

Digging up and digging down: Urban undergrounds

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Archaeology is the academic discipline most preoccupied with what is underneath us. It is also a field of study that until relatively recently has been predominated by work in non-urban areas. We are three urban scholars who harbour our own fixations with the underground. In fact, we have just compiled an edited collection that surveys 80 underground sites in every continent, including Antarctica (Dobraszczyk et al 2016). This process dovetailed unexpectedly with this call to consider whether we are indeed all archaeologists now. From the ruins of disused sewage systems to the churning of subterranean space by tunnel boring machines, we, like archaeologists, spend more time with our thought under street level than anywhere else. What we would like to suggest in this short paper is that the excavation of urban undergrounds, as a sort of reverse archaeology where the newest stratigraphy must always go further down, is feeding intellectual interest in underground spaces, which has been accelerating since the large-scale 19th-century excavations of cities like London and Paris. Our key argument is that excavation is not just an archaeological praxis, it is also the process that has led to layer-upon-layer of infrastructure crowding the underground, separating functions, often in the interest of circulation. Circulation is of course another disciplinary bridge we could build between geography and archaeology, trade and mobility being central to both disciplines.

Consider the construction of Crossrail in London as a point of crossover. One of the striking elements of the BBC series on the building of the ‘Fifteen Billion Pound Railway’ is not only the sheer diversity of challenges that engineers face and how they respond, but also the unique opportunities (and indeed challenges) that the project has opened to archaeologists who will soon shed new light on the period of the Black Death.¹ Similar connections might be drawn between the building of railways in Victorian London and the interest of figures such as Charles Roach Smith in recovering the domestic, mundane and fragmentary as part of London’s Roman ancestry.²

Figure 1: The Crossrail excavation under London, where archaeology and infrastructure intersect (photograph by Theo Kindynis)

We seek here to forge links between urban, industrial and contemporary archaeology and the broad range of themes that confronted us in the process of collating and making sense of the 80 entries on global undergrounds for our new book, a good number of which brought us into contact with recent scholarship by archaeologists and what has been called the ‘vertical turn’ in geography.

The politics of subterranea is a topic that social and cultural scholars have turned to with increasing attention in the past decade. In the words of Stephen Graham and Lucy Hewitt, the ‘flattening of discourses and imaginaries [that] tends still to dominate critical urban research in the Anglophone world’ needs to be

¹ The third episode in the series is evocatively titled ‘Platforms and Plague Pits’. See *The Fifteen Billion Pound Railway*, BBC2, first broadcast in July 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04b7h1w> last accessed 3 April 2015.

² Professor Rosemary Sweet (University of Leicester) is currently working on Charles Roach Smith and his *Illustrations of Roman London* (1859). For an audio podcast of her talk at the Institute of Historical Research (4 February 2015), see the archive of the Metropolitan History Seminar at <http://www.history.ac.uk/podcasts/metropolitan-history>

challenged (Graham and Hewitt 2013: 71–72). Graham and Hewitt suggest shifting geographical imaginations to underground infrastructure as a means of combating this ‘horizontalism’. Indeed, in recent years, a clutch of new geographic literature has sprung up that thinks through our relationship to vertical space (see Adey 2010, Elden 2013 and Graham 2014 for instance). Yet much of this work has continued to see subterranean space as space out, over and under what we know – continuing to render it conceptual, forbidden and even exotic. Archaeology, as a discipline that invites the public to participate in the excavation of knowledges in various ways, seems to us to offer a more participatory perspective for engaging with underground spaces.³ Geographer Gavin Bridge recently suggested that:

Shafts, tunnels, mines and other holes into the ground serve as conduits connecting the plane of existence (the surface) to a radically different space below. As conduits, their function is to connect – to enable movement by bringing two spaces into relation (Bridge 2013: 55).

We find three promising links in the passage above in the context of seeking intersection between urban geography and archaeology. First, we see the underground as an intertwined space: in opening our imagination to the vertical, we do not wish to pitch it against the horizontal; for the cultural entanglements that move along and within both axes are enmeshed and inseparable. Just as archaeology recognizes that space is fundamental to the understanding of time, we contend that time is crucial to the construction of space and place. Second, conduits connect places and meanings; undergrounds are vehicles for powerful narratives, from personal stories of labour and fear to more structural issues that perpetuate asymmetries across class, gender or wealth. Third, undergrounds crystallize one of the functions that is most essential to cities enmeshed in global networks of mobilities today: circulation. A separate infrastructure suggesting a sectional understanding of the city where people, goods, capital, information, and waste circulate – cut off from the turbulent rhythm of streets and daily life – is something that deserves our attention, and that of archaeologists, not least because of the connections between space and politics that converge underground (see Galviz 2013).

One very important component of a richer awareness of the underground is a reflection on where we look for the discourses and practices of subterranean space and how they have been transformed in the past. This view tends to privilege those who have the power to plan, transform and manipulate urban space: the architects, engineers, emperors, kings, religious leaders, aristocrats, wealthy merchants, artists, and politicians who often have the resources to excavate. While we should never lose sight of the important histories of those excavations, there are other stories that can be recovered: testimonies to labour, beliefs, mythologies and subversive tunnelling and underground dwelling. The long histories of many cities are as much about processes of sinking as they are about reaching for the skies, not just through the successive stacking of material remains but through the laying of the foundations of rising cities, and of the stories that go hand in hand with them.

³ Ongoing work by heritage organization across the UK and Europe gives plenty of evidence of this. Two relevant examples are the projects *Assembling Alternative Futures* (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/directory/assembling-alternative-futures-heritage>) and *Reconfiguring Ruins* (<http://reconfiguringruins.blogs.sas.ac.uk>), last accessed 13 September 2015.

The underground is both a collection of spaces and events in need of recordation, and a place of connections between surface, subsurface and even supersurface matter. We would like to encourage moves away from a sense of sites, surfaces and linearity when approaching undergrounds, and closer towards – following Peter Sloterdijk’s suggestion – spherical constellations of meaning that imagine urban space as an ‘intimate, enclosed and shared round shape, spread out through joint inhabiting’ (Sloterdijk 1999: 1011). No other definition better captures the multiplicities of the vast connections and movements that the contributors to our *Global Undergrounds* book have made apparent through their essays. Central to those connections and movements are the human dimensions of the undergrounds that we explore: whether built to escape war and destruction or planned as a conscious exercise in building national identities, these are spaces that speak to primordial fears and debris, intimacy, enclosure, labour, and the envisioning of futures. These are spaces of function and meaning and also spaces of becoming.

Our aim in this article is simply to point to, and demonstrate, a fruitful path toward exploring these multiplicities, one that engages as many different perspectives as can be (reasonably) gathered; and that is predicated on *exploration* rather than *explanation*. For some, this may seem like an abdication of the responsibility to commit – a revelling in ambiguity for its own sake; yet, we believe strongly in a stance that *listens, gathers and assembles* rather than coheres and orders.

Our collective attachment to subterranea has accelerated in direct relation to the fact that most people on the planet now live in cities where their relationship with the underground is both practical and expansive in its meanings and associations. Though we do not argue this awareness has imbued everyone with the sensibilities of archaeologists, as scholars fascinated in processes of place-making we argue that urban undergrounds are more important than they ever have been. Perhaps as archaeology, geography and history become increasingly intertwined, so too can we expect that people will have a greater awareness of the intersections between time and space as the worlds that we inhabit continue to sink.

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