

## Custom Bike Urbanism

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Those who practice Custom Bike Urbanism are citizens from the bottom end of China's polarized society; the people who are typically omitted from the plans created by generic master planning methodology. The spaces they inhabit are relentlessly being marginalised and are often subject to gentrification through urban renewal. Authorities claim that such spaces are dilapidated, unhygienic, and have no value. As a result, street widening in favor of motorized vehicles replaces the living space of custom bikes. Custom Bike Urbanism is a physical reality of the city that enriches people's lives and can be seen as an informal reaction to the current city construction process. The objective of Custom Bike Urbanism is not isolating, but rather engaging. It closely looks into the everyday tactics of people whose livelihood inevitably relies on customized bicycles or tricycles (custom bikes), their process of occupying streets as a field, and making their living through their constant negotiations within existing urban conditions. Custom Bike Urbanism presents a perspective on creating dynamic, multidimensional, and lateral urban spaces that emerge from within. Ultimately, this bottom-up urbanism complements the fixed, selective, and totalizing thinking of the top-down urban planning.

### Customisation as Bricolage

The catalog (pages 72 - 77) is an excerpt of customised bicycles and tricycles sampled during the last five years from

Shanghai and to a lesser extent Beijing. It demonstrates different methods of customising bikes and their adapted use by lower socioeconomic class locals, migrants, and minority groups as a means of transport, and income generation.

Mobile Home (Fig. 01) exemplifies this most directly; a non-registered migrant worker in Shanghai has added a box to the carrier of his tricycle, this is constructed of recycled veneer timber boards with a tiny window cut-out to provide ventilation and view to the street. He rides his bike to construction sites where he works as a day labourer, carries materials and scraps to and from building sites, and sleeps in the box.

Custom bikes are simply made out of bicycles and tricycles purchased at local bicycle markets. Their custom components are usually gathered from local shops or scraps from construction sites, bicycles, tricycles or automobiles. The fabrication technique is rustic and can be self-made or built by local subcontractors at very cheap prices. The pragmatism affiliated with custom bikes is better understood with a concept that Lévi-Strauss refers as bricolage. The term explains the creation of a work by resourceful use of diverse materials that happen to be available. Likewise, regardless of their original purpose, custom bikes make use of whatever materials are at hand. The custom bike defines bikes that go beyond their original function of moving and carrying. The pragmatic approach is further carried out beyond the customisation of bikes themselves and is applied to the ways which they assimilate themselves into existing urban conditions.

### From individuals survival to emergence of hot spots in the city

Among the different custom bikes, the ones that are frequently seen on streets with heavy pedestrian traffic are employed in retail activities. By means of their bikes, these rider-owners can make a daily income. Mobility is the crucial factor for their business. The bike allows them to move across the city, to engage customers and to quickly ride away from the local police when they crack down on illegal street vendors. Their instability allows them to occupy 'in-between' spaces of the city, optimizing their business opportunities. They can stop at the entrance of a gated residential community, a boundary between private and public territory, a bus stop, a transit point with a News stand (Fig. 17) waiting for customers, a back street in a business district, a concealed space between buildings in which a food vendor sells breakfast (Fig. 11), or a large blank space around buildings resulting from the district plan set back regulation in which street vendors open a market (Fig. 15). All of those 'in-between' spaces are otherwise empty, or merely for passing through. Fig. 28 explains a unique situation that a fruits vendor occupies a temporarily blank wall of a building demolition site. He takes advantage of the location next to an existing fruit market. Occupancy by custom bikes temporarily converts space into places of attraction in the city.

When custom bikes collectively assemble, they turn urban spaces into more contested spaces. Custom bikes can turn local food markets into open-air farmers' markets, spontaneously turn the entrance of supermarkets into flea markets, create night markets in the downtown

back alleys, or turn streets into bars and Karaoke Television districts into late night public dining areas. All of the newly created places are appreciated by local residents and outsiders, regardless of gender, class and ethnicity. From Chinese Muslims cooking beef and lamb kebabs on the street to sweets vendors from Xinjiang region that present their ware like food pyramids (Fig. 30), aggregation of custom bikes amplifies existing urban conditions and generates vital and dynamic temporally hot spots in the city.

#### **Mobility / Ecology / Infrastructure**

The convenience of custom bikes' mobility complements the insufficiency of infrastructure driven development, and promotes environmentally friendly urban behaviour. The Taxi Bike (Fig. 32), for example, enables short distance movement for those who have to travel a few city blocks in Beijing, from subway station to their office buildings. The Bike Taxi contributes to a more ecological way of transport in the city. Distribution and collection of reusable water-cooler bottles using custom bikes is now an ecological water supply system that has become a part of citizens' everyday life in Shanghai (Fig. 07). This system of recycling is not strictly enforced by regulations in Chinese cities. Custom bikes collecting recyclable refuse are active participants in domestic waste recycling (Fig. 31). The Disjunction brought about in the transitional periods of city development is bridged by custom bikes. A 'Gas Distributor (Fig. 06)' bike rides into narrow and meandering lanes in the old part of the city in order to distribute cylinders to households that are not connected to gas line infrastructure.

#### **Informal to formal**

The informality of custom bikes is formalised in cases where they infiltrate into public sectors. Cheap labour resources are utilized by government appointed divisions to maintain and beautify the public spaces and facilities of the city. For instance, Dust Collectors (Fig. 33) are allocated all over the city, and the streets are zoned into distinct areas for each of them to clean. They manually sweep roads with a broom and collect garbage on the street. Although it may seem illogical in the eyes of western rationalism, the system can respond with flexibility to different road conditions. City Cleaners (Fig. 34) wash roads and public facilities such as benches, street ramps and trash cans using water supplied from fire hydrants on the streets. City Cleaners gain rights to use the public resources. The same source of water is used by Moving Sprinklers (Fig. 35) to water plants and trees along public streets. The formalisation of custom bikes thus provides employment opportunities to those who previously were precluded from the master plans, and bring them public rights.

#### **Towards a dynamic equilibrium**

Custom-Bike Urbanism is another urbanism. It exerts itself into urban spaces where multiple differences can then coexist. Nested within the existing city, it challenges generic master plan's closure and control, and contributes to more dynamic cities that reflect a multitude of individuals. It formulates the city as a space of differences through mutual dependency of mobility and fixity, which together produce dynamic relationships in multiple places and spaces. The mobility of custom bikes destabilises urban spaces and transforms them into places

of activity that include a broad range of the actors of the city. The instability that characterises these custom bikes is positive, as long as it produces and sustains openness. Custom Bike Urbanism does not replace or overwrite the city with imposed plans. It rather oscillates and thickens layers of the city from within and vitalizes urban spaces essentially left for interpretation by the generic master plans. It mobilizes the city in dynamic equilibrium and eventually leads to more sustainable city development. ■