



adreamgrowsin Brooklyn

"TIME'S UP!" AND THE BATTLE FOR NEW YORK'S STREETS

It's November in New York, the sun is out but with no power to warm. I'm walking across the Williamsburg Bridge with a photographer friend, tagging along really, in search of an elusive urban habitué, the bike messenger, which we were told can be found, huddled like migratory waterfowl, on the far shore. I'm envisioning a clutch of mohawked parolees with lip piercings and difficult life stories etched into wind- and sun-chapped faces, drinking coffee and smoking reefer. I have the thrilling sense of entering an alien world, an anthropologist on Mars. My friend just wants some good shots.

Text > Richard Oesterheld Images > Russ Lamoureux



I'll fix this
too if I
can call dibs
on it.
Might be a
week or so...
xo
Leslie
(I ♥ Folders)

But our quest will be waylaid by a group whose in-your-face tactics have polarized New York. Are they a lunatic fringe of environmentally minded cyclists forcing change on an unwilling city, or a respectable grassroots organization of over 20 years standing whose hard-won concessions have been co-opted by a chic urban reformer in the mayor's office?

The bike messengers, alas, will have to wait.



As we cross into Brooklyn, having walked from Manhattan on a level of the bridge reserved for bikes and pedestrians, we notice a pair of bright yellow saloon doors nestled between a dicey-looking bar and a hipster gym. Next to the doors, under a graffiti portrait of Che Guevara (is there any other kind?), stands a custom vending machine dispensing all manner of biking paraphernalia: chains and alarms; tubes and locks. No actual cyclists just yet, but clearly we're getting warm.

There's a flyer taped to the machine for a group called Time's Up! Russ, my photographer friend, is already taking shots. Up the street a gaggle of film students shoots a movie. There's a faint smell of perfectly cooked porterhouses drifting over from the legendary Peter Luger's steakhouse. And everywhere, Hasidim in head-to-toe black, their deliberate presence lending the area a certain old world gravitas.

Into this scene Baruch Herzfeld materializes. He's an affable, somewhat doughy, very talkative thirty-something in green arm warmers and a pub hat. His rapid-patter speech is thick with the influences of a Brooklyn-Jewish upbringing. We start talking. A rabbi stops to ask him if he's been to temple. Herzfeld deflects the question, tells him, "This guy's taking my picture for a rabbi card." (Trading cards collected by Hasidic boys.) To a boy who grew up in a starch-collar Lutheran church, this sort of cheekiness is shocking. The rabbi moves on.

As delightful as Herzfeld is, he's just the opening act, the gatekeeper, albeit a crucial one: he donates the space that Time's Up! uses in Brooklyn. What exactly Time's Up! is, apart from a shameless borrower of Act Up!'s name-as-a-call-to-action, we don't know—yet. There are tantalizing clues—the vending machine, a bike pump



dispensing "free" air, stickers with eco-revolutionary argot and a cryptic logo—but no solid answers. That's okay. Herzfeld knows just the guy.

We're off to see the wizard.

It's a little known fact that New York was the first American city to create a bike lane, in 1894, at the height of the national craze for the new "safety" bike of the sort we ride today, with chains and sprockets and tires of equal size. But then came cars, then highways, entrenched interests, and in the space of a decade or two, bikes and lanes dedicated to them were off the agenda. New York was for motorists.

It wasn't until the 1980s, when acid rain was lashing the planet and a newly discovered hole in the ozone layer caused a worldwide freakout

over global warming, that bikes entered the discussion in New York once again, as the original zero-emission vehicle. But progress, as George Bernard Shaw put it, depends on the unreasonable man. Where could such a guy be found? Not in the mayor's office: Mayor Koch's last effort involved removing bike lanes, after taxi drivers and deliverymen and incensed commuters—the only voices that seemingly counted—called for his head.

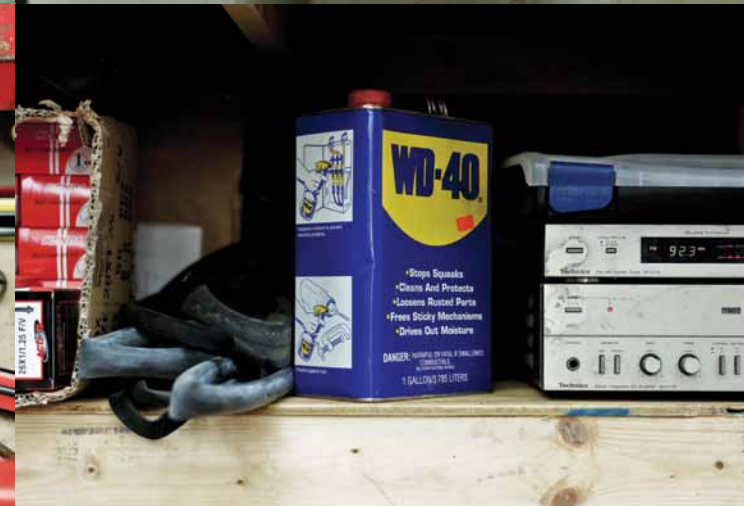
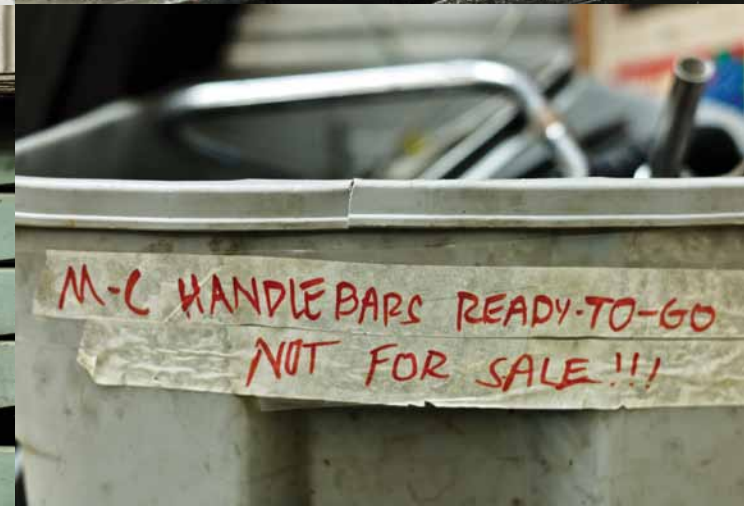
That the unreasonable man would turn out to be a Lower East Side plumber; that his efforts to get New Yorkers out of their cars and onto bikes would predate City Hall's push by nearly twenty years (and would often be opposed violently by the city's police); and that his tireless advocacy would, arguably, make the current, wholesale rejiggering of public space

in New York possible, seems, well, the stuff of Broadway theater.

Herzfeld takes us past the yellow doors and up a narrow passageway to an open-air repair shop canopied with bike wheels and shaded by the Williamsburg bridge. Bad pop music blares. There are tools and frames and rusty bike racks, beer cans, half-drunk Pom Wonderfuls, jury-rigged power lines looped over nails—a ramshackle atelier.

There's also an indoor space crammed with literature and video equipment and volunteers (and an iffy toilet). It's apparent that the real heart of the place is the workshop, outside.

Which is where we finally meet the wizard, Bill DiPaola, though at the moment we enter he's pruning shrubbery with an oscillating saw,



guerilla-style. He's middle aged, with the lean build of a cyclist and a face that's stubbornly European.

He sets down his saw and spends a few minutes—just a few—with us. (This is one of three New York-area facilities he oversees.) If Herzfeld is a trumpet, DiPaola is more nylon-stringed guitar, quiet but insistent. Most of what I'll learn about Time's Up! will actually come later, when DiPaola and I talk by phone.

DiPaola was born and raised in New York. By 1987, the year he founded Time's Up!, he'd graduated college and fallen into work as a plumber after the Peace Corps turned him down. ("They needed people who knew about irrigation and water systems.") Then came the realization: he didn't have

to leave the city to make a difference; he could have an impact here, where he lived and worked. In fact, he was already, by riding from job to job rather than driving.

Time's Up! started small, making posters and handouts, holding the occasional march or rally—raising awareness. Said DiPaola, "It was a little early, a little difficult for New York City." Time's Up! was background noise.

They shifted strategies in the 90s, focusing more "on transportation issues." They started with group bike rides in Central Park, waving banners that demanded "Cars Out of the Park!" An idea floated over from the West Coast: Critical Mass Rides, where cyclists took to the

streets en masse to reclaim the share of the road lost to them more than a century earlier. Time's Up! gave its stamp of approval. Then came themed rides, with costumes and performers, Moonlight Rides, the introduction of Pedicabs, mentions in *The New York Times* and the *New Yorker*.

Time's Up! was on the map, and bicycling, for better or worse, became its *raison d'être*.

Read about cycling in New York City and one statistic comes up again and again: 250 miles of new bike lanes created in the past four years. More often than not, that number will be accompanied by the name, if not a photo, of Janette Sadik-Khan, New York's Transportation Commissioner, appointed in 2007 by



Mayor Bloomberg. She is attractive and girlishly thin, with a sense of style that has endeared her to New York's fashion-conscious classes.

Her accomplishments are legion: all those new bike lanes; a re-do of Times Square that transformed it from a traffic corridor into an Italian-style piazza; a whole section of Broadway closed to traffic; pop-up plazas across the city; and her next big idea: a public bike share. "She's been doing a lot of really great things," noted DiPaola.

What gets lost in the rush to wreathe Sadik-Khan in laurels is a less convenient fact: that somehow, before her arrival, other people in the city had managed to get 500 miles of bike lanes installed, and this in an era when the Department of Transportation's own bicycle czar felt compelled to quit, saying "I came to the conclusion that the department is not truly committed

to promoting bicycling in New York." (New York Times, 8/21/2006)

The heaping of plaudits on the newcomer—Time's Up! has been around for 23 years—ranks: "It [cycling] happened, but direct action made it happen." And DiPaola is quick to point out that without education, without a city-sponsored plan to change norms and attitudes, bike lanes "are just paint." He wants cyclists to stop thinking of bicycling as recreation or sport, best done with ten speeds or fixed gears, and at high speed. (Time's Up! pioneered a hauntingly beautiful campaign, now national, to highlight cyclist deaths: "ghost" bikes, painted all white, stationed at accident sites as memorials.) The future is the Dutch-style commuter bike. "People sit up differently," note DiPaola. "They're much taller, they can see the road. They don't travel as fast."

Much has been achieved; much remains to be done. Talk to DiPaola and you will hear one word repeated again and again: community. He talks of the bicycling community, of course, but also of the communities the bike lanes traverse, the environmental community. He wants nothing less than the Amsterdam-ification of New York. (A goal not without its ironies: New York was established as a Dutch colony, New Amsterdam.)

Those rusty heaps in his workshop? Commuter bikes, brought over from China, being assembled 50 at a time by an army of volunteers, available to the public for \$120. That's the work DiPaola bends himself to as our brief chat concludes, but only after he turns up the music to drown out the thrum of traffic overhead.]p[

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