



City on a Grid: How New York Became New York

Gerard Koepfel

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You either love it or hate it, but nothing says New York like the street grid of Manhattan. Created in 1811 by a three-man commission featuring headstrong Founding Father Gouverneur Morris, the plan called for a dozen parallel avenues crossing at right angles with many dozens of parallel streets in an unbroken grid. Hills and valleys, streams and ponds, forests and swamps were invisible to the grid; so too were country villages, roads, farms, and estates and generations of property lines. All would disappear as the crosshatch fabric of the grid overspread the island: a heavy greatcoat on the land, the dense undergarment of the future city.

No other grid in Western civilization was so large and uniform as the one ordained in 1811. Not without reason. When the grid plan was announced, New York was just under two hundred years old, an overgrown town at the southern tip of Manhattan, a notorious jumble of streets laid at the whim of landowners. To bring order beyond the chaos-and good real estate to market-the street planning commission came up with a monolithic grid for the rest of the island. Mannahatta-the native "island of hills"-became a place of rectangles, in thousands of blocks on the flattened landscape, and many more thousands of right-angled buildings rising in vertical mimicry.

The Manhattan grid has been called "a disaster" of urban planning and "the most courageous act of prediction in Western civilization." However one feels about it, the most famous urban design of a living city defines its daily life. This is its story.

City on a Grid: How New York Became New York Details

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Author : Gerard Koeppe

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From Reader Review *City on a Grid: How New York Became New York* for online ebook

Erin Bilé says

Clearly well researched but is very dry and reads like a textbook or research paper. Lacking any interesting anecdotes.

Sean Rowland says

The history and story of how the grid came to be is an interesting one. It shows the decisions that were made and not made that put NYC in a straitjacket that is almost impossible to escape. The narrative does get bogged down in too much minutiae at times, but this is still a good view into how urban planning can greatly impact the lives of people that live in cities.

Robert S says

City on a Grid is a comprehensive well-researched look at the creation of the street grid of Manhattan in New York.

Koeppel discusses the creation of the grid, the individuals who helped shape it, and some of the many opinions about it. Individuals tend to fall in the "love it" or "leave it" camps with the grid, either wishing it was a part of their own town or being thankful that their cities were allowed to grow a bit more organically. Koeppel's discussion showcases the merits for both sides ultimately, showing the advantages of the grid system being put in place but still leaving some readers (including this one) to wonder how the city would be today if allowed to develop in a different manner.

Personally, I prefer the grid system of Manhattan over say trying to get around Boston. However, there is definitely some room for growth in the current system.

My only real problems with *City on a Grid* are twofold; one being the need for more maps when discussing the grid as the book is more enjoyable if you have at least a standard knowledge of it, and the second being a heavier focus than desired about the individuals behind the grid rather than the grid itself.

Overall, the book is definitely worth a read for anyone who's interested in the grid or the topic of urban planning.

Kathy Deppe says

I had high hopes for this book as I grew up in NY along with family and friends..lots of history in NY-I love it! Love NYC;Long Island;Upstate etc all of the state..plus, I enjoy history. However, I was very disappointed..I could not get into this book at all-VERY dry reading, but the photos were nice to look at.

Seemed to me more like a text book.

George says

Interesting history of how Manhattan got its unique grid shape

alphonse p guardino says

I found the book interesting. Lots of things about the history of NYC that I did not know.

But in some ways I think the book could have been better organized. It could also have used better quality illustrations!

Rich Grech says

Well researched recap of the process under which the NYC street grid plan came to be. If you're not interested in things like this, it probably won't get you interested - but for anyone with a passing interest in city planning or NYC history - I say give it a read.

Lalitha Vadrevu says

An interesting book by Gerard Koepfel on how the Island of Mannahatta became the present-day Manhattan. Although a bit dry, the book is engaging for someone who moved recently to this bustling city. It is a detailed account of the challenges and controversies surrounding the making of this gridded city and its many avenues.

Richard says

New York City is the first city I got a chance to know, and I've always been familiar with, and comfortable with, its grid of numbered streets and avenues, which made a logical sense, kind of like a metric system of urban planning. If you're planning to meet someone at Second Avenue and 79th Street, for example, even if you've never been to that part of town, you know exactly where it is and how to get there. The grid makes it easier to feel that you know the city.

But New York City didn't necessarily have to have a grid. I'm so accustomed to the layout of the city's streets that it never really occurred to me that there might have been an alternative. This book, by Gerard Koepfel, examines how the grid came to be (not such an interesting story) and what might have been instead, which is much more interesting. Reading this book caused me to consider alternative Manhattans, and that's something I appreciated.

Koeppel, in his introduction, says that his book won't judge the grid, it will just consider the arguments for and against, but it's pretty clear that he's not a fan. He laments that the grid has prevented Manhattan from being beautiful, a point I don't agree with. Sure, Manhattan doesn't have a great boulevard like the Champs-Élysées, but I've never, while on foot in New York, even noticed this lack. And I've been to Paris, and walked along the Champs-Élysées, and when doing so it never occurred to me that New York didn't have anything similar.

The author makes some strange statements. He doesn't like Central Park's rectangular shape. He says the park is "imprisoned by the grid." I *like* the big green rectangle. When viewed from aerial photos, or from the Empire State Building, it looks like a gigantic carpet placed in the heart of Manhattan. And I doubt that anyone walking or riding or otherwise recreating in Central Park has ever felt constrained by its rectangular shape.

However, Koeppel argues convincingly that the grid wasn't a result of ingenious design, but was instead something slapped together by a group of Commissioners who had other priorities. And the grid does have flaws. Envisioning a Manhattan planned by wiser Commissioners is an interesting exercise. A wider Fifth Avenue. More avenues overall. (Madison and Lexington Avenues were not part of the original plan, but were added later when it became apparent that there was too much space between Fifth and Park and between Park and Third. Before they could get around to adding another avenue between Fifth and Sixth, the area was already too developed to squeeze in another thoroughfare.)

The book was kind of dry at times. Reading about lines on maps can get dull after a while. But I'm someone who will always be interested in reading about how my favorite city became what it is today, so there was no way I wasn't going to read this book. It wasn't a great book by any means, and while I reject the author's unstated (but strongly hinted) perspective that the grid is a curse on the city, I'm very glad I read it.

Sara says

A comprehensive history of New York City's grid system, this historical volume starts off strong but gradually falls into a recitation of minor historical personages and events.

Michael Lewyn says

The first half or so of this book, focusing on pre-1811 Manhattan and then on a commission's adoption of the grid, was impressively detailed but a bit dry, if not downright boring, for my tastes. To summarize it briefly: the commission didn't give a lot of thought to, or spend a lot of time on, what it was doing, and still created Manhattan's grid (which then required an extensive use of eminent domain to enforce, as the city bought out land that didn't fit within street boundaries).

The second half of the book discusses how landowners filled in the streets created by the grid with houses and apartments, and discusses problems with the grid. Although Koeppel seems pretty negative about it, his only clear and sensible objection is that the grid created too few north-south avenues (thus limiting

circulation of all modes of transportation) and that some streets were too wide (especially problematic after the growth of the auto). He suggests here and there that New York is not beautiful, but since plenty of non-gridded places are quite ugly, I don't find this to be a persuasive argument.

Steve Solnick says

Prodigiously researched history of New York's street grid - alternately fascinating and frustrating. At times it feels like the author is mining a dissertation on Manhattan's earliest urban planning days, going down rabbit holes about how an early city surveyor was paid. At times, it reads like a mild polemic against the tyranny of the grid. At times, it zooms by utopian visions of the mid-20th century with just a glance. Taken as a whole, the book offers some fascinating background on the unique urban planning layout that is Manhattan and valuable context for, perhaps, reading OTHER books about the social and economic implications of Manhattan's distinctive layout. I learned a lot.

Michelle says

Bleh. Not one interesting tidbit. And the writing style was so inconsistent! Frustrating and jarring when writers do that.

Mark Robertson says

This is an interesting history of New York City's physical layout, explaining how the city adopted and implemented the grid system of wide avenues and narrow streets that describes most of the island above Houston Street. While explaining the grid, Koeppel also discusses proposals that were floated to fill in the East River, among other things. Most New Yorkers will probably find this book thought provoking.

The author points out correctly that you either love or hate the grid system - I'm firmly in the "I love it" camp. Nonetheless, this book does make me wonder if I'd love New York even more if it had retained more of its natural features, if the city's development hadn't been more organic rather than rigidly imposed. It is, of course, too late. Hills have been leveled, ravines filled in, brooks covered, etc.

This author has, according to this book's jacket, written a history of the Erie Canal and also a book about getting water to New York City, and he has also contributed to other works, including the Encyclopedia of New York City, where he was an associate editor. His background at the encyclopedia may explain what I thought was one of this book's major flaws: Koeppel seems to be easily sidetracked, giving short histories of marginal players that, while often interesting, are not at all central to the history of the grid. Also, near the end of this book he laments the city's lack of a boulevard, but to my mind Park Avenue at least kind of fits the bill. Nowhere does he explain how it is that Park is so much wider than the other avenues east of Central Park. (I know that it covers the rail lines, but the plan for the city's grid was adopted in 1811, years before there was any rail service.) Finally, in this book's last paragraph, Koeppel writes that "The street grid was laid on a preindustrial island that is now a postindustrial city in a world struggling with sustainability. Sustainability has made the grid's un-green density dangerous." I take issue with this last statement: New Yorkers have, I believe, the smallest carbon footprint of any other U.S. inhabitants, and that is due entirely to the city's population density.

Scott says

I've always been a little claustrophobic living on the island. Now I finally have a name to my pain. While the author claims grid-neutrality in the beginning, he is clearly an 'anti-griddy' and makes a strong case for his thinly hidden biases with regards to traditional concepts of urban beauty, the incompetence of the original planners, and the evil machinations of Hamilton's foe Aaron Burr, the man who may ultimately be responsible for it all.

On the other hand, the author's "avenues" of thinking often flow only one way, making little mention of how our subway mitigates the north-south traffic question. Some parts can be disorientating when describing the layout of specific streets without benefit of a map, and sentences could occasionally use a little more rigid conformity themselves (I've never seen a sentence featuring two semi-colons before and I'd be happy if I never saw one again).

But overall, it's a fascinating perspective on something most of New Yorkers perhaps necessarily take for granted, as well as those living in the seeming majority of American cities that followed its rectilinear example. An eye-opening treatise and a great source of grid-based cocktail party conversation at the very least.
