Cities provide storage for our secrets, whether we want them to or not. All places do, really. Unlike a diary, that needs you to actively fill it with your thoughts, a city will automatically file memories that you might not have thought all that significant, keeping them until one day you return somewhere and think, 'This was where...'

This weekend, as part of Rider Spoke, a group of computer-equipped cyclists will unlock a private tour of these memory libraries of Leeds. Over two evenings the riders will seek out corners of the city and anonymously record answers to questions posed by the artists from Blast Theory; recordings that will stay behind in that location for other riders to discover.

“It’s a bike ride where you record secrets, and listen to other people’s secrets,” explains Matt Adams from Blast Theory. “You have a small computer on the handlebars of your bike and you wear an earpiece. As you cycle you’re asked a number of questions about your life, and you choose places to cycle to, to record your answer. You can listen to other people’s answers that are dotted around you as well.
“I liken it to a mixture between a very private thing - because you do it on your own and make your recordings on your own - and a very public thing, where you’re broadcasting quite personal things out to other people. In that way it’s a like a mix between a diary and a pirate radio station - it has both of those qualities. One thing that makes it quite powerful is that you’re in dialogue with other people, but they are all people who cycled before you, so they’re absent at the time that you listen to their recordings. It’s a little bit like a secret society.”

The secrets shared among that society this weekend will alter the mental map of Leeds for each of the riders. Not only will each cyclist have to think through the relationship between secret and place for each answer they record, but they will learn the secret associations the places around them have for the other riders. The bike commute on the Monday morning after will be changed, if only slightly, forever; not only by the feeling that, ‘This was where I...’ but now also with, ‘That was where someone...’

“That’s partly where the work comes from,” says Matt. “That weird sort of ghost presence that you have when you go back to a part of the city you used to live in, or at a certain time you spent a lot of time in this area of a city because you were going out with someone who lived there. You have this very strong set of associations with particular street corners or bus stops, that can really leave an imprint on you.”

Speaking aloud about those associations into an audio recorder for others to hear isn’t the most natural response to a haunting memory, but Rider Spoke’s cycling tour is deliberately staged at night so that introspection can find its voice.

“One of the things about cycling is that you’re already separated,” says Matt. “You’re separated from the mass of pedestrians and the mass of drivers when you’re cycling, and you’re travelling at a slightly different speed from both of them. Cycling has this very evocative feeling, a sort of free-wheeling, a sort of cruising around - and to then do that at night gives you an even greater sense of the city being yours. It gives a range and freedom to explore at that time when the shops and the businesses tend to be closed. I think it sets the atmosphere very distinctively.

“One of the things that as a cyclist you’re trying to do is find enough space. During the day you still have this sense that you have to try and fight for your place on the street, that you’re a minority; I personally find at night that really drops away and you feel a greater sense of ownership.”

Blast Theory have held Rider Spoke events previously in London, Athens, Brighton, Budapest, Sydney and Adelaide, and Matt says, “I hope it will work really well in Leeds, because Leeds is a very evocative city; it’s got a very strong identity, a very strong cultural history.”

In other cities, “We have been very pleasantly surprised by how moving a lot of the answers are, how people are often very forthright and very eloquent about their lives. We once made an archive project called Riders Have Spoken which we showed in the British Library in London, that was 400 of our favourite answers from across the UK, from Australia, from Europe. We do keep them all, because I think they’re a really precious collection of recordings.”

If you’d like to contribute to that collection, and be part of the clandestine exchange of secrets among cyclists, have a look at the video below of Rider Spoke in Sydney, then click here to sign up for this weekend in Leeds. Blast Theory are bringing Rider Spoke to Leeds as part of Juliana’s Bike, a cycling-oriented festival of arts and events organised by East Street Arts that begins this month. Visit Julianasbike.org.uk for an up to date calendar of events.
More from The City Talking:

Le Prince: Interview with Leeds City College Award Winners
ABOUT 7 MONTHS AGO

Last week we attended the Leeds City College Awards. We were proud to be sponsors of the event and we were truly inspired by the student's stories and their talent. One thing that really stood out to us at the event was the Spotlight Award winners, a group of students who made a short film on Louis Le Prince.

Tourist Attraction: Granary Wharf
ABOUT 7 MONTHS AGO

I love Granary Wharf, so much so I lived there for an year, this is really a fairytale location of the city.