



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution

By Janette Sadik-Khan and Seth Solomonow

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Nov. 16, 2022 to discuss *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution* by Janette Sadik-Khan, New York City's transportation commissioner from 2007 to 2013, and Seth Solomonow, who served on her staff. During their time in office, big changes were made in how New Yorkers used streets, including the building of 400 miles of bike lanes, launching of bike sharing and bus rapid transit lines, expansion of pedestrian infrastructure, creation of 50 plazas and, most prominently, the closing of Broadway and expansion of Times Square's pedestrian areas.

The book explains why Sadik-Khan companioned these changes, what the impact was on the city, how residents and businesses responded, and how she and others in Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration dealt with the opposition the changes caused.

Five Big Ideas

Our goal at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group was to highlight ideas from *Streetfight* that we thought could make Urban Atlanta better. We identified five "big ideas."

1. Adopting the approach Sadik-Khan writes about, **Urban Atlanta should use existing streets and other rights of way in new ways.** Among these new uses are expanding sidewalks, creating bike lanes, installing bus-only lanes, building small plazas, and encouraging sidewalk dining.



2. We should **reorient our transportation departments toward all forms of mobility and not just motor vehicles**. That means treating buses and others forms of transit, pedestrians and cycling as equally important to cities as autos and trucks.
 - In the city of Atlanta, the key agency is the city’s transportation department. In other places, it might include the county transportation department and the Georgia Department of Transportation.
 - In cities that do not have their own transportation departments, we will need groups inside and outside local government to advocate for new uses of our streets.
3. **We should make experiments part of our transportation planning process**. Following Sadik-Khan’s approach in New York, study streets as they are used today, then use paint and plastic stanchions to configure them in new ways (say, creating bike lanes or reconfiguring parking places for sidewalk dining). Study the results and learn from these experiments.
4. **We should go big on bike infrastructure**. Bicycle commuting and other cycling uses are growing in Urban Atlanta. Now is the time to expand our bike infrastructure and become one of the nation’s leaders. Sadik-Khan’s book has suggestions for doing this.
5. **We should find or create an organization that can keep Urban Atlanta focused on other uses of streets**. This was what Sadik-Khan did as New York’s transportation commissioner. It is unlikely Urban Atlanta will have such a knowledgeable and forceful advocate in an influential position. We will have to depend on an organization, then, to study transportation alternatives, explain why we need to experiment with new uses of our streets and roads, and speak to transportation professionals, political leaders, news media and citizens.

Why Do These Things?

Using Sadik-Khan’s experiences in New York plus their own knowledge, our members explained why Urban Atlanta would benefit from sharing streets and roads with other forms of mobility:

- It would make our communities safer and more livable.
- It would generate new revenues for businesses and tax revenues for local governments.
- It would allow parts of Urban Atlanta to “be the place you want to go on vacation,” with wide sidewalks, sidewalk dining, slower traffic, and safe ways for children and adult cyclists and pedestrians to explore neighborhoods.
- It would open the door to greater density. As Sadik-Khan writes, “Density is destiny.” Density lowers greenhouse emissions, makes transit more efficient, lowers the per capita cost of urban infrastructure, and makes cities more affordable by reducing the need for expensive cars.
- Experimenting with new ways of using streets will build on itself. A good example is the Beltline. Until they saw it, Atlantans had no idea how a car-free urban trail worked. Now, there’s almost too much demand for the Beltline. Shared streets—where pedestrians, cyclists, transit and cars all have a place—would generate demand in a similar way.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the best changes generate opposition. And certainly Sadik-Khan faced great skepticism in changing street uses in New York. So our members discussed what obstacles or barriers the five big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- We don’t have the right people in critical leadership positions.
- We think we’re already doing some of these things. For instance, we *have* a city DOT. (Problem is, it isn’t committed to sharing streets with all forms of mobility.)
- As in New York, opponents will accuse those who want to share streets with declaring a “war on cars.”
- Some advocates of opening up streets for other uses are unyielding to the point of being obstacles themselves.
- We don’t have a strong and constant voice for sharing the streets.
- We don’t have the resources to try experiments with street-sharing. And we certainly don’t have the resources for creating miles of bike lanes.

- Many interests must say “yes” for change to work, and a determined handful can stop change. So build alliances is key. Among the interests that must be persuaded of the benefits of shared streets: state DOT, city transportation and planning professionals, mayors and city councils, businesses, community improvement districts, neighborhood associations and citizens.
- Inertia is strong, and so is cynicism. “It goes nowhere” has been a both a critique of transit in Atlanta and, ironically, an excuse for not expanding it.

Ways Around the Obstacles

Streetfight is a valuable book not only for its ideas but for learning Sadik-Khan’s strategies for dealing with opposition. Here are some ideas our members offered, in addition to the ones in the book:

- Do not give opponents a chance to characterize shared streets as “a war on cars.” No one wants cars eliminated. We want *choice* in mobility and the use of streets.
- Build alliances and, as part of this, reach out to affordable housing interests. Greater choice—especially if it includes expanding public transit—makes cities more affordable.
- When we experiment with shared streets, be accountable. If the data show that reconfiguring streets did not result in measurable benefits, then return the old street. This is how you build credibility.
- Get much better at describing the value of shared streets and mobility choices. And as we try new things that deliver benefits, document the results.
- Find new resources for underwriting the relatively inexpensive costs of shared-street experiments (as Sadik-Khan writes, much can be done with paint and plastic stanchions). Two possibilities for funding experiments: the philanthropic community and community improvement districts.

A Synopsis of *Streetfight*

Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution is 294 pages, not including notes, acknowledgements and index. It has 14 chapters plus a preface, an introduction and numerous before-and-after photographs.

Sadik-Khan was New York City’s transportation commissioner from 2007 to 2013; Solomonow served on her staff. During their time in office, big changes were made in the way New Yorkers used their streets, including the building of 400 miles of bike lanes, launching of bike sharing and bus rapid transit lines, expansion of pedestrian infrastructure, creation of 60 plazas and, most prominently, the closing of Broadway and creation of a huge pedestrian area in Times Square.

The book explains why Sadik-Khan championed these changes, what the impact was on the city, how residents and businesses responded, and how she and others in Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration dealt with the backlash some of these changes caused.

The changes—and the backlash—had a common origin: Sadia-Khan’s belief (shared by others in the Bloomberg administration) that city streets should be used for things other than just cars and trucks. As she explains, streets and roads make up 25 percent of New York’s landmass, which takes in some of the world’s most expensive real estate. This was, she believed, too large a commitment of public resources to a single mode of transportation.

In practice, though, this usually meant marginal changes: taking a car lane in some streets to create bike lanes and safer crosswalks, or a second lane from major roads for buses. In a few instances the changes were bolder, as when the city shut down parts of Broadway for pedestrian plazas.

The backlash, though, was anything but modest. Critics warned that lost car lanes would cause gridlock, retail would be devastated, and property values would plummet. And, they said, the only ones who would benefit would be a tiny elite who rode bicycles. (This wasn’t true. Bicycle ridership in the city rose 400 percent after the bike lanes were built and bike sharing began, Sadik-Khan reports. Bike sharing

went from zero to 10 million rides in its first year. And along the changed streets, bicycle and pedestrian injuries plummeted and retail sales rose.)

The book, then, has two stories to tell: The changes that Sadik-Khan and others brought to New York's streets, and how she dealt with opposition and outright disinformation.

So, how did she deal with the backlash? With a mantra and two methods. The mantra: "Sustainable streets" (that is, those used by many forms of transportation) bring safety, mobility and economic improvements. The methods: extensive outreach to neighborhoods and merchants before the streets were changed, and documentation of the results after.

The mantra and the methods were related. Sadik-Khan's department studied the safety, mobility and economic conditions of streets before changes were made. Afterwards, they documented the results, again using safety, mobility and economic improvement as standards. Over time, this process—using data to show what existed before and how things were made better—made the case for change.

Two other parts of Sadik-Khan's approach are worth noting: experimentation and fast implementation. That is, she was willing to try something "and see if it sticks." The building of neighborhood plazas out of portions of streets was one of those experiments. She was willing to try these things because they could be done quickly and cheaply, often using paint, reflectors, plastic stanchions and concrete lane dividers. As a result, plazas went up quickly, usually within days. And if they didn't work, they could be taken down quickly.

Not many of Sadik-Khan's experiments came down. By the time she left office, New Yorkers had become fans of the pedestrian plazas, bike lanes, bike sharing, bus improvements, and street closings, as public opinion polls showed. Importantly, so did the next mayoral administration, which changed almost none of the things Sadik-Khan started.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define "urbanism" broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.