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Just as pedestrian fatalities in the United States have surged to 40-year highs, the Transportation Department delivered a December holiday gift: For the first time, federal guidelines explicitly include asphalt art projects as part of the roadway design tool kit that can be used on city streets. At last, cities have been given permission from the federal government to unlock their creative potential and roll out streets that engage the eye — and work better.

Asphalt art projects — collaborations between cities, community groups and artists — have taken off in the past decade, thanks to early-adopting cities such as New York, Seattle and Portland, Ore., with help from the National Association of City Transportation Officials and “tactical urbanism” firms such as Street Plans. They provide street designs that cue drivers to slow down, provide people on foot more interesting places to walk and create new local landmarks. They can even be used to widen sidewalks without digging up streets, giving space back to the public and making the whole street safer. To provide a road map for the increasing municipal interest, in 2019 Bloomberg Philanthropies produced the Asphalt Art Guide and launched the Asphalt Art Initiative (AAI), distributing grants to 90 projects in cities across the United States and around the world to produce and assess their own eye-catching street design projects.

Despite the overwhelming demand for projects such as these, until now they have colored just outside the lines of official street design guidance in this country. Previous versions of the DOT’s Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (with the ungainly acronym MUTCD) said next to nothing on the subject. The first attempt to fill the void was an infamously confusing 2013 interpretation memo on “Application of Colored Pavement” that became a roadway Rorschach test — both proponents and opponents of such projects found clauses that supported their points of view. Even worse, a now-removed part of the FAQ section explicitly prohibited such projects, asserting they had the “potential to compromise motorist safety by interfering with, detracting from, or obscuring official traffic control devices.”

Meanwhile, the growing number of local engineering officials who saw benefits in this kind of street art continued to look beyond the letter of the MUTCD and approve asphalt art projects, especially when they included long-proven traffic safety elements such as painted curb extensions and lane narrowings. Building on that, Bloomberg Philanthropies partnered with Sam Schwartz Consulting and Street Plans to produce

a study of 17 past arts-driven projects as well as five AAI grantee projects. That found a 50 percent reduction in crashes involving pedestrians and cyclists and a 27 percent increase in drivers yielding to pedestrians with the right of way.

And that brings us to the latest MUTCD. The manual breaks some important new ground: It finally acknowledges that many such projects exist — a milestone in itself — and, far from prohibiting or discouraging them, it provides guidance on how and where to apply them.

Of course, the new guidelines aren't perfect: They could have gone further on designing streets to reduce speeding or encouraging bike and pedestrian infrastructure. But when it comes to creative projects such as asphalt art, regulators have filled in the once-blank canvas and the naysaying opposition can finally be brushed aside. We now look forward to seeing a growing number of asphalt artists paint the town in cities coast-to-coast as we work together to tackle the country's traffic crash crisis.