

NY City Street Design Manual

May 20, 2009

*In the Future, the City's Streets Are to Behave *

*By DAVID W. CHEN, New York Times

Imagine narrow European-style roadways shared by pedestrians, cyclists and cars, all traveling at low speeds. Sidewalks made of recycled rubber in different colors under sleek energy-efficient lamps. Mini-islands jutting into the street, topped by trees and landscaping, designed to further slow traffic and add a dash of green.

This is what New York City streets could look like, according to the Bloomberg administration http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/broadway_0223409.pdf, which has issued the city's first street design manual in an effort to make over the utilitarian 1970s-style streetscape that dominates the city.

The Department of Transportation will begin reviewing development plans to see whether they align with the 232-page manual's guidelines, and promises that projects with these features will win approval quickly.

"Lots of things have changed in 40 years, but this part of our infrastructure hasn't," said Janette Sadik-Khan, the city's transportation commissioner. "If we're going to be a world-class city, we need guidelines that lay out the operating instructions of how we get there."

The manual, to be released on Wednesday, culminates nearly two years of work involving more than a dozen agencies led by the Department of Transportation. By offering "a single framework and playbook," as Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg says in the introduction, the manual promises to simplify the design process and reduce the costs for city agencies, urban planners, developers and community groups.

Urban planners say that the document is long overdue, and that it promises to be as much a map to the future as it is a handbook for the present: getting people to think about streets as not just thoroughfares for cars, but as public spaces incorporating safety, aesthetics, environmental and community concerns.

Robert Moses Mr. Bloomberg is not. "Moses had a sort of utopian view of orderly, suburban places that de-emphasized New York's 'cityness,' while Bloomberg embraces the soul of the city itself and recognizes it as a solution to the region's environmental, sustainability, and energy problems," said Robert Puentes, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Some drivers, though, are reserving judgment. Taxi drivers, for one, say that while they appreciate the city's efforts to beautify the streets, they hope that they do not lead, even indirectly, to fewer parking spots or traffic that is too slow.

"The streets are a place where many motorists need access to, in order to earn a livelihood, so what would be of some concern is if there was less space for vehicles, or drivers had to slow down to complete their fares," said Bhairavi Desai, executive director of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance.

The manual does not supersede any laws or regulations and it does not portend rapid changes visible overnight to residents or visitors; rather, the effect should be gradual, and in keeping with the character of a neighborhood, the manual says.

Still, the manual stands out as an unequivocal mission statement, echoing guides issued in recent years by cities like Chicago, San Francisco, Washington and Portland, Ore. It also complements a broad push by the Bloomberg administration to make the city more amenable to pedestrians and bicyclists — with next week's closing of parts of Broadway being one prominent, if controversial, example.

For the most part, though, the manual spells out in technical detail a wealth of choices as to what the city likes — and doesn't like — when it comes to roadways, sidewalks, trees, lighting and benches.

A good portion of the manual analyzes the different materials deemed attractive, practical and cost-effective. These include flexible rubber sidewalk pavers, which can be shaped to avoid trees or other objects. **They also include several kinds of LED street lights.**

One example illustrating the difference the guide could make is a stretch of Carlton Avenue near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Years ago, it was just an uninviting ribbon of pavement, stretching into the horizon; now, it looks like an integral part of the Fort Greene and Clinton Hill neighborhoods, with a large white median dotted by trees.

The manual also sheds light on how cumbersome the design process for development or renovation has been, given the number of agencies or entities normally involved. On a typical street, according to one illustration, almost a dozen entities — including six city agencies — are responsible for elements ranging from sidewalk cafes (Department of Consumer Affairs) to utility poles (Department of Transportation) to facades or awnings (Department of Buildings).

"In tough times, it's vital to pioneer new cost-efficient practices, especially when dealing with the expensive need to maintain the city's infrastructure," said Deputy Mayor Edward Skyler.

At times, the manual has the veneer of a vicarious travel guide, because many of the photographs depict scenes from places outside New York: a roundabout in Asheville, N.C.; a neighborhood traffic circle in West Palm Beach, Fla.; a dedicated bus lane in Paris; a raised intersection in Cologne, Germany; and a shared street in Brighton, England.

City Councilman John C. Liu, chairman of the Council's Transportation Committee, said the important thing was to simplify the overall process of development as it relates to the streets.

"I think it's positive, because the city has always been notorious for imposing all sorts of requirements and new standards which often take people by surprise," said Mr. Liu, who has sometimes clashed with the Department of Transportation. "This will have the effect of encouraging people toward this kind of standard without making people jump through hoops."