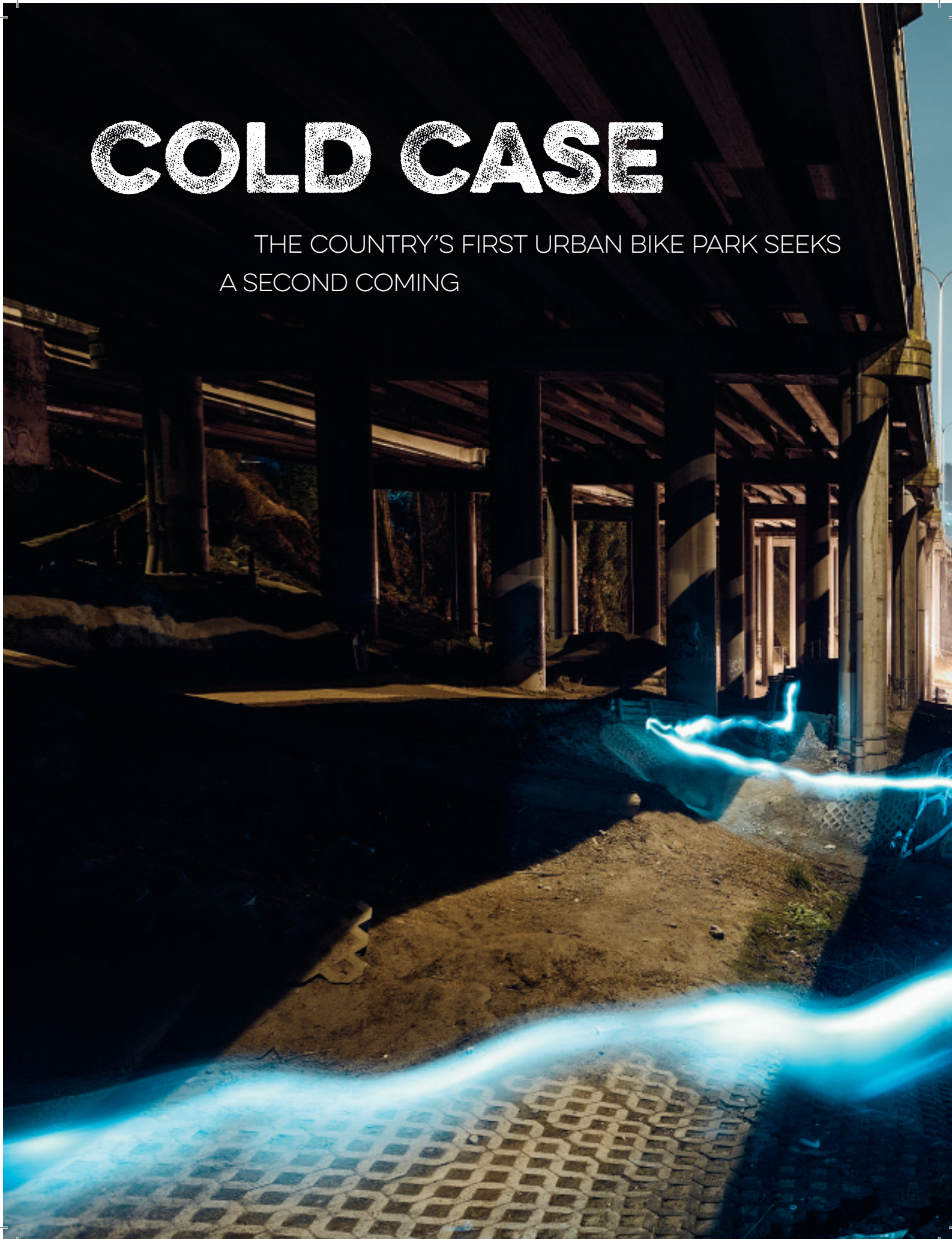


COLD CASE

THE COUNTRY'S FIRST URBAN BIKE PARK SEEKS
A SECOND COMING





BY HEATHER HANSMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JORDAN MANLEY

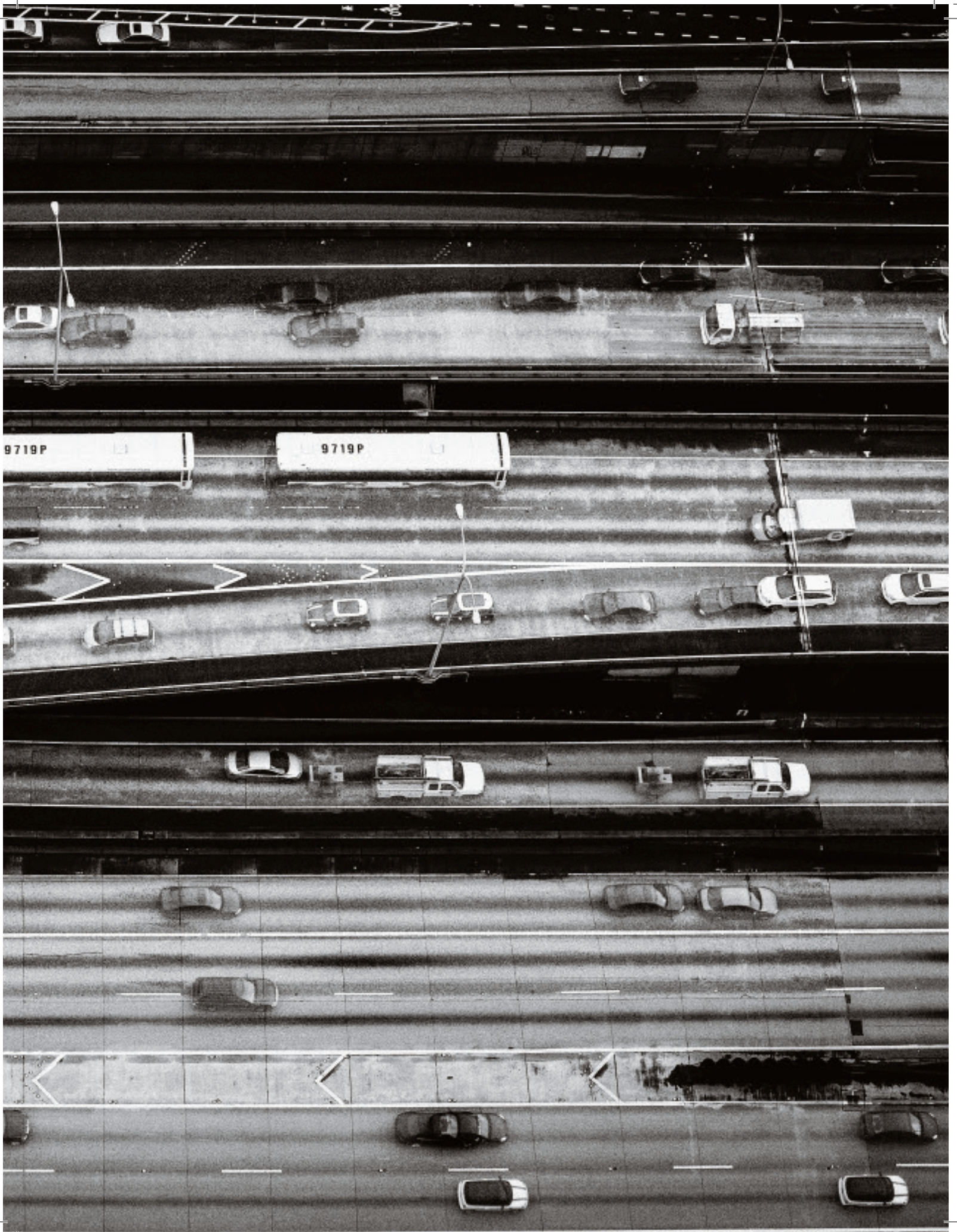


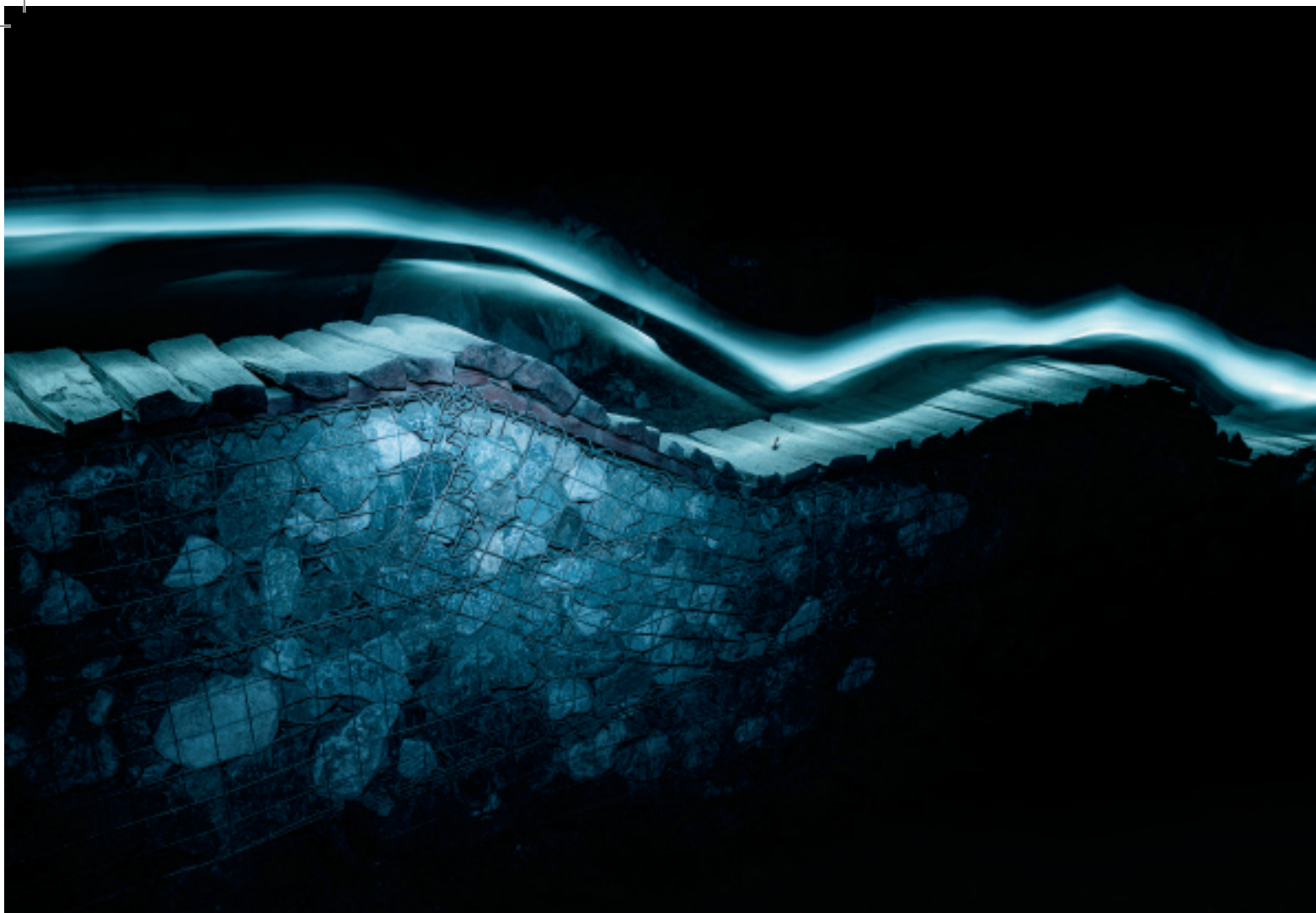
ON A DREARY SATURDAY IN SEATTLE, I carefully switchback my way through a series of narrow, terraced trails under a freeway on-ramp. I navigate around the tenuous-looking wall-rides, and a rickety roller-coaster bridge because I don't want to risk a face smash on concrete. There's no one else around except for a lone guy running stairs, but I get the feeling that someone is watching me. It might be the graffiti-covered head of the Obey Giant staring down from one of the pillars that holds up the overpass, or it might be the fact that I'm not used to being somewhere so empty within the city limits.

Seattle's I-5 Colonnade Bike Park, a knot of trails carved out of a concrete bunker under Interstate 5, was the first urban bike park in the country. When it was built in 2005 it was heralded as the future of city riding, but a decade later it's a ghost town, all moon dust and mangled concrete. It's not in disrepair, exactly. It just feels lonely and rarely ridden.

Today, urban bike parks are popping up across the country. There are now more than 100 in the U.S., including one 100-feet underground in Louisville, Kentucky, which opened in February, and another slated for San Francisco's McLaren Park this spring. In many ways these parks seem like an ideal marriage of public land use and positive ridership growth, but it's not as simple as building trails on unused civic land and waiting for riders to start rolling in.

Colonnade now sits empty of riders a lot of the time. The homeless population, which had been pushed out of the park by trailbuilding, has been creeping back in, leaving piles of trash and scattering needles. The riders who lobbied for the park have largely abandoned it for more wooded trails nearby. But the people who conceived, fought for, and built it—from the City of Seattle Parks to the nonprofit trail building group, the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance—still say it was a good idea, and that they would do it all over again.





A DECADE LATER, MANY CONSIDER THE FEATURES AND TRAILS AT COLONNADE TO BE OUTDATED ; JON KENNEDY WAS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE EVERGREEN MOUNTAIN BIKE ALLIANCE WHEN COLONNADE WAS APPROVED IN 2005. THE GROUP'S VOLUNTEERS BUILT THE PARK.

Interstate 5, which runs the length of the west coast, splits the gut of Seattle. As it hugs the east side of Lake Union (which you might recognize from a certain Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan movie) it bisects two neighborhoods—Eastlake, down by the water, and Capitol Hill. The freeway is high above the ground there, but for years the area beneath it was a wasteland filled with transients and drug deals. It was the kind of place you wouldn't walk alone, even in broad daylight. In the late '90s, downhill racer and Eastlake resident Simon Lawton wondered if he could do something better with the empty space. He started digging primitive trails and building dirt jumps. His neighbor, Chris Lehman, who was on the city council, saw him and asked what he thought about building a bike park there to connect the two neighborhoods, push out the vagrants

and give people a place to ride in the city. Lawton jumped on board.

"I went to so many meetings literally for five years," Lawton says. With Lehman pointing him to the right people, he started pitching the then-unheard-of idea of a bike park. He talked to the city, to the parks department, to the neighborhood council, and to the Department of Transportation, which owned the land. It was relatively easy to convince the city that a rundown, vacant, freeway underpass could be turned into a productive space, and by 2004, he'd locked down \$1.88 million from the city with the help of a pro parks levy. He'd also linked up with the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance, which at the time was called the Backcountry Bicycle Trail Club. Evergreen was a non-profit trailbuilding group, and although its volunteers had never really built park-style trails before, they were a dedicated bunch.

They pulled people in, raised money for supplies, and labored to dig out the trails and build features. They helped forge relationships between different land use groups, which ultimately proved to be the biggest benefit that came out of Colonnade.

"We learned how to effectively procure money, volunteers and material," says Jon Kennedy, who was the executive director of Evergreen at the time. In December 2005, Seattle's mayor cut the ribbon on the park.

"Originally it was overwhelming there," Kennedy says. "Busloads of kids were coming from as far away as Olympia (Washington, some 60 miles south). It started off huge because it was a model of how positive







activity displaces negative activity.”

But after interest piqued initially, it fell off.

There are intrinsic issues with mountain biking in urban areas, aside from the lack of scenery, for why that happened. The riding is tough and unforgiving. At Colonnade, a lot of the surfaces are hard concrete, and, because it’s sheltered from the rain, the dirt that does exist is powdery dust. Over the past decade, bike park design has morphed to focus on features like pumptracks and dirt jumps, but because Colonnade was built in the early days of urban parks it’s full of tightly wound XC trails and nerve-racking skinnies. “Note that Colonnade can eat up bikes and be quite challenging,” Evergreen says on its website.

And then there’s the sketch factor. The area under the freeway had previously been a homeless encampment, which the city wanted to push out, and even though the bike park changed the dynamic and brought more traffic, it didn’t solve the problem. “It’s a dry place to get out of the weather and here, if you’re homeless, that’s a big deal,” says David Graves, the senior planner for the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department, who worked on the project. “It’s not just endemic to there, we struggle with it in a lot of our parks, and bike trails are not going to fix that problem.”

Another part of the problem was that Evergreen and the rest of the Seattle bike community undercut themselves. As Colonnade was being built—and in large part *because* Colonnade paved the way—the group got the go-ahead to build another bike park, Duthie Hill, across Lake Washington in suburban Issaquah. Duthie was everything Colonnade wasn’t: tacky dirt and perfectly sculpted jumps built in the woods instead of under the freeway and close enough that most Seattleites could still get there easily.

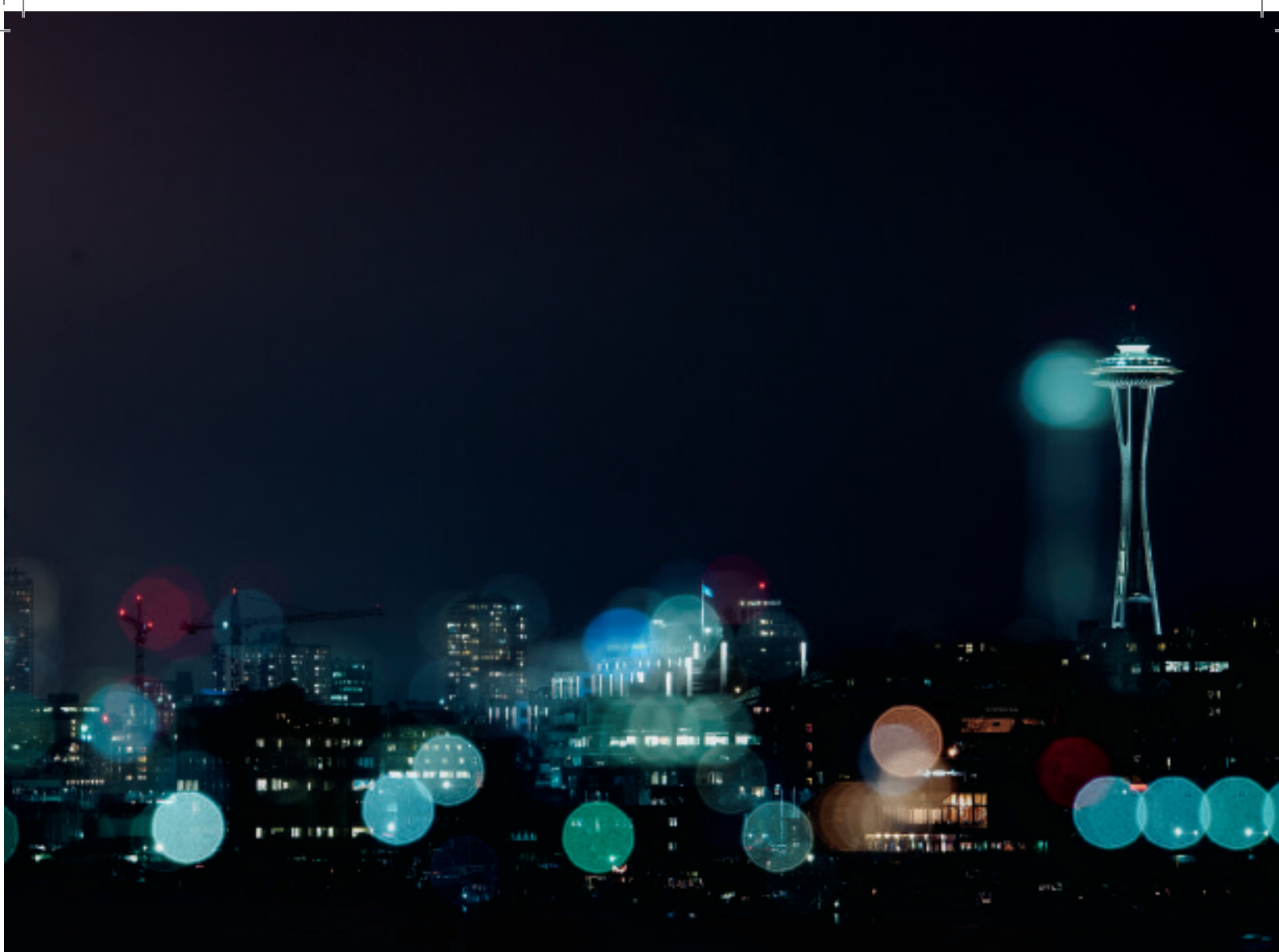
That’s the biggest thing about urban bike parks—mountain bikers want to ride in the, you know, *mountains*. Colonnade, with its concrete and constant hum of traffic, feels like anything but wilderness. “The largest lesson is that our

MIKE WESTRA ESTIMATES THAT TRAFFIC AT COLONNADE HAS DECLINED FROM 40,000 RIDERS ANNUALLY TO 5,000 OVER THE PAST DECADE, BUT HE THINKS THE PARK CAN RISE AGAIN; DUTHIE HILL, 20 MILES OUTSIDE OF SEATTLE, HAS BEEN A BLESSING FOR CITY MOUNTAIN BIKERS AND A CURSE FOR COLONNADE.

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community has a huge connection to the forest,” says Mike Westra, Evergreen’s project manager.

Westra estimates that Colonnade attracted some 40,000 mountain bikers per year until 2010, the year Duthie Hill was built. After that it steadily declined to its current rate of about 5,000 riders per year.

So why build trail in the city if we want to ride in the woods? And why are more parks springing up if Colonnade’s ridership hasn’t been anywhere near predicted?

“There are so many things we’ve learned at Colonnade that we’ve applied. The original motivation was totally different than the motivation for bike parks these days,” Westra says.

Instead of trying to imitate trail riding, now the goal is to capitalize on a park’s location. Parks should be easy to access so kids and other riders will get pulled in to the sport, and builders should focus on features that can hone riders’ skills. Westra says he still thinks city bike parks are a good idea, and that they hold significant

value for a community. They just need to avoid some of Colonnade’s pitfalls.

Colonnade taught Evergreen important logistical lessons, too. They’ve figured out how to work with the city and other disparate land managers, and how to fundraise. And now they know that local mountain bikers care enough to come out to shovel dirt and built trails under a freeway.

Now when Kennedy, and anyone else involved, talks about Colonnade they call it a model—imperfect, but a training ground for how to build a bike park. In the rest of Washington, and along the I-5 corridor in places like Tacoma and Lynnwood, there are bike parks under construction using a template influenced by the lessons learned from Colonnade.

“I really think it started the movement of local bike parks,” Kennedy says.

Seattle has plans in the works for a second city bike park at Cheasty Greenspace, a wooded park in south Seattle. And there’s a movement to revamp Colonnade, using a decade’s worth of design

lessons to make it work. A ‘Rebuild the ‘Nade’ group is planning to add more modern features, like a pumptrack, and to take out some of the more intimidating ones, so it makes sense for local kids. The Eastlake Community Council secured \$21,000, financed by the Seattle Neighborhood Matching Fund, to improve the park. They’re trying to work with the tricky location, instead of against it, and capitalize on the fact that it’s so close to the city. They want to bring back a crowd, which they think will help thin out transients. “We’re going to focus on urban audience, and on riders who can’t afford a big fancy trail bike,” Westra says. He doesn’t think it’ll quite have the traction of something like Duthie, but he thinks it can be a way to feed people into the sport because having a bike park in your backyard keeps the barriers to entry low. “I think urban bike parks are extremely critical,” he says. “I would just warn anyone who wants to build one under the freeway.” ▀