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Does MIT's Copenhagen Wheel go the distance?

by [Elizabeth Armstrong Moore](#)

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It's no secret that Portland, Ore., is [one of the world's top biking towns](#). (Full disclosure: I live and bike here, and love both.) Thanks in part to a bike culture that has led to the development of hundreds of miles of bike lanes, ample signage, and rows of bright blue parking racks, Portland gets accolades for healthy people and air.

But it is Copenhagen, Denmark, home to the [2009 climate summit](#), that tops pretty much every list you'll find as the [world's best biking city](#), with a whopping 36 percent of commuters going by bike. So it is fitting that [MIT's Senseable City Lab](#) came up with [The Copenhagen Wheel](#), which it [unveiled this week](#) in Copenhagen.

But to some, the wheel, whose [several great features](#) include storing kinetic energy for help up hills and monitoring traffic, fog, and nearby friends, is also a bit of a joke, something akin to rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

To environmentalists, there are far bigger mountains that need to be summited (pun shamelessly intended), all the better if by bikes-without-batteries, as the saying may soon go.

To engineers, the storing of kinetic energy is nothing new at all. It's already used in hybrid vehicles, and the 1982 book [Bicycling Science](#), put out by none other than, you guessed



MIT's new take on storing and boosting power, keeping track of nearby friends, and monitoring traffic, fitness, and fog doesn't have everyone convinced.

(Credit: [Senseable City Lab](#))

it, MIT Press, outlines various energy storage systems for bikes known three decades ago.

And to bike enthusiasts, who've tended toward lighter and simpler bicycles of late (Portland's hipster v. roadie ["Performance" video](#) sums up the culture well), adding weight and complexity to a bike, not to mention a hefty price tag estimated at \$500 to \$1,000, is downright counterintuitive.

And when it comes to one's health, of course, it's best to use your own body to get around. Pedaling a bike is better for your heart rate than, say, pushing buttons on an electric one. The Copenhagen Wheel is to someone who already bikes a lot what a diet fad is to someone who already eats well.

But at the end of the day, if the Copenhagen Wheel gets people who wouldn't otherwise bike to actually bike, it's a boon for personal and, at least to some extent, environmental health. As MIT project leader Christine Outram [tells the New York Times](#), "It's a technology that can get more people on bikes."



Elizabeth Armstrong Moore is a freelance journalist based in Portland, Ore. She has contributed to Wired magazine, The Christian Science Monitor, and public radio. Her semi-obscure hobbies include unicycling, slacklining, hula-hooping, scuba diving, billiards, Sudoku, Magic the Gathering, and classical piano. She is a member of the CNET Blog Network and is not an employee of CNET.