

[Doc Digresses: An Interview with J Hogue, Publisher of Art in Ruins](#)

With Kate Bramson's wintry departure from *The Providence Journal* and Ned Connors ensconced in the private sector, there's only one person left in this town who's actively kicking my ass on the urban development beat. The embarrassing part is that he doesn't even write anymore. Ten years ago, a man built a timeless body of work and he's been raking in the primary source gold ever since.

What is primary source gold, Doc? Comments from old people, baby!! Far smarter historians than our mystery man have failed to weave "oral histories" from these hallowed yarns, yet few have collected more raw material. His website is a veritable watering hole for old people with "anecdotes" (known elsewhere on the web as "comments"), which unlike interviews are completely volunteered and virtually unedited — pearls from the Ocean State's saltiest web surfers.

What is this miracle forum? How is the people's history of Rhode Island architecture being written with so little oversight? The answer is ArtInRuins.com, an archive devoted to the littlest state's crummiest buildings. Jesus-like in its love for each and every structure, ArtInRuins insists that history is to be told through the individual, not the general; by the people, not the expert.

And who is ArtInRuins' mysterious publisher? My friend once called him the Ron Jeremy of Rhode Island ruin porn, but I didn't mention that because "ruin porn" is sort of a trigger word for him. His name is J Hogue, a part-time graphic designer from Smithfield, and, like me, a full-time land-use paranoiac.

Doc Brinker (Motif): Why did you start ArtInRuins?

J Hogue: Around 2001, right after I moved here, there was a lot of interest in redeveloping the mills. Eagle Square was the big one. It became a Shaws Plaza and now it's a Price Rite. It was on the news. Public meetings. People showed up and were vocal about it. There was actually a mill that came down just before that, where the Home Depot is on Charles Street. So it started to feel like, "Oh, this is going to keep happening."

And so out of the Eagle Square fight came a nonprofit real estate company for the arts called Puente. Steelyard came out of there, Monohasset Mill came out of there and ArtInRuins really came out of it, too. As a documentary project, I started taking as many photos as I could. The Masonic Temple was easy to get into; Brown and Sharpe, which is now the Foundry, parts of it were easy to get into.

In the early '90s, Providence was more like what I guess New York's West Village would've been like in the '70s. Great for art. Not great for safety. Not great for tourism. Then, trying to be more than that, Providence shifted toward becoming a city that developers wanted a piece of. They were looking at all these 'vacant' mills that were doing a lot, but not generating a lot of revenue.

DB: There's been a lot of preservation in the residential sector of the real estate market, but is Providence doing as good of a job with its industrial building stock?

JH: Right now? No. Development has sort of ground to a halt, which I think is in some ways a good

thing because development was happening too quickly for a while. But it's dropped off so much that it's not really at a sustainable level. It's at no level.

DB: When did that peak in development take place?

JH: It all coincided with 2008, which wasn't a good year for anybody. The recession was bad and then the historic tax credit legislation expired and the state didn't want to renew it because they were losing money on that deal. So that made developers go belly up or move out of town.

You really don't see any large mill developments anymore. You see smaller projects here and there, maybe five or six units, but nothing on the scale of Rising Sun or The Plant or Calendar Mills or Pearl Street Lofts or the Foundry. I think that's good in some ways, because we lost oversight while it was burning really hot. But now we're losing things to demolition because the value proposition to turn the mill buildings into something viable isn't there anymore.

DB: The 'anecdotes' sections on ArtInRuins blew me away. How did you attract all these old people to such an obscure corner of the web?

JH: I'm not sure exactly how that happened. I think it's primarily because if someone is fairly new to the internet, maybe, they're going to do a couple searches. Maybe they're going to search for the place where they worked. And it just so happens, if it's been torn down in the last 10 years, I probably have documentation of it. So they find it, and they see my photos, and they see a couple other anecdotes that are up there... It just happened naturally. I thought it was going to be more about the photography, but people being able to tell their story has worked out better than I could've imagined. The amount of trolling is so tiny.

DB: Do you think it's ever better to leave a building as a ruin than to rehabilitate it?

JH: I would love to see that. I don't think anyone here in a dense New England city would let that happen. Some people call what I do 'ruin porn.' You could say that. There is some of that there. But at the same time, I think there is value to it. Things that are shiny and bright are nice for one thing, but things that are old and have a natural decay to them and have layers of reuse and patching have a completely different character. The Chinese term for that is wok hei, which basically translates to "the flavor of the wok." The more it's used, the more flavor it imparts on what it cooks. That's how I think about some of these shells. And it would nice to have some of those that are open, like a Greek ruin. They'd be there for what they are and what they were, not what they could become.

DB: What about that brick façade that's propped up on Weybosset Street?

JH: That's a victim of the exuberance of 2007-2008. The 110 it was called. I forget how tall it was going to be, but it was just shy of the Industrial Trust Building. Residential tower, glass — you know, the whole nine yards. They got that spot because they were going to preserve that historic façade, which belonged to a bank built in 1890. So they tore down the rest of the structures that were there from the same era. And now all that's left is that façade. So again, the intent was good, but who's going to pay to keep propping that up? How is that going to be repurposed?

DB: Have you ever been emotionally affected by a particular building going down?

JH: The Fruit and Produce warehouse was a favorite of mine. I'm not even sure why. It was a long, low-

slung building behind the mall. Had a really nice, clean architectural detail about it. Had such a specific use. The way it came down seemed so backhanded and nefarious. For nothing to be built in its spot felt like a stab. Especially since it took them six months to demolish. It was only two stories tall, but the walls were so thick... It was basically built to be a refrigerator. There was nothing structurally wrong with it.

DB: Any buildings on your mind these days?

JH: Yeah, there's one that I might drive up and take some photos of after this if I have time. Off of the highway heading toward Boston there's a giant, giant building on the edge of Central Falls and North Attleboro that's coming down. Those kinds of towns, they have so much of that building stock that they don't value it in the same way. It's a 40-acre parcel. It's sort of crumbling. But up until very recently there were still tenants in there. I kind of can't imagine anyone building something of that magnitude around here again. I think that's what's interesting about a lot of these buildings. You can't really imagine the industry that needed that sort of space.