

The Copenhagen Wheel: hybrid saviour or empty hype?



MIT unveiled a device at the Copenhagen climate conference that was touted as a transport breakthrough – a kinetic-energy-powered battery for bicycles. Nice idea, but a little problematic.


The fundamental point of the Copenhagen Wheel is that it's meant to inspire lots of people to sell, or at least cut down on the use of, their cars. Unveiled recently at the United Nations Climate Conference, and designed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the wheel works by saving the energy dissipated while cycling and braking in a battery – if a rider gets tired on a hill or a long stretch of road, the stored energy can be called on to provide extra horsepower.


“We thought about taking [the bicycle], one of the most efficient machines ever made, and making it smarter,” said Assaf Biderman, the project’s associate director. And making the bicycle smarter is not only the small lightweight hub, which can be clipped to just about any type of rear wheel, but also a handlebar-mounted smartphone, which detects

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smog levels and traffic congestion while monitoring the rider's fitness goals.

The Copenhagen Wheel is in its final prototype stages, and is expected to be in full production within a year. MIT, which has been in discussions with a number of companies about commercialising the device, estimates a retail price of US\$500.

But there are a few conceptual problems. For starters, Copenhagen is one of the world's most bike-friendly cities, with hundreds of kilometres of cyclist lanes and specially calibrated traffic lights. What about the thousands of cities where it's just downright dangerous to get around on two wheels? Also, emission-free though it may be, the only way the Copenhagen Wheel can have a major impact on the environment is if it inspires a "sizeable" percentage of the world's 800-million or so car owners to stop driving.

Which is why at least one commentator – Elizabeth Armstrong Moore, from CNet – has compared the invention to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

By staff writer

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Watch: Copenhagen Wheel promotional video

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