

Back Pedaling  
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## **The Cycling Psychogeographer: Getting Started**

*by William Humber*

In my previous column I examined the emerging field of psychogeography. It has the potential to unleash on the landscape unarmed, except for notebooks and cameras, discoveries of traditional downtowns, troubled high rise jumbles of disconnected buildings in the old first generation of post second world war suburbs, or the fast disappearing countryside in the megapolitan city region.

The latter is a territory, in Toronto's case stretching towards Orillia in the north, to Peterborough in the east, Kitchener in the west, and Niagara Falls around the Lake Ontario bend, and represents the larger world in which we travel not just for work, but often school, and, more than we care to admit, recreation and entertainment.

Up until now the psychogeography field has been dominated not only by pedestrians but philosophically by a preponderance of emphasis on the well-known big city core, not surprising given its genesis in Guy Debord's Paris. Consider the odd actions of situationist acolytes of people like Debord who take their discovery to the next level of action. You quickly realize the realm of engagement is largely confined to public art in back alleys, small plantings in derelict public lands in the inner city, and for the more adventurous, wearing cycling shorts on the subway in the middle of winter.

Unfortunately that's a long way from reclaiming the car-dominated world most people experience. If there's a reason however that people don't venture outside of traditional places, it's perhaps the sheer drabness of so much of the built environment, a world James Howard Kunstler described as demonstrating a lack of inspiration so depressing no amount of Prozac could ever provide a remedy.

Will Self the author of a new book on Psychogeography expanded his pedestrian wanderings to include cycling from Liverpool, in his native England, to Manchester by way of a ship canal. In the process he encountered what were once the arteries of the greatest shipbuilding centre in the world now reduced to weeds and neglect, and despairing of such places took to the route of a dismantled railway across country to Altrincham.

The latter proved such a muddy slough that he finally ended the journey by folding up his bike and taking a tramcar the last leg of the journey. In so doing however he revealed a world that if ever seriously tackled in an integrated fashion by addressing a palimpsest of once proud infrastructure, the nearness of water, and the charms of a decayed natural

world, might produce that thing every city in the world is now pursuing, its uniqueness as a place where people want to live and invest in. It's a formula for treasuring the past but using it in imaginative ways to envision a future remarkable for the ways restoration can create something unexpected and new, not simply a fossilization of what went before.

Unleashing on the environment a well equipped cycling battalion with their notebooks and digital cameras can begin laying the foundation out of which a lively identity emerges.

Much of our extended urban world is characterized not just by the drab but by an incredible emptiness - few people on the streets, little reason to be there, and in some cases real danger not from gun wielding crazies but well meaning people in fast cars oblivious to anyone else. We have lost many things, which once told us the story of a place. City newspapers are simply too big to tell our local stories, and a once lively local press has, in almost all communities, been replaced by soulless publications devoted to endless consumerism, big box stores and the briefest recording of a few significant events.

The psychogeographer on wheels can reclaim this story, and armed with digital camera, and a web site can help reinvent a place, record its regular changes and impose on even the drabest pictures, more liberating visions. This would be a project of truly revolutionary scope and imagination. I know from my own experience of cycling the back roads around Bowmanville that I encountered a story I could only find this way.

On Will Self's tour he tried to interest five Mancunians in a Thai restaurant as to his day's journey from Runcorn to Sale. But he notes, "This remark went blissfully unacknowledged." But the very idea of its being so foreign to a regular group of people should tell anyone with a sense of uncovering the unknown that here is a trip worth taking.