

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR SECURING A MOVABLE ITEM TO A STRUCTURE

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application claims priority from United States provisional patent
5 application serial number 61/047,162 filed April 23, 2008, the specification of
which is herein incorporated by reference.

The present application further claims priority from United States patent
application serial number 12/417,108 filed April 2, 2009, the specification of which
is herein incorporated by reference.

10 The present application further claims priority from EP patent application number
09 157 502.7 filed April 7, 2009, the specification of which is herein incorporated
by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates to locking systems. More precisely, the invention pertains to
15 an electronic lock for securing a movable item to a structure and an associated
method.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Securing a moveable item to a structure is of great interest for various
applications. For instance, it may be desirable to secure a vehicle to a fixed
20 structure. This may be particularly advantageous in applications where the
vehicle is to be rented for a given amount of time.

More specifically, there has been in recent years a rise in the popularity of
automated rental systems for vehicles such as bicycles for example. Such a
system generally comprises an automated rental station from which a user may
25 rent a bicycle for a given amount of time.

In such a system, a bicycle to be rented is generally removably secured to a bicycle rack by means of a locking mechanism. A user may selectively unsecure and secure again the bicycle from the bicycle rack in certain circumstances, for instance after paying a given fee and/or providing a personal identification code.

- 5 Such rental systems generally comprise a plurality of rental stations located in different public locations, making them likely targets of acts of vandalism from malevolent individuals. Their robustness is thus an important element of a successful rental system.

For example, US Patent No. 5,917,407, granted to Squire, discloses an
10 automated bicycle renting station wherein the bicycle rack comprises a locking mechanism having a hook or latch member. This hook or latch member is designed to selectively pivot around an axle to engage a rod or a keeper mounted on the bicycle to be secured, thereby effectively securing the bicycle to the renting station.

- 15 Such a station may be subject to vandalism. Indeed, a malicious person may tug at the bicycle engaged in the renting station, using the latch as a lever and the axle as a pivot point to bend the latch out of shape or damage the keeper and free the bicycle from the renting station without paying the given fee.

Other locking systems for bicycles have also been proposed in the art. However,
20 such systems are still prone to property damage and theft of bicycles and may thus cause great financial harm to operators of such bicycle renting systems.

Moreover, in some bicycle rental systems, unsecuring a bicycle from a bicycle rental station involves lifting the bicycle or otherwise manipulating the bicycle such that a great physical effort is required from a user of the bicycle rental
25 system. This activity is inconvenient for the user and may lead to injuries.

Furthermore, in some bicycle rental systems, the task of guiding the bicycle towards the bicycle rack for the purpose of securing the bicycle to the bicycle rack may be arduous and inconvenient for a user.

There is therefore a need for a method and an apparatus that will overcome at least one of the above mentioned drawbacks.

BRIEF SUMMARY

There is provided an electronic lock for removably securing a movable item to a structure, the electronic lock comprising first and second complementary cooperating connecting members, each being fixedly mounted to a respective one of the movable item and the structure and being engageable together in a lockable position, and a securing assembly for securing the first and second connecting members together when engaged in the lockable position, the securing assembly comprising a movable locking member operatively associated to the first connecting member, a locking aperture defined in the second connecting member, the locking aperture being adapted for receiving the movable locking member when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position, an actuator operatively coupled to the movable locking member for actuating the movable locking member between an unlocked position enabling disengagement of the first and second connecting members and a locked position wherein the movable locking member engages the locking aperture and electronic control means operatively coupled to the actuator for controlling selective actuation of the movable locking member from the unlocked position to the locked position and from the locked position to the unlocked position when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position.

In one embodiment, the first connecting member comprises a female connector mounted to the structure and the second connecting member comprises a corresponding complementary male connector mounted to the movable item.

In another embodiment, the second connecting member comprises a male connector having a front tapered portion, the tapered portion comprising two opposed side surfaces converging towards each other and a bottom surface, the first connecting member comprising a female connector having a recess adapted

for receiving the front tapered portion therein, the recess comprising a corresponding tapered portion having two opposed inner side walls converging towards each other and two opposed sitting members projecting inwards the recess and adapted for slidably receiving thereon the tapered portion of the male connector.

In a further embodiment, each of the two opposed side surfaces and the bottom surface of the front tapered portion of the male connector comprises a planar surface.

In another embodiment, the two opposed side surfaces of the front tapered portion of the male connector define a V-shape and the corresponding inner side walls of the tapered portion of the recess of the female connector define a complementary V-shape adapted to snugly receive the front tapered portion of the male connector.

In yet another embodiment, each of the two opposed side surfaces of the front tapered portion of the male connector comprises a substantially vertical planar surface and each of the two opposed inner side walls of the tapered portion of the recess of the female connector comprises a substantially vertical planar surface.

In yet another embodiment, the second connecting member comprises a locking finger extending downwardly from the front tapered portion, the locking aperture being provided on the locking finger.

In a further embodiment, the recess of the female connector further comprises two opposed lower inner side walls converging towards each other and defining a finger channel adapted for receiving the locking finger therein.

In one embodiment, the male connector further comprises a back portion and a hinge extending between the front tapered portion and the back portion for enabling a jointed coupling therebetween.

In one embodiment, the electronic lock further comprises holding means adapted for cooperating with each of the connecting members for temporarily holding the connecting members together in the lockable position once engaged therein.

5 In a further embodiment, the holding means comprise a pair of two opposed biased elements mounted to a respective one of the first and second connecting members, each of the biased elements having a resting position wherein the element is urged outwardly and protrudes from the corresponding connecting member, the holding means further comprising a pair of corresponding cooperating opposed receiving recesses mounted to the remaining connecting
10 member, each of the receiving recesses being adapted to receive therein a corresponding biased element when the first and second connecting members are engaged in the lockable position, thereby holding the connecting members together in the lockable position.

15 In another further embodiment, each of the biased elements comprises a ball and a ball spring mounted in a ball housing, each of the receiving recesses comprising a corresponding spherical portion.

In yet another further embodiment, each of the biased elements is mounted on the connecting member mounted to the structure and each of the receiving recesses is mounted on the connecting member mounted to the movable item.

20 In yet a further embodiment, the connecting member mounted to the structure comprises a female connector and the connecting member mounted to the movable item comprises a male connector.

In one embodiment, the securing assembly comprises position detecting means mounted to one of the first and second connecting members for detecting a
25 positioning of the first and second connecting members in the lockable position.

In another embodiment, the securing assembly comprises position detecting means mounted to the female connector for detecting a positioning of the first and second connecting members in the lockable position, the position detecting

means being adapted for detecting a positioning of the locking finger in the finger channel.

In one embodiment, the securing assembly further comprises position detecting means mounted to one of the first and second connecting members for detecting a positioning of the first and second connecting member in the lockable position, the electronic control means being adapted for selectively actuating the actuator to move the movable locking member from the unlocked position to the locked position upon detection of the positioning of the first and second connecting member in the lockable position.

10 In another embodiment, the securing assembly further comprises position detecting means mounted to one of the first and second connecting members for detecting a positioning of the first and second connecting member in the lockable position, an identification tag associated with the movable item and an identification reader for identifying the identification tag and the associated
15 movable item when the first and second connectors are engaged in the lockable position.

In a further embodiment, the electronic control means are adapted for selectively actuating the actuator to move the movable locking member from the unlocked position to the locked position upon detection of the positioning of the first and second connecting members in the lockable position and identification of the
20 associated movable item.

In yet a further embodiment, the identification tag comprises an RFID tag and the identification reader comprises an RFID reader mounted to the structure.

In one embodiment, the electronic control means comprise unsecuring means for enabling an actuating of the movable locking member from the locked position to the unlocked position, the unsecuring means being selected from a group consisting of a card reader adapted for receiving a corresponding user card, a keypad adapted for receiving a user code and a bar code reader adapted for reading a corresponding bar code.

In another embodiment, the movable locking member comprises an elongated member axially translatable between the unlocked position and the locked position, the locking member being engaged at both ends in the first connecting member through the locking aperture when in the locked position.

- 5 In a further embodiment, the actuator comprises a motor and a shaft driven by the motor, the shaft being attached to the movable locking member for driving the movable locking member between the unlocked position and the locked position.

In yet a further embodiment, the securing assembly further comprises shaft position detecting means for monitoring a position of the shaft to thereby monitor
10 a position of the movable locking member.

In yet a further embodiment, the shaft position detecting means comprise an optical detector and a mechanical detector, each of the detectors being adapted for detecting the position of the shaft and an associated position of the movable locking member in the locked position.

- 15 In one embodiment, the movable item comprises a bicycle and the structure comprises a bicycle rack.

In a further embodiment, the bicycle rack is a part of a bicycle rental station.

In another further embodiment, the connecting member mounted on the bicycle comprises attaching means for fixedly attaching the connecting member to a fork
20 of the bicycle.

In yet a further embodiment, the attaching means comprise a pair of cylindrical holes extending through the connecting member mounted on the bicycle, the pair of cylindrical holes being adapted to fixedly receive the fork of the bicycle therein.

- In one embodiment, the movable item comprises a vehicle selected from a group
25 consisting of a stroller, a wheelchair, an all-terrain vehicle, a scooter and a boat.

According to one embodiment, there is provided an electronic lock for removably securing a movable item to a structure, the electronic lock comprising an

- elongated male connector fixedly mounted to the movable item and comprising a locking aperture, a female connector fixedly mounted to the structure and adapted for removably receiving therein the elongated male connector and a securing assembly associated to the female connector, the securing assembly
- 5 comprising a movable locking member displaceable between an unlocked position for allowing the female connector to receive therein the elongated male connector and a locked position, an actuator for causing displacement of the locking member between the unlocked position and the locked position and electronic control means coupled to the actuator for controlling displacement of
- 10 the locking member between the unlocked position and the locked position, wherein when the elongated male connector is received in the female connector, the electronic control means controls the actuator for causing the locking member to displace towards the locked position and to engage the locking aperture, thereby securing the elongated male connector in the female connector.
- 15 According to another aspect, there is provided a method for removably securing a movable item to a structure.

- Accordingly, the method comprises providing an electronic lock for removably securing the movable item to the structure, the electronic lock comprising first and second complementary cooperating connecting members, each being fixedly
- 20 mounted to a respective one of the movable item and the structure and being engageable together in a lockable position, and a securing assembly for securing the first and second connecting members together when engaged in the lockable position, the securing assembly comprising a movable locking member operatively associated to the first connecting member, a locking aperture defined
- 25 in the second connecting member, the locking aperture being adapted for receiving the movable locking member when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position, an actuator operatively coupled to the movable locking member for actuating the movable locking member between an unlocked position enabling disengagement of the first and second connecting
- 30 members and a locked position wherein the movable locking member engages the locking aperture and electronic control means operatively coupled to the

actuator for controlling selective actuation of the movable locking member from the unlocked position to the locked position and from the locked position to the unlocked position when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position; engaging the first and second connecting members together in the lockable position and actuating the locking member to the locked position so that the locking member engages the locking aperture, thereby securing the movable item to the structure.

In one embodiment, the method further comprises monitoring a positioning of the first and second connecting members in the lockable position before actuating the locking member.

In another embodiment, the method further comprises identifying the movable item before actuating the locking member.

In yet another embodiment, engaging the first and second connecting members together in the lockable position comprises guiding the connecting member mounted to the movable item towards the lockable position.

In yet another embodiment, engaging the first and second connecting members together in the lockable position comprises holding the first and second connecting members engaged in the lockable position.

In yet another embodiment, the method further comprises, before actuating the locking member, detecting a positioning of the first and second connecting members in the lockable position and identifying the movable item to provide an identification thereof, wherein, in the actuating, the locking member is actuated to the locked position upon detection of the positioning of the first and second connecting members in the lockable position and the identification of the movable item.

In a further embodiment, identifying comprises a radio-frequency identification.

In one embodiment, the method further comprises requesting a user identification and actuating the locking member to the unlocked position for unsecuring the movable item upon reception of the user identification.

5 In another embodiment, the movable item comprises a bicycle and the structure comprises a bicycle rack.

According to another aspect, there is provided a kit for removably securing a movable item to a structure.

Accordingly, the kit comprises first and second complementary cooperating connecting members, each being fixedly mountable to a respective one of the
10 movable item and the structure and being engageable together in a lockable position, and a securing assembly for securing the first and second connecting members together when engaged in the lockable position, the securing assembly comprising a movable locking member operatively associatable to the first connecting member, a locking aperture defined in the second connecting
15 member, the locking aperture being adapted for receiving the movable locking member when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position, an actuator operatively couplable to the movable locking member for actuating the movable locking member between an unlocked position
enabling disengagement of the first and second connecting members and a
20 locked position wherein the movable locking member engages the locking aperture and electronic control means operatively couplable to the actuator for controlling selective actuation of the movable locking member from the unlocked position to the locked position and from the locked position to the unlocked position when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable
25 position.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In order that the invention may be readily understood, embodiments of the invention are illustrated by way of example in the accompanying drawings.

Figure 1 is a rear perspective view of a bicycle rack having an electronic lock mounted thereon in accordance with one embodiment, with a bicycle removed from the bicycle rack.

Figure 2 is another rear perspective view of the bicycle rack shown in Figure 1.

5 Figure 3 is a front perspective view of the bicycle rack shown in Figure 1.

Figure 4 is a rear perspective view of the bicycle secured to the bicycle rack using the electronic lock shown in Figure 1.

Figure 4A is an enlarged view of the electronic lock shown in Figure 4.

10 Figure 5A is a front perspective view of an electronic lock for removably securing a movable item to a structure, in accordance with one embodiment.

Figure 5B is a right perspective view of the electronic lock shown in Figure 5A.

Figure 5C is a right perspective view of another electronic lock for removably securing a movable item to a structure.

15 Figure 6 is a right perspective view of the electronic lock shown in Figure 5B wherein the male connector is engaged with the female connector.

Figure 7 is a bottom perspective view of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6.

Figure 8A is a left side elevation view of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6.

Figure 8B is a top plan view of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6.

Figure 8C is a right side elevation view of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6.

20 Figure 8D is a front elevation view of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6.

Figure 9 is a 3D perspective view, cross-sectioned along lines AA-AA of Fig. 6, of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6.

Figure 10 is a rear elevation view of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6.

Figure 11A is a front elevation view, cross-sectioned along lines AA-AA of Fig. 6, of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6, wherein the male connector is unsecured from the female connector.

5 Figure 11B is another front elevation view, cross-sectioned along lines AA-AA of Fig. 6, of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6 wherein the male connector has been secured in the female connector.

Figure 11C is a front elevation view, cross-sectioned along lines BB-BB of Fig. 6, of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6, wherein the male connector has been engaged in the female connector.

10 Figure 12A is a left perspective view of the male connector of an electronic lock for removably securing a movable item to a structure.

Figure 12B is a bottom perspective view of the male connector shown in Figure 12A.

15 Figure 13 is a front perspective view, cross-sectioned along lines BB-BB of Fig. 6, of the electronic lock shown in Figure 6.

Figure 14 is an exploded view of an embodiment of the female connector of the electronic lock for removably securing a movable item to a structure.

Figure 15 is a flow chart of a method for removably securing a movable item to a structure, in accordance with one embodiment.

20 Figure 16 is a flow chart of a method for removably securing a movable item to a structure, in accordance with another embodiment.

Further details of the invention and its advantages will be apparent from the detailed description included below.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

In the following description of the embodiments, references to the accompanying drawings are by way of illustration of an example by which the invention may be practiced. It will be understood that other embodiments may be made without
5 departing from the scope of the invention disclosed.

The invention provides an electronic lock for securing a movable item to a structure. As it will be more clearly understood upon reading of the present description, the electronic lock may advantageously be used in a great variety of applications, such as for example in a vehicle rental system such as a bicycle
10 rental system. The skilled addressee will however appreciate that many other applications may be considered, as it will be more detailed thereafter.

In the following description of the illustrated embodiments, the movable item comprises a bicycle and the structure comprises a bicycle rack. The bicycle rack is part of a bicycle renting station and is fixedly mounted thereto. It will be
15 appreciated that an operator of such a station may want to control rentals of bicycles to be rented and returns of rented bicycles. Such a station would thus greatly benefit from having means to removably secure a bicycle to be rented to the bicycle rack.

Now referring to Figures 1 to 3, there is shown a bicycle rack **100** having an
20 electronic lock **102** mounted thereon in accordance with one embodiment. There is further shown a bicycle **104** removed from the bicycle rack **100**.

The electronic lock **102** comprises first and second complementary cooperating connecting members, each being fixedly mounted to a respective one of the bicycle **104** and the bicycle rack **100**. In the illustrated embodiment, the first
25 connecting member comprises a female connector **106** mounted to the bicycle rack **100** and the second connecting member comprises a corresponding complementary male connector **108** mounted to the bicycle **104**, as better shown in Figure 2.

As it will be more clearly detailed hereinafter, the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** are engageable together in a lockable position.

In the embodiment shown in Figures 1 to 3, the bicycle **104** comprises a front fork **110**, a front wheel **112** and a handlebar **114**. More specifically, the front fork **110** comprises a first lower end **116** having the front wheel **112** rotatably mounted thereto and a second opposed upper end **118** where to the handlebar **114** is fixedly mounted. The skilled addressee will appreciate that, in such an embodiment, the handlebar **114** may be used to rotate the front wheel **112**.

Still in the embodiment shown in Figures 1 to 3, the male connector **108** is fixedly mounted to the front fork **110** of the bicycle **104**. This configuration is of great advantage since it facilitates the engagement of the bicycle **104** in the bicycle rack **100**.

Still referring to Figures 1 to 3, in one embodiment, the bicycle rack **100** comprises a substantially vertical hollow elongated frame **120** having a first lower end **122** fixedly attached to a base **124** and an opposed upper end **126** comprising a female connector fixing recess **128**. The female connector **106** is fixedly mounted in the female connector fixing recess **128** using fixing means (not shown) such as bolts and screws. The skilled addressee will appreciate that any other fixing means adapted to fixedly secure the female connector **106** in the recess **128** may be considered.

In one embodiment, the base **124** comprises a structure adapted for mounting at least one bicycle rack thereon.

In an alternative embodiment, the base **124** comprises a substantially horizontal ground surface such as a parking lot, a sidewalk, a portion of a street or the like.

The skilled addressee will appreciate that, in one embodiment the female connector **106** is vertically positioned at a level substantially corresponding to the level of the male connector **108** when the front wheel **112** of the bicycle **104** is lying on the base **124**. This configuration helps the user of the bicycle **104** to

guide the male connector **108** towards the female connector **106** without having to lift the bicycle **104**, which is of great advantage.

As previously mentioned, in one embodiment, the bicycle rack **100** is part of a bicycle rental station, the bicycle rental station being part of a bicycle rental system. It will be appreciated that such a bicycle rental station is generally installed in a public area. Therefore, to prevent the female connector **106** from being tampered with, stolen or otherwise vandalized, the female connector fixing means (not shown) is advantageously robust and reliable.

In one embodiment, the female connector fixing means comprise fasteners provided with a corresponding special unfastening tool, the special unfastening tool being in the possession of an operator of the bicycle renting system. This configuration advantageously enables the operator to selectively remove the female connector from the bicycle rack for maintenance purposes or other purposes while preventing undesired removal of the female connector **106** from the bicycle rack **100** by an unauthorized person.

In another embodiment, the female connector fixing means comprise welding the female connector **106** inside the female connector fixing recess **128**. It will however be appreciated that any other means adapted for preventing an unauthorized removal of the female connector **106** from the bicycle rack **100** may be considered.

For example, in yet another embodiment, the female connector **106** and the hollow elongated frame **120** may form an integral structure.

As better shown in Figure 3, the illustrated bicycle rack **100** further comprises a vertical wheel receiving slot **300** defined on the hollow elongated frame **120**, this wheel receiving slot **300** being adapted to receive therein the front wheel **112** of the bicycle **104**.

In one embodiment, the hollow elongated frame **120** may further comprise a pair of wheel guiding members **130**, **132** extending vertically between the lower end

122 and the opposed upper end **126** of the bicycle rack **100**, the wheel guiding members **132**, **134** being positioned on both sides of the wheel receiving slot **300**, as best shown in Figure 2.

5 The wheel guiding members **130**, **132** enable the guiding of the bicycle wheel **112** forwardly when the bicycle **104** is engaging the wheel receiving slot **300**. It will be appreciated that the wheel guiding members **130**, **132** and the wheel receiving slot **300** may contribute to the alignment of the male connector **108** with the female connector **106**, as it will become apparent below.

10 The skilled addressee will appreciate that the shape of the bicycle rack **100** is dependent on where the male connector **108** is mounted to the bicycle **104**. For example, in an alternative embodiment, the bicycle rack **100** may comprise a vertical pole having a first lower end attached to a base and a second, opposed upper end, the female connector **106** being mounted at the upper end of the pole.

15 In yet another embodiment, the bicycle rack **100** may comprise a horizontal docking bar having a plurality of spaced apart female connectors fixedly mounted thereon, the plurality of female connectors being adapted for receiving a plurality of male connectors therein.

The skilled addressee will appreciate that various other configurations may be considered for the bicycle rack **100**.

20 Now referring to Figures 4 and 4A, there is shown a bicycle **104** secured to a bicycle rack **100** using the electronic lock **102**.

It will be appreciated that in the embodiment shown in Figures 4 and 4A, the male connector **108** and the corresponding female connector **106** are engaged together in the lockable position, while in the embodiment shown in Figures 1 to 25 3, the male connector **108** is disengaged from the corresponding female connector **106**.

It will be further appreciated that in the embodiment shown in Figures 4 and 4A, the front wheel **112** of the bicycle **104** is engaged in the wheel receiving slot **300**,

while in the embodiment shown in Figures 1 to 3, the front wheel **112** of the bicycle **104** is disengaged from the wheel receiving slot **300**.

The operation of engaging the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** together in the lockable position will now be described in accordance with one
5 embodiment, with reference to Figures 1 to 4A.

The bicycle **104** is first positioned near the bicycle rack **100**, the male connector **108** generally facing towards the female connector **106**, as shown in Figures 1 to 3. A user uses the handlebar **114** to rotate the front wheel **112** of the bicycle **104** until the front wheel **112** is aligned with the wheel receiving slot **300**.

10 The bicycle **104** may now be moved forwardly in a direction **F** using the handlebar **114** such that the front wheel **112** of the bicycle **104** engages the wheel receiving slot **300**, as shown in Figures 4 and 4A. It will be appreciated that the wheel guiding members **130**, **132** further contributes to guide the bicycle wheel **112** forwardly into the wheel receiving slot **300**.

15 It will be further appreciated that in this embodiment, guiding the front bicycle wheel **112** forwardly causes the male connector **108**, advantageously mounted to the fork **110** of the bicycle, to be guided towards the female connector **106**.

The bicycle is further moved forwardly in the direction **F** until the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** engage together in the lockable position. Once
20 they are engaged in the lockable position, the electronic lock **102** can be used to secure the connectors **106**, **108** together, thereby securing the bicycle **104** to the bicycle rack **100**, as it will become apparent below.

It will be appreciated that such a positioning of the male connector **106** at the front of the bicycle **104** advantageously enables a user to move the bicycle **104**
25 forward by using the handlebar **114** while standing of either the left or right side of the bicycle **104**. Thus, the securing of the bicycle **104** in the rack **100** is facilitated, which is of great advantage.

Now referring to Figures 5A and 5B, there is shown an electronic lock **102** for removably securing a bicycle **104** (not shown) to a bicycle rack **100** (not shown).

In the illustrated embodiment, the male connector **108** comprises a back portion **501** and a front tapered portion **503** forwardly extending therefrom. The front tapered portion **503** comprises two opposed side surfaces **550**, **552** converging towards each other, a bottom surface **551** and a top surface **553**, as better shown in Figures 12A and 12B.

More specifically, in the illustrated embodiment, each of the two opposed side surfaces **550**, **552** comprise a substantially vertical planar surface, these two opposed side surfaces **550**, **552** converging towards each other to thereby define a V-shape.

In one embodiment, the male connector **108** comprises attaching means for fixedly attaching the male connector **108** to the front fork **110** of the bicycle **104** (not shown). In the embodiment shown in Figures 5A and 5B, the attaching means are provided on the back portion **501** and comprise two cylindrical holes **500** vertically oriented and adapted to fixedly receive therein the fork **110** of the bicycle **104**. The skilled addressee will appreciate that various other arrangements may be considered.

In the embodiment shown in Figure 5A and 5B, the back portion **501** and the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108** form an integral structure.

Now referring to Figure 5C, there is shown an alternative embodiment of a male connector **108**. In the illustrated embodiment, the male connector **108** further comprises a hinge **505** extending between the front tapered portion **503** and the back portion **501** for enabling a jointed coupling therebetween.

More specifically, in one embodiment, the hinge **505** comprises a pair of opposed pivoting hinge members, each being respectively attached to a corresponding one of the back portion **501** and the front portion **503** so as to enable an upward

pivoting movement of the back portion **501** with respect to the front tapered portion **503**.

One skilled in the art will appreciate that such a configuration prevents a malicious individual from damaging the male connector **108** by applying an upward force at a back end of the bicycle **104**, thereby using the bicycle **104** as a lever. This configuration may be of great advantage in the case where the electronic lock **102** is located in a public area and may be subject to acts of vandalism.

In one embodiment, the hinge **505** further comprises a torsion spring (not shown) resiliently connecting the front tapered portion **503** to the back portion **501**. It will be appreciated that other arrangements may be considered to provide an articulated connection between the back portion **501** and the front tapered portion **503**.

Now referring to Figures 5B, 12A and 12B, in one embodiment, the male connector **108** further comprises a locking finger **508** extending downwardly from the front tapered portion **503**. The locking finger **508** is substantially vertical and is provided with a locking aperture **510** thereon. In this embodiment, the locking aperture **510** has an axis extending substantially horizontally through the locking finger **508**, perpendicularly to the direction **F**.

In one embodiment, the locking finger **508** and the front tapered portion **503** form an integral structure. Such a configuration provides the male connector **108** with an improved resistance to vandalism, which is of great advantage in the case where the electronic lock **102** is used in a public bicycle rental system.

In another embodiment, the locking finger **508** is welded to the bottom surface **551** of the front tapered portion **503** using welding techniques known to the skilled addressee such as arc welding, stick welding, plasma welding, TIG welding or the like.

In yet another embodiment, the locking finger **508** may be glued to the bottom surface **551** of the front tapered portion **503** using an adhesive known to the skilled addressee, such as epoxy or the like.

5 In yet another embodiment, the male connector **108** may not comprise a locking finger **508**. In such an embodiment, the locking aperture **510** is instead provided on the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108**.

Now referring back to Figures 5A and 5B, in one embodiment, the female connector **106** comprises a recess **511** adapted for receiving the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector therein. More specifically, the recess **511**
10 comprises a tapered portion having two opposed inner side walls **512**, **514**. In one embodiment, each of the two opposed side walls **512**, **514** comprises a substantially vertical planar surface, the two opposed side walls **512**, **514** converging towards each other to thereby define a V-shape therebetween.

15 In another embodiment, each of the two opposed side walls **512**, **514** may comprise a concave or convex surface adapted to receive a corresponding convex or concave surface of the front tapered portion **503**.

The skilled addressee will appreciate that various other configurations may be considered for the two opposed side walls **512**, **514**, as long as the shape of the recess **511** is complementary to the shape of the front tapered portion **503** of the
20 male connector **108**. For example, corresponding complementary vertically slanted surfaces may be envisaged.

Still referring to Figures 5A and 5B, in one embodiment, the recess **511** further comprises a back wall **513** wherefrom extend outwardly and backwardly the two opposed inner side walls **512**, **514**. In an alternative embodiment, the recess **511**
25 may not comprise a back wall. Instead, the two opposed inner side walls **512**, **514** may converge forwardly towards an opening defined therebetween.

In one embodiment, the recess **511** further comprises two opposed sitting members **516**, **518** projecting inwardly into the recess **511**. The two opposed

sitting members **516**, **518** are adapted for slidably receiving thereon the bottom surface **551** of the tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108**, as it will become apparent below.

Still referring to Figures 5A and 5B, in one embodiment, the recess **511** further
5 comprises two opposed lower inner side walls **520**, **522** converging towards each other and defining a finger channel **515** adapted for receiving the locking finger **508** therein, as better shown in Figure 7.

More specifically, according to one embodiment, each of the two opposed sitting
members **516**, **518** comprise a fin or a protruding member extending sidewardly
10 from the two opposed inner side walls **512**, **514** in a flange-like configuration. Each of the two fins comprises a top sitting surface adapted to receive thereon the bottom surface **551** of the tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108**.

In one embodiment, the two opposed lower inner side walls **520**, **522** comprise
two planar surfaces extending substantially downwardly from the two top sitting
15 surfaces.

In the embodiment shown in Figures 5A and 5B, each of the two opposed lower
inner side walls **520**, **522** comprise a front portion and a back portion. The two
back portions face each other and define the finger channel **515** therebetween
which is adapted to receive the locking finger **508** therein. The two front portions
20 face each other and define a V-shaped guiding channel in front of the finger
channel **515** for guiding the locking finger **508** therein.

The skilled addressee will appreciate that the above described arrangement may
help guiding the male connector **108** into the female connector **106** using the two
opposed lower inner side walls **520**, **522**, which is of great advantage.

25 In the illustrated embodiment, each of the two opposed sitting members **516**, **518**
comprise a continuous surface. The skilled addressee will however appreciate
that a plurality of spaced apart top surfaces may be considered. For instance, the
two opposed sitting members **516**, **518** may comprise a plurality of spaced apart

cantilevers extending inwardly into the recess **511** from the two opposed inner side walls **512**, **514**, the spaced apart cantilevers being aligned so as to form a path on which the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108** may travel towards the lockable position.

- 5 In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 5A, the sitting members **516**, **518** provide a substantially planar sliding surface. The skilled addressee will however appreciate that a surface slightly curved upwardly may be considered and may further facilitate the insertion of the male connector **108** in the female connector **106**.
- 10 The skilled addressee will appreciate that various configurations of the recess **511** of the female connector **106** and of the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108** may be provided, as long as the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108** and the recess **511** of the female connector **106** are complementary such that the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108**
- 15 may snugly engage the recess **511**, as it will become apparent below.

Now referring to Figures 6 to 8D, there is shown an electronic lock **102** that may be used for removably securing a bicycle to a bicycle rack, the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** being engaged together in the lockable position. It will be appreciated that in the illustrated embodiment, the male

20 connector **108** has not yet been secured to the female connector **106**.

As better shown in Figure 6, the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108** snugly engages the tapered portion of the recess **511** of the female connector **106**. In other words, the two opposed side surfaces **550**, **552** of the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108** respectively abut the two

25 corresponding opposed inner side walls **512**, **514** of the recess **511** of the female connector **106**. In the meantime, the bottom surface **551** of the front tapered portion **503** is lying on the two opposed sitting members **516**, **518**.

Such a position of the male connector **108** with respect to the female connector **106** enables a selective locking of the electronic lock using a securing assembly, as it will be more clearly detailed below.

As previously mentioned, it will be appreciated that various other arrangements
5 may be considered for the male connector **108** and the female connector **106**, as long as they are complementary to each other and engageable in a lockable position.

Now referring to Figures 9 and 11A, the electronic lock further comprises a securing assembly **506** for securing the male connector **108** and the female
10 connector **106** together when engaged in the lockable position shown in Figure 6 to 8D.

It will be appreciated that, in the embodiment shown in Figures 9 and 11A, the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** are engaged in the lockable position, but the male connector **108** is not yet secured to the female connector
15 **106**.

In one embodiment, the securing assembly **506** comprises a movable locking member **1000** operatively associated to the female connector **106**. The locking aperture **510** provided on the locking finger **508** is adapted to receive the movable locking member **1000** when the male connector **108** and the female
20 connector **106** are engaged together in the lockable position. Throughout the following description, the securing assembly **506** will be described as being associated to the female connector **106** but the skilled addressee will appreciate that the securing assembly may be alternatively associated to the male connector **108**.

25 In the illustrated embodiment, the movable locking member **1000** comprises an elongated member axially translatable between an unlocked position enabling disengagement of the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** and a locked position wherein the movable locking member **1000** engages the locking aperture **510** to prevent disengagement of the two connectors **106**, **108**.

The movable locking member **1000** is translatable in a bore defined in the female connector **106**, the bore being coaxial to the locking aperture **510**. In other words, the bore is positioned such that it is axially aligned with the locking aperture **510** when the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** are engaged together in the lockable position so as to enable a translation of the locking member **1000** in and out of the locking aperture **510**.

Still referring to Figures 9 and 11A, the securing assembly **506** further comprises an actuator operatively coupled to the movable locking member **1000** for actuating the movable locking member **1000** between the unlocked position and the locked position.

In the illustrated embodiment, the actuator comprises a motor **540** and a shaft **542** driven by the motor **540**, the shaft **542** being attached to the movable locking member **1000** for driving the movable locking member **1000** between the unlocked position and the locked position.

In one embodiment, the motor **540** comprises a stepping motor and the shaft **542** comprises an externally threaded shaft rotatably coupled to the motor **540**. The skilled addressee will appreciate that various other arrangements may be considered. For example, other actuators known in the art, such as a pneumatic actuator, a hydraulic actuator, a magnetic actuator or the like, may be used to drive the shaft.

In one embodiment, the actuator is automatic. It will be appreciated that in this embodiment, no physical effort from a user is required, which is of great advantage as it will become apparent below.

In the illustrated embodiment, an additional bore **524** coaxial to the first one is provided in the female connector **106**, as better shown in Figure 5A. Thus, when actuated in the locked position, the locking member **1000** simultaneously engages the first bore, the locking aperture **510** and the additional bore **524**, as illustrated in Figure 11B. In other words, the locking member **1000** is engaged at

both ends in the female connector **106** through the locking aperture **510** when the locking member **1000** is in the locked position.

One skilled in the art will appreciate that this configuration provides a great advantage to the electronic lock. Indeed, if the male connector is forcibly pulled
5 from the female connector in a direction opposed to the direction **F** in an effort to remove the bicycle from the bicycle rack when the locking member is in the locked position, a force exerted by the locking finger on the locking member will be distributed between both ends of the locking member engaged in the female connector **106**. This configuration is of great advantage for providing a robust
10 securing of the bicycle to the bicycle rack.

The skilled addressee will appreciate that other arrangements may be considered. For example, the locking aperture **510** may comprise a blind hole adapted to receive a corresponding end of the locking member **1000**.

Now referring to Figure 10, the securing assembly **506** further comprises
15 electronic control means operatively coupled to the actuator for controlling selective actuation of the movable locking member **1000** from the unlocked position to the locked position when the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** are engaged together in the lockable position. Moreover, the electronic control means also controls selective actuation of the movable locking
20 member **1000** from the locked position to the unlocked position, as it will become apparent below.

In one embodiment, actuation of the movable locking member is automatic. More specifically, in this embodiment, the electronic control means are operatively coupled to the actuator such that they selectively urge activation of the actuator.
25 This causes the movable locking member **1000** to be actuated from the unlocked position to the locked position or from the locked position to the unlocked position to the locked position, as mentioned hereabove.

One will appreciate that this configuration is of great advantage since it requires no physical effort from the user to displace the movable locking member **1000**,

thereby reducing the risk of injury and the inconvenience related to such an activity.

Moreover, the actuation of the movable locking member **1000** being automatic and requiring no physical effort from a user, the need to provide manual means to activate the actuator, such as a lever, a button or the like, is eliminated. In this configuration, the electronic control means and the actuator may be enclosed in a protective shell, as is the case in one embodiment. This configuration is also of great advantage, since it protects sensitive parts of the electronic control means and the actuator from damage, for instance caused by rain, wind, dust, vandalism or the like.

In one embodiment, the electronic control means comprise integrated electronic control components **902** fixedly mounted into the female connector **106**.

In a further embodiment, the electronic control means further comprise a modular electronic connector **900** operatively connected to the integrated electronic control components **902**. The modular electronic connector **900** is provided for connecting the integrated electronic control components **902** to a processing terminal (not shown), for instance a bicycle rental terminal of an automated bicycle rental station.

In another embodiment, the electronic control means comprise unsecuring means for enabling an actuating of the movable locking member **1000** from the locked position to the unlocked position. The unsecuring means may be selected from a group consisting of a card reader adapted for receiving a corresponding user card, a keypad adapted for receiving a user code and a bar code reader adapted for reading a corresponding bar code.

In the embodiment illustrated in Figures 4 and 4A, the unsecuring means comprise a card reader, more specifically a magnetic card reader **400**, adapted for receiving a corresponding user card **402**. The skilled addressee will appreciate that other arrangements enabling an identification of the user prior to the unsecuring of the bicycle may be used.

Referring now to Figure 9, the securing assembly **506** may further comprises shaft position detecting means for monitoring a position of the shaft to thereby monitor a position of the movable locking member **1000**. In one embodiment, the shaft position detecting means is connected to the control means.

- 5 According to one embodiment, the shaft position detecting means comprise a mechanical detector. In this embodiment, the shaft position detecting means comprise a sensor **1002** fixedly mounted to the second end of the shaft **542**. More specifically, in this embodiment, the motor comprises a central bore wherein the shaft is axially engaged therethrough, the first end of the shaft **542**
10 extending coaxially towards the recess **511** and the second end of the shaft **542** extending from a second, opposed end of the motor.

- In one embodiment, the shaft position detecting means further comprise a mechanical switch **1004** positioned near the second end of the shaft **542**, the mechanical switch being located such that it may be activated by the sensor **1002**
15 when the locking member is in the unlocked position.

In a further embodiment, the shaft position detecting means may comprise a second detector **1100** positioned near the first end of the shaft **542**. This second detector **1100** may be used to validate that the male connector **108** is really secured to the female connector **106**, which is of great advantage.

- 20 In another embodiment, the shaft position detecting means may comprise an optical detector conveniently mounted proximate either the second end of the shaft or the first end of the shaft **542**.

- The skilled addressee will appreciate that, in one embodiment, each of the detectors may be adapted to detect a position of the shaft **542** and an associated
25 position of the movable locking member **1000** in the locked position.

In one embodiment, the shaft position detecting means may comprise both a mechanical detector and an optical detector. The skilled addressee will appreciate that such an embodiment is of great advantage since it provides an

enhanced reliability to the system. Indeed, this arrangement may improve the reliance of the operator with respect to the system.

Referring back to Figures 5A and 5B, in one embodiment, the electronic lock **102** further comprises holding means adapted for cooperating with each of the
5 connecting members **106**, **108** for temporarily holding the connecting members **106**, **108** together in the lockable position.

In the illustrated embodiment, the holding means comprise a pair of opposed biased elements **502**, **504** mounted to the female connector **106**. Each of the biased element **502**, **504** has a resting position wherein the element is urged
10 outwardly and protrudes from the corresponding connecting member.

In this embodiment, the holding means further comprise a pair of receiving recesses **526**, **528** mounted to the male connector **108**, as better shown in Figures 12A and 12B. The pair of receiving recesses **526**, **528** corresponds to the pair of opposed biased elements **502**, **504** and is adapted to receive therein a
15 corresponding biased element **502**, **504** when the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** are engaged in the lockable position.

In the illustrated embodiment, each of the opposed biased elements **502**, **504** is mounted to one of the opposed inner side walls **512**, **514** of the tapered portion **503** of the female connector **106**. Moreover, each of the receiving recesses **526**,
20 **528** is mounted to one of the opposed side surfaces **550**, **552** of the tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108**.

In another embodiment, each of the opposed biased elements **502**, **504** may be mounted to one of the opposed side surfaces **550**, **552** of the tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108**. In this case, each of the receiving recesses **526**, **528**
25 is mounted to one of the opposed inner side walls **512**, **514** of the tapered portion **503** of the female connector **106**.

It will be appreciated that the opposed biased elements and corresponding recesses may be positioned according to various configurations, as long as the

opposed biased elements are mounted to one of the male connector and the female connector and the corresponding cooperating receiving recesses are mounted to the remaining connector. The skilled addressee will however appreciate that various other configuration may be considered.

- 5 The holding means are of great advantage since they allow the user of a bicycle to be informed that the bicycle has been conveniently positioned in the corresponding rack before securing it to the rack.

Now referring to Figures 11C and 13, in the illustrated embodiment, each of the opposed biased elements **502**, **504** comprises a ball and a ball spring **1101**, **1103**
10 mounted to a ball housing. Each of the receiving recesses **526**, **528** comprises a corresponding spherical portion, the spherical portion having a diameter substantially similar to the ball associated thereto. This configuration enables each of the balls to snugly fit into their respective corresponding recess.

It will be appreciated that any other holding means allowing to temporarily retain
15 the male connector **108** into the female connector **106** may be considered.

In one embodiment, this above described configuration further enables a movable item to be temporarily attached to a structure in a "reduced load" design. For instance, according to one configuration, the movable item may be engaged in the structure in a lockable position wherein the movable item does not rest on
20 a lower surface. In such a configuration, the movable item may be temporarily retained in the lockable position using the holding means until the movable item is secured to the structure.

Now referring back to Figures 5A and 5B, in one embodiment, the securing assembly further comprises position detecting means mounted to the female
25 connector **106** for detecting a positioning of the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** in the lockable position.

More specifically, in one embodiment, the position detecting means may be adapted for detecting a positioning of the locking finger **508** in the finger channel **515**.

5 According to one configuration, the position detecting means may comprise a contact detector (not shown) operatively mounted to the back wall **513** proximate the finger channel **515**. The position detecting means may be activated when the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector **108** is moved forwardly into the recess **511** of the female connector **106** and the locking finger contacts the contact detector when engaging the finger channel **515**.

10 In an alternative embodiment, the position detecting means may comprise a magnetic proximity detector operatively mounted into the back wall **513** proximate the finger channel **515**. In such an embodiment, the locking finger **508** is provided with a magnet element (not shown) mounted therein. The position detecting means will be activated when the front tapered portion **503** of the male connector
15 **108** is moved forwardly into the recess **511** of the female connector **106** and the magnetic proximity detector detects the presence of the magnet in the finger channel **515**.

This configuration advantageously prevents the activation of the position detecting means when an object other than a corresponding male connector is
20 engaged in the female connector.

In one embodiment, the detection of the male connector and the female connector in the lockable position is operatively coupled to an indicator for indicating the positioning of the male connector and the female connector in the lockable position to a user of the electronic lock. The indicator may be a visual
25 indicator such as a LED or the like; alternatively, the indicator may be an audio indicator such as a speaker or the like.

In one embodiment, the position detecting means are operatively coupled to the electronic control means. In such an embodiment, the electronic control means are adapted for selectively actuating the actuator to move the movable locking

finger **1000** from the unlocked position to the locked position upon detection of the positioning of the male connector **108** and the female connector **106** in the lockable position.

5 In another embodiment, the securing assembly **506** further comprises an identification tag (not shown) associated with the bicycle and an identification tag reader (not shown) for identifying the identification tag and the associated bicycle when the male connector and the female connector are engaged in the lockable position.

10 This configuration is of great advantage to enable a monitoring of the use of each of the bicycles. It may also be of great advantage in another application wherein a large number of items are temporarily stored and retrieved at a later time, for instance for identifying vehicles secured to racks in a warehouse.

15 In a further embodiment, the electronic control means are operatively coupled to both position detecting means and identifying means. In such an embodiment, the electronic control means are adapted for selectively actuating the actuator to move the movable locking member from the unlocked position to the locked position upon two conditions, a first condition being a detection of the positioning of the male connector and the female connector in the lockable position, a second condition being an identification of the associated bicycle.

20 In one embodiment, the identification tag comprises an RFID tag and the identification reader comprises an RFID reader mounted to the bicycle rack. This configuration is of great advantage since no electric wire between the tag and the reader is needed. The skilled addressee will appreciate that other arrangements may be considered. For example, a first and a second corresponding electric
25 connector may be provided on each connector respectively. In this case, when the male connector engages the female connector, the two electric connectors engage together to obtain the identification information. The use of RFID technology is nevertheless preferred over the use of conventional electric connectors since it may help reduce breaking of the system.

It will be appreciated that this configuration is of great advantage in a bicycle rental system. Indeed, in such a system, the electronic lock detects the engagement of a rented bicycle being returned by a user into the bicycle rack and identifies the bicycle before securing the bicycle to the bicycle rack and charging
5 a fee to the user according to given parameters.

A method for securing a bicycle to a bicycle rack will now be described in accordance with one embodiment, with reference to Figure 15.

According to step **1500**, an electronic lock as previously described is provided, the electronic lock being mounted to a bicycle rack. In one embodiment, the
10 electronic lock comprises a male connector mounted to the bicycle and a female connector mounted to the bicycle rack, the male connector and the female connector being engageable together in a lockable position.

In one embodiment, the electronic lock further comprises a securing assembly for securing the male connector and the female connector together when engaged in
15 the lockable position. In one embodiment, the securing assembly comprises a movable locking member operatively associated to the female connector and a locking aperture defined in the second connecting member, the locking aperture being adapted for receiving the movable locking member when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position.

20 In one embodiment, the securing assembly further comprises an actuator operatively coupled to the movable locking member for actuating the movable locking member between an unlocked position enabling disengagement of the male connector and the female connector and a locked position wherein the movable locking member engages the locking aperture.

25 According to step **1502**, the male connector and the female connector are engaged together in the lockable position.

According to step **1504**, the movable locking member is actuated to the locked position, thereby securing the bicycle to the bicycle rack.

Another method for securing a bicycle to a bicycle rack will now be described in accordance with another embodiment, with reference to Figure 16.

According to step **1600**, an electronic lock is provided, the electronic lock being mounted to a bicycle rack. In one embodiment, the electronic lock comprises a male connector mounted to the bicycle and a female connector mounted to the bicycle rack, the male connector and the female connector being engageable together in a lockable position.

According to step **1602**, in one embodiment, a user then guides the male connector of the bicycle to be secured into the female connector towards the lockable position.

According to step **1604**, the male connector and the female connector are then engaged together in the lockable position.

According to step **1606**, in one embodiment, the first and second connecting members are then held engaged together in the lockable position.

According to step **1608**, in one embodiment, a positioning of the male connector and the female connector in the lockable position is then monitored.

According to step **1610**, in one embodiment, the bicycle is identified to provide an identification thereof.

According to step **1612**, the movable locking member is actuated to the locked position, thereby securing the bicycle to the bicycle rack.

There is also provided a kit for removably securing a bicycle to a bicycle rack. In this embodiment, the male connector is not yet mounted on the bicycle, but is mountable thereto. Similarly, the female connector is not yet mounted to the bicycle rack, but is mountable thereto.

The skilled addressee will appreciate that, in one embodiment, it may be envisaged to mount the female connector to the bicycle and the male connector to the bicycle rack.

Furthermore, providing the male connector and the female connector separately may also be contemplated by the skilled addressee.

The skilled addressee will appreciate that, in one embodiment, the movable locking member, the actuator and the electronic control means may be
5 associated with the connecting member mounted to the movable item.

The skilled addressee will also appreciate that other configurations for the first and second complementary cooperating connecting members may be considered. For instance, the first connecting member may comprise a male connector and the second connecting member may comprise a female
10 connector.

One skilled in the art will further appreciate that the electronic lock herein described may be used in other applications. In an alternative embodiment, the movable item may comprise a boat and the structure a docking wharf. In another embodiment, the movable item may comprise a stroller and the structure a
15 stroller renting station located in a mall.

In yet another embodiment, the structure may not be part of a bicycle rental station. In such an embodiment, the structure may instead comprise a bicycle rack owned by a user. Alternatively, in a city area, the structure may be a fence or a house wall. This configuration advantageously enables a user owning a
20 movable item, such as a bicycle, to removably secure the movable item to a structure owned by the same user.

The skilled addressee will appreciate that other arrangements for the movable locking member may be considered. Indeed, in the present description the locking member has been described as being translatable but one may
25 envisaged an alternative embodiment wherein the movable locking member would be rotatable between the locked and the unlocked position.

Although the above description relates to specific preferred embodiments as presently contemplated by the inventor, it will be understood that the invention in

its broad aspect includes mechanical and functional equivalents of the elements described herein.

CLAIMS:

1. An electronic lock for removably securing a movable item to a structure, the electronic lock comprising:

-first and second complementary cooperating connecting members, each being fixedly mounted to a respective one of the movable item and the structure and being engageable together in a lockable position; and

-a securing assembly for securing said first and second connecting members together when engaged in the lockable position, said securing assembly comprising:

a movable locking member operatively associated to the first connecting member;

a locking aperture defined in the second connecting member, said locking aperture being adapted for receiving the movable locking member when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position;

an actuator operatively coupled to the movable locking member for actuating the movable locking member between an unlocked position enabling disengagement of the first and second connecting members and a locked position wherein the movable locking member engages the locking aperture; and

electronic control means operatively coupled to the actuator for controlling selective actuation of the movable locking member from the unlocked position to the locked position and from the locked position to the unlocked position when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position.

2. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said electronic control means are operatively coupled to the actuator for urging activation of the actuator, thereby causing the movable locking member to be selectively actuated

from the unlocked position to the locked position and from the locked position to the unlocked position.

3. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said first connecting member comprises a female connector mounted to said structure and said second connecting member comprises a corresponding complementary male connector mounted to said movable item.

4. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said second connecting member comprises a male connector having a front tapered portion, said tapered portion comprising two opposed side surfaces converging towards each other and a bottom surface, said first connecting member comprising a female connector having a recess adapted for receiving said front tapered portion therein, said recess comprising a corresponding tapered portion having two opposed inner side walls converging towards each other and two opposed sitting members projecting inwards said recess and adapted for slidably receiving thereon said tapered portion of said male connector.

5. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 4, wherein each of said two opposed side surfaces and said bottom surface of said front tapered portion of said male connector comprises a planar surface.

6. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 4, wherein the two opposed side surfaces of the front tapered portion of the male connector define a V-shape and the corresponding inner side walls of the tapered portion of the recess of the female connector define a complementary V-shape adapted to snugly receive the front tapered portion of the male connector.

7. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 4, wherein each of said two opposed side surfaces of the front tapered portion of the male connector comprises a substantially vertical planar surface and each of said two opposed

inner side walls of the tapered portion of the recess of the female connector comprises a substantially vertical planar surface.

8. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 4, wherein said second connecting member comprises a locking finger extending downwardly from the front tapered portion, said locking aperture being provided on said locking finger.

9. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 8, wherein said recess of said female connector further comprises two opposed lower inner side walls converging towards each other and defining a finger channel adapted for receiving the locking finger therein.

10. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 4, wherein said male connector further comprises a back portion and a hinge extending between the front tapered portion and the back portion for enabling a jointed coupling therebetween.

11. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, further comprising holding means adapted for cooperating with each of the connecting members for temporarily holding said connecting members together in said lockable position once engaged therein.

12. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 11, wherein said holding means comprise a pair of two opposed biased elements mounted to a respective one of said first and second connecting members, each of said biased elements having a resting position wherein said element is urged outwardly and protrudes from the corresponding connecting member, said holding means further comprising a pair of corresponding cooperating opposed receiving recesses mounted to the remaining connecting member, each of said receiving recesses being adapted to receive therein a corresponding biased element when said first and second connecting members are engaged in said lockable position, thereby holding said connecting members together in said lockable position.

13. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 12, wherein each of said biased elements comprises a ball and a ball spring mounted in a ball housing, each of said receiving recesses comprising a corresponding spherical portion.

14. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 12, wherein each of said biased elements is mounted on the connecting member mounted to the structure and each of the receiving recesses is mounted on the connecting member mounted to the movable item.

15. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 14, wherein the connecting member mounted to the structure comprises a female connector and the connecting member mounted to the movable item comprises a male connector.

16. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said securing assembly comprises position detecting means mounted to one of said first and second connecting members for detecting a positioning of said first and second connecting members in said lockable position.

17. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 9, wherein said securing assembly comprises position detecting means mounted to the female connector for detecting a positioning of said first and second connecting members in said lockable position, said position detecting means being adapted for detecting a positioning of the locking finger in the finger channel.

18. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said securing assembly further comprises position detecting means mounted to one of said first and second connecting members for detecting a positioning of said first and second connecting member in said lockable position, said electronic control means being adapted for selectively actuating said actuator to move said movable locking member from said unlocked position to said locked position upon detection of said positioning of said first and second connecting member in said lockable position.

19. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said securing assembly further comprises:

position detecting means mounted to one of said first and second connecting members for detecting a positioning of said first and second connecting member in said lockable position;

an identification tag associated with said movable item; and

an identification reader for identifying said identification tag and said associated movable item when said first and second connectors are engaged in said lockable position.

20. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 19, wherein said electronic control means is adapted for selectively actuating said actuator to move said movable locking member from said unlocked position to said locked position upon detection of said positioning of said first and second connecting members in said lockable position and identification of the associated movable item.

21. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 19, wherein said identification tag comprises an RFID tag and said identification reader comprises an RFID reader mounted to said structure.

22. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said electronic control means comprise unsecuring means for enabling an actuating of the movable locking member from the locked position to the unlocked position, said unsecuring means being selected from a group consisting of a card reader adapted for receiving a corresponding user card, a keypad adapted for receiving a user code and a bar code reader adapted for reading a corresponding bar code.

23. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said movable locking member comprises an elongated member axially translatable between said unlocked position and said locked position, said locking member being engaged

at both ends in said first connecting member through said locking aperture when in said locked position.

24. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 23, wherein said actuator comprises a motor and a shaft driven by said motor, said shaft being attached to the movable locking member for driving said movable locking member between said unlocked position and said locked position.

25. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 24, wherein said securing assembly further comprises shaft position detecting means for monitoring a position of the shaft to thereby monitor a position of the movable locking member.

26. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 25, wherein said shaft position detecting means comprise an optical detector and a mechanical detector, each of said detector being adapted for detecting the position of the shaft and an associated position of the movable locking member in said locked position.

27. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said movable item comprises a bicycle and said structure comprises a bicycle rack.

28. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 27, wherein said bicycle rack is a part of a bicycle rental station.

29. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 27, wherein said connecting member mounted on said bicycle comprises attaching means for fixedly attaching said connecting member to a fork of said bicycle.

30. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 29, wherein said attaching means comprise a pair of cylindrical holes extending through said connecting member mounted on said bicycle, said pair of cylindrical holes being adapted to fixedly receive said fork of said bicycle therein.

31. The electronic lock as claimed in claim 1, wherein said movable item comprises a vehicle selected from a group consisting of a stroller, a wheelchair, an all-terrain vehicle, a scooter and a boat.

32. An electronic lock for removably securing a movable item to a structure, the electronic lock comprising:

- an elongated male connector fixedly mounted to the movable item and comprising a locking aperture;

- a female connector fixedly mounted to the structure and adapted for removably receiving therein the elongated male connector;

- a securing assembly associated to the female connector, the securing assembly comprising:

- a movable locking member displaceable between an unlocked position for allowing the female connector to receive therein the elongated male connector and a locked position;

- an actuator for causing displacement of the locking member between the unlocked position and the locked position;

- electronic control means coupled to the actuator for controlling displacement of the locking member between the unlocked position and the locked position;

wherein when the elongated male connector is received in the female connector, the electronic control means controls the actuator for causing the locking member to displace towards the locked position and to engage the locking aperture, thereby securing the elongated male connector in the female connector.

33. A method for removably securing a movable item to a structure, the method comprising:

- providing an electronic lock for removably securing the movable item to the structure, the electronic lock comprising:

first and second complementary cooperating connecting members, each being fixedly mounted to a respective one of the movable item and the structure and being engageable together in a lockable position; and

a securing assembly for securing said first and second connecting members together when engaged in the lockable position, said securing assembly comprising:

a movable locking member operatively associated to the first connecting member;

a locking aperture defined in the second connecting member, said locking aperture being adapted for receiving the movable locking member when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position;

an actuator operatively coupled to the movable locking member for actuating the movable locking member between an unlocked position enabling disengagement of the first and second connecting members and a locked position wherein the movable locking member engages the locking aperture; and

electronic control means operatively coupled to the actuator for controlling selective actuation of the movable locking member from the unlocked position to the locked position and from the locked position to the unlocked position when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position;

engaging the first and second connecting members together in the lockable position; and

actuating the locking member to the locked position so that the locking member engages the locking aperture, thereby securing said movable item to said structure.

34. The method as claimed in claim 33, further comprising monitoring a positioning of said first and second connecting members in said lockable position before actuating the locking member.

35. The method as claimed in claim 33, further comprising identifying said movable item before actuating the locking member.

36. The method as claimed in claim 33, wherein said engaging of the first and second connecting members together in the lockable position comprises guiding said connecting member mounted to said movable item towards said lockable position.

37. The method as claimed in claim 33, wherein said engaging of the first and second connecting members together in the lockable position comprises holding said first and second connecting members engaged in said lockable position.

38. The method as claimed in claim 33, further comprising, before actuating said locking member:

detecting a positioning of said first and second connecting members in said lockable position; and

identifying said movable item to provide an identification thereof;

wherein, in said actuating, the locking member is actuated to the locked position upon detection of said positioning of said first and second connecting members in said lockable position and said identification of said movable item.

39. The method as claimed in claim 38, wherein said identifying comprises a radio-frequency identification.

40. The method as claimed in claim 33, further comprising:

requesting a user identification; and

actuating the locking member to the unlocked position for unsecuring said movable item upon reception of said user identification.

41. The method as claimed in claim 33, wherein said movable item comprises a bicycle and said structure comprises a bicycle rack.

42. A kit for removably securing a movable item to a structure, the kit comprising:

first and second complementary cooperating connecting members, each being fixedly mountable to a respective one of the movable item and the structure and being engageable together in a lockable position; and

a securing assembly for securing said first and second connecting members together when engaged in the lockable position, said securing assembly comprising:

a movable locking member operatively associatable to the first connecting member;

a locking aperture defined in the second connecting member, said locking aperture being adapted for receiving the movable locking member when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position;

an actuator operatively couplable to the movable locking member for actuating the movable locking member between an unlocked position enabling disengagement of the first and second connecting members and a locked position wherein the movable locking member engages the locking aperture; and

electronic control means operatively couplable to the actuator for controlling selective actuation of the movable locking member from the unlocked position to the locked position and from the locked position to the unlocked position when the connecting members are engaged together in the lockable position.