Delirious New York
A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan

Rem Koolhaas
Introduction

Philosophers and philologists should be concerned in the first place with poetic metaphysics; that is, the science that looks for proof not in the external world, but in the very modifications of the mind that meditates on it. Since the world of nations is made by men, it is inside their minds that its principles should be sought.
— Giambattista Vico, Principles of a New Science, 1759

Why do we have a mind if not to get our way?
— Fyodor Dostoyevski

MANIFESTO

How to write a manifesto—on a form of urbanism for what remains of the 20th century—in an age disgusted with them? The fatal weakness of manifestos is their inherent lack of evidence. Manhattan’s problem is the opposite: it is a mountain range of evidence without manifesto.

This book was conceived at the intersection of these two observations: it is a retroactive manifesto for Manhattan.

Manhattan is the 20th century’s Rosetta Stone. Not only are large parts of its surface occupied by architectural mutations (Central Park, the Skyscraper), utopian fragments (Rockefeller Center, the UN Building) and irrational phenomena (Radio City Music Hall), but in addition each block is covered with several layers of phantom architecture in the form of past occupancies, aborted projects and popular fantasies that provide alternative images to the New York that exists.

Especially between 1890 and 1940 a new culture (the Machine Age?) selected Manhattan as laboratory: 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.

This book is an interpretation of that Manhattan which gives its seemingly discontinuous—even irreconcilable—episodes a degree of consistency and coherence, an interpretation that intends to establish Manhattan as the product of an unformulated theory, Manhattanism, whose program—to exist in a world totally fabricated by man, i.e., to live inside fantasy—was so ambitious that to be realized, it could never be openly stated.

ECSTASY
If Manhattan is still in search of a theory, then this theory, once identified, should yield a formula for an architecture that is at once ambitious and popular.
Manhattan has generated a shameless architecture that has been loved in direct proportion to its defiant lack of self-hatred, respected exactly to the degree that it went too far.
Manhattan has consistently inspired in its beholders ecstasy about architecture.
In spite—or perhaps because—of this, its performance and implications have been consistently ignored and even suppressed by the architectural profession.

DENSITY
Manhattanism is the one urbanistic ideology that has fed, from its conception, on the splendors and miseries of the metropolitan condition—hyper-density—without once losing faith in it as the basis for a desirable modern culture. Manhattan's architecture is a paradigm for the exploitation of congestion.
The retroactive formulation of Manhattan's program is a polemical operation.
It reveals a number of strategies, theorems and breakthroughs that not only give logic and pattern to the city's past performance, but whose continuing validity is itself an argument for a second coming of Manhattanism, this time as an explicit doctrine that can transcend the island of its origins to claim its place among contemporary urbanisms. With Manhattan as example, this book is a blueprint for a "Culture of Congestion."

BLUEPRINT
A blueprint does not predict the cracks that will develop in the future; it describes an ideal state that can only be approximated. In the same way this book describes a theoretical Manhattan, a Manhattan as conjecture, of which the present city is the compromised and imperfect realization. From all the episodes of Manhattan's urbanism this book isolates only those moments where the blueprint is most visible and most convincing. It should, and inevitably will, be read against the torrent of negative analyses that emanates from Manhattan about Manhattan and that has firmly established Manhattan as the Capital of Perpetual Crisis. Only through the speculative reconstruction of a perfect Manhattan can its monumental successes and failures be read.

BLOCKS
In terms of structure, this book is a simulacrum of Manhattan's Grid: a collection of blocks whose proximity and juxtaposition reinforce their separate meanings.
The first four blocks—"Coney Island," "The Skyscraper," "Rockefeller Center" and "Europeans"—chronicle the permutations of Manhattanism as an implied rather than explicit doctrine.
They show the progression (and subsequent decline) of Manhattan's determination to remove its territory as far from the natural as humanly possible.
The fifth block—the Appendix—is a sequence of architectural projects that solidifies Manhattanism into an explicit doctrine and negotiates the transition from Manhattanism's unconscious architectural production to a conscious phase.

GHOSTWRITER
Movie stars who have led adventure-packed lives are often too egocentric to discover patterns, too inarticulate to express intentions, too restless to record or remember events. Ghostwriters do it for them.

In the same way I was Manhattan's ghostwriter.
(With the added complication that my source and subject passed into premature senility before its "life" was completed. That is why I had to provide my own ending.)
Prehistory

PROGRAM

"What race first peopled the island of Manhatta?"
"They were, but are not.
"Sixteen centuries of the Christian era rolled away, and no trace of civilization was left on the spot where now stands a city renowned for commerce, intelligence and wealth.
"The wild children of nature, unmolested by the white man, roamed through its forests, and impelled their light canoes along its tranquil waters. But the time was near at hand when these domains of the savage were to be invaded by strangers who would lay the humble foundations of a mighty state, and scatter everywhere in their path exterminating principles which, with constantly augmenting force, would never cease to act until the whole aboriginal race should be extirpated and their memory... be almost blotted out from under heaven. Civilization, originating in the east, had reached the western confines of the old world. It was now to cross the barrier that had arrested its progress, and penetrate the forest of a continent that had just appeared to the astonished gaze of the millions of Christendom.
"North American barbarism was to give place to European refinement."
In the middle of the 19th century—more than 200 years into the experiment which is Manhattan—a sudden self-consciousness about its uniqueness erupts. The need to mythologize its past and rewrite a history that can serve its future becomes urgent.
The quotation above—from 1848—describes Manhattan’s program with disregard for the facts, but precisely identifies its intentions. Manhattan is a theater of progress.
Its protagonists are the "exterminating principles which, with constantly...
augmenting force, would never cease to act.” Its plot is: barbarism giving way to refinement.

From these givens, its future can be extrapolated forever: since the exterminating principles never cease to act, it follows that what is refinement one moment will be barbarism the next.

Therefore, the performance can never end or even progress in the conventional sense of dramatic plotting; it can only be the cyclic restatement of a single theme: creation and destruction irrevocably interlocked, endlessly reenacted.

The only suspense in the spectacle comes from the constantly escalating intensity of the performance.

PROJECT

“To many people in Europe, of course, facts about New Amsterdam were of no importance. A completely fictitious view would do, if it matched their idea of what a city was...”

In 1672 a French engraver, Jollain, sends into the world a bird’s-eye view of New Amsterdam.

It is completely false; none of the information it communicates is based on reality. Yet it is a depiction — perhaps accidental — of the project Manhattan: an urban science fiction.

At the center of the image appears a distinctly European walled city, whose reason for being, like that of the original Amsterdam, seems to be a linear port along the length of the city that allows direct access.

A church, a stock market, a city hall, a palace of justice, a prison and, outside the wall, a hospital complete the apparatus of the mother civilization. Only the large number of facilities for the treatment and storage of animal skins in the city testifies to its location in the New World.

Outside the walls on the left is an extension that seems to promise — after barely 50 years of existence — a new beginning, in the form of a structured system of more or less identical blocks that can extend, if the need arises, all over the island, their rhythm interrupted by a Broadway-like diagonal.

The island’s landscape ranges from the flat to the mountainous, from the wild to the placid; the climate seems to alternate between Mediterranean summers (outside the walls is a sugarcane field) and severe (pelting-producing) winters.

All the components of the map are European; but, kidnapped from their context and transplanted to a mythical island, they are reassembled into an unrecognizable — yet ultimately accurate — new whole: a utopian
Europe, the product of compression and density. Already, adds the engraver, "the city is famous for its enormous number of inhabitants..." The city is a catalogue of models and precedents: all the desirable elements that exist scattered through the Old World finally assembled in a single place.

**COLONY**

Apart from the Indians, who have always been there—Weckquaesgecks in the south, Reckgawawacks in the north, both part of the Mohican tribe—Manhattan is discovered in 1609 by Henry Hudson in his search for "a new route to the Indies by way of the north" on behalf of the Dutch East India Company.

Four years later, Manhattan accommodates four houses (i.e., recognizable as such to Western eyes) among the Indian huts.

In 1623 30 families sail from Holland to Manhattan to plant a colony. With them is Cryn Fredericksz, an engineer, who carries written instructions on how the town should be laid out.

Since their whole country is man-made, there are no "accidents" for the Dutch. They plan the settlement of Manhattan as if it is part of their fabricated motherland.

The core of the new city is to be a pentagonal fort. Fredericksz is to survey a ditch 24 feet wide and 4 feet deep enclosing a rectangle extending back 1,600 feet from the water and 2,000 feet wide. . . . "The outside of the surrounding ditch having been staked out as above, 200 feet shall be staked out at the inside along all three sides A, B, C, for the purpose of locating therein the dwellings of the farmers and their gardens, and what is left shall remain vacant for the erection of more houses in the future...".

Outside the fort, on the other side of the ditch, there are to be 12 farms laid out in a system of rectangular plots separated by ditches.

But "this neat symmetrical pattern, conceived in the security and comfort of the company's offices in Amsterdam, proved unsuitable to the site on the tip of Manhattan..."

A smaller fort is built; the rest of the town laid out in a relatively disorderly manner.

Only once more does the Dutch instinct for order assert itself: when the settlers carve, out of the bedrock, a canal that runs to the center of the city. On either side is a collection of traditional Dutch houses with gabled roofs that maintains the illusion that the transplantation of Amsterdam into the New World has been a success.
In 1626 Peter Minuit buys the island Manhattan for 24 dollars from "the Indians." But the transaction is a falsehood; the sellers do not own the property. They do not even live there. They are just visiting.

**PREDICTION**

In 1807 Simeon deWitt, Gouverneur Morris and John Rutherford are commissioned to design the model that will regulate the "final and conclusive" occupancy of Manhattan. Four years later they propose — above the demarcation that separates the known from the unknowable part of the city — 12 avenues running north-south and 155 streets running east-west.

With that simple action they describe a city of $13 \times 156 = 2,028$ blocks (excluding topographical accidents); a matrix that captures, at the same time, all remaining territory and all future activity on the island.

The Manhattan Grid.

Advocated by its authors as facilitating the "buying, selling and improving of real estate," this "Apotheosis of the gridiron" — "with its simple appeal to unsophisticated minds" — is, 150 years after its superimposition on the island, still a negative symbol of the shortsightedness of commercial interests.

In fact, it is the most courageous act of prediction in Western civilization:

Commissioners’ proposal for Manhattan Grid, 1811 — “the land it divides, unoccupied; the population it describes, conjectural; the buildings it locates, phantoms; the activities it frames, nonexistent.”

The land it divides, unoccupied; the population it describes, conjectural; the buildings it locates, phantoms; the activities it frames, nonexistent.

**REPORT**

The argumentation of the Commissioners’ report introduces what will become the key strategy of Manhattan’s performance: the drastic disconnection between actual and stated intentions, the formula that creates the critical no-man’s-land where Manhattanism can exercise its ambitions.

“One of the first objects that claimed their attention was the form and manner in which business should be conducted; that is to say, whether they should confine themselves to rectilinear streets or whether they should adopt some of these supposed improvements, by circles, ovals and stars, which certainly embellish a plan, whatever may be their effects as to convenience and utility. In considering that subject, they could not but bear in mind that a city is composed principally of the habitations of men, and that strait sided, and right angled houses are the most cheap to build, and the most convenient to live in. The effect of these plain and simple reflections was decisive...”

*Manhattan is a utilitarian polemic.*

“It may, to many, be a matter of surprise, that so few vacant spaces have
been left, and those so small, for the benefit of fresh air, and consequent observation of health. Certainly, if the city of New York were destined to stand on the side of a small stream such as the Seine or Thames, a great number of ample spaces might be needful; but those large arms of the sea which embrace Manhattan island, render its situation, in regard to health and pleasure, as well as to convenience and commerce, peculiarly felicitous; when, therefore, from the same causes the price of land is so uncommonly great, it seemed proper to admit the principles of economy of greater influence than might, under circumstances of a different kind, have consisted with the dictates of prudence and the sense of duty..."

Manhattan is a counter-Paris, an anti-London.

"To some it may be a matter of surprise, that the whole island has not been laid out as a city; to others, it may be a subject of merriment that the Commissioners have provided space for a greater population than is collected at any spot this side of China. They have been governed in this respect by the shape of the ground.... To have come short of the extent laid out might have defeated just expectation and to have gone further might have furnished materials to the pernicious spirit of speculation...."

The Grid is, above all, a conceptual speculation.

In spite of its apparent neutrality, it implies an intellectual program for the island: in its indifference to topography, to what exists, it claims the superiority of mental construction over reality. The plotting of its streets and blocks announces that the subjugation, if not obliteration, of nature is its true ambition.

All blocks are the same; their equivalence invalidates, at once, all the systems of articulation and differentiation that have guided the design of traditional cities. The Grid makes the history of architecture and all previous lessons of urbanism irrelevant. It forces Manhattan's builders to develop a new system of formal values, to invent strategies for the distinction of one block from another.

The Grid's two-dimensional discipline also creates undreamt-of freedom for three-dimensional anarchy. The Grid defines a new balance between control and de-control in which the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos.

With its imposition, Manhattan is forever immunized against any (further) totalitarian intervention. In the single block—the largest possible area that can fall under architectural control—it develops a maximum unit of urbanistic Ego.

Since there is no hope that larger parts of the island can ever be domi-
nated by a single client or architect, each intention—each architectural ideology—has to be realized fully within the limitations of the block. Since Manhattan is finite and the number of its blocks forever fixed, the city cannot grow in any conventional manner.

Its planning therefore can never describe a specific built configuration that is to remain static through the ages; it can only predict that whatever happens, it will have to happen somewhere within the 2,028 blocks of the Grid.

It follows that one form of human occupancy can only be established at the expense of another. The city becomes a mosaic of episodes, each with its own particular life span, that contest each other through the medium of the Grid.

IDOL

In 1845 a model of the city is exhibited, first in the city itself, then as a traveling object to substantiate Manhattan's growing self-idolatry. The "counterpart to the great Metropolis" is "a perfect fac-simile of New York, representing every street, land, building, shed, park, fence, tree, and every other object in the city.... Over the model is a canopy of carved ornamental woodwork in Gothic architecture representing the finest oil-painting the leading business establishments of the city...."

The icons of religion are replaced by those of building. Architecture is Manhattan's new religion.

CARPET

By 1850, the possibility that New York's exploding population could engulf the remaining space in the Grid like a freak wave seems real. Urgent plans are made to reserve sites that are still available for parks, but "while we are discussing the subject the advancing population of the city is sweeping over them and covering them for our reach..."

In 1853 this danger is averted with the appointment of the Commissioners of Estimate and Assessment, who are to acquire and survey land for a park in a designated area between Fifth and Eighth avenues and 59th and 104th (later 110th) streets. Central Park is not only the major recreational facility of Manhattan but also the record of its progress: a taxidermic preservation of nature that exhibits forever the drama of culture outdistancing nature. Like the Grid, it is a colossal leap of faith: the contrast it describes—between the built and the unbuilt—hardly exists at the time of its creation.

"The time will come when New York will be built up, when all the grading
and filling will be done, and the picturesquely-varied, rocky formation of the island will have been converted into formations of rows and rows of monotonous straight streets, and piles of erect buildings. There will be no suggestion left of its present varied surface, with the exception of a few acres contained in the park.

"Then the priceless value of the present picturesque outlines of the ground will be distinctly perceived, and its adaptability for its purpose more fully recognized. It therefore seems desirable to interfere with its easy, undulating outlines, and picturesque, rocky scenery as little as possible, and, on the other hand, to endeavor rapidly, and by every legitimate means, to increase and judiciously develop these particularly individual and characteristic sources of landscape effects...."

"To interfere as little as possible," but on the other hand "to increase and develop landscape effects": if Central Park can be read as an operation of preservation, it is, even more, a series of manipulations and transformations performed on the nature "saved" by its designers. Its lakes are artificial, its trees (trans)planted, its accidents engineered, its incidents supported by an invisible infrastructure that controls their assembly. A catalogue of natural elements is taken from its original context, reconstituted and compressed into a system of nature that makes the rectilinearity of the Mall no more formal than the planned informality of the Ramble.

Central Park is a synthetic Arcadian Carpet.

TOWER
The inspiring example of London's International Exhibition, held in 1851 in the Crystal Palace, triggers Manhattan's ambition. Two years later, it has organized its own fair, staking a claim for its superiority, in almost every respect, over all other American cities. At this time, the city hardly extends north of 42nd Street — apart from the omnipresent Grid. Except near Wall Street it looks almost rural; single houses scattered on the grass-covered blocks. The fair, implanted on what will become Bryant Park, is marked by two colossal structures that completely overwhelm their surroundings, introducing a new scale into the island's skyline, which they dominate easily. The first is a version of London's Crystal Palace; but since the division into blocks precludes structures beyond a certain length, it is a cruciform whose intersection is topped by an enormous dome: "Its slender ribs seem inadequate to sustain its vast size and it presents the appearance of a balloon expanded and impatient for a flight into the far-off sky...."
The second, complementary structure is a tower on the other side of 42nd Street: the Latting Observatory, 350 feet high. "If we except the Tower of Babel, this may perhaps be called the World's first Skyscraper..." It is built of iron-braced timber, and its base accommodates shops. A steam elevator gives access to the first- and second-floor landings, where telescopes are installed.

For the first time, Manhattan’s inhabitants can inspect their domain. To have a sense of the island as a whole is also to be aware of its limitations, the irreversibility of its containment. If this new consciousness limits the field of their ambition, it can only increase its intensity.

Such inspections from above become a recurrent theme under Manhattanism; the geographical self-consciousness they generate is translated into spurts of collective energy, shared megalomaniac goals.

**SPHERE**

Manhattan’s Crystal Palace contains, like all early Exhibitions, an implausible juxtaposition of the demented production of useless Victorian items celebrating (now that machines can mimic the techniques of uniqueness) the democratization of the object; at the same time it is a Pandora’s box of genuinely new and revolutionary techniques and inventions, all of which eventually will be turned loose on the island even though they are strictly incompatible.

For new modes of mass transportation alone, there are proposals for underground, on-grade and elevated systems, which — though in themselves rational — would, if applied simultaneously, utterly destroy each other’s logic.

As yet contained in the colossal cage of the dome, they will turn Manhattan into a Galapagos Island of new technologies, where a new chapter in the survival of the fittest, this time a battle among species of machines, is imminent.

Among the exhibits in the sphere is one invention that above all others will change the face of Manhattan (and, to a lesser degree, of the world): the elevator.

It is presented to the public as a theatrical spectacle. Elisha Otis, the inventor, mounts a platform that ascends — the major part, it seems, of the demonstration. But when it has reached its highest level, an assistant presents Otis with a dagger on a velvet cushion.

The inventor takes the knife, seemingly to attack the crucial element of
his own invention: the cable that has hoisted the platform upward and that now prevents its fall. Otis cuts the cable; it snaps.

Nothing happens, to platform or inventor.

Invisible safety catches — the essence of Otis' brilliance — prevent the platform from rejoining the surface of the earth.

Thus Otis introduces an invention in urban theatricality: the anticlimax as denouement, the non-event as triumph.

Like the elevator, each technological invention is pregnant with a double image: contained in its success is the specter of its possible failure.

The means of averting that phantom disaster are almost as important as the original invention itself.

Otis has introduced a theme that will be a leitmotiv of the island's future development: Manhattan is an accumulation of possible disasters that never happen.

CONTRAST

The Latting Observatory and the dome of the Crystal Palace introduce an archetypal contrast that will appear and reappear throughout Manhattan's history in ever-new incarnations.

The needle and the globe represent the two extremes of Manhattan's formal vocabulary and describe the outer limits of its architectural choices. The needle is the thinnest, least voluminous structure to mark a location within the Grid.

It combines maximum physical impact with a negligible consumption of ground. It is, essentially, a building without an interior.

The globe is, mathematically, the form that encloses the maximum interior volume with the least external skin. It has a promiscuous capacity to absorb objects, people, iconographies, symbolisms; it relates them through the mere fact of their coexistence in its interior. In many ways, the history of Manhattanism as a separate, identifiable architecture is a dialectic between these two forms, with the needle wanting to become a globe and the globe wanting, from time to time, to turn into a needle — a cross-fertilization that results in a series of successful hybrids in which the needle's capacity for attracting attention and its territorial modesty are matched with the consummate receptivity of the sphere.