

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

New York as a Biking City? It Could Happen. And It Should.

A new report proposes 425 miles of interconnected bike lanes across the five boroughs. Another sees new car-free bridges into Manhattan from Queens, Brooklyn and New Jersey.



By Michael Kimmelman

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If not change, then glimmers of it. Maybe.

Before the pandemic, New York City bus advocates had to plead with City Hall for more dedicated busways. Now City Hall is trumpeting a plan for five new ones. It used to take months, and cost a king's ransom, for restaurants to get a sidewalk cafe permit. The other weekend, to help the struggling industry, the city waived the whole process for thousands of businesses.

And it has opened miles of streets to pedestrians and cyclists — albeit only temporarily, with erratic enforcement. I'm looking out my window right now at an avenue that was supposed to be closed to cars. The sawhorses are pushed aside. It's traffic as usual.

Still.

Covid-19, the street protests that followed the killing of George Floyd, the need to provide safely-spaced New Yorkers more outdoor breathing room and alternate ways to move around town, all combined to provoke what has the makings of a bureaucratic reboot — or at least, for the moment, combined to force a few hands at City Hall.

The challenges are staggering. Plunging tax revenues, widespread unemployment, unpaid rents, municipal service cutbacks. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is staring at a multibillion-dollar budget shortfall and a subway system that millions of New Yorkers have now become reluctant to use.

Getting through this whole crisis depends on city leaders' capacity to think ahead, not hunker down. Robert Moses, New York's storied planning czar, plotted during the depths of the Depression so he could be ready when the money materialized. Whatever else one might say about Moses, he knew how to get stuff done.

By contrast, New York today has become good at shooting down new ideas, celebrating defeat over compromise, pointing out why any big, costly initiative is not worth pursuing because something else also needs doing, as if a great city shouldn't find ways to do more than one thing at a time.

Well, now is the time.

The Regional Plan Association, a not-for-profit pillar of the planning establishment, recently released a report that points a way forward. It lays out a master plan for 425 miles of interconnected, high capacity, protected bike lanes in the five boroughs. Last summer, the city issued its own proposal, called Green Wave, in response to an alarming spike in the number of bicyclists killed. The Green Wave promised to add 30 miles of protected lanes a year, up from 20 miles.

Alas, the plan has already fallen behind schedule. Only 480 of the city's 1,250 miles of bike lanes are presently protected. Studies show an average of 11.5 disruptions per mile, meaning that some car or truck is invading and endangering a bike lane every other block. The combination of our car-friendly mayor and obstructionist community boards packed with not-in-my-backyard, or NIMBY, opponents of bike lanes has been deadly for the development of the city's cycling network and for cyclists.

The R.P.A. report takes the community boards rightly to task. It provides a road map for mayoral candidates in 2021 willing to stand up to NIMBYs — describing how “a mix of scenic greenways, wide boulevards, car-choked commercial streets and quieter back roads” can be converted into a “citywide, continuous, connected, conflict-free” network of priority lanes. Cycling is “critical infrastructure,” the report emphasizes, a point made all the more obvious now that New Yorkers have become wary of subways and buses.

Biking was of course already becoming a ride of choice for an increasing number of residents before this year — more than 1.6 million New Yorkers rode bikes in 2019, according to the city’s own count. Since the coronavirus, bike sales have spiked, not just here. They have nearly doubled nationwide. Car owners now talk up the benefits of isolating in private automobiles; but most New Yorkers don’t own, or can’t afford, cars — never mind that the city needs fewer not more automobiles.



Pedestrians and cyclists share the Brooklyn Bridge during a warm day in January of this year. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

If the mayor wants to get New York rolling again he could imitate cities that subsidize bike purchases by underserved residents and promote electric-assist cycling. The R.P.A. report states the obvious: Cycling is not just about health and clean air. It’s also a reliable mode of transport when a pandemic or hurricane disrupts normal routines.

Getting around town for millions of New Yorkers includes crossing rivers, the subject of another new report that is the brainchild of a group of transportation engineers led by Sam Schwartz, a former city traffic commissioner. The group suggests constructing several slender new car-free bridges into Manhattan from Queens, Brooklyn and New Jersey, starting with what they call the Queens Ribbon.

I asked Mr. Schwartz to describe the concept. He offered some historical context. During the past century, he pointed out, New York has ceded nearly a quarter of its public land to private cars, demolishing neighborhoods, widening avenues, narrowing sidewalks.

Overall, this has made the city less mobile.

The Brooklyn Bridge, for example, was originally built for trains, bicycles and pedestrians. More than 400,000 people a day on average once crossed it. Then it was “modernized” for cars. Now it handles less than half that number of people. As recently as the 1950s, overnight street parking was still illegal in New York. Some 11,000 miles of New York City streets are now given over to parked cars, 10 times the space devoted to bike lanes.

The point?

That the cityscape has changed before. And it can change again.



The plan proposed by a group of transportation engineers led by Sam Schwartz includes constructing several car-free bridges into Manhattan from Queens, Brooklyn and New Jersey. Christina Roman/Sam Schwartz Engineering

The Queens Ribbon is conceived along those lines — an attempt to rebalance, if ever so slightly, the scales of mobility for the 21st century. According to Mr. Schwartz and his colleagues, it would accommodate some 20,000 cyclists and pedestrians a day, linking Long Island City in Queens with Roosevelt Island and Midtown Manhattan — an emerging desire line, what with development in Long Island City, the Cornell Tech campus opening on Roosevelt Island and bike traffic across the East River more than doubling in recent years.

Rendered in concept drawings by T.Y. Lin International, an engineering firm, the bridge's design summons to mind similar car-free bridges in London and Singapore. It is pencil-thin, just 20 feet wide, a concrete platform strung from suspension cables, supported by three delta-shaped piers.

Estimated cost: \$100 million.



The Queens Ribbon design summons to mind similar car-free bridges in London and Singapore. T.Y. Lin International

Cycling advocates have greeted the proposal with some reserve, noting that bikers and pedestrians can't afford to wait to improve the river crossings — that it would cost less and take far less time simply to free up room on existing bridges now.

They're right. Mr. Schwartz agrees. As a young new city transportation commissioner during the 1970s, he pressed to install bike lanes on what were then crumbling and abandoned bridges, which made zero accommodation for cyclists. New York back then was broke and in shambles. He was told by superiors in City Hall that hard choices had to be made. Cars were the

priority. He fought anyway, and installed several pioneering lanes on the Queensboro and other bridges.

Now, he said, “We could steal a lane from cars for bikes on the Brooklyn Bridge and maybe squeeze another lane on the Queensboro Bridge and more room on the Verrazano and the George Washington. We should do it.” The main obstacle is political courage, Mr. Schwartz added, not engineering.

Even so, the city will still need new bridges for cyclists and pedestrians in the coming decades, he said. And now’s the time to start planning them. The George Washington Bridge was proposed in 1906, planned during the Spanish flu and constructed during the Depression. Bold ideas take years to realize, Mr. Schwartz emphasized. He knows from personal experience. He spent nearly the last half-century pushing for a surcharge on cars coming into Manhattan before congestion pricing, as the policy is called, finally became law.

As to whether \$100 million for a new bridge sounds tone deaf in the midst of a fiscal crisis, New Yorkers, he pointed out, recently forked over nearly \$1 billion to retrofit the Kosciuszko Bridge between Brooklyn and Queens with more car lanes. Paying what the engineers project to be \$30-odd million over three years to construct the Queens Ribbon out of a \$20 billion 10-year capital budget for city and state transportation would constitute, as Mr. Schwartz puts it, “the equivalent of an accounting error.” The bridge could be financed through value capture or public-private investment, he said.

After the Queens Ribbon report was released, the city’s transportation commissioner, Polly Trottenberg, promised to look into it. She has always been open to new ideas. The mayor, not so much.

But perhaps this is a turning point.

“Today we have big challenges but no big plans,” Mr. Schwartz told me. “We spend 10 years arguing every idea before anything happens. So let the arguing begin.”