

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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JANETTE SADIK-KHAN

**STREETFIGHT**

HANDBOOK  
FOR AN URBAN  
REVOLUTION



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URBAN REVOLUTION

**STREET  
FIGHT**

JANETTE SADIK-KHAN  
AND SETH SOLOMONOW





VIKING

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Set in Linotype Syntax Serif Com and Gotham

Designed by Amy Hill

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



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## Setting the Agenda

**A**s a rule, 95,000-word documents about urban health and long-term sustainability aren't headline news, much less the stuff of dinner-table conversation. The news on Earth Day 2007 was different. Mayor Bloomberg unveiled PlaNYC at the American Museum of Natural History, beneath its famous 94-foot-long, 21,000-pound fiberglass blue whale, underscoring the urgency of the message. The unusually direct language the mayor used at the event was as rare as the animals that filled the museum halls, and it made news.

The document that Mayor Bloomberg and Team Camelot under Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff produced (pronounced "Plan-Y-C") was the first real inventory of the city's collective resources, assets, and deficiencies. It systematically reverse-engineered the city to accommodate expected population growth, amortizing the costs of investments over decades instead of election cycles, and looked at the impact of growth on health, the environment, and quality of life. From 2000 to 2005 alone, New York City's population grew by 200,000 people.

Doctoroff recalled that the plan didn't start with trying to solve the ultimate challenge of New York's long-term growth, but with trying to solve a single problem then facing the city: where to house the vast stockpiles of chemical salt needed for city plows when it snowed. The municipal land needed for the salt storage set in motion an inventory of city properties, which in turn forced officials to think about the properties needed for the equipment that carries and disperses the salt. The process quickly led to inquiries about lots for vehicles, for refueling them, and for transfer stations to carry out the waste—the banal stuff of municipal real estate.

As the exercise unfolded, Doctoroff recognized they were contemplating essential questions of the city's long-term health, not just addressing today's problems. "We realized that planning for the future was more than an exercise in creating space for government operations," he told me. "By 2030, there will be nine million people in New York City," Doctoroff says, a net increase of nearly a million people, or the equivalent of adding the current populations of Miami and Boston into the five boroughs.

To address the increased demands on the city, PlaNYC returned to a central theme: density is New York's destiny, and city planning must leverage that strength to enhance mobility and the quality of city life and avoid sprawl. Successful urban density isn't simply a matter of tall buildings stacked next to one another. City residents require both space and privacy, green space and open sky, breathing room and room to run. How cities deliver their services must be organized in ways that can be maintained over decades without depleting their coffers or making neighborhoods and the environment inhospitable.

Determining how these pieces fit together is a problem of public space design, and it's inextricable from the underlying city goals and policies. The plan's 127 proposals would increase the city's housing stock by 265,000 units, expand wetlands and plant a million trees,

build more efficient buildings and install street lighting that uses less energy. To reduce greenhouse gases, PlaNYC also sought to lower emissions by having fewer vehicles on the roads and enabling all New Yorkers to live within a ten-minute walk of open space. By investing more in ten years on sustainable infrastructure, the city could have a greener, more attractive city and realize savings from those investments fifteen, twenty, and thirty-five years later.

In 2007, the idea of planning beyond the length of a term in office was still a political fantasy. Sustainability plans for entire cities were still a rarity in the first decade of the new millennium. Similar plans had been drafted in Seattle and San Francisco. London in 2004 released the London Plan, one year after implementing its first congestion fee for cars entering the city center. But these plans lacked unifying sustainability themes across all city agencies to reach beyond urban planning and into the essential issues of land use, energy, waste management, air quality, and climate change.

Such strategies recognize and emphasize that ideas can outlast the people who drafted them. "Cities without plans tend to be politically disenfranchised with fragmented governments," says Transport for London's commissioner, Sir Peter Hendy, knighted in part for his success managing the city's transportation plan during the 2012 Summer Olympics. "As a result, they don't have any long-term purpose, don't have any long-term plan, and haven't done much. Whereas [in London] we have this massive population and economic growth, and it's fueled by all sorts of policies being executed alongside congestion charging—cycling, renewal of the subway—which then make the plan work. I think that is an incredible lesson here and for the rest of the world."

One of the first urban planning frameworks in the United States was established in Oregon more than forty years ago, and it has served as a great model and impressive success story. Inspired by urban devel-

opment models from early-twentieth-century England and led by visionary governor Tom McCall, the state legislature in 1973 required Oregon cities to establish urban boundaries outside of which commercial and residential development is prohibited. Every five years cities can assess their land use needs for the next twenty years, and if they believe there is a compelling need, they must make their case before the legislature to open new tracts of green space for housing or business. Some opponents object that by concentrating new growth within city boundaries, the boundaries artificially inflate real estate prices that should have been left to the free market. But something else has happened. Portland has become a model for transit and human-powered transportation. Its bike commuting rate of around 6 percent, while laughably small by European standards—and even considering that commuting trips represent only a fraction of overall bike trips—is the closest thing to Copenhagen among American cities of more than half a million people. Bike commuting tripled there from 2000 to 2012, and streetcars ply the car-free streets of downtown. One generation's planning helped dictate the next generation's infrastructure investment. In 2015, Portland officials opened the Tilikum Crossing, a 1,720-foot bridge that was the first span over the Willamette River in forty years. The bridge, known as the Bridge of the People, was designed to carry trains for Portland's light rail MAX system, streetcars, buses, bikes, pedestrians, ambulances, and fire trucks, but no private cars.

In other American cities, by contrast, urban planning is often absent from agendas. Houston, Texas, is renowned for having no long-term plan or even a unified zoning code that spells out what kinds of buildings can be built where. The result, predictably, is that Houston's population of 2.2 million is sprawled over more than 625 square miles, or about one tenth of the people in Mexico City spread throughout a slightly smaller area.

Comprehensive urban planning is a productive exercise in itself. PlaNYC reframed the idea of the city and repudiated the idea that cities (not just New York) are environmental, social, and economic lost causes. "We went from cities being a problem to density being the solution," said Rit Aggarwala, the sustainability guru Doctoroff brought in to manage the development of the report. The result was a document that was written in clear and accessible language and its positive tone reflected the belief that cities are sources of national strength.

While PlaNYC had high-level goals for congestion pricing, bike lanes, and bus rapid transit, it didn't spell out what that infrastructure should look like or the strategies to implement it. That was my job as the newly appointed commissioner of DOT. I immediately started by translating these goals into a strategic action plan for the 4,500-person agency, and, most important, building a team that could execute it. The first play was to identify the talent already within the agency, which would let us get to work fast.

As my right hand, I appointed Lori Ardito, a smart, seasoned DOT professional to oversee operations—paving and fixing roads, installing signs and signals, and keeping the Staten Island Ferry running on time. Her appointment also reassured the DOT establishment that I valued their skills and input. It also made it easier when I brought in a cadre of people from outside the agency—some who were former critics of DOT or who brought decades of experience from inventive private sector practices. They would help expand the capabilities of the entire team and push the bureaucracy to act with a nimbleness it had never seen. We set out to achieve big goals and change the very nature of the business and how we got things done. On my team were people who shared my brand of strategic thought and impatience with government dithering, like Jon Orcutt, a creative and pragmatic transportation advocate and leader to run our policy shop and major initiatives.

My friend Margaret Newman, an architect with a razor-sharp design



eye, became my chief of staff and elevated our aesthetic and lighting standards. Andy Wiley-Schwartz came from the Project for Public Spaces to head DOT's fledgling new office for public space. Another key player was Bruce Schaller, a data guru with years at the transit, parks, and taxi departments, to lead the agency's new Planning and Sustainability Division and help manage the plan to inaugurate five new bus rapid transit lines and meet the biggest goal of all: congestion pricing. Starting on our new course with this new team, we had no choice but to work fast—there were only thirty-two months before the mayor's second term would expire.

We started by developing an action plan for implementing PlaNYC's transportation agenda. The agency's deputy commissioners led a top-to-bottom audit of the department to plan our path forward instead of lurching from emergency to emergency. Within the first year we produced the agency's first-ever strategic plan, Sustainable Streets, a conversion of PlaNYC at the transportation level, with goals and benchmarks for a better city. It set forth goals to cut traffic fatalities by half and to bring dedicated bus lanes, enhance public space, and bike infrastructure across the city. DOT's sustainable future meant more recycled asphalt, more bridge investment, more cleaner-burning fuels in our operations, more efficient lights on our streets, and, critically, a new neighborhood communications strategy.

Another big part of the agenda was overhauling the public outreach process. For years DOT had communicated with communities through a curt exchange of form letters. A resident or civic group would request a stop sign or traffic signal and, after a study of traffic volumes and the number of pedestrians crossing the street, the department usually responded in a letter saying "No." No, the intersection did not have enough traffic to meet federal guidelines for installing a traffic signal. No, not enough pedestrians crossed the intersection to warrant a stop sign. In the view of the citizens, by saying no, the government had

failed in a basic responsibility to do something and solve an obvious problem. What they didn't know is that the underlying problem that they were concerned about might have had more effective solutions. The 12,700 intersections in New York City with traffic signals are no less prone to dangerous speeding and adding new ones may create new problems. Signals can spend more than half their time green, leaving plenty of time to speed. And many drivers who see a green light at a distant intersection often feel induced to hit the gas to increase their chance of beating the eventual red light. This is why transportation departments install traffic signals primarily to control the right-of-way, not to regulate speed.

Instead of mailing letters that simply denied traffic signal requests, we posed a new question to these communities: What problem were they trying to solve? Were there other strategies that were not considered because they were not specifically requested? If the problem was speeding, we could look at the possibility of narrower lanes, speed bumps, and parking restrictions near the corner so stopped cars wouldn't block the visibility of crossing pedestrians. Creative street design, not stop signs, could change safety on a street. To better define the problems and showcase new solutions, we developed workshops called DOT Academy, where agency staff made presentations to elected officials, community board leaders, and their staffs so they would know what we did and what to ask for—instead of stop signs and traffic signals.

At typical public meetings, city officials lecture community members for twenty minutes, then take questions. This format works against general public participation and in favor of the few who feel passionate enough to declare an opinion before a room of people—often the most extreme opinions, which frequently result in a polarized room. People with moderate opinions remain silent and stay out of the conflict, which means decision makers don't hear a full range of views. To encourage participation and also provide a better gauge of public wishes and senti-

ment in programs like our rapid bus projects, we arranged planning meetings that would seat participants at individual tables in groups of ten or even fewer, each one moderated by transportation staffers who jotted down ideas and provided details of proposed projects. Each individual—a resident, a business owner, a representative from a local institution—now had the chance to have his say, civilly, and resolve differences among themselves.

Of course the general public is not the only one engaged in the street business. The departments of design and construction, parks, buildings, planning, environmental protection, and others all developed projects that touched the streets. To put all these agencies on the same street design page, we pulled together eleven agencies and started working to create New York City's first ever street design guide. It includes the latest in designs piloted in New York or used in other cities—like bioswales that channel flooding rainwater from streets into landscaped tree pits, curb extensions that decreased crossing distances for pedestrians, and new techniques in street marking.

The collective impact of these plans, processes, and policies was a wholesale government rebranding. We were changing the language and the expectations of what the department was capable of and responsible for, and how it should use the resources under its control. In so doing, we helped expand and transform people's expectations of the city itself. We didn't eliminate tensions and opposition, but created a goal-based approach to government that resulted in better projects and outcomes, which, while they would not please each of New York's 8.4 million traffic engineers, would better serve more of them than ever before.

But nobody was served well by the traffic that had existed since Moses's time. The very first item on the transportation agenda at City Hall was a plan to deal with congestion and the chronic underfunding of our transportation network. This wasn't the first time I tried to tackle

the problem. As Mayor Dinkins's transportation adviser, I oversaw a report on the feasibility of tolling the East River bridges to fund the capital and operating needs of New York City's bridges and streets.

Swarming traffic persists as an inescapable part of daily life in Gotham and most major cities. Manhattan's population of 1.6 million doubles every weekday as commuters descend upon the borough's clusters of entertainment, finance, fashion, publishing, academia, dining, and media. As vivid as traffic is in Manhattan lore, a relatively small number of people are in vehicles. Only 6.6 percent of the 1.6 million people who travel to work in Manhattan daily drive alone, compared with a national average of 76.4 percent. Instead, public transportation is the choice for 59 percent of commuters who arrive at their Manhattan desks—riding aboard subways, buses, ferries, and commuter trains that connect the city and its suburban counties. That makes New York a public transportation nirvana compared with the national average of just 5 percent of commuters taking transit.

Even a small percentage of people driving alone is a huge absolute number in a metropolitan area of 20 million people. Cumulatively, within the five boroughs including Manhattan, drivers make 7.7 million daily car trips and rack up 30 million miles daily. These large numbers of vehicles require an immense amount of room while they are moving and while they are parked, which is why most New York City street space has been devoted to them. This disequilibrium is itself a daily streetfight, with taxis, pedestrians, bikes, buses, pedicabs, deliverymen, trucks, and street vendors in an uneasy dance for space, pace, and safety. Cars and trucks double-park to make deliveries, blocking lanes and forcing dangerous and traffic-inducing merges. Millions of hours of people's lives are collectively spent stuck in traffic annually, getting nowhere while emitting fumes into local neighborhoods. The Partnership for New York City estimated in 2006 that congestion cost the region \$13 billion each year in economic and health matters.

Our goal was to rebalance these streets, bringing greater equity to the transportation network and reducing the impact of congestion. The price of entering the city by car—free at many bridges—was the linchpin. There is no active congestion pricing system in the United States, yet paying tolls to use bridges and roads is a rich, if loathed, American driving tradition. I remember years ago fumbling for change to throw into a toll basket on the New Jersey Turnpike or Interstate 95 in Connecticut, a step up from handing over a crumpled bill and coins to a toll collector at one of the city's tunnels or bridges. By the late 1980s, electronic toll collection like E-ZPass started to snap up tolls without your having to hit the brakes. Despite this tradition, people who drive tend not to see a correlation between the price they pay to use the road and the poor quality of and congestion on that road. The idea of paying a toll to enter an area, as opposed to using a bridge or road, still remains as foreign a concept today as the idea of paying for driving at all.

"I was a skeptic myself," admitted Mayor Bloomberg when he publicly discussed congestion pricing for the first time. "But I looked at the facts, and that's what I'm asking New Yorkers to do. And the fact is in cities like London and Singapore, fees succeeded in reducing congestion and improving air quality."

Singapore introduced the first congestion pricing and taxing system in 1975, which officials married to new transit investments and strict rules on owning cars, decreasing traffic volume and leading to a long-term increase in the use of transit. In the early 2000s European planners started to pick up on the quiet, pocketbook power of charging people to drive. To reduce congestion and vehicle emissions, London officials in 2003 introduced a fee for drivers coming into the city center on weekdays. By 2006 the plan reduced congestion within the zone by an estimated 30 percent and decreased greenhouse gases by 16 percent. Meanwhile, Londoners walked and took buses in increasing numbers. Stockholm, Sweden, introduced a pilot congestion charge program, one

that it made permanent in 2006, within months of PlaNYC's launch. Again, traffic decreased. From my first day in office I was thrust into this, the most controversial issue in the city. Joined frequently by Bruce Schaller and Rit Aggarwala, I became one of the public faces of the battle at public hearings and testimony in front of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the city council, and other public meetings required before a policy can take effect.

We thought that charging people who drive into downtown Manhattan might succeed in ways that pleading, cajoling, and engineering never could. Congestion, danger, lack of parking, and aggravation hadn't dissuaded many New Yorkers from driving, and having one of the world's best transit networks wasn't enough. Maybe the price would tip the balance.

The original proposal in PlaNYC was a charge of \$8 for vehicles to enter Manhattan anywhere south of 86th Street weekday mornings through early evenings. Faced with a new toll, a driver who wouldn't have thought twice about commuting before might do some quick math and ask herself "Is this trip really necessary?" Beyond reducing congestion itself, the goal of the charge was to raise a projected \$380 million a year to improve transit options, reduce crowding on subways and buses, and upgrade the heavily used but aging transit network. This piece was critical. It's not enough to use tolls to get people to change how they get around. Cities need to provide new and more reliable transit options. The congestion charge would give cities the means to do it.

Despite New York City's manifest traffic problems, New York drivers would not be so easily convinced that anything could be done—or even needed to be done—about it. Part of the problem wasn't the policy or the goals but the branding. Congestion pricing was unfortunately named, with two problems, traffic and payment, united in one pithy phrase. It was also awkwardly abstract, rooted more in the basic con-



cept of supply and demand. Inconsistent tolls at New York City bridges and tunnels, which are run by different agencies and authorities, tempt millions of annual drivers to "bridge shop" for the least expensive trip. Instead of taking a direct route across tolled bridges, people drive, some in large trucks, miles out of their way to reach the four toll-free East River bridges to Manhattan: the Brooklyn Bridge, the Manhattan Bridge, and the Williamsburg and Queensboro/Ed Koch bridges. Drivers then course along local streets to reach the Port Authority's Holland Tunnel and Lincoln Tunnel and their free one-way trips to New Jersey. An alternative, more direct trip to New Jersey might really be through Staten Island, where a cash toll at the MTA's Verrazano-Narrows Bridge starts at \$16 round trip and can run \$124 for a seven-axle truck (and no, that's not a typo as of 2015!). The network incentivizes people to drive through Manhattan for free. Charging vehicles to enter Manhattan would change that message.

Opponents framed the debate not in terms of traffic—Would it or wouldn't it succeed in reducing congestion or improve public transportation?—but as an attack on poorer New Yorkers. Elected officials railed that poorer residents live farther from subway stations and bus stops and had no choice but to drive. Paying a daily congestion pricing fee to drive to work in Manhattan could add up to \$2,000 in tolls a year that hit those who can least afford to pay it. Wealthier New Yorkers, the argument continued, wouldn't flinch at the toll and would continue to drive. It should come as no surprise that the chief spokesman making that argument was a state legislator from Westchester County, one of the five wealthiest counties in the state by median income that is heavily populated by commuters.

Residents from Queens, Staten Island, the Bronx, and Brooklyn—the populations congestion pricing was targeted to help—also inveighed that it would be unfair that their tolls would be used to fund a public transit system they did not use. Yet in the example of one bor-

ough, Brooklyn, census data showed that 57 percent of households don't even own a car. The households that did own cars enjoyed a median household income a full 100 percent higher than those without cars. And while we may think of Manhattan as the sole business hub in town, about two thirds of Brooklyn workers don't work in Manhattan, commuting instead to work within Brooklyn, in another borough, or in a neighboring county. Those who commute regularly to Manhattan overwhelmingly take public transit. By the time the math of congestion pricing was wrestled to this level, the data showed that 97.5 percent of Brooklyn residents wouldn't have to pay a congestion charge to get to work.

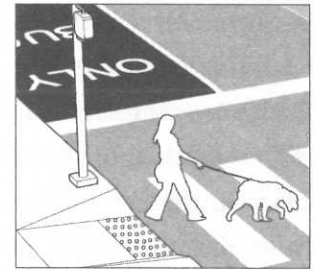
Despite passionate arguments against congestion pricing, New Yorkers backed the proposal 67 percent to 27 percent in a poll, provided that the proceeds would be used to improve transit service. Even the typically raucous editorial boards at New York City's newspapers supported the plan or at least hedged. After an intense national competition for federal funds under the Urban Partnership Program, U.S. transportation secretary Mary Peters offered New York City \$354 million to implement a congestion pricing program, conditioned on the state legislature's approval of the plan by spring 2008.

The political battle developed into a six-month full-court press, a blur of meetings, charts, and statistics. A subsequent New York City Council vote to authorize congestion pricing wasn't really close, but the atmosphere in the chambers was no less dramatic, yielding a 30–20 yes vote on March 31, 2008. But elation at the city council vote turned to dejection in Albany. The final decision on congestion pricing wasn't the mayor's or even the city council's alone. New York State prohibits New York City from a range of revenue collection practices without authorization from the legendarily ineffectual state legislature. State legislators in April 2008 smothered the plan without even taking a vote, typical of the institution, led by Sheldon Silver, who stepped down

from the assembly speakership in disgrace in 2015, following his arrest and subsequent conviction on charges of corruption. Silver claimed that the assembly would have defeated the proposal had it been brought to the floor for a vote. But by not taking a vote, the assembly deprived New Yorkers of the opportunity to know where their elected leaders stood on the issue and why—and had no way to hold them accountable for the decision.

The news seemed almost unreal, the cowardice particularly galling because the legislature had forced us through so many procedural hurdles and dozens of public meetings, hearings, and media battles, only to do nothing. "What we are witnessing today is one of the biggest cop-outs in New York's history," Mayor Bloomberg spokesman John Gallagher said as the plan foundered.

We had lost this particular battle but had changed the conversation about how New Yorkers get around and who pays for it. The congestion pricing debate has made New Yorkers more receptive to projects like rapid bus systems. And congestion pricing remains on the table. The latest iteration of the tolling proposal is called Move NY, promoted by former transportation first deputy commissioner Sam Schwartz. The new plan, being discussed today at editorial boards, community boards, and political meetings, takes a five-borough view by lowering tolls at crossings where drivers lack good transit alternatives while instituting tolls at others so that motorists pay more or less the same toll wherever they cross—and whenever they enter Manhattan below Sixtieth Street. It may not be this plan, but I remain convinced that it's not a matter of *if* some kind of tolling plan will be introduced in New York; it's a matter of *when*.



## 4

### How to Read the Street

A century-old, fundamental traffic principle, ignored by a century of transportation planners, is that you get what you build for. Building more lanes only creates more traffic. Although decades of evidence confirm this principle, state transportation departments are still staffed with people whose primary mission is to build and maintain more roads. As long as planners widen roads and build new ones; as long as drivers have poor transportation options and remain insulated from the full cost of their trips; and as long as government policies encourage people to live in far-flung suburbs, we will have an even more sprawling urban future.

"This looks like Carvana!"

It was May 2014, and an exuberant Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti stood with state transportation officials on a balcony overlooking the Sepulveda Pass and a four-and-a-half-year project to build a ten-mile carpool lane on the northbound 405 freeway. Following an extended