

Thwarting Bike Thieves

By Prof. Lorraine Gamman and Adam Thorpe

Designers and criminals have a lot in common. Both make a living out of adaptive ingenuity, often in response to social change and evolution, and their handiwork is everywhere. As increasing numbers of the public and policy makers wake up to the benefits of cycling in London, opportunities arise for designers and criminals to profit from the bicycle boom.

Deficiencies in design

Design Against Crime (DAC) is an ethical, practice-led, design research agenda, linked to understanding crime, and socially responsive design. DAC philosophy is informed by the idea that things as well as people cause problems. If the design of environments and objects presents criminals with opportunities, criminals will take them – sometimes literally.

One strand of DAC's design led research is a project called "Bikeoff". The aim of this project is to reduce cycle theft by undertaking and evaluating research into bike theft (criminal perpetrator techniques, bike parking and other data) to inform the design and implementation of cycle parking facilities, and putting into effect those designs that have been found to work against crime, but which don't make the environment look hostile.

Bikeoff was born of bitter experience. In January 2004, Adam Thorpe, DAC research fellow became one of the 22% of UK cyclists to experience bicycle theft (but not one of 17% who stop cycling as a result). We decided bike theft was an appropriate issue for DAC to tackle, not least because many of the cyclists we knew, had their bike stolen in the last five years, and so we started to research the field. We found no information available relating to bicycle theft in London post-congestion charging where increased bicycle usage is evident. Yet anecdotal evidence from friends, students and colleagues suggested bike theft had increased in this period. We approached our DAC advisors with this information, but were told, early in 2004, that bicycle theft was "not a priority" crime for police. PC Ike Gray of Camden later helped DAC persuade the Met to review their approach to bike crime, and has since helped Chris Thomas of DAC visualize bike theft perpetrator techniques, available to view as a leaflet downloadable from bikeoff.org.

The more bicycles that are ridden, the more opportunities there are for the thieves to steal them. Around 80,000 bicycles were taken in 2004-5 in London. We set up Bikeoff to ask how the design of equipment and environments could reduce the risk. We believe the answer lies in re-thinking, in design terms, the overall 'scene of the crime' and responding it. The location and design of bike parking plus

measures, such as the design of bikes and locks and perhaps registration schemes, also needs scrutiny too. So, one of Bikeoff's first outputs was to make the case via a publication aimed at the crime prevention community that current bike parking appears to deliver "environmental complicity" and often makes it easy, located in out-of-the way-spaces, for thieves to rob us.¹

In 2004-5 Bikeoff set up a weblog, at www.bikeoff.org, where user feedback regarding security can be recorded and discussed. We want to encourage cyclists to continue to share their opinions with us about best and worst cycle parking practice and to learn from this. We use the data logged on the site to inform our research and our design solutions. We feel there is lots more we can do with Bikeoff. In future we wish to develop this site to create an online bicycle parking guide for London. It could give users a space to be heard, and provide them with a mechanism to grade or star-rate the parking they use every day. We can feed that information back to the police and local council, if there is a need to improve it. We envisage a future contexts where cyclists could use Bikeoff.org to learn of crime hotspots, and avoid them, as well as helping to inform parking providers about what makes cycle parking work.

A new look at locks

In his work with Vexed Generation, Bikeoff designer Adam Thorpe and his partner in Vexed, Joe Hunter, worked with the Danish bike design company Biomega, and Puma, on the design of a bicycle aimed at urban cyclists. To dissuade thieves, the Puma bike features an integrated lock which if broken renders the bike useless and drastically reduces the resale value. Initial production runs have sold out, demonstrating to manufacturers the consumer demand for 'secure cycling' and the unique functionality a DAC approach can bring to a brief.

In July 2005, DAC began working with TfL and the London Borough of Camden on a new bike research project. This two-year initiative will culminate in the design and implementation of a benchmark secure cycle parking facility. This will be located outside Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (where the Bikeoff project is based) and serve the College, the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre and the Holborn Gateway area.

Cycle security: best practice

The research DAC delivers on the Holborn Gateway projects will aim to identify and apply best practice related to:

¹ Gamman, L., Thorpe, A., Willcocks, M. (2004) Bike Off! Tracking the Design Terrains of Cycle Parking: Reviewing Use, Misuse and Abuse, *Crime Prevention and Community Safety: An International Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp 19-36. Downloadable from www.bikeoff.org.

- information environment – in the context of cycle parking (this means signage and communication design)
- surveillance and guardianship – schemes by which we can look after our own bikes or make use of existing services (for example street wardens) to do so rather than rely on CCTV
- furniture and site improvement – designing more user-friendly/ abuser-unfriendly stands and sites

The work will be evaluated so that if it is found to reduce theft it can be put into practice elsewhere. Cyclists are invited to contact Bikeoff and to share their experiences and opinions of the parking provision. Additionally, DAC research fellow, Marcus Willcocks, who is located in Barcelona, has developed a network of Spanish cycle researchers and contacts. Their work and insights are also being drawn upon by the Bikeoff project.

Coming to a bike rack near you

Whilst we'd like to think that in the long term, the design of cycle parking stands and facilities will ensure best locking practice amongst cyclists, in the meantime, Bikeoff has worked with TfL and Camden police to create a 'Lock both wheels and the frame' sticker to be placed on cycle parking throughout London. This is in response to research that shows that bicycle theft patterns follow 'new user' patterns. Our observational research on the Holborn Gateway project, some of which has been undertaken by Deigo Bello, a former MAID student employed by DAC, has identified that many cyclists don't lock their bikes properly, making them vulnerable to theft. The idea of the sticker is to show cyclist how to lock bikes properly (two locks are often needed) and to ensure cyclists don't have to lose their bike before they learn how to lock them! Of 30 boroughs consulted only 20% chose not to use the stickers (linked to notions about graffiti), and despite some resistance, it should mean many stickers will eventually go up in London, and that bike theft will go down.

In the two years of the Bikeoff research project, we have observed some major shifts in the willingness of the police and others to tackle bicycle crime. For example, the Finsbury Park bike parking development, delivered in partnership with TfL, Securabyc and local councils appears to offer commuters the opportunity to park safely at the tube. We are reviewing this site to understand whether this system works or not and hope that our research, publications and disseminations via exhibition, seminars and consultancy will continue to contribute to positive change. In 2005-06, for the first time, the Home Office has set the Met Police a target to reduce bike theft. This change means there is more discussion about bike theft in the popular arena, more publicity about Immobilise.com, the bike registration site, and more interest all round in reducing bike theft, in line with increased interest in bike usage.

Promoting cycling

Bikeoff is currently working with Blueprint magazine and Feilden Clegg Architects to support a bike shed design competition that should generate some new bike parking designs, which will be seen at the London Architectural biennale (June 2006). Our plans for the future are to embrace creativity linked to the design of cycle parking, and to help set and create secure design standards. Research funding permitting, we hope also, in future, to launch a national bike parking design competition as well as design resources aimed at young designers to help them get smart quick about how to design out bike theft. Meanwhile, in September this year we will again work with Brendt Barbur to organize and create the second London Cycle Film Festival (we launched the first one last year at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre). Please access www.bikeoff.org for more details in future.