



Janette Sadik-Khan at the plaza on Broadway.



New York City, USA

Janette Sadik-Khan

REIMAGINING STREETS, REVITALISING CITIES

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interview

During her term as Transportation Commissioner of New York City, **Janette Sadik-Khan** showed the world how providing space on the street for everyone can have a positive impact on all aspects of the city. In this interview with **URBAN SOLUTIONS**, Ms Sadik-Khan shares the intricate link between city and street planning, and how redesigning streets is not as unintuitive as one would think.

● **You were brought in as Transportation Commissioner to revolutionise New York City's streets, but ended up revitalising the whole city. How do better streets make cities more liveable?**

What we saw almost immediately in NYC is that the health of a city's economy and of its citizens are directly linked to the health of its streets. Streets that are difficult to cross, that are unattractive and focused on moving cars, and with no place for cyclists or pedestrians are bad for people and bad for business. So it's no surprise then that when we looked at the performance of streets after we installed common-sense solutions like bike and bus lanes, we saw improvements on every front.

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When you make it safer and easier to get around, the benefits to your city don't stop at the curb – you see improvements everywhere you turn.

Injuries and crashes plummeted, even as more people were out on two feet or two wheels. On Ninth Avenue in Manhattan, local retail sales shot up by as much as 49% after we installed the nation's first parking-protected bike lane. When you make it safer and easier to get around, the benefits to your city don't stop at the curb – you see improvements everywhere you turn.



The fact is, our streets work better for everyone when you don't make pedestrians and cyclists ...fight over the scraps not given over to cars.

● **When referring to the closing of Broadway at Times Square, you once said, “it doesn't need to be a zero-sum game between moving traffic and creating public space.” Could you elaborate how so?**

If you read the papers, you'd think that there's a finite amount of space on our streets; and pedestrians, cyclists and drivers are doomed to fight it out on the road. But with careful planning and comprehensive public outreach, we showed that you can make your existing streets work better and accommodate the needs of all users of the road. When we closed Broadway to cars in Times Square, taxi speeds in the neighbourhood increased by 17% – despite predictions of permanent gridlock – because the road design made it easier for drivers to navigate and reduced conflicts with pedestrians. When we installed protected bike lanes and dedicated bus lanes on First and Second Avenues in Manhattan, we saw injury crashes drop by nearly 40% and bus speeds increase by 18%. The fact is, our streets work better for everyone when you don't make pedestrians and cyclists – often the majority of road users – fight over the scraps not given over to cars.

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● **Your street redesign projects frequently transformed road spaces into public spaces. How did you work with Amanda Burden, former Planning Commissioner, to achieve this?**

At DOT (Department of Transportation), we were lucky to have a very supportive Mayor who understood the benefits of redesigning our streets for all New Yorkers and provided support from every corner of his administration. He set the tone with PlaNYC, a long-range sustainability plan, which focused on how to make New York City work better while accommodating a million more people who are predicted to live here by 2030. This was a tremendous undertaking that required coordination with the Department of City Planning and every city agency. So as we worked to reengineer our streets to better accommodate more people, we also worked on changes to the zoning code that would require fewer parking spots and allow more and more people to get around the city without having a car. Today, we're seeing movement on this front in cities across the world.

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● **What other obstacles did you encounter during your term as Transportation Commissioner, and how did you overcome it?**

In New York, our streets remained unchanged for so long that many people didn't know it was even possible for them to look any different. So we got to work immediately, showing New Yorkers that streets could be welcoming public spaces that served everyone. Often using inexpensive and temporary materials and working closely with neighbourhoods, we reimagined streets across the city, from tourist hubs like Times Square to small, local corridors that were designed only for automobiles. Once people got a taste for better functioning streets and saw what was possible, the support was overwhelming. While there will always be those willing to focus on even the smallest controversy, polls at the end of Mayor Bloomberg's administration showed 73% support for bike share, 72% support for plazas and 64% support for bike lanes. If this had been an election, it would have been a landslide.

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- 01 Ninth Avenue, before the implementation of bicycle and bus lanes.
- 02 Ninth Avenue today.
- 03 Traffic conditions on Broadway, before its closure to automobiles.
- 04 The pedestrian plaza at Times Square was set up with temporary materials, but created a lasting impression.



● **How are pilot projects effective in introducing walking and cycling to cities? What advice would you give to other city leaders looking to implement their own pilots?**

Nobody wants to be told what's good for their streets and they don't want shiny designs and promises about what something will look like in 5 or 10 years. The best way to convince people of something is to try it. If it works, keep it; if not, you can put it back the way it was. So in Times Square, we lined up local stakeholders and convinced them that this was worth trying. When it succeeded, making front-page news around the world, it sent a message that went well beyond Times Square: it showed you can change streets and see the payoff in real time, sometimes even overnight. When the plazas were immediately filled with thousands of people and retail sales shot up, the chain reaction took off. People from other neighbourhoods saw these changes and they said, "We want that too." By the end, we rarely needed pilots because people had already seen these kinds of street designs being used very successfully elsewhere in the city. They became the new must-have for every neighbourhood.



Active transportation is not some fad that people will grow out of...everyone is a pedestrian at some point in their commute, and that's where our planning focus needs to start.

● **What is your response to people who think that focusing on low-technology approaches to transport such as walking and cycling is moving away from becoming a world-class city?**

The strategy of laying out more roads to accommodate more cars hasn't worked, and we can't double-deck our streets without doubling our problems and destroying the very street life that turns our cities into destinations to begin with. The key is to rethink how we use our streets and find ways to increase their efficiency. Faster bus routes, protected bike lanes and bike share, expanded and improved pedestrian space: these strategies create new choices without billions of dollars in investment and decades of planning, and they've increased New York City's stature around the globe. As cities get bigger and denser, there will always be a need for new infrastructure investment, as cities from Los Angeles to Salt Lake to London to Singapore have demonstrated. But in an era of finite resources and infinite demands on our transportation systems, we need to get smarter about how we use our existing streets. That means making well-planned and efficient changes with the resources at hand, so that you realise the benefits quickly.

● **How does cycling and walking fit into the future of mobility, where advances to technology in transportation such as Automatic Vehicles might become more prevalent?**

Active transportation is not some fad that people will grow out of. Over the last decade in New York, the number of cyclist quadrupled and we've estimated 342,000 daily biking trips, with some 40,000 on our bike share system alone. Meanwhile we've seen pedestrian volumes soar where we've made streets safer and more pleasant for people. There is huge latent demand for new transportation choices. The challenge is to develop neighbourhoods that are compact and liveable, so that people can get to their homes and businesses on their own power or on public transit. There are great synergies here: the most popular bike share stations in NYC are adjacent to our subway and commuter rail hubs like Grand Central, and every day, thousands of riders switch from train to bike or back again for that crucial last-mile connection. Meanwhile, the next generation of transit tech, including rideshare apps like Uber and Lyft will only further encourage people to leave their car keys at home. However you get around, everyone is a pedestrian at some point in their commute, and that's where our planning focus needs to start.

01 The pedestrian plaza at Times Square continues to attract people.

● **What is your vision of a utopic walking and bicycling city? What key features would such a city have, and which cities other than New York City do you think is on their way of achieving this?**

This isn't rocket science – it's about rethinking how you use your streets so that they better serve everyone on two feet, two wheels, or four. During my time at NYC DOT, we developed 132 different strategies for this and the results spoke for themselves. We built almost 400 miles of bike lanes across the boroughs, focusing on a network that connected key destinations. We installed the nation's first protected bike lane, and now there are more than 200 nationwide. The country's biggest bike share system has seen more than 713,000 registrations and riders have travelled more than 25 million miles. It had a positive effect on real estate values and the city is working to expand it to even more neighbourhoods. And after installing or initiating 60 public plazas, the number continues to expand, and you're seeing countless safety improvements across the city. You don't need to wait around for a car-free utopia; the tools to build cities of the future are already within our grasp.



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01 Delancey Street is one of the many streets in New York City made over with pedestrian plazas and bicycle lanes.

● **Many cities wish for the same success that New York City has achieved, but face obstacles such as lack of expertise, political support, and finances. In providing support to such cities, how does Bloomberg Associates stand out as a consulting firm from the rest in this regard?**

No two cities are exactly alike and you need to play to your strengths and work around your constraints. Remember that even New York is a city of islands, with some 800 bridges and thousands of miles of streets, and we weren't exactly known for having the friendliest

streets. So adding almost 400 miles of bike lanes took creativity and very careful planning, as well as world-class public outreach. At Bloomberg Associates, we have the opportunity to share what worked in New York and assist Mayors and other leaders from around the world in writing their own success stories. While every city is unique, there is one universal truth no matter where you travel: if you design streets so cycling, walking and transit choices are attractive, safe, efficient and convenient, people will use them – and you'll be well on the way to a more sustainable and more competitive city.