

[Expert Column] "Eco-Friendly" on the Surface: The Illusion of NYC's Street Experiments and the Alienation of Residents

Subtitle: Chaos Hidden by Data and the Absence of Mass Transit Priorities

By Heagy Kweon (Cultural Heritage and Tourism Researcher)

In recent years, New York City has undergone radical changes in alignment with global trends toward "carbon neutrality" and "people-centered streets." Times Square has been transformed into a pedestrian plaza, and dedicated bike lanes now web across major avenues. Urban scholars like Luca Bertolini have praised these initiatives as successful "urban experiments," encouraging their adoption worldwide. Statistical data showing reduced accident rates and increased sales support their claims.

However, as a resident who has witnessed Manhattan's rise and fall from the ground for over 30 years, I wish to speak about the "truth on the ground" hidden behind these flashy statistics. If we do not face the residents' suffering and policy contradictions that lab data fail to capture, New York's experiment will remain only a success.

Who is the Road For? Alienation of Residents and Theme Park-ification of Tourism

The NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) promotes bike lanes as an excellent "commuting option" for citizens. But who actually dominates these roads? Bike lanes in Central Park and along the Hudson River have become leisure spaces for tourists on "Citi Bikes." Despite residents' intense daily routines, the city is increasingly becoming a giant theme park.

To make matters worse, since the pandemic, a surge of food delivery platform workers has used bike lanes as commercial highways. On roads where speeding and reckless driving have become normalized, pedestrians and regular cyclists constantly feel threatened. Rather than improving the environment of underdeveloped areas, bicycle infrastructure acts as a "tool of gentrification," raising property values and attracting younger demographics with higher purchasing power, while pushing out low-income residents and livelihood drivers who originally lived there.

The Fallacy of Priorities: Neglected "Real" Eco-Friendly Means

What is the most certain and effective way to reduce New York's carbon emissions? It is not painting streets to make bike lanes, but modernizing the subways and buses, which have an overwhelmingly higher modal share.

Currently, the New York subway has become a "space to avoid" for citizens due to over 100 years of aging infrastructure, notoriously poor hygiene, frequent delays, and a lack of security. The reason many citizens endure traffic congestion to take taxis or private cars is not that there are no bike lanes, but because public transit is repulsive. Obsessing only over expanding bike lanes, which are easy to show visible results for, while neglecting subway improvements that require massive budgets and time, is typical administration chasing "political cost-effectiveness."

Chaos on the Ground Hidden by Data

Manhattan's roads are already saturated. Reducing lanes without the alternative of a pleasant subway system causes extreme bottlenecks as logistics trucks, commercial vehicles, and taxis tangle in narrowed roads. This ironically leads to increased exhaust fumes and energy waste due to idling.



▲ *Manhattan streets are where vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians are entangled. Unlike statistical safety indicators, the psychological risk felt on the ground is very high. (Source: Google Images)*

The scene on the ground is truly "chaos." Unloading trucks, taxis picking up and dropping off passengers, vehicles encroaching on bike lanes, and jaywalking pedestrians mix together, leading to frequent "near-miss" accidents that are not captured in statistics. While fatality rates may have decreased numerically, the psychological anxiety citizens feel has actually amplified. Attempting to transplant the flat terrain and medieval road networks of Amsterdam or Copenhagen directly into New York, a commercial city where skyscrapers are dense and "speed" is life, is armchair administration that ignores the city's context.



▲ *A logistics truck was forced to unload right next to a dedicated bike lane. Narrowed roads hinder the city's essential logistics flow and drive cyclists into blind spots. (Source: New York Post)*

Conclusion: Beyond Performative Administration

New York's street experiments may have succeeded theoretically, but signs of failure are evident in terms of residents' quality of life. To create true "streets for people," we must stop performative expansion and go back to basics.

First, budget priority should be given to improving subway hygiene and safety and securing dedicated bus lanes (BRT) rather than expanding bike lanes. Second, clear regulations on commercial delivery motorcycles and electric bicycles are needed to ensure pedestrian safety. Finally, instead of laying uniform bike lanes across Manhattan, flexible "road diets" tailored to local characteristics are necessary.

As a 32-year New Yorker and a researcher studying cultural heritage and space, I propose: The owners of the city should not be passing tourists or statistical figures, but the residents rooted and living there. Now is the time to stop chasing European romance and seek field-centered alternatives that reflect New York's fierce reality.

About the Author | Heagy Kweon is A researcher in the field of cultural heritage and tourism. She lived in New York for 32 years, working as an architect and interior designer. Currently, she focuses on analyzing the "operating structure of a region" rather than the form of space, and proposing practical solutions through research. She has a deep interest in urban regeneration, adaptive reuse, and sustainable tourism, and he produces policy briefs that narrow the gap between data and the field.