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Appropriating the city: space, theory, and bike messengers

Jeffrey L. Kidder

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Abstract Over the last 30 years, social theorists have increasingly emphasized the importance of space. However, in empirical research, the dialectical relationship between social interaction and the physical environment is still a largely neglected issue. Using the theory of structuration, I provide a concrete example of why and how space matters in the cultural analysis of an urban social world. I argue that bike messengers—individuals who deliver time-sensitive materials in downtown cores of major cities—cannot be understood outside an analysis of space. Specifically, I connect the cultural significance of messenger practices to the emplacement of those practices inside the urban environment.

Bike messengers work in the downtown cores of major metropolitan areas. Their services are most useful in older cities whose business districts, developed long before the primacy of automobiles, are prone to traffic congestion and are continually hampered by insufficient parking. Outside of these areas, bicycle couriers are largely unknown, and their existence is considered quaint, if anything. Yet, inside these major urban centers, the bike messengers' presence is considered an intriguing or even disturbing cultural phenomenon. As one newspaper article explained, "They live the life you may have dreamed of but never had the courage or foolish disregard to try" (Cheney 1993:A1). They are "toned, tattooed daredevils who cut through exhaust and traffic all day long delivering just about anything that will fit in their shoulder bags" (Sanders 2003:2). They are also "law-flouting, obscenity-spewing, bath-needing, wild-riding, pedestrian-smashing madmen" (Levy 1989:E4) who are "maniacal and dangerous" (Lee 2001:14), and, thus, "richly deserve our wholehearted contempt and an attaché case or umbrella plunged into their spokes" (Rosenthal 1987:50).

In one of the early statements of what would become the Chicago School of urban research, Park (1923) notes, "The small community often tolerates eccentricity. The city, on the contrary, rewards it. Neither the criminal, the defective, nor the genius

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has the same opportunity to develop his innate dispositions in a small town that he invariably finds in a great city" (41). Today, bike messengers similarly thrive in this kind of environment. They are one of the countless cultural variations proliferating within a metropolis unfettered by the mores of the *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies 1887). From Gans's (1962) classic ethnography of a Boston slum to Jankowski's (1991) study of street gangs back to Small's (2004) recent work in a Boston barrio, urbanists have long chronicled the social worlds that make cities fascinating, fearful, and frustrating places. Largely absent from this literature, however, is a serious engagement with *physical* space. Urban ethnographers study in cities, but tend ignore the material structures through which their respondents operate.

There are ethnographies that do take the physical setting seriously. Neal and Walter's (2007) Foucaudian analysis of social control in the English countryside is rooted in how people use rural space. Likewise, Bell's (1994) study of an English exurb emplaces the moral boundary between nature and society within the environment of his research site. Alternatively, in refining Marxists critiques of youth subcultures, Rutheiser's (1993) situates Belizean students in the vastly different spaces of the school and the street corner. In contrasting Spanish America with the southern United States, Richardson (1980) asserts that it is the physical space individuals inhabit (e.g., churches and public plazas) that enculturates them into their respective societies. An analysis, of course, echoing Bourdieu's (1970) much lauded writing on the Kabyle house—a sex-segregated dwelling informed by structural oppositions (e.g., wet and dry, dark and light, and culture and nature). For Bourdieu, the house acts not only to naturalize gender differences, but also to inscribe a set of dispositions onto the body. The built environment, therefore, is integrated into the socialized universe of meaning as a product of beliefs and as producer of those beliefs.

These empirical analyzes are part of a larger theoretical trend (starting in the 1970s and culminating in the 1990s) to incorporate insights from the previously marginalized discipline of geography into the very heart of social theory (see Friedland and Boden 1994; Giddens 1984; Gregory 1994; Pred 1986; Soja 1989; Urry 1985; Werlen 1988; Zukin 1991). At the abstract level, social theory has somewhat begrudgingly come to grips with *why* spaces matters. Space, it is argued, is part of the dialectical relationship between structure and agency (see below). But, when confronted with concrete examples, it is far from clear *how* space matters. Pred (1986) and Soja (1989) root their theoretical insights in empirical data, but their work is historical and aggregated (also see Harvey 2003; Massey 1984). Conversely, interpretative works that address space tend to describe environments far more than they theorize its sociological relevance. Harvey (2006) may be right that space, like culture, is now a keyword, but urban ethnography continues to be a largely aspatial enterprise (Gieryn 2000). As such, the theoretical relevance of material structures in *everyday* life remains obscured. Moreover, while there is an increasing place for space in certain subsets of the literature, sociology as a discipline maintains a certain ambivalence (or aversion) to incorporating spatial theories into empirical research (Gieryn 2002a provides a notable exception).

In an effort to help fill this empirical void between abstract theories and observed phenomenon, I use structuration theory (Giddens 1984) to analyze urban ethnographic data about bike messengers. I argue that the social world of bike

messengers cannot be divorced from their spatial practices. Like skateboarders (see Borden 2001), couriers are in a dialectical relationship with the city's built structures. It is through their use of the city (practices enabled and constrained by the urban environment) that messengers construct their social world and make sense of their lives. As I illustrate below, the courier's world is sociologically titillating; it is an occupational subculture (Trice 1993) that has grown into an all-encompassing lifestyle. For the subjects of this study, being a messenger is not simply a particular set of job tasks. Instead, it is a deeply felt testament to who they really are. The courier's concept of self is intertwined with their appropriation of urban space. That is, messengers are who they are, wild-riding madmen living the life many readers may have only dreamed of, precisely because space matters not simply as something in the background (the stage on which they act) but as a dialectic component of the lifeworld.

Theoretical background: emplacing action

Structuration and a place for space

Not surprisingly, it is geographers who have rumbled the loudest in advocating the importance of space in social theory. Most famously, Harvey (1973, 1982, 1985, 1987), in trying to reconcile Marxism with urban theory, insists that geographical positioning is relevant to the unfolding of individual biographies. Through space (unevenly developed, with varying access to resources), actors produce and reproduce capital (also see Gregory 1994; Massey 1984; Soja 1989). In this sense, geographers have constructed a political economy of space. The issue is not simply that cities, as Molotch (1976) insists, are growth machines guided by the financial interests of powerful social actors. Places do not merely boom or bust; the contemporary landscape is a mediation of market forces and the willful concerns of what a place should be (Zukin 1991); which is to say, power relations are embedded in how space is used. For example, the creation of American suburbs after World War II was a form of growth, but it was a very particular form of growth: single-family homes that were separated from the inner-city and reached by private automobiles (see Wright 1981). Ultimately, post-WWII suburban development was more than a change to the physical landscape; it was also a change to the cultural landscape. The inner-city became the wellspring of bourgeois fear and the chosen remedy was a white flight to the suburbs (see Avila 2004).

Recently, Gieryn (2000) has attempted to revive a theoretical interest in the physical environment. However, Gieryn's approach is divorced from the specific concerns of political economy. Instead, Gieryn's work is motivated by a more general concern about the role of the spatial structures in human behavior. Space, Gieryn contends, is not simply something in the background of social action; space is itself part of that action. Filled with activity and values, spaces are not voids, but "places" (Casey 1993). That is, space is shaped by those who use it, but space also shapes the actions of those within it. Buildings, for example, are not inert things (Gieryn 2002a); they are contested terrains. Architectural plans are debated. Once built, rooms and walls restrict or encourage choices. Further, buildings are also ideas—

places for family or places for work, places of worship or places for vice—that actors frame in various ways (also see Richardson 1980).

Gieryn highlights the theoretical challenge structure and agency poses for urban sociology. Gieryn's work, combined with a political economy approach, shows the city or a suburb to be, in a very literal sense, a series of structural forms—the buildings and streets physically comprising the city and the social groups occupying those spaces. At the same time, these structural properties are only sociologically relevant when they are utilized in systems of interaction. Following Giddens's concept of structuration, the city can be conceptualized as a set of "rules and resources." That is, the city is composed of meaningful schema—ideas, values, and laws—as well as material things—people, objects, and buildings. Individuals draw upon these structural properties in the praxis of daily life. For Giddens (1979:5), as is well known, there is no one-way casualty; structures enable as they constrain. Instead of a dualism between subject and object, there is a *duality of structure*: "structure is both the medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices".

While Giddens provides a coherent model for structural duality, broadly speaking, it is the work of Lefebvre (1976) that directly relates practice to the perpetuation and transformation of material space. For Lefebvre, physical, mental, and social spaces must be conceived together, as "space is at once the result and the cause, product and producer [...]" (142). That is, the environment in which we think and act is a product of those thoughts and actions, just as those thoughts and actions are in some way determined by the environment. Space, therefore, has three dimensions: space is perceived, conceived, and lived. Space is an experienced set of material practices—a mother cooking in the family kitchen, for example. Meanings are also given to these practices—the mother becomes the nurturer while the father becomes the wage earner. It is important to remember here that these practices exist in a space—a house divided into sex-segregated roles (Hayden 1984; Spain 1992). The first two dimensions offer themselves to a rather static reading; conceptions of space simply become perceptions of space. However, because space is not only determining, but can also be determined, space, as it is lived, can be *appropriated* by the user against intended conceptions. That is, the architect cannot predict use. More importantly, for Lefebvre, such re-imaginings of space offer the potential to subvert capitalist rationality.

Gans and the impotence of space

The incorporation of space into social theory is not without its critics. Gans, for example, has repeatedly struck out at theoretical attempts to integrate the physical environment (also see Saunders 1986). Gans (1969:37–38) considers an emphasis on space ineffectual and sociological misguided. "Bad design can interfere with what goes on inside a building, of course, and good design can aid it, but design *per se* does not significantly shape human behaviour". Reacting against what he considers to be myopic professional training and class bias on the part of urban planners, Gans insists that the environment alone cannot overcome the larger forces shaping one's life. "What affects people, then, is not the raw physical environment, but the social and economic environment in which that physical environment is used." (39). It is the use of space, therefore, not the shape of space that is socially determining (Gans 2002).

In one sense, there are strong connections between Gans and Lefebvre. In Lefebvre's view, space can only be understood as something that is lived. This is analogous to Gans attack on urban planners. That is, both theorists understand that space can be appropriated in unintended ways. As Lefebvre (1976) writes, "The user's space is *lived*—not represented (or conceived). When compared with the abstract space of the experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of everyday activities of users is a concrete one, one which is to say, subjective" (362). As Gans (1962) research on working-class neighborhoods demonstrates, politicians and reformers who conceive (i.e., plan) urban projects (e.g., youth outreach programs) are often too far removed from the social realities of those that use their creations. On the other hand, the bulk of Gans's work has certainly been to devalue the relevance of space, and he directly criticizes Gieryn and Lefebvre for emphasizing it (Gans 2002).

Alternatively, with Lefebvre, we can understand that an emphasis on the built environment is not, as Gans argues, the result of the sociologist or urban planner's occupational and class biases (see Gieryn 2002b for a direct response to Gans's critique). Physical space is part of the social world. While class, race, gender, and age influence how physical place is lived, the place itself cannot be disconnected from this process. "Social relations [...] have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*" (Lefebvre 1976:404). Or, as Gieryn (2000) writes of sociology, "Everything we study is emplaced; it happens somewhere and involves material stuff" (466). To this end, Harvey's (1987) argues that postmodern urban developments (e.g., Baltimore's Inner Harbor) are not only mere sites of consumption, but reorganizations of the urban experience—an experience that dominates subjective imagination and reifies capitalist rationality. Likewise, Pred's (1986) study of southern Sweden shows that the alterations of land-use patterns precipitated by the nineteenth century enclosure movement directly relate to concurrent changes in social relationships. That is, emplacement means more than pointing out the obvious: all action exists in space. Instead, it means that spatial and social relationships are intertwined.

Structuration theory helps us understand how social relations are anchored in and mediated through physical space. Following Giddens, the built environment (as a set of structures) should not be conceived of outside human interaction. For Gans, the home or the road to the supermarket is nothing but a physical limit on agency. Beyond what physics prohibits, humans go about their lives unencumbered. However, if space is perceived, conceived, and lived, as Lefebvre claims, agency and structure are part of a duality: they are determined by human action just as they determine it. As such, the built environment is both structured and structuring. In other words, living in suburbs and shopping at mega-market grocery stores is qualitatively different from living in walkable cities and shopping in the downtown core. This, of course, is Jacob's (1961) grand critique of urban development. Anthropologically, this point is illustrated in Bourdieu's analysis of the Kabyle house and in Richardson's cultural comparison of urban settings. Overall, the social relevance of space is summed up in what Soja (1989) calls socio-spatial dialectic. In this dialectic "social relations of production are both space-forming and space-contingent" (81). Further, it must be understood that space is not a predetermined process; it is only realized in the practice of knowing, strategic agents. From this

perspective, *the city becomes implicated in the activities within it*. The city, in other words, is a duality—structure *and* agency—and cannot be adequately conceived of outside this interplay.

In the analysis that follows, I look at how bike messengers utilize the rules and resources of the city. In typical urban ethnographies, the built environment is secondary—it is always there, but it tends to be treated as something beyond theoretical analysis. For example, Fusco's (2005) study of locker rooms takes great pains to detail the built environment (she even interviewed the locker room's architect), but there is no attempt to develop a socio-spatial dialectic of the locker room (also see Manzo 2005; Nippert-Eng 2005). Conversely, the modality between messengers and the city's physical materials (i.e., streets, sidewalks, and their traffic) and meaningful schemas (i.e., laws and norms governing traffic flow) is the sole purpose of this article. As I show below, it is only by engaging with urban structures that the messenger's social world is possible. It is only realized through courier practice intimately tied to the city's streets. In this sense, the city makes messengers at the same time that the messengers make the city. This is Pred's main theoretical contribution. "The practices through which social structure is both expressed and reproduced cannot be divorced from the structuring of space and the use of spatial structures" (198).

Research methods and field sites: being a bike messenger

The data for this article were gathered through over three years of participant observation spread over the course of five years. From June 2002 to June 2003, I worked as a bike messenger in New York City. From August 2006 through May 2007, I worked as a bike messenger in Seattle. In between these two extended periods of fieldwork, I regularly participated in messenger events and sporadically worked as a bike courier in San Diego. Additionally, I have traveled to Atlanta, Chicago, Milwaukee, and San Francisco to discuss messenger work and life with local couriers. In the summer of 2007, I also revisited New York to gather new data from many of my original sources.

In New York, I worked for two companies. The first, Sprint Courier, is one of New York's largest, employing over 100 bike messengers in addition to a fleet of trucks and walkers. I worked at Sprint for seven months. The second company, Flying High Courier, is one of New York's smallest, employing two bikers. I worked at Flying High for five months. In Seattle, I worked for Choice Legal Services (CLS). CLS not only delivers packages, but also provides an array of legal services: process service, research, and investigation. With well over ten riders, CLS is large by Seattle's standards. Whereas for Sprint and Flying High, I was dispatched to pick-up any number of odd things (e.g., a shopping bag filled with family portraits for Kathleen Turner or a blood sample for the red cross), with a few minor exceptions, CLS's couriers only deliver legal documents to law firms and courthouses. In San Diego, I worked for High Five Courier (an all-purpose bike messenger company). High Five is a small company with no more than three riders on the road at any one time.

In all places, working as a messenger (or being able to introduce myself as a former messenger) gave me entry into the social world. Far more important than

work itself, is the non-work time I spent with messengers. It is during social gatherings and other off-work events that messengers discuss, contest, and represent the meanings and values of their world. Therefore, I talked with messengers after work in parks and bars, went to messenger parties, raced in alleycats (illegal street races held in open traffic, discussed further below), and went on group rides with other messengers. In other words, I attempted to integrate myself within each messenger community.

Following Wacquant's (2004) emphasis on "observant participation" (6), I rely primarily on informal discussions and questions ask in the moment of activity. This is not only a less obtrusive form of data collection, but respondents are less likely to distort their actions or self-consciously manage their image when not forced into an interview situation (also see Nelson 1969). Further, I have not simply asked couriers to describe what being a messenger is like, I have experienced it myself. This emic approach not only gives me first-hand knowledge (see Rosaldo 1989), but also allows me to converse with messengers as an insider. As Mitchell (2002) claims, surveys and interviews, removed from the nuances of the lifeworld and devoid of personal relationships, result in caricatures of social groups (also see Wacquant 2004). Accepted as an insider, I conducted formal interviews with 31 current and former messengers in Seattle and San Diego. These interviews confirm (in elongated form) what my informal conversations with messengers already revealed.

During the course of my fieldwork, some of the messengers with whom I interacted were unaware of my research. In New York, this is a matter of necessity; a messenger comes into contact with hundreds of other riders throughout the day. As such, the numerous individuals who indirectly helped me with this research could not all be expected to give "informed consent." Becker (1951), Mitchell (2002), Ouellet (1994), and many others sociologists have also conducted such semi-covert research. Conversely, messengers with whom I had recurring contact were informed of my sociological interest, and all were supportive of the undertaking. In Seattle and San Diego, nearly all messengers were aware of my research.

To ensure the privacy and protection of the individuals and companies discussed in this research, I use pseudonyms in lieu of real names; the exception being quotes from messengers published in other sources. As explained above, I collected data primarily through informal interviews conducted throughout the workday, at races, parties, and other social gatherings. In nearly every social situation, couriers freely discussed various aspects of messenger life. As such, engaging couriers about their social world was remarkably easy and unobtrusive. I jotted down responses in private and compiled them in my field notes during the evening. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) approach to grounded theory, I analyzed and coded my field notes and interviews for recurring themes and trends.

In addition to active participation, informal discussions, and formal interviews, I supplement my ethnographic work with historical and contemporary documentation. In the course of my research, I read as much of the literature produced by the bike messenger social world as I could find. The most notable of this literature are the New York Bike Messenger Association's ten issues of *Urban Death Maze*, a desktop-published magazine produced from 1998 to 2001. Likewise, the Courier Association of Seattle's short-lived publication *CAOS* (2000–2001) and *Kickstand* (1997–present), an intermittently self-published Seattle courier magazine, gave me a

valuable historical perspective. Equally important are Travis Culley's (2002) and Rebecca "Lambchop" Reilly's (2000) memoirs about their lives as messengers. I also used books, articles, and documentaries produced by outsiders for mainstream audiences. However, it should be made clear, the data for this article come, first and foremost, from observant participation; quotations from other sources are used only to reinforce my findings.

What is a bike messenger?

Bike couriers work for messenger companies. Firms requiring deliveries contact a messenger company. Most firms have accounts with specific companies. Messenger companies generally offer several time options (with varying prices): same day, two hour, one hour, half hour (generally called a "rush"), and 15 min (a "double rush"). There are additional charges for large or heavy items as well as jobs performed after normal business hours. The riders themselves are dispersed throughout the city. They keep in contact with their company through two-way communication devices like Nextel cellular phones, which offer a walkie-talkie feature, or digital two-way radios. Based on where their riders are located, what other jobs riders are holding, and the dispatcher's assessment of the different riders' performances (i.e., their speed as well as their general competencies), work is allocated to the messengers.

Advances in telecommunication technology have not created an entirely virtual business environment. Despite the promise of being able to telecommute from anywhere—a supposed "death of distance"—cities are still essential for production (Graham 1997). Select cities are control nodes for the global economy (Friedmann 1986; Sassen 1991), and many firms continue to cluster in downtown cores because there are strategic economic advantages to physical proximity (Scott et al. 2001). One reason that physical proximity matters is that many items crucial to post-industrial production cannot currently be digitized. For example, firms dealing with architectural blueprints, advertising proofs, court filings, film, garment bags, legal documents, medicine, and model portfolios still use real (i.e., material) objects. Even for items that technically can be transmitted digitally (e.g., advertising proofs and court filings), in most cases hardcopies are still preferred (designers want to see the exact colors being replicated and law firms want physically stamped copies of their briefs as proof of delivery). As such, the Informational Age requires real highways, not just informational ones. More to the point, while companies like DHL, Fedex, and UPS can deliver items around the globe in under 24 h, it is the bike messenger who offers the fastest delivery times within the city.

Bicycles are smaller and lighter than cars, and can be parked almost anywhere. They are also more maneuverable, allowing riders to weave in and out of gridlocked traffic. Unlike mopeds and motorcycles, the bicycle's ambiguous legal position also allows its riders to travel on sidewalks and go the wrong way down one-way streets. For these same reasons, cyclists can also run red lights by skillfully maneuvering between the (relatively small) spaces separating moving vehicles. Such actions are officially prohibited (and clearly dangerous), but legal enforcement is inconsistent and minimal at best. For instance, Christy, a messenger of less than a year, calculated that she ran more than 10,000 red lights before receiving her first and only ticket. As

such, bicycle delivery—"the fastest known way through the morass of [downtown] traffic" (Geist 1983:B1)—is an essential (if not somewhat paradoxical) aspect of post-industrial production.

In New York, nearly all messengers are paid a piece-rate. These commission riders (as they are called) make between 40% and 60% of the price paid for a job. Most messengers average between three to five dollars per delivery, but on occasion a single package can be worth several times more than that (a late-night, oversize, double rush, for instance). A New York messenger can average 16 to 25 deliveries a day, but it is not uncommon for some messengers to complete fewer than 20 runs while others can do more than 40. One hundred dollars a day is considered a respectable day's wage in New York, but some messengers make far less (or more) than this. In Seattle, many of the messenger companies pay hourly. The pay is between $9.50 an hour to $15 an hour. Commission riders make a comparable wage to New York, and make a similar number of deliveries. In San Diego, all messengers are paid between $7.50 to $15 hourly. Across the country, business is usually slower in the summer and better in the winter. In my year of work in New York, I had days when I made less than $30 and others when I made over $150. In the course of ten months in Seattle, I started at $10.50 an hour and finished making $10.90 an hour. In San Diego, I earned $10 an hour. In all places, payment for bicycles, bike repair, courier bags, and traffic violations is almost always shouldered by the messengers themselves; however, many companies offer funds (or discounts) for bike parts and maintenance. Most hourly workers are covered by worker compensation if hurt on the job. Piece-rate couriers, however, are generally considered independent contractors or work off the books, and, therefore, do not qualify for workers' compensation. As such, hospital visits and time off of work are immense financial burdens.

Currently, there are over 1,000 messengers working in New York City. Seattle has a population over 60, and in San Diego there are few than 20. In New York, a vast majority of messengers are minorities and immigrants. This is not true for Seattle (approximately 80% native-born white) or San Diego (usually around 90% native-born white). Most messengers are men in their early 20s to early 30s. In New York, women make up less than five percent of the population. In Seattle, females constitute around 20% of messengers, and in San Diego it is usually about 15%. In all places, though, for people with little formal education, criminal records, drug and alcohol addictions, or undocumented work status, messengering is often the best job option. Alternatively, messengering is a hip straight job, attracting not only the disenfranchised, but those disillusioned with more routinized forms of labor. Making a good income as a messenger can be extremely difficult, but making some income is exceptionally easy. This is especially true in the loose labor market of New York. There, a messenger who loses their job can easily move to another company. As one New York messenger told me about his company, "Every morning at eight. They'll hire anybody who wants to work." A Seattle messenger who quit one company to start work at another (with no notice to her now former employer) stated, "We're all a bit squirrelly, that's why we're doing this work."

The most notable aspect of messenger work is the danger. Dennerlein and Meeker (2003) report that bike couriers have an injury rate three times higher than meat-packers—an occupation long considered to be one of America's most dangerous.

The national average for injuries in the workplace is 3.0 lost days of work per year for 100 workers; meat-packers lose 15.6. Messengers were found to lose an average of 47. While Dennerlein and Meeker's research lacks methodological rigor (they used a convenience sample and had no method for cross-checking the accuracy of their respondents), their findings, even if inflated, are sobering. During my fieldwork, most of my key sources (in all cities) had at least one minor collision with automobiles or pedestrians, and some not so minor. Cuts, bruises, stitches, and mangled bicycles are a regular part of CLS's office environment. For example, Darren, speaking to me with several missing teeth, a broken orbital and 57 stitches (all in his face), expressed a statistical truism (underscored by a certain messenger fatalism), "You ride your bike enough, you're gonna wreck. Hopefully you're not going to get run over by a car, but you're going to have an accident. It's a fact. The more you ride your bike, you will have an accident."

The dangers of the occupation are apparent when one considers the realities of urban cycling. For starters, a bicycle is a simple two-wheeled machine usually weighing less than 25 lbs. It offers no protection to the rider, a fact compounded by the messengers' disdain for helmets. The main avenues of any city street are filled with cars whose drivers turn unexpectedly, make lane changes without looking, and speed up or slow down erratically. In New York, taxis are especially dangerous—making sudden stops and turns without signaling or checking their mirrors for cyclists. The biggest threat, however, are parked cars. The sides of city streets are lined with vehicles whose doors might fling open with no warning. Being "doored" is one of the most common causes of injury (Hurst 2004). Pedestrians are another latent danger for the cyclist. Walkers look for cars, but often their attention passes over bicyclists as they step into the road. At speeds that can exceed 30 miles per hour, a cyclist (and also the pedestrian) can easily be injured or killed in such a collision. In the 1980s, for example, Chuck, another messenger who was injured on the job, spent a week in a coma after colliding with a pedestrian. Weather conditions increase these risks. Rain, snow, and ice reduce braking power, turn metal fixtures into slippery glass, and conceal potholes among other hazards (a danger greatly intensified by Seattle's hilly topography). Beyond the mortal dangers, the work environment can be exceedingly uncomfortable as well. Winters can be painfully cold; summers can be insufferably hot. And, rain can quickly turn a mildly cool day into a shivering nightmare.

Because of these dangers and discomforts (as well as social stigma), the messenger industry has an extremely high turnover rate, especially in New York. According to Sprint Courier, over 50 percent of their rookie messengers quit work within two months; many do not make it past their first week. Cities like Seattle and San Diego have tighter messenger markets and tend to have more stable work forces. Regardless, five years is long time to be a messenger, and ten is a rarity. Because of the high turnover rate, seasoned couriers view rookie messengers negatively. Companies like Sprint and CLS, whose workforces are mostly rookies, are equally viewed in a negative light; one New York messenger, for instance, called Sprint a "rookie factory." "Real messengers" are measured against the assumed character-istics of rookies. Rookie messengers are perceived to lack knowledge of the city, are said to not know how to handle one's self in traffic, to lose packages, and stay home on cold and rainy days. Generally speaking, a messenger is no longer a rookie after a

full year of work (Reilly 2000). A messenger who has spent several years on the road is considered a veteran. Veteran status garners a high degree of respect among other messengers. In New York, a handful of couriers have ridden for several decades. Because of the dangers and hardship embodied in the occupation, these "original messengers" are treated almost reverently by their peers.

Appropriating the city

Rules versus problems

Building from Lefebvre, Borden (2001), an architectural theorist, claims that skateboarders appropriate the space of the city. Specifically, for Lefebvre, planners have (attempted) to structure subjective meaning out of the city. For example, urban roadways (designed for automobiles) reduce experience to the reading of basic signs. In this sense, drivers do not interact with the environment; they merely follow the rules of the road (as dictated by painted lines, warning signs, and traffic signals). Borrowing from Barthes (1953), Lefebvre (1968) calls such purely utilitarian designs the zero point of architecture. They are abstract spaces conceived solely for the advancement of capital at the expense of aesthetic and humanistic concerns (also see Lefebvre 1976). However, skaters take the urban planner's abstract spaces and infuse them with meaning. That is, skaters move past ordinary perceptions and official conceptions of the urban landscape to creatively experience space in unintended ways. By using handrails, curbs, and steps as objects of play, the bland functionality of they city becomes a site of lived dramatization. As Borden writes, "In the case of the handrail, the skateboarder's reuse of the handrail—ollieing [a skateboarding move where the skater jumps into the air with the board stuck to their feet] onto the rail and, balanced perilously on the skateboard deck, sliding down the fulcrum line of the metal bar—targets something to do with safety and turn it into an object of risk" (192).

Like skateboarders, bike messengers play in (and with) urban space. Streets and sidewalk, cars and pedestrians are all conceptualized as part of a complex, shifting puzzle (as a point of fact, the New York messengers' entitled their magazine *Urban Death Maze*). The messenger's goal is to uncover the fastest possible route between two points. This is not primarily about pedal power and aerobic capacity. Instead, it is about "skills with spatial capacity" as the messenger, Andy, was quick to point out. Elaborating, Andy stated, "Well, it's not just spatial. It's also timing. When you've been on the road a long time with cars [...] when you see that opening [...] you know if you can make it or not. And, anybody else who looked at it would be like, 'You're … insane,' but you're not. You just know exactly how fast you're going and how fast they're going and you can do the math." An excerpt from my field notes (11/14/02) is indicative of this skill. "I saw [Vinny] in traffic today. I was stopped on 23rd Street at Broadway. The traffic coming down Broadway looked impenetrable, but then [Vinny] just appears between two moving buses, weaving out of pedestrian traffic. He wasn't going fast or anything. He just slipped through it." Andreas, explaining how messengers use space, asked me, "Have you ever seen [Vinny] ride? It is not that he rides that fast, but he can get through traffic [...]. He can use every little space between cars."

Whereas skaters creatively use the functionally bland objects of the city (e.g., handrails and parking curbs), messengers play with the functional rules of city traffic. For bike couriers, traffic laws are used only as predictors (in a heuristic of risk) of what *other* users of the city should be doing. Culley (2002), writes of this perspective, "Red means red and green means green: I keep moving regardless" (189). Recounting a recent traffic citation, Jessica informed her friends, "I didn't know I'd even run [a red light]. I look at traffic. I don't pay attention to lights."

What Culley, Jessica, and Andy demonstrate is that, messengers do not conceptualize traffic as a set of rules. Instead, traffic is a set of problems (i.e., dangers) that must be continually resolved. For example, a red light at an intersection signifies that one is likely to encounter more problems than if the light was green. The messenger may or may not be able to resolve this problem (i.e., fit between the cross-flow of traffic). If she can solve it, laws are ignored. If the rider cannot find a line through, she must stop, but stopping is always a source of frustration. In describing the riding knowledge he had obtained since working as a messenger, Bill explained, that now he can "flow through traffic. [...] Whereas before I probably would have either given the pedestrian the right of way or let the car go the right of way. But, finding those ways to absolutely get myself out of anybody's way and still keep moving, it's something I never really did before." To this point, when I ask Annabel, a rookie, if she liked her job she replied, "Overall, it's fun, but some days it's frustrating." When I ask why, she answered, "Pedestrians and cars get in my way and I can't flow." Months later, Annabel proudly (and somewhat sarcastically) referred to herself as an "artist" after a veteran messenger complimented her increasing skills at urban cycling (i.e., in keeping her flow).

As they move through the city, other objects and users of the city become obstacles and implements for the messenger as they attempt to keep their flow. Pedestrians provide a good example. Colliding with a pedestrian is dangerous for both rider and walker. Of the numerous stories of such accidents, Chuck's weeklong coma stands as a stark reminder of the danger pedestrians pose to cyclists (and vice versa). A basic courier mantra, therefore, is, "Avoid collisions, they slow you down" (Ray, quoted in Geist 1983:B1). Alternatively, pedestrians are also implements of the messengers because jaywalkers can slow down cars, and alter the flow of traffic to the messenger's advantage. Jack refers to this as "the human shield." Nathan, whom I was interviewing at the same time, explained, "Since they are jaywalking, you can be sure that no cars are coming." Jack quick chimed in, "Or, if a car is coming, they'll hit them instead of you." Hence, the human shield. Buses can provide the same effect ("bus shielding"). Both are examples if how messengers creatively (and in some ways, counter-intuitively) *use* the rules and resources of the city (in Giddens's sense of the terms) to ride against the rules (in the legal sense of the term) of the city.

It must be remembered that, this sort of knowledge is often tacit, and even when used consciously, it is decided upon in fractions of a second. In the case of pedestrian shielding, as a messenger speeds towards an intersection, he looks for indications about what may or may not occur as he crosses the plane of the opposing street. The presence of pedestrians helps the rider determine what other vehicles can or cannot do in the following few instances of time. As Bill stated, "It's not necessarily a logical thing. You're not sitting there analyzing. You don't know why

you're doing these things, but your mind is occupied and kind of taking in the fact that there is a car with its left turn signal on over here, there is a pedestrian right there [...]." Or as Howie indicated, "I don't know how the mind works. I'm not consciously saying should I go or should I stop. I'm making decisions really fast."

The difference between the orientation to "rules" and "problems" is demonstrated by the worried and (often times) angry motorist who frets over a cyclist refusing to obey traffic laws (even when there is no danger present). On night in Seattle, as I rode with Jack, he blew through a stop sign. He slipped seamlessly between cars; none of the drivers needed (or had quick enough reflexes) to hit their brakes. Regardless, an extremely irate man yelled from his car, "You're going to get killed riding your bike like that." Jack simply ignored the warning (and threat) and continued riding. A moment later he looked at me calmly and remarked, "No, actually, I'm not going to get killed riding like that. That's how you ride *not* to get hit." Sarah explains this perspective by stating, "[M]essengers know how to ride in urban traffic, and flow *with* traffic. [...] I think that idea of 'we are traffic too' can hurt you more than help you. [...] I try to stay out of the way. [...] I think if I rode and obeyed all the laws and treated myself as traffic, I'd actually be stopping the flow as opposed to going with it."

In this regard, the relationship between the messenger and her bicycle and between herself and traffic is completely divergent from that of the bicycle commuter and the competitive cyclist. For example, all three types of rider are concerned with safety. Non-messengers tend to follow the principles of vehicular cycling (Hurst 2004); bikes should behave like others vehicles on the road and, in turn, be given the same rights as other vehicles. This is Sarah's derision of the "we are traffic too" argument. Alternatively, messengers conceive of bicycles as a sort of supra-traffic. In this conception, cars and pedestrians are required to follow the rules of the road, and cyclists are given clemency to fit between the cracks of the system. The messengers' view of themselves, thus, perfectly reflects a traditional view of agency and structure; that they are free to operate *between* the girders of the structure (see Giddens 1984). As a Chicago messenger explained, "A nice metaphor for it is, if you imagine like water falling over rocks in a stream. There is a natural way to go, and you know, the path of least resistance, etcetera. So, if there is a line of cars in traffic in a street that you're going down, there is just kind of a natural way that you fall through" (Josh, quoted in Mucha and Scheffler 2007).

Time constraints and edgework

When messengers discursively rationalize their riding (or in Josh's case, romantically philosophize it), they often emphasize safety. Corporeal security, however, is only part (and in many ways only a small part) of the equation. There are distinct dangers in the principles of vehicular cycling (see Hurst 2004), but the problem-oriented method of messenger riding has its own very obvious hazards (and the frequency of messenger injuries underlines this fact). Clearly, the messengers' style of riding is primarily concerned with speed and efficiency (in the short run). After all, messengers are paid for making fast deliveries, and regardless of whether they are paid on commission or by the hour, messengers feel compelled to live up to their image.

Speed and efficiency is the essence of bike messenger labor (Stewart 2004). Concurrent with this is the courier's disregard for traffic laws. As Reilly (2000) writes of double rush jobs: "By merely dispatching jobs of that nature, there is the implied order to the courier to break the law" (29). Many couriers cherish the outlaw aspect of the job, and many smaller companies embrace the image as well. Larger companies, like Sprint and CLS, however, maintain strict Don't Ask Don't Tell policies between their riders and their supervisors. They, thus, put a barrier between what everyone at the company knows has to be done and what management is legally willing to be held accountable for. Likewise, one Seattle messenger, nervous about having his picture taken during the course of my research, sarcastically expressed his reservation by stating, "I don't know, something about having to break laws every minute of the day."

Working as a messenger, I was routinely given jobs that could not possibly be completed within the confines of the law (or even common sense). Take, for example, an excerpt from my field notes (06/05/03), "[My dispatcher] radioed me and said he had a 'super rush.' He told me I had less than 15 minutes to go to Broadway Video [at 53 Street and Broadway], and make it down to Deutsche [at 15 Street and Eighth Avenue]. I did it in 12. I did the actual distance in seven (the other five minutes was lost inside Broadway Video)." I could only do this by running red lights and traveling the wrong way down one-way streets. Other, more cavalier messengers could have done this even quicker.

Not surprisingly, when explaining their behavior on the road, messengers cite time constraints as their motivating force. Johnny explained it simply, "You've got to get your job done." To this, Robin added, "How you do your job is how you do it." But, just as a concern for safety is only a partial justification for how a messenger moves through traffic, time constraints alone are not a satisfactory explanation for *why* messengers ride the way they do. As nearly every messenger is quick to point out, riding bikes in the city can be fun—fun precisely because of the dangers generated by the messenger's continual search for speed and efficiency. As Scott explained, "There are actually real times when there are [extremely hard to meet deadlines]. Where, if you wait at red lights, you are not going to make the job. But, almost 90 percent of the time it's not like that. I want to get it done as fast as possible. Even if I have like an hour or something to get eight blocks, it is like I want to be there in one second. So, I'll just run every red light. It's funner to go way faster." Or, as Robin stated (openly admitting the contradiction to his previous justifications for why he rides the way he does), "I am terrible. When I am in no hurry, I am more impatient because I feel that I can get away with it."

In this sense, messenger work is part of the death-defying excitement of edgework (Lyng 1990; also see Kidder 2006a). It is what Marco calls "the thrill of being able to jet through cars." As he explained, "You get that kind of adrenaline rush, and you kind of look back and say, 'Whoa, man, I could have been killed by this car and this and that.' It's shit you don't realize when you're riding because you kind of zone everything out except for the cars within a couple of inches from you." Or as Howie stated, "[T]he urban equivalent of mountain biking is bike messengering." That is, at its peak moments—when trying to make seemingly impossible deadlines (whether they are imposed by the client or merely the rider herself)—messengering is about, as Rhonda said, "pushing every single one of your limits." As Lyng (1990) makes

clear, pushing the edge of your limits can be extremely enjoyable. To this end, Johnny, now "retired" from messengering and working for a successful independent record label, stated, "It is the most fun job I will ever have in my life, without a doubt."

Cities and social worlds

Courier riding and messenger meaning

For Borden, skateboarding is not only the reinterpretation of space. The appropriation of abstract space involves the bodily practice of the skater, but this lived experience cannot occur beyond an engagement with that space. That is, skaters are not unfettered agency, ollieing on top of the city's structure. Instead, skateboarding is realized *within* such space. "In terms of skateboarding's relations to architecture, its production of space is not purely bodily or sensorial; instead, the skater's body produces its space dialectically with the production of architectural space" (101). The skater reads the surface of space to find lines of movement and the body *interfaces* with the physical structure—"a dynamic intersection of body, board, and terrain" (96). It is at this interaction (and only at this intersection) that skaters can produce space on their own terms (terms that have been, in part, constructed by previous conceptions of space). "Above all, it is the engagement with architecture that is important [...], such that the moving body treats architecture as but one projector of space to be interpolated with the projection of space from itself" (107).

The rule-orientation of vehicular cycling applies in all situations—empty country roads and crowded city streets. That is, the specific practices of riding in rural areas or urban areas may differ, but the perspective is the same (i.e., follow the rules of the road and act predictably). Alternatively, the messengers' style of problem-oriented cycling is only viable within the context of urban gridlock. Sarah astutely made this point when trying to explain why the messengers' riding style is about more than time deadlines. "I think downtown riding is different than any riding almost anywhere else in the city. [...] I'm much more aggressive, but it's because I'm downtown. [...] I think it is more downtown versus non-downtown than clock versus off the clock." It is downtown—packed and congested—that there are cracks for the courier to flow through. Messengers cannot ride like messengers outside the downtown core. Whatever puzzles are offered on suburban streets or rural stretches, they are not the challenges surmountable by the messengers' skills with spatial capacity. As such, the edgework of urban cycling is *enabled* by the city. Regardless of how messengers conceptualize themselves in traffic—as pure agency striking out against the structure— the constraints of the city are integral to their actions. In this way, the physical dimensions of Giddens's duality of structure start to come into focus. It is the very limitations of the urban environment (i.e., the gridlock and unavoidable inefficiencies of traffic engineering) that allow messengers to act back upon the city and assert their own conceptions of space onto the city. In other words, the values and behaviors of messengers are intertwined with the physical space of the city.

To understand this, the analysis must move beyond descriptions and explanations of messenger practice and uncover the meanings couriers give to them. It is here that

space becomes explicitly cultural—where we can understand *the significance of emplaced action*. To begin, the problem-oriented method of riding is not confined to the workday. To the contrary, the speed, daring, and creative outlook is carried over into the messengers' non-work life. When I asked Max, for example, if he runs red lights when not working he replied, "Occasionally, sometimes." But, then, thinking it over, stated, "If I look around and there's not a cop, yeah, I'm gonna go for it because I'm on a bike, you're in a car, I'm going to be gone before you get through that light anyway." For Max, this relates to what he calls "the rhythm and flow of the city" and what he sees as his inalienable right to manipulate his way through it. This goes back to Andy and his open disdain for the law; the rules were written for motor vehicles and messengers possess talents that should not be confined to such codes of conduct. This also relates back to Jessica's point about not even knowing she had run a red light. More dramatically, Stan, inviting me to spend time with a group of messengers one weekend, explained that he and his friends "ride around and cause havoc." Later, on a ride from Brooklyn to Queens, rarely stopping for lights, infuriating drivers (one to the point of a physical standoff where a member of our group felt compelled to brandish his bike lock as a weapon—an intimidation tactic that thankfully worked and no physical blows were thrown), I learned just how literal Stan's invitation was.

What Stan's innovation (and the lawlessness of the ensuing ride) underscores is the connection between how a messenger rides and the larger lifestyle that she is part of. Kyle summed it up this way, "It is what you do for a living. It's what you do for a living, but it's not *just* what you do for a living. It becomes way more than that. [...] You're still riding your bike around the same, you're still carrying the same shit in your bag, you just don't have deliveries to pick up and drop. You've replaced it with a six-pack of beer [...]. The distinction between job and hanging out is very blurred in the end of this occupation." In this blurring, it is not just work and leisure that lose their bounds. The wild riding behaviors of messengers become indications of their innermost selves. Edward, frustrated with the condemnation of other, more reserved (and law abiding), cyclists exclaimed, "You don't know about our life and how we live. [...] This is our life." Edward said this while recounting a story of a messenger being severally injured while riding. A similar fate would meet Edward a few months later, but his shattered femur did not alter his worldview.

The epitome of the how messengers live and the cultural values surrounding how messengers ride is the alleycat. As mentioned earlier, alleycats are illegal street races held in open traffic. There is no course or predetermined route of travel. Instead, there are checkpoints dispersed throughout the city. Racers must use their geographic knowledge and skills with spatial capacity (along with cardiovascular fitness) to outwit, as well as outride, their opponents. At each checkpoint racers have their manifest (supplied by the race organizer at the starting line) stamped (a process which mimics the workday and proves that the rider went to each stop). Beyond the need to have a completed manifest, "there are no rules" (as numerous couriers have explained); the first one to the finish line wins. Alleycats vary in complexity, length, and attendance (some draw only a few local racers while others—especially certain New York races—can attract couriers from around the globe). All alleycats, however, are first and foremost hedonistic parties (and athletic competitions a distant second).

Not all messengers race. Some only attend alleycats to drink and socialize. Others avoid them altogether. For those that consider messengering an integral part of their lifestyle, though, races (regardless if one competes or not) are *the* defining event. As Gertrude proclaimed, "I live for these things! It is all I want to do." When I asked Robin to explain why he races, his answer was, "I think that it's mostly because I like what I do enough to want to it again. And, if I'm not [racing] on Friday night, it is funny how much you find yourself talking about it. It's ridiculous. [...] I think that's just it. [Alleycats are] an opportunity to express how much you really like what you do." To this Johnny added, "And, an alleycat boils down your job, like the game aspect of your job, and it is fun to be good at a game, and it is fun to beat other people at games, especially your friends. It is super, super fun." Reiterating Kyle's point, messengering is what these couriers do for a living, but it's not *just* what they do for a living.

Structuration in the city

It goes without saying that bike messengering is a strictly urban occupation. It is equally apparent that alleycats are a purely urban phenomenon. Less obvious, however, is what such simple observations mean for the role of space in cultural theories about urban social worlds. Clearly, messenger practices are emplaced. This fact alone is unlikely to raise the researcher's eyebrows, but it should. To go back to Giddens, the move from dualism to duality has immense repercussions for the conceptualization of structure. Traditionally, structure is generally understood as a constraint—more so, an *external* constraint. And, this is why Lefebvre (1976) believes that "space is a trap" (233); space is naturalized and, thus, its influence is assumed to be neutral. In other words, structure is removed from agency—as if it could exist outside of human action. Conversely, by viewing structure as an external force, the actor's activities are freed from structure, insofar as they do not directly confront the structure. From this perspective, "The structural properties of social systems [...] are like walls of a room from which an individual cannot escape but inside which he or she is able to move at whim" (Giddens 1984:174). Not surprisingly, this view represents the messengers' take on their actions. Summing up her younger (and wilder) years as a messenger, Rosie stated, "There definitely wasn't any social rules, and that was very free."

Theoretically, however, for Giddens (1979:53), this view is flawed. Agency and structure exist in a dialectical relationship—"the notion of action and structure *presuppose one another*." For the purposes of the present argument, the built environment (along with the more commonly theorized rules and resources of society) is "an agentic player in the game" (Gieryn 2000:466). Which is why Lefebvre wants to avoid the trap of space (mere perceptions and conceptions of space) and theorized how space is *lived*. Just as Borden sees skateboarders connected to their use of architecture, couriers are tied to the city's structure. There are good reasons why Rosie feels that there were no social rules and why Marco described his occupation by claiming, "[W]e're pretty much just paid outlaws." Sociologically, however, these lay conceptions miss the duality inherent in courier practices. In terms of structuration, messengers are far less outside the law than inside it. The freedom Rosie describes comes from how messengers use the very strictures (e.g., the flow of traffic and the rules of the road) that contain them.

There is also a second, bolder point to analyzing messenger practice as a form of urban structuration. Messengers not only utilize the rules and resources of the city, but in doing so, they help reconstitute what the city is. Using Geertz (1973), alleycats are a form of "sentimental education" (449)—rituals where messengers express and display their values (see Kidder 2006b). In alleycats, couriers make it clear that they do not care about traffic laws, and instead wildly embrace the potential edgework of dodging cars. Building from Lefebvre, however, alleycats not only educate; they transform the space in which they occur. The utilitarian and rational rules of traffic (inexorably tied to the reproduction of global capital) are turned upside down and used for their own negation. In turning the streets into race courses (either in an alleycat or in making a paid delivery), messengers turn the veins of commerce into the roots of play. It is precisely these sorts of events that Lefebvre (1968) believes can overturn the oppressive cloak of rationalization permeating everyday life.

Conclusions

Structure and agency presuppose one another. This means that structures cannot be understood outside of the reflexively aware individuals whose activities construct them. Likewise, agency is only possible in relation to the structures in which action takes place (physically, mentally, or socially). While theoretically compelling, social researchers have difficulty applying this theoretical insight to their empirical data. And, in the case of physical structures, the issue has been largely ignored altogether. This article is an attempt to help fill the gap by emplacing the culturally significant practices of messengers squarely within the urban environment in which they occur.

As a word of caution, let me state, agency and structure may presuppose on another, however, it is a mistake to assume that structuration requires parity in this dynamic. For example, in Willis's (1977) famous study of working class teenagers, the lads are not cultural dupes. In their various efforts at "having a laff" (at the expense of those in positions authority), they transform their relation to school by redefining the terms of engagement. But, the school itself functions just the same. They have not transformed the school's relationship to them (save the fact that they receive more disciplinary action than the more subdued students). Likewise, messengers are in a dialectic relationship with the city, but the space they produce does not change the urban environment outside their specific interaction with it. As such, the point is not that messengers can appreciably transform the city for others (only those with great power achieve such results). Instead, the argument I am making states that urban social worlds themselves are in a dialectic relationship with the city, and to understand an urban social world the researcher must understand how its actions are emplaced. The challenge for urban students (and social researchers, more generally) is to continue to integrate spatial dimensions into our analyses.

Granted, the social worlds of skateboarders and messengers may utilize the built environment more so than many others. Specifically, the social world of bike messengers and skaters is based around mobility. Conversely, the social worlds typically studied by sociologists are largely immobile (at least in the way they are conceived within the research). Both Gans's and Smalls's subjects, for example, are

rooted in specific places (Boston's West End and South End, respectively). What makes bike messengers (or skateboarders) a compelling case study for structuration is their mobility; it highlights how and why space matters. However, the extreme mobility of this group in contrast to others should not blind us to the mobility others possess. With a few exceptions (e.g., the extremely infirm or the totally incapacitated), to be human is to have (at least some) conscious control over one's moment-to-moment placement in the world. This is integral to the definition of agency (see Giddens 1984). In other words, following Gieryn, Harvey, Lefebvre, Pred, and Soja (and others), it is clear space is always a part of practice. Which is to say, researchers might study workers *in* factories or residents *in* slums, but people in all settings have (varying degrees of) agency over their immediate surroundings as well as the ability to leave the setting for another (at least temporarily). One can think here of Goffman's (1961) study of asylums. Even though confined within total institutions, inmates are not totally powerless; they can make remarkably creative use of the rules and resources to which they are subject.

Of course, the more skeptical (and sociologically cynical) reader (like Gans) may challenge the relevance of material space in social theory altogether. However, in the preceding pages, I have attempted to show (with a rather simple, concrete example) that design is, in fact, a significant part of how human action is carried out. Specifically, I have shown messengers to have a colorful, vibrant, and outlandish social world that has developed around the behaviors city design inadvertently allows. Clearly, there are economic and social factors also at work, but what makes messengering "the best job ever" as so many messengers have called it is the way couriers are able to play with space and turn deliveries into edgework. Further, I have also tried to show, design not only shapes human behavior, but behavior shapes design. That is, while the obdurate form of the built environment remains unaltered, the meaning of the design—how it is experience ("lived," in Lefebvre's conception)— is altered through practice. To ignore this is to fall into the trap of environmental determinism—the belief that city planners can dictate how space is used (the very trap Gans worked so hard to overcome).

By focusing on the duality of urban space, how agents use the rules and resources of the city, we see a glimpse of liberating potential. Not grand-scale revolution, but dramatization of urban space—an alternative to the rationality of everyday life. However, this potential is not realized in spite of the constraints urbanism throws before its occupants, but precisely because of them. In the way messengers use the built environment (regardless of whether we find the behavior itself foolhardy or civically irresponsible) the material world is, at least partially, de-reified. The city, in each instance of messenger transgression, becomes opened up as a site of play. And, it is this potential—a potential open to all individuals in many different ways—that Lefebvre believes can lead to a more fulfilling (i.e., less rationalized) method of social organization. For the purposes of this article, Lefebvre's political agenda is far less important than its theoretical underpinnings. As researchers, whether we are concerned with (French) leftist critiques of everyday life or not, the relevance of emplacing practices should be clear. As the example of messengers shows, the city is not simply a thing in the background of the messengers' social world. Urbanism is a way of life for messengers, but enabled by their creative use of structure, messengers appropriate the city for their own unique purposes.

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