

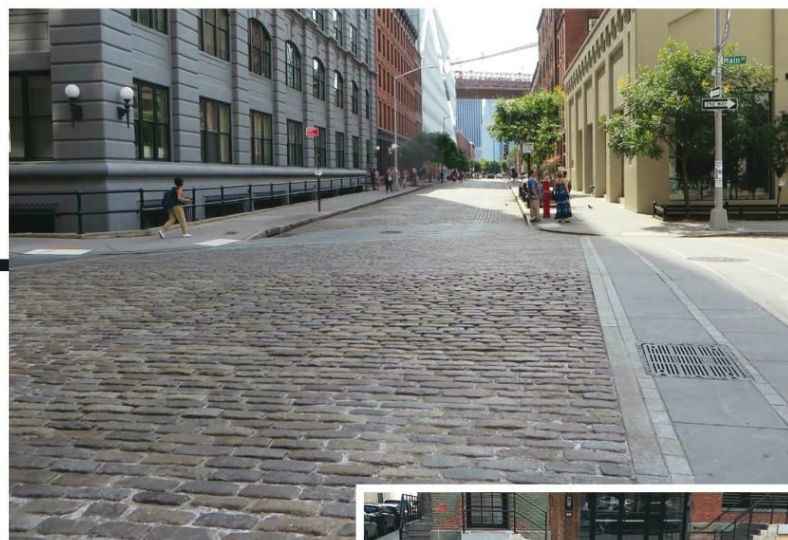
## PAVING THE WAY

**A NEW STUDY IDENTIFIES WAYS TO MAKE HISTORIC STREETS SAFE AND ACCESSIBLE.**

Of the many threads that form the fabric of New York's historic districts, streets can be among the most vulnerable. They are public rights-of-way, susceptible to utility upgrades and required by law to meet accessibility standards. As a result, historic paving such as the distinctive Belgian block in the DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) neighborhood of Brooklyn is often chopped up, cut through, paved over, or replaced, contributing to a gradual degradation of the district's historic character. But according to a new report commissioned by New York's Historic Districts Council (HDC), modern accessibility standards and the preservation of historic paving need not be in opposition.

The report, *Toward Accessible Historic Streetscapes*, produced by Denisha Williams, ASLA, and Jeff Byles of Being Here Landscape Architecture & Environmental Design, focuses on the Belgian block streets and sidewalks of DUMBO, where last year a series of roadway reconstruction projects prompted a question that no one seemed to be asking: Was it really necessary to tear out the existing rectangular granite pavers, or was there a way to make them compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)? HDC hired Being Here to find the answer.

For Williams, it was a topic of particular interest. "I grew up in what I call



a wheelchair family," she says. Her father used a wheelchair from age 11 until he died in his late 30s. It was an experience that made her "keenly aware of accessibility issues, long before the ADA became law." Williams worked in historic preservation before going back to school for landscape architecture and founding Being Here in 2012. Byles, who is also a writer, joined in 2014. Still, they were "surprised by the richness and the depth of character that these materials bring to communities," Byles says. "Historic paving materials tell such a powerful story about our past. A humble Belgian block or a historic brick really is a direct link to the industrial history of places like DUMBO."

They were also delighted to find sophisticated and useful precedents for ways to preserve historic streetscapes and meet ADA requirements. For an ongoing roadway reconstruction project within the Gansevoort Market Historic District, Ken Smith Workshop devised a sorting system for the street's granite pavers. The roughest, most irregular Belgian blocks will be reset in the roadway, while the smoothest, most regular blocks will be reserved for areas requiring ADA compliance.



(ADA Standards for Accessible Design stipulate that "surfaces should be firm, stable, and slip-resistant" and limit vertical surface changes to a quarter inch and gaps to half an inch.) Elsewhere in the city, a type of granite paver called Tumblestone is being used to re-create the appearance of historic Belgian block.

Williams and Byles also make specific recommendations to the city's Department of Transportation, such as the establishment of a separately funded Historic Streets Maintenance Plan, but the study's relevance is not limited to New York City. Any municipality with areas of historic paving will face similar questions, and the intention is that this study can help. "There's not much guidance or technical assistance readily available for city agencies who are looking for help in preserving their historic streets," Byles says. "We hope that our study can be a first step in making these best practices more available." ●

**TOP**  
A historic Belgian block streetscape in DUMBO, including a reconstructed crosswalk of granite pavers.

**INSET**  
An area along Bridge Street illustrates the accessibility challenges of historic pavements.