

# SCOOTERS AND PUBLIC SPACE

## Design Against Birds

*Daniel Giles Helm*

“To design against is to subvert the oppressive and re-envision the mundane. “Design” signals a world that could be. “Designing against” is then a yearning for what won’t be. It is a symbolic act hoping to diminish our alienation and the suffering of communities in a time of collapse. Time, power, and history might not be on our side, but at least we have some CAD tools.”

I’ve been talking a lot about scooters recently. Replace “scooters” with just about any other noun and you might not know what I’m talking about, but with “scooters” you do. Those damn scooters. Racing down pedestrian sidewalks. Parked inconsiderately, often in right-of-ways. They’re aesthetically unfortunate, but more importantly, their presence is immediately redefining public spaces -- as one faculty member put it, “I know they’re new, but it’s hard to recall what it was like when they weren’t around.” Quickly woven into the built environment, their presence brings along questions of space, planning, and politics.

I’m aware of the rent-a-scooter’s utility, popularity, environmental promise, and for many, their fun and convenience. They’re so successful precisely because they fill a public transportation void that our cities and universities aren’t fulfilling. And yes, they are an electric solution in a time when we should take what we can get regarding the elimination of fossil-fuel consumption. But all of this is a part of my anger towards them. The scooters, the objects themselves, are little monuments to the failures of our communities and institutions.

The scooters call attention to spaces that we typically ignore. The passageways that we typically look past are now re-envisioned as temporary stor-

age spots for a business’s property. The scooters never seem to be parked in designated areas, such as near bike racks, but rather are littered about indiscriminately. When grouped together, they make a salesfloor out of a sidewalk, and when scattered disparately, they mark the spot of where their last rider found it most convenient to continue walking from. On sidewalks, they create an obstacle course. In entryways to buildings, they function as billboards sponsored by tax dollars and student fees. And what right do they have to be there? When a company from San Jose or San Mateo comes into our community and dumps their revenue-makers on our sidewalks, uses common spaces as a retail opportunity, and blocks the right-of-way for walkers and wheelchair users, our collective response is to spend weeks hemming and hawing about what to do about it. A city council may ask for some dollars here and there, but they don’t issue citations for public dumping. Mainly they just don’t want to risk butting heads with such a powerful business. And powerful they are. Bird Scooters, the largest such company, is valued at \$2 billion, Lime at \$1 billion. Combined that’s over 12 times the 2018 operating budget for the City of Norman.

But at least they bring jobs, right? Well, they

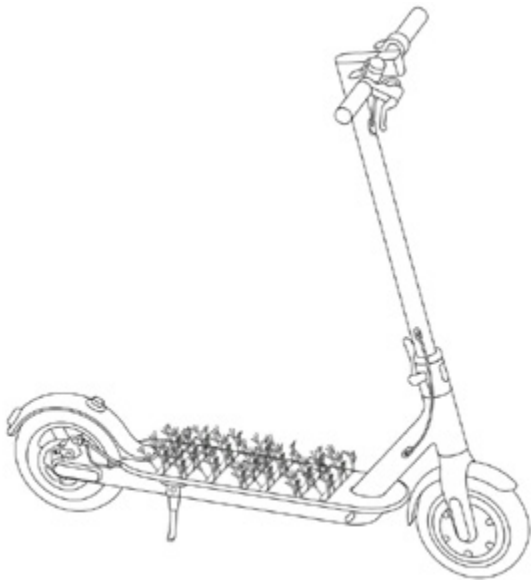


all, aren't there bigger issues to fret over?

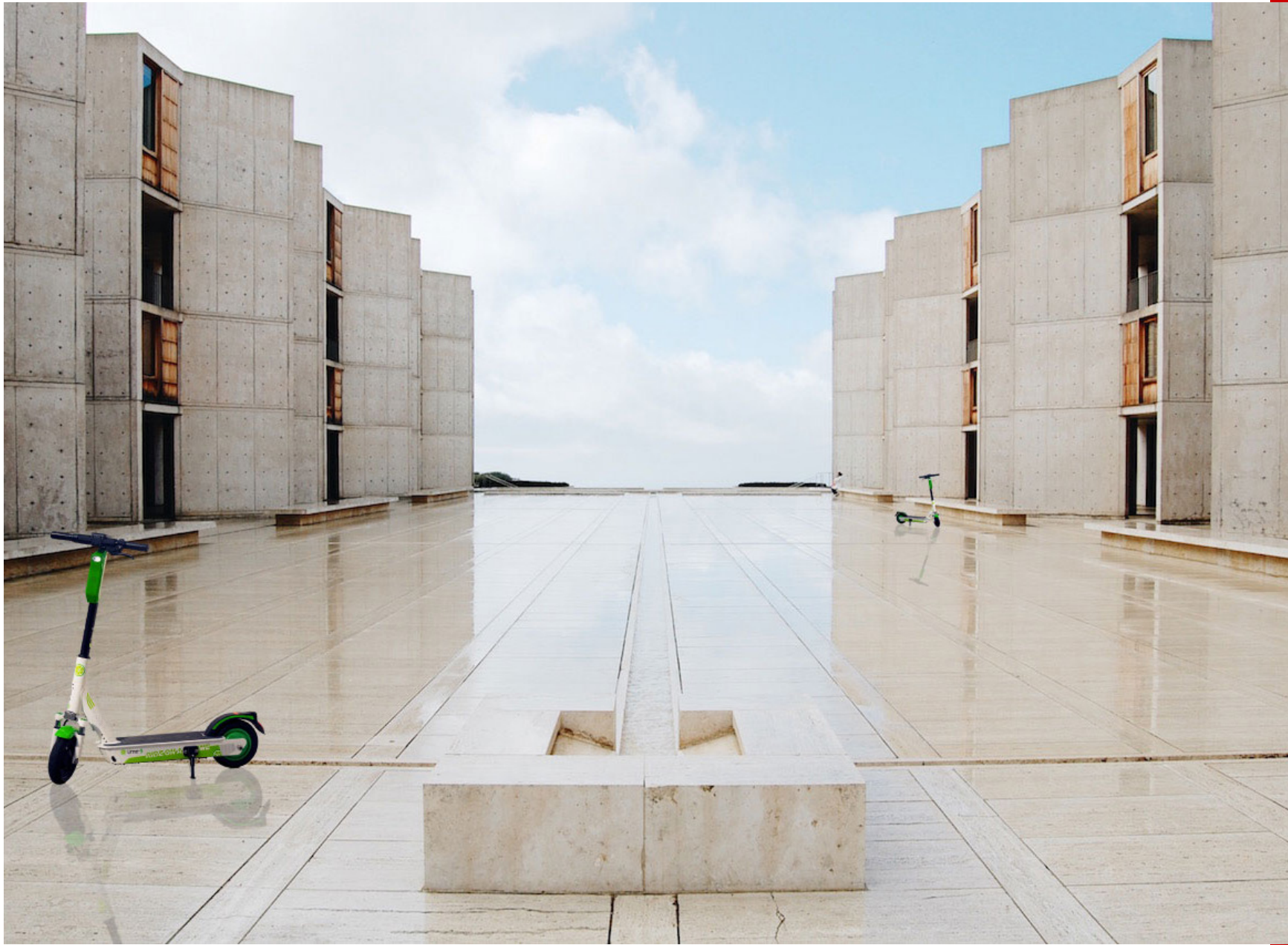
My distaste for the scooters could be rooted in their blatant mockery of the dystopian present. As they pose across the campus or whiz by me as I walk between buildings, they become a physical embodiment of my disbelief with what it is to be alive in 2019. Sure, billboards have polluted the built environment to the benefit of the highest bidder for a long time, but now we pay for the maintenance of their space. Sure, labor has been weakened to the point where full-time employment is ever more elusive, but now even physical labor is done as spec work. Sure, a building can't declare a singular message in isolation, but now the idea is mocked by an oversized consumer electronic, standing defiant against the spatial considerations of the architect. And sure, we've been surveilled and tracked by corporations while engaging with our cell phones, but now we can't even clear space on a blocked sidewalk without being concerned about its GPS device. It's not that societal norms

haven't been twisted for some time, but this is just the decade when the powerful in business and politics get to unapologetically flaunt it. The collective control over our spaces and communities has long been on the decline, but the slope is starting to feel awfully slippery.

I've been talking a lot about scooters recently, but I've also been asking: what does it mean to work against them, either as objects or as symbols? How do I incorporate these feelings into my practice? And how do I do so in a way that doesn't antagonize riders or the technology? And where exactly is the blame -- shouldn't we prioritize enjoyment over guilt when envisioning the potential solutions to our looming environmental catastrophe? I wasn't alive or making work when billboards were introduced or labor unions were all but destroyed, but I hope I would have been responding to it, despite the futility. I've been talking a lot about scooters recently, and it might just be a lot of talk.



*Bird with Bird Control Spikes*



*Scooters and  
Kahn*

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