

**Death of buildings in consumer culture: natural death, architectural murder and cultural rape**

## **Abstract**

We propose that focusing on the death of buildings has much to offer in terms of our understanding of consumer culture. The aim of this paper is to explore the death of buildings from the perspective of consumers who have an interest in exploring obsolete buildings. Drawing on an ethnographic study of urban exploration, we uncover consumer understandings of death and mortality. We make a number of contributions. First, we demonstrate how death terminology is appropriate to material culture. Second, we reveal how consumer fascination with derelict buildings opens up opportunities for otherwise suppressed thoughts and conversations about death. Third, we recognise the multidimensional nature of death and introduce the concept of cultural death in consumer culture.

**Keywords:** death, buildings, ethnography, consumer culture, urban exploration

# **Death of buildings in consumer culture: natural death, architectural murder and cultural rape**

## **Introduction**

*“Buildings are more like us than we realise. They can be born into wealth or poverty, enjoying every privilege or struggling to make ends meet. They have parents – gods, kings and emperors, governments, visionaries and madmen – as well as friends and enemies. They have duties and responsibilities. They can endure crises of faith and purpose. They can succeed or fail. They can live. And, sooner or later, they die”* (Crawford 2015).

This opening quotation is taken from the overleaf of Crawford’s (2015) *‘Fallen Glory’* which outlines the biographies of 20 lost buildings that have become part of our collective memory such as the Twin Towers, the Berlin Wall and the Tower of Babel. The stories of the death of these buildings not only have architectural significance but also open up cultural accounts of key moments in history. Following Crawford’s (2015) lead, we propose that focusing on the death of buildings also has much to offer in terms of our understanding of consumer culture.

The aim of this paper is therefore to explore the death of buildings from the perspective of consumers. We uncover these consumer understandings through an ethnographic study of urban exploration. Urban exploration involves the discovery and exploration of restricted and derelict buildings (Garrett 2011). These buildings are less iconic than those considered by Crawford (2015) but are nevertheless meaningful to urban explorers. Consumer research surrounding death tends to prioritise the death of people and focuses on issues such as bereavement (e.g. O’Donohoe 2015), possession disposition through gifting (e.g. Turley and O’Donohoe 2013) or death rituals (e.g. Hackley and Hackley

2016). By exploring death within an alternative context, we address the following research questions: What do consumers understand of death within material culture? How do derelict buildings shape consumers' understanding of death and mortality? How does the death of buildings inform our understanding of consumer culture?

Although waste is “an inevitable consequence of consumption” (De Coverly et al. 2008, 295) that occurs when objects fall into disuse and obsolescence, waste and disposal have attracted less research attention than other elements in the consumption process (Benton 2014; Parsons and Maclaran 2009). By considering derelict buildings through a death studies lens, we open up this field of enquiry and make a number of contributions. First, we demonstrate how death terminology is appropriate to material culture. Second, we reveal how consumer fascination with derelict buildings opens up opportunities for otherwise suppressed thoughts and conversations about death. Third, we recognise the multidimensional nature of death and introduce the concept of cultural death in consumer culture.

The article is organised as follows. First, we review relevant literature on the life and death of buildings. Next, we discuss derelict places as modern ruins of the recent past including an overview of urban exploration to better contextualise the study. We then detail the methods of data collection and analysis. Findings are organised around three central themes that emerged from our data: physical death for buildings and the process of dying, cultural death and its associated feelings of loss, and a good death for buildings. Finally, we discuss the contributions arising from our research for understanding death in consumer culture.

### **The life and death of buildings**

Appaduari (1986) asserts that objects have social lives as they move through biographies and experience changes in their commodity status. A once cherished object can move into disuse, towards waste and eventual disposal after the owner's death. Buildings may exhibit such biographies as they evolve over time, for example, Maclaran and Brown (2005) illustrate how refurbishment changed the meanings associated with a festival shopping mall. Hollis' (2009) aptly titled '*The Secret Lives of Buildings*' epitomises this perspective and is based on the premise that "buildings are designed to last, and therefore they outlast the insubstantial pageants that made them. Then, liberated from the shackles of immediate utility and the intentions of their masters, they are free to do as they will." This suggestion of the agency of buildings is also revealed in the vocabulary of architecture that brings buildings to life through bodily (e.g. building structures described as bones) and spiritual (e.g. the building's soul) metaphors (Cairns and Jacobs 2014).

The emerging debate on vital materialism has drawn attention to the vitality of objects as flows of materiality, and to the agentic powers of both human and non-human things (Bennett 2004). Consumer researchers have recognised the agency of objects, for example, Ming and Fitchett (2011) argue that modern day societies are characterised by death-fearing culture where the death-disposal of objects gives consumers anxiety. They conceptualise death objects as the possessions left behind or orphaned by the deceased and suggest that death objects have an agentic permanence and presence beyond the mortality of their owners. Similarly, Baker et al. (2016) demonstrate the sense of permanence and inalienability associated with bodily remains and a person's final resting place given the role this plays in the ongoing family story. Further Epp and Price (2010) demonstrate that valued objects threatened with displacement due to changes in family circumstances can be granted agency to be reincorporated and reengaged into networks of use. Arguably, buildings may have equal

agency with Crawford (2015, 3) contrasting the “epic” lives of buildings that can last for thousands of years against human’s limited lifespans.

The process of decay is fickle as different rates of decomposition completely erase materials whilst others remain (Edensor 2005b), creating a ‘temporal collage’ (Lynch 1972). Gregson, Watkins and Calestani (2010) illustrate that materials are animate and performative in the processes of disposal and recycling due to their ability to transform, morph and mutate into other states. The vitality of materials is most profound in the processes of decay where objects degrade and transform. This is reflected in Taussig’s (2003, 15-16) account of decay in bogs and swamps where life and death are suspended “between a miraculous preservation and an always there of immanent decay.” Decay disrupts the linearity of memory as it causes temporalities and materials to intersect, collide and merge through decomposition: “decaying buildings extinguish and reveal successive histories as layers peel away and things fall out from their hiding places” (Edensor 2005b, 834).

### **Derelict buildings: modern ruins of the recent past**

Since the rise to popularity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century ruins have historically been admired for their sublime grandeur and wild desolation (Shanks 2014). Throughout history ruins have been understood as signifying displacements of time, space and being. Indeed Simmel (1959, 265) considers the ruin as a remnant of past life and a signifier of death in describing it as “the site of life from which life has departed...the present form of past life.” Diderot described his experience of walking amongst ruins as being “between two eternities” (1995 [1767], 196). For Augé (2003) this demonstrates the ruin’s capacity to disturb linear notions of time. Benjamin (1999) furthers this notion of disjuncture by suggesting that ruins have the potential to exist as a dialectical image that haunts the present with an abandoned future. This relates to Derrida’s (1994) notion of hauntology as an alternative ontology that displaces the

importance of being and presence by drawing attention to the ‘specter’, that is neither present, absent, dead or alive (Laclau 1995). Derrida (1994) considers the endurance of certain historical events and notions as examples of hauntology, whereby revenants from the past are stuck in a continuous limbo of being and non-being, never fully coming into fruition in the present day. Relating this to understandings of consumption, Edensor (2005c) posits that ruins exist in a state of indeterminacy, jointly absent and present in a state of ‘unfinished disposal’ (Degen and Hetherington 2001), in limbo between rejection and obliteration.

Contemporary understandings of ruins are ambiguous and contested (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014). This has been furthered by the variety of ruin terminology; authentic ruin (Huysen 2010), romantic ruin (Ashurst 2007), heritage ruin (Pétursdóttir 2012), industrial ruin (Edensor 2005a), and modern ruin (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014). Modern ruins of the recent past are rarely granted the same fascination, admiration or protection by heritage agencies because of their historical immaturity and rotting state they are “caught up somewhere between disposal and history” (Pétursdóttir 2012, 33). For Apel (2015) the appeal of historical ruins is rooted in Romanticism whereas the contemporary fascination with modern ruins is driven by anxiety of capitalism. Following the product life cycle, once buildings have lost their functional use, they subsequently lose value and become considered as waste (Edensor 2005c). In contrast, the heritage ruin is a disciplined, sanitised and purified space that is devoid of natural and modern intrusions (Edensor 2005a). Despite this terminological diaspora ruins are generally viewed as outcomes of destruction (Stoler 2008), societal or architectural failure (Crawford 2015), costs of consumerism (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014) and the consequences of capitalism (Edensor 2005a). This is most evident in North American cities where economic instability, deindustrialisation, the collapse of Fordism and rise of neoliberalism (Apel, 2015) has created “a ruin landscape” (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014, 4983) that is littered with empty factories, derelict shopping malls, and

redundant mining towns. Detroit has become the focus of this social critique and Leary (2011) argues the cultural fascination with Detroit's ruins is a lament for 20<sup>th</sup> century history and culture, and a social anxiety about the future. Indeed urban studies highlight the creative destruction of cityscapes as an inevitable outcome of capitalism, such as Manhattan slum clearances (Page 2001), Les Halles' marketplace destruction (Wakeman 2007) and Singapore's waterfront regeneration (Chang and Huang 2005) which represent intentional reconstructions of social history, collective memory and a silencing of local memory. In addition to physical, social and symbolic losses, Apel (2015) and Leary (2011) critique ruinophilia for romanticising serious social problems and economic failure that demoralises residents and sensationalises austerity and poverty.

Whilst much literature points to the negativity of ruins as failure and false progression, the rise of ruinophilia, ruin porn and urban exploration imagery has rekindled the 18<sup>th</sup> century cultural fascination with desolation and ruination. Indeed the increasing allure or *schadenfreude* of societal misfortune shares some common ground with dark tourism. Lennon and Foley (2000) define dark tourism as any tourist experience associated with death and distress. Locations of dark tourism include war museums and memorials (Stone and Sharpley 2008), battle sites (Strange and Kempa 2003), locations of famous deaths (Alderman 2002; Rojek 1993), disasters and social atrocities, such as the World Trade Centre terrorist attack, and the Holocaust death camps (Beech 2000). Dark tourism has become increasingly commodified (Stone 2012) where sites are staged to create spectacular narratives. For example, Chronis, Arnould and Hampton (2012, 269) demonstrate how Gettysburg is staged as a place that is characterised by death, sacrifice, defeat and loss. As such, drawing on Godfrey and Lilley (2009), Gettysburg may become a regime of memory rather than a regime of truth.



Despite its historical origins (Seaton 1996; Edwards 2016), much research has suggested the growing fascination with death is a post-modern phenomenon (Muzaini, Teo and Yeoh 2007; Foley and Lennon 1996). Hartman (2014) attributes the recent rise in dark tourism to social and political turbulence whereas Ashworth and Isaac (2015) suggest it reflects a general rise in leisure and heritage and could be an outcome of increasing scholarship attention. Research suggest that consumers use dark tourism in various ways; to alleviate the impact of death and enable exposure to violence and taboo (Stone and Sharpley 2008; 2013), to learn about history (Biran, Poria and Oren 2011), to co-create and express a national identity (Tinson, Saren and Roth 2015), to simulate affective states (Podoshen 2013; Ashworth and Isaac 2015) and experience unmediated reality reflecting a cultural fascination with dystopia and disaster (Podoshen et al. 2015).

In contrast to places of dark tourism, urban exploration is the discovery and exploration of restricted and derelict places in the built environment that are not publicly accessible (Garrett 2011). This restriction distinguishes urban exploration from dark tourist activities that typically have permission-based access provided by tourist agencies. Like street artists that appropriate public space as a shared public good (Visconti et al. 2010), urban explorers do not own these place but rather they engage in recreational trespass (Garrett 2013). Urban exploration involves complex practices of researching place histories, discovering access to sites and the physical exploration of urban relics. Urban explorers also act as archivists by textually and photographically documenting the history and decay of these often forgotten urban places which they share with global online community forums.

The late urban explorer Jeff Chapman (aka Ninjalicious) documented the growth of the subculture of urban exploration and traces its roots from Philibert Aspaire's exploration of the Parisian catacombs in 1793 through to the San Francisco Suicide Club and the Cave Clan (Ninjalicious, 2005). This has renewed the alternative aesthetic appreciation of decay which

has appeared in a number of art exhibitions such as Tate Britain's 'Ruin Lust' in 2014 that displayed traditional to present-day ruin art, and the Resistance Gallery's 2010 exhibition of 'Beauty in Decay' that featured urban explorer photography.

## **Method**

Our findings are based upon a multi-method ethnography that utilises a variety of techniques including ethnographic interviewing, netnography, observant participation, fieldnotes, photography, and researcher diary. This range of collection techniques allowed the researchers to gain a holistic understanding of the practices and experience of urban exploration. Initially the first author became embedded within the online context of urban exploration through a one-year netnography of both discussion forums and personal webpages that were identified as "relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, data-rich, and experientially satisfying" (Kozinets 2015, 175). This involved following specific discussion threads and regular monitoring of personal websites and social networking pages for textual and visual reports of explorations. Importantly, the netnography also facilitated contact with urban explorers who were invited to participate in an interview. Our findings within this paper primarily draw on interview data. However, the netnography and other ethnographic materials contribute to our understanding and interpretation of the interview texts.

Ethnographic interviewing seeks to gain richer understanding of consumers' experiences by locating the interview process within the consumption context (Heyl 2008; Holt 1997) by means of a friendly conversation (Spradley 1979). Where possible, interviews were conducted at site locations. This face-to-face visualisation was important to build rapport, but also to allow the use of auto-driven photo elicitation (Heisley and Levy 1990), where the participants displayed and discussed their own exploration photographs during the

interview. Given the geographical spread of our sample, some interviews were conducted over video-calling.

**Table 1: Participant Details**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Josh	38	Male	UK	Artisan bike designer
Abby	23	Female	Germany	Postgraduate student
Matt	25	Male	UK	Postgraduate student
Sam	27	Female	UK	Travel writer
Pete	30s	Male	UK	Government worker
Andy	21	Male	UK	Sportsperson
Connor	25	Male	UK	Computer technician
Mila	30s	Female	Germany	Freelance writer
Rory	30s	Male	UK	Professional photographer
Simon	30s	Male	UK	Mental health practitioner
Hannah	22	Female	Germany	Undergraduate student
William	52	Male	UK	Disability support worker
Euan	40	Male	UK	Freelance building surveyor
Liam	38	Male	UK	Manufacturing technician
Nick	33	Male	UK	Events manager
Lydia	50	Female	UK	Magistrate
Ariel	29	Female	UK	Historian writer
Paul	40	Male	UK	Professional photographer
Luke	32	Male	UK	Mechanical engineer
Nate	26	Male	United States	Advertising producer
Seb	26	Male	Italy	Professional Photographer
Ross	38	Male	UK	IT technician
Rob	Late 40s	Male	UK	Business executive
Lexi	32	Female	Germany	Professional photographer
Max	40	Male	Netherlands	Sales Manager
Aaron	36	Male	Canada	Sales executive
Tom	40	Male	Canada	Advertising executive
Jack	35	Male	UK	Self-employed contract cleaner

Twenty-eight experienced urban explorers were interviewed (see Table 1). Interviews followed a semi-structured approach covering broad topic areas such as exploration practices and equipment, attachment to places of urban exploration, documentation of explorations, and online community interactions. Interviews lasted between 90-120 minutes. As advocated by Holt (1997), emic terms created by the participant were probed to elicit deeper

understandings of their grounded meaning. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full, generating 630 pages of data. Data analysis followed an iterative process, allowing the researchers to move back and forth between emic terms and etic theorisation.

## **Findings**

We present our findings in relation to three key themes: an examination of the physical death and the process of dying for buildings, an exploration of cultural death and its associated feelings of loss, and finally a discussion of what constitutes a good death for buildings.

### ***The physical death of buildings and the process of dying***

Participants often associate the physical death of buildings with the intrusion of nature, which reclaims places through the processes of decay, water ingress and dry rot. Once nature, like a parasite or cancer, takes a hold of a building participants anticipate its physical death and like the family of the terminally ill begin to adjust to its demise, as Rob demonstrates:

Certainly the vines growing internally, and it doesn't take long, it doesn't take much. Unfortunately when nature does get into the buildings it doesn't take long for it to take over as well as destroy the building at the same time. So you feel a nervousness when you start seeing – depends on the level of nature in there – how long the place has got left. (Rob)

In an interdisciplinary analysis of mortality, Connolly (2011) considers the ruin as a representation of dying in material culture. Death can be sudden or expected, just or unjust, in-time or off-time (Carr 2012). Like people who die expectedly, justly or in-time following a long illness or in old age, buildings often experience a prolonged physical demise, slowly losing the characteristics and vitality which distinguished them in life.

While many participants felt that nature (as a living thing in its own right) was virtuous through its beauty, its intrusion into buildings was bittersweet since it simultaneously attacks the integrity of the building causing its physical death. Lorimer and Murray (2015, 60) term this as the ruin paradox whereby there are conflicting desires for the ruin to remain but also to be left to “Rot in Peace”. This ruin paradox is captured in Mila’s comments:

Yeah somehow you are sad about it but somehow you are happy that they have gotten in that state. It is a kind of contradiction so...yeah it is difficult. Somehow you are happy about these places, and you want them to stay there like that but they cannot stay in the same state because they will get more rotten and they will just fall apart one day which is also sad, but that is life, the circle of life. (Mila)

Crawford (2015) discusses how the intrusion of nature can be so extensive and complete that determining the presence or existence of the pre-existing building becomes difficult. Mila highlights that physical death in these circumstances, as in terminal illness is an inevitable end. Similar to Gregson et al. (2010), her discussion highlights the process of dying as a continuous change in material states that will result in the building physically disintegrating. Many other participants also associated this decaying process with dying where at one point the building will be physically gone. This is illustrated in Lydia’s acceptance of the impermanence of even the most epic buildings.

I think that moment in time when it is sort of decaying and beautiful is great but nothing lasts forever and there is always going to be that moment when we just have to let go of them. Sad though it is. But that is when you want people like me taking photos that we can look back on and just remind ourselves of just how stunning they were in their hey-day, or not even in hey-day, at that point when they were starting to fade away. (Lydia)

This acceptance of death was reflected amongst all participants. Seeing the building over time change and deteriorate may, like the family of those with chronic illness, allow the urban

explorer to experience a “quasi-widowhood” before the actual death occurs (Carr 2012, 191). In human death family members may become susceptible to “habituated grief” (Carr 2012, 191). While urban explorers do not experience the same intensity of loss as in human death, they do adjust or “habituate” as they witness the decline of the building. Indeed the activity of urban exploration appears to offer individuals an appreciation of the impermanence of life and inevitability of death.

Josh offers a further insight into the point of a building’s terminal demise and his pragmatism sets aside the sentimentally of saving buildings and considers the sheer cost and ability of contemporary society to save these dying buildings. In doing so, he reflects ongoing debates in historic preservation which suggest that preservation is only one part of urban planning (Ryberg-Webster and Kinahan 2014).

In some ways it is a pity because....you have to be pragmatic. These buildings, once they get to a certain stage, especially once the water starts getting into them, then saving them becomes incredibly expensive. Nobody in their right mind is really going to throw millions and millions of pounds in saving a really old building, when they could just demolish it.

(Josh)

Participants often stressed that each building has its own individual fate that is dependent on its particular physical condition, cultural importance or potential cost for redevelopment, as Crawford (2015, 388) suggests “survival alone does not equate with significance. Indeed sometimes it is a site’s very obscurity that explains its preservation.” However, such ruins may be considered as between life and death, like people who are “in a permanent vegetative state are irreversibly unconscious, yet they are not considered dead” (Truog and Miller 2014, 886) so these buildings retain a physical status which falls short of their ultimate death. In the medical discipline Bury (1982) terms this loss of healthy functioning as biological disruption whereby chronic illness causes individuals and their social networks to consider pain and

suffering as potential reality that changes everyday life experience. A building experiences biographic disruption once it has fallen into disuse and is left derelict.

For some such buildings urban explorers often wish for an end to their ‘suffering’. In common with human illness, treatment withdrawal is difficult and challenging for family members however it is rendered more straightforward when families perceive that it will end suffering (Coombs 2015). For buildings, participants talk about this terminal point coming when they can no longer realistically be saved. This is captured by Rory’s discussions of 1960s high-rise flats where he claims: “But yeah what can you do with these flats? It is too late for a lot of them, it is too late and it is too far gone.”

As such, we contend that the physical death of a building occurs once physical integrity of the structure rots, the cost to save it outstrips its apparent value and its condition is terminal in that there is no realistic chance of saviour. This reflects economic studies of historic preservation which suggest that cost-benefit analysis underpins decisions to preserve (Ryberg-Webster and Kinahan 2014). It remains difficult to determine the specific moment of a building’s death, however, urban explorers mourn yet accept the inevitability of the building’s ultimate demise when its physical integrity begins to erode. For urban explorers, physical death is also accompanied by cultural death.

### ***Experiencing loss at a building’s cultural death***

Although there is no universal perspective on what death entails, it is often associated with loss and grief. Urban explorers reflect on buildings that no longer exist in their original material form due to natural collapse, demolition or redevelopment with anger, grief and a sense of “melancholy” and “sadness” (Paul). As Crawford (2015, 3) discusses, “we care about buildings - sometimes more than we care about our fellow human beings.” For

participants these losses were most starkly felt when considering buildings beyond their materiality to reflect upon the various cultural demises they represent.

### *Cultural obsolescence*

In the consumption cycle a product enters the stages of disposal when it no longer has its original use or it has become obsolescent (Hetherington 2004). Participants recognise this movement in a building's use to disuse as the first cultural loss experienced in dying buildings; an inevitable force caused by social and cultural progression. So as Cairns and Jacobs (2014, 103) suggest these obsolete buildings become "in place but out of time." For Luke it is the progression of technology that has dealt the ultimate fate to many buildings as their original use becomes unnecessary in contemporary consumer culture:

It is a shame that they do decline but it is the way that it is going. It is like cinemas shutting down because of Netflix and things like that. You don't have to leave your house. I do think that the internet and things like that obviously, it has got a decline for everything. (Luke)

In reflecting on the demise of Whittingham Asylum in 2015, Luke acknowledges that the specificity of the original use of some buildings impedes their ability to be saved or regenerated, trapping them as relics of another time at odds with contemporary practicalities and sensibilities.

At one time it was the biggest asylum in Europe. I think there were like three and a half thousand patients. It is...it is...I'm trying to think of a word. It is, well I am going to say crazy that it is got to that state that they couldn't find a use of it but some things are hard to use...Inevitably some places have to go. [...] It is an absolutely massive site and they knocked it all down for 650 homes. (Luke)

Whilst Luke appreciates the physical and often social difficulty in altering the use of a building, his assertion that it was "crazy" an alternative use could not be found highlights his sense of astonishment that buildings cannot always be saved or transformed into a new use.



However, Luke's acceptance of the inevitable loss of buildings reflects Edensor's (2005b, 829) argument that ruins are a product of capitalism - "marginal sites which continue to litter the increasingly post-industrial cities of the West, now bypassed by the flows of money, energy, people, and traffic within which they were once enfolded." Further some of these sites (such as Whittingham Asylum) are so tied to their original use, which no longer fits with contemporary culture, that they cannot be exorcised of this past and repurposed. However, whilst many participants demonstrate acceptance they also experience feelings of deep sadness that this is the case.

That is when I get really sad when people can't be bothered to do that little bit of extra hard work to save something that the past has given us as a gift and instead they knock it down, or they leave it empty, or they put up something that has got no character about it and it will be pulled down again in another fifteen, twenty, thirty years' time anyway because its purpose has run out. (Ariel)

For Ariel, buildings are gifts from the past, imbued with meaning that should be cared for and cherished. Ariel's sadness is directed towards the loss of these historical gifts but also towards the continual shortening lifespans of buildings and accelerated cycles of loss that occur as buildings become more disposable once their purpose has run out.

### *Cultural places*

Buildings are often representative of particular episodes of cultural history (Crawford 2015; Edensor 2005b) and participants voice their sadness at this loss. This is visible in Ariel's comments on the planned demolition of Haslar Hospital, which was used to treat injured soldiers from HMS Victory during the battle of Waterloo.

Especially for somewhere that is historically important. Such as a place like Haslar Hospital, they are going to knock it down and build houses there. They are knocking down a massive piece of Britain's navel history. [...](Ariel)

Ariel's account of Haslar Hospital has historical importance as a site of collective memory. Other participants discuss the neglected mundane places in their local communities that do not share such spectacular historical importance but are nonetheless culturally and socially important. Luke gives the example of a local outdoor sea-water swimming pool. Now derelict, Luke considers this to be a loss of "so many memories of what it once was." This reflects the loss of individual memory and subjective recollections that anchor human experience (Chang and Huang, 2005). Whilst Ariel and Luke's accounts reflect different registers of memory, both are at risk of social amnesia and collective forgetting (Schwartz, 2009). The loss of these sites is mourned especially by participants because they sit in contrast to museums where cultural memory becomes fixed through sanitisation. These derelict buildings represent a loss of more complex and contrary voices which have potential to disrupt dominant ways of seeing and being (Edensor 2005b).

Similarly, Sam talks about the loss of local factories and mills in Oldham.

There is a mill in Oldham and it is a listed building. It is going to eventually get demolished. It is a shame because all that will end up happening is eventually it will get knocked down and they will build a set of homogenous flats there or just new-build houses and people will just forget that there was this big important building there. I mean look at it, it is obviously not as beautiful as that [points to the city halls], but that is the history of the city, of the town. (Sam)

For Sam, the loss of these industrial ruins has particular cultural importance to the local history of the region. Sam is further saddened at the thought that people will forget about these once culturally important places of work and community when they have been demolished and replaced by housing. Despite the lack of grandeur and spectacle, these buildings have been compared to cherished public buildings. Although the use of these places precedes participants' personal experiences, they still consider the demise of these buildings

as a personal loss to their cultural heritage. Drawing upon Hill and Cromatie's (2004) assertion that we are passively tethered to our past, Podoshen and Hunt (2009) demonstrate that consumers can be impacted by events that precede their lifetime due to cultural and ethnic ties through collective memory. As such, our participants' sense of cultural loss is embedded in the collective memory of the regions' past events.

### *Cultural skill*

Participants also mourned the loss of the architectural craftsmanship that is often found within these buildings. For many, disregard of such features represents a larger cultural trend of disposability, "throwaway society" (Paul) and "wasteful race" (Ross).

I think we live in a throwaway society nowadays. Buildings they are not like the grand architecture like it was back in the day. There is no woodwork and fancy architecture. It is just like all MDF and bricks. It is not what we used to have in the past. That is why I love it.

I love seeing that before it is gone. Once it is gone, it is gone. (Liam)

For Ross, even the redevelopment of a building can involve cultural loss if important architectural features are removed, covered up and erased from the building's fabric. This reflects Starn's (2002) discussion of how authenticity may be lost as preservation changes the nature of the buildings, creating a false authenticity or inauthentic truth:

I would rather they were used for absolutely anything to be honest, as long as they don't tear the heart out of the place by taking out all of the décor. Most of them unfortunately get changed into flats. It's like a lot of churches, there seems to be a bit of a fashion for people building up old churches and turning them into flats, apartments but then they hide all of the features behind plasterboard walls. All the stained glass would be covered up and it just lost the heart and soul of the building. (Ross)

More than cultural importance, Ross regards the decorative materials as the "heart and soul" of a building, and without them, as in the brain death of people, the building has lost its

“integrated functioning” and original character (Truog and Miller 2004, 886). Ross imbues human qualities to buildings that illustrate the connection he feels towards these often neglected relics.

Associated with the loss of these architectural features is the loss of the skills required to create them. This cultural death is particularly evident in Paul’s account where the finality of a building’s demise often means that the ornate interiors and skills to create them die with the buildings themselves.

These buildings that they are leaving to crumble are buildings that people had put so much effort, and time and money into. They are absolutely gorgeous you know. These are the buildings that mill owners used to build to show off how much money they had. They would put...they are so ornate and they just don’t make them like that anymore. I just think that we are losing that too quickly. We are losing it and nobody is trying to replicate it.

(Paul)

This concern was present throughout participants’ responses captured by Rob’s discussion of Victorian brickwork: “That craftsmanship is not about anymore.” As such, the loss of these buildings often represents a larger societal change where some skills are no longer necessary.

Rob elaborates on this premise:

We are just missing so many opportunities and a lot of these [buildings] are just falling into disrepair. The workmanship and the class of master shipbuilding is gone. We look at nowadays there are no apprentices for stone masonry and carpentry. You are just a joiner who makes something out of a piece of wood that has already been pre-fabricated, bricks are done on a kiln, they are not done out of a stone quarry. There is something there that has just been taken away and one day we will just lose it all. (Rob)

Rob highlights the generational legacy of craft work which has in some cases experienced a cultural death as it is no longer needed in modern buildings. The finality of his assertion that “one day we will just lose it all” demonstrates the severity and weight of this cultural loss as a

non-returnable end for many skills and crafts. Adding another layer to the notion of cultural death William highlights the “brutality” of cultural loss.

When I was a kid buildings never meant much to me. The world was a big dark place. But now looking at it in the clear light of day, all of these old Victorian places the craftsmanship that went into them was unbelievable. Another thing is the brutality of just dismissing them and getting rid of them for land is culturally quite bad for me now. I think these places could be saved. I think they could be kept in a way that we respect what they used to be.

Whereas they just keep the facings of them. That is taking the heart. (William)

Like Ross, William considers buildings to have a heart in their original use and material integrity. For William, neglecting, dismissing and destroying buildings is a brutal act on culture and evokes imagery of murder and mutilation. In this case cultural death has a sense of mistreatment and violence.

### ***A good death for buildings***

Once diagnosed with a terminal illness the notion of a good death (Aries 1974; Seale and van der Geest 2004) is viewed to be the preferable outcome. Much like a person, participants hold notions of good and bad deaths for buildings and reflect a preference for a peaceful death. In particular Simon draws on the notion of a natural death to discuss ruins where nature has taken control.

I think they should just be left as they were... Maybe someone will come to it who owns it, but until then just let it rest in peace I guess. [...] I would like for them to stay there and whatever happens to them happens to them through nature. If they end up blowing over and crumbling then that is what is meant to be. (Simon)

For Simon, letting buildings “rest in peace” means trusting in fate to deal “what is meant to be.” Even though Simon would like these places to remain he finds this natural demise easier

to accept, reflecting an aesthete's view of preservation (Starn 2002). Lydia offers similar sentiments in her discussion of the Maunsell Sea Forts:

If you take those sea forts out in the sea for example they are actually trying to raise money to turn it into a high-end hotel. So at the moment you have got this beautiful decaying lump of rust, which potentially in five years could be a very swish modern looking hotel. Whether it will happen is another matter because it will be a feat of engineering and it will take a huge amount of money. I have got mixed feeling about that. Personally I would like to see it fall into the sea and just die gracefully. Likewise I just think that some buildings are just so far gone we should almost just let them fade away. Restoration is a wonderful thing isn't it, if it is done beautifully and for good reasons. I like to see the buildings just left in peace to be honest. (Lydia)

Despite the potential for redevelopment Lydia would prefer a natural death for the Maunsell Sea Forts as she believes they are past the point of saving. Her sentiments of “die gracefully”, “fade away” and “rest in peace” offer an understanding of a good death for buildings. Nature is left to take its course, rejecting restorative treatments, such as sandblasting or underpinning which are likely to have little impact in the same way that the terminally ill often don't wish for intrusive resuscitative interventions (Miljković et al, 2015). This runs counter to Lorimer and Murray's (2015, 61) assertion that “[r]ot is a process that sits uneasily with the image of a peaceful end.” Instead a peaceful death for buildings allows nature to ravage the structures returning their once monumental stature into the earth.

In contrast to the good peaceful death from natural causes, participants understand a bad death or a “sad ending” (Jack) to be caused by human agency. Families who experience sudden, unjust or off-time deaths often find these more difficult to grieve (Carr 2009). Crawford (2015) reflects this in his discussion of the sudden, unjust and off-time destruction of the World Trade Centre and the ‘void’ left behind. Similarly, participants often cite metal thieves, vandals and owners to cause the majority of damage within derelict buildings.

Indeed, the strength of this feeling is captured in William's comments on demolition and arson by owners to illustrate the abuse that buildings experience before their demise.

There are other times that they deliberately get stuff set on fire. I find that dreadful because it is a cultural thing for me. They are burning my history. [...] The cultural aspect, to me the place has just been culturally raped. That is the way that it is. I have never known so many buildings getting pulled down and suspicious buildings going on fire. (William)

For William, arson is a cultural abuse akin to the violence and inhumanity of rape. His assertions viscerally illustrate the violent pillage and stripping away of history and heritage in cultural death. In an examination of images of catastrophe, Kaplan (2008) introduces the notion of witnessing whereby an individual is transformed by an image of trauma. In particular, we see evidence of witnessing in William's assertion that "they are burning my history" affirming this notion of witnessing a traumatic event that is felt by the individual as a personal loss or suffering. In her discussion of demolition Ariel expresses the horror and violence when people take control over physical death.

We have respect for the buildings and we have absolutely no respect for the people who have let them fall into the state of decay that they have fallen into, at least I don't anyway. [...] I called it architectural murder. In some respects depending on the state of the building it can also be architectural euthanasia but in a lot of cases a building can be saved (Ariel)

Compared with the peacefulness of the good death, Ariel's choice of "murder" highlights the physical brutality and violent end to some buildings' lives. However, she also suggests that human intervention with the inevitable fate of physical death through euthanasia can relieve suffering. In many respects this demonstrates consumers' empathy with the building. Whilst dark tourists experience empathetic grief with sites of death and macabre (Ashworth and Issacs, 2015), urban explorers experience empathetic grief with the neglect that buildings experience for their mundanity or unacknowledged industrial value. These buildings become metonyms of social activity, cultural significance and expressions of material culture that

have been lost through the physical deterioration of the building. Earlier comments saw participants humanising buildings by using words like “heart” and “soul”. This humanizing extends into understanding of a good death for a building as participants seek a peaceful and natural end to a building’s biography.

## **Conclusions**

This study deepens our understanding of death in consumer culture.. Consumers draw on the vocabulary of death throughout their accounts of urban exploration and reveal experiences of loss and grief associated with the physical and cultural decline of buildings. This extends previous consumer research which often focuses on the death of people. Given Kaplan’s (2008) suggestion that daily bombardment and proliferation of traumatic news images have created a culture of trauma, it is perhaps unsurprising that consumers extend the language of death into diverse contexts. An interdisciplinary body of theory has considered the agency and vitality of buildings in terms of their cultural, social and economic significance (Miles 2010; Maclaran and Brown 2005; Cairn and Jacobs 2015). Our findings contribute to this work by equally demonstrating the significance of the death of buildings.

Despite our findings revealing some similarities between human death and building death (e.g. the desire for a good death, feelings of grief), the divergences between the two are equally insightful. Interestingly, urban explorers generally have no prior relationship or attachment to the buildings before dereliction. Rather, they only come to know the building during the process of its physical dying. Unlike previous research on possession disposition which illustrates how divestment rituals associated with letting go can have a strong impact on the extended self (Hirschman, Ruvio and Belk 2012; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Roster 2014), urban explorers are not tied to buildings through ownership or personal affiliation. Their emotions towards derelict buildings are driven by broader societal and



cultural issues that go far beyond personal connections. From a theoretical perspective, this implies that obsolescence is not necessarily the end stage of consumer culture interactions, but can actually be the beginning of consumer fascination. Urban explorers are much more appreciative of desolate buildings than they are of those linked to urban vitality, a perspective that runs counter to a building's value being determined by capitalist interests. In their analysis of human-object relationships, Lanier et al. (2013) draw on the concepts of value and worth to illustrate how consumer assessments of an object's worth can transcend market value. For urban explorers, their interest in a building is not triggered when it is at the height of market value but rather when its market value has all but expired. At this point, the risk of the building's physical death brings its cultural worth to the fore. While Lanier et al. (2013) consider the relationship between value and worth within the context of more cherished possessions (children's toys as depicted in the Toy Story movies), we illustrate that a similar distinction may be relevant even for objects that are not part of the extended self. Consumer interest towards obsolete buildings cannot be explained in supply and demand terms as in limited edition products (Jang et al, 2015) or the market energy associated with the death of a celebrity (Radford and Bloch 2016). Indeed, such a value-oriented supply and demand perspective would overlook how it is worth (not value) that "gives life meaning" (Lanier et al. 2013, 37).

This may also extend our understanding of how material culture may be sustainably consumed. Connolly and Prothero (2003) critique the sustainability literature for being focussed upon recycling, where the unused becomes disposed and societal consumption patterns remain unchanged. Our findings show that material objects can be viewed differently by seeing worth in buildings beyond their primary economic purpose. Urban explorers counter the disposable nature of consumer culture, essentially extending useful life throughout the dying process.

We argue that consumers' fascination with derelict buildings can support their understanding of death and mortality more broadly. It is widely acknowledged that consumers do not like to think about or discuss death and refrain from consumer actions associated with planning for death (Levy 2015). A focus on the death of buildings allows for such otherwise suppressed thoughts and conversations to emerge. While contemplating one's own death or the death of loved ones may be accompanied by overpowering emotions, contemplation of the death of buildings provides the opportunity for acknowledging the impermanence of life and the inevitability of death. Kaplan (2008) conceptualises five degrees of trauma: (1) direct experience of trauma, (2) experiencing a relative in trauma, (3) the direct observation of trauma, (4) hearing the narrative of trauma and (5) mediated trauma such as viewing traumatic scenes in the media. For Stone (2012) dark tourism is a modern mediating institution that provides a social filter between life and death and is therefore akin to the least severe of Kaplan's degrees of trauma. Unlike dark tourism, the practices of urban exploration involve physical and haptic engagement with the materiality of decay in its unsanitised form. This closeness, more akin to Kaplan's (2008) direct observation of trauma, gives consumers greater ability to reflect on issues of death and mortality.

Death can be used "not as a physiological reality described metaphorically, but as itself a metaphor to describe other realities" as demonstrated by Walter (2014, 69) in relation to organisational death. Previous research has considered the distinction between physical death and social death for example, Sweeting and Gilhooly (1997) suggest that social death can precede physical death for dementia patients while Gabel (2016) distinguishes between physical death as an immediate end, and social death as an enduring process in an examination of online memorialisation practices. Our analysis of the death of buildings reveals cultural death to be equally worthy of exploration. As our findings demonstrate, the death of buildings has significance beyond physical and structural demise and is equally

important from a cultural perspective. Previous work has explored how buildings can regenerate public spaces, offer spaces for consumption and in turn, reinforce cultural vitality (Miles 2010). Thus, the life of buildings can signal cultural life. We consider the alternative perspective: the death of buildings can signal cultural death. In our context cultural death is manifest in three ways: (1) cultural obsolescence where derelict buildings are at odds with contemporary practicalities and sensibilities, (2) loss of cultural places where complex historical narratives become forgotten, (3) loss of cultural skills where the architectural features are erased alongside a non-returnable end for associated skills and crafts. Whilst social death reflects a loss of social identity, loss of social connectedness and losses associated with bodily degeneration (Králová 2015), cultural death reflects a loss of material culture evidenced in lost activities, places, skills and cultural objects. Although important buildings and ruins are memorialised (Pétursdóttir 2012), the loss of more mundane ruins means that the collective memory becomes narrow and alternative voices which may be equally important to consumer culture become lost. This cultural death brings losses that are as significant as those associated with physical death of buildings. Emically our participants link these losses to a throwaway society and critique its associated values. From an etic perspective this reinforces Cairns and Jacob's (2015) discussion of capitalism's impact on what is considered as culturally important. We theorise the concept of cultural death to be an important contribution because it supports our understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of death in consumer culture.

This study opens up a number of avenues for future research. In demonstrating the broad value of a death studies lens, we suggest that this could be applied to other material and non-human entities, such as objects, art forms, social movements and places. We further consider that future research on the concept of cultural death may open up hidden perspectives on losses within consumer culture.



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