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MIT project to track trash

by Lance Whitney

It's 10 p.m. Do you know where your trash is? A new project from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology hopes to find out.

A team of MIT researchers announced on Wednesday a project called Trash Track, designed to monitor trash from start to finish. The team will electronically tag different pieces of waste to trace their voyage through the disposal systems of New York City and Seattle.

By examining the patterns and costs of waste disposal, MIT hopes to educate people about the impact of garbage on the environment and make them aware of what they throw out.

"Trash is one of today's most pressing issues--both directly and as a reflection of our attitudes and behaviors," says professor Carlo Ratti, head of the MIT Senseable City Lab. "Our project aims to reveal the disposal process of our everyday objects, as well as to highlight potential inefficiencies in today's recycling and sanitation systems. The project could be considered the urban equivalent of nuclear medicine--when a tracer is injected and followed through the human body."

Volunteers in New York and Seattle will allow individual pieces of their trash to be tagged with wireless location markers, known as "trash tags." The tags will calculate the ongoing location of each piece of trash and report back to a central server, where the data can be analyzed and viewed in real time.

"Trash Track aims to make the removal chain more transparent," says the lab's associate director, Assaf Biderman. "We hope that the project will promote
behavioral change and encourage people to make more sustainable decisions about what they consume and how it affects the world around them."

Simulation of the Trash Tracker in action
(Credit: MIT Senseable City Lab)

Starting in September, the public will be able to see the results of the study online and at special exhibits at the Architectural League in New York City and the Seattle Public Library.

Lance Whitney wears a few different technology hats--journalist, Web developer, and software trainer. He's a contributing editor for Microsoft TechNet Magazine and writes for other computer publications and Web sites. You can follow Lance on Twitter at @lancewhit. Lance is a member of the CNET Blog Network, and he is not an employee of CNET.