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PEOPLE - the way we live

Deserted asylums attract the curious, the studios

Abandoned facilities fascinate thrill seekers and those searching for pieces of the past.

September 3, 2006 | By Gregory Brown

Jonathan Brothers once rushed up a set of stairs in an abandoned insane asylum only to burst into a room full of Reserve Officer [Training](#) Corps cadets practicing close-quarters combat fighting with raised M-16 rifles.

Such are the perils of a devout insane-asylum explorer.

For nearly three months, Brothers worked on his pet project. He scoured the [Internet](#) and historical databases. He crept into closed-off sanatoriums. He hopes eventually to complete a database of the major abandoned insane asylums in the United States.

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Abandoned insane asylums have attracted a following of [photographers](#) and explorers. Of particular interest are facilities built following the principles of Thomas Kirkbride, who in the 1840s pioneered the idea of self-contained sanitarium communities. He was responsible for the spires and sprawling stone compounds of facilities such as Danvers State Hospital, called the "castle on the hill," in Danvers, Mass.

"For some people, it's the deep and sometimes dark past surrounding these places," says Brothers, who maintains his [database](#) at asylumprojects.org. "Others hope to find something there, something of the past that they can connect to when the institution was open and running. Other people may have spent time there and want to go back."

Today, many of the stone mansions built to house the mentally ill or isolate those with diseases such as tuberculosis are vacant and decaying. Riddled with forgotten memories, they have become [home](#) to adventurers.

Some simply explore, thrilled by eluding law enforcement and shunning "no trespassing" warnings to discover a hidden nook or cranny. Others are photographers, hoping to catch glimpses of past pain on film. Some enthusiasts simply chronicle the facilities, compiling in-depth directories of the hundreds of abandoned asylums across the United States.

While explorers often mention a tangible sadness, a feeling of longing and loss that resonates from abandoned asylums, photographers delight in the little slips of life that still remain: a curling, fading list of patients on a floor; a twisted bed with the sheets still wrapped over the mattress; a patient recreation room with old jigsaw puzzles or rusted steel chairs.

Remnants of the past

Asylums began to fall vacant during the 1970s as new drugs helped the mentally ill function in society and as court decisions held that people could not be institutionalized against their will. Many patients moved to less-restrictive [treatment](#) facilities.

Shaun O'Boyle has a passion for architecture and industrial [photography](#). Among his favorite subjects are abandoned factories and mills, as well as the Buffalo Psychiatric Center, an abandoned asylum in Upstate New York.

"What makes me most interested in visiting these places is finding things left behind -- equipment, furniture, personal items -- these start telling a [story](#) about who the people were who lived here," O'Boyle says. "What looks like an old wreck from a distance can contain some beautiful and intimate

portraits when looked at carefully."

Although O'Boyle considers himself more of a [photographer](#) than an explorer, he still has challenges getting into sites. Trespassing is prohibited on most asylum grounds.

"For many urban explorers, the reason to be exploring is for the rush of being places you are not supposed to be, but when your main objective is to take photographs it's easier to be able to . . . do your work if you are there with the consent of the owner," O'Boyle says.

Part of our culture

Ellen Derry, a Web designer who lives in Crestview in Florida's Panhandle, has finished a project, "Tales of Eloise." Her site, talesofeloise.com, grew from her fascination with Eloise Insane Asylum in Detroit that once was one of the country's largest hospitals.

At its peak Eloise existed as a self-sufficient community, growing its own food, maintaining its own post office and handling all of its own laundry and other services. The facility was shuttered in the late 1970s, and most of its records were destroyed, leaving a level of mystery and intrigue unmatched by most other abandoned asylums.

Derry says that she often heard ghost [stories](#) about the mysterious network of tunnels that exist under Eloise.

"Whether people know it or not, these asylums have influenced the American culture," Brothers says.

"When I go to these places, I always think back and imagine all the emotions that went on there. I think of what the people went through as they were [patients](#) or workers at that hospital."

