

2015

The Great Good Bicycle Shop: Exploring the Community Roles of a Neighborhood Business

Timothy J. Wesolowski
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honorstheses>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Wesolowski, Timothy J., "The Great Good Bicycle Shop: Exploring the Community Roles of a Neighborhood Business" (2015). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 137.
<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.126>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

The Great Good Bicycle Shop: Exploring the Community Roles of a Neighborhood Business

by

Timothy J. Wesolowski

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

in

University Honors

and

Community Development

Thesis Advisor

Richard L. White, Ph.D.

Portland State University

2015

Acknowledgements

There are many people without whom I could not have possibly finished this thesis. First I'd like to thank my parents and family for their constant support both in and out of school; thanks for trusting me to eventually make it here. I'd also like to show my appreciation to all my friends who have put up with my aloofness during the research and writing processes.

I have to thank Dr. Richard White for his dedication to the Community Development program here at PSU, and his valuable guidance in this project as well as in my growth as a student and citizen of the world.

Some of the richest sources cited in here came from Fred Clements and the National Bicycle Dealers Association: my most sincere thanks for the materials and your dedication to local bike shops across the county. And last but certainly not least, to all of those who participated in the interviews that made this project come to life – thanks for taking the time to talk shop with me.

Abstract

The local bicycle shop (LBS) has long served its neighborhood as a retail establishment and service center, but little has been done to analyze its influence on the greater community. After examining the categories of people who cycle and frequent bike shops, a rough typology of the different kinds of bike shops often found in a city was synthesized. This paper examines the different roles or assets that a given shop can be in a neighborhood. From a third place or anchoring institution to advocate for and even component of cycling infrastructure, the LBS fulfills one or several of these responsibilities to its community. The definitions of these four community assets will provide insight into how the average bicycle shop might act as such. Specific shops in the city of Portland are then carefully examined through observation and staff interviews to determine the extent to which these roles are actually performed. This paper suggests that a community that wishes to establish or maintain itself as friendly towards cycling should recognize the LBS as a crucial part of that image by providing a unique place for all people to gather, socialize, and exchange knowledge.

Introduction

Since the late 1990's, bicycling as a means of recreation as well as transportation has grown significantly in popularity in the United States (Pucher, Komanoff, & Schimek, 1999), but as of 2005 it was estimated that only 0.4% of all adults commuted to work by bike (Handy & Xing, 2011, p.92). Cycling is an excellent mode of sustainable transportation and a number of major cities are embracing and promoting this trend as a relatively simple way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It has also been found that an increased presence of cyclists results in a lower number of bicycle/automobile accidents, likely due to an increase in motorists' awareness of bicycles as a legitimate mode of transportation (Jacobsen, 2003). Portland, Oregon is one such city and has for many years been considered a model for bicycle transportation infrastructure in this country. As more and more individuals choose to ride bikes (for any number of reasons), there is a growing need for access to bicycles, bicycle parts and accessories, as well as expertise in their maintenance and repair. Neighborhood bike shops exist for this very reason.

The cycle shop is often filled with customers of varying levels of interest in the bicycle as either transportation or recreation, but they all stand to benefit in some way from the shop's products or services. As these individuals continue to interact with one another and the employees, there is an opportunity for a budding bicycle culture (or, at the very least, a bicycle network) to emerge. The local bike shop (LBS) has long served as a gathering place for both organized and impromptu group rides, and it is only fitting with the types of interactions the shop can provide.

But is this all that a typical local bike shop has to offer – retail, service, and an open door? I argue that, whether or not those involved are directly aware of it, the LBS serves a more important role in fostering community amongst its clients and neighbors. A bike shop can be an asset to a community by acting as an anchor or landmark, a social gathering place, an advocate for transportation planning, and a foundation for cycling in the area. I approached this project as both student and bicycle mechanic, with nearly a decade of experience in the field. Over the years, I have been employed part- or full-time at five different bike shops in four counties and two states, visited countless others, and was a part of the United States' first high school-level bicycle mechanic training program. Inspired by the thought that perhaps there was some merit to my own instinct about the importance of a neighborhood's bike shop, I set out to find more.

This thesis aims to meld the physical, social, political, and economic relationships at play in a community manifested in the local bike shops by applying community development and planning theories to their study. Understanding these dynamics in this particular context should give the reader an idea of how they affect other businesses and institutions, opening the door for further research in any number of different fields. The general concepts of this argument should be applicable to anyone in the broader fields of community development, urban studies, and even those outside of academia. It is my goal with this project to better convey the subtle complexities of the common bike shop. The local bike shop is a retail establishment, service provider, and a jumping-off point for many individuals in the greater cycling community.

Literature Review

Community developers, urban planners, and other academics and professionals have written extensively about community resources in local institutions, but nothing focused specifically on bicycle shops as community assets. Those general texts will be discussed later in the context of the local bike shop's community roles. There are academic studies on the different types of people who cycle for transportation in the City of Portland (Dill, 2012; Geller, 2006) that can give us a sense of who might benefit most from a bike shop as community asset, but again there is nothing which directly compares to this project. A study by Handy and Xing (2011) delved deeper into the external factors of what makes a place good for cycling and provides a strong social tie-in to my own work. Finally, the National Bicycle Dealer Association (NBDA) has produced a number of documents examining the bicycle industry from a more market-based approach. This expert insider perspective is useful in highlighting the complexities of the local bike shop.

Handy and Xing (2011) studied six different small cities in the United States to determine what factors led to higher numbers of bicycle commuters per capita. Nearby Eugene, OR was included in their study. They examined three types of factors that affect this rate: individual, social, and physical. The social and physical aspects most closely relate to my own project, having to do with the cultural leanings of a community towards cycling and the land use and infrastructure surrounding it. Dill and Carr (2003) take a similar look at the physical environment, looking at fifty U.S. cities instead of six. They report similarly that more (and better) cycling infrastructure is "positively and significantly correlated with higher rates of bicycle commuting" (Dill & Carr, 2003). A highly significant number of respondents in Handy and Xing's (2011, p. 106) survey stated that a prevalent

bicycle community was important in their level of comfort as cyclists. This survey provides a good look at some of what motivates an individual to use his or her bicycle for transportation in the city. It does not, however, explain if community and infrastructure create a comfortable environment for cycling, or vice-versa.

Including those already mentioned, there are a number of scholars and planners writing about bicycles and bicyclists in urban environments, and I have drawn on some of their texts to provide contrast to the more theoretical discussions in community development. Geller's (2006) categorization and Dill's (2012) review of four types of cyclists in Portland provide planners with a way of visualizing where bicycle infrastructure projects may be most effective by identifying the kind of person who might use them. These studies focused on just the one city, but their arguments could certainly be applied to other metropolitan or urban settings across the country.

Perhaps closer to this project's goals are respected bicycle industry journals that produce reports on worldwide trends at the consumer, shop, and manufacturing levels. I have drawn on some of these to provide context for my own analysis. Bicycle Retailer and Industry News (BRAIN) is a print and online publication of the National Bicycle Dealer Association that features market information as well as opinion pieces by leading professionals. Fred Clements, the executive director of the NBDA, is a frequent contributor to BRAIN and has published a number of articles closely linked to my own argument, including "Bike shop survival is in everyone's interest," which is largely the inspiration for this project (Clements, 2014a).

In a later BRAIN article, Clements (2014b) takes a look at the "changing market" of bike shops and how different types and generations of customers require different kinds of

service from their LBS. Gender and race differences are also mentioned, but the typology of customers Clements proposes best fits into my own research. While this text is aimed at the cycle shop owner or manager trying to maintain profitability in a competitive and shifting economy, there are interesting community parallels that might benefit from further examination.

4 types of customers (Clements, 2014b):

- Enthusiast
- Moving Up
- Casual
- Infrequent

4 types of cyclists (Geller, 2006; Dill, 2012):

- Strong and Fearless
- Enthused and Confident
- Interested but Concerned
- No Way, No How

It is interesting to think about these two together. While I do not see a direct correlation between the two lists (i.e., a “No Way, No How” citizen who never rides a bike will likely not even be an “Infrequent” visitor to a bike shop), seeing the two together provides an idea of how different people require different things from a LBS. Here we begin to see how certain shops might then cater their business to one specific group of customers or cyclists listed above.

What is lacking in any of those previous articles is any mention of what makes one bike shop different from the next. In its report on the state of bicycle retail in the United

States, the National Bicycle Dealer Association (2014 pp. 12, 45) identified 22 distinct classifications of shops. Because of the specificity of those 22 categories (see Appendix A), the overlapping characteristics between many of them, and the scope of this project looking only at Portland, OR and a very few number of bike shops within it, I have collapsed those 22 categories down to 4 for my area of study: neighborhood/family, high end/destination, niche/women's specific, and non-profit/co-operative.

The "neighborhood" or "family" bike shop might be the most familiar to the average bicycle rider (likely an "interested but concerned" in Geller's 2006 typology). This is a shop that is largely service oriented, performing flat tire repairs and tune-ups on less expensive bikes, while selling commuter and children's bicycles and accoutrements for the casual cyclist.

The "high end" shop specializes in the sale and service of bikes in the several-thousand-dollar price range, serving the enthusiast and amateur or even professional cyclist. Often times this shop becomes a destination for cyclists and consumers, who might travel from out-of-town or even state for a comprehensive repair, bicycle purchase, or simply to visit.

"Niche" bicycle shops are the newest of the four models (Gluskin Townley Group, 2014, pp. 11, 17), and cater to a very particular clientele (even more so than the high end shop). There is a growing market for female-oriented bikes and accessories, and female-specific shops are opening to meet the needs of that particular demographic (Gluskin Townley Group, 2014, p. 11).

The final category of non-profit or co-operatively owned bike shop is one that is run explicitly as a community resource. This shop is likely to sell used bicycles and discount

accessories to provide accessibility to bicycle transportation. These shops are likely to be located in lower income neighborhoods where there is often greater need for such a service.

This understanding of who might be riding bicycles, how they shop at their local bike shop, and what kind of shop that might be, allows for a discussion of how bike shops act as an asset to the community. 'Community' in this sense generally refers to some place or neighborhood, although it is possible for a shop's community to extend beyond a geographic limit to include a specific network of bicycle riders.. Think of the high end bike shop described above: because it may be a destination for a certain subset of cyclists who in turn travel to it from outside of a neighborhood or even city limit, its community may not necessarily be as place-based as the family bike shop. These lines are difficult to establish, and I will make few distinctions between them because the significance of the shop's role as community asset does not, in my view, dictate a place-based definition of community. The four models of bicycle retail outlined above will likely embrace their community roles differently, and not every bike shop will necessarily provide each of them equally.

The Four Community Roles

There are many different ways to think about spaces as community assets, but for the purposes of this research paper I have chosen four. I think these best describe the benefits bike shops in general provide to their communities, though there may certainly be others. Below are definitions of these four community roles, along with a few generalizations about how they might apply to a bike shop. Later in the thesis we will see how they apply to the specific shops of study.

Anchoring Institution

As one might expect, an anchoring institution is a neighborhood business or other establishment that serves as a physical expression of residents' wants or needs. Described by Morrish and Brown (2000), an anchoring institution is "where the...activities of our communities are focused" (p. 67). The anchor "answers community needs" and "conveys a sense of permanence and continuity" (Morrish & Brown, 2000, p. 67). The authors describe five main characteristics of anchoring institutions: location and prominence, scale of the building, tradition, orientation or use as a landmark, and mixed purposes (much like a third place; more on that later). These five facets all have to do with the structure itself and how that enhances or provides contrast to surrounding neighborhood aesthetics.

Anchoring institutions are often monumental structures like grand cathedrals, but the LBS can share some of this visual prominence. Many bike shops will have a row or rows of bicycles out front of the shop to display models and catch the eyes of passersby. Murals are not an uncommon sight on the sides or even facades of some shops, generally in contrast to more conservative retail storefronts. Finally, a LBS serves as a good landmark for local and visiting cyclists to navigate in a neighborhood or city. The location of an anchoring institution does not always refer to hyper-localized areas like neighborhoods. Instead, according to Morrish and Brown (2000), they "can imprint a cultural identity on...an entire city" (p. 68). In Portland, with its 70 (at last count) bike shops (Portland Bureau of Transportation, 2015), we might think of bike shops collectively as an anchoring institution for the whole city.

Third Place

The mixed purpose aspect of an anchoring institution is closely linked to the concept of a 'third place.' These places often serve as both a gathering space and for-profit business (such as a bar or salon). They provide community members with an alternate avenue for building social capital with people other than family or coworkers (home and work being the first two 'places'), and an outlet to meet and collaborate with other likeminded people. Oldenburg (1989) defines third places as "levelers," or spaces of equality amongst users for "upbeat" conversation. He goes on to describe them as being "low-profile" and serving as "a home away from home" for regulars. Having regular users is a key component of Oldenburg's definition.

In the shop where I work, there are many regular customers who come in just to talk with the mechanics or any other regulars who might be present. I have seen this type of behavior in other shops throughout the years and do not find it to be an uncommon characteristic of the enthusiastic cyclist or customer. Such conversations are not necessarily related to bicycles, either. Neighborhood or even world news and any other topic suitable for barroom discussion may be raised. As Oldenburg (1989) insists in third places, these conversations are typically lighthearted and "upbeat." While the regulars who gather in a bike shop may not belong to the same neighborhood, they can certainly share in the greater community of bicycle riders.

Advocate

According to Stoecker (2005, p.50), advocacy is "the practice of trying to create social change on behalf of others...who are unable to advocate for themselves." The advocacy link for bicycle shops is often directly linked to infrastructure creation and maintenance. Such measures benefit those people who already cycle for transportation

and/or recreation as well as those who might otherwise be less inclined to ride bikes. For a shop, this may seem to stem from purely economic motives as more bikes means more customers, but the effects can be much larger. The nature of the bike shop (and much of the industry) is that most people involved share a real passion for bicycles, and advocacy means much more than the potential for more profit.

Advocacy can be more than just bike lanes and parking, however. Jay Graves, former owner of the Portland Metro area chain Bike Gallery, is a long time bicycle advocate. After attending a National Bike Summit in Washington, D.C., Graves told the Oregonian that bicycling “is undeniably a great solution for urban challenges” and that, as an advocate, “the most important thing is...to just continue showing up” (Brettman, 2013). Brettman’s article gives Graves credit for his involvement in Cycle Oregon and the Community Cycling Center, publicly promoting better cycling practices for all residents of the region. Bike shops and advocates are also involved in an ongoing struggle to provide better access to singletrack trails for off-road cycling. Barry O’Connor, manager of the Fat Tire Farm mountain bike shop has been a vocal opponent of the ban on mountain bikes in the River View Natural Area. In his opinion, “city officials lose a community of allies with a vested interest in maintaining the trails” by excluding cyclists from the area (House, 2015). With the many different forms of cycling come many complementary kinds of advocacy for them.

Infrastructure

As mentioned in the above literature review, several studies have shown a strong correlation between the rate of bicycling and an area’s bicycle friendliness vis-à-vis infrastructure. By definition, infrastructure is the “underlying base or foundation for an organization or system” (Clements, 2014a). In transportation planning, this would refer to

bike lanes, separated cycle paths or mixed use trails, etc. In that article, Clements goes on to argue that, because of the services required to keep bikes on the road, the local bicycle shop deserves to be included under the umbrella of bicycle infrastructure.

Framing the argument in terms of personal automobiles, if transportation infrastructure is comprised of all the physical properties that allow a person to drive in and through a city, then it is not unreasonable to consider the auto repair shop, gas station, and even perhaps the car dealership as a part of that foundation. In order to drive a car, one of course needs streets, highways, and parking facilities. But what about the car itself? Roads are useless without some means of transportation to use on them, and it is the dealer and repair shop who place and keep cars on the road. And since cars are not the only means of using a roadway, its other users should be considered in this definition. Unfortunately, I have not found any other studies making such an argument in terms of auto shop as infrastructure, but I do not find it to be an unreasonable assumption. If we can agree on that premise, the bicycle dealer and repair shop should also be allowed into this broader view of transportation infrastructure.

Methods

To help determine the strength and validity of the claims that bicycle shops serve as anchoring institutions, third places, advocates, and infrastructure, I set out to conduct interviews with other bike shop professionals. Because of the exploratory nature of this project, I designed the research with a qualitative, intensive methodology in mind. Four Portland bicycle shops that are, in my view, exemplary representations of each of the categories listed in the literature review (neighborhood/family, high end/destination,

niche/women's specific, and non-profit/co-operative) were selected for these interviews. Identifying shops in this manner allowed me to gather data from the broad spectrum of bike shops in general (as well as in Portland) in a limited amount of time.

A research protocol (see Appendix B) was created and submitted to the Portland State University Internal Review Board (IRB) for approval. After approval was granted, visits to each shop were made to conduct the interviews. Each interviewee was asked the same seven questions, with probing questions prepared for clarification or explanation on a participant's response. The questions asked were designed to provide information found to be lacking after conducting the Literature Review. The process was more of a guided, casual conversation than formal interview. Conversations were recorded digitally (with permission) to transcribe accurate quotes, and all recordings were deleted within seven days of the interview. Five interviews were conducted in the four selected bike shops (all within Portland's city limits) over a four-week period.

Disclosure: I am currently employed as a mechanic in a neighborhood bike shop in Portland. Through my years spent working in the bicycle industry, I have met and developed personal relationships with many shop salespeople, mechanics, managers, and owners. Some of these individuals were interviewed as part of the research collection, and I am aware of the potential concern it may raise. Utilizing the same interview protocol for each person should have eliminated any potential bias in data collection, and I believe that having this 'insider status' may have in fact allowed the informants to be more candid in their responses. Each interviewee was informed that the data he or she provided would be made confidential in this report. This both ensures protection against any comments made and further removes any bias from my personal relationships with respondents.

Data Results

After briefly introducing the research topic, I asked respondents to create their own typology of bike shops. Each interview produced a slightly different list from mine and from one another, but covered more or less the same basic business models but with different names. In some instances the definitions of a category would overlap somewhat with one or more of my own, and in others our choice of words would match exactly. The aggregated typology from all five interviews would look like this:

- Neighborhood/Commuter/Casual
- Expert/Destination/Specialty
- Road/Race/Triathlon
- Mountain Bike
- Superstore/Chain
- Cargo/"Weird" Bikes
- Used/Sustainability-focused
- Non-Profit

These eight categories can fit into my four as follows:

- **Neighborhood/Family:** Neighborhood/Commuter/Casual
- **High End/Destination:** Expert/Destination/Specialty, Road/Race/Triathlon, Mountain Bike, Superstore/Chain

- **Niche/Women's Specific:** Expert/Destination/Specialty (specializing in either a highly specific kind of bicycle or customer), Cargo/"Weird" Bikes (specializing in a the specific bike alone)
- **Non-Profit/Co-operative:** Used/Sustainability Focused, Non-Profit

As can be seen here, there is some overlap in categories and definitions.

Not all respondents identified their own shops in the same way I did, but their explanations of what made that shop fit another category revealed two things: first, creating such a typology relies largely on semantics and shared definitions of words like 'destination' and 'specialty,' and second, most shops actually have some combination of features from two or more of the general categories. With these caveats, I believe my selection of these shops represents a good cross-section of the types of LBS available to people in Portland and the United States as a whole.

One respondent described her shop as "an interesting mix" of the types of shops she identified (her categories were a bit different than the four I identified: "neighborhood;" "race" bikes; "having one specific expertise;" and "destination"). They "end up being a destination shop," due to being both a neighborhood bike shop as well as one aiming to serve a very specific clientele (a 'niche' shop, by my definition). The model of customer service required for a niche shop – warmly welcoming one group of people into that space – translates very well to the neighborhood or family shop, she added. This creates "a bike shop environment that feels comfortable to go into" regardless of the customer's identification with any particular community.

A different respondent lamented the loss of the "barber shop" model of bicycle shop-as-third place where one can go to "just chew the fat", describing it as a "dying breed" in

most towns. Another respondent spoke of recent plans to physically expand his shop with a covered front patio to encourage local wheelmen and women to gather before and after rides with an inviting space to share stories, pump up tires, and even perform minor adjustments to their bicycles: “We’d like to cultivate that. That’s something we aspire to. There’s value in that.” This idea of physical prominence as an invitation for gathering directly relates to the principles of an anchoring institution while also fostering the third place ideal of being a neutral gathering space.

The interview protocol did not cover any of the unique physical features that make up anchoring institutions, as this information could be ascertained by observation alone. For those shops located on or near neighborhood greenways (bicycle boulevards), integration into that piece of infrastructure helps to establish the business as an anchor for bike riders living in or passing through the neighborhood. Of the four shops visited, three kept a number of bicycles out front for display and two had large, vibrant murals on their exterior walls. The only shop that did not have bikes outside was situated on a bustling retail corridor with little spare room on the already crowded, narrow sidewalks; large windows allow passersby to see the models inside the shop.

Another shop took advantage of its street-facing windows to showcase a mural and several other works of art on the inside walls, as well as an array of bicycles and parts and accessories. Architecturally, three of the four shops (though not the same three as those with bikes out front) blended in discreetly with surrounding businesses. It was the high-end/destination shop that stood apart from the street’s architecture, being the largest and most prominent building in the vicinity. Despite these differences in physical appearance, each shop had something to attract different types of cyclists to its door.

Having regulars – and not just as repeat customers – was considered a good thing by every respondent. “Regular customers...I’ve actually had to have the conversation to let them know they don’t need to buy something or pretend they want something. They’re really just welcome to come in,” one respondent noted. She added that “cultivating return customers” and having “lots of regulars” is a goal of the business, and not just for economic reasons. In fact, the shop space is designed to be lower volume so that such relationships remain possible. Having a strong base of regulars is “definitely a part of daily life here,” replied an interviewee from a different shop. This might come from how, as this respondent pointed out, the regulars and employees share in the same passion for bike riding. While the regulars in a barber shop, bar, or café are likely required to spend money while using the establishment as a third place, these respondents made it clear that this is not necessarily the case for bike shop regulars.

For-profit bike shops can still “fill a void” in community needs, according to one respondent. “I worked at non-profits for years and I’m not convinced that that tax status alone makes it such that you provide good service to the community.” She elaborated that, “it’s possible to have financial gain commingle with community gain.” Respondents from the neighborhood bike shop shared this basic principle on what to stock and how to operate their business: “Supplying them with what they need...listening to their requests.” While this may sound like a purely economical supply and demand response to how any shop should operate, one respondent stated it more in terms of community than profit. Describing a particular service they offer, he stated, “We at least feel better about what’s going on” – getting people on safe, comfortable bikes that they bought elsewhere is more important to them than short-term profitability.

This same shop regularly hosts a 'do-it-yourself' night where customers are invited to use shop space to perform their own repairs and accessory installations. According to one respondent, the feedback from the community has been excellent but actual turnout remains relatively low. "They seem to really, really, if nothing else, appreciate the fact that we offer it." The event also "changes the conversation" about labor costs "if you've got more time than money." While the respondent finds that, "There's always some kind of education in a retail setting," this type of service is exemplary of the bike shop as community asset.

Another bike shop offers classes open to the public for cyclists of any level to learn not only basic mechanical proficiency but also how to safely and comfortably ride and fit a bicycle. "You need some skills that go beyond wrenching," she stressed. Again we find shop owners and employees believing strongly in the importance of education, sometimes even before bottom-line profitability. Sponsoring a race series that is "very much a community event" was seen as important to a respondent from a destination shop, in spite of the fact that "it's probably something we [the shop] probably lose money on." "It's something that we organize to make racing more accessible financially and socially." Removing barriers to all sorts of bike riding is crucial in encouraging the development of new riders as well as the physical infrastructure that makes cycling more enjoyable for all.

One respondent from a small, neighborhood bike shop agreed that thinking of shops in general (as well as his in particular) as infrastructure might make sense in discussing bicycle planning, but found it difficult to determine what exactly should be done because of it. Should local policy benefit his shop if they were to be counted as infrastructure? Or should the business pay into some sort of fund to expand and improve the neighborhood's

bicycle routes? The respondent concluded that bike shops are “not that much of a public service,” so maybe incentivizing policy was too much. Located only two blocks away from one of NE Portland’s major bicycle boulevards, he saw the shop almost as a part of that thoroughfare rather than a separate piece of infrastructure. “When we use those words ‘bike infrastructure,’ I think we’re talking about legislation or government funding – things that are very regulated,” another respondent elaborated. “And when we talk about how a bike shop contributes to the community, it’s a much more loosely defined thing.” Maintaining that flexible definition is important for a LBS to remain “fluid and responsive” to changing social and cultural contexts and situations.

Thinking more about bike shop-as-infrastructure, one respondent believes that “if the city [Portland] wants to continue to be a ‘bike city,’ it needs to invest in the infrastructure alongside investing in business.” To have one without the other, at least as far as bikes are concerned, is not sustainable. Integration into an established bicycle greenway, for example, can help a shop serve as an anchor for visiting cyclists and residents alike, but may largely be a matter of proximity and convenience.

When it comes to bicycle infrastructure in Portland, another respondent felt strongly that bike shops should be more active in their advocacy roles from both community and economic perspectives. She sees the LBS as “part of the bike eco-system” in Portland and believes we need a better “understanding [of] how they [bike shops] support different types of riding” in this way. A different respondent added off-road mountain biking trails under the umbrella of ‘bicycle infrastructure.’ While not typically thought of as transportation routes, trails like these are critical to supporting mountain biking and making mountain bikers feel included in the broader bicycle community.

Advocating for trail access is something that this respondent and his shop are both involved in and committed to. Supporting this part of the “bike eco-system” is especially difficult when it is seen as infringing on natural space and, according to this respondent, it is easy to burn out or become jaded when one spends years fighting the same battles and gaining little ground.

In outer East Portland, one respondent described the lack of both bicycle shops and conventional infrastructure as a “chicken or the egg” dilemma – which should come first? Can that part of the city sustain one without the other? Expanding on this notion of the “chicken or the egg” of East Portland bicycling habits, another respondent had this to share: “If people feel like there are resources and support systems to riding bicycles that they can rely on, I feel like they’re more likely to use their bike for more things.”

Access to childcare and a lack of support for children who ride bikes are two major barriers to more widespread family cycling identified by this respondent. Topics like these reveal more complex societal issues, especially when considering bicycle trends related to gender. When asked what she was doing to combat these barriers, the respondent answered that her shop was “inviting new people [and especially women] into the ‘Bike Community,’” showing would-be cyclists that there is no “secret handshake” for entry.

This need for community is a major barrier for all new riders, and especially those “Interested but Concerned” people of color. [Please note that this respondent identified Geller’s (2006) category verbatim and with no intervention or mention of the study by me.] Bicycles are a “unique” mode of transportation, according to this respondent, because of the ability for many people to travel together in a group at a “critical mass” (not to be confused with the semi-organized Critical Mass protest/awareness rides popular

throughout many major cities, but rather a large enough volume of cyclists in an area to shift the community's perception of what it means to be a person on a bike). "People of color ride bicycles, but not in the way that we perceive bicycle riding," he elaborated. Bike commuting is not always a priority among these individuals, but they have their own uses "that are important to them." Cultural sensitivity is therefore paramount in building a sense of 'bicycle community' among minority and other marginalized individuals. The local bike shop can help foster such unity.

Discussion

Advocacy continues to be a crucial part of maintaining and improving cycling in Portland and beyond, and shops will remain a part of that group as long as these industry insiders keep up their good work. Each respondent had a different idea on his or her own role as an advocate, ranging from service provider to community organizer. As attitudes towards cycling as a viable mode of transportation shift, so too will the importance of efforts from advocacy groups and local bike shops. Because of the unique position each LBS holds in its community, these advocacy efforts can improve the physical conditions for cyclists of all levels, inviting more and more otherwise hesitant or reluctant individuals into the community.

Interestingly, it seems that 'infrastructure' is the most questionable of the four roles identified. I started the project agreeing with Clements that the LBS should indeed be considered part of a community's cycling infrastructure, but the data produced through my interviews raised a number of concerns with such inclusion. What kinds of policy implications does this bring up? Should we attempt to draw the otherwise fluid definition

of what it means to be a bicycle shop into the rigid world of planning and government? Although the idea may seem simple on the surface, once unpacked it reveals much more. This does not necessarily mean that bike shops should not be thought of in some planning terms, but rather highlights yet another complexity in this way of examining the business. Let's not forget the "chicken or the egg" way of thinking about the relationship between bike transportation routes and shops; we ought to think of these two as somehow linked even if we do not consider them one and the same.

To get a better sense of how a LBS serves to anchor its community or neighborhood may require data collection from customers and residents rather than only shop employees and owners. Perhaps a survey of individuals in and around the bike shops interviewed for this paper would reveal some pattern of how people view the particular shop in terms of space and identity. Another approach might be to select shops because of their monumental presence in an area. Do shops with greater physical prominence also exhibit more clearly defined community traits?

The data do show that, at least of those questioned, the notion of bike shop-as-third place holds real promise. Putting community ahead of profits (to an extent, at least), or "to have financial gain commingle with community gain," as one respondent put it, is a key feature of many bike shops. Allowing customers to feel welcome in their shops was a goal of every person interviewed, whether they recognized the direct community building it brings or not. The notion of regular customers, as already mentioned, elicited enthusiastic responses from every shop employee I spoke with. Add shop-sponsored community events to a base of dedicated regulars and we begin to see where a budding bicycle culture can be fostered and an established one reinforced. If nothing else, I hope that those interviewed

recognize the significance in this and continue to cultivate and promote community in their businesses.

There is one more category that I excluded from my original typology for the purposes of this project that one respondent was quick to identify. This type of shop, in my view, is very actively promoting the idea of third place bicycle hangout. “Kind of emerging is your ‘not really a bike shop’ – a bar.” This is the bike shop-plus-café or bar that offers its clients a cup of coffee, bite to eat, or cold beer in addition to bicycle-related sales and service. The model has garnered attention from popular media outlets, both bicycle-focused and otherwise. I think this new type of bike shop deserves our attention and research, but it seems that such a business is started with an explicit understanding of how bike shops can operate outside of retail roles and I wanted this particular project to focus on the more passive instances of bike shop-as community asset. The bike shop-plus-X model is given a nod in the National Bicycle Dealers Association report that helped guide my original typology (Gluskin Townley Group, 2014, pp. 12-13). Returning to this document, it might be interesting to do research on community roles in each of the 22 types of bike shops identified by the NBDA. A more ‘extensive’ project like that could provide more depth to this research (Stoecker, 2005, pp. 7-8).

Conclusion

Bike shops function as landmarks (anchoring institutions), gathering spaces (third places), advocates, and infrastructure for the greater bicycling community. As an avid cyclist and dedicated shop mechanic, the local bike shop holds an important place in my life. Bicycle shops have served as more than retail establishments and sources of

employment for me, and I hope that others might see these different roles that they can play for communities. After reviewing the literature, I found a real lack of scholarly work on the topic and decided it best to explore it through my own primary research.

What I found is some general agreement among a small sample of other shop employees, managers, and owners that the local bicycle shop does indeed act as more than a simple retail establishment. It operates on a model hoping to welcome, educate, and provide for the people within its geographic and social sphere. What this results in is a local business that can anchor a neighborhood into the broader cycling world, provide a comfortable 'home away from home' for its clientele, and help promote safer bicycle riding for all. No matter what words are used to describe the type of asset that a particular bike shop may be, all of those interviewed expressed ways in which their shops cater to people outside of the usual retail and service functions that benefit their communities.

Due to the exploratory nature of this work, there is quite a bit of further research that could be done into the nature of the bike shop as community asset argument proposed here. A more intensive study of these or similar shops could produce richer insight into the real benefits of these spaces for community; conversely, an extensive sampling of bike shops across the country would reveal whether or not these claims hold true outside of such a strong cycling city as Portland, OR (Stoecker, 2005, pp. 7-8, 16-18). A deeper examination of community roles outside of the four identified in this study may also be worthwhile; I do not claim that these are the only ways in which a local bike shop serves its neighborhood.

As the project progressed, I encountered many connections to Abrahamson's definitions and theories of urban enclaves (1996). Enclaves contain self-identified

communities of individuals who relate to one another based both on place and a shared cultural trait (Abrahamson, 1996 p. 5). These are best exemplified in larger cities' Chinatowns or other similar racially or ethnically defined neighborhoods, but perhaps we can imagine a broader 'bicycle community' as having enclaves centered around many different neighborhood bike shops. As Abrahamson describes, "Attraction to an enclave can also be based on the goods and services...offered in its specialized stores and institutions" (1996, p. 9). While a bicycle community is not typically a place-based one, it may not be unreasonable to view the entire city of Portland, OR (with its history of bike-friendly policies) as a place that acts to draw in this community from other parts of the state and nation. The neighborhoods in which this study was conducted certainly have a large share of bicycle commuters, and the bike shops within them may help to anchor that particular enclave.

The notion of 'bike shop as infrastructure' likely deserves more research from both primary and secondary sources. While little seems to have been written about other transportation institutions belonging to the definition of 'infrastructure,' there may be other ways to frame this particular argument. At the very least, the integration of the other three assets into the humble bike shop should reveal that there is room for more ways of thinking about such a local business's community roles.

Community developers should take special note of the economic implications of this argument. With an understanding of the complex nature of neighborhood institutions and how they contribute to community life outside of purely economic terms, community developers (and bike shop professionals, as this paper reveals) are uniquely equipped to push for investment in local bicycle shops as a way to improve city and neighborhood life

by encouraging active transportation and fostering community relationships, all while also stimulating the local economy. With so many ways to define 'community' and all the possible assets that individuals and institutions may possess to benefit those around them, it is exciting to think of how else a local bike shop might actively or unwittingly behave in such ways.

Bibliography

- Abrahamson, M. (1996). *Urban Enclaves: Identity and Place in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Brettman, A. (2013, March 14). "Jay Graves, former Bike Gallery owner, ready for second act." *The Oregonian*. Retrieved from http://www.oregonlive.com/cycling/index.ssf/2013/03/jay_graves_former_bike_gallery.html
- Clements, F. (2014). "Fred Clements: Bike shop survival is in everyone's interest." *Bicycle Retailer and Industry News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bicycleretailer.com/retail-news/2014/09/16/fred-clements-bike-shop-survival-everyones-interest-0#>
- Clements, F. (2014). "Fred Clements: Will bike shops serve the changing market?" *Bicycle Retailer and Industry News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bicycleretailer.com/studies-reports/2014/10/28/fred-clements-will-bike-shops-serve-changing-market#.VUvjma3BzGc>
- Dill, J. & Carr, T. (2003). "Bicycle Commuting and Facilities in Major U.S. Cities." *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board* 1828, 116-123. Retrieved from <http://trb.metapress.com/content/5573wq3237qh4g01/>
- Dill, J. & McNeil, N. (2012). "Four Types of Cyclists?" *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board* 2387, 129-138. Retrieved from <http://docs.trb.org/prp/13-5213.pdf>
- Geller, R. (2006). Portland Office of Transportation. *Four Types of Cyclists*. Retrieved from <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/264746>

- Gluskin Townley Group. (2014). *NBDA: The 2014 U.S. Specialty Retail Channel Study and Report*. Costa Mesa, CA: National Bicycle Dealers Association.
- Handy, S. L. & Xing, Y. (2011). "Factors Correlated with Bicycle Commuting: A Study in Six Small U.S. Cities." *International Journal of Sustainable Transportation* 5:2, 91-110. DOI: 10.080/15568310903514789
- House, K. (2015, March 3). "Portland officials ban mountain bikers from longtime turf at River View Natural Area." *The Oregonian*. Retrieved from http://www.oregonlive.com/environment/index.ssf/2015/03/portland_officials_ban_mountain.html
- Jacobsen, P. L. (2003). "Safety in numbers: more walkers and bicyclists, safer walking and bicycling." *Injury Prevention* 9, 205-209. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1731007/pdf/v009p00205.pdf>
- Morrish, W. R. & Brown, C. R. (2000). *Planning to Stay*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.
- Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Help Get You Through the Day*. New York: Paragon House.
- Stoecker, R. (2005). *Research Methods for Community Change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Portland Bureau of Transportation. (2015). *Bicycle Shops in Portland*. Retrieved from <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/71973>
- Pucher, J., Komanoff, C., & Schimek, P. (1999). "Bicycling renaissance in North America? Recent trends and alternative policies to promote bicycling." *Transportation Research Part A*, 33:7-8, 625-654. Retrieved from <http://www.vtpi.org/pucher3.pdf>

Appendix A

“Classification of Focus of Bicycle Retail Business”

1. Family bike shop
2. Maintenance and service
3. High-end road racing shop
4. High-end mountain bike shop
5. Used bike shop
6. Urban bike shop – mix of bicycle brands including domestic
7. BMX/Freestyle
8. Women’s bike shop
9. Electric bicycle shop
10. Outdoor retailer with bicycles
11. Custom boutique
12. High-end touring
13. Sporting goods dealer with bicycles
14. Campus/College shop
15. Antique bicycle shop
16. Community-oriented non-profit shop
17. Commuter shop
18. Multisport/Triathlon shop
19. Recumbent shop
20. Rental & demo center
21. Urban bike shop – locally made bicycles
22. Other type of shop

Appendix B

Research Protocol

If you were to characterize bike shops in general and come up with some basic categories for them, what might that look like?

How would you describe your shop?

How might you categorize this place?

Would you say that this bike shop is high-end, more neighborhood or family focused, or do you serve a very specific clientele?

What role do you see a bike shop like this playing in the community?

Is it more than just retail and service?

Do you host (or plan to host) any sort of community events based out of the shop (i.e., group rides, classes, demos, trail work, parties, etc.)?

How do you think these events have/might benefit your shop?

The neighborhood or community?

Do any of your regular customers come in just for conversation?

Can you give me an example?

Do they use the shop space as a hangout?

To meet up before or after bike rides?

What do you think of when you hear the term 'bicycle infrastructure'?

What does that look like?

Could you give me an example?

Do you think bike shops could be thought of as a part of cycling infrastructure?

Why or why not?

What might that imply for a bike shop like yours?

What do you see as the major bicycle-related challenges or concerns for your customers/neighborhood?

Are you or your shop engaged in finding a solution to this problem?

Is there anything else you'd like to add or is there anything you think I missed?