

# Surprise: Big Old New York City Is the Cutting Edge for Urban Transportation and a Vision for a Sustainable Future

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Who would have thought that New York City, the nation's most populous city, often perceived as lumbering when it comes to change, would be a cutting-edge innovator in transportation and the future of open space? Who would imagine the city could serve as an incubator for the rest of the country for ideas about the future of urban life? At a time when the price of fuel is skyrocketing as its availability decreases and the burst housing bubble turns exurban sprawl into ghost-towns, smart, savvy, creative, environmentally conscious people are returning to the inner city, where a sustainable lifestyle is more feasible.



*Photo Credit: Olugbenro Ogunsemore*

It's supposed to be nearly impossible to get anything important accomplished quickly in New York City. With powerful, conflicting political interests, tabloids ready to pounce at every opportunity, and a state legislature arbitrarily lording over the world's most influential city from its perch in Albany, progress and innovation face an obstacle course of challenges -- or, more accurately, a minefield.

But New York City's transportation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan, has turned conventional wisdom on its head. In three years on the job, with her potent combination of smarts, chutzpah and political savvy, Sadik-Khan has made great strides in moving New York City into the 21st century. She has overseen the building of hundreds of miles of innovative bike lanes; she's turned traffic-clogged streets like parts of Broadway into vibrant public spaces; she has secured

huge grants from the Feds to improve bus service, and perhaps most importantly to her boss, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, she has made the streets safer than they have been in many decades.

Sam Schwartz, first deputy transportation commissioner from 1982-'86, and now a consultant and columnist, says, "She has this remarkable speed. A speed she likes which of is unmatched." He readily acknowledges that Sadik-Khan has done more in the past few years than anyone "in the past 50."

## **Gobs of praise, pockets of resistance**

Visionary change, especially in a time of economic anxiety and scarcity, is never easy, and Sadik-Khan's remarkable accomplishments have met with resistance from some. On the one hand, she's seen as a brilliant, take-charge innovator, giving hope to many who want change, and receiving some glowing press coverage along the way. *Esquire* magazine chose her as one of the "The Brightest: 16 Geniuses Who Give us Hope" and writer Lisa Taddeo lavished her with praise:

Until one day about five decades after Robert Moses was dethroned, another prophet was anointed. One who wore silk dresses. She looked nicer than Moses, and she had a new way of doing things — using facts and numbers the way he had used will and force. She seemed gentler, too, but she imposed her way almost as much. And whether or not the new officials and the new villagers agreed with her, the intestines of New York City began to quickly unravel once again.

Michael Crowley of *New York Magazine* says Sadik-Khan manages to be equal parts Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses. She "is a heroic figure of vision and inspiration -- the women who tamed the automobile and made the city safe for cyclists.....'She's a rocket,' says her friend and City Planning director Amanda Burden, courageous, determined, hilarious, fearless, and exuberant."

But others see Sadik-Khan as moving too fast, not spending the necessary time to prepare people for change; ironic, since Sadik-Khan, ever a political animal, invests a good deal of energy consulting with a wide range of stakeholders. To the conservative tabloid media she has become a lightning rod for their frustrations and a target for their brand of newspaper drama.

Change that looks to address a future that hasn't quite arrived -- like climate chaos -- is difficult and can produce fierce resistance from the protectors of the status quo. Just look at the success conservatives and the Tea Party, with huge funding by the billionaire Koch brothers, have had in scuttling cap and trade. With endless resources and fake think-tanks, conservatives have actually convinced a growing number of Americans to deny the scientific reality that life on the planet will be quite different in the coming decades.

The future of NYC also forces people to look ahead, when they are not necessarily ready. New York is expected to add another million people over the next 20-30 years. Now is the time to plan and build the infrastructure and figure out the best ways to handle the growth.

And like it or not, change for the 21st century is about tackling the special status of the automobile, and in some ways the unfair perks that drivers have always had in America, even in a city where so many use mass transportation.

Sadik-Khan says, "I look at it as balance. About a third of New Yorkers walk, about a third of New Yorkers take transit, and about a third of New Yorkers drive. We haven't allocated our street space accordingly. When you think about it, so many things have changed in the last 25 years in New York City. Crime is down, our schools are better, parks are better. The one thing that hasn't changed in 25 years are our streets. No business would be in business for 25 years if they hadn't changed the way they worked."

Sadik-Khan's focus on bicycles and pedestrians has caused pushback, especially from the *New York Post*, with headlines like: "Strangled by bikes: Transport commish is out of control."

The tabloids have taken up the cause of the "forgotten driver," and advocate for neighborhoods whose residents may feel they have been by passed too quickly. Ironically, they paint the transportation reformers, not the car drivers, as elites, even though the changes being implemented are enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers and large numbers of visitors, who bring huge spending money to the city -- and even though no car has been removed from the streets. In fact, the Transportation Department has data showing that traffic moves faster in certain key areas as a result of the changes, and that businesses are thriving where the pedestrian traffic has multiplied -- retail asking rents in Times Square rose 71 percent, the biggest increase in history, and key stakeholders, from the local business districts to community boards, are pleased with what is happening.

However, as is often the case with competing media, it's easy to generate tensions between Manhattan and the Outer Boroughs, where cars are more plentiful and people more conservative. The tabloids love to focus on a visible target, demonize him/her and drive a wedge of outrage to sell papers. And in the case of Sadik-Khan, the more that magazines can't help themselves from lavishing praise and (in a somewhat sexist manner) obsessing about how attractive, hot, and hip she is, the more she is attacked by the tabloids -- fodder for a faux class war.

## **Change is difficult**

It is important to not underestimate the impact of change, which can be hard for many people. In a world where unwanted change is imposed on people all the time, many want their lives to be as predictable as possible. So when they walk out of their apartment in the morning and see chairs and large flower pots instead of the vehicles they saw the day before, they may be taken aback (though probably eventually thrilled).

Part of the responsibility of being a visionary is that people want to hear what you have to say, and there is ample opportunity to articulate your ideas. In reporting, some parts of the media can go gaga about the attractiveness of the vision, and give the impression that the ideas are already underway, already happening, and that the people at the grassroots are being left behind. This makes the community consulting process doubly hard.

I have no doubt that Sadik-Khan's pace can take your breath away. I watched with fascination from my apartment as the bike lane was rapidly built down Columbus Avenue, with a whole new urban art of lines, grids, turns and changes. When I realized that, jeez, parking was actually going to be in what used to be the second lane, I thought, "Oh boy, people aren't going to understand this. What is going to happen?" But the neighborhood quickly adjusted in just a day or two. And yes, there are probably fewer parking spaces, but like it or not, the long-term goal is fewer cars.

As Sadik-Khan told Sarah Goodyear from [Grist](#):

"Every project that we undertake has detractors. Inaction would have its own set of detractors as well. And there is well-covered opposition, but I also think that there is uncovered vocal and deep support for these projects in communities. Every single project that we do, bike project, bus project, or otherwise, goes through the community board. It's been approved by the community board. We work very, very hard to tailor these projects to meet the needs of local businesses and residents. No project is perfect right out of the box, so we go back and tweak them, and do everything we can to adjust them so they work better. I think we've been pretty successful at that. Change is hard. Change is difficult. I like to say that people support change as long as things look exactly as they did before."

## **Working with the mayor, planning for the future**

Even her critics have to admit that as commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan has a slew of accomplishments under her belt. The secret to her success isn't so mysterious: it requires a plan with clear goals. The problems being addressed are researched and analyzed and success is measured and quantified, so the results can be known.

As many know, the mayor, a highly successful businessman, is a data-driven leader. Nothing the city's DOT undertakes is a seat-of-the-pants operation. In a national speech Sadik-Khan outlined the necessary ingredients for changing the game on transportation in your city. Here's how the blog [Urbanphile](#) summarized it:

It starts with strong leadership from the top (i.e., the mayor) with a long-term vision for the future. Then you need a policy framework to make it reality. The public needs to know why you're doing what you're doing.

If you don't have these basics – if you don't have leadership, don't have a plan – you might as well hang it up.

For Sadik-Khan, the Holy Grail for planning is the Mayor's [PlaNYC](#). As *New York Magazine* reported, Sadik-Khan was hired "just as Bloomberg was putting the finishing touches on PlaNYC, a blueprint for expanded green space and a reduced carbon footprint for the city that would require substantial rethinking of key government agencies—especially transportation. PlaNYC was a lot more radical than the mayor got credit for at the time, and a serious departure from how he thought of the city's physical landscape. It also demonstrated Bloomberg's affinity for symbolic gestures (like the gimmicky idea of planting 1 million trees). Not only were Sadik-Khan's ideas about public transportation and open space consistent with PlaNYC, but she, too, intuitively understood the power of symbols—a café table or even a bicycle—to illustrate an appealing vision of the city's future.

“I was appointed at about the same time that PlaNYC was announced, Sadik-Khan says. "In the run-up to the appointment, I spent a lot of time with his senior team, talking about the priorities. They were basically chapter and verse in PlaNYC. So it was a wonderful meeting of the minds. The importance of improving the quality of life, and the economic health of the city is a huge priority for me."

Sadik-Khan adds: “The thing that I loved about PlaNYC is that it wasn't just a conceptual plan, or a set of principles that got stuck on a bookshelf. It's a really detailed action plan with benchmarks. For us, the Department of Transportation, it became a game plan for how we look at our streets, so that we are designing greener mobility into our street grid. We are looking at our streets differently, and treating them as the valuable public spaces that they are. With 6,000 miles of streets, that's a lot of real estate to work with. We're looking to create world-class streets that work better for everyone who uses them, and are more inviting."

## **Safety comes first**

With all the focus on Sadik-Khan as "the Commissioner of Bicycles" -- and yes, the biking revolution is a key cornerstone to the urban vision -- what is often lost is that Sadik-Khan is a sophisticated, savvy urban trans expert who spent years in the engineering firm Parsons Brinckerhoff traveling around the world seeing how other countries do it. (She also served in the Federal Transit Administration under Bill Clinton.) Another obsession of hers is buses; she loves to trot out the stats about increasing the timeliness of commuter buses. But her real obsession is safety, and here she is in total sync with her boss.

When asked about Sadik-Khan, Mayor Bloomberg said, "I bring in the best people I can find to do the best job possible. Improving our transportation network is an important priority for us and clearly Janette is a doer, someone who knows how to get things done and who is not afraid to try new ideas. For all the attention she's gotten for being a pioneer – and she is the most dynamic transportation leader in the country – she does not get enough credit for partnering with community and business leaders to make our streets safer than they've ever been. She is literally saving lives."

In one conversation I had with her, she quizzed me, “Do you know the legal speed limit across the city?” When I guessed 35 mph, she said “See, no one knows the speed limit -- it's 30 mph and it is set at that level because a pedestrian struck at 40 mph is 3.5 times more likely to be killed than one struck at 30 mph." The DOT also has a special focus on drinking and driving, which is a surprisingly significant problem in the outer boroughs.

On the safety front, the *New York Times*' Michael Grynbaum reported last summer on a study that tracked pedestrian accidents: "Taxis, it turns out are not a careening menace: cabs, along with buses and trucks account for far fewer accidents in Manhattan than did private automobiles. Jaywalkers were involved in fewer collisions than their law-abiding counterparts who waited for the 'walk' sign though they were more likely to be killed or seriously hurt by the collision....in 80% of city accidents that resulted in death or serious injury, a male driver was behind the wheel...." (57% of cars are registered to men). And oddly, left-hand turns were three

times as likely to cause a deadly crash than right hand turns... so NYC walkers stay on the right side of moving traffic and you will be safer.

The data from the study, which Sadik-Khan called the "Rosetta Stone for safety in the streets of New York," will be used to continue to reengineer the city's street grid, with the goal of saving lives.

Sadik-Khan says, "We're looking to serve everyone, whether you walk, whether you bike, whether you drive, whether you take the subway or take the bus. And making our streets as safe as they can be for everyone is the number one mission of the Department of Transportation: safe and efficient movement of people and goods. We've made some great progress. The traffic fatalities are the lowest that they've been in 100 years." So it's the safety issue that Sadik-Khan is preoccupied with, actually more than the bikes, although they are interrelated because people won't be on their bikes in great numbers if they don't feel safe -- hence the protected bike lanes with the car lane on the outside, borrowed from the city planners in Copenhagen.

## Looking to the future

The U.S. is in a tough spot. The hangover from the second greatest economic downturn in history is still with us. Politics has become increasingly polarized, producing not only a gridlock on progress, but certainly a failure of imagination. When it comes to preparing ourselves as a country for an uncertain future, many feel despair at the lack of foresight and cooperation; in essence, a lack of vision.

One of the reasons people project so much hope onto Sadik-Khan in her role is because she is a rare bird, a visionary who can get things done. She is not just thinking about tomorrow, but next year, and 10 years down the road. That's part of what gets people excited; very few visionaries get the chance to put their ideas into action.

This change is important for the country's future, too, despite what conservatives may be railing about. The need for change in the face of fossil fuel dominance can either undermine the country's economic future or help usher in a new era of health and smart living. But make no mistake -- any change will require a corresponding change of habits, and a positive attitude.

One optimist about the future is bestselling author Richard Florida, who became famous for his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In his new book, *The Great Reset: How New Ways of Living and Working Drive Post-Crash Prosperity*, Florida says we are poised for "the great reset" that will power the future and reshape our lives. "How we invest in people and infrastructure, and shape our cities and regions, will tell us a lot about the future we will create." According to Florida, key elements of that future include:

- new consumption patterns and new assumptions about "ownership" that are less centered around houses and cars
- new forms of infrastructure that speed the movement of people, goods and ideas
- a radically altered and much denser economic landscape organized around megaregions that will drive the development of new industries, jobs and a whole new way of life.
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Notice how the big elements of Florida's vision are in sync with Mayor Bloomberg's future plan, and what Sadik-Khan is doing.

*Esquire's* Lisa Taddeo notes the "parklets and the bike lanes are not the most important thing Sadik-Khan can export. In the grand scheme, they are just the precursors. The real wonder here is that this is a new way of governing. In large part she learned it from Bloomberg and then set it to a fast beat. It's about policy dictated by facts rather than interest groups. It's about not simply cutting the red tape of bureaucracy but, if need be, finding a path entirely around it. It's about actually taking action, now. Sadik-Khan has shown that it's still possible in 2010 for a government official to get things done as quickly and efficiently as Moses did, but with different and greener results."

On Sadik-Khan's future list is an other idea from Copenhagen; a public bike share that is being tried in several cities around the world. "There would be stations in lower Manhattan and midtown and Brooklyn to start. You could pick up a bike after touring City Hall and drop it off on 42nd before you see *The Lion King*."

And then there is her dream to get all city workers a Zipcar membership. This could halve the city's fleet of 16,000 passenger cars. True to form, she has already begotten a pilot of this plan. Since Labor Day, three hundred city workers have been using twenty-five cars, whereas they had previously been using fifty. It is the New York City of the future. It is, most likely, the Everycity of the future.