

Forget the revival of West Side Story. Broadway's biggest drama of the season will be right under your feet. And T.A. is working to bring the transformation to a stage near you.

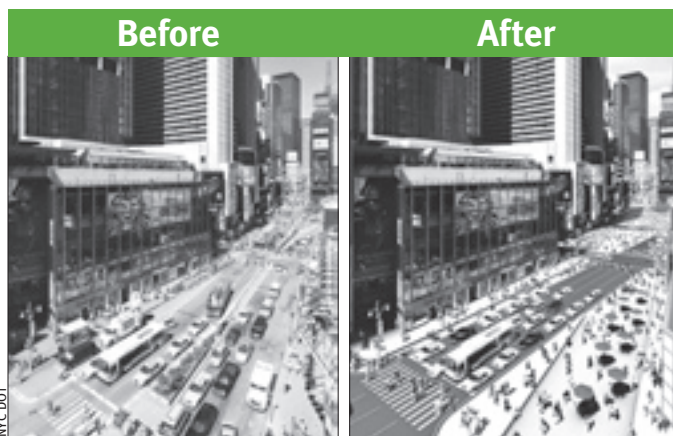
# Broadway in Bloom



WILEY NORVEL

**I**N FEBRUARY, MAYOR BLOOMBERG AND DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan announced Greenlight for Midtown, the transformation of Broadway between Columbus Circle and Madison Square. While the pitch focused heavily on the traffic benefits (Broadway is the skewed monkey wrench in Manhattan's elegant grid), the plan's most concrete and visible achievement would be more than three acres of new pedestrian space in Midtown, including a car-free Broadway at two of the city's premier iconic crossroads: Times Square and Herald Square.

Beginning in April, the DOT will narrow Broadway's vehicle lanes, replacing them with expanded pedestrian space and a new protected bike lane modeled on last year's well-received Broadway Boulevard project. And following Memorial Day, shovels will hit the ground to carve out some of the largest and most dynamic swaths of pedestrian space New York City has ever seen. The entirety of Broadway will be closed to cars where it crosses 7th and 6th Avenues, easing traffic congestion and giving much-needed room to breathe for the area's crush-loads of pedestrians.

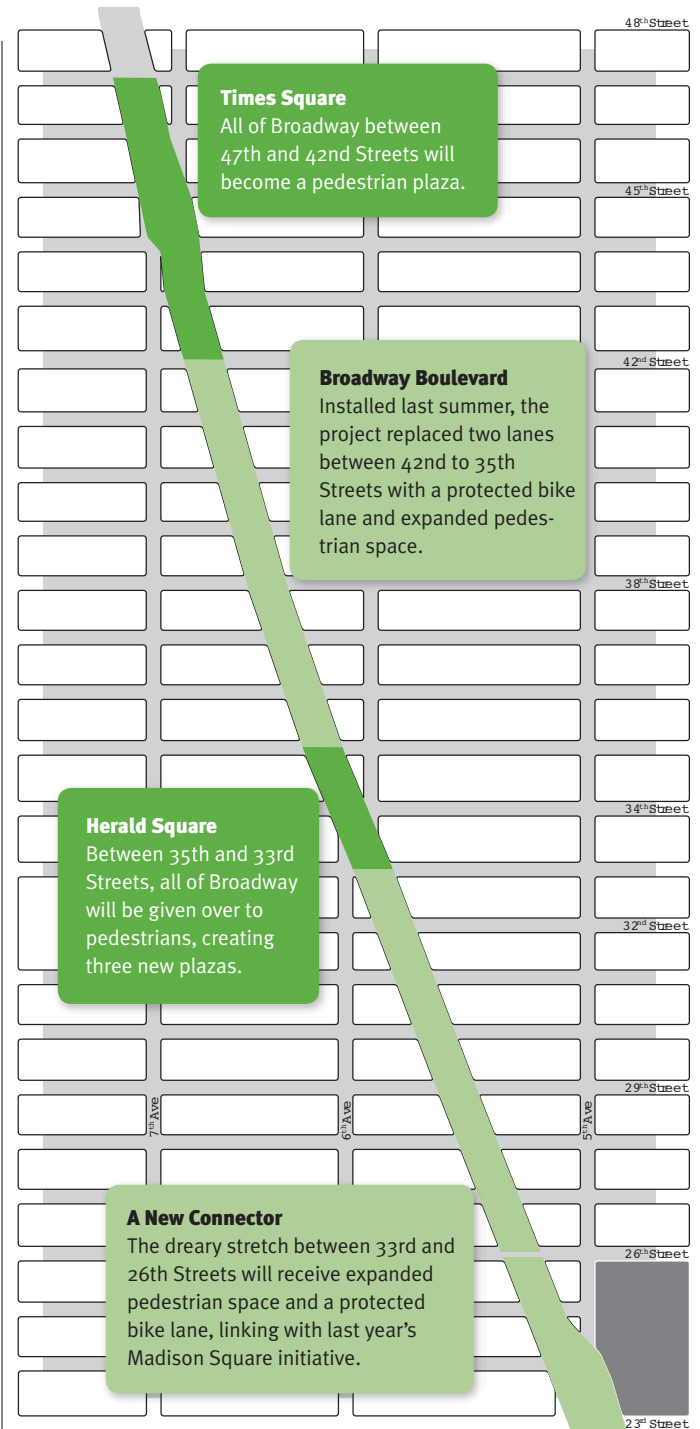


## Nobody goes there anymore; it's too crowded

Times Square is home to that only-in-New York phenomenon: pedlock. Its sidewalks are so crowded that thousands simply walk in the street, often at their own peril. And even though there are at least five times more pedestrians than vehicles, the intersection's 356,000 pedestrians are given only 11% of the overall space. The rest is all-car, all the time. Eight blocks south, Herald Square fares little better.

That the public realm has been so neglected for so long in these otherwise iconic spaces and in smaller ones across the city is difficult to explain. After all, New York's great parks are the envy of the world. But when the grass ends and the concrete begins, there is still something missing. The public plazas of lower Manhattan lack dimension, especially when the lunchtime crowds disperse. And those scattered around the five boroughs, usually adjacent to public buildings, have an insufficient critical mass of users to be their own destinations. The DOT's plans for Times Square and Herald Square, and their plaza program for all five boroughs, are a total departure from this earlier generation of ho-hum public spaces. They are putting plazas where pedestrians already are and have cause to be: in the street.

New Yorkers are not easy to convince, and it's only based on a year of success that the City has created the political breathing room for something as ambitious as the current Broadway Boulevard, which was announced amid general skepticism. Reporters looked to the city's



armchair traffic engineers—taxi drivers—who delivered a resounding thumbs down. Predictions of traffic chaos ensued. And then, to the surprise of critics, the City got it right. Traffic continued to move. Office workers and tourists packed the tables and benches, basking in a hitherto unglamorous swath of Broadway.

It was the same story all over the city throughout 2008. Gansevoort Plaza with its landmarked cobblestones got the royal treatment last April, with new stone bollards to demarcate swaths of pedestrian space. At the Bronx "Hub" where thousands of subway and bus commuters converge each day, a new plaza was installed on

## In Focus

a newly car-free block of Willis Avenue. And by midsummer, the biggest reclamation yet took shape at Madison Square, where the intersection of Broadway and Fifth Avenue was simplified and narrowed, making way for new curbside bike lanes and expansive plazas complete with seating, umbrellas and greenery. Across the city, the DOT is making good on its commitment to build or renovate a plaza in every community board district.

### Never has so much been reclaimed for so many, with so little

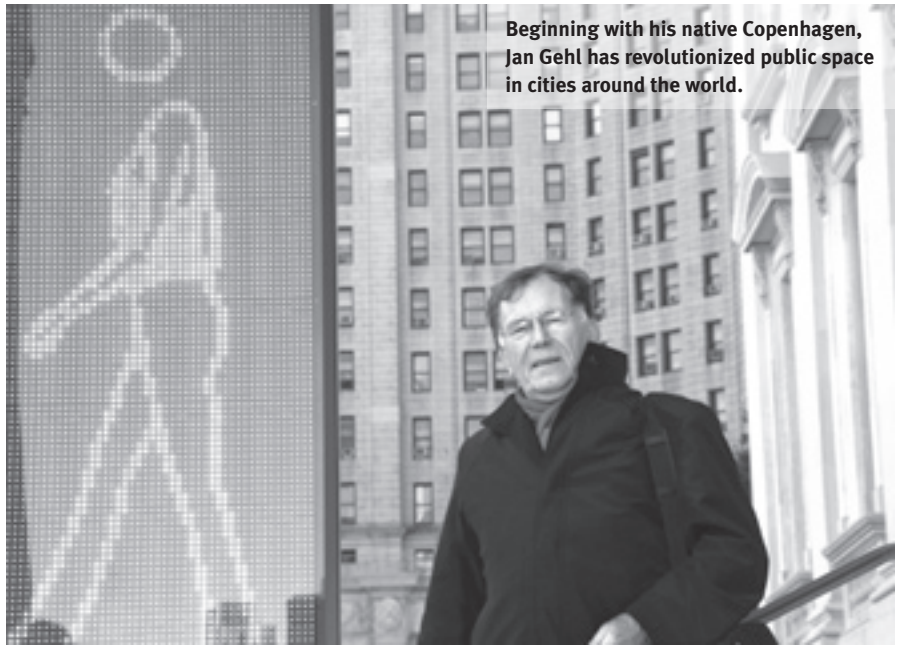
These major street changes are being executed in weeks, not years. And the budgets are small: seven blocks of Broadway Boulevard cost a mere \$1.5 million to design and install. The DOT is using stone blocks, planters and paint to demarcate new pedestrian space. The old practice of digging up the street has been bypassed, removing the need for costly drainage and utility changes. Quick installation means less disruption to traffic and businesses from construction, and means the City can take on plazas in quick succession.

For Mayor Bloomberg, plazas are becoming something of a legacy issue. It's precisely the sort of tangible, feel-good, photo-friendly reform that makes for a striking political highlight reel. And more than anything else, the quick, dramatic redistribution of space from cars to people is proving that streets can change in our lifetime without the sky falling. Bloomberg isn't the first world-class mayor to bask in the prestige of well-conceived public space. Ken Livingstone, Lord Mayor of London from 2000 to 2008, played much the same role on the other side of the Atlantic. Like Bloomberg, Livingstone pushed (successfully) for congestion pricing, and has left his mark on some of his city's most iconic landmarks. Under Livingstone, Trafalgar Square, once the great traffic circle of Central London, became a great pedestrian oasis. And both mayors have leaned heavily on the infallible urban expertise of one man...

### Gehl Force Winds

Like London, New York's new love affair with the public plaza can be traced to Denmark's celebrated urban designer, Jan Gehl. Charming and effusive, his love of cities is contagious. Gehl convinced Londoners to reclaim Trafalgar Square, enabled Melbourne to rebound from 50 years of bad transportation planning and over the course of a generation helped transform much of central Copenhagen into the world's pre-eminent pedestrianized core. His philosophy of how streets should function is summed up in the unforgettable maxim, "Sidewalks should be for kissing."

In November 2005, T.A. brought Gehl to New York City for a whirlwind tour of lectures, engagements with business leaders and a handful of meetings with the Department of City Planning and the Department of Transportation. He took the city by storm, wowing New Yorkers of all stripes with the transformations he had wrought overseas—stories that hadn't yet been told in New York. He left NYC an overnight celebrity, and T.A. pressed hard for the City to engage Gehl Architects to work here.



Beginning with his native Copenhagen, Jan Gehl has revolutionized public space in cities around the world.

By 2007, the city was a different place. Gone was the DOT Commissioner who had proved so resistant to Gehl's premise of bike and pedestrian-focused streets and public spaces. Putting the city on a new course were Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC, the newly hired DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan and a corps of advocates-turned-officials put the City on a new course. In October 2007, Gehl returned to New York for the launch of the Upper West Side Streets Renaissance Campaign amid rumors that he would soon be commissioned by the City to develop new blueprints for refreshingly new street designs. When he spoke at a Renaissance Campaign event, car-free Broadway was among the most talked-about topics.

T.A. researchers and volunteers helped Gehl's team collect data on pedestrian volumes and traffic patterns on several major corridors, of which Broadway was the star attraction. The data worked its way into World Class Streets, the new Gehl-inspired DOT playbook. And from here on out, those blueprints will continue to influence the way New York City streets are redesigned.

### Beyond Broadway

T.A. will be working to export the lessons from Broadway's next act across the city, and around the country. The traffic counts, crash records and surveys conducted by the DOT will become a body of data from which Business Improvement Districts, community boards and advocates can make the case for change on their own streets. And emboldened by its success, the City is poised to be a willing partner.

The Broadway redesign is the City's biggest livable streets undertaking yet. It's hard to imagine a higher-impact project. And just as the improved safety resulting from last year's crop of plazas laid the groundwork for this year's big splash, Times Square and Herald Square will at last put to rest the fear that returning streets to people means traffic grinding to a halt. This success story will be seen and experienced not only by millions of New Yorkers, but by tens of millions of visitors who will in turn export NYC's visionary streets in photographs, home videos and by word of mouth. And when they return to their own neighborhoods and look down, they will see the potential for more than just asphalt. □