Community bike workshops: creating vélonomie through the social economy

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Working Bikes, Chicago

https://youtu.be/3M05VQpQgqs?t=21s
https://youtu.be/OSFHsuNdYjA?t=12s
1. The community bike workshop
2. Promoting the “invisible cyclist”

Space
People
Missions
Networks

3. Summing up
1. The community bike workshop

The Bike Shed, CERES, Melbourne Australia

What is going on here?

www.thebikeshed.org.au/
A community bike workshop is:

• A ‘not-for-profit community-based organisations formed around the restoration and maintenance of bicycles’ .... Facilitating cycling as a form of sustainable transport

• Or, more radically – a workshop where you can work independently/autonomously on your own bike --

• «Un atelier ouvert est un poste de travail bien équipé mis à la disposition des clients pour qu’ils viennent y travailler de manière autonome sur leur propre vélo. » CyCLO Brussels
Volunteer workers (and some paid) who have mechanical skills

Bikes parts ($cheap) and tools

People with bike problems, desire to own a bike, looking for parts, skills

The workshop ‘assemblage’ or ‘social field’ comprises: people, things, social interactions
The social field is bigger

Volunteer **workers** (and some paid)

**People** with bike problems, desire to own a bike, looking for parts, skills

**A building** – and discarded or gifted parts and bikes from all over the city or region.

**The institution** – governance, rules, mission, physical and online status

Outside **networks** – bike advocacy, government, NGOs, community economy

**Knowledge and skills** - imparting these, helps to socialise and demystify technology

**Social interaction** - as part of community capacity building and empowerment. Non-market based transactions and local scale interactions
Workshops:

• Part of a ‘community or diverse economy’
• A non-capitalist DIY entity that recycles and re-uses low technology
• Urban commons open to all
• Commitment to low carbon, sustainable mobility or grassroots solutions to mobility issues
• A social care ethos in a community hub, and a broad social field of citizens, workers, volunteers across gender, race and age
• Nascent social enterprises, that often grow
• Commitment to “innovation” (skills learning and knowledge transmission)
• Bicycle justice, social justice. Sometimes a citizens’ movement, activist, environmentalist, and challenging transport norms.

Little researched.
2. The importance of recognising “the invisible cyclist”

– Cyclists remain ‘invisible’ to the majority of drivers in low-cycling cities (but not to cycling organisations, planners, and certain scholars and policymakers)

– ‘Right to the city’ should include ‘right to mobility’, following Henri Lefebvre.

– Invisibility is made worse by existing policies – e.g. bad infrastructure, and in Belgium car leasing - 36.7% of all cars registered in Brussels are company cars (Vito 2014)
Sustainable transport organisations and policymakers have strong mobility plans, but focus on what they know best – carrots, or supply side (infrastructure, cycle lanes, more public transport) not demand.

....and are often hijacked by politicians when trying to restrict driving (as with changing the tax system, or narrowing the roads).

Henri Lefebvre was right – market logic suppresses the right to the city... “They conceive and realize without hiding it, for the market, with profit in mind.” (Lefebvre 1968)

Urban developers want “privileged consumption”, (urban cycling is now enlisted in this as a hip, gentrifying activity but not its more risky, anarchic component like community workshops).
Reducing invisibility and promoting justice?

• We can learn from those that have adapted to urban congestion through active transport modes, creating “Bicycle Justice” (Adonia Lugo et al, 2016 Bicycle Justice. Routledge)

• We should try to understand a mobility subculture already committed to sustainable transport; a DIY culture driven by self-help (and belief)

• Look beyond the transport issue to the place that bike organisations have in a community, and in an economy.
Research methods

• Participant-observation
• Semi structured interviews with key personnel; collaboration with Dr. Ruth Lane, Monash and Masters student Bernardita del Real
• So far; 28 workshops visited in USA, UK, France, Belgium, Australia, NZ

Yep, it’s a bike
Workshops visited

- The Bike Shed, Melbourne (all)
- Mechanical Tempest, Wellington, NZ (SB) 2014
- Bath Bike Workshop, Bath UK (SB) 2013
- Velorution, Paris (BRH) 2015
- La Vélostation, Strasbourg, France (BRH) 2015
- Bretz’Selle, Strasbourg, France (BRH) 2015
- Ateliers de la rue Voot, Brussels, Belgium (SB, 2015)
- The Bike Shack, Seattle, USA (Mar 2015) SB
- The Bike Farm, Portland, USA (April 2015) SB
- The Bicycle Kitchen, Los Angeles USA (RH&SB, 2013)
- BICAS, Tucson AZ, USA (SB when living there in the 2000s, and SB April 2015)
- Working Bikes, Chicago IL, USA (SB and RL, April 2015) article March 2015
- West Town Bikes, Chicago IL, USA (RL, April 2015)
- Cyclo Bockstael, Laken, Brussels (SB, May 2015)
- Cyclo Vlaamsesteeneenweg 85 (brief)
- Vélo Pital, Woluwé, Brussels (SB, May 2015)
- Maison des Cyclistes, Mons, Belgium (SB, June 2015 to rent a bike, brief chat!)
- Fahrradwerkstatt in Regenbogenfabrik, Kreuzberg, Berlin, Germany (SB, June 2015) (legalised squat with other activities too)
- ADFC Werkstatt, Berlin-Mitte, Germany (SB and Matthias Kowasch) (part of ADFC German bike club)
- Biketopia, Berkeley
- Bike Kitchen, San Fran

Workshops volunteered at

- Vélorution, Paris (BRH) 2015
- La Vélostation, Strasbourg (BRH) 2015
- The Bike Shed, Melbourne (BN)
- La Cyclopera+va, Brussels (SB, 2015)
Space

Locality – where are the workshops?

– In most cities, workshops are found in locations with cheap rents, guaranteed space, or among populations with particular needs.

– Locations move/are unpredictable, and less present in more affluent outer suburbs.

– In Brussels, they are dispersed around the CBD. Some link to social disadvantaged areas.
Premises

• Little is needed – secure storage and room for tools and stands
  – financial outlays generally small
  – Content and size of premises varies from bare walls and bikes, no water or electricity, to massive warehouses
  – At least two workshops bought their buildings but have to pay bank loans, eg Bike Kitchen LA, Working Bikes
  – 123Velo, Fahrradwerkstatt in Kreuzberg, Berlin and Worcester Earn-a-Bike pay little or nothing as part of a collective, except utilities.
  – Bike Shed in Melbourne paid nothing for years, but does now.
  – Assured: ADFC Werkstatt Berlin, Ateliers Rue Voot, VeloPital UL Woluwe, CyCLO Ateliers
**Fahrradwerkstatt** in Regenbogenfabrik, Kreuzberg, Berlin

Survived the squatter evictions of the 1980s, many cognate activities on site
Bike Kitchen, East Hollywood, Los Angeles — space was bought with a donation after years in an apartment building and then a shopfront. Appointments needed

**MONDAY:** 12:00pm to 5:00pm
**MONDAY NIGHT:** "Bicycle Bitchen" (female-identified only): 6:30pm to 9:30pm
**TUESDAY thru THURSDAY:** 6:30pm to 9:30pm
**SATURDAY:** 12:00pm to 4:00pm
**SUNDAY:** 2:00pm to 6:00pm

4429 Fountain Ave, LA CA 90029
BICAS, Tucson, AZ, USA (since 1989) – a stable, rented warehouse for 2 decades, with investment (but now they have moved)
BICAS, Tucson
Shop and counter

Tues-Sun 11-6pm
13 paid staff
Address: 44 W. 6th Street
http://bicas.org/
Bike Shack, University district, Seattle
shared space with community tool loan centre; an
unremarkable mid-priced neighbourhood with locals and
some students

A bigger workshop is downtown in Seattle
**Worcester MA, Earn a Bike** – basement of ‘Shared Soup’ community House in the cheapest and most disadvantaged part of town (Main South), bought with pooled funds from 2 members in 2010 ‘Main South ‘. All wooden buildings, this one rebuilt after 2009 fire.

**Hours (closed in Winter)**
Earn-a-Bike  
Saturdays 11-4  
Women and Trans Night  
Tuesdays 6-9pm  
Adult Night  
Thursdays 6-9pm

[www.worcesterearnabike.org](http://www.worcesterearnabike.org)
Shop Hours
Mon: 4-9pm
Wed: 4-9pm
Fri: 12-4pm
Sat: 12-4pm
Sun: 12-4pm
Women & Trans: 1st & 3rd Tuesdays 4:30 – 7:30pm
Noche Bilingüe: 2nd Tuesdays 4:30 – 7:30pm
Open Shop Night: 1st Thursdays 6:00 – 9:00pm

Bike Farm, Portland – recently rented cheaply after GFC and the fall in rents.
Huge space in hipster East Portland neighbourhood, 1810 NE First Ave. bilingual
Working Bikes, Chicago.
Emerged from a small single-person effort to become a giant operation with thousands of bikes in storage, volunteers, and some paid staff. Bought a three floor warehouse in a poorer neighbourhood, Pincen, with a truck loading bay.

http://www.workingbikes.org

Hours We are open for sales & repairs
Wednesday 12 – 7
Thursday 12 – 7
Friday 12 – 5
Saturday 12 – 5

3 floors
6000 bikes exported each year to Africa
1000 donated to local community
Biketopia, south Berkeley

- Shopfront, zoned commercial. Open each weeknight
- Fix yourself, or the shop will charge to do it
- Many women volunteers, many students

http://www.biketopiaberkeley.org/
Aims, missions

There are three main types of workshops:

A) Volunteer community workshops (ateliers vélo communautaire avec des bénévoles) working towards vélonomie (bicycle autonomy), with different levels of additional commitment to social transformation among them, and usually a ‘leader’ or ‘representative’ to obtain non profit status (asbl, 501c nonprofit, etc.)

- Mechanical Tempest in Wellington NZ, Worcester Earn a Bike, the Bike Shed in Melbourne, Seattle Bike Shack, Portland Bike Farm, Biketopia
- Cycloperativa, 123 Vélo, Vélo Pital
123 Velo, Brussels, regularised squat with only volunteers and little or no link to government. Source of Critical Mass, International CM 2015, etc.

“123Velo works on sharing skills and stuff. We survive thanks to gifts of unused, broken, crashed bikes and spare parts. Here anybody can repair or learn to repair their bike. The most keen can build their own bike from scratch, but also build utility, experimental or artistic projects - whatever rolls!”

« .....Les bases du 123vélo sont l’échange de compétences et de matériels. Nous vivons grâce aux DONS de vélos non-utilisés, cassés, accidentés, ainsi que de toutes pièces tachées ou détachées. Ici tout le monde peut réparer ou apprendre à réparer son vélo. Les plus motivés pourront construire leur propre vélo en partant de zéro, mais aussi tout autre projet utilitaire, expérimental ou artistique, tant qu’il roule ! »
Cycloperativa, Rue du Midi, Brussels

Mission*
The association has a goal to promote and defend the environment and the quality of life in the city, by promoting bike use in a cooperative way. The major objective is to support the use of bikes in Anneessens through offering a repair workshop as a vector for social cohesion.

L’association a pour but de promouvoir et de défendre l’environnement et la qualité de vie en ville par la promotion du vélo dans une démarche de coopération.
L’objectif principal est de favoriser l’usage du vélo à Anneessens par la mise à disposition d’un atelier de réparation comme vecteur de cohésion sociale.

Open: Monday night, 6-9

*[Cycloperativa La saga d’un atelier de vélo collectif à Anneessens 2015]*

A two year cheap lease ended in 2015. Moved again 2017
B) Workshops with paid labour and shop pricing “social enterprises”

BICAS Tucson, Working Bikes Chicago, Rue Voot, Cyclo Bockstael/Atelier

- Social enterprise model. Retaining non-profit status (after bills and wages are paid)
- Shop fees charged
- But also some subsidies (*subventions*) with conditions – *Cyclo Bockstael*
C) Workshops with a wider mission – aid and social welfare

• Bath Bikes UK, attached to Julian House (a homeless charity), Working Bikes in Chicago

• Are they really community workshops? (Working Bikes has some community volunteering, Bath doesn’t)
Rules are surprisingly well developed

Biketopia, Berkeley – no rules

Guided for volunteers, Portland

Rules, Working Bikes, Chicago
The big division and the ‘transformation’ of workshops
‘Volunteer run’ vs. ‘transition to a social enterprise’.
Depends on success, and the attitudes of key personnel.

**Type a)** Volunteer status is maintained [with probable financial and premises difficulties], and is one in the eye for capitalism, but requires much ‘bricolage’ and (ironically) some forward planning.

**Type b)** workshops with paid staff still teach vélonomie but reach a different audience when they charge $$$, and tend to forego radical actions. BICAS in Tucson shows this – to get grants and city government support, compromises are made.
People

Volunteers and paid staff

- Activists and professionals mix in workshops with different goals – some are ‘bike enthusiasts’, most want better urban transport, others want non-profit organisations supporting social goals
- E.g. Matt in Worcester MA– an unpaid student and local community organiser
- Gender race and class. A lot of men! (esp.Brussels). Very few women mechanics (Brussels=3/44 in 13 workshops)
- ‘Hands tied training’ to transfer skills, in Vélorution, Paris
All workshops have 1-3 originators, leading to teams of 3-8 key staff. A critical point is when the originator withdraws, when the personnel change, or if disagreements result.
Professionals; A. and M.- paid and committed staff (BICAS Tucson and Working Bikes Chicago).

Cyclo Bockstael, Laken (since 2014)
ADFC Werkstatt, Berlin-Mitte, Germany
A volunteer for 13 years in centre photo, says he ‘simply repairs’.
Housed in ADFC, they take donations and open 3 times a week
Vélo Pital, campus Univ. Louvain, Woluwe – crazy medical students
Clientèle

- Mostly, those within cycling distance
- Also local residents, with variable ethnicity, age and gender (see next slide) and with/without bikes
- Mainly local residents at Cycloperativa, and most US workshops (not in Berlin – people come many km)
- Multilingual + or -
- Students, at campus workshops!
- Are workshops changing travel behaviour for new converts (demand side) or just providing cheap repair options for individual cyclists?
- Social capital building is clear in Paris, and some Brussels examples – but not quantified

Beursschouwburg Hipsters
People who attend workshops in the Wallonie network (french speaking Belgium) http://l’heureuxCyclage.be  32% women. Age mix unremarkable

Cycling population in Brussels, c. 70% men (ProVelo 2012)
Rising immigrant population cycling (Rijsbosch 2013)
39% aged 20-39
Networks and linkages

Several forms;

• Internet réseaux (networks) and information exchange. Within city – links to other like-minded organisations, particularly those dealing with a different aspect of social action and bikes (e.g. in Portland), Bike Hack, advocacy groups in Brussels - GRACQ [Groupe de Recherche et d’Action des Cyclistes Quotidiens ASBL]– Fietsersbond (member association).

• Ambivalence about networking among volunteer workshops. Anarchist sentiment, a lack of time, lack of interest

New business, Portland, Bike Farm is around corner
Portland Bike Farm works with the [http://www.communitycyclingcenter.org](http://www.communitycyclingcenter.org) that refurbishes and sells bikes and offers youth programs.
• Critical Mass – on the Brussels CM site, clear links to workshop participation, and the Vélorution Internationale in July 2015 in Brussels has workshop visits organised.

• Across regions and countries - *Heureux Cyclage (France, Wallonie)* and *Bike-Bike (US)*

• Links to the state – considerable ambivalence – even in “socialist” France.

• A ‘dance’ takes place between official institutions and the grassroots protest movement – only sometimes are they partners
France – 120 workshops, 220 paid employees, good spatial coverage, 2014

Source: Heureux Cyclage survey, 2014
3. Summing up

Culture

• The workshop is an assemblage with its own internal dynamics, but it is embedded in places, communities and wider networks.

• Workshops rely on word of mouth, volunteerism, friendship, fun – and are part of the cultural attributes of the city.

• ...but they also teach skills and support ‘rights to the city’....especially through creating demand for cycling.

• Volunteer workshops are not ‘sustainable’ without their “situated knowledge” – do they lose this if they become more conformist?

• Some workshops escape the locality, and probably provide more employment, when they do so.
Planning

• To stimulate sustainable transport, workshops will play a role. But they are still largely “invisible” to mainstream ‘sustainable mobilities’ planning, perhaps because some are populist, local, and political. They can’t be ‘controlled’ easily. (Brussels city offers some support, through working with CyCLO etc. and small grants)

• But - city managers may finally be realising that better bike infrastructure SUPPLY, does not itself create a bike culture –DEMAND for a velo city does

• Workshops assist that culture.

• They also accompany middle class gentrification processes
A workshop is a speck in a dynamic, and changing, urban system. Part of a neighbourhood, and a social movement, in vibrant cities. But a very important one – these specks are growing.

Vive L’atelier!
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