

STARTS &amp; STOPS

## Sculptors reinventing the wheel-holder

By Noah Bierman | November 2, 2008

On a recent trip to downtown Louisville, Ky., I saw a giant sculpted head adorned with a loop (where the neck would have been) that people can lock their bicycles to.

It was part sculpture, part bicycle rack. But it was mostly sculpture. And it was captivating.

Louisville may be the most aggressive city in the country when it comes to building artistic bicycle racks - an inspired merger of high culture and smart transportation.

For the stores adjacent to the racks, these are works of art, rather than assemblages of metal that block the sidewalk. At the same time, they remind passersby that biking is a viable way to visit downtown or get to work.

Other cities - including Boston and Brookline, have made similar efforts - though none as extensive. But now larger scale projects such as Louisville's are beginning to gain popularity nationally.

Louisville has 24 such racks, with plans for 10 more next year, each built by local artists, who are chosen based on their past work. The Downtown Management District gives the artists \$2,000 to \$2,500 for materials and then tells them to pursue their visions, said Ken Herndon, who started the project there in 2001.

"In effect, the artists are giving these away" in exchange for creative control and exposure, Herndon said. The artist who created the sculpted head, David Bibelhauser, has even made a business of selling them, Herndon said.

Some of the pieces don't look like they hold many bikes, but the city has no shortage of conventional bike racks to pick up the slack.

Nicole Freedman, the Boston bicycle czarina who reports to the mayor, said she has been intrigued by the bike-rack sculptures she has seen in Portland, Ore., and elsewhere and would consider expanding local efforts, depending on the success of some independent projects already underway.

Over the next three years, Boston is installing 750 standard bike racks, shaped like lollipops. The focus is on function, rather than form. Bicycle advocates like David Watson, executive director of the Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition, likes the attention drawn by sculptural bike racks, but is concerned that they won't provide much capacity once biking truly catches on. Big industrial racks like the new cages at the Alewife MBTA station provide many more slots, even if they aren't much to look at.

But there are a few independent rack projects that could build some momentum locally.

The UrbanArts Institute, a nonprofit housed at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, has helped spark two such projects using private grant money.

The first, four racks by artist Richard Duca next to the Honan-Allston Branch Library, were dedicated in 2006. They're a mixture of abstract forms that look something like stylized black bicycles.

The second project is expected next year in Mission Hill. Artists for Humanity, a nonprofit that works with schoolchildren in the arts, won the commission to build enough racks for six bicycles in the area and has been working with students on the designs. They're expecting to install them in spring 2009.

Christina Lanzl, project manager at the UrbanArts Institute, said she would like to see some of the completed bike racks duplicated in other parts of the city, eventually, perhaps with some local flourishes.

"It's a matter of funding," Lanzl said. "Who will fund that kind of thing?"

### Circulating a tax benefit

Bicycle commuters were also the focus of a rather peculiar add-on to Congress's recent \$700 billion bailout bill. The bill provides a \$20-per-month tax benefit for bicycle commuters, through their employers.

Watson, of MassBike, said the biking community is concerned that it will be hard to collect the money because it requires lots of paperwork from the employer to justify that the stipend is being used to enhance cycling needs. A similar benefit for parking and public transit is easier to collect because it doesn't require as much paperwork, he said.

But one Cambridge company sees an opportunity to convert more cyclists and make it easier for companies to collect the tax credit and pass it on to workers.

Montague Bikes is offering to sell its \$700 folding bike at a discount - \$480 - to companies that agree to participate in the program. The companies can then sell or give the bikes to employees, who can work off the expense by riding to work for 24 months and collecting the stipend.

It could mean a free bike, courtesy of the government bailout.

Devin Riley, a company spokesman, said Montague has not yet signed up any employers, but hopes to do so before the federal benefit takes effect in January.

### **Taking a pass on surveys**

A few weeks ago, I wrote about a Massachusetts Turnpike Authority plan to give out 5,000 free Fast Lane transponders to commuters who agree to fill out a survey. Don't expect to get those surveys from most toll-takers. Their union, not surprisingly, is not so excited about converting more commuters to automated payment.

Robert Cullinane, secretary/treasurer of Teamsters Union Local 127, said he has told his members not to pass out the surveys and plans to file a grievance over what he said was an attempt to tell his members to do so without his permission.

Alan LeBovidge, turnpike director, said the administration will rely mostly on nonunion employees to hand out the surveys in coming weeks. He has already been out at the tollbooths, passing some out to drivers in person. He said some union toll-takers who work in the western part of the Pike have also been asked to pass them out.

For now, there is no process set up for drivers to request the surveys. They have to run into someone to get them.

Cullinane, whose union stands to lose 100 jobs over the next 16 months, mocked management's efforts as unsafe: "I think it's absurd to be standing out there handing anything out in the middle of the street, in the middle of the highway."

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