

An aerial photograph of a skyscraper with a distinctive grid-like facade, likely the Empire State Building. The building's facade is composed of a series of vertical and horizontal lines, creating a checkerboard pattern. The building is set against a dark, textured background. In the upper right corner, there is a small inset photograph showing a dense urban landscape with various buildings and streets.

delirious new york

rem koolhaas

THE MONACELLI PRESS

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MADISON

PARK

E. 52ND

Corporation of New York

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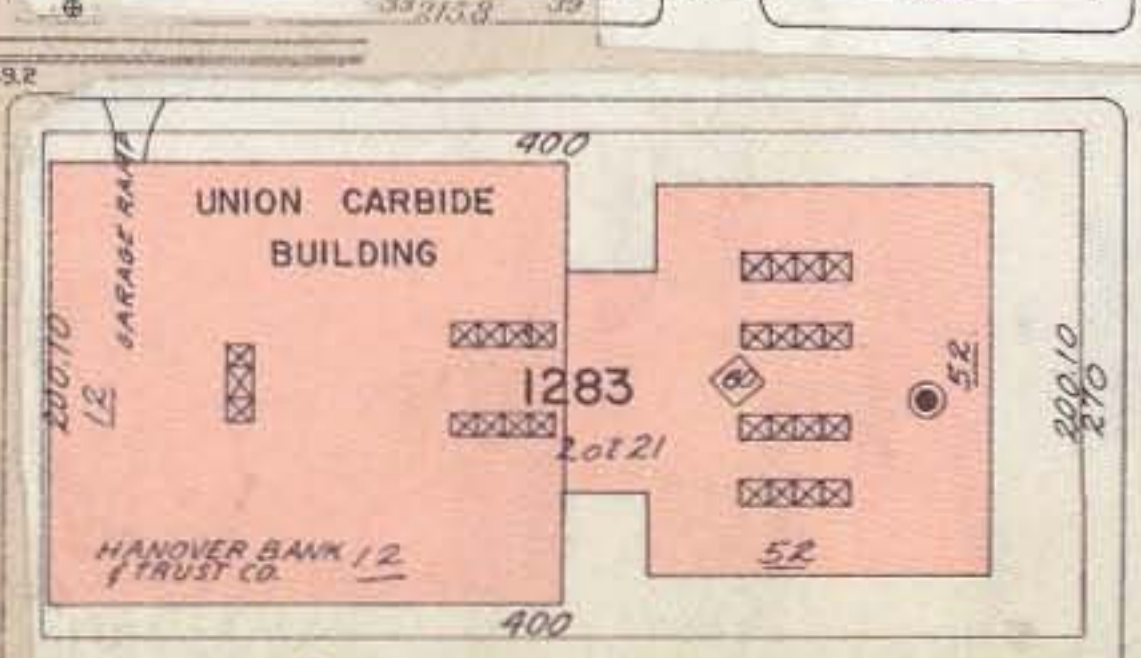
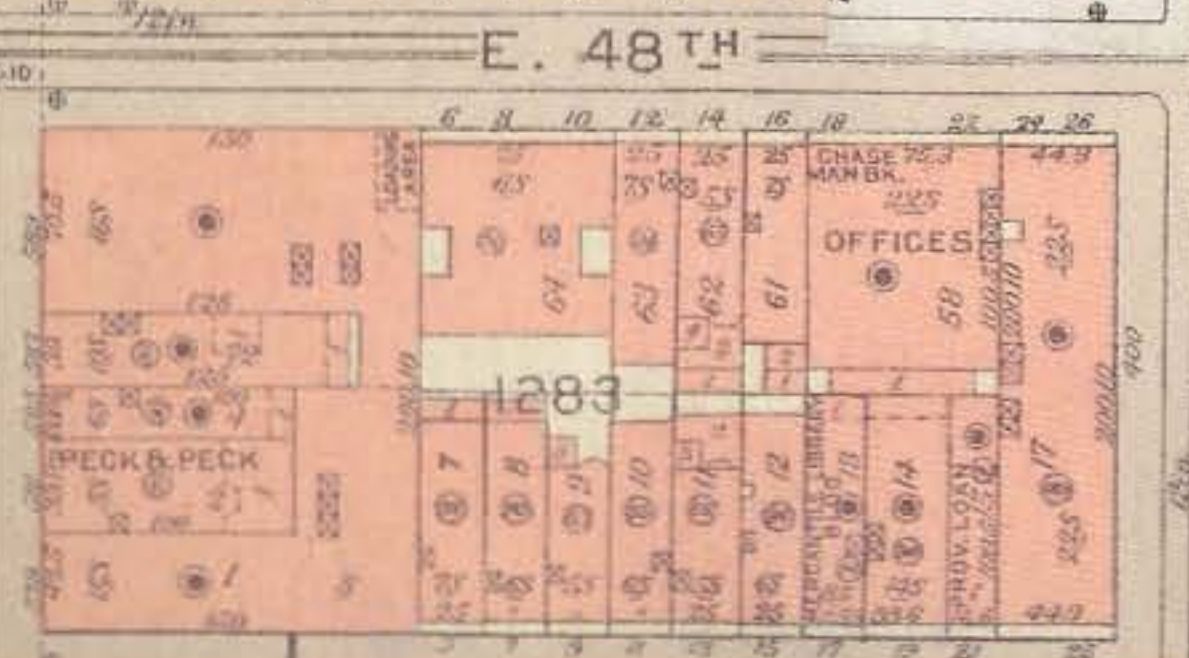
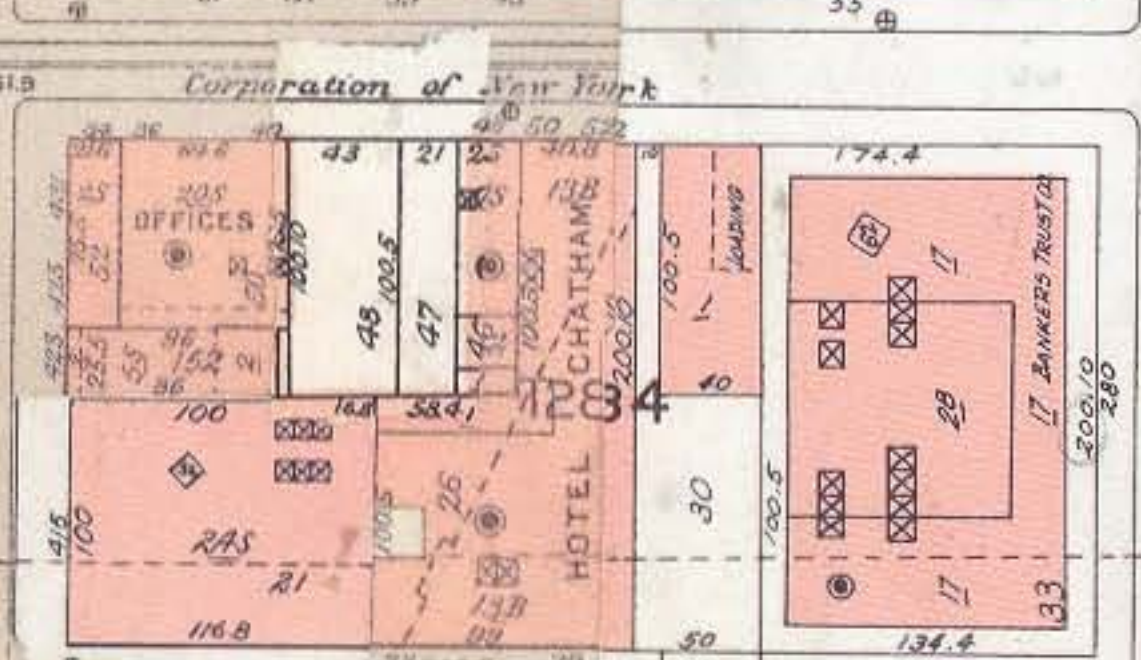
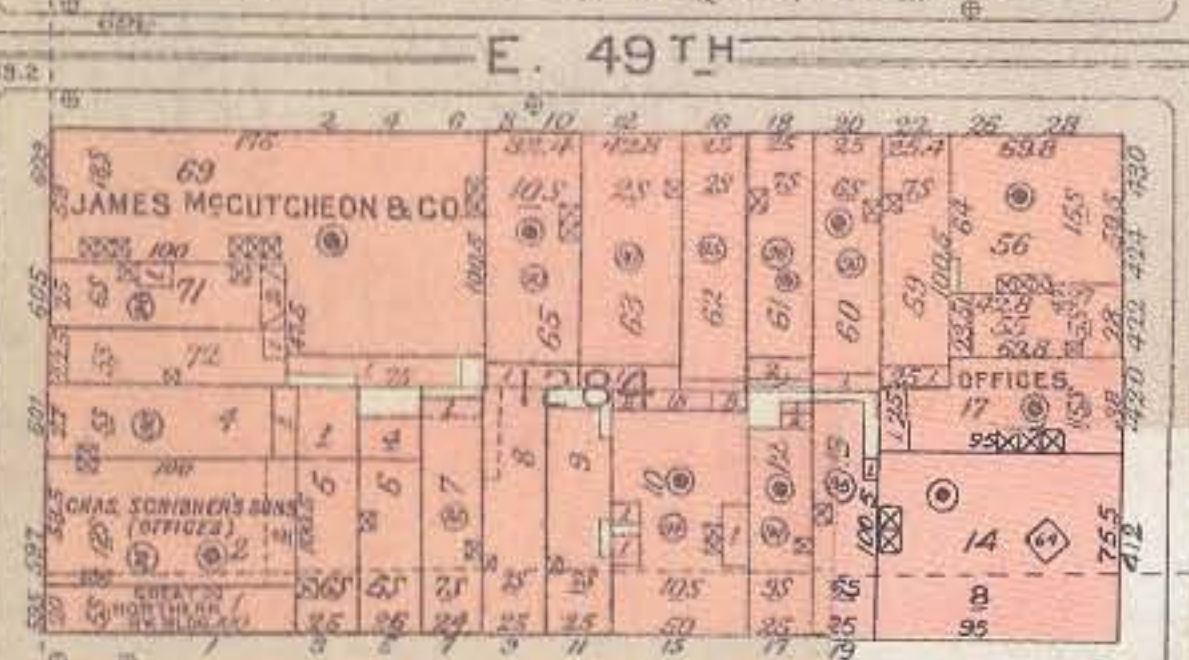
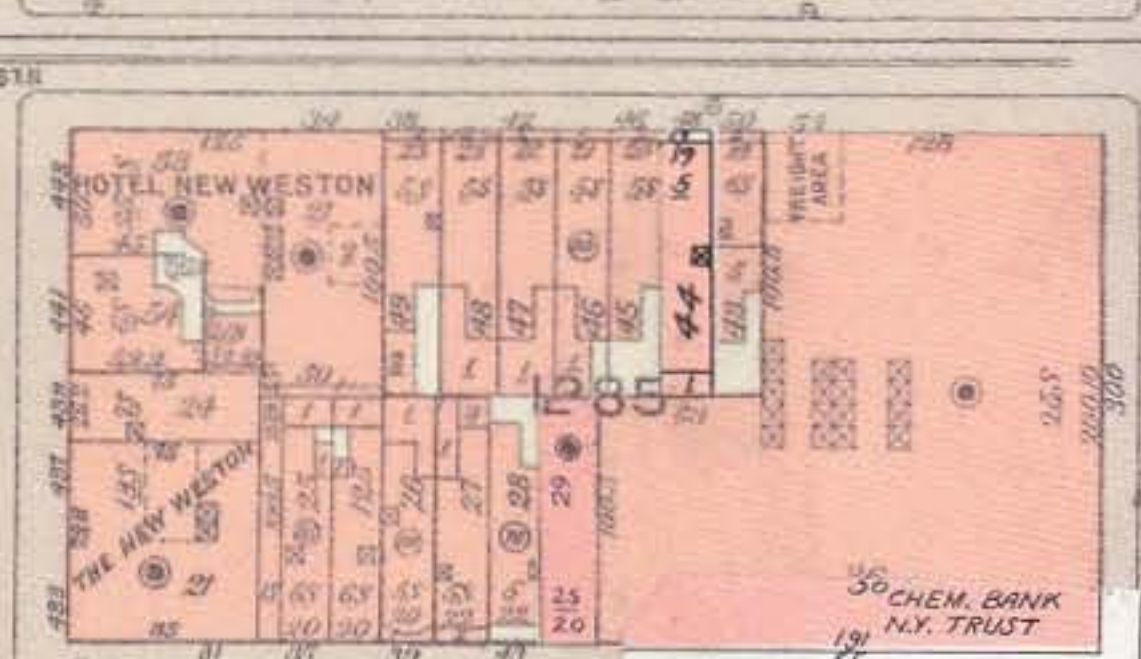
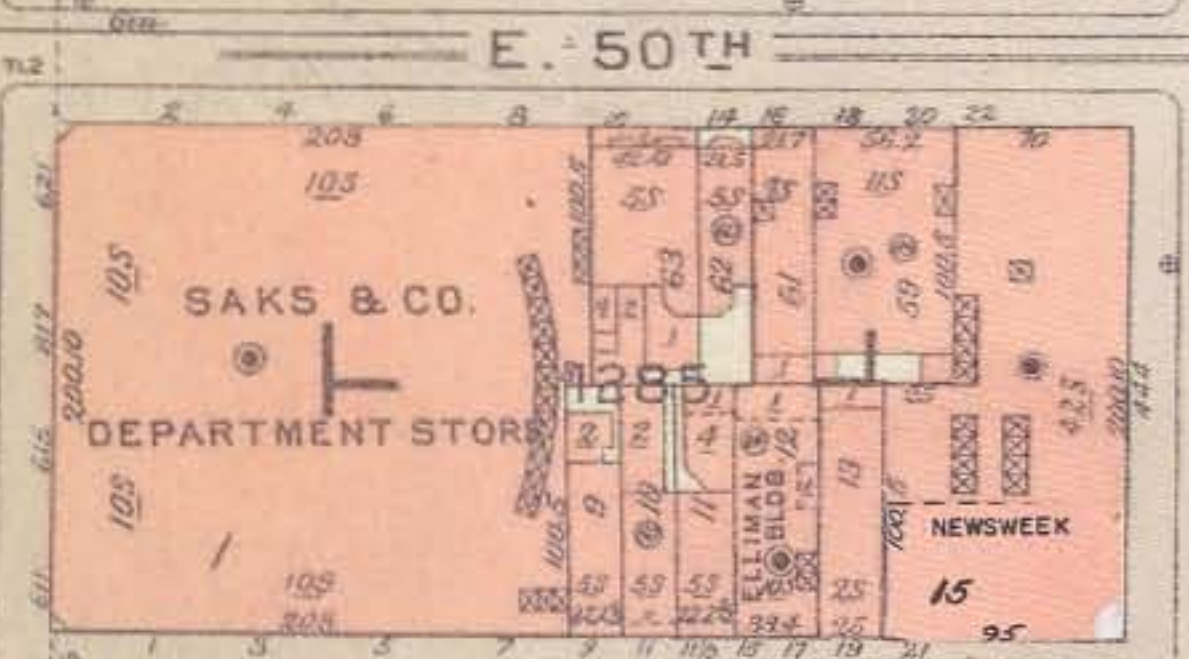
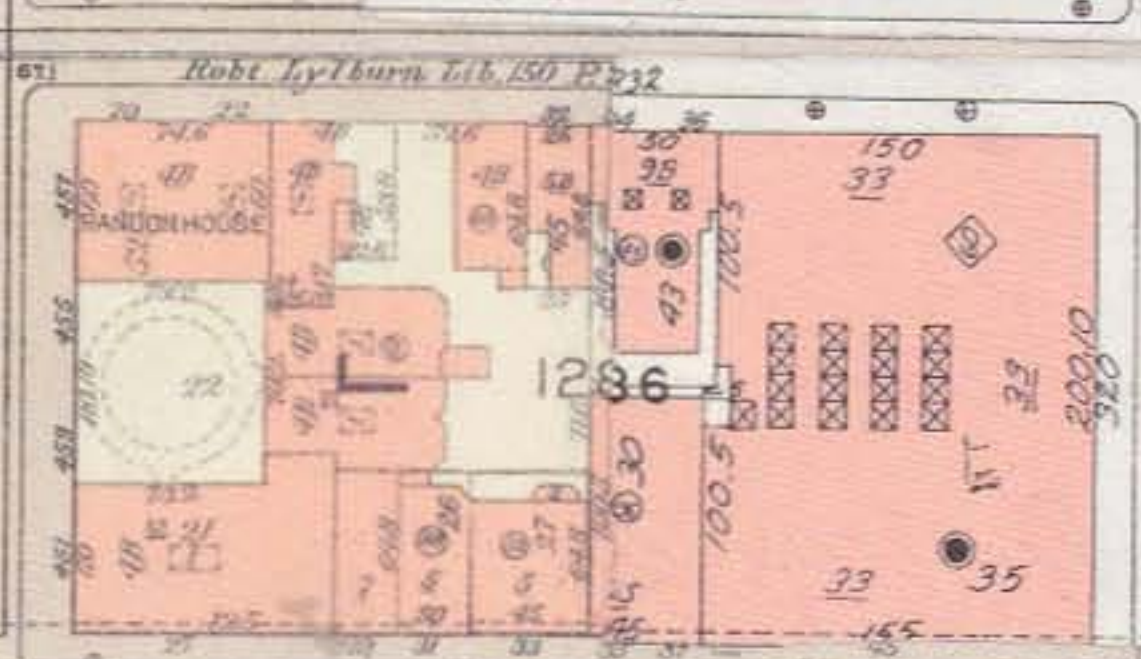
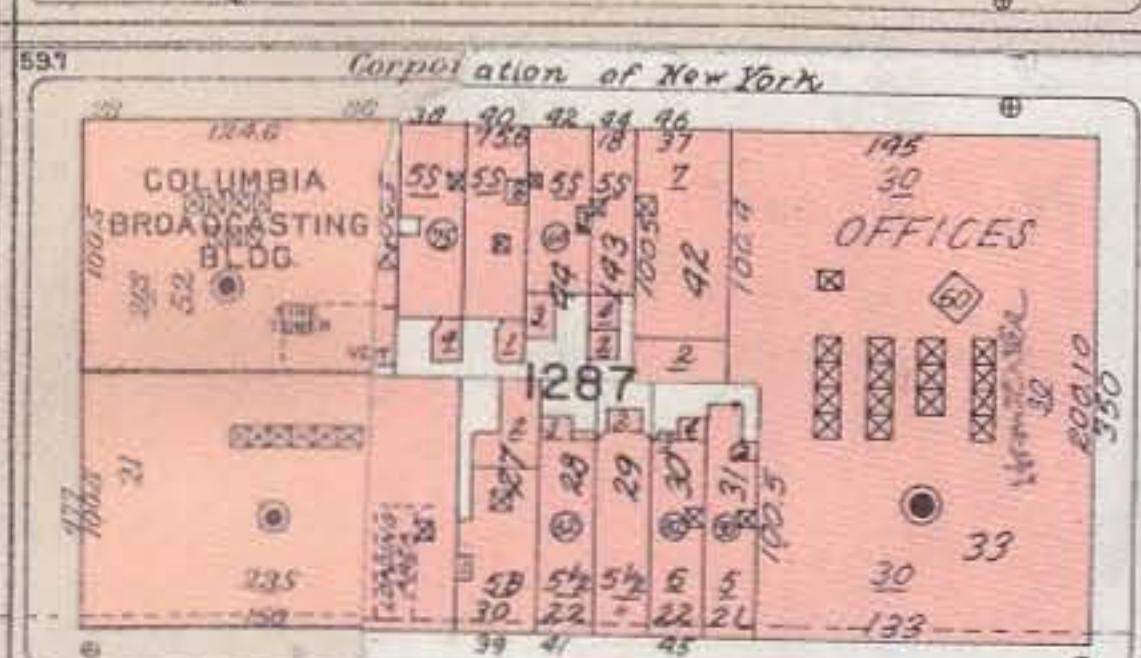
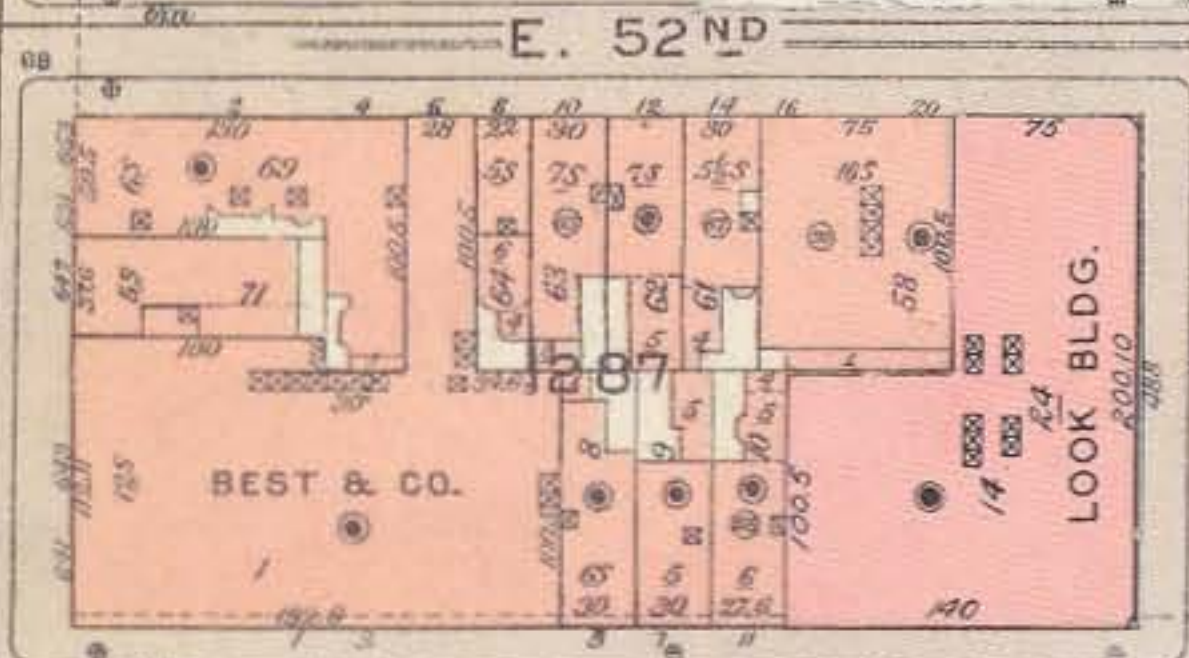
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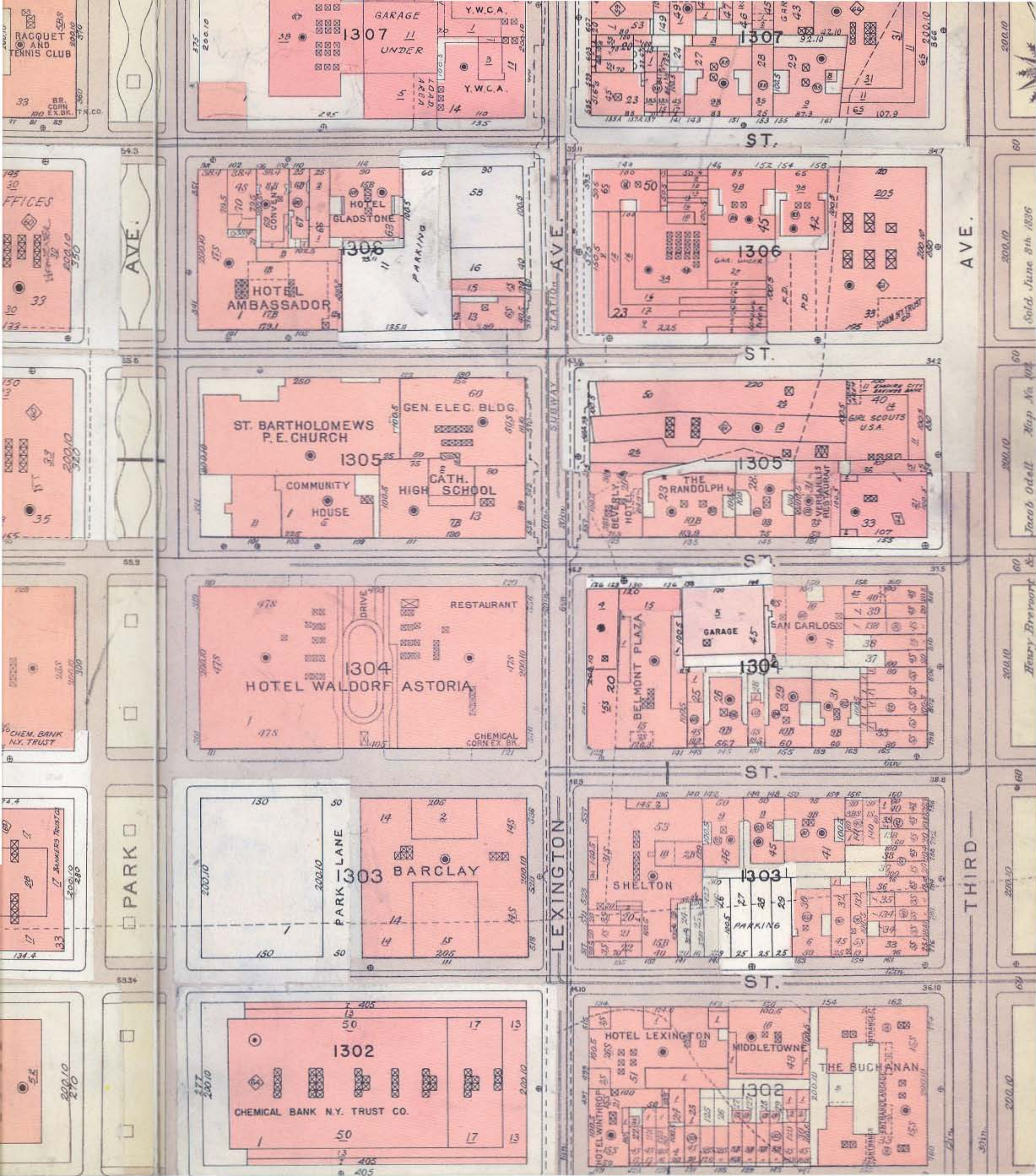
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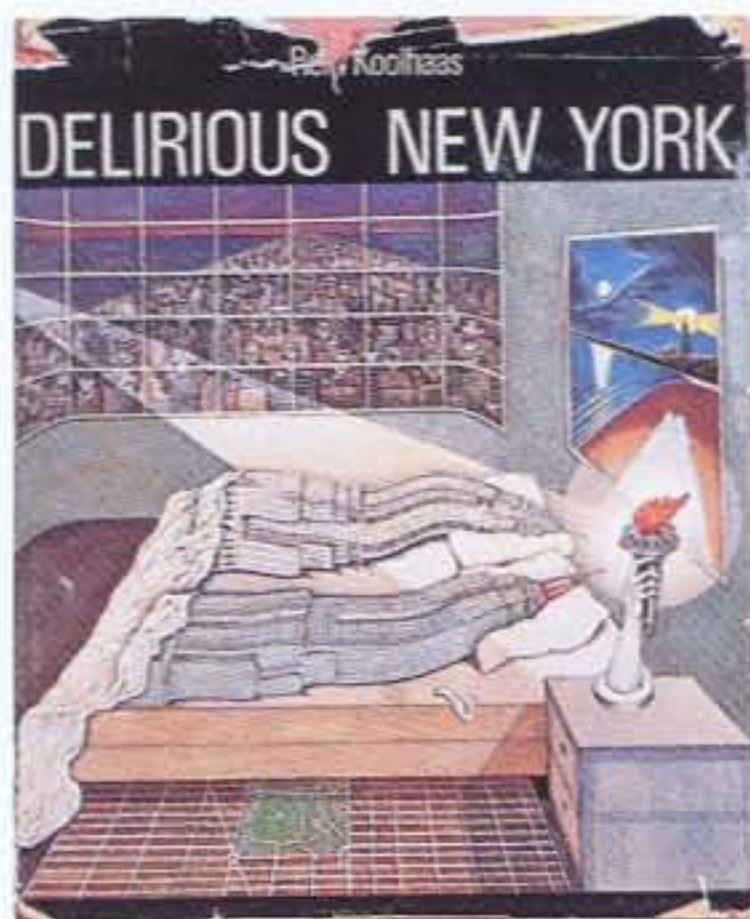
Delirious New York

Delirious New York
A Retroactive Manifesto
for Manhattan



Rem Koolhaas

The Museum of Modern Art



Delirious New York, 1978.

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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.

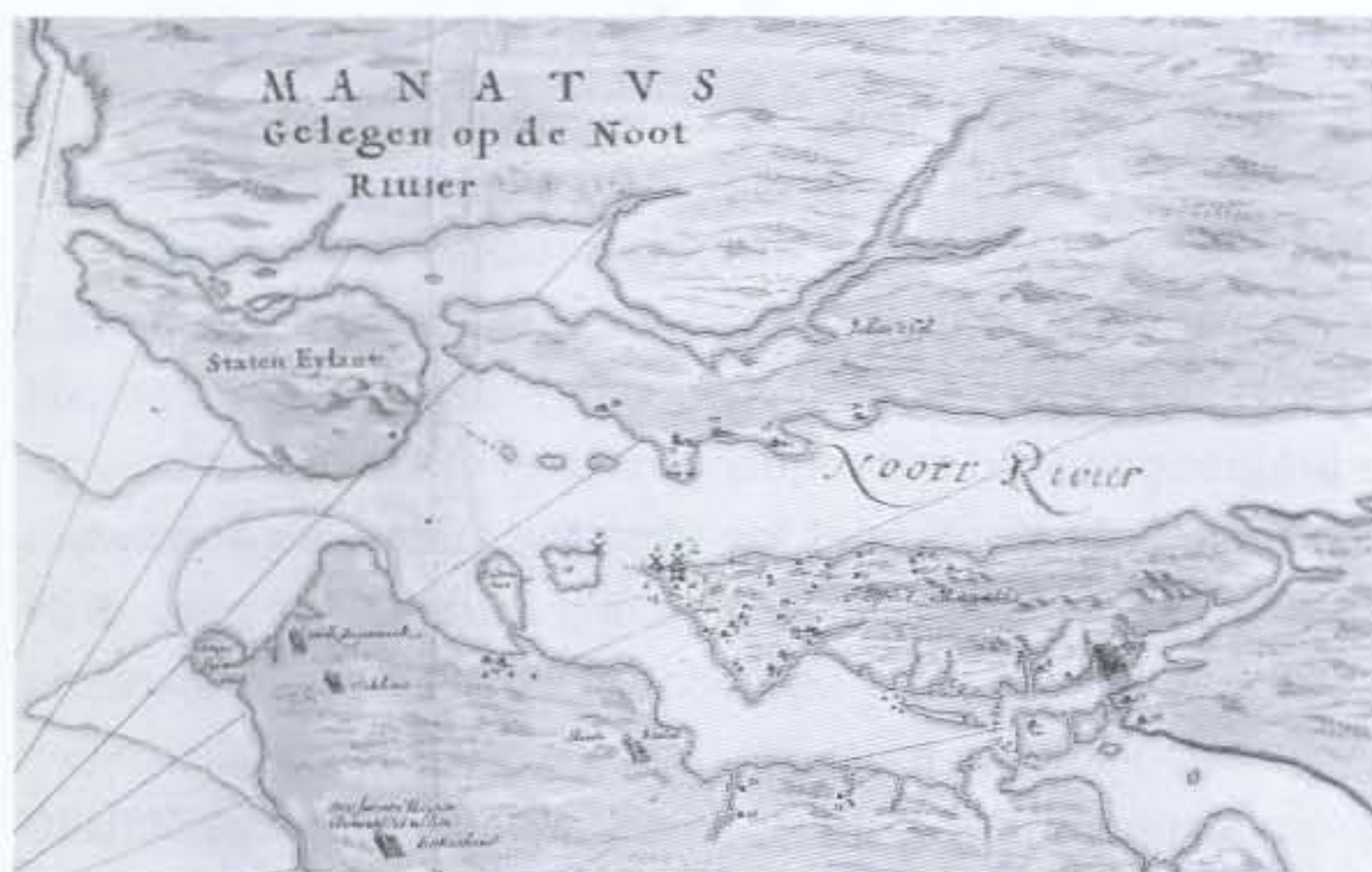
The fifth block — the Appendix — is a sequence of architectural projects that solidifies Manhattanism into an explicit doctrine and negotiates the transition from Manhattanism's unconscious architectural production to a conscious phase.

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.)



Manhattan: a theater of progress
(small appendage near entrance to
New York Harbor will later develop
into Coney Island).

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."¹ 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



Jollain, "bird's-eye view of New Amsterdam," 1672.

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...."²

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.

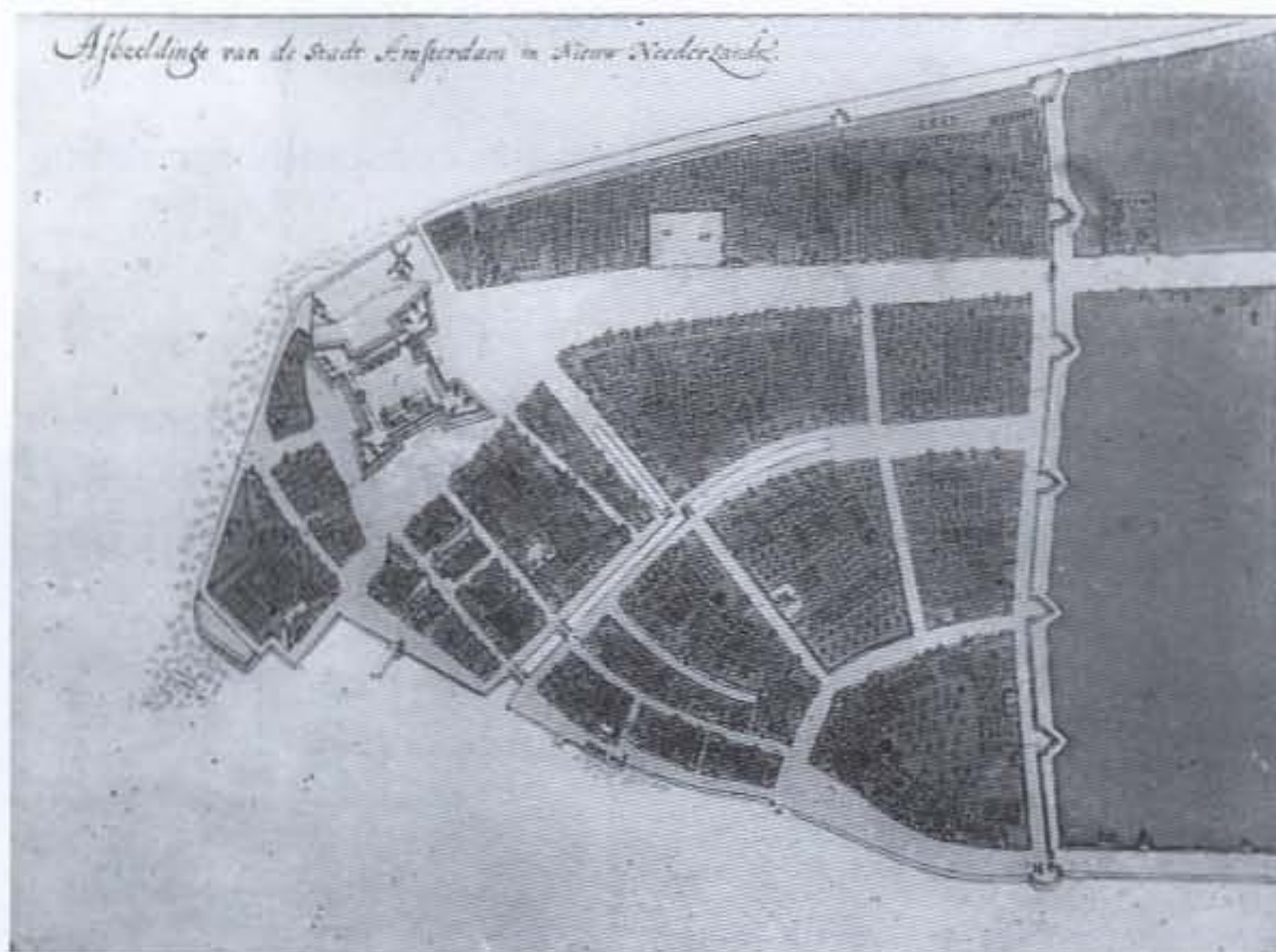
At the center of the image appears a distinctly European walled city, whose reason for being, like that of the original Amsterdam, seems to be a linear port along the length of the city that allows direct access.

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 (pelt-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



Bird's-eye view of New Amsterdam as built — "North American barbarism" gives way to "European refinement."



Phantom sale of Manhattan, 1626.

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..."³

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.

Amsterdam
American barbarism"
in refinement."



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"⁴ — 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."



Commissioners' proposal
Manhattan Grid, 1811 —
and it divides,
occupied; the population
describes, conjectural;
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