

PRAISE FOR **JANETTE SADIK-KHAN**

AND **STREETFIGHT**

"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

"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

"Cities are where innovation, creativity, and the unexpected happen, 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

"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 important, a streetfighter. 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 Bogotá, Colombia

"[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

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SETH SOLOMONOW

**STREETFIGHT**

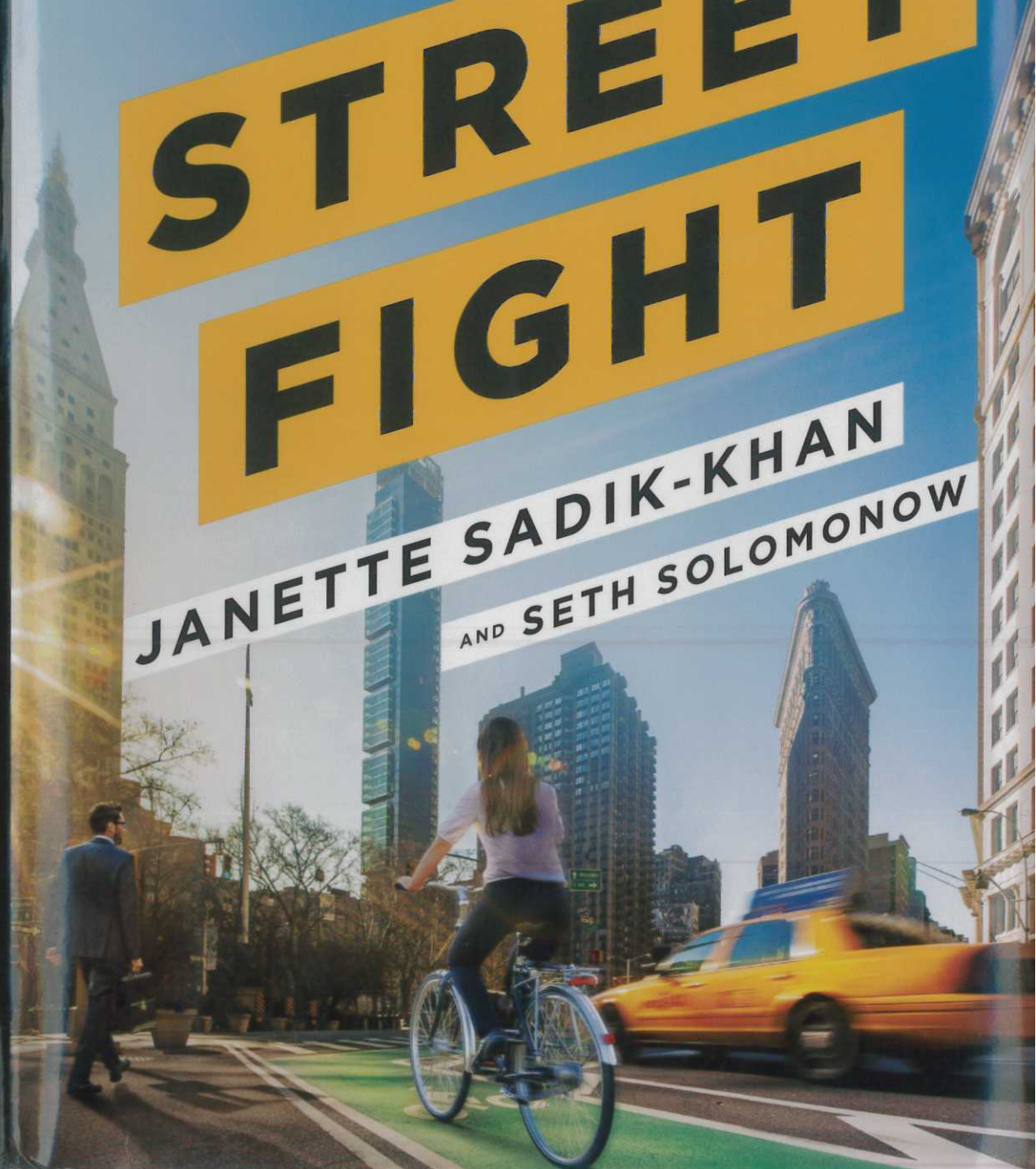
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FOR AN URBAN  
REVOLUTION



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**STREET  
FIGHT**

JANETTE SADIK-KHAN  
AND SETH SOLOMONOW



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*To the men and women  
of the  
New York City Department of Transportation*

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## Preface

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.

## PREFACE

*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

## PREFACE

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 trans-

portation 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.

## Streetfight



## INTRODUCTION

### A New Street Code

**E**very city street has an underlying operating code, and no matter how exotic the place, the streets from Melbourne to Mumbai to Manhattan are all failing our cities in exactly the same way. Signs and signals, lanes and markings, sidewalks and crossings, together these elements program the basic function of a street. The operating code is the underlying language that is given meaning when street design intersects with people. But it's the operation of the street—when we walk and when we don't, the way we stop and go, the intuitive way we understand the road as we drive, walk, and bike along it—that reveals the code's deeper meaning and its gaps.

Streets for the last century have been designed to keep traffic moving but not to support the life alongside it. Many streets offer city dwellers poor options for getting around, discouraging walking and stifling vibrancy and the spontaneous social gathering and spending that energize the world's greatest cities, dragging down economies that would otherwise

thrive. Inefficient and poorly designed streets are the stage for chronic congestion and 1.24 million traffic deaths annually along 22 million miles of road worldwide. Until relatively recently, there has been no commonly shared vocabulary to name or describe these failures. People are unaware that streets can be a powerful force in urban life.

New York City embodies the strengths and contradictions of urban streets. A nineteenth-century street grid was imposed over Manhattan's pre-Colonial footpaths. Streets were then designed to maximize vehicle traffic under a twentieth-century city planning dogma, which grafted motor vehicles and an ideal of suburban progress onto a city where millions of people walk and ride subways and buses. Postwar New York was built for a future that forgot its dense and lively urban origins. Its new, car-focused infrastructure became an obstacle for the future that eventually arrived. The most visible outcroppings of this problem—clogged streets, traffic congestion, danger, inefficiency, and uninviting, overrun driving surfaces—have become immutable features of cities everywhere.

City streets, built in a different age, barely serve today's residents. Car-based urban areas have adjusted to increases in population only by adding to already obsolete infrastructure. Building new highways, widening streets, and endlessly sprawling the city's limits have merely multiplied the damage to city cores and smothered the very assets that make cities places where people want to live—their accessibility, convenience, diversity, culture, and immediacy. Interpreting streets as places only to move cars instead of people turns cities into uninviting places for people.

Cities have always been cradles of culture, technology, and commerce, where history's most luminous minds and civilizations converged. But little of this creativity is reflected on the streets of the world's growing megalopolises. Elected leaders, city planners, and citizens have few expectations for how city streets should perform, and

without a clear understanding of the scope of the problem, few cities even have goals to make their streets safer and more walkable, reduce congestion, and discourage sprawl.

Streets are the social, political, and commercial arteries of cities. Such iconic addresses as Park Avenue, Champs-Élysées, Lombard Street, or Rodeo Drive identify social status. Streets mark political and cultural boundaries like 8 Mile Road in Detroit, Falls Road in Belfast, and the segregated roads of the West Bank. They play critical roles in democracies and in the transformative moments of history. Whether it's Tiananmen Square, Mexico City's Zócalo, the Bastille, Trafalgar Square, or Tahrir, Wenceslas, or Taksim squares, these are the spaces where life and history happen.

Every city resident is a pedestrian at some point in the day. A city whose streets invite people to walk, bike, and sit along them also inspires people to innovate, invest, and stay for good. Regardless of where you live or how you get around or how much you may detest a bike lane, bus lane, or plaza, streets matter. They are the mortar that holds most of the world's population together. They must be designed to encourage street life, economy, and culture.

City dwellers around the world are beginning to see the potential of their city streets and want to reclaim them. They are recognizing an unmet hunger for livable, inviting public space. Many cities have embarked on significant, headline-grabbing efforts to reclaim roads, bridges, tunnels, and rail rights-of-way and turn legacy hardware into the stuff of urban dreams—parks and greenways, city idylls that provide room to walk, bike, and play in the middle of a city where a highway once stood. Some cities are building bike lane networks and creating bike-share programs. Tactical urbanists reclaim parking spaces for a day and calm traffic with murals painted onto asphalt. Yet few of these strategies have been incorporated into the way that cities operate from the street up. Traffic planners and engineers still use outdated

planning and engineering manuals that prescribe wide lanes, giving scant thought to how design can create walkable urban spaces. Even where the imagination exists and the political will is aligned, the effort to achieve these overdue transformations can quickly become a streetfight against the status quo.

During an intense, six-year period under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City proved to itself, the nation, and the world that almost everything that was assumed about how urban streets operate was wrong. Real-world experience showed that reducing the number of lanes on carefully selected streets or closing them entirely not only provided pedestrian space and breathed new life into neighborhoods, but also actually improved traffic. Simply painting part of a street to make it into a plaza, bike, or bus lane not only made the street safer, it also improved traffic and increased bike and pedestrian foot traffic and helped local businesses to prosper.

The revival of the city's transportation network was accomplished without bulldozing a single neighborhood or razing a single building. It was cheap—absurdly cheap—compared with the billions of dollars American cities have spent annually building new streetcar and light rail lines and rehabilitating or replacing aging roads and bridges. And it was fast, installed in days and weeks using almost do-it-yourself tactics: paint, planters, lights, signs, signals, and surplus stone. Overnight, centuries-old roads turned into pedestrian oases atop space that had been there all along, hidden in plain sight.

While this counterintuitive approach enjoyed widespread support and improbably high poll numbers, it also enraged a small but vocal army of opponents. They were a mix of people who disliked Mayor Bloomberg and were skeptical of any government action that was environmental, healthy, or “vaguely French.” They denounced the changes and politicized the very data that should have transcended the passions surrounding these changes.

Street life improved by virtually every measure. But it was the push-back to this approach that got the biggest headlines. When you push the status quo, it pushes back, hard. Everyone likes to watch a good fight. And this most surely was a streetfight: a politically bloody and ripped-from-the-tabloids streetfight. I was—and still am—deeply embedded in that streetfight. Call me biased, call me crazy—many people have—but I am convinced that the fight to wrest back New York City's streets holds lessons for every urban area, and that the future of our cities depends on it.