

Janette Sadik-Khan: Urban Reengineer

The new city of the future

By Lisa Taddeo – Esquire



janette sadik-khan. Olugbenro Ogunsemore

Once there was a man so in love with the road that he held meetings in his limousine. Ribbons of asphalt snaking like moon rays into the horizon made him think of the future, of the forward movement of luxury and dominion. But even more than this man loved the road, he cherished what the road connoted. Speed. Efficiency. Action. Getting from a start point to an end point like a time traveler, with no thought at all to the detourments along the way. *Way, what way?* There is only *arrival*.

This man, who was not the governor or the mayor or the president, built a city on biblical muscle, for here was a mortal who passed policy like a prophet. Red tape became dead tape in the fury of his creation. For forty long years — from the 1920s to the 1960s — he could not be stopped. Beet-faced officials and pleading villagers came to the base of his ziggurat, holding notices and petitions. Don't raze our homes, begged the villagers, and the officials stomped their wing-tipped feet in indignation. But not a single hair bristled on the prophet's neck. He

knew best, but more relevantly he held the keys to the coffers, so he simply figured out a way around the masses. He built right through the wails of their protestation, he tore down their tenements and shot highways through their towns and bridges over their rivers and drove tunnels down deep below their stomping feet. He upended and reassembled their whole world, and the city vibrated forward with the movement of his passion.

But finally the man went too far. He proposed one highway too many. The world was changing, the wealthy landowners were starting to hold preservation dearer than innovation, and the man was no longer called a visionary but a destructionist. And so they tore their despot down from his four-wheeled throne in that worst way in which despots can be removed — quietly.

And for the next half century, the building stopped as the city licked its concrete wounds. The roads went cold and quiet. No asphalt was poured, no tunnels dug, no streets reimaged. Instead, the thrum of panicked building was replaced by a system of smug gridlock. Bureaucracy as far as the eye could see, red tape longer than purgatory. The city awoke every morning grappling out of quicksand, dead set, it seemed, on maintaining past inconveniences.

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.



Liu Xin/Xinhua Press/Corbis

During three Saturdays this past August, Sadik-Khan closed down several main streets to traffic and sponsored dance classes, running events, festivals, and pop-up pools like these.

At a ribbon cutting in Union Square, New York City's Department of Transportation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan, walks the politician walk, four steps and your arm is grabbed, five more and you are spun into a circle of pearls and L'Air du Temps. The commissioner has Anna Wintour hair, a tight face, and a tan, thin body that does not look fifty but mid-thirties, sexy. She wears wraps over sleeveless dresses and when they fall away during rousing handshakes there is a toned yoga shoulder exposed, brownish and unabashed.

She smiles a lot, half like a lady and half like a man. Today, before her speech in Union Square, she admires one of her trademark swaths of pedestrian play zone. It's a strip of epoxy gravel spotted with metal tables and chairs and slotted between the sidewalk and the street, and appropriately it feels like a hybrid of the two. Repurposed planters with pastel hibiscus protect the pedestrians from traffic, and on the flip side of the cars is part of Sadik-Khan's empire of new bike lanes. The commissioner *loves* bikes.

The new plaza has been up only a few days and already it's peopled with iPad readers and texters and nearby business employees having their before-work coffee.

"People just right away use new spaces, they don't question them," she says, smiling. "There is such a *hunger* for open spaces in New York. We want to sate it as much as possible."

A woman seated at one of the tables does not make eye contact but says to Sadik-Khan, "Who's going to maintain this area?"

Sadik-Khan turns, ever smiling, to address the willful dissenter. "The local businesses do, and the city of New York does."

"You don't know that," says the woman.

"Uh, yes I do. It's already happening in Madison Square, and in Herald Square, and in Times Square." These are the other places where she has created pedestrian plazas; specifically in the latter she has entirely closed down Broadway to vehicles between Forty-seventh and Forty-second Streets. *No cars on a long and wild strip of Broadway!*

"Local businesses are going to lose money if cars have nowhere left to park."

Sadik-Khan nearly laughs in the woman's face. "Quite the opposite! Revenues from businesses in Times Square have risen 71 percent! That's the biggest increase in history!"

Stat! The commissioner dispatches data streams as though from a machine gun, pelting dissenters with a language that is part English and part numerical: *Injuries to motorists and passengers in the project areas are down 63 percent. Pedestrian injuries are down 35 percent. Eighty percent fewer pedestrians are walking in the roadway in Times Square.*

The dissenter does not speak again. In a city of people who matter and people who don't, the woman at the table does not have the position or the information to pause the forward movement of the new commissioner, and so the dissenter disappears into a statistic. And Sadik-Khan moves toward the green ribbon.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg is well known to be a data-driven mayor. If you are going to add a fire hydrant in Harlem, he wants to know how many German shepherds are expected to urinate on it. Sadik-Khan is the one out there monitoring the pH balance. And that attention to detail and conversion of detail into data is how she realized her power.

Prior to her appointment in 2007, Sadik-Khan was the senior vice-president of Parsons Brinckerhoff, one of the world's largest engineering firms, and before that she was deputy administrator of the Federal Transit Administration under President Bill Clinton and director of the Office of Transportation under former New York mayor David Dinkins. Somewhere along that résumé she developed the unique superpower of being perpetually right, or at least convincing people of it at data gunpoint. Today she manages forty-five hundred city employees and oversees the safety of New York City's transportation infrastructure, including its highways and byways and bridges and ferries.

"Janette," says the mayor, "uses a data-driven approach to tackle tough challenges and build consensus around innovative solutions." At its most innocent, this is precisely what the DOT commissioner does. Builds consensus, using data. But perhaps more empirically, the commissioner *wreaks* consensus, *inflicting* data.

The boldest and most passionate change she's made is closing down Times Square to traffic and painting a plaza there. The plazas at Madison, Herald, and Union Squares have since followed, and now a whole long stretch of Broadway — two hundred thousand square feet, the size of three and a half football fields — is a pedestrian parkland, tables and flowers and sweating tourists resting their eighty-pound Toys 'R' Us bags while billboards glint commercially above them. In the most elementary terms, Sadik-Khan has plucked the city from under the chassis of the automobile and distributed it, Robin Hood — like, to runners and cyclists and mothers with strollers and large men with small dogs.

In her thrall to expedite Bloomberg's PlaNYC mission to turn New York into a butterfly by 2030, Sadik-Khan is shutting down half of Thirty-fourth Street to traffic, creating Manhattan's first river-to-river rapid bus corridor in 2012, plus striking out the beginnings of an eventual eighteen-hundred-mile master bike plan and sprinkling more car tolls to deter more cars. There will be one million more people in New York by 2030, and big changes have to happen to accommodate that influx. The world's most famous street, well, it just didn't conform to the grid.

"Broadway," she says, "was simply a powerful farmer's precolonial footpath, and the great thing it did was create these wonderful squares." But now she doesn't need it anymore. So she restored the grid by doing the math. There were seventy pedestrians for every ten cars in Times Square, but cars were louder and more catered to, so, "you know, the balance was in the wrong direction." She turned it into a village green, where tourists have room to rubberneck on the sidewalks while busy New Yorkers can zoom out of their way across the plaza. That's a pretty monstrous change, and it happened over a long weekend.

"I don't hate cars," says the commissioner, not pissed, but almost. "It's a matter of balance. Until a few years ago, our streets looked the same as they did fifty years ago. That's not good business, to not update something in fifty years! We're updating our streets to reflect the way people live now. And we're designing a city for people, not a city for vehicles." This is a swipe at the old guard, and a new prophecy. Robert Moses took a city of narrow old roads and tore it down and rebuilt a metropolis for gleaming hoods and raw motor, and Sadik-Khan is going to change it back.

Millions of New Yorkers love the new plazas and walking spaces and bike lanes. But millions of car drivers are pissed off. Their roads are being seized. And this is where Sadik-Khan's stats ride in on their unassailable and nonpolluting white horse. Say you drive your Honda Accord from a subway-starved swath of Queens to your job in midtown. And you've noticed the traffic is worse. Go find Sadik-Khan pedaling her Specialized Globe bike from her home in the West Village to her office downtown. Tell her you *know*, dammit, that traffic in midtown is worse. She will smile and say, Listen. If vehicles are going more slowly, then that's safer for everyone! She will say that vehicle-related injuries are down a tremendous 63 percent.

But she won't stop there. After stuffing you full with safety data she'll insist you try a pie of peripheral benefits. One of the reasons GPS units were plugged into all thirteen thousand yellow taxis in New York was so that the DOT could track the performance of the new system. More stats! They found that northbound taxi trips in west midtown were 17 percent faster in the fall of 2009 (after the Broadway shutdown) than in the fall of 2008. And the stats don't lie!

Like Bible-thumpers and vegans, she has a million different figures memorized cold. She has them organized into trees. If you go this way, she will cut you off with this branch of reasoning. Head in that direction and she has a unique countering set of facts. Either way, it trickles down to the same end result. You have your tardy-to-work card, but she has just saved a few hundred lives. One argument is the clear winner, and it doesn't drive a Honda.

The legend of the quick-change artist began in DUMBO, that sexy industrial hangarland of Brooklyn under the Manhattan Bridge overpass. Over one nonholiday weekend, Sadik-Khan transformed a parking lot into a park. She painted a white border, and the space within it green for grass, and then she grabbed some leftover blocks and voilà — instant magic plaza.

"It was a quick way of showing you can transform a space in a matter of hours instead of a matter of years," says the commissioner. It was a powerful message. Thousands of idealists in corduroy pants converged and salivated for more.

In that little park in DUMBO, you can see how Sadik-Khan has managed to get so much done so fast. Yes, she wields data like a weapon to stun the public into submission for the greater, greener good. But she is also a master of other — some might say keen, others dark — political arts. She wants to move fast. Won't get stuck in red tape. Hates it like hell. So like Moses, she's figured out her own way around it.

Whereas most city officials and past DOT commissioners would have insisted on capital funds for something like, say, a bike lane, Sadik-Khan teases them out on the cheap. When you use capital funds for a project, you need approval from a few different places, and it takes months, sometimes years. So she takes a bunch of guys already painting double lines and gets them to dot a bike lane with the extra paint. Where she wants a plaza to swallow a car lane, she convinces abutting stores and the local business-improvement chapter to pay for the cleaning and to take the chairs and tables in every evening and set them out every morning. She tells them that shutting down the street will actually help their business, the way it did in Times Square. She shows them the numbers and where once they may have been against her, suddenly they are footing her bill. She doesn't even need to check in with Bloomberg. Like a high school a cappella group trying to get to Ibiza for spring break, Sadik-Khan finds money between seat cushions. She uses her guile and glamour to get what she needs, craftily but lawfully.

More downright rebelliously, she sometimes circumvents the community by experimenting with test swatches called pilots, like little harbingers of the future. With a pilot change, you don't necessarily need community permission, since the idea is that you may end up just taking it down. For example, with the DUMBO parklet, a past commissioner might have educated the residents first, tried to get them to buy into the plan. But it takes months to convince a neighborhood to agree to a change. Instead, she just painted. She did the same thing in the Meatpacking District, when she drummed up a plaza next to the Apple store, and again on Willoughby Street in Brooklyn. She's figured out a quiet way to get her way without getting the pesky public in her face.

Part of this is psychological warfare. Moses once said, "Once you sink that first stake, they'll never make you pull it up." Sadik-Khan has co-opted those words. Under her rule, bike lanes materialize overnight. Sidewalks become pop-up cafés and flowers bloom inside repurposed pots in quick and cowering deference. New Yorkers aren't used to this kind of change. So there they sit at their new café and they sip their Darjeeling, looking rather stunned or drugged and if not pleased, then at the very least *seated*.

Some love her for it. When overnight she shut down an entire turning lane on a busy avenue in Brooklyn so that pedestrians could cross the street in peace, the community thought she was a saint. But later, when she didn't so much as reply to a letter from Brooklyn Borough president Marty Markowitz asking her to reconsider the addition of a bike lane that could slow traffic considerably, a lot of Brooklyn wanted to lock up her paint cans. But she didn't have to answer to him. She had the power to do just as she pleased.

The bike lane was painted in.

"She has this remarkable speed," says Sam Schwartz, who was the traffic commissioner from 1982 to 1986 and is now a consultant and transit columnist. "A speed the likes of which is unmatched." He readily acknowledges that Sadik-Khan has done more in the past few years than anyone did in the past fifty.

"She's preparing us for a future that will have fewer cars," says Schwartz. This is something that is tough to swallow for many. But Sadik-Khan is using her method to make biking look cooler. If it's such a pain in the ass to drive in the city, then owning a car won't be a luxury. It will be a Members Only jacket. So roads that had four lanes now have three, and three lanes are thinning to two.

Her next passion project is to reconcile the geography of New York, to provide clear Disney signage and let people know, if they are in Chinatown, that Little Italy is a mere six minutes' walking distance from where they are standing. This will drive profits, she says, and make things easier for visitors. SoHo This Way, Gentle Tourist.

The project will be announced this month, but it won't surprise people who know her if she stakes a few signs before it's fully under way, the way she did in DUMBO. If objects are already up, then it only costs more to take them down. Like Robert Moses before her, she removes the debate by negating the question.

But for all that power, there is something soft over something hard. She smiles and says things like, "You know the way Broadway just *kisses* Seventh Avenue?" There is something of a fairy-

tale beguilement here, a traffic dictator disguised in silk dresses. If Moses had owned a pink fingernail of her beguilement, he might have scored a bridge across the Atlantic.



Matthew Roth/Streetsblog San Francisco

Sadik-Khan's ideas are spreading to other cities. San Francisco is experimenting with carving out pedestrian plazas.

At another event, an evening wine fundraiser to further revitalize Union Square, one of her pet squares, the commissioner has on a brown shawl and a silver dress and brown Mary Janes with a sustainable heel. She does not eat meat but she loves the bigeye-tuna roll at the Blue Water Grill stand. She drinks the exact perfect amount. People stop and thank her and get inside her space. She is a back-of-the-hand toucher and an emphatic and loving nodder. She gives you her whole neck when she laughs. Everything that is pussycat about her is mostly because she has excellent social skills.

While Moses was a man, tall as a spire and gruff, Sadik-Khan is sly-eyed and disarming. Another reason for her ability to paint that bike lane, perhaps, is that you didn't see the dress coming. She may bake for her lawyer husband and go to parent-teacher meetings at her son's school, but you can bet she has found a new way to streamline a brownie.

Force exerted with a smile is the most relevant kind for the times in which we live. She mentions a secret little sushi spot she found by City Hall. One day, former deputy mayor Kevin Sheekey showed up and Sadik-Khan said to herself, No, get *out!* This is *my* place! Laughing, she shows her throat, but she means it. Don't go to her fucking place. And right now, in this moment in history, New York City is her place.

But to anyone with a clear enough scent of human ambition, this is about more than New York. At the intersection of visionary and engineer you'll find the personal aspiration that is, often, what drives change like this. New York is a testing zone; Sadik-Khan is using it to show the

world — the president — what the world city of the future could look like. "If you can do it here," she says with a smile, "you can do it anywhere."

What she's doing in New York is trickling across the nation. Parklets are popping up in San Francisco. Portland, Oregon, the outdoor hipster capital of the country, was inspired by New York City, of all places, to have protected bike lanes — an idea Sadik-Khan lifted from Copenhagen, where the bike lanes are protected from traffic by a single-file line of parked cars.

Next on her list is another idea from Copenhagen, a public bike share. 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 Forty-second before you see *The Lion King*. She's a little reticent to discuss it, but the fact that she's mentioning it at all means she knows she'll keep pushing until it comes out a yea on the other side. And then there is her dream to get all city workers a Zipcar membership, so no one will actually own his own city vehicle. This could halve the city's fleet of sixteen thousand 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.

But the parklets and the bike lanes are not the most important thing she 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.

This evening the Union Square restaurants have laid out tastes of their kitchens beside gourds and haystacks. Fried chicken wrapped in paper and roasted-corn soup with crab and ham in short plastic cups. A country band is playing on the stage beneath the white tent. Bloomberg is not here, so Sadik-Khan is the most fetching political celebrity in the square. Back by the tuna rolls, she is a conspiratorial leaner-in. Like a good officeholder, she knows how to make you feel like you're with her, likely not next week, but definitely tonight, and maybe a lucky window of tomorrow.

Yet the personality part of her accomplishes something more divine. A local barbecue place has an offering of ribs, huge joints of meat glossed in Chinese spare-rib red. To the meatless, they are grotesque, like car-related injuries. The commissioner reaffirms her passion for the tuna and leaves when desirable people leave, early enough to be missed, having stayed long enough to be remembered. It isn't until she is completely out the door that the people who were in her midst converge upon the ribs, with red wine and enterprising incisors. They are not entirely ashamed, but almost.

Back in her West Village bedroom, the commissioner dreams in futuristic pastoral, the Cross Bronx Expressway melting down into benches, joggers in ponytails loping across lime-green plazas, and bicycles, many thousands of them, as far as the eye can see.

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