



Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution

By Janette Sadik-Khan, Seth Solomonow

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An empowering road map for rethinking, reinvigorating, and redesigning our cities, from a pioneer in the movement for safer, more livable streets

As New York City's transportation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan managed the seemingly impossible and transformed the streets of one of the world's greatest, toughest cities into dynamic spaces safe for pedestrians and bikers. Her approach was dramatic and effective: Simply painting a part of the street to make it into a plaza or bus lane not only made the street safer, but it also lessened congestion and increased foot traffic, which improved the bottom line of businesses. Real-life experience confirmed that if you know how to read the street, you can make it function better by not totally reconstructing it but by reallocating the space that's already there.

Breaking the street into its component parts, *Streetfight* demonstrates, with step-by-step visuals, how to rewrite the underlying "source code" of a street, with pointers on how to add protected bike paths, improve crosswalk space, and provide visual cues to reduce speeding. Achieving such a radical overhaul wasn't easy, and *Streetfight* pulls back the curtain on the battles Sadik-Khan won to make her approach work. She includes examples of how this new way to read the streets has already made its way around the world, from pocket parks in Mexico City and Los Angeles to more pedestrian-friendly streets in Auckland and Buenos Aires, and innovative bike-lane designs and plazas in Austin, Indianapolis, and San Francisco. Many are inspired by the changes taking place in New York City and are based on the same techniques. *Streetfight* deconstructs, reassembles, and reinvents the street, inviting readers to see it in ways they never imagined.

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Editorial Review

Review

"No one has done more in less time to rewrite the future of New York's streets."—**Reclaim**

"An inspiring read... The sort of book that should be read by every officeholder... But it is also a read for the rest of us. Anyone whose memory is longer than a New York minute who can remember when New York wasn't the pedestrian and bike friendly envy of cities the world over."—**The Huffington Post**

"Janette Sadik-Khan is like the child that Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs never had: an urban visionary determined to reshape the streets of New York, but with an abiding concern for the health of neighborhoods and the safety of their residents. If you care about the future of cities, read *Streetfight*."—**Michael Bloomberg, former New York City Mayor**

"Cities are where innovation, creativity and the unexpected happens, and Janette has helped make ours, New York City, safer, more livable and more profitable all at once. I watched these exciting changes happen, but the really interesting part is how she managed to implement these changes quickly and cheaply. That's where other cities can use this as a manual for change on issues like health reform, education and the arts. This, then, is not just a book about transportation."—**David Byrne, musician, artist**

"This book is an urban epic as audacious as the changes Janette Sadik-Khan made to the map of New York City. She is a superhero for cities and an inspiration that streets built to human scale aren't impossible, but merely awaiting those who dare."—**Jan Gehl, Urbanist, architect, author**

"To create safe and inclusive cities, being a visionary is not enough. You must also be an advocate, a communicator, a doer and, perhaps most importantly, a street fighter. Janette is that person and this is a book that provides the proof of the possible for citizens and their elected leaders everywhere."—**Enrique Peñalosa, Mayor of Bogota**

"Sadik-Khan's work will serve as a guidebook to city planners and traffic engineers everywhere, and motivate disenchanted urban dwellers to urge local politicians to make their cities more liveable."—**Booklist**

"[A] bicycle visionary."—Frank Bruni, **The New York Times**

"Sadik-Khan manages to be equal parts Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses."—**New York Magazine**

"If [Robert] Moses had owned a pink fingernail of [Sadik-Khan's] beguilement, he might have scored a bridge across the Atlantic."—**Esquire**

"[Sadik-Khan is] an urban visionary who cuts through the gridlock."—**Slate**

"This is a feel-great read for those of us who love cities, especially as pedestrians and bicyclists. Along with local efforts, the book contains wonderful examples of national and global reclamation projects. The good news comes in daily as examples of successful street rebalancing projects continue to mount from all over the world, and advocacy groups that push for these changes grow and strengthen. . . . Fortunately for all of us, [Sadik-Khan] was wildly successful."—**UrbDeZine San Francisco**

About the Author

Janette Sadik-Khan is one of the world's foremost authorities on transportation and urban transformation. She served as New York City's transportation commissioner from 2007 to 2013 under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, overseeing historic changes to New York City's streets—closing Broadway to cars in Times Square, building nearly 400 miles of bike lanes, and creating more than 60 plazas citywide. A founding principal with Bloomberg Associates, she works with mayors around the world to reimagine and redesign their cities. She chairs the National Association of Transportation Officials, implementing new people-focused street design standards that have been adopted in 45 cities across the continent. She lives in New York City.

Seth Solomonow is a manager with Bloomberg Associates. He was the chief media strategist for Janette Sadik-Khan and New York City's transportation department under Mayor Michael Bloomberg. A graduate of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, Solomonow has written for *The New York Times* and his hometown newspaper, *The Staten Island Advance*. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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My six-year, seven-month, eighteen-day tenure as New York City transportation commissioner began with a meeting at City Hall, at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, in early spring 2007.

"Why do you want to be traffic commissioner?" the 108th mayor of New York City asked me.

It was my first time even in a room with Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire entrepreneur-turned-mayor, now flanked by six of his deputies, Knights of Camelot-style at an immense round table. Six years into his administration and two years into his second term, it wasn't clear to me that day who or what he was looking for in a commissioner.

And here was his very first question. His question wasn't a test. It's a common misconception that the commissioner's job is limited to managing traffic. "I don't want to be the *traffic* commissioner," I responded. "I want to be *transportation* commissioner."

Bloomberg said nothing, and no one jumped in to break the tension.

Well, at least I got to meet the mayor, I consoled myself, confident that I had just blown the interview.

Nevertheless, I pushed ahead with my priorities, unsure how they'd be received. I wanted to make New York City's punch-line buses work better. I wanted to make bike riding a real, safe transportation option on New York's mean streets. I wanted to institute a toll for people driving into Manhattan during rush hour, creating the congestion that chokes the city, and use its revenue to make these new public transportation options possible.

These were far from mainstream transportation ideas, but I assumed that Team Camelot must have wanted to hear my pitch or they wouldn't have asked me to the table. Michael Bloomberg's reputation globally was for innovation and a by-the-numbers-please approach to governance.

This was the mayor who created the 311 system that allows residents to dial one number to obtain virtually any city service. He had banned smoking in bars and trans fats from restaurants—trifles compared with his overseeing dramatic reductions in crime and wresting control over city schools from a notoriously ineffective Board of Education.

But at the time I sat in front of him, there was no transportation leg to his legacy's table, no initiative, goal, or accomplishment on the scale of his other achievements that addressed the fundamental issues of congestion, danger, mobility, and economic stagnation on New York's streets.

So I was direct. I knew how the city worked and I wanted to change its transportation status quo. Fifteen years earlier I finished my tenure as transportation adviser to Mayor David Dinkins, after counseling him on local and regional transportation issues—subways, buses, bridges, transit hubs, airports, and highways—which included agencies and authorities and not just the transportation department he controlled. Since then I worked under President Bill Clinton at the Federal

Transit Administration, helped run the transit practice at Parsons Brinckerhoff, a major international transportation engineering firm, and was founding president of a subsidiary technology consulting company.

Based on my audience with Bloomberg, I assumed that he and his team were not on the hunt for someone to ride out the rest of the term with little change or controversy. They wanted a commissioner who understood government architecture and the elements of transportation, but with a private-sector metabolism that thrived on ideas and innovative approaches to problems.

Glancing around the table as the interview continued, I did not sense much interest in these ideas. I was even more certain that my appointment would never happen.

I misjudged.

Bloomberg offered me the job after a second meeting, a breakfast of slightly burned toast and coffee at Viand, his favorite local diner on the Upper East Side. I discovered the reason there wasn't more palpable enthusiasm in the room when I first interviewed: The crux of this city-altering approach was already being codified into PlaNYC—a long-range sustainability plan guided by Dan Doctoroff, the visionary deputy mayor for economic development. PlaNYC had not yet been unveiled to the public, explaining why the mayor and his team didn't react to the various proposals that I had put forth during the interview.

PlaNYC was a detailed, 127-initiative blueprint for urban sustainability unlike anything New York or any big city had ever seen. It stated a goal of reducing carbon emissions by 30 percent while improving the efficiency and quality of life in New York City neighborhoods and business districts. It also took the unusual step of laying the groundwork needed to accommodate the one million more New Yorkers expected to live in the city by 2030, which would have a profound impact on the operation and allocation of resources of every city agency. And it was the first articulation of a vision that would require changing the basic design and use of city streets. For transportation it demanded new strategies, like developing networks of rapid buses and bike lanes, bringing open space into every neighborhood in New York City, and using less energy and more sustainable materials in the construction of streets. PlaNYC was a manual to rewrite the existing street code and overcome the myth that New York was an ungovernable city, a place where the status quo would always prevail.

This new vision came into focus as a growing advocacy movement hit critical mass, spurred by Transportation Alternatives, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, the Straphangers Campaign, and political outsiders who often understood the goals of government more keenly than many people in office. With the release of PlaNYC, the advocates suddenly found an administration proposing traffic solutions beyond traffic signs and signals and dedicated to safety, efficiency, and transportation investment based on data.

Bloomberg introduced me to reporters and to the New York City public at a press conference on April 27, 2007, one week after PlaNYC was announced. "Don't fuck it up," he whispered to me after we finished our remarks. He was only half kidding. I didn't realize at the time that it was a piece of advice he gave all his appointees.

Back in New York City's Department of Transportation after a long hiatus, I knew that the agency influenced more than just traffic. New York City has 6,300 miles of streets, 12,000 miles of sidewalks, more than 1 million street signs, 12,700 intersections with traffic signals, 315,000 streetlights, 789 bridges, and the Staten Island Ferry, which moves 22 million people annually. Streets comprise 25 percent of the city's landmass, making the transportation commissioner the largest real estate developer in the city. The agency's chief mission is managing the hardware and responding to the daily emergencies that wreak havoc on it. New York City's Department of Transportation (DOT), with a head count hovering around 4,500 employees, is larger than the transportation departments for many American states. Instead of rural roads and highways, New York's portfolio contains some of the most valuable, dense, and contested real estate in the nation. Viewed through another lens, DOT had control over more than just concrete, asphalt, steel, and striping lanes. These are the fundamental materials that govern the entire public realm, and, if applied slightly differently, could have radical new impact.

New York desperately needed a new approach. City leaders, urban planners, traffic engineers, and the

people who they serve have been hobbled by two opposite, increasingly unproductive tendencies. First, megaproject monomania, still embraced by mayors and pushed by engineers who want to build bridges, new highway flyovers, bypasses, interchanges, and stadiums to leave a mark and “do something” during their tenures. This tendency clashes with the second common practice: city residents who assert neighborhood-based preservation and resist not just neighborhood-destroying projects but also virtually any other change to the urban context. The future of our cities has fallen between these cracks, remaining stagnant as municipal governments plan big—sometimes too big—and urban communities routinely oppose changes in the status quo by thinking small—sometimes too small. What both parties lack, first, is a vision for how streets can support the life and vitality of both neighborhoods and the city as a whole, and, second, a shared vocabulary to identify and reach that vision amid mutual distrust.

For leaders, overcoming obsolete thinking demands the resolve, courage, and grit to withstand the slings and arrows that inevitably follow change. I discovered that it was more effective to use the language of choices and safety while working with local communities to put rapid-fire projects on the ground. We moved in real time, with materials we had on hand. Our projects then became instruments for the public to gain understanding, providing the support we needed to expand our approach. The fast implementation of projects proved to be far more effective than the traditional model of attempting to achieve near unanimity on projects even when you already have consensus that the status quo doesn’t work. Efforts to reach an idealized consensus have resulted in years of indecision, inaction, and paralysis-by-analysis as leaders attempt to placate the opposition that accompanies any change to streets.

Every community has excuses for why changing the way they use their streets is impossible, impractical, or just insane. I learned firsthand that there is no end to the reasons for inaction. But inaction is inexcusable. As our cities grow, leaders and the people they serve cannot accept dysfunctional streets; they must fight to change them. The fight for these changes—well, that’s just part of the job. More than policy or ideas themselves, the most valuable lessons for any city involve the on-the-ground, practical experience of connecting vision to plans and then executing projects that produce positive change. Pinned above my desk during my six and a half years as commissioner was an adage from Harvard urban planning and design professor Jerold Kayden: “To plan is human, to implement, divine.”

Based on real-world practice, not ivory-tower idealism, this book deconstructs, reassembles, and reinvents the street. We invite you to view something you experience every day in ways that you might never have imagined. We hope it inspires city officials, planners, and all other city residents to initiate changes in their cities around the world. The new operating code for streets we reveal in this book is already being translated into projects in global cities, from pocket parks and plazas in Mexico City and San Francisco to pedestrian- and transit-friendly road redesigns in Los Angeles and Buenos Aires, to parking-protected bike lanes in Chicago and Salt Lake City and reclaimed streets for pedestrians near the Colosseum in Rome. If it can happen in New York City, according to the Sinatra model of transportation theory, it can happen anywhere.

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