

OP-ED



Change the streets, change the city

BY JOHN MASSENGALE

The protest marches on our city streets demand our attention. But with phase one of the economic reopening starting last week, we need to think about how to use those public spaces to survive the fallout of the pandemic.

Even before the reopening, there were twice as many people driving into Manhattan than we saw at the lowest point in April.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has put the responsibility for fixing that on New Yorkers. He said commuters will have to “improvise” how they get to work.

“I really want to push back on the notion that we can solve everything all the time,” de Blasio said.

That’s not good enough.

We can’t mire the recovery process in regulations and bureaucracy.

Here’s a multipronged plan that can help reopen and renew New York City.

We need to act quickly, before out-of-town drivers reclaim city streets for their cars.

Other American cities are already widening sidewalks and opening

streets to restaurants. Any cars or delivery trucks on the street will have to share the space with people.

European experience shows, perhaps counterintuitively, that these shared-space streets are much safer for everyone than the standard New York street, where the center is reserved for moving cars as pedestrians are kicked to the side of the road.

Renew New York

If we don’t help them immediately, many businesses will not come back.

Restaurant and store owners and employees need to go back to work if they are going to survive.

Even before the lockdown order, many storefronts in the city and across the state were empty.

De Blasio and Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer have proposed a tax on vacant storefronts to counter the problem.

Another solution would make use of those vacancies.

The city could help fill those shops by providing free space for three months.

To get the storefront for free, the tenant moving in signs a contract agreeing either to begin paying rent after three months or to move out.

They tried it in Australia, and many of the spaces have gone to makers and artists, who have successfully incubated new businesses.

WE NEED A NETWORK OF OPEN STREETS THAT PEOPLE CAN USE

streets to restaurants.

We need what tactical urbanists call lighter, quicker, cheaper strategies for opening our streets in new ways before a surge of drivers makes that impossible.

We need a network of open streets that people can use to hike and bike around the city, and we need that network to connect to streets with retail businesses, so that stores and restaurants can reopen successfully.

The open streets we have now are scattered here and there, in isolation, and they don’t support the needs of stores and restaurants.

Cities, including Portland, Ore. and Philadelphia, are already working on such a plan.

Helping store owners

If we allow restaurants to have widely spaced dining tables and stores to have display tables, social distancing will push pedestrians out into the streets, which

Positive changes

Unless we act quickly, the most likely scenario for the future of New York is that cars will come back in higher numbers than before, local businesses will fail, storefronts will remain empty, and hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers will be unemployed.

We can do better.

For the health of New Yorkers and the planet, we don’t want to go back to the old status quo.

Americans are marching in the streets to improve the future. Changing how we use those streets in everyday life would change how we live.

Change the streets and change the city. ■

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