

Better cities, one street at a time

Skye Duncan and **Melinda Hanson** outline the global benefits brought about by the publication of the Global Street Design Guide



In 2014, Queens Boulevard in New York City got a makeover. Travel lanes were narrowed, crosswalks shortened, and signals updated to give pedestrians priority. There hasn't been a single traffic death along the 11-kilometer corridor since the city made these changes and ramped up speed enforcement, a dramatic improvement for a stretch of road that was previously referred to as the “Boulevard of Death” and once saw 19 pedestrian deaths in a single year.

This retrofit project is, unfortunately, not yet the norm. Streets around the world have been designed for motor vehicles. Inequitable distribution of space and general lack of pedestrian infrastructure make streets dangerous places to walk, cycle, or board transit: according to recent estimates, more than 1.3 million people die each year in

traffic crashes. It's no wonder that when given a choice, many people seek refuge in a car.

The current street design paradigm has been shaped by volumes of design standards that focus on increasing throughput of cars, with little thought given to pedestrians, cyclists, or

transit riders. For example, the “Green Book” (*A Policy on Geometric Design of Highways and Streets*) released by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials has been a go-to resource for engineers around the world. The Green Book, and others like it, approach



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street design from the lens of a motor vehicle, recommending wide travel lanes, broad turning radii, and open roads free of obstacles.

Applying these recommendations in urban areas can create hostile conditions for anyone not in a car. These designs invite speeding, a leading contributor to injuries and fatalities in cities. They send a message that our streets belong to car owners, and that a person in a car is more important than a person on the sidewalk. Finally, these designs continue to support an inefficient transportation system that ties countless millions in kilometers-long traffic jams, taking away valuable time that could otherwise be better spent.

BETTER BY DESIGN

Street design guidebooks are invaluable resources that capture lessons learned by traffic engineers and planners. They help urban practitioners to design for the outcomes they want and avoid repeating past mistakes. Each street is a blank slate: new streets offer opportunities to get design right from the beginning, and existing streets provide a chance for transformation.

There are many decisions to be made around width, markings, signals and geometries, each of which will change the way a street is used. For example, it's been well documented that a street with straight and wide travel lanes and little street-level activity will invite cars to speed, while a narrow street that includes a cycle track, sidewalks and trees will invite cycling and encourage cars to drive slowly.

In recent years, new volumes of street design guidance developed by

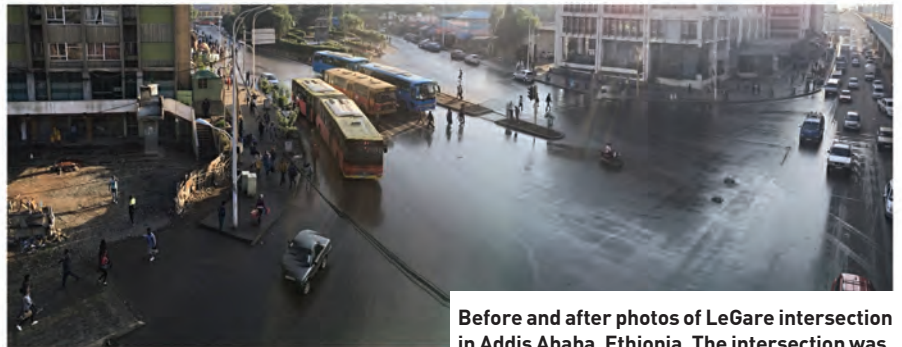
cities from Copenhagen to New York to London have prioritized human-centered design, considering the vulnerabilities and needs of people and designing streets to prioritize public space, active transportation, and transit over private vehicle throughput.

Recognizing the power of these guidebooks and wanting to make them globally applicable, our organization, the National Association of City Transportation Officials' Global Designing Cities Initiative (NACTO-GDCI) published the *Global Street Design Guide* in 2016. Building upon NACTO's urban street design guides, and thanks to generous support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, the *Global Street Design Guide* was developed with input from experts in 72 cities and 42 countries – making it applicable to diverse urban

contexts around the world. The Guide approaches design through a people and place-based approach and offers case studies and technical details to inform street designs that prioritize walking, cycling, and transit, while making streets safer and more inviting. To date, it's been endorsed by 36 cities and 26 organizations.

PEOPLE-CENTRIC DESIGN

The *Global Street Design Guide* supports practitioners as they move toward street designs that put people first, with real-world examples of designs that have been successfully implemented in cities around the world. The *Guide* also shows how to engage the numerous stakeholders involved in city-making and provides a methodology for metrics collection and evaluation so that cities can



Before and after photos of LeGare intersection in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The intersection was transformed to improve pedestrian safety.



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Above: the *Global Street Design Guide* offers strategies to shift the traditional hierarchy and plan streets that prioritize pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders over private motor vehicles.



Left: in Fortaleza, Brazil, the *Guide* is helping to implement low-speed zones

set goals, measure impact, and get the most out of projects.

In practice, the *Guide* is helping local officials to identify impediments to urban design best practice and update local standards and policies accordingly. In Brazil, the *Global Street Design Guide* played a crucial role in inspiring Sao Paulo's transport engineers to reconsider common practice in traffic circle design and inspired the city of Fortaleza to implement low-speed zones around the city. In Mumbai, the *GSDG* is being used to train local engineers.

In Bogota, Colombia, the *Guide* is helping to inform a new city-level street design manual. And in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the guide has become the go-to resource for local transportation agencies looking to improve safety and efficiency at the city's intersections – including at Sebategna intersection, where an interim intervention underscored the need to expand sidewalks, improve crossings, and add signals to improve pedestrian safety at the intersection.

This is just the start. We've heard from practitioners that the *Global Street Design Guide* serves as a permission slip to re-imagine what's possible and innovate. As more cities begin to implement their visions using the practical standards set forth in the *Global Street Design Guide*, we'll begin to see even more improvements on our streets. We invite you to join in on this effort by endorsing the *Global Street Design Guide* and letting other practitioners know that it's available online for free. Let's work together to create better cities, one street at a time. 🌐

FYI

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