

A Plea for Fifth Avenue

Sadik-Khan, Janette . Sadik-Khan, Janette.

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Traffic around Trump Tower is a mess, but there's a fix: Turn the street into a pedestrian plaza.

FULL TEXT

Presidential elections have consequences, and this one will affect New York City more than any in recent memory. This isn't a comment on the candidates or the nationwide political tone, but on the simple fact that the winner of this election, Donald J. Trump, lives in New York City. And not just in New York City, but on Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, home to one of the world's densest concentrations of humanity and traffic bedlam.

Fifth Avenue's five lanes run past landmarks like the New York Public Library, the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center, as well as numerous cathedrals of commerce, tourism and high-end retail. Because the avenue is such a popular destination, retail floor space there rents for \$3,000 per square foot a year, the highest price in the world, more than double the cost of similar space along the Champs Élysées. It seems appropriate that gold is a popular color for building facades on Fifth.

Fifth Avenue at 56th Street is the site of Mr. Trump's apartment in Trump Tower, which has rapidly turned into a fortress of Secret Service agents and heavily armed police officers surrounded by curious tourists, camera crews and protesters. They join the usual shoppers, workers and other pedestrians on what were already crowded sidewalks, and often spill into the street. This has significantly slowed traffic, and security concerns have forced the closing of side streets.

While Mr. Trump has said he will move into the White House, his wife and youngest child plan to wait until at least the end of the school year. During the campaign, Mr. Trump was known for flying home late at night so that he could wake up in his own bed, and he has said that he plans to return to the city frequently. If he chooses to stay even part of the week in New York, Trump Tower will become a de facto presidential residence and seat of global power.

The motorcades and security restrictions that will result will permanently paralyze the city's streets. The swearing-in hasn't even happened, but the swearing has already started: New Yorkers want their Fifth Avenue back.

As much as Mr. Trump's election is a historic moment, it also provides an extraordinary opportunity to reclaim Fifth Avenue as a pedestrian street, free of private vehicular traffic but shared with mass transit. The change, which should span the stretch of the avenue from Central Park to the Empire State Building at 34th Street, would create a truly American public space: an entirely new civic platform at the nation's new center of political gravity.

A natural comparison would be with car-free Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House. Creating public plazas out of streets physically embodies democracy in cities. It gives people room to reflect on their civic institutions instead of being herded along — as they currently are around Trump Tower.

Unlike Pennsylvania Avenue, however, Fifth Avenue is a vital transit conduit for 38 bus lines carrying tens of thousands of people every day across Manhattan and to and from the other boroughs. Reserving two lanes for their use (and for the motorcades) would allow the other three to be dedicated to pedestrians.

Commercial traffic has already long been banned from Fifth Avenue, and deliveries by truck could continue at enhanced delivery zones on side streets during set times of the day. As for taxis, the city can make accommodations for passenger drop-offs, but prevent cabs from cruising along empty for blocks on end.

This isn't just a feel-good experiment in civics, nor is it a public transit boondoggle. Streets that accommodate more people are also better for business.

In a similar project I helped introduce in 2009, in the administration of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, seven blocks of Broadway in Times Square were closed to traffic, and two traffic lanes were removed between Columbus Circle at 59th Street and 17th Street, a distance of more than two miles. New Yorkers in cars and cabs are quick to adapt to change, and drivers easily found alternate routes. Pedestrian traffic on Broadway soared and business boomed.

The expansion of rapid bus networks in the city and the opening of the Second Avenue subway mean that there are more alternatives than ever to driving in Midtown Manhattan. Turning Fifth Avenue into a bus- and pedestrian-friendly corridor can be the next step: It would not only solve the problem of the Trump Tower jam but also encourage more people to walk, use the growing bike share system and enjoy the better bus service.

This change would require close consultation with the city Police Department and transportation officials. It would also have to meet the needs of the federal authorities managing the president's security. But this transformation of Fifth Avenue may be that sweet spot where urbanism, transportation engineering, democracy and politics can align.

New Yorkers get their street back, the federal government gets a zone that would make the job of protecting the president easier, and President Trump gets a public space he can call his own.

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Source URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/09/opinion/a-plea-for-fifth-avenue.html?partner=bloomberg>

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DETAILS

Subject:	Public spaces; Local elections; Traffic; Buses
Location:	New York; United States--US
Company / organization:	Name: Public Library-New York City NY; NAICS: 519210; Name: Secret Service-US; NAICS: 922120
Identifier / keyword:	Pedestrian Malls; United States Politics and Government; Trump Tower (Manhattan, NY); Trump, Donald J; Fifth Avenue (Manhattan, NY)
URL:	http://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/09/opinion/a-plea-for-fifth-avenue.html?partner=bloomberg
Publication title:	New York Times (Online); New York
Publication year:	2017
Publication date:	Jan 9, 2017
Section:	opinion
Publisher:	New York Times Company
Place of publication:	New York
Country of publication:	United States
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States

e-ISSN: 15538095

Source type: Blog, Podcast, or Website

Language of publication: English

Document type: News

ProQuest document ID: 1856698459

Document URL: <http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/nytimes/blogs-podcasts-websites/plea-fifth-avenue/docview/1856698459/sem-2?accountid=35635>

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Last updated: 2025-03-27

Database: New York Times

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