

Abandoned Spaces in the physical and online world

An essay about the differences and similarities of abandoned spaces in two different worlds

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Introduction

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Introduction

Thinking of abandoned spaces, almost everybody thinks of abandoned houses or mills. But abandoned spaces can evolve everywhere in any form. Like in the online world, or the world within the browser. The world wide web contains a lot of these abandoned spaces, they can be a bit hidden, searching them with a search-engine. These online abandoned spaces have lots of parallels with abandoned spaces in the physical world.

This essay will contain of three parts. The first part is about the abandoned spaces in the physical world. Where can you find them, why are they there and what is the esthetic beauty of such a space. The second part will be about the abandoned spaces in the online world, or the world within the browser. Where are the abandoned spaces in the browser? Why are they there and what do they look like. The third and last part contains the conclusion and at the same time the main part: the actual connections between the abandoned spaces in the different worlds.

Why a compassion between these spaces in two totally different worlds? Because of a fascination for abandoned spaces, I wanted to see if these spaces also exist inside of the online world, a world with a lot of parallels with the physical world. The beauty of these abandoned spaces was really a mystery to me.

Abandoned spaces in the physical world

What are these abandoned spaces, where can they be found and how do they look like?

Abandoned spaces in the physical exist everywhere in the world, it can be any form of building or construction. Some don't last long after being abandoned, some do. The ones that do are the most recognizable as abandoned spaces, because they really look like what is commonly known as an abandoned space. All through history abandoned spaces play a big part, for instance there are the ruins from the ancient Greek and from the Roman empire, the abandoned mills from the industrialization in the beginning of 1800 and people who are leaving their homes because of the financial crisis in 2009. All these spaces are still there waiting for a new function or family. Some of the spaces aren't abandoned for a long time, they get a new purpose or are demolished so a new building can take its place. Others are empty for a long time, being slowly demolished by time, nature and the weather. These spaces can be anything. Like the old mills in England, leftovers from the industrialization. Or Prypiat, in Ukraine, where the Chernobyl disaster took place. Or the ghost towns in the Midwest of the USA.

It also depends on the policy a government is having about property and ownership. In the Netherlands, for example, when a house is abandoned it can be squatted after a year of nobody doing anything about it. But this law is changing, so this will no longer be a solution to the vacancy of houses or commercial properties. Before the law change, the Netherlands didn't have a lot of abandoned spaces. Most of them were occupied by students, artists or small businesses. This also helped with the maintenance of these buildings.

In England the policy is a bit different, here you have the leftovers from the industrialization. In the beginning of the 19 century a lot of mills and houses for the workers around these mills were built. In this way whole new neighborhoods and towns were created. When the industrialization went on, these mills were soon out-dated and replaced by newer mills in the rest of Europe, or they moved to low wage countries. What was left were these mills, in a polluted area, where nobody wanted to live anymore of there was no work anymore. A similar thing happened in France, Germany (the Rur area) and Belgium.

Now, I will discuss a few of these area's in detail, starting with Prypiat.

Prypiat, Chernobyl.

Chernobyl¹ is considered as the worst nuclear accident in the history of the world. In 1986 one of the reactors of the nuclear power plant in Ukraine (which, by then still was a part of the Soviet Union) failed and released a lot of radioactivity following a massive power excursion. During a test, which went totally wrong this disaster took place.

Because Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union, and the political leaders in the Soviet Union wanted to keep a good face to the rest of the world, it took way too long before the news came out. The first foreign country to notice that a huge disaster happened was the USA, from the satellites from NASA. The people in Prypiat weren't informed either of the gravity of the disaster, and just went on with their lives. Not knowing that the whole town of Prypiat was contaminated with

1 <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/chernobyl/inf07.html> & Documentary <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/the-battle-of-chernobyl/>

radioactivity.

Prypiat was a model-town, built for people who worked in the nuclear power plant. People who lived there tell it was a great town, with lots of green and nice houses, a park and a forest. Prypiat had 50.000 inhabitants.

The day after the disaster a lot of busses came in to the town, and the people of Prypiat were told that they had to leave. The baggage that was allowed was limited to 3 days of clothes, and almost no personal stuff, because of the radiation. Everybody had to leave immediately.

The Soviets didn't give much information out to the world. For instance, information about how many people died, and why there were still people working in the other parts of the plant after the disaster. Right after the explosion, there were people cleaning the radioactivity on the roof, with no protection or anything. They all died from radioactivity poison.

The town of Prypiat was abandoned since that day, and nobody was allowed in anymore. For 25 years already there hasn't been anything done to the town. Nature is taking over, animals are living there, but the leftovers from the town and the disaster are still very present.

You can take tours to the town, only for a limited of time, because of the radiation. Going back, some people go to their old houses, and find photo's, schoolbooks and everything they left behind. One of the things you can notice is that the houses are very empty. Furniture, expensive clothes or art is gone. Stolen by people, who knew it was contaminated, and probably sold it again.

There also is an amusement-park, which never got the chance to open and now looks like it was worn down to its end. Everything is rusty, dirty, there is grass and moss growing everywhere.

This example of an abandoned city wasn't planned, and could not be foreseen. It was abandoned because of a major disaster, and can probably never be lived in again. In another fifty years from now, the decay has gone further, and the history of the city will no longer be visible.

Ghost Towns in the Midwest of America.

In the Great Plains of the USA, located in the Midwest, you can find a lot of abandoned towns, or almost abandoned towns². The Great Plains is one of the poorest areas of the USA, where many farmers live. Because of the climate, which is very dry, it is very hard to grow anything and do this year after year.

In the times of the colonists, when people started to emigrate to the USA, the poorest people came to the Great Plains. The land here was very cheap and the native Indians were very easy to bribe. The colonists soon discovered that this wasn't the easiest area to start a farm, the land was very infertile and the climate was very dry. Farming was very hard work and didn't bring up a lot. For three generations they managed to stay and keep their businesses rolling, but recently things changed. The new generation is not going to stay, they are moving to the big cities, where they can study and work. When their parents pass away, they do not claim their properties and leave them to be abandoned. This happens very often, so whole villages get abandoned. It is like a vicious circle; more people start to leave, so the grocery shop also leaves, after that so do the barber, pub and drugstore. After this only more people start to leave, because there is nothing left. When the oldest people die, they leave an empty town behind. The New York Times called this area the 'rural ghetto'. But the USA has more of these abandoned towns, for other reasons. For instance, there are the abandoned towns of the gold seekers, the towns that the inhabitants had to leave because of the dust bowl in the dirty thirties and some towns next to Route 66, which is no longer the main route from east to west.

Nobody claims these towns, and they are nobodies property anymore, so the USA lets them be. Similar towns can be found in England, Australia, Canada, Mexico, Germany and other mining countries.

Abandoned spaces in Europe.

Other reasons for abandonment can have to do with industrialization, the plague/other deceases, military bases that are no longer necessary or the Berlin wall.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_town#United_States & Alan Weisman, The World Without us, 2007

What are the esthetics, and what is fascinating about abandoned spaces?

Already in the late 18th century people were inspired and fascinated by abandoned spaces, or by letting nature go. This movement in art, philosophy and poetry was called Romanticism.

Romanticism was a reaction on the Renaissance, where they believed in a perfect world, where everything was based on mathematical laws and realism. In that time overcoming nature was a big part of the outdoor, and was an extension of their believes. In the Romanticism they let nature go, and ruins became a big part of the outdoor.

Romanticism³ was a reaction on the situation in the beginning of the century. It can be described as an everlasting amount of individual reactions on a continuously changing situation. The artists in this time believed in their inner light, and worked from this light. They painted/talked about the 'real' landscape. In these 'real' landscapes they showed a lot of ruins, rotten wood, old buildings and abandoned spaces. This could be where the fascination with the abandoned spaces, as we know it now, started.

Abandoned spaces do have something special about them⁴. One of the special things is that you can find several items that belonged to the former inhabitant, owner or function. Not knowing him or her, this can be quite interesting. It's a dark place, where you know you shouldn't be.

The decay also is special in itself. What does a building look like when there haven't been people inside it for 25 years? The things that happen with the wallpaper, the paint, the wood, the frame, the stuff inside will always be a mystery. This is because everytime it will be different. The climate, location, animal culture all have their impact on the decay. These outside factors can be different everytime, but it is not hard to see them as a building has been empty for say 20 years.

3 Hugh Honour & John Fleming, *Algemene Kunstgeschiedenis*, Elfde Druk, 2003, Chapter 15: Van Romantiek tot Realisme, p. 642-691

4 Alan Weisman, *The World Without us*, 2007

Abandoned spaces in the online world

What are these abandoned spaces, where can they be found and how do they look like?

The online world – or, the world within the browser - is different from the offline – the physical – world, and these are hard to map. The online world is very widespread and it exist of many little spaces, connected with each other through links and search engines. These spaces are the many websites the internet consists of nowadays.

Because of the dot-com boom⁵ in the late 90's, the internet grew exponentially. The dot-com bubble was a figurative bubble which grew from 1998 until in 2001 when it 'burst'. This bubble contained the new internet based companies, also known as the dot-coms. Companies discovered that when they made a website, a dot-com, their stock prices increased. Having said this, (nearly) every company had a website by 2001. The internet became more popular each day, and not only companies but also regular people were getting their own dot-com. Companies like Angelfire, Awardspace, Dot.tk and Freewebs were founded. Here you could design and fill in your own website. People made it into little internet companies, pages about their hobby, life, fan-pages, about their family. This was all in the times of web 1.0. The websites were very simple, sometimes with moving text or animated gifs, but nothing special. These pages could be linked to each other with regular url based linking. Some of these websites became very popular, some of them were only viewed by family or/and friends.

With the coming of web 2.0 and all its new functions and websites, for instance the social networks, user generated content and rich internet applications these web 1.0 websites became less and less popular. Not only the visitors of some websites left, but also the owners themselves. They went to social network sites, such as Facebook, or moved to a blog⁶. The old pages are left behind, almost nobody deletes an old page, certainly not when it's free.

Some of these pages can still be modified after the owner is gone, when they have a guest-book or comment page. Sometimes even only the guest-book remains of a website.

Nowadays the abandoned online space gets bigger every day, because so many people make blogs or profiles on pages. Which they do nothing with, or do just one thing with and then abandon it.

Websites can be abandoned for lots of reasons, here some other examples.

When a company goes bankrupt, and they have to close the whole thing down, the website can be abandoned. Many times the website just gets left behind, with a last notion that the company no longer exists. Like: <http://www.icesave.co.uk/>. These websites won't be there forever, most of the time when the domain name has to be paid again, and the company doesn't need it anymore, they'll stop. This also stands for companies who are sold to a bigger company or fusions between two companies.

Another reason you can call a website abandoned is when the owner dies. This sounds very harsh, but it happens. Alot of people have a profile page on any social network nowadays. When a person with a profile on , for example, Myspace dies, the page can become a place for friends to leave last memories or thoughts. On <http://www.mydeathspace.com/article-list.aspx> is a list of people who

⁵ James K. Galbraith and Travis Hale, Income Distribution and the Information Technology Bubble, 2004

⁶ Jakob Nielsen, Participation Inequality: Encouraging More Users to Contribute

died and had a Myspace profile. Here you can make an extra page with these memories or thoughts. These pages are still modified after the death of the owner.

The last abandoned website category I will discuss are the old versions of websites. Websites often get redesigned, because of web 2.0, or fashion problems. These old websites are still findable, sometimes with a different url or on a link on the new website. But they are almost always on the Internet Archive, with the Way Backmachine <http://www.archive.org/web/web.php> you can look up these old versions. Just type in the url you want to know anything about, and it gives you a time line and all old versions. These old versions can also be abandoned websites, although they aren't really online anymore.

In this essay I will focus on the first category I discussed, the websites where the owner is gone, but are still out there on-line and where you can sometimes still leave comments.

How do you recognize abandoned websites?

Abandoned websites are recognizable in a few simple, different ways. I will elaborate on a few of them.

Broken links.

Broken links can be defined by links to nowhere. Abandoned websites often redirect to other websites or places on their own page that no longer exist.

For example, take this band's website: <http://www.angelfire.com/punk3/mut/>. An abandoned website of a band. If you go to the link page, a new pop up window opens. Clicking on the other bands, none of them work. The other stuff has one working link, the one to: savannahunderground. This website is still in use. But on the main page of <http://www.angelfire.com/punk3/mut/> even their own picture page isn't working anymore. This is one way to see that a website is abandoned. Often websites have guest books. In the days of web 1.0 this was a very popular add-on to your website. But a lot of these websites are abandoned and the guest books were on free guest book hosting pages. Sometimes these hosting pages no longer exist, so a lot of guest books were transformed into broken links. What also happens is the other way around, namely, that the host of the website no longer exists, but the guest-book does still exist. So the only thing left from a website is a guest book.

Info from the page, header & pictures.

In a website there can be a lot of hidden information, for example in the page itself. Sometimes people say when the website was last updated, in this way you can easily see how long ago the owner updated the page. See for example: <http://www.angelfire.com/il/geocosmos/>, this page shows at the bottom that it was last updated on November 19, 2003. At the links, by means of a little message above the update, you can see when the other pages were updated. They were all updated between 2000 and 2003. Another funny thing is that the three links on the top left of the list are all broken links.

Info from the header is easy to access, but it is not always there. In web 1.0 a header is often an image or text about the website. In this header there could be a lot of information, this hidden information is called meta data.

This meta data can also be in pictures. For instance, when you take a photo with a digital camera, the camera saves information to the picture, which you can't see if you view the picture. But you can, for example with a right mouse click.

On <http://savanttools.com/exif.asp> you can enter a JPG-image link and see all the metadata that belongs to that picture.

This hidden information about when a website was last updated can, on HTML-pages only, be viewed in a browser. Just go to a website and paste the following code into the URL-bar: 'javascript:alert(document.lastModified)'. And a little popup window will tell you when the website was last updated.

Server updates.

Websites are always hosted on servers. These servers can be in someone's home, on a local server, or on a public server, such as angelfire, a free server. These servers contain software, distributed from different versions or companies. These servers have to be updated once in a while, so the hosting will continue to be correct. These updates can affect the design from a website. For instance, things can move around, or things can no longer work, like special features the host offered that were being used, but of which the code has been changed.

Others ways to recognize an abandoned website can be: they're hard to find, last updated at ..., dated design, location, broken pictures.

What are the esthetics, and what is fascinating about abandoned spaces?

The fascinating elements in abandoned websites are really in the broken things. The broken links, pictures that aren't working anymore, things that shift around because of the server updates or changes in the program. These are little things, and can always be seen right away. The subtlety of the problems that abandoned websites have to deal with is their real beauty.

The design of an abandoned website, has also a lot to do with the esthetics of abandoned websites. Most of the abandoned websites are a few years old and are really outdated in design. The fashion in design changes so fast lately, companies can and will make a different web site every other year if they want to stay "up to date". The abandoned websites, especially the ones from the web 1.0 times, are beautiful in their design. They are very recognizable for that time. The ones that people made themselves are most of the time very hard to read, and have absolutely no overview. They place links to one of their other pages everywhere they think is good, but not where you would expect them.

Another thing which contributes to the beauty of abandoned websites is that they are hidden, they are hard to find. So when you find one, the longer it has been abandoned the better.

Conclusion: A comparison between abandoned spaces in the physical and online world

Design & look in time.

In architecture it is easy to define trends in time. The trend to build houses was very different in 1900 than it is now. A lot of factors have had to do with this, like the need of bigger houses, or a separate room for every family member. But also the way in which the building is build changes, for instance, now bigger cranes and better tools and techniques are available. When you see an abandoned house or building, it can't be difficult to see in what time it was build and when the inhabitants left it.

Online this is not very different. The online trends in website designing shift much more often than the trends in architecture. The step from web 1.0 to web 2.0 has had very much to do with the trends in design of a website. Because in web 2.0 many more options were available, the design became much more 'flashy'. The animated gifs made place for really animations and the angelfire websites made place for profiles on Facebook and Linked-in. The result of this was that a lot of these web 1.0 websites were abandoned. They are the leftovers from the web 1.0 age, and they all look alike. The features, the colors and the order of things in these websites are the trends of the beginning of the internet age.

The design of abandoned spaces in the physical and the online world are comparable to each other because you can easily see what time the abandoned space was created in. When it was abandoned in both cases is not hard to find, you just have to dig for information. In the physical world this can be a diary, a calendar, or even food. In the online world these are the dates, metadata and guest books.

Content in time.

The content of an abandoned house will change in time. Because of decay; wood rots away, pictures slowly fade, windows break, animals come in and steal the food and make nests. These are some of the influences that change the content of an abandoned house. The content of an abandoned website can also change in time. Influences from outside can be: people who still comment on the website, for example in a guest book or comment on entries of an abandoned blog. Another way is when the server that hosts the website is updated with new software or different software is added. The way the website should work can change and elements that are on the website can move around or disappear.

Again these two are comparable to each other. But there are also a few differences. These differences have to do with the way the outside sources influence the abandoned spaces. In the physical world a house can totally disappear within 200 years. In the online world, when a server is maintained, a website can exist as long as browsers exist. But a difference between these two abandoned spaces is that a abandoned space in the physical world relies on the unpredictability of nature. This extreme form of unpredictability does not exist on the internet, there are a few forms of unpredictability, but these are more reliable on time changing and trends on the internet. Nature relies on more factors than just time, a few examples are climate, location, history of the space and the type of building it was when it was abandoned.

Physical abandoned spaces can be squatted, in Holland after a year of vacancy you can squat it and live there for a cheap price. This law excises to prevent that lots of houses and buildings end up

empty, decayed and abandoned. But the question arises if this kind of behavior, not set in laws, more yet in unwritten laws, exists on online abandoned spaces. It happens, not often, but sometimes blogs or websites get squatted. People search for popular URL's or blogs that are abandoned. These blogs or URL's are not updated anymore, but get a lot of visitors. The online squatters hack these pages, or just legally buy the URL, and put their content on the blog or URL.

Location, where do they exist

In the physical world it usually goes like this: when you find one abandoned space, like a house, it is guaranteed that you will find more in the area. Abandoned houses aren't abandoned for no reason. Many times it has to do with money or the economy, with as a result that whole communities have to leave their houses behind. Houses belong to a community, a town or city. Websites, on the other hand, stand alone. They can be linked to other websites, or can be a community itself. When you find an abandoned website, it is no guaranty for other abandoned websites. The online world has lots of similarities with the physical world, but it cannot be mapped the way you can map the physical world. Of course you can map the online world, but in many different ways. You can locate the servers, and map which websites are hosted where. Or you can map the links between them, you will go from website to website, but you can never map everything this way. Just because some websites are 'orphans', meaning that no websites are linked to this website and vice versa, they stand alone. Another way is to map the online world through a search engine like Google, with keywords and ratings. These three options for mapping the online world will give tremendous different maps. When mapping the physical world, different options of mapping are also possible. But the different options, like climate and population, do influence each-other. When a climate is unbearable to live in, the population will be very low.

The presence/absence of human beings.

An abandoned physical space arises when all human beings leave, the owner, the workers and the visitors. But at an online abandoned space not all human beings have to leave to create one. Only the owner has to leave, the owner can be multiple people in the form of owners. It actually means that the person(s) that update the website have to leave. An physical abandoned space can be recognized when you see the actual absence of human beings. Opposite to a online abandoned space where you can never know if you are the only one there, or if there are many other visitors. Because this abandoned space doesn't rely on the presence of users or visitors.

Finally.

Having researched and said this, my fascination for abandoned spaces has only grown, especially for the online abandoned spaces. These spaces are so well hidden, they aren't around like the physical abandoned spaces. Finding these spaces can be a journey in it self.

One question that rises from this essay is: what could happen in the future. Are these spaces taking over, there could be a point when the most internet space is abandoned. Or maybe when there will be something developed like web 3.0, will all the now so very popular web 2.0 be abandoned? Can this development have parallels with the abandoned spaces in the physical world. In 2025 2 out of 3 people will live in cities, so more and more houses outside of the cities will be abandoned. These could be nice comparisons in a few years of time.

Resources

Books:

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