

Introduction to “The Pedway of Today” by Hui-Min Tsen (Green Lantern Press, 2013)

Pedway As Breakroom As Time Machine

Or, The World As Breakroom

Or, Time Traveler's Breakroom

Or, Turning a Breakroom into a Time Machine

Or, Onward Journey fellow Time Travelers

Or, Escaping The Real by turning a breakroom into a time machine

By Daniel Tucker

Descending into the Pedway, a whiff of fast food teases my nose, the light changes from daylight to fluorescent, and name-badged workers move at the steady pace only a halfway decent paycheck could fuel. It is an alternate universe that is not the slightest bit alternative — the Pedway reeks of reality — a really really real reality. As real and banal as the doorway to the job you never wanted to work in the first place but nevertheless find yourself passing through, at the beginning and end of every work day; years later you're still there.

As the City of Chicago describes it online, “Chicago’s downtown pedestrian way system, the Pedway, lies in the heart of the city. This system of underground tunnels and overhead bridges links more than 40 blocks in the Central Business District, covering roughly five miles. Used by tens of thousands of pedestrians each day, the Pedway connects to public and private buildings, CTA stations and commuter rail facilities.”

The Pedway forms a unity across disunity — the physical embodiment of what is known as a Public/Private Partnership. Dipping in and out of government buildings, department stores, hotels, office towers, public transit systems and food courts — the Pedway is like a thread or timeline, an organizing device for disparate organizational forms that shape, in part, society.

Early on in artist Hui-min Tsen's guided tour of the Pedway she states, "We are now *entering* the workers world." Like an employee breakroom, it really does feel like a place you aren't supposed to be unless you work there. But you find yourself there, like the live version of a workplace environment portrayed in a Frederick Wiseman film. So, how are you to interpret this place, this workplace environment? I had the pleasure of joining Tsen on a guided tour she led for a small group of Chicagoans, you have the pleasure of navigating and discovering it for yourself in this guidebook. In order to get you started, I will dive into a few of the most personally fascinating aspects of this world Tsen has opened up for us to explore.

Witnessing this concentration of government offices in the age of austerity, I cannot help but consider how government is changing. Amongst the many jurisdictional terrains represented in the Pedway's political geography (State, County and City governments have offices within the system), one notable example is the "Express Lane" for Secretary of State. To anyone who has been required to navigate such bureaucracies, "express" is at least an oxymoron, and at most an admission of some inadequacy of the non-express offices down the hall and around the corner.

Observing the express lane and many other offices in the vicinity, the majority presence of African American workers is undeniable. The role of the Public sector in US cities in stabilizing middle class Black communities casts the ideology underpinning privatization, typically critiqued through an economic justice lens, into a decidedly racialized and historical light. Looking back in time fifty years ago this office would have been staffed by residents of European descent, but the success of the Civil Rights movement in racially integrating workplaces dramatically transformed cities across the country. This represents a great deal of time investment in change, by a country with citizens who promoted and resisted it, by movements who advocated it, by institutions that implemented it. Any transference of public sector jobs to the private sector will have a destabilizing effect on the economic viability of many communities and in a racially segregated city like Chicago, this destabilization is distributed unevenly to communities of color. Being in the presence of these government offices and office workers, the threat of undoing of civil-rights era progress looms large and "express lanes" feel like a last gasp effort to keep up with neoliberal era progress.

As Tsen states at point #21, the Pedway can feel displacing like a time machine – displacing the traveler or the worker from orientation, purpose or simply from the familiarity of time.

Another site down the hall is a time piece repair company. The underground glass-fronted booth reveals a mess of old clocks, watches, magnifying glasses and the tools of a delicate mechanic. A question emerges with a sight like this — what do we need these time pieces for? A wound watch looks great, and can last a long time, but cell phones and clocks set by satellite have surpassed the digital ones that were said to have replaced the clock decades ago. What motivates this ongoing demand for an outmoded industry? What does keeping time or time keeping mean today?

On the one hand, time is the immaterial raw material of power — time to work and to live, or the aspiration of time management and just-in-time production all bring to mind the role that time plays in structuring our lives. On the other hand, what time can *do* is changing as work and living can happen whenever. Do you really need to show up on time to work when you can work from home, resolve problems over email, learn a new skill by watching it on live streaming video class? How do you account for time spent working when you never stop working because your phone never stops buzzing or your mind never stops buzzing? What are the instances when we need to tell precise time and when could it be set aside? How many alternate time scales can one person or a community accommodate?

Most of us have *work time* which is pretty rationalized, *home time* is a bit slower, *down time* is supposedly something all-together different that involves leisure. Many people are from places other than where they live, and so they have people in different time zones and those people have their time scales as well. Some of us may work a late shift and our time is flipped, and fewer and fewer of us might use the sunlight or weather to dictate what we can do when and for how long. But generally speaking, we do a lot to the time kept by satellite-set phones and computers where we spend most of our time.

These spaces conjure images of the past. So seeing a clock shop implies a certain kind of nostalgia, which is wrapped up in our own emotional connection to things and our aesthetic preferences for certain appearances and forms. And seeing a government office where stacks of paper, rubber stamps and even typewriters reside comes along with a similar bit of nostalgia and aesthetic preferences as well. While information moves as fast as fiber optics will allow, some things need to get put in an envelope and passed around, then filed away for safekeeping.

A conservative (which can be found on the political Right and Left) would say things should stay the same, while a progressive would say they can, do and should change. But what about a position in between that acknowledges those times we might have aesthetic preferences for the past despite agreeing with the arguments for moving on? What about a position that acknowledges the gains of past reforms in the form of good jobs for those previously excluded, but agree there is room for increased efficiency? Can we have express lanes without throwing out the things we like about our history? Can we have an emotional attachment to certain forms, without binding ourselves to times past?

Being in the world demands acts of time travel. Being sent back in time is part of the experience of being historical, engaging history and the material remnants of the past.

The really realness of everyday life needs desperately to be disrupted and displaced. We cannot reside in the banal breakrooms we have constructed. We need fantasy. And we need perspective. And we need history. All of which can displace us enough to be able to find a position that really suits this time.

Hui -Min Tsen's project engages many traditions — some might call her form art, psychogeography, storytelling, tourism, trespassing, or just being a counterproductive nuisance in a workers world. Her approach is disruptive because it introduces fantasy, perspective and history into a common frame for an experience in a place where such experiences are not supposed to take place. Tsen turns a series of walkways with the look, smell and feel of a workers world into an alternate world, where associations are possible between fast food and civil rights, clockmakers and bureaucrats. She subverts the "real" and turns a breakroom into a time machine.