

Manhattan

Mechanicsville

“...a mythical island where the invention and testing of a metropolitan lifestyle and its attendant architecture could be pursued as a collective experiment in which the entire city became a factory of man-made experience, where the real and the natural ceased to exist.”ⁱ

“Manhattan is a major commercial, financial, and cultural center of both United States and the world....Manhattan’s daytime population swells to 2.87 mill, with commuters adding a net 1.34 mill to the population.”ⁱⁱ

What forces hides behind successful human creations. Are they born from ideology and good moral, or do they come from pure practical, functional and selfish needs and the forces of economics. Further, how do human creations, like cities, design and architecture influence culture, and when and how does it happen. Manhattan is an example of both great city planning and an extraordinary urban culture, but without any visionary predominant strategy for either.

This essay will try to investigate some of the background for how Manhattan developed as a city, and how possibly its physical structure became, by intention, or by accident, a catalyzer for such creative endeavors.

The Island of Manhattan was to become the most adventures experiment of a free capitalistic, democratic urban development in the 19th and 20th century; the age of mechanization.

Despite a city developed by an unquestioned faith in progress, creed, and lack of social considerations, it still became a hub for creativity, and a focal point for the international contemporary art, film, media - and music scene etc.

Beginning in 1623 a few dozen Dutch families arrived in “in the new world” to re-fabricate their motherland. No stranger to artificial urban landscaping the seeds of Manhattan was “sawn”.

1625 establishment of Fort Amsterdam is recognized as the birth date of New York City.

“The Commissioners’ Plan of 1811, called for twelve numbered avenues running north and south....each 100 feet wide, with First Avenue on the east side and Twelfth Avenue on the west. The numbered streets of Manhattan run east-west, and are 60 feet wide. ... The grid’s skew is approximately 28.9 degrees.... The diagonal of Broadway is the most notable of many exceptions to the grid.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The plan for the final grid structure consisted of about 2000 blocks, 200’-250 by 400’-600 feet.

A frantic and shameless development of the city developed with great speed, accelerated and escalated towards heaven, to become what is still the core of Manhattan – a Mechanicsville of 20th century.

A basically unchanged grid structure unfolding in two-dimensional disciplines against three-dimensional anarchy. A free exploitation of each 2000 blocks, to be built as massive, dark and cloud piercing as anyone could dream of (with zoning law of 1916 imposing set-backs to reduce shadows from the sky scrapers, giving the skyline its characteristic stepped formations).

Within this enormous, but strictly limited mega block Island, the frenzy and fragmented utopia, we basically know today, was erected in about 125 years time, to culminate in the great depression (although several of the most famous and tallest buildings were erected at that time).

By then it housed about 2, 3 million people along with offices, businesses, and entertainment venues. A mega village, in constant flight forward; always is changing in new bizarre mutations. The furious anarchy of development created a, never seen before, metropolis of intense congestion- with the massive dark material of the blocks, and spears pitching the sky above heavy stepped bases, pierced itself by the underlying grid- structure of streets and avenues.

A phantom city of masked towers put together with a relatively narrow distance in- between blocks (compared to the height) forming rivers of cars and people floating through the streets, day and night. The curse of this city is that it`s inhabitants can only go too` far, and never return, because the past and the future is a blurry grey ghost never really to be found.

The retreat

“Eighteenth-century faith in progress . . . started from science; that of the nineteenth century, from mechanization. Industry, which brought about this mechanization with its unceasing flow of inventions, had something of the miracle that roused the fantasy of the masses.”^{iv}

Coney Island was developed simultaneously as Manhattan as an amusement park and a retreat for the city people. Along the beach facing the Atlantic Ocean several different amusement park concepts grew up, based on calculated needs for pleasure and escape by the investors. Another laboratory for frantic development, but here only stage sets in cardboards was constructed. Using the latest technology available, to create an illusion of the exotic fantastic; the Steeplechase, Dreamland, Tilyou and Luna Park. Put to life- by thousands of light bulbs at night, the parks presented presumably meaningless other worlds of hedonism and obscure and false dreams of the exotic – other worlds. 300 midgets, youngsters dressed in neat sailor dresses and animals gathered on Coney Island, and presented ever more fantastic shows, each season, as the artificial place kept growing. A parody of the modernist seriousness of cultivated European lifestyle, it finally burns in 1911, and eventually dies in the 1930`s, when the City started a process to make it a public park.

The “real” Manhattan would embrace much of the entertainment culture of Coney Island, and later incorporate it inside its own structure; hidden behind neutral dark rational carpet facades. The Coney parks would enfold inside the blocks with different themes in different rooms like; exotic jungles, Roman city scenery, enormous gyms or multi theatres like the Radio Music Hall. Coney Island carried on in Manhattan.

Mental freedom

The structure (grid) of Manhattan, its limited fixed size, and subdivisions of each block gave it a specific rhythm. Each block became independent Islands. The further subdivisions of the individual blocks happened randomly, but kept changing until a certain mass- climax was reached. Manhattan was eventually fully exploited by pure capitalistic dynamics and forces. The subdivisions of the buildings created certain constructed horizontal rhythms based on the span capacity of beams, girders and slabs, utilizing traditional industrial construction technology. Considering a similar vertical division of heights between stories it is possible to imagine an enormous 3 –D grid structure; a matrix inside each block multiplied by at least 2000. Infinity of possible combinations; with small, narrow, long, or big rooms, streets and sidewalks. Full of simultaneous randomness and rigor. It was a survival of the fittest developer, but mostly not ruled by anyone beyond each individual block. The marginal between cost and sale, mixed with available technology, dreams, guts and money have shaped Manhattan more than intellect, theory, government control or ideology.

A possible free anarchy set in motion for almost 100- years with presumably unlimited means and no barriers except the grid. This created an enormous functional framework made for convenience, utility and pleasure. The city escalated and took form without a plan.

The demand for utility, functionality and convenience creates a seemingly flexible and unrestricted, multifunctional urban environment. Finally, this furthermore allow for a “free” middle space for people`s actions, within the 3- dimensional grid- matrix. Vacant spaces or low rent, available thought time; spaces where people will take back control of the stage and act in the city. This became especially true with the decline of industry and rise of the service society. Former industrial spaces inside the “X- ray buildings” became available for art galleries, artists, bars’ or vintage secondhand clothes. Recently the rapid rise of real estate prices and decline of crime has encouraged people to move into new, former poor, neighborhoods, and the city has again transformed its social and economical dynamics.

The unrestricted grid of the public street pattern creates, together with the random subdivisions of each block, a contrasting but complementing rhythm. Rhythms of different neighborhoods. Rhythms of urban cultures, finance and art, entertainment, food, hotels, sports and different lifestyles. An enormous variety stuck together in a relatively small space. The regulator is the grid, on an Island, and the creator is people`s success and failures. A possible shared consciousness prevails through patterns of movements, and events within the matrix of Manhattan. The soft human scale micro movements of traffic speed, pedestrians, different shops and bar- hours sets the stage for people and their choices, versus the massive static built macro fabric of the blocks ruled by the laws of economics.

The soul of Manhattan dwells somewhere, within its static and moving forms. It both feeds from and gives life to a secret energy in the city and allows for infinite possible variations of human action; combinations of both real and unreal – imagined events. It encompasses a specific feeling, of speed, bluish light and gray shadows, freedom of movements and choices, an uneasiness of what might happen, but a certainty of locations.

The powerful presence of the dark block- Islands; of shadowy sky scrapers with towers piercing white clouds far above, offer entrances; doors and gates leading through to a mysterious dimly illuminated world inside. Often the inside world of the blocks contrasts the neutrality outside with exotic themes and dreamlike realities taking peoples imagination away from the city to a distant past, a brilliant future, or simply the now. Manhattan allow for an ever changing, forward striving urban society propelled by the banality of the ever need to pay (rising) rent. An urban culture which is embedded in a specific city, that continue to take new human and artificial forms within its limitations and possibilities; to create space for mental freedom.

Peoplesville

“To live together in the world means to essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in- between, relates and separates men at the same time.”^v

“Manhattan`s vibrant visual art scene in the 1950`s and 1960`s was the center of American pop art movement, which gave birth to such giants as Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein. Perhaps no other

artist is associated with the downtown pop art movement of the late 1970`s as Andy Warhol, who socialized clubs like Serendipity 3 and Studio 54.^{vi}

It was built during the peak of the industrialized revolution. The mechanization of the private sphere - the household, found its natural playground. The bachelor apartments- complexes with food elevators, the mechanized kitchen and bathrooms, mechanized entertainments, cars, the subway, heating and ventilation systems, all and much more was tested in this city.

The alienation from nature must have been extreme in a city where the only piece of “real nature” was Central Park, an artificial park, recreated from what was left of nature during Manhattans development. However through the law of equilibrium people would eventually take back the city, overcome the machine, and created their own “mental city”. A city of dreams – of the exotic. This was at first intentionally done by the developers at Coney Island, as a trick to make money, within the new mega structures in Manhattan, but later, maybe in the 1960`s more unintentionally within the carcasses of former industry X- ray buildings left vacant by the decline of the industrial economy. People took back the stage and put themselves n the center. Manhattan seems, oddly enough, to have become a very human place in our time.

Already a historic city, preserved by its own physical limitation, it can only really change by drastic means. Grand and horrible demolitions like the 9/11 attack that suddenly liberates, through tragedy, a possibly new urban development. Again it is the faith for this city to grow and change by absolute marginal and drastic means and needs, supply and demands, destiny, rather than intended controlled politics, ideology and planned urban visions.

Maybe it is God`s will, or peoples secret inner forces and capabilities that make up the culture of a city. It is certainly not natural, but artificial in one way or another; a constructed reality within peoples mind. You won`t like it before you have adapted the mindset – it`s culture.

Kai Gundersen
04.04.2010

ⁱ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 1978/ 1994 The Monacelli Press

ⁱⁱ Wikipedia – “Manhattan”, 16.03.10

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, 1948 Oxford University Press, INC

^v Hannah Arendt, *The human condition*, 1958 The University of Chicago Press

^{vi} Wikipedia – “Manhattan”, 16.03.10