

# V4.06

## The Politics of Cycling Exhibition Review—Cycle Revolution

The Design Museum, London, November 18, 2015 – June 30, 2016

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In her analysis of the “offshore” activities of the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1950s, art historian Gay McDonald noted that the institution’s persuasive rhetoric and careful exhibition selection “conveniently dovetailed in broad terms with the US Government’s prevailing efforts to build a positive image of the American way of life abroad.”<sup>1</sup> This symbiosis between a cultural institution and the government might not surprise us in the context of the 1950s, but in 2016 visitors may assume that the narratives presented in reputable institutions stem from an independent and critical position—a solid foundation from which they can inform and educate their visitors. *Cycle Revolution*, a 2015-16 exhibition held at the Design Museum, London, reminded us to be wary of that preconception as the narrative portrayed demonstrated that however neutral an institution appears to be, the reality of its presentation may be very different.

Curated by Donna Loveday, Head of Curatorial at the Design Museum, *Cycle Revolution* sought to “celebrate the diversity of contemporary cycling in Britain.”<sup>2</sup>

Highlighting everyone from quotidian commuters to Olympic champions, the exhibition tracked the cycling fever that has come to grip Britain over the last decade.

Upon entry, visitors were drawn in a circuit around the peripheral walls of the large gallery space, punctuated by bicycles from around the world. The first theme, “High Performers,” saw visitors guided through a showcase of Britain’s cycling elite, from the triumphs of Olympian Bradley Wiggins to the highlights of cyclist Chris Boardman’s career. However, this presentation of the realm of competitive cycling was misleadingly short on international context, and the British flag, emblazoned on a number of objects, was so overpowering, it implied an exercise in branding. This is not to say that patriotic subtext is an entirely new notion in the display of design to the public—the UK has a long history of it. In reference to the Great Exhibition of 1851, writer Fiona Shipwright labelled the legendary Crystal Palace as “perhaps the greatest feat of architectural Empire-branding ever undertaken in the UK.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the contents of *Cycle Revolution* attempted to brand the UK as the forerunner in international competitive cycling.

So why did the Design Museum, a non-profit organization that thrives on the donations of its generous benefactors, feel the need to be so patriotic? The choice of Santander Cycles, London’s self-service cycle hire scheme, as the main exhibition partner may well have been an influence. A statement by Transport for London (TfL), the local government body responsible for Santander Cycles, stated that the exhibition was part of TfL’s Transported by Design program, which “celebrates good design on the capital’s transport network.”<sup>4</sup>

It was “Cycling—The Future,” the theme conveyed in the central corpus of the gallery, that in no subtle way hit at the heart of the exhibition’s message. Upon entering the space, one was immediately confronted by a screen portraying a life-sized version of the then-Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, whose presence would have come as no surprise to any visitor even vaguely familiar with British politics. In fact, the Santander Cycles bikes are more commonly known as “Boris

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Figure 1. Peripheral wall of *Cycle Revolution* exhibition featuring a Santander bicycle in lower right corner. The Design Museum, London, UK 2016. Courtesy of the Design Museum.



Bikes” because of Johnson’s role in the initiative’s development. (Fig. 1) Curiously, *Cycle Revolution* invoked the exact wording of Johnson’s Transport Strategy, which outlined his transport vision for London and stated his dedication to “encouraging a cycling revolution” in Britain.<sup>5</sup>

In his short video appearance in the exhibition, Johnson proudly claimed that “London is rapidly turning into the cycling capital of the world.” Meanwhile, noted elsewhere in the gallery were statistics that only four percent of trips around London are made on bicycles, compared with 48 percent in Amsterdam and 50 percent in Copenhagen. When “Cycling—The Future” showcased what other cities have achieved in terms of infrastructure for cyclists, it highlighted just how much London is lagging behind its urban counterparts, thus further complicating Johnson’s claim. Examples like the Hovenring, the world’s first suspended cycle path roundabout found between Eindhoven and Veldhoven in the Netherlands, and the Nørrebrogade (“The Green Wave”)—one of Copenhagen’s major commuting streets with time-programmed traffic lights which allow cyclists to commute without hitting a red light—put the current state of London’s cycling network to shame. A quick stroll around London reveals a distinct lack of parking for bikes, the absence of cycle lanes, and the overwhelming presence of nervous cyclists on footpaths.

Another section, titled “Urban Riders,” spoke to the cycling commuters of London, and presented “Ultimate Urban Rider” Lucy Granville, a young London-based mother. Granville’s well-loved Coventry Eagle was proudly displayed alongside a video showing her cycling around the city on her bike. Granville was chosen after the museum issued an open call in cities across the world to find a cyclist worthy of the title. Granville is a Londoner, but she was chosen for good reason—she has never been in an accident during her 15 years of cycling in the city. While this may very well be true, it paints an idealistic picture of cycling in London—where in reality, 432 cyclists were seriously injured or killed on the roads in 2014.<sup>6</sup> *Cycle Revolution* touted all the positive aspects of cycling yet glossed over its more dangerous elements that are so prevalent in reality. The opportunity to consider how the design of bikes—and the infrastructure of cycling—can protect or put

cyclists at risk was missed. If it had addressed such issues, the Design Museum could have considered critically the impact of these design choices on everyday life, affirming its role as a design institution.

The inclusion and exaltation of Lucy Granville, the echoes of Johnson's proclamations about London, and the general celebratory tone of the entire exhibition all sang a similar tune. The melody invoked the idea of a future where Britain reigns supreme in the world of cycling, pitching London as a safe haven for cyclists. In their presentation of a selective narrative that boasts Britain's design achievements in the realm of cycling, the Design Museum appeared to pander to the agenda of the exhibition's sponsor, Santander Cycles

The kind of empty rhetoric present in *Cycle Revolution* can be witnessed throughout the history of displaying design. In her analysis of design criticism in the US and the UK between 1955 and 2007, design critic and historian Alice Twemlow identified a recognizable trait in British design exhibitions of the 1990s under the rule of Prime Minister Tony Blair and New Labour:

Due to the nature of their funding and the missions of the organizing institutions, most of these exhibitions were promotional, providing little opportunity for critical reflection on the part of their curators. They presented variations on the theme of design and creativity as marketable assets in the political project of asserting a dynamically reconceived national identity.<sup>7</sup>

Twemlow's characterization, although it speaks of Britain of 20 years ago, could easily be applied to *Cycle Revolution*. As one of the final exhibitions in Design Museum's River Thames location before the museum moved to Kensington, *Cycle Revolution's* building of a narrative that culminated in pushing Britain as a cycling capital did little service other than promoting governmental policies and encouraging the sale of bicycles. While the Design Museum may cherish its unique role as an institution separate from the government's control (in contrast with the Victoria and Albert Museum which is a non-departmental public body), by

accepting partners such as Santander Cycles, it fails to take full advantage of its position. Despite the obvious need for the capital such partnerships bring, undercutting the independent position of the museum is a high price to pay. Now more than ever, the Design Museum should relish its potential to take a critical position. As the UK prepares for the uncertainty of life post-Brexit, it is the duty of institutions such as the Design Museum to be bold and share with their publics nuanced and complete stories, whatever the subject. ■

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gay McDonald, "The 'Advance' of American Postwar Design in Europe: MoMA and the Design for Use, USA Exhibition 1951-1953," *Design Issues* 24, no. 2 (2008): 15-27.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Loveday, "A Word From The Curator," in *Cycle Revolution* (London: The Design Museum, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Fiona Shipwright, "Heart of Glass, The Crystal Palace, London, 1851," *Uncube*, <http://www.uncubemagazine.com/sixcms/detail.php?id=15358283&articleid=art-1426524361222-359d0d72-31db-4db3-bb16-07bbb975fa5a>.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Emery, "Mayor's Transport Strategy Wants 'Cycling Revolution,'" *Road*, October 12, 2009, <http://road.cc/content/news/10075-mayor%E2%80%99s-transport-strategy-wants-cycling-revolution>.

<sup>5</sup> The Mayor's Transport Strategy, "Transport For London," <https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/about-tfl/how-we-work/planning-for-the-future/the-mayors-transport-strategy>.

<sup>6</sup> "Number of Cyclists in London Reaches Record High," *BBC News*, June 4, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-33002701>.

<sup>7</sup> Alice Twemlow, "Purposes, Poetics and Publics: The Shifting Dynamics of Design Criticism in the US and the UK" (PhD diss., Royal College of Art, 2013), 328.