

Change the Car Culture – Car Free Brooklyn Bridge

Overview

Our plan for a car-free Brooklyn Bridge has multiple stages: a simple Tactical Urbanism phase that can be built immediately with temporary barriers to keep traffic off the bridge; one or two future stages when the city upgrades the infrastructure; and a long-term plan to demolish ramps and free land for parks and affordable housing.

The number of people using the car-free bridge would dwarf the number of visitors to the High Line, which had 8 million visitors last year. Cyclists and pedestrians would use the bridge to commute. City residents and visiting tourists would make it the most popular place in New York.

Vision & Inspiration

Why do we have too many cars in Manhattan? Because we spend billions of dollars encouraging people to drive in. The latest example is the talk of rebuilding the BQE, which acts like a fire hydrant pumping cars into Manhattan over the Brooklyn Bridge.

These cars are killing us. Nearly 40,000 Americans die in traffic collisions every year, many of them because of bad driving by others. That includes 6,283 pedestrians killed last year in the US, or one every 84 minutes. Sitting in our cars while we drive everywhere is killing us too, with obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Pollution from our cars is killing us and the planet. Forty percent of America's carbon greenhouse gases comes from cars and trucks.

Everyone alive today in America has lived in the age of the automobile. But no one alive today has been in a situation like the one we find ourselves in now with COVID 19. This is a moment when we have the opportunity to choose better ways of living for the future.

New York City already has the goal of decreasing automobile use in Manhattan. If we are smart, we will use this opportunity to make positive changes to change the car culture more rapidly and completely than we were previously considering.

As an architectural historian and historian of New York City, I have studied the after-effects of the Spanish Flu on the city. One hundred years ago, the deadliest pandemic in history killed 675,000 Americans, when the total population of the US was less than a third of what it is now. Estimates of deaths worldwide range from 40 to 100 million.



The Roaring Twenties that followed were a period of commercial and cultural boom for Western cities perhaps unmatched in previous history. If you read contemporary accounts, it's striking that business people, artists, architects, planners, and elected officials acted as though the Spanish Flu had never happened. People flocked to cities.

Our team believes that New York should seize every opportunity to move forward with new ideas that are better for people, the city, and the planet. There are 3 ways across the Hudson for cars coming into Manhattan, but 16 on the east side of the island. Let's seize the moment and build a better city. Our world has changed.

Future view of City Hall Park and the Brooklyn Bridge in Manhattan, looking east. Centre Street, Park Row, and Nassau Street become the gateway to a Financial District Slow Zone between Chambers Street and the Battery.

See page 5 for a photograph of the existing conditions.

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Feasibility & History

When Janette Sadik-Khan was NYC DOT Commissioner, her team developed a menu of paint, barriers, and lightweight furniture that enabled them to change the intersection of Fifth Avenue, Broadway, and 23rd Street literally overnight. Using the same strategies and objects, the city could easily use Tactical Urbanism techniques to quickly transform Brooklyn Bridge into a pedestrian paradise.

Making the changes permanent would be simple too. We propose expanding the decks at the piers to make room for food carts, much like the food section on the High Line. A third deck could be added between the piers, near the middle of the river.

The existing decks sit on beams strengthened to support them. The expanded decks would use similar construction. The most expensive part of the proposition would be adding elevators for handicapped access to the upper walkway.

Because the Brooklyn Bridge is an iconic structure listed on the National Register of Historic Places, we've taken a respectful approach towards the bridge when thinking about the design of new elements. The new railings and stairs would use readily available parts from catalogs, chosen for harmony with the existing deck and railings. Dark brown or gray paint would easily distinguish them from the original.

Environment & Biophilia

Cars and trucks produce 40% of the carbon greenhouse gases in America. And in the last few weeks, we have all seen how quickly and dramatically air quality improves when a pandemic makes people drive less. Driving around the world is only down by 40% to 60%, but you can see the change that has made in satellite photos from space.

For more than seventy years, New York City built roads, bridges, and tunnels that encouraged people to drive in and out of the city. That is still true today. Manhattan's one-way transportation corridors are suburban-style arterials that say to suburbanites, "C'mon in, our streets are just like yours." Making Brooklyn Bridge car-free would be a strong signal that New York is serious about the environment and climate change.

Second, the design brief says, "The bridge must consider biophilic design." We agree. Brooklyn Bridge is a great biophilic design. When dealing with the bridge, we should act like doctors and preservationists, who say, "First do no harm."



A view looking west on the new car-free Brooklyn Bridge.

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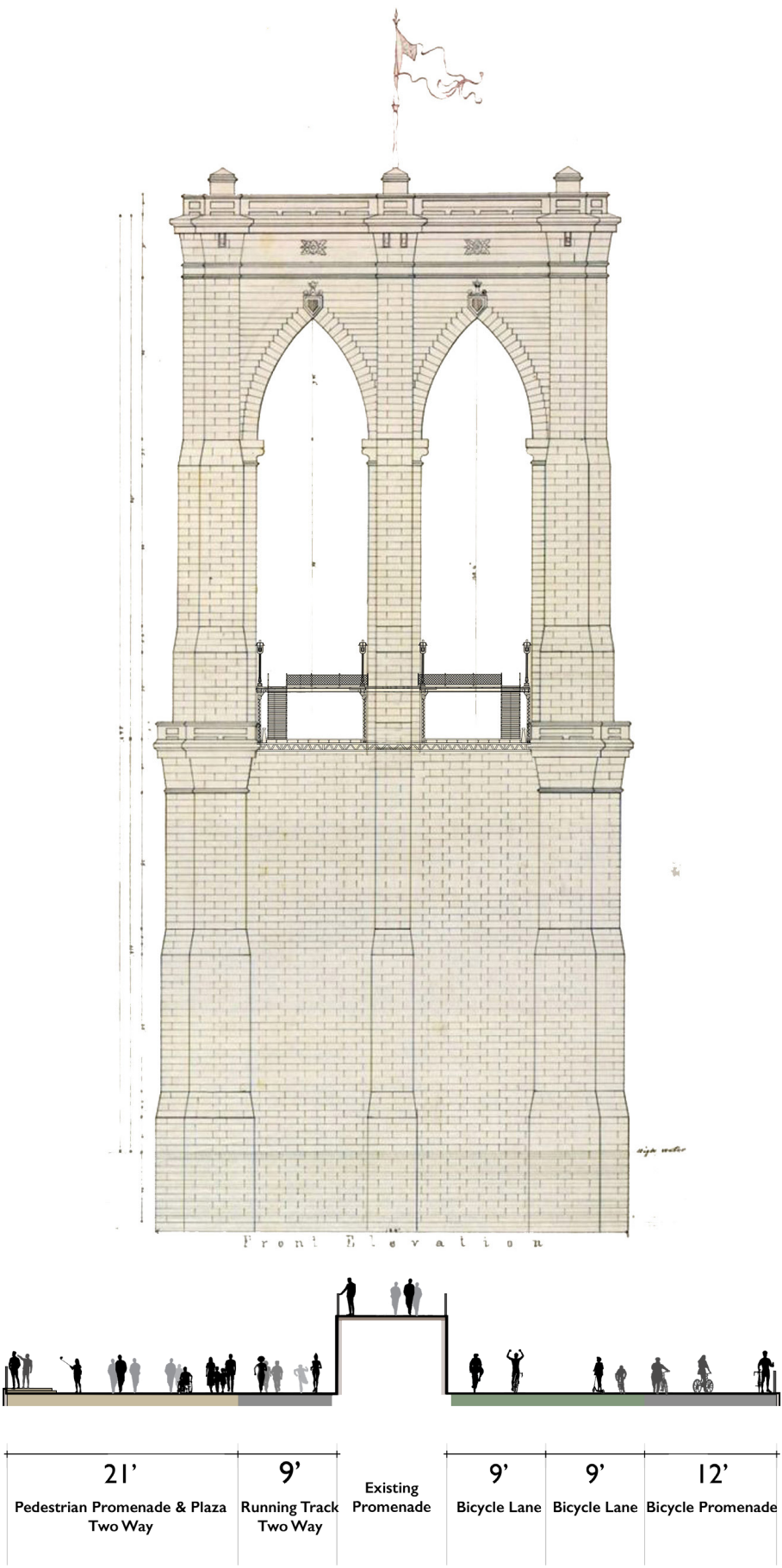
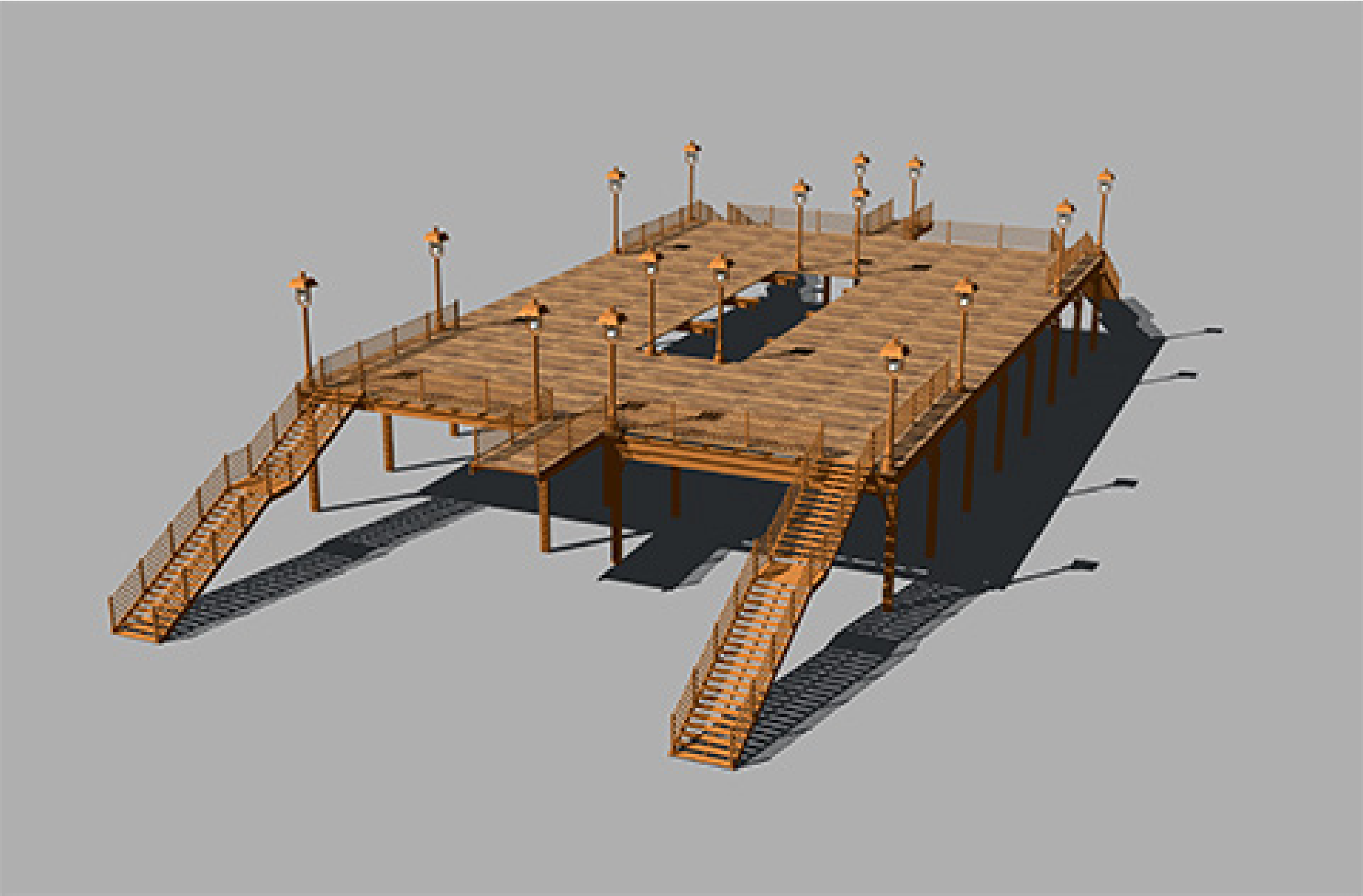
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The massive stone piers are biomorphic forms that remind us of the forces of gravity. The suspension cables do that too. The generative details use the quality of fractals to give visual interest and intuitive connection. The large, rough-cut stones and the view over the East River to New York Harbor pull us into nature.

At the same time, the bridge is a place with sometimes violent weather, suspended above a river. Most plants and bushes would die there, while plants that could thrive would look out of place. We recommend details that let the beautiful bridge and the extraordinary view be the center of attention.

In our long-term plan, replace the ramps and auto sewers built by Robert Moses to move traffic and pull nature from City Hall Park and Cadman Plaza Park (Brooklyn’s Borough Hall park) up to the bridge. Each end of the bridge becomes a human-scaled gateway to Brooklyn and Manhattan.

To the right and below: The expanded deck and a diagram of the roadways.



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Change the Car Culture – Slow New York

By John Massengale: All of the renderings and illustrations for this competition are new. One is an updated version of an earlier drawing, made for the Financial District Neighborhood Association (FDNA), inspired also by a *Daily News* Op-Ed wrote with John Norquist, the former Mayor of Milwaukee and the former President of the Congress for New Urbanism.

My original idea for FDNA was to use ramps built by Robert Moses for cars to enter and exit the Brooklyn Bridge in Manhattan. I realized the ramps were sufficient to divert all traffic to and from the bridge. I had always been bothered by the way Moses treated pedestrians in the vicinity of the bridge as second- and third-class citizens.

Coming out of the Municipal Building or the subways underneath it and walking to Nassau Street and Wall Street should be a great urban experience, but the reality is a constant stream of noisy, dangerous cars pushing people to the side of the road while their drivers attempt to get through the inevitable traffic jams.

Our *Daily News* Op-Ed, which discussed what to do with the crumbling BQE, compared the highway to a fire hydrant pumping cars into Manhattan, treating the magnificent Brooklyn Bridge like an undersized fire hose. No wonder we have "auto sewers" at each end.

Riding a Citibike to an appointment in Dumbo a few weeks after the op-ed rudely reminded me how crowded the meager area on the bridge assigned to bikers and walkers is. When I got off the bridge in Brooklyn and took the most direct route to the appointment, I was appalled to see once again how ugly and dangerous the streets at the foot of the bridge are.

So I have been talking up the idea of a car-free Brooklyn Bridge for the last few months, getting a wonderful reception. My original turn-the-cars around drawing made a very good impression on people and got a lot of attention. It even made it to Fox 5 News one night.

But I've gotten an even better reaction to the idea of no cars on the bridge. And although I haven't shown the new car-free sketch of the bridge and City Hall Park to anyone other than the Change the Car Culture competition team and my family, I think it's a much better drawing and a much better idea.

We also made an aerial view illustrating how removing the ramps at the Brooklyn end of the bridge could create valuable land for parks,



affordable housing, and new development. For the drawing, we assume that in twenty years the BQE will be abandoned or buried. All around the country, removing city highways has been one of the first steps in changing the car culture and improving city life. Why should New Yorkers settle for anything less?

An aerial view of downtown Brooklyn and Cadman Plaza Park, circa 2040. The drawing suggests some of the many opportunities that could come from taking back land currently devoted to traffic flow. See page 5 for a photograph of the existing conditions. © 2020 Massengale & Co LLC, rendering by JJ Zanetta

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