A Day in the Life of P509: Data Packet Handler (AKA bike messenger)

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Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I squeeze the handset, wait for the beep, and then announce into the ether, "P509 is clear at Bowery n Canal." Clouds pass overhead. My LCD display flips to 09:54. "Sending three," my dispatcher pipes out. Beep da beep. Beep da beep. Three text messages arrive on my handset screen detailing the packet information: tracking number, customer, caller, call time, pickup, delivery and item description. I jot key information down on my clipboard manifest. Sweat glands ready their daily supply. Load bag, spin bag round to back, unlock bike, swing 30 lbs chain lock round torso and re-lock on waist, run with bike into traffic and hop on.

Spinning down the avenue, my mind flips between monitoring the flow of traffic and calculating my route. All the systems established to control the moving sea of metal -- such as traffic lights, lane markers, one way streets, and curbs -- are just a series of suggestions at this point. As a data packet handler, it's my job to find the best routes through my network. Two wheels trump four. During new employee orientation, we were told to ride slow and smart, not fast and dumb. In this world, network latency is a good thing. Being smart means being connected -- linked by a telecom leash to my dispatcher.

In his book *Open Sky*, Paul Virilio describes this telecom-leashed existence as a 'body terminal,' the omnipresent descendant of the territorial, mobile body. Data packet handlers embody both of these characteristics. However, despite the on-demand connection to my dispatcher, the protocols of the traffic network tend to override the protocols of my dispatcher network where the sidewalk ends and the lobby begins. While both systems seek an efficiency of flow, the breakdown occurs where skin meets pavement, concrete, or even worse, security.

If you consult *Sweets*, the premiere US building products catalog, you will find a section named 10450 Pedestrian Control Devices dedicated to slowness. Amongst the items listed are access doors, turnstiles, lighting and security systems. Most of us have passed through enhanced security protocols at airports but there is a new level of security arising in everyday workplaces in the form of what I will call public furniture of control or PFoC's (pee-fox). PFoC's are bossy cousins to the possibly more familiar street furniture family of benches, sign posts, trash cans, etc.

Brake, swing right leg round to left, dismount. Fish out keys, swing lock off hips and around bike, lock. Swing bag round front while walking to pickup/drop address, pull out data packets and manifest. At most drops, the address is wrong. The first layer of disconnecting between our protocols is in the initial handshake. In *Me++*, William Mitchell describes connectivity as the defining characteristic of the 21C urban condition and suggests that we experience this connectivity with networks at their interface. Sweat glands release their cache as the air-conditioned lobby envelops my pores.

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"Sorry, but you'll have to go out that door, around the corner, door on left, etc." points many a security guard. Thus begins the painful divergence between my on-demand access-anywhere network and the network of PFoC's. Exit polished stone lobby, round corner, enter side door/loading dock. Wait! "Photo ID please." My first day on the job, a laminated mug shot for P509 was issued. I was official. The security bouncer waves me through. Wait! "Photo ID please." Another bouncer. Flash ID. "Up ramp to window, see lady."

"P509 into wait time 200 Park." Trod up ramp, see lady at desk with her own air conditioning. I must be in the building now. "You been here before?" I nod. "Step back." She kinks up a little outrigger with digital camera from behind the counter. "Ok." Write company name, drop company name, sign in 'guestbook.' Receive daily visitor sticker badge with photo ID on it. On return trip no photo taken. Why? Because you are in their database now. I'm in. If ever in doubt, being in the drop network means being in air-conditioned slowness.

Thus begins a typical encounter with PFoC's. They primarily exist on three scales -- mobile, body, and surface. Examples of mobile units include customized temporary visitor badges, swipe cards for turnstiles to elevator lobbies, and the security bouncers, either roaming or stationed. Body scale units include (proceeding from entry door to elevator door) bollards, door buzzers, Tensabarrier® labyrinths, security desks, mechanical and electronic turnstiles, and/or x-ray

machines. Overseeing the entire theatre of inside/outside transitions is a blanket of security cameras. One particularly glassy lobby has alternating bird silhouettes on the glass and cameras on the mullions, a kind of bizarre moebius strip of prevention. "Sign and print your name, please." Express elevator down. Beep la boop. "Dropped 200 Park, two on board, rollin' to Lex." Beep. "Roger that." Boop.

PFoC's have grown to an architectural scale. Every drop has at least two addresses. Depending on which network I traverse, I use a different address. Data packets rarely go to the address fixed in bronze, chrome, or granite despite the writing on the label. Into the gulf of execution -- the potential gap in correspondence between a user's intentions (drop a data packet) and a system's actions (addressing) as described by Don Norman in "The Psychopathology of Everyday Things" -- grows an increasing variety of architecture and furniture annexes. PFoC's began as flexible spatial devices, but a Tensabarrier® labyrinth can quickly become a messenger center, a co-located lobby of its own, or a prison for the paperless. "Drop 230 Park."

Ultimately, the increasing permanence of PFoC's fosters the trend of privately owned public spaces. Brandscaping replaces landscaping. Restricted physical access produces exclusive visual exposure. Slowness and saturation are the mandates for its design. A PFoC-encrusted raumplan (Loos) has replaced plan libre (Le Corbusier). The Seagram and Lever House pilotis have barnacles. The limits PFoCs impose on behavior snip the grass roots of the omnipresent terminal body. The route between the network of suits and sweats is now an outsourced-overseen interface where connectivity is granted only if you obey the ergonomics of control. Beep la boop. "P509 clear with signatures."

THE LIPSTICK BUILDING
VISITOR
PICK UP ``
30
FLOOR
B&W
06
09
12:40:18 PM

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The MetLife Building 200 Park
DELIVERY
Name: SCOTT PATER
Company: BREAKAW
Tenant: BOVIS LEND
LEASE LMB, INC.
Floor: 9

References:

Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (Verso Books: London, 1997)
William Mitchell, *Me++* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2003)
Sweets Catalog, www.sweets.com
Donald Norman, "The Psychopathology of Everyday Things" in *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (Basic Books: New York, 1998)

As the day nears its end, the slower service levels are discontinued until only the fastest (and most lucrative) level is left available for last-minute clients. Standby time eats up a fair amount of the day. Especially at smaller companies, there isn't always enough volume of calls to keep the entire fleet busy all day. As such, couriers will spend a couple hours each day waiting for new calls to come in. Some will work for multiple dispatchers in an attempt to keep themselves busy throughout the day, although this approach has disadvantages; namely, that the different dispatchers aren&a