

A Bicycle Built for Seven

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We, the five of us, are pedaling a bike that's way too super-sized for the city of Ann Arbor's bike lanes. The Conference Bike (CoBi), a red circular apparatus with seating for seven and a round handlebar in the center, has one driver in control of steering. And with everyone pedaling, we smoothly take our rightful position in traffic.

There isn't much this urbane college town hasn't seen; the CoBi has been making the rounds of the University of Michigan campus and downtown Ann Arbor for about four years now, but still, no one's too jaded. Drivers give the thumbs up. And we're the camera darlings of State Street. "I'm on ten thousand phones," Tom Bartlett, owner and driver of the CoBi, says.

Some would say the CoBi is misunderstood. Although the League of American Bicyclists has designated U-M as a bike-friendly university, according to Bartlett, the CoBi is a bicycle *non grata* on campus. But as we circumnavigate the Diag, it's hard to see how we're breaking any rules. Per the U-M Parking and Transportation Services department, motorcycles, mopeds, and Segways are forbidden on campus pathways. The CoBi, however, is its own gray category — a decidedly non-motorized transportation hub.

Even more importantly, Bartlett coins it a work of art. The CoBi was invented by internationally-known artist Eric Staller, whose curious large-scale works include the Magic Garden — a series of domes in a plaza in Osaka, Japan — and copper windmills with eyeball centers hanging from the ceiling of Media Plaza, in Utrecht, Netherlands. Stateside, his "Angelville" sculpture and man-shaped cabinets are housed at Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids.

Coasting westward down the slight tilt of Liberty Street, our collective weight astride the 400-pound bike lets us bypass pedaling. Bartlett brakes at 111 S. Fourth Avenue, a circa-1867 building he co-owns with an unnamed business partner. The property is the headquarters of Bartlett's business, Circumference. The purpose of the space is yet to be defined, although a gallery scene strongly comes to mind. Residential is another option on the table, Bartlett muses. An enormous hinged panel hanging in front of the window is intended to be a gallery wall visible from outside, though nothing hangs there currently. Aside from tools and other building supplies, the place is mostly empty. It has brick walls, good bones — and certainly room for several CoBis, could they squeeze through the front door.

The bike is six feet wide and eight feet long. Manufactured in Germany, only 300 have been produced; indeed, in the U.S., a CoBi is a rare bird. Most reside in Europe, although Google has two at corporate headquarters. Bartlett will say only that its cost approaches that of a new economy-sized car.

Eventually, we park the bike back at the intersection of Liberty and Division, a corner large enough to accommodate its hulk. No one minds its presence. "There's always been a sensibility in Ann Arbor that you could do things that were unusual if you wanted to," Bartlett, the former head of Ann Arbor's Public Art Commission and a city resident for over 43 years, says. "People

come from out of town. It didn't used to be so touristy, like it is now. But that hasn't been bad for me."

Bartlett charges \$5 a head for a circuit around town, a popular pastime on summer nights. "I don't think there's anybody I know of that's operating a Conference Bike in that way...The other ones are usually lease operations."

An organizer for the TedX U-M Inform Transform event hired Bartlett to take attendees for rides. He's also trailered the CoBi to Cleveland for an urban-design collective and to Indiana for a corporate team-building event. And he continually fields calls from other parties interested in having one for their communities, such as Bend, Ore.

"Definitely the first thing you have to do is talk to the authorities about what you're going to do," Bartlett advises.

Despite its charms, the CoBi doesn't have an easy in. An attempt to ferry it over to car-free Mackinac Island, a bikers' haven, fell dead in the water. Competition for the carriage drivers, Bartlett believes. "There were just economic interests there that were not going to make room for the Conference Bike. It has to do with art, but it has to do with commerce, too."

He's found Ann Arbor to be open to that mix. "I'm trying to work with gallery forms that you might say are going to work in a college town in an intellectual center in the Midwest instead of in a big city." He defines a gallery form as any conduit that runs from the artist's studio to the audience for their work, or even an art medium in its own right.

Is the bike itself a gallery form, I ask. "It's a carrier of our content," he says.

So, it wouldn't be public art without the riders? "I think the social environment that it's created is the essence of the artwork, of the Conference Bike," Bartlett replies.

The view from Bar Louie is a steady parade of people stopping to photograph and sit on the CoBi. He often also parks in front of Cherry Republic on Main Street — across from Spooner, a living crochet work of art. "He's been here as long as me," Bartlett notes. "It's like me and Spooner have been standing on that corner for 40 years."

A seat on the CoBi is a straddling of the sweet spot of art and transportation, mixed with some indefinability. The piece has an approachable, timeless appeal.

"It's not that people have to understand the art content of Jeff Koons, or something that a Marxist critic wrote about him," Bartlett explains. "They've just never seen anything like that before in their life. That to me, that's everything, for that to happen to somebody. That's what I want art to do."