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## Tinkering With Taxis

Flowers add color to yellow urban symbol



If the image of a New York City taxi is any one thing, it's yellow -- as splashy as a warning sign and as single-minded as a crayon. But an estimated 30,000 New Yorkers are about to put personal stamps on its archetypal cabs by painting bold floral decals, destined to be plastered on taxis from September through December. The stickers are marks of a metropolitan milestone -- the centennial of the city's metered vehicles for hire -- and measures of an expanding definition of public art.

Supporters envision the project, called Garden in Transit, as kaleidoscopic artwork on a massive civic canvas, with the public as artist. Organizers recently set up a studio in a historic hotel ballroom and are inviting anyone interested in painting to go to the project's Web site, [www.gardenintransit.org](http://www.gardenintransit.org).

"The city will look more vibrant, and this just sets New York apart from all the other cities that have transportation that's so bland," Evelisse Viamontee, 13, said after painting a panel -- in sky blue, teal and lavender -- at the studio on a recent morning.

City Taxi & Limousine Commissioner Matthew Daus called it "just a great way to marry art and history."

While cabs are common in at least parts of many cities, New York is an undisputed taxi capital. Its almost 13,000 taxis make up the nation's biggest fleet by far -- the next largest,

in Washington, D.C., totals about 6,800, said Bruce Schaller, a former New York taxi commission official who produces an annual taxi fact book.

Besides the decal display in the fall, New York plans to mark its taxis' 100th anniversary with an exhibit of novel cab designs and other events in April.

The city had horse-drawn and even electric cabs before 1907, but taxi culture hit a turning point that year when cabs with meters and gasoline motors -- and the term "taxicab" -- arrived in New York, according to Michael Angelich and Ben Merkel, historian and director respectively of the Checker Car Club of America.

Taxicabs quickly became and remain a key form of transportation in a city where 55 percent of households still don't have access to a vehicle of their own, compared with 9 percent nationwide, according to a 2005 U.S. Census survey.

Cabs became even more ubiquitous after the city started requiring the distinctive yellow hue in 1968, aiming to make it easier to tell licensed taxis from unlicensed ones, Merkel and Angelich said.

So it is no small thing to tinker with the look of a New York taxi. It took a few years for brothers Ed and Bernie Massey, the founders of a Santa Monica-based art-therapy organization called Portraits of Hope, to get approval for the taxi decals.

Plans call for painting 800,000 square feet of vinyl -- about 17 professional football fields' worth -- preprinted with outlines of oversized, six-petaled flowers.

Organizers expect 30,000 children and adults will paint 5-foot-square stickers at schools, hospitals and the project's new studio in the one-time ballroom of the Hotel Pennsylvania.

Enough painted stickers for every yellow cab will be supplied by organizers, but taxi owners have the option of declining.

If Ed Massey sees the taxi decals as opportunities for citizens "to impact the cityscape of New York," they are also reflections of an increasingly flexible view of public art. At least some observers now apply the term to everything from painted bus benches to virtual reality realms.

"Public art used to be the equestrian statue in the town square," said David Darts, an assistant professor of art at New York University. "When we think about public art today, it really is something that's more conceptual in nature."