

Pedaling Hope

by Jen Petersen

“Let’s turn right at the street up there...the one with the big sycamore?” Joe called out to me as we took the lane on a particularly perilous section of Beverly Boulevard that bisects the Wilshire Country Club.

“Ummm, Arden?” I asked.

“Right.”

I said something about the chilly microclimate we were cycling through, amazed that air so noticeably cooled by golf course sprinklers could leap the ivy-covered walls around the course that bound the street’s shoulders.

“...and the Arroyo del Jardín de las Flores,” Joe added.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, it’s mostly buried, but there’s a creek running right through the golf course—it’s an upper tributary of Ballona Creek.”

A moment later we turned on to Arden, passing the landmark tree that straddled the property line between its two front yards. We were in an exceptionally green neighborhood near the center of a city spread out over 498 square miles, the heart of a 4,850-square-mile metropolitan area. But this otherwise unassuming “big sycamore,” for cyclists like us, marked a low-traffic path of least resistance, a respite from these hostile streets. I smiled as we pedaled on into the night, taking comfort in the cracked and dimly-lit streets. The stillness of a late Sunday night accompanied our invisibility through the final couple of miles home.

This and other experiences of urban exploration on two wheels have taught me that beauty is the opposite of fear, and it can be claimed through subversive habitation. Bicycling provides us with an unbuffered range of sensory experiences of the monumental urbanity we have created, and a view into the spaces of hope in its cracks, fissures, and contradictions. To bicycle through frenetic and congested cities is a work of beauty, one that can redraw the often discriminatory boundaries of neighborhoods, redeem strained

social relations, and rehabilitate a suffocating natural environment, together with the ways urban inhabitants become crippled by it. Inherently human-scaled, it is one path to an alternative understanding of the urban.

The constraints of market-driven urbanity have been noted by critical socio-spatial theorists. For them, the urban form is shaped by the dictates of capitalism's impulses, and choices of how to inhabit and know the urban, despite the lore of a choice-broadening free market, are ironically limited. Resistance at the scale of the everyday is crucial to reappropriating cities as sites of freedom, livability, and democracy. Through such resistance, people enact a "right to the city," as thinkers like Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey have called this choice to create a humanistic urban totality. Such willful, "revolutionary urban praxis" (Lefebvre 2003) challenges the kind of competitive urbanism that pits humans against each other and their natural environment, and also redraws the sharp lines of race and class etched inequitably into urban infrastructure. To accept these elements of urban life is to tacitly support the power structures promoting uneven capitalist development at the level of the urban grid. Such complicity, according to Lefebvre, reveals the "passivity of those involved...an indication of the absence of democracy" (Lefebvre 2003: 137).

Choosing to know a place differently, in ways more expressive of humanistic values, invites a different, clearer-eyed urbanity to shape the individual. David Harvey writes, "We are, all of us, architects, of a sort. We individually and collectively make the city through our daily actions and our political, intellectual and economic engagements. But, in turn, the city makes us" (2003: 940). People must acknowledge their dialectical relationship with urbanity. "What sort of city do I want to shape me?" is a central question all urban dwellers must ask, for humans live with the social and environmental consequences of their urban creations, whether they are active or passive. Consciously seeking new perceptions of urban spaces literally changes our base of local knowledge, redirecting our attention to views not sanctioned by planners or cartographers of political and economic districts. Movement, after all, is a basic expression of freedom, and a deliberate modal choice is an essential way to claim that freedom—a basic right to the city. The alternative is an urban life lived in confinement and fear, within the bounds and along the paths dictated by the "experts" who have designed them.

Daily opportunities to reimagine badly planned urban spaces and forgotten interstices abound. On a bicycle, one traverses, and therefore contends with and comes to know the spaces missing from the mental maps of subway-riders, motorists, and even pedestrians. For the cyclist, such spaces are gradually transformed into contiguous, demystified places. Furthermore, the urban cyclist develops intimate knowledge of physical impediments to movement by such a vulnerable mode—traffic patterns, poorly maintained asphalt, narrow shoulders, and bad air quality, and the supposed limits and constraints of given spaces. Knowledge, whether of hidden, beautiful places or particularly oppressive and suffering ones, supplants fear of the unknown. A finely tuned textural feel for place reworks the urban cyclist's mental map and is an important step toward shaping cities "in accord with our heart's desire" (Harvey, 941). An intoxicating sense of discovery accompanies this slow, place-converting process.

Travel by two human-powered wheels is an active choice to encounter urban elements that often go unnoted and unappreciated, particularly by people of privilege. To commute by bicycle, for example, is a choice to breathe in the dangers of diesel pollution, which the city's poorest dwellers take in by design. But such a choice also, ten minutes hence, gives access to a completely unfiltered and breathtaking view of a quintessential monument to modernity—the Brooklyn Bridge—stretched out in masoned extravagance. And what is more precious than to be treated, on a late night ride along the Hudson River, to a private showing of lights reflected in the water from tall buildings on the palisades of the opposite bank, while sailboats rock in the river's currents? Cycling also promises encounters with pedestrians and other cyclists. Greetings and reassurance, not glassed

in by power windows or drowned out by the noise of idling engines, can replace the sometimes violent spatial competition that plays out between travelers who move by other means. And the beauty of this conscious urban praxis does not just find expression through growing confidence, empathy, and experiences of triumph, joy, freedom, and hope. Visceral experiences of anger, frustration, and impatience also characterize this alternative way of knowing, where the careless actions of pedestrians and oblivious or overtly confrontational motorists encroach upon spaces of liberation.

Such a mindful modal choice, however, is not valuable solely because of its subversive or personally transforming qualities. Together with active engagement in organized efforts to transform cities, our daily choices educate and influence politicians, city planners, and architects by demonstration. Beautiful urbanism is the practice of urban life by which, at the level of individual experience, we project and reflect a vision of hope by purposefully cultivating new ways of seeing and knowing.

On a recent trip to the sprawling suburban, once entirely agricultural South Bay area of Northern California, I insisted on carting my bike along—as an experiment not only in self-reliance, but also in the deliberate reinvention of place. I loaded up my panniers in the hallway of my Crown Heights, Brooklyn, apartment, took one last, long look at my tattered New York City cycling map, and hit the streets bound for JFK. I didn't know the names of the neighborhoods I would pass through—just that Brownsville, and a part of East New York, and Howard Beach were, roughly speaking, southeast of where I'd begun and stood between me and the airport. Nor did I know what would signal my entry into and departure from a given neighborhood. I chose a compass-led journey for the sake of efficiency, since energy conservation tops my list of route qualifications. On this trip, undertaken at midday on a weekday, I experienced everything from ubiquitous signs of black male underemployment and unemployment to suffocating air quality on Liberty Avenue and the usual retail indications of ethnic populations. All told, the trip took about 40 minutes, including some wrong turns and compensatory back-tracking. The marshy smell of wetlands and signs for the Aqueduct race track signaled my proximity to JFK. Turning off the bustling, four-lane boulevard (plus two lanes for automobile parking), then crossing Conduit Boulevard and the Shore Parkway, I suddenly found myself in an outpost of sleepy, suburban-looking, single-family homes, where ethnic homogeneity waned from the Italian flags decorating houses and car antennae. Rather than navigate the airport's service roads, I and my bike boarded the AirTrain and were whisked to the appropriate terminal. There, as passengers and ticket agents looked quizzically on, I removed my pedals and handlebars, deflated tires, and secured everything with zip ties before enclosing the whole ensemble—FAA-prohibited tools included—into the heavy-duty bike bag I had purchased for this purpose, and then checked in, still in my spandex cycling shorts.

“Did you really ride here?” a curious fellow-passenger standing in line behind me asked.

“Yes!” I answered, still energized from the ride and the thrill of subversive ground transport, and ducked into the ladies room for a costume change.

I did the same in reverse after a late-night arrival at San Jose International, and then rode the short distance to my downtown hotel. Early the next morning I awoke to study the Santa Clara County cycling map I'd downloaded to my laptop, and discovered a dedicated bike path following Coyote Creek, parallel to the 101 freeway, and covering 17 of the 25 miles between me and the 10 a.m. date I had at the farmer's market with friends in Morgan Hill. After wiggling my way out of downtown and through very Vietnamese and Cambodian East San Jose, I arrived at Hellyer Park, spread out against the same golden, gently rolling hills I had run with my high school cross country team. Delighted

to fill my nostrils and lungs with sweet, riparian air, I relished my first-ever metaphorical feel of distance between city and my native suburb—a chasm I had previously conceived of in monotonous highway miles. The path borders and criss-crosses the freeway more than once, and pedaling along I mused on the irony of a missed parallel ecology, always within close range of my automobile-veiled view from six (soon to be eight) lanes, yet worlds away from the ideas of freedom and mobility I once had. From my current vista, I had the physiological experience—via leg fatigue—of a sprawling urbanity. I saw carved-up hillsides being readied for the next subdivision, and bits of trash floating down the gurgling creek. Following this watershed through morning mist, at no more than 15 miles per hour, I began a new relationship with what had formerly been an unimportant, interstitial space of slow, traffic-provoked annoyance. This morning my alternative path offered peace and quiet, and even some wisdom.

As an Angeleno, I often felt like the most important thing I did in a day was to ride my bike to work, or across town to a meeting. Each time I followed my route from the mid-Wilshire area where I lived to a class at UCLA, navigating through neighborhoods on virtually car-free surface streets, I was reminded of the social distance between my own diversely working-class Korean, Central American, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Filipino neighborhood, and a transitional, mostly Korean one, and the stately, old homes with perfectly manicured lawns and great old oak (and sycamore!) trees of Hancock Park. The further west I traveled, the more obvious were the signs of affluence and cultural homogeneity. But I certainly would have missed the subtle but revealing spatial indicators of stratification—from street trash and street trees to barred windows and parking regulations—had I chosen to travel by car. Learning to read the street signs of socioeconomic difference has bolstered my confidence and ultimately my awareness of where efforts to build a more livable, whole city are most required.

To map Los Angeles by its underground creeks and giant sycamore trees, and New York City by the autumn wind's strength on the Manhattan Bridge bikeway and the late-night chill blowing off the Hudson, is to become a cartographer of microclimates. This mapping practice also makes one a witness to the spaces of suffering usually eliminated from the course of travel, and challenges the fear instilled by "authoritative" news reports of crime and nefarious activity, typically of a racist hue. Willful acceptance of this creative role invites empathy and, ultimately, identification with the city's most vulnerable residents—human and non—that have been left out of planning processes but clearly feel their outcomes. "Can I live in Los Angeles without becoming a frustrated motorist?" Harvey asks rhetorically in his short essay "The Right to the City" (2003: 940). "By all means!" is the quick answer. Failure to do so is to relinquish a fundamental privilege we urban residents possess—to trade resigned urbanism for our human right to create and reclaim places of beauty and hope.

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