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Livable Streets (For People, Not Cars)
by Tom Angotti
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The simplest way city officials can improve the quality of life for every New Yorker is to start thinking about the city's streets and sidewalks in a different way. That is the message of a new effort called [the New York City Streets Renaissance Campaign](#), which was launched recently with an exhibition at the Municipal Art Society entitled "Livable Streets: A New Vision for New York."

The Livable Streets exhibition is filled with ideas to make the streets more enjoyable, such as carving out plazas (complete with chairs and tables) in such barren, traffic-clogged intersections as [Astor Place](#). (Click [here](#) for links to some brief videos).

But it also offers a wealth of examples from large cities throughout the world that already have given their streets back to the people. Over the last 25 years, for example, Copenhagen drastically reduced traffic and created one of the most elaborate and extensively utilized pedestrian and bicycle networks in the world. Cities like Philadelphia and Chicago are creating safer streets for people of all ages and abilities, reducing pollution and health risks, and making both business districts and busy neighborhoods easier places to walk to, and walk around. They are doing all this without compromising the regional road networks.

Unfortunately, this is not what's happening in New York City. Here there is a disconnect between the city's land use and transportation policies.

The City's Car-Centered Policies

The limitations of New York City's transportation infrastructure are becoming more and more apparent, especially given the tens of millions of square feet of new office, retail and residential development that are planned for the city, much of it in high-density clusters. Simply dumping more traffic onto local streets may very well make the new developments less attractive and accessible, and scare away investors.

A few mass transit projects aimed at improving accessibility in Manhattan, like the Second Avenue subway line, may help, but they won't fully address the city-wide problems of gridlock, air pollution, noise, and dangers to pedestrians and cyclists caused by dependence on motor vehicles.

The problem is that the city's transportation policy is mainly oriented towards moving as many vehicles through the city's streets as quickly as possible. This is a monumental engineering task in a city with so many pedestrians, residential neighborhoods, and local retailers. And it doesn't work. The more the city dedicates its asphalt to cars and trucks, the more vehicles that show up and fill the streets, making things worse instead of better. The losers are the majority of New Yorkers who walk and use transit, and the growing crowd of bicyclists (some 140,000 daily, despite enormous obstacles and unsafe conditions). New York City has the largest mass transit system in the nation, yet New Yorkers have the longest commutes in the nation because of vehicular traffic congestion.

A Better Goal: Moving People

The Department of Transportation should drop the goal of moving as many cars as possible and focus instead on moving people. According to Transportation Alternatives Executive Director Paul Steely White, the city "should follow London's lead and develop new longer-term and more meaningful performance targets that aim to reduce traffic volumes and increase biking, walking and transit use." Currently, New York City's Department of Transportation ranks intersections by their "level of service" with the highest marks going to intersections that move more vehicles with the least delay. People on foot or bikes are not in the formula. But often we should be slowing traffic to make our neighborhoods safer rather than trying to speed it up. The transportation department doesn't consider qualitative factors such as the vitality of shopping districts, public plazas, and residential streets.

Instead of starting with the assumption that the city's street network has to accommodate as many cars as possible,

up, the department could start by asking how much traffic the city wants, and then plan for the street system that's needed to carry that traffic. Since the majority of New Yorkers don't depend on cars, the central focus of planning could be on how to improve the infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists. Instead of only measuring car travel, we could measure how pedestrian and bicycle flow (and safety) is helped or hindered by the minority traveling in vehicles. We could plan for the city's 12,000 miles of sidewalks instead of using them as targets for ticket blitzes. Efforts by the Department of Transportation to create a better environment for cycling are diminished by the agency's inability to do much more than paint stripes along the side of streets that continue to carry huge volumes of vehicular traffic.

Sustainable Transportation Policy?

It might be productive for the sponsors of the Streets Renaissance Campaign -- [Transportation Alternatives](#), [The Open Planning Project](#), and [Project for Public Spaces](#) -- to try to start a new dialogue and share their vision with city officials. The political obstacles for this vision should not be underestimated. It has not been long since Mayor Michael Bloomberg was forced to withdraw his proposal to put tolls on the East River bridges, a simple measure that would have reduced traffic in Manhattan. On the other hand, it is no secret that Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff, who in the mayor's second term has been charged with overseeing the Department of Transportation, commutes by bike on one of the city's few safe off-street greenways. Perhaps the Department of Transportation will be prodded to envision how the city could be filled with safe, planned bicycle ways that are more than just stripes on pavement.

The dialogue could be broadened to include the city's health officials, who are grappling with epidemics of asthma, obesity and diabetes that are related in one way or another to over-reliance on the auto. A 1996 study by the Natural Resources Defense Council found that every year over 46,000 New Yorkers die from illnesses related to particulate air pollution, most of which is related to traffic. Perhaps it's time for the city's analysts to tally the costs of this devastation in the Department of Transportation's management reports.

Now is a good opportunity to usher in the concept of "sustainability" in the New York policy arena. This term started with a 1987 United Nations report on the environment and is used around the world to mean planning to meet present needs without jeopardizing the needs of future generations. On the West Coast and in some other large U.S. cities, sustainability is on the lips of elected officials and shapes their approach to planning. Seattle's growth plan, for example, is called "Sustainable Seattle." It requires that the planning horizon for new projects stretch beyond the terms of the bank loans and that new development goes along with planning for the city's infrastructure and the quality of life of residents and workers. And perhaps city officials will look closer at the connections between land use and transportation. Some of the new mall-like mega-development in the city includes parking that induces more cars, displaces mixed-use neighborhoods and local retail centers that have had high proportions of pedestrian and mass transit use, and in several generations will transform New York from an open city with many choices to a city of enclaves no different from any other in the nation.

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