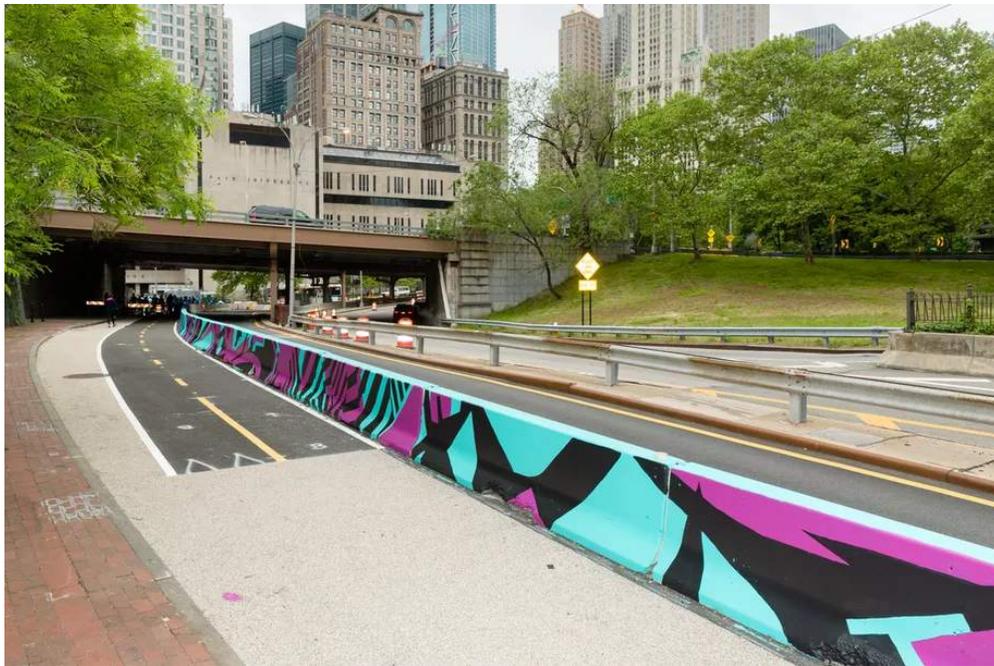


NYC's coolest public art is making streets safer

The vibrant murals on protected bike lanes are about “enhancing quality of life and creating inviting and welcoming streets.”

By **Diana Budds** | Feb 14, 2020, 10:00am EST



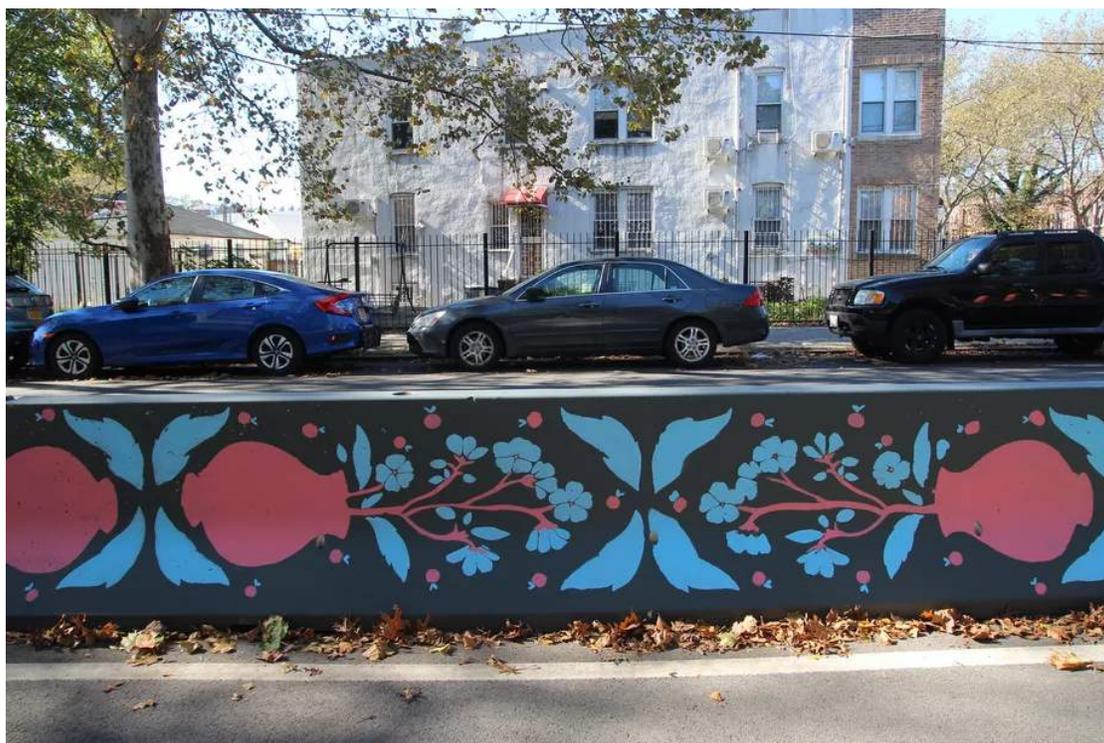
Razzle Dazzle, a mural by Ann Tarantino, is part of the New York City Department of Transportation's Barrier Beautification Program. | Etienne Frossard

[Ann Tarantino](#) remembers the first time she rode past *Razzle Dazzle*, the 400-foot-long mural she created for the jersey barriers protecting a bike lane where Park Row crosses under the Brooklyn Bridge. Covered in abstract teal, purple, and black shapes, the pattern riffs on [WWI dazzle camouflage](#). “It was like being inside a painting,” she says. “[The mural] makes you more aware of the space around you.”

Tarantino's mural is the result of the New York City Department of Transportation's [Barrier Beautification Program](#) (BBP), an initiative that places artwork on cycling safety

infrastructure. For the past 12 years, the DOT has been steadily turning streets, sidewalks, underpasses, fences, public plazas, medians, and other blank surfaces on land under its jurisdiction into temporary canvases for artists. And as the city ramps up its construction of protected bike lanes under the Green Wave plan, an initiative to address the rise in cyclist fatalities that calls for 30 new miles of lanes each year, the BBP is set to gain more real estate and bring more artists into the fold.

“From day one, the program was about enhancing quality of life and creating inviting and welcoming streets,” says Emily Colasacco, director of DOT Art. “It continues to be that.”



Strong/Soft like a Cliffrose, by Cat Willett | Courtesy DOT

Since the BBP's inception in 2010, local artists have completed 41 projects that have transformed just under six miles of plain concrete barriers into vibrant murals that are making the city's streets safer and neighborhoods more beautiful and more welcoming.

Here's how the program works: DOT reviews proposals from artists. They look for simple, bold, and colorful patterns that can be applied using paint and stencils and that will work on a barrier ranging in length from 200 feet to 2,000 feet. The DOT works with the artist and community partners—which have included middle school students, corporations, and volunteer organizations—to paint the murals. They're considered

temporary, so they're not maintained past one year. The pilot mural was installed on a protected bike lane on 155th Street, near Harlem River Drive, and the most recent, by illustrator Cat Willet, was installed in Bay Ridge in October. The graphics on the barriers include florals, abstract portraits, cats, pixelated fruits, and even the iconic '80s Jazz pattern.

This so-called "asphalt art," which New York City pioneered under former Mayor Michael Bloomberg and DOT commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, is also an effective and relatively inexpensive traffic-calming measure in its own right. The idea is that artwork on the Jersey barriers is an aberration in the typically gray streetscape, which causes drivers to focus more and slow down. (New York City's transportation department is one of the only operational agencies with a dedicated arts program, according to Colasacco.)



Alphabet City by Elizabeth Hamby | Courtesy DOT



Jazz City by Jessie Contour | Courtesy DOT

The transformation isn't just visual; it's metaphorical, too. Streets are some of the most contested spaces in New York. [Pedestrian and cyclist traffic fatalities are on the rise](#), with [2019 the deadliest year for bikers](#) since 2000. The city is working to address the legacy of car-oriented travel through new and existing policies—like the [streets master plan](#), [Vision Zero](#), [bus-only lanes](#), [leading pedestrian intervals](#), and [congestion pricing](#)—and the artwork helps to immediately validate and legitimize multi-modal uses that haven't been prioritized in the past.

Cities around the world have been implementing their own programs similar to NYC DOT's and Sadik-Khan, who is now at Bloomberg Philanthropies, is still leading the charge. The organization [recently published a best-practices guide](#) and announced [a new grant initiative](#) to help more cities implement their own programs.

“It's not just about art—it's about creating safe spaces for people for pennies on the dollar,” Sadik-Khan told Curbed's Alissa Walker about the impact of asphalt art. “This is fast, easy, inexpensive, and transformative.”

As an artist, Tarantino focuses on landscape-scale work in the public realm, with part of her creative practice focused on interrogating the experience of inhabiting space. Before working on the Park Row mural, she spent several months living in and traveling around Brazil, and noticed how landscapes were marked and used. National flags, she observed, indicated who did and didn't belong. That got her thinking about patterns in the landscape and their potential to signal inclusion or exclusion.



Volunteers install *Shadowbox* by Gavin Snider and Lindsey Fisher | Courtesy DOT



Shadowbox by Gavin Snider and Lindsey Fisher | Courtesy DOT

“I’ve been looking at patterns in landscape and how it defines space, or power, or belonging—like [the patterns of] traffic cones, flags, and stop signs,” Tarantino says. “Designating and carving out space for a particular type of movement validates biking as a way to get around. I do bike quite a bit; there is animosity about cyclists and that can be scary for people. I think it’s something of a political act to celebrate that space.”



Drew Barriermore by Kat Lam | Courtesy DOT



Crushing It by Nancy Ahn | Courtesy DOT

As the city ramps up its construction of protected bike lanes under the [Green Wave plan](#), the BBP is set to bring more local artists into the fold and install these murals in more neighborhoods. The DOT is [seeking requests for proposals for the 2020 Barrier Beautification Program until February 14](#) and [requesting qualifications](#) for the asphalt art program until February 21.

[Gavin Snider](#), an architectural designer and illustrator, was drawn to the program because of its ability to turn something mundane into a work of art. Plus, most of his work—[brilliant sketches of cityscapes](#)—isn't something the public experiences, and this was a chance to work at the neighborhood scale.

A Citi Bike commuter, Snider began to notice the murals on his rides and eventually found out that they were DOT projects from a placard posted on one. His piece—[Shadowbox](#), a maroon-and-red abstract pattern based on building facades he saw while riding—was installed on the Delancey Street protected bike lane, between Allen and Clinton streets, in 2018.

Snider applauds the DOT's commitment to retool car-centric streets and use art to help with that change, but believes the murals also raise awareness that the city's bike lanes are often treated as an afterthought.

“It's great that it's a solution, but it's a temporary solution and unfinished solution,” he says. “In an ideal world this wouldn't exist because there'd be lanes that are separate and protected and included in the design of the streets.... It's an uphill battle in a city that's car-oriented but [the DOT is] conscious and dedicated to trying to make the best of the situations. The street being for cars, bikes, and people is a never-ending challenge.”