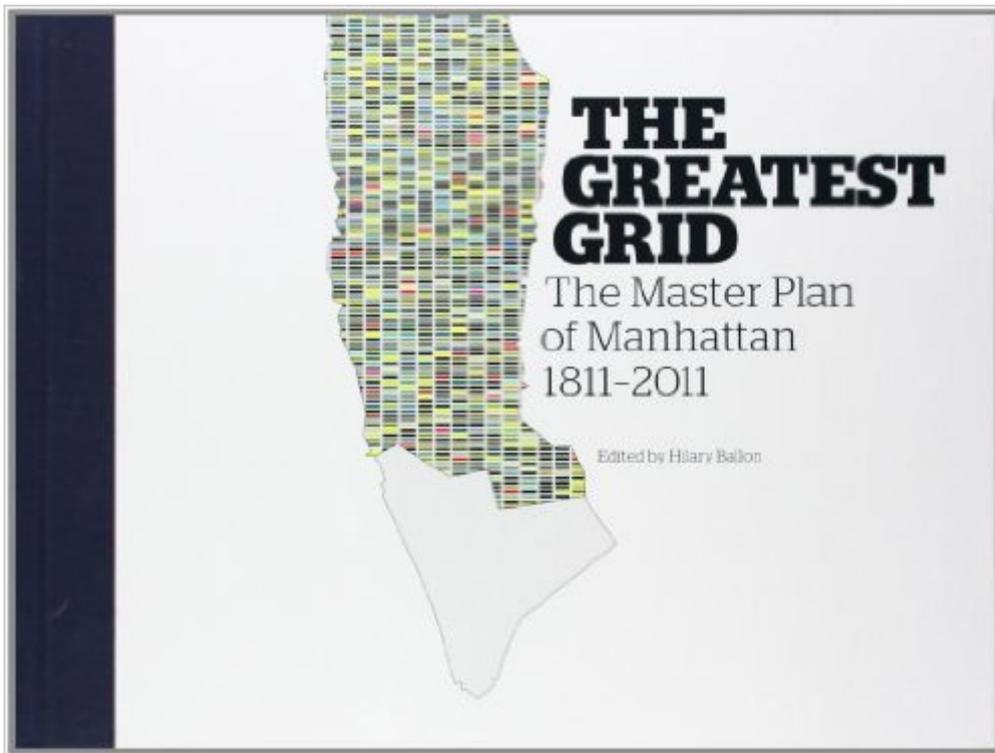


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The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan Of Manhattan, 1811-2011



Synopsis

Laying out Manhattan's street grid and providing a rationale for the growth of New York was the city's first great civic enterprise, not to mention a brazenly ambitious project and major milestone in the history of city planning. The grid created the physical conditions for business and society to flourish and embodied the drive and discipline for which the city would come to be known. Published to coincide with an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York celebrating the bicentennial of the Commissioners' 1811 Plan of Manhattan, this volume does more than memorialize such a visionary effort, it serves as an enduring reference full of rare images and information. The Greatest Grid shares the history of the Commissioners' plan, incorporating archival photos and illustrations, primary documents and testimony, and magnificent maps with essential analysis. The text, written by leading historians of New York City, follows the grid's initial design, implementation, and evolution, and then speaks to its enduring influence. A foldout map, accompanied by explanatory notes, reproduces the Commissioners' original plan, and additional maps and prints chart the city's pre-1811 irregular growth patterns and local precedent for the grid's design. Constituting the first sustained examination of this subject, this text describes the social, political, and intellectual figures who were instrumental in remaking early New York, not in the image of old Europe but as a reflection of other American cities and a distinct New World sensibility. The grid reaffirmed old hierarchies while creating new opportunities for power and advancement, giving rise to the multicultural, highly networked landscape New Yorkers thrive in today.

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Customer Reviews

The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011 is an exhibit on display at the Museum of the City of New York through April 15, 2012. It explores the comprehensive history of Manhattan's master street plan. I visited the exhibition on January 13. While seeing it in person allowed me to appreciate the physical size of the maps, the exhibit's most important component is the accompanying book. Mirroring the layout of the exhibit, the book breaks down Manhattan's physical history essentially into these components: 1) Precedents: Law of the Indies, Philadelphia, etc. 2) People: Commissioners, surveyors, and opponents 3) Street Plan: Creation, protection, and construction 4) Effects on Manhattan: Subdivision and property values. There are 13 chapters in total each with an overview essay. These essays are clearly written and reveal the authors' deep understanding of the grid's greater implications. For example, beginning chapter 4 on opening streets: "The miracle of the 1811 plan was that it was enforced. It took about sixty years for the grid to be built up to 155th Street, sixty years during which mayors and administrations, interest groups and aesthetic values frequently changed and might have undermined the plan-but the grid prevailed. New York sustained a multigenerational commitment to its first major infrastructure project-a rarity in the history of master plans, which are more often ignored or forgotten than implemented." Following these introductions is a full series of photographs and maps with their own extensive captions. Overall, this is a deeply insightful and comprehensive collection on Manhattan's grid plan. A visit to the museum will allow you to experience the greatest grid itself, but if you cannot make it certainly purchase the book. For further review and photos visit the website "The Great American Grid."

This book complements an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York organized for the bicentennial in 2011 of the adoption of the famous Commissioners' street grid. It is in fact made up of captions to maps, photos and other illustrations. These provide an in depth description of the growth of New York in the 19th century, as the imagined grid was actually implemented over land that was already parcelled out and occupied by farms and other extensive uses. This led of course to various adaptations that include Broadway and the squares that result as it crosses the grid as well as the implementation of Central Park. The discussion also briefly covers the 20th century when the grid was attacked to create monumental buildings such as Grand Central Station or superblocks as those on the Lower East Side. There are a couple of caveats. Many spelling mistakes could have been avoided by using any widely available word processor. Also, despite the oversized dimensions of the book, maps are often too small to actually be examined with all the attention one would

desire. Overall, this captivating book is recommended to all interested in urban development and of course in New York City in particular.

This book is fascinating for anybody interested in the history of New York, or in city planning in general. It tells the story of New York's revolutionary grid system, interesting especially because the Manhattan grid utilizes every spot on the island of Manhattan above the already built-up city. It displays over 200 historic documents, maps, paintings, drawings and photographs, showing the northward progression of the grid over the years. It also tells in detail about the criticism of the grid system over the years, and does not shy away from revealing its shortcomings, e.g., the lack of parks in the original plan. Moreover, it tells in detail about the changes made to the grid during various periods, such as the laying out of New York's many gorgeous parks, the addition of several avenues on the East Side, and the "super-blocks" - blocks enlarged due to the elimination of stretches of streets and avenues. Finally, it gives the details of the expansion of a variant of the grid above 155th Street, which originally was to be the northern limit of the grid - difficult due to the harsh topography of this area.

Manhattan is unusual among older cities in being laid out in a rectangular plan that makes it really easy to figure out where you are -- well, as long as you are north of 14th Street. Though the grid did show up millenia ago, in Roman camps, most older cities are less regular in plan. Boston, for example, is believed to have been laid out by wandering cows. Why then is Manhattan so regular? Because they planned it that way. This book -- elegantly and accurately -- recapitulates the Museum of the City of New York's exhibition on the master plan that made Manhattan. Manhattan's population tripled from 1790 to 1810, an annual rate of 33% (take that, Chengdu). It was pretty clear that growth was going to stay very, very strong, and that planning for expansion was a good idea. As early as 1804, the City Council had begun the process of developing a plan, and in 1811 that was embodied in the Commissioners' Plan. Since then, the plan has held, albeit with many modifications. The book shows how Manhattan developed before the plan, the political circumstances of its institution, and discusses in detail John Randal's survey of Manhattan, completed in 1820, which made it possible to convert the plan from a paper proposal to an on-the-ground reality. It then shows how Manhattan moved uptown, amending the plan to make a more livable city, and only on occasion to meet the needs of developers. It includes many highly detailed maps, many contemporaneous illustrations, and a comprehensive accompanying text. This book is a real accomplishment, and a necessary part of any good library of New York books.

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