heart of New York City's maritime trade were falling apart. One day in 1973, a large section of the roadway of the elevated West Side Highway collapsed, rendering the entire structure useless. It would be hard to find a better example of the city's crumbling infrastructure.[28]

Many of the men interviewed commented that these ruined neighbourhoods offered acceptance to young homeless Chicanos and Puerto Ricans. Further, interviewees noted that the poor, recently arrived Hispanics and gay men seemed a world away from residents of other neighbourhoods;[29] those "arrondissements of gentility" such as Madison Avenue, Fifth Avenue, and Park Avenue, were filled with "nannies pushing strollers filled with fortunate heirs; adolescents in blazers, slacks, and topsiders, young men in rugby shirts, passed by."[30] Whilst many new immigrants were attracted to these crumbling neighbourhoods because of their financial status, all of the gay men interviewed observed that the attraction of these 'undesirable' parts of the city for gay men was a reflection more on their symbolic marginality rather than their financial marginality. Gay men at the time were symbolically marginal because much of their sexual practice was highly stigmatised, beyond the pale of respectability or acceptability, both ideologically marginal, and thought to be morally dubious and full of unmapped pitfalls.[31]

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[28] Allen Tannenbaum, 'New York in the '70s: A Remembrance,' *The Digital Journalist* (February, 2004), at http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0402/at_intro.html. Accessed 6/06/2012.

[29] *Interview with Valentine* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with Bian* (15 November, 2006); *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with O'Byrne* (12 November, 2006); *Interview with Ralston* (21 November, 2006); *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006); *Interview with Moore* (24 November, 2006); *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006); *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006); *Interview with Kau* (12 November, 2006); *Interview with Perez* (12 November, 2006).

[30] Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' p. 69. See also *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with O'Byrne* (12 November, 2006); *Interview with Ralston* (21 November, 2006); and *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006).

[31] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis: The Landmark History of Gay Life in America since World War II* (New York: Harvest Books, 1997); *Interview with Kau* (12 November, 2006); *Interview with Perez* (12 November, 2006).

Several of the gay men interviewed noted how derelict neighbourhoods provided their sexuality – which was oppressed within other parts of the city – with a degree of freedom that they were unable to comprehend or act on within more regulated districts.[32] Ruminating on the origin of this freedom, the interviewees explained that when these neighbourhoods decayed and industrial buildings were closed down and abandoned, they dropped out of the stabilising networks that maintained the everyday social order through the predictable and regular usage of space.[33] That is, they slipped from the social, spatial, and material order that limited potential for other usages, freeing them from their previously obvious meaning. These sites were abandoned by regulatory bodies as places of disorder and waste as these bodies refocused their attention on maintenance of the gentrified parts of the city. This left urban ruins under weak surveillance, allowing all types of marginal communities to emerge and take root. This sense of freedom, brought about through the reduction in functional determinacy and surveillance, was accentuated by the fact that the built forms themselves began to break down and fall into ruin, as they destabilised and entered into a state of under-determination. This freed urban ruins from their previous predictable and regular usage, and over time opened their materiality up to a rich potential for interpretation, reinterpretation, and reuse. As one interviewee noted: "These ruins, these slums, whilst not free of oppression, provided an escape, a strange sense of freedom the moment I entered it, and a potentiality that is not possible in other parts of the city."[34]

The interviewees who journeyed to these ruins during the 1970s and 1980s also recalled how the ruins provided them with a "weird magic,"[35] and

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[32] *Interview with Valentine* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with Perez* (12 November, 2006); *Interview with Bian* (15 November, 2006); *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with O'Byrne* (12 November, 2006); *Interview with Ralston* (21 November, 2006); *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006); *Interview with Moore* (24 November, 2006); *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006); *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006); *Interview with Kau* (12 November, 2006).

[33] Paul Chambers, 'Sacred Landscapes, Redundant Chapels and Carpet Warehouses: The Religious Heritage of South West Wales,' in *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual*, eds Elisabeth Arweck and William Keenan (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 21-31. Chambers intriguingly investigates an inversion of the process explored in this article. That is, we explore secular ruined districts that have become the site of religio-sexual and spiritual transformation, whereas Chambers studied how the retreat of institutional religion left a slew of "redundant church buildings," the fate of which has been "closure and dereliction," or secular uses, such as becoming a "carpet warehouse" (p. 24).

[34] *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006).

[35] *Interview with O'Byrne* (12 November, 2006).

contained a particular "romantic significance"[36] which manifested itself in their desire to experience "wild and uncontrolled sexuality."[37] As neighbourhoods fell into ruin, opened up to marginal groups, and were freed from the regulatory processes of the city, they created, as one interviewee recalled, an urban resurgence of "the wild" at the confluence of de-industrialisation and de-urbanisation. Andrew Holleran argues that urban wildernesses brought forth what the French term *nostalgie de la boue* – nostalgia for the mud – the romanticisation and desire for the primal being, in this case the desire for unfettered and uncontrolled primal pleasure.[38] This desire recalls Sigmund Freud's contention that the civilised have always longed to be uncivilised, and envied the great virtues that they attributed to such 'primitives.'[39]

Travel, Sexuality and Self-Transformation
This urban wilderness afforded gay men with a raw environment that could embody a "particular type of sexuality between men"[40] that many interviewees believed was not possible in the gentrified spaces of the city. As Andrew Holleran has opined, "one can hardly suck cock on Madison Avenue."[41] Another, who travelled regularly from the Upper East Side to ruined neighbourhoods in the Lower East side of Manhattan for sex, recalled:

> [W]hilst the sex was alluring in that it was adventurous and thrilling, it was primitive, violent, aggressive, brutal, and such uncontrolled sensuality. I was not able to have sex like this in the more gentrified past of the city … these gentrified urban environments did not afford this, they tended to repress or mask it.[42]

The ruins were, for urban gay men, a part of an axis between the extremely aestheticised and the extremely sleazy, seedy, and seamy; one that constituted their being and permeated through gay culture. This axis – which none of the gay men interviewed found easy to explain – balanced a desire for gentrified pleasures with a desire for primal pleasure, and was articulated through a range of references to ruins. Recalling their experience of urban ruins, interviewees explained how they "couldn't wait to wallow in the murky world of the ruins"[43] following a day in the office or a "night out at the theatre,"[44] and why

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[36] Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' p. 68.

[37] *Interview with Moore* (24 November, 2006).

[38] Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' pp. 67-74.

[39] Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

[40] *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006).

[41] Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' p. 69.

[42] *Interview with O'Byrne* (12 November, 2006).

[43] *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006).

"in the same day [they] wear ripped clothes and congregate in ruins for sex and also sit in a Wall Street office wearing Armani drinking a latte."[45]

In his groundbreaking analysis of tourists, Dean MacCannell posited that what they sought, above all else, was to experience *authenticity*. He argued that the regime of work in the post-industrial West resulted in alienation from the individual's everyday life. Concurrently, the leisure activity of travel allows alienated individuals "to enter into a quest for authentic experiences, perceptions and insights" which are unavailable in his or her profane life.[46] This implicitly coded travel and the experience of otherness as a tourist as sacred, as ritual practice that affords self-transformation, in the fashion of initiation ceremonies and other rites of passage in pre-modern societies. The applicability of this contention to the experiences of men interviewed for this research is clear; men who would "work day and night on their bodies in the gym, and then go looking for the most uncultured of bodies amongst the ruins ... trash ... bodies which haven't seen the inside of a gym,"[47] regarded their everyday existence, implicitly or explicitly, as inauthentic when confronted by the raw experiences to be had among the ruins. In the daylight world of employment in the visible public spaces of New York city, gay men in the 1970s and 1980s were often invisible, leading inauthentic lives in which they either openly 'passed for straight' or sought at least to evade attention to their sexuality and thus their 'real' or 'true' identities. To enter these ruined neighbourhoods was to accept the risks and dangers of immersion in a wilderness where social controls and safeguards were absent, but these concerns were unimportant when compared with the "relief when [they] had sex that had none of the sensitivity ... assur[ing] [them] of none of the safety which [they were] accustomed [outside of the ruins]."[48]

Yet the interpretation of the journey in to the ruins through these simple binary oppositions, of sacred and profane, authentic and inauthentic, true self and false self, is not the only insight that can be gained from tourism theory and the recognition of both travel and self-transformation as prime sites of contemporary spirituality or secular religion. Indeed, the notion of 'the journey' may appear problematic, in that the distances travelled are short, Manhattan being only 22.96 square miles in area. Distance alone, however, does not accord authenticity to a pilgrimage, or any significant journey. The

[44] *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006).
[45] *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006).
[46] MacCannell, *The Tourist*, p. 105.
[47] *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006).
[48] *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006); *Interview with O'Dougherty* (20 November, 2006).

gay men interviewed travelled from neighbourhoods of affluence and safety to neighbourhoods where "[p]imps, hookers, and drug dealers owned the night … Crime was rampant … parks were in decay, with litter and bare lawns … [frequented by] muggers and rapists."[49] These journeys, though short, were existentially challenging, fraught with personal danger and risk, as well as the promise of liberation. Erik Cohen, while recognising the importance of MacCannell's methodological approach to tourists, proposed that the fundamental issue for assessing the meaning of touristic journeying was "the degree to which [the traveller's] journey represents a 'quest for the centre,' and the nature of that centre."[50] He therefore developed a typology of tourist experience which posited five possible orientations to the 'centre': 1) the Recreational tourist is committed to his or her own culture as centre, and travel merely represents an enjoyable 'vacation' from that centre; 2) the Diversionary tourist is less committed to his or her own culture as centre, and travel is thus "the meaningless pleasure of a centre-less person"[51]; 3) the Experiential tourist is aware of his or her alienation and seeks to "recapture meaning by a vicarious, essentially aesthetic, experience of the authenticity of others"; 4) the Experimental tourist "is in 'search of himself [sic],' insofar as … he [sic] seeks to discover that form of life which elicits a resonance in himself [sic] … His [sic] is essentially a religious quest, but diffuse"; and 5) the Existential tourist is committed to an elective 'centre,' and may:

> …live in two worlds: the world of their everyday life, where they follow their practical pursuits, which for them is devoid of deeper meaning; and the world of their 'elective' centre, to which they will depart on periodical pilgrimage to derive spiritual sustenance … [T]he tourist travelling in the existential mode is phenomenologically analogous to a pilgrimage.[52]

Cohen concluded that existential tourists are in exile when they are not living in their elective centre. In equating existential tourism with pilgrimage and a religious quest, which is realised through finding one's true 'self' via experiences of authenticity, he anticipated the rise of studies of 'secular religiosity' and 'self spirituality' which transformed the study of religion and spirituality in the 1990s.[53]

We do not argue that all the gay men who engaged with their sexuality through risk and adventure in ruined and decaying areas of New York in the

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[49] Tannenbaum, 'New York in the 70s.'

[50] Cohen, 'A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,' p. 183.

[51] Cohen, 'A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,' p. 186.

[52] Cohen, 'A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,' p. 190.

[53] See N. J. Demerath III, 'The Varieties of Sacred Experience: Finding the Sacred in a Secular Grove,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2000), pp. 1-11.

1970s and 1980s were explicitly engaged with spirituality or regarded themselves as pilgrims. Rather, Cohen's typology sheds light on a range of possible motivations for such sexual journeying and risk-taking. For those in the Recreational and Diversionary modes, the ruins afforded sex that entertained and diverted, while their everyday lives were dominated by the alien system of the heteronormative West, its hygienic urban spaces and rigid gender role-prescriptions. The focus of this article is on those gay men who align with Cohen's Experiential, Experimental, and Existential touristic modes. This is because they exhibit greater awareness of the negative role that mainstream Western society as 'centre' played in their lives, and were drawn (in varying degrees of intensity) to the *communitas* of the periphery, the fellowship of alienated sexual pilgrims, seekers after pleasure, and the authentic self.

Conclusion

Given the centrality of this axis of pleasure to the very being of many of the gay men interviewed, it is not surprising that they felt a sense of personal loss as this urban wilderness was gradually absorbed through gentrification back into the everyday life of New York city towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Whilst for these gay men these spaces were an opportunity to experience a more primal spectrum of pleasures, for city planners these sites were only interstitial spaces; areas of blight that awaited urban regeneration. It was in the later 1970s and early 1980s that local government bodies, speared by the resurgence in city life, began to rezone. Whilst the ruins were absorbed back into the city and gradually disappeared, the desire to find environments that would afford and satisfy the spectrum of pleasure and sexual experience that constituted their authentic being did not. Andrew Holleran mused that:

> [i]f Westway is ever built, and the shoreline made pretty by city planners when the city is totally renovated, when gays have restored all the tenements, garden restaurants have sprouted on the lower East Side, and the meat packing district is given over entirely to boutiques and card shops – then we'll build an island in New York Harbour composed entirely of rotten piers, blocks of collapsed walls, and litter-strewn lots. Ruins become decor, nostalgia for the mud. We all want to escape … Would you ever have ended up in the ruins had you not been gay?[54]

Holleran's powerful lament here demonstrates that the yearning of gay men for spaces that were not everyday, brightly-lit, clean, and regulated was not

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[54] Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' p. 69.

frivolous, nor purely hedonistic. Rather, it was a fundamental desire for places where rites of passage could take place, and where authenticity could be experienced. He poetically prophesied that when the ruined neighbourhoods have disappeared, it would be necessary to re-create them, to make anew the space of possibilities, the place that affords their true being. For gay men, journeying to ruined neighbourhoods and derelict piers in New York afforded them the opportunity to develop their sexual identities and experiences in ways that were not possible in the more gentrified spaces of the city in which they also lived. They allowed them to expand their sexuality across a broader spectrum of experience, evocatively drawing them into a world in which their sexuality was amplified through its passage into 'sleaze,' a passage which men themselves were drawn to, sought to reconcile and integrate into their selves, and also sought to perpetuate.

This article has argued that gay men utilised the lack of regulation within ruined neighbourhoods and derelict piers in late 1970s and 1980s New York to afford themselves an opportunity to develop their sexual identities and experiences in ways that were not possible in the more gentrified spaces of the city and allowed them to expand their sexuality across a broader spectrum of experience. Ruins, we contend, afford certain possibilities for sexuality that are linked to their lack of performative and aesthetic regulation and to their untrammelled disorder. This consideration of the ritualistic quality of travelling to urban ruins to experience authenticity that was impossible in the regulated city provides a deeper understanding of the importance of ruins to the way in which gay men developed their identities, sexuality and communal and personal relations with each other in the later twentieth century. The application of MacCannell's and Cohen's theories of the tourist and of travel to the interview data permitted a more nuanced perspective on the way in which the decaying, abandoned, and transforming material world of ruins impacts upon gay men's sexuality, self-understanding, and being. The paradoxical truth is that journeying to environs characterised by physical disintegration resulted in experiences that impacted profoundly on the self-integration of the gay men who travelled as sexual pilgrims to the periphery in search of both the self and a viable 'centre' in which to be.