

STREET WARS

Parisians Are Choosing Bikes Over Cars. Will New Yorkers Do That, Too?

The transformation of cycling access in Paris over the past few years may have lessons for New York and its car-clogged streets.



By Dodai Stewart

Aug. 26, 2024, 3:00 a.m. ET

This is Street Wars, a weekly series on the battle for space on New York's streets and sidewalks.

This is going to make some New Yorkers mad, but we need to look at what Paris is doing with its streets.

I was sent to Paris last month as part of the team covering the Olympic Games, and I kept noticing different ways — some huge, some small — that the streets in Paris were superior to those in my beloved New York. It wasn't just the magnificent Beaux-Arts architecture.

For starters, Paris has quite a few mid-block crosswalks. As a pedestrian, it feels safer: Drivers can actually see you. New York's corner-oriented intersections are dangerous. City data shows that crashes at intersections typically lead to 50 percent of all traffic fatalities and 70 percent of all injuries in a year.

Last year, Mayor Eric Adams announced a plan to improve visibility at intersections — a practice called “daylighting,” which the city says has been completed at hundreds of intersections so far. New York is also installing raised crosswalks, in hopes of making pedestrians more conspicuous and prompting drivers passing over the incline to slow down.

Change can't come soon enough, seeing as how 127 people, including 61 pedestrians, were killed by drivers during the first six months of this year.

New York could also benefit from the yellow-painted delivery zone areas Paris has on residential blocks. These ensure cars don't get parked on certain stretches of curb, leaving room outside the flow of traffic for trucks to be unloaded or taxi drivers to drop off passengers.

But the biggest lesson for New York may lie in how Paris is dealing with bikes.

Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, has been on a yearslong campaign to transform the once smog-choked city into the world's leading environmentally sustainable metropolis. This includes charging triple to park large S.U.V.s, closing more than 100 streets to cars, getting rid of about 50,000 parking spots and planning to add more than 800 miles of bike lanes.

In 2020, with Paris in the grips of the coronavirus pandemic, Hidalgo and her team set up lots of temporary cycling routes. Most have become permanent. And there's more to come: A cycling plan, to be completed by 2026, involves creating another 100 miles of new bike lanes.

A couple of years ago, the explosion of bicycles in Paris was described as “anarchy” — which sounds familiar to people in New York, where residents have referred to the growing number of e-bike riders zigzagging in and out of traffic, often at high speeds, as a “nightmare.”

Things have changed. Parisians are getting used to the fact that biking is one of the best ways to get around — and studies show that bike use now exceeds car use there.

Currently, 11.2 percent of trips in Paris are made by bike, compared with 5 percent in early 2020, David Belliard, the deputy mayor of Paris, told me in a text message. Just 4.3 percent of trips are made by car.

And some major streets, like the Rue de Rivoli, now have more lanes devoted to bikes than cars. “It is safe for cyclists,” Belliard said, “but it is also a new way of designing a street where the car is no longer king.”



The Rue de Rivoli, a major street in central Paris, now has more lanes allotted to bikes than to cars. Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

This made a huge difference during the Olympic Games, when the city had to accommodate thousands of additional people.

While the Metro runs frequently and services a lot of the city, “it is quite old,” Belliard said, and not all of it is air-conditioned.

Parisian officials quite purposely pointed to the city’s bike share program, Vélib, which is similar to New York’s Citi Bike, as a good alternative to the subway during the Games. It was, Belliard said, “a way of encouraging people not to be packed into these carriages.”

By steering visitors toward biking, officials were also hoping to discourage car use, he said: “It was a good way of reducing the carbon footprint of visitors.”

An added bonus? Humane sound levels. You don’t have to be on a bike to appreciate a bike-friendly city. Streets teeming with bicycles are much, much quieter than streets crammed with cars. (Los Angeles is also planning a car-free Olympic Games.)

As I walked between the skateboarding arena near the Place de la Concorde and the fencing venue at the Grand Palais, green and blue Vélib bicycles breezed by, as did chunkier Uber Lime bikes. Entire families cycled to and fro, but there was a joyous peacefulness about it.

I tried to imagine what New York would be like if hundreds of thousands of sports fans descended on it for three weeks, but the thought gave me heart palpitations, so I stopped.

Sarah Bitter, the chief executive of Vélopolitaine, a start-up focused on cycling mobility, has been cycling in Paris for over 15 years. She likes that she gets exercise and feels connected to the weather. Plus: “I feel like I’m in a movie,” she says. “I’m along the Seine and it’s beautiful and I can see all the beautiful buildings.”

That said, she thinks Paris can still do better. She has a 14-year-old daughter and says the city “is not secure enough for kids to go to school by bicycle.”

Still, she says, the cycling revolution has been important, and it’s not just about the “guys in suits” who commute by bike. “It’s used for logistics,” Bitter said. “A lot of grocery stores are delivering by bicycle.” That means fewer cars, lower emissions and calmer streets for everyone.

Mikael Colville-Andersen, an urban designer and urban mobility expert who has worked in cities across the world, agrees that Paris and New York have a long way to go.

Copenhagen still has the “gold standard” of bike infrastructure design, he said, and it does a better job of considering bikes, pedestrians and cars at intersections. “Paris lacks that,” he said. “They just have totally dropped the ball.”

In Paris, many bike lanes are repurposed car lanes, leaving cyclists riding next to cars without separation or barriers, he said.

But the cyclists I saw had plenty of room, compared with what they would have had in New York City. Of course, it was August, and the Olympics were in full swing, and a lot of Parisians had cleared out.

My colleague Karen Hanley, a video journalist, is a Citi Bike user when she’s at home in Brooklyn, and felt comfortable cycling through Paris during the Games.

“Getting around on bike was just easier,” she said, adding that the protected bike lanes — where a strip of concrete separates cyclists from drivers — gave her a sense of safety.

“The drivers in Paris felt like they were aware of me,” she added. “In New York, even as a pedestrian walking down the street, not on a bike, I’m a little bit more hesitant when I’m crossing the street.”

Her one complaint about Paris cycling was that sometimes a route took her over cobblestones: “It was really shaky.”

Thinking of all the ways the streets of New York are used, I asked Colville-Andersen what an ideal street would look like.

“I usually say that a good street is one where people actually get healthier moving down it,” he said. “Nobody gets injured or dies, and commerce thrives.”

Some argue that focusing on making streets more hospitable to bikers leaves older or disabled people behind. Belliard, the deputy mayor, said Paris hopes to make cycling more inclusive.

“We see older Parisians cycling today — maybe it’s for shorter distances, maybe it’s a bit slower than others — but more and more of them are taking the plunge,” he said. “For disabled people, we are talking to and supporting companies that are making special bikes. It is still a work in progress, but we are pursuing this

important goal.”

Looking at before and after photos of Paris, the transformation from car-clogged to bike-friendly is striking. My hometown of New York City would have a long way to go for a similar effect.

But for what it’s worth, Colville-Andersen has faith in us, pointing out the low rates of car ownership in the city and the “bombastic” attitude — “You kind of go all in!” — we’re known for here.

“If there’s a city in America that’s primed for this, it’s New York,” he said.



The 20-cent taxis of the 1920s

If you think New York traffic is bad now, check out photos from a hundred years ago, when a “taxicab war” was being waged in the city.

According to an article published on Aug. 3, 1924, the fare dropped from 30 cents a mile to 20 cents a mile and suddenly cabs were more popular. (In 2024 dollars, that would be like going from \$5.45 per mile to \$3.64 per mile.)

But the affordability led to congestion; 300,000 people were taking cabs daily

“People who never did anything more than dodge taxis are riding in them,” The New York Times reported. “Those who hailed them on gala occasions are using them as a regular thing.”



Taxis on 42nd Street and Park Avenue in Manhattan in 1924. Associated Press

Drivers also raised concerns about their ability to make a decent living. One declared the situation “terrible” and said that “the taxi driver hasn’t much of a future.” (A century later, taxi and ride-share drivers are still struggling.)

Still, the reporter noted:

Chauffeurs in the shopping district said that women were patronizing the 20-cent cabs quite liberally. The men thought that the bargain element was the lure, as women were partial to anything that was one-third off, whether it was a dress they didn’t need or a taxi ride.

Enjoying our *Street Wars* series? Tell us what you like or how we could improve: streetwars@nytimes.com



Leon Edler

What we’re reading

- Could that garage become apartments? New York City is turning to its own properties in a desperate search for space to build new homes. [The New York Times]
- A 16-year-old who was killed by a truck while riding an e-bike in Brooklyn was the 12th minor killed in traffic this year. [Daily News, Gothamist]
- The new Labour transport minister said she plans to support local authorities who want to introduce 20 m.p.h. speed zones in the United Kingdom. [Bloomberg]
- Here’s one way to move a couch. [What Is New York]
- Have you been to the Greenest Block in Brooklyn? [New York Post, Brooklyn Magazine, Brooklyn Botanic Garden]

Dodai Stewart writes about living in New York City, with a focus on how, and where, we gather. More about Dodai Stewart

EDIT GUIDE