

A Plan and a Policy

The proposal for a Madison Avenue mall, tied to a larger traffic plan for midtown Manhattan, is being greeted as pie in the sky by a public that has been fed little else by politicians in the past.

It is worth, as the expression goes, examining the plan on its merits. It is a solidly researched, expertly designed effort by able professionals meant to bring order and amenity out of New York's chaos. This is an assignment inevitably fraught with difficulties and dislocations. But it faces the fact that present conditions—constantly increasing traffic strangulation, unacceptable levels of pollution that will be illegal by Federal standards in a few years, rapidly decreasing amenity and an uncertain economic future—are threatening the golden egg that is midtown, and by extension, the city itself.

The inefficiency as well as the inconvenience of midtown traffic is staggering. It can be measured in dollars and in coronaries. Madison Avenue is used as an express north artery, a local traffic street, a redundant bus route, a truck delivery area and an all-day parking lot. Fifty-one per cent of traffic is taxis, often cruising empty, and 31 per cent is private cars. The chief contributor to congestion has been identified as unnecessary vehicle trips.

A Regional Plan Association study concludes that the pavement allotted to cars and taxis is the least productively used from the standpoint of transportation performance. Its strong recommendation for restricting traffic and widening sidewalks preceded the city's proposal for the Madison mall.

Beneath the plan lies a policy. That, alone, is news in New York. It is that transportation is a service, tied to land use, and that when the means threatens the end something must be done. Midtown as an attractive and economically viable place for people and business is being destroyed by its so-called transportation system. Getting there is no fun at all, and being there is a lot less fun than it was.

The Madison mall would greatly enhance the city. It is not just a pretty idea. The plan is tied to a comprehensive and absolutely essential sorting out of midtown traffic functions, as proposed in such studies as the van Ginkel report, *Movement in Midtown*. This report, commissioned by the city, is the basis of all of the recommendations now being made by the Office of Midtown Planning and Development, the Transportation Administration, and the Commissioner of Air Resources—representing one of the rare times when assorted city fiefdoms are pulling together according to a master blueprint. The plan will fail without coordination of all of its necessary elements, from express bus lanes and park-and-ride facilities to taxi controls.

It is not without serious problems in its realization but similar pedestrian malls are working well in major cities of Europe. A recent report at an international conference documented the fact that experience proves these traffic bans to be economically feasible and commercially successful. We believe the merchants of Madison Avenue would benefit from the proposal, as would the shoppers. Many New Yorkers, however, are prone to stick with the status quo—even when the automobile leads nowhere but up against the wall.