7 BEST PRACTICES

Supporting Transit and Non-Motorized Travel Through Complete Streets

NEW YORK CITY

WHAT IS IT?

Since 2007, the New York City Department of Transportation, (NYCDOT) has reallocated hundreds of miles of right-of-way on the city's streets, repurposing space for autos into public plazas, protected "cycle tracks," and bus-only lanes. The initiative, called "Sustainable Streets," has established clear and detailed transportation policies aimed at improving transit and non-motorized access throughout the city. The initiative is noteworthy for Seattle because several "complete streets" projects have been completed on a trial basis, as pilot programs, with lower costs and on an expedited timeline compared to permanent projects.

WHY DO IT?

"Complete streets" are designed to safely and sustainably accommodate all users, including transit riders, pedestrians, and cyclists.

HOW WELL DOES IT WORK?

While the street-redesign projects implemented by NYCDOT have received a great deal of attention, it is the process by which they have been implemented that may be most noteworthy. In most U.S. cities, even minor street design and transit projects require extensive and time-consuming processes. Repeated rounds of public hearings, environmental reviews, and the occasional legal challenge can delay implementation and greatly increase costs. NYCDOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, however, has implemented projects on a trial basis, often using inexpensive materials that can be upgraded at a later date.

This approach offers a number of advantages. First, projects can be implemented much more quickly and cheaply. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the public is able to experience rather than merely envision a design, in real time and in the real world. This allows for a certain amount of experimentation and presents opportunities to adjust and refine before infrastructure is put more permanently in place. It also allows poeple to grow accustomed to a redesigned space, which can allay the fears of an idea in the abstract or the human tendency to be wary of change. While many of these projects have been wildly successful, others have not been well received and have been removed.

The NYCDOT approach has since been adopted by other cities including San Francisco, which has implemented a "Pavement to Parks" program to convert street space to pedestrian use.

The "pilot" approach is not without its critics. Implementing projects as pilots, they claim, is simply a way to bypass public process. However, the fact that certain contentious projects have been removed, including striped bike lanes in Williamsburg which drew concern from Hasidic community around the dress of cyclists, stresses the flexibility of low cost pilot projects.

Among the actual projects implemented by NYC DOT, three categories have attracted the most attention: pedestrian plazas and promenades; bicycle lanes, including "cycle tracks" separated from traffic; and bus-only lanes.

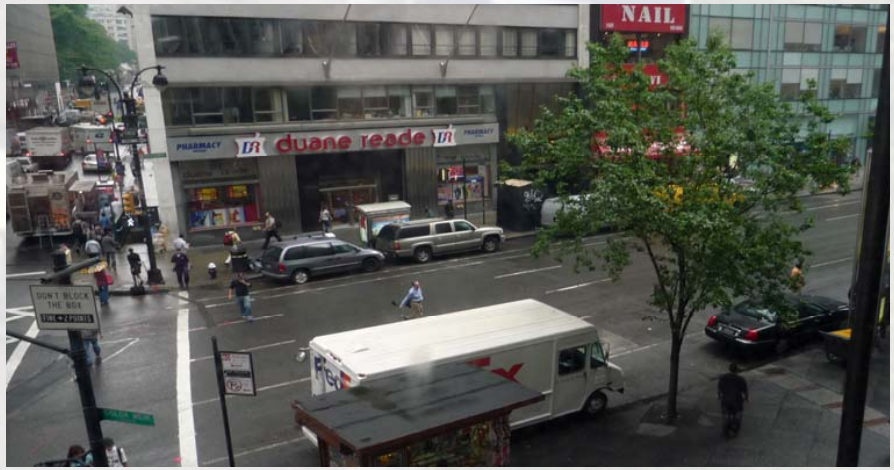
The highest profile of the pedestrian projects has been conversion of a two-mile stretch of Broadway in Midtown Manhattan into "Broadway Boulevard," a project described as "bypass surgery on the heart of New York." The project has been implemented in phases, starting with conversion of two lanes of Broadway in the Times Square area to a pedestrian promenade and cycle track, alongside the curb. Pavement was treated with an epoxy application, planters were placed next to traffic and parking lanes, and inexpensive benches, tables, and chairs were provided. The entire original project, along seven blocks of Broadway, cost just $700,000. The project has since been expanded to encompass 36 blocks of Broadway between Columbus Circle and Madison Square, with full closures of Broadway and larger plazas at key locations, including Times Square. Broadway Boulevard is a pilot project; data on traffic congestion is being collected over a six-month period. Conversion of six-way intersections along Broadway to simpler four-way intersections with longer green signal phases is expected to reduce auto travel times by as much as 37% on northbound Sixth Avenue. The project is a public-private partnership, with business improvement districts (BIDs) contributing to maintenance.

Initial public reaction has been mixed, with concerns about the safety of placing tables and chairs next to travel lanes where there are no curbs, about traffic impacts, about the quality of temporary street furniture, and about the fundamental change in the nature of Times Square, which some say feels less vibrant since cars were removed. However, newspaper articles have reported that it remains impossible to find a seat in Times Square, despite all the new seating. The Broadway Boulevard project might be viewed as a simple response to popular demand: 356,000 pedestrians a day need the space more than 50,000 vehicles.

While Broadway Boulevard is the most visible of the projects implemented by NYCDOT, it is just one among many.

BROADWAY BOULEVARD, MANHATTAN, 2008

Before



After

WALK. BIKE. RIDE.

SDOT Seattle Department of Transportation

Smaller pedestrian projects have been implemented throughout the city, and more than 180 miles of bike lanes have been added to its streets. On Ninth Avenue on the west side of Manhattan is a "cycle track" in which the parking and bicycle lanes have been reversed, with the bike lanes placed next to the curb and a painted median and landscaped islands placed between the bike and parking lanes. Meanwhile, along 34th Street in Midtown and on Fordham Road in the Bronx, Select Bus Service now operates in dedicated curbside lanes. Unlike more expensive bus rapid transit projects in other cities, these projects have been implemented quickly and inexpensively by painting the lanes, separating them from traffic with reflective domes, and installing cameras for enforcement.

While the NYCDOT has successfully implemented several complete street projects that improve mobility for buses, it is important to note that New York City also has a fully developed subway system. In Seattle, transit operates primarily on surface streets where the needs of other modes must be balanced with transit speed and reliability. Due to geographic barriers and the resulting street network in Seattle, complete streets principles that accommodate all modes, may be infeasible and/or impractical in some corridors. In urban environments, transportation needs to be viewed as a multimodal system that balances user needs at various geographic levels ranging from the cross section of a specific street to neighborhoods to the entire city.

A CASE FOR BALANCE

The Complete Streets model has become a common approach to moving the use of our urban streets away from auto-domination and balancing the need for bicycle and pedestrian movement. The Complete Streets organization defines a complete street as one:

Designed and operated to enable safe access for all users. Pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and bus riders of all ages and abilities are able to safely move along and across a complete street.

Many cities around the nation have adopted Complete Streets ordinances and are incorporating practices into planning and street design.

Complete Streets are important for transit because:

- The pedestrian network serves as the 'connective tissue' of the transit system. Every trip begins and ends as a pedestrian trip, and poorly planned access to bus stops is a real barrier for disabled travelers as well as a psychological barrier for all travelers. The U.S. Access Board sets minimum requirements for disabled access, but Complete Streets encourage quality pedestrian design that goes well beyond basic safety requirements.
- They encourage multiple jurisdictions to engage in important discussions about the quality of experience for all street users. A major challenge for pedestrian accessibility is the disconnect between transit operators, who are responsible for transit facilities, and departments of public works, who are generally responsible for the roadway and pedestrian facilities that provide access to transit facilities. It is important that the agencies move past the "not my problem" mentality and coordinate their activities carefully for accessible streets and sidewalks.
- Better street design encourages new and more intensive land uses, which creates more demand for top-quality transit.

Complete Streets policies can challenge transit operators because:

- Complete Streets recognize the need to accommodate transit vehicles, but overall policies are bicycle and pedestrian oriented.
- The reduction of traffic controls in favor of very slow speeds and integration can negatively impact transit operating speed and reliability, thereby reducing transit's ability to compete with the automobile. Sometimes segregating transit is the right thing to do, particularly in an urban core where a system converges and small amount of incremental delay can equate to significant operating cost and passenger delay over the course of time.
- Complete Streets advocacy is oriented toward non-motorized travel and may discount the importance of maintaining transit performance. Since a large percentage of regional trips are longer than most people will comfortably walk or bike, transit is critical in reducing use of private automobiles.
- Complete Streets advocates are often white collar cyclists that have greater capacity to organize and advocate for their agenda. As cycling grows in popularity, many communities are seeing an imbalance in advocacy for bicycle facilities when compared with transit.

For more information on bicycle and pedestrian integration with transit, see the *Accessibility in Transit for Bicyclists and Accessibility in Transit for Pedestrians* sections.