

Quicken the "Green Street" Revolution



KEN COUGHLIN

Buses, bikes, pedestrians and cars in harmony on one street? It's possible. Page 10

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Transportation ALTERNATIVES

MISSION STATEMENT: Our mission is to reclaim New York City's streets from the automobile, and to advocate for bicycling, walking and public transit as the best transportation alternatives.

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COVER PHOTO: Will Sherman (front), Publicis (back)

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Private automobiles constitute the primary cause of traffic congestion and permanent relief cannot be expected until steps are taken to discourage their use... The proportionate part of roadway space required to transport a person by private automobile is seven or eight times greater than is required to transport him by street car. Offsetting any inconvenience which such [car] restrictions might impose on a comparative few is the great gain which would unquestionably accrue to the general public...

-Rail Experts Want Private Cars Barred in Midtown: Wider Streets of No Avail, Committee Says, The New York Times, April 20, 1926.

BEFORE TRANSPORTATION Alternatives, before Barry Benepe and even before the late Jane Jacobs, there were those who fought hard and smart against the onslaught of the automobile.

Just within the span of three years in the Roaring Twenties there were several campaigns to beat back the rising tide of cars. In 1926 the Manhattan Surface Line Operators Traffic Committee, a union of trolley drivers (quoted above), sought to ban cars from midtown. In 1927 the Eighth Avenue Association fought like hell to stop the narrowing of their sidewalk from 20 to 10 feet, presciently declaring, "A limitation of sidewalk space would deprive the pedestrian of room without helping the vehicular traffic problem." And in 1928 the Park Avenue Association advocated against the widening of their street because "any invitation for more motor vehicle traffic will dangerously impair the many attractive features of Park Avenue as a residential district".

Imagine for a moment an alternative history wherein these fighters were history's winners. Imagine a parallel universe where sidewalks were not narrowed, stoops remained unshored, and trolleys were not deposed as the kings of the streets. What if? What if the streets of New York were not taken over by cars, but instead reserved for pedestrians, bicycles, buses and trolleys? What kind of city and world would we now live in?

Our great city—and due to New York City's preeminence, our world—would be greener, cleaner and more playful; our daily lives would have much less stress and noise. We would be happier. Street play, street life and conversation would be much more plentiful. Downtowns might never have died. Fewer

New Yorkers would suffer from asthma and obesity. Traffic and oil would play much less of a role in our personal and political lives. Congestion pricing and the carbon tax would already be in effect.

This green street ideal is not lost. In fact, green streets are now being reclaimed from the car faster than ever, and T.A. is leading the way. In just the past few months, thanks in large part to the new leadership at the DOT, thousands of square feet of street space formerly reserved for cars has been transformed into bike lanes, pedestrian plazas and, in a few select areas, bike parking. Relative to the past several decades, during which NYC streets have changed very little, change is now happening at a rapid pace.

Look no further than the pages of this magazine for exciting new ways that City streets are rapidly being reshaped and reclaimed (my favorites are on pages 4 and 9). But as exciting as these projects are, change is not happening fast enough. Unless things speed up, the green street revolution will come too late for our sanity, our health and our environment.

There is much you can do to accelerate the process. Start by doubling your annual contribution to Transportation Alternatives. T.A. is one of the leanest and most effective organizations around but, frankly, we need more money if we are going to put intense enough pressure on our leaders to approve congestion pricing, usher in necessary parking reforms, and accelerate pro-bike and pedestrian street makeovers.

In the 1900s, when the sidewalks were narrowed and given over to the car in myriad other ways, few recognized the dreadful trade-offs that were being made. Now, with a Mayor who over the next two years is looking to paint the city green, we have an opportunity to lock in this new direction, quicken the transformation and set the bar even higher for future mayors. But the greening of NYC streets will only happen in our lifetimes if you act now to speed the revolution. Act now! Go to greenthestreets.org to get involved.

Sincerely,

Paul Steely White
Executive Director
Transportation Alternatives