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Bikes Just Lack 'Curb Appeal'

By Charles Komanoff

The folks who run the World Trade Center stole my friend Jon's bicycle. They smashed the lock, then demanded \$30 to give the bike back.

Jon's crime? Chaining his bike in an "undesignated area." The bike rack on West Street had been moved 200 feet, to an out-of-sight spot. In its place was a construction fence — an ideal thing to lock a bike to, with no "bicycle parking prohibited" signs. Fifty feet away, however, were notices directing bicyclists to park only in designated areas. The signs, attached to lampposts, were the size of Post-It Notes.

The World Trade Center, with its two gleaming towers looming over a broad, windswept plaza, isn't thought

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Why is New York City so hard on its bicyclists?

of as a bicycling hotbed. But bike commuters and messengers stop there every day, just as they do in the rest of New York. Jon had heard rumors that bikes were being confiscated at the Trade Center, but like most official acts having to do with bicycling here, the policy was put into effect without notifying cyclists.

"We have to consider curb appeal," the Trade Center facilities manager told me. "It's what prospective tenants see from the curb, when they get

out of their cars. They don't want bikes cluttering everything up."

No one wants clutter. That's why Japan builds special garages for bicycles in city centers and at railway stations. China and Europe are dotted with bike parking pavilions, some fully attended and landscaped. By comparison, the 15-acre Trade Center has only a handful of places where one may lock a bike. One of the main entrances is hundreds of feet from the nearest rack — a long distance to walk when the client on the 94th floor is clamoring for the package in your messenger bag.

The solution seems obvious. For in-and-out traffic, install bike racks near each entrance. For all-day office workers, set up indoor bike parking, perhaps in the underground area where bikes that have been pilfered by the authorities are now stored.

To be sure, not everyone will play by the rules. Like most New Yorkers, bike riders operate more by convenience than by regulations. As long as there are bikes, there will be bike "clutter," in the view of those who see

bicycles as obtrusive.

We cyclists view it differently. We see each bike as a trusted freedom machine that transports us around town unencumbered, free of petroleum and its pollution. Our bicycles bypass the mess in the Middle East as they transcend traffic and the regulated ordinariness of city life.

The World Trade Center is owned and managed by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. How ironic that a transportation agency is systematically disabling a non-oil means of travel at the same time that the nation has stationed troops in Saudi Arabia to maintain our access to oil.

I hope common sense will win out at the Port Authority, and the Trade Center will stop taking bicycles. Jon's has been returned (though without a replacement for his smashed lock). Perhaps the Port Authority will even install bike racks. Perhaps our city, and our country as well, will begin waking up from these crazy ways of thinking that keep us enslaved to oil and to those who control it. □