



MANHATTAN, NEW YORK – MANHATTAN, BRUSSELS  
postwar urban planning in the grip of an island

-

*What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?*

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*Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!*

*Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!*

-

*Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!*

*They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!*

-

Allen Ginsberg, Howl

1956



# MANHATTAN, NEW YORK – MANHATTAN, BRUSSELS

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*“It is a question, basically, of presenting a critique of our own time, based upon retrospective analysis.”*

Michel Foucault

## INTRODUCTION

From the first human settlements, the history of mankind has been a history of an ever growing urbanization. The spread of urbanized space was a constant element in humanity's past and now, at the beginning of the third millennium, we realize it will only become more crucial. Every day, the percentage of people living in cities is growing, most spectacularly in the developing countries. Although the way places like Lagos, Mumbai and Kinshasa are evolving seems less and less connected to Western cities, there is a common characteristic to all of them. It's the little piece of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Manhattan they all contain, in their skyline, in their dreams, in their plans for the future.

Over the last century, New York has been the urban laboratory for countless evolutions of our way of life, and it is often still the place where trends and tendencies that are still slumbering elsewhere, appear clearly for the first time. If cities are the places where the future of humanity is born, then Manhattan is the place where that future is conceived. Architects and urban theorists may no longer consider it the locus of humanity's time to come, but to many people it still represents the American Dream -with all the connotations this entails. By trying to comprehend and analyze the most important elements that define Manhattan, New York, I want to unravel the processes that have (re)shaped our cities in such drastic ways over the last fifty years . So, even though this paper focuses on two specific urban areas -both of them called Manhattan-, it will include Rome too, about Houston and Shenzhen, about Rotterdam and Sao Paulo, about every city in the world. Because all of them have to some extent been Manhattanized.

Two works have been of the utmost importance in writing this paper and opening my eyes to some of the invisible processes at work in a city. First of all, there was Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York*. His 1978 retroactive manifesto for Manhattan -which by now has become unavoidable in writing on New York- showed me how powerful the metaphorical, subconscious, almost poetical side of city planning could be in shaping a city. The idea that planners, while claiming to be making rational plans for the city, are actually, subconsciously, planning something completely else, can give a beautiful insight in the sometimes totally irrational development of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century city. Published at a time when cities were first of all problems to be solved, places to get away from, *Delirious New York* contributed to a new way of thinking about cities: the city as a place of dreams and wonders, of trial by error, a magnificent, surprising, complex place, neither good nor bad but beautiful in all its humanity.

I have tried to develop these elements further for the post-WWII-period, whereas Koolhaas focused primarily on Manhattan's Age of Wonders, from 1890 to 1940. His concepts, while often contestable and provocative, offer a refreshing view of the functioning of urban development. Two of those concepts



support a large part of my argument: the Culture of Congestion and the Manhattan Metaphor. Although Koolhaas never mentions this concept as such, he establishes the idea that in the twenties and thirties certain urban thinkers made plans for New York which, while portraying a city in which congestion would be solved, would metaphorically raise congestion to a level where it would become something positive. This theoretical metaphor, even though it could not be realized at that time, would settle itself in the minds of the people to come back with a vengeance after WWII and thoroughly change the way cities were being planned. Certainly a provocative theory, but one that can offer very rich, new insights in city planning.

The other work I have to mention is Robert Fitch's *The assassination of New York*. At least as provocative as Koolhaas' book, it approaches the same issue from a completely different angle. Fitch's book investigates the personal, conscious socio-economic factors that have influenced New York's development from the 1920s to the 1990s. His main argument – New York has been the victim of planned anti-urban policies as well as impersonal macro-economic evolutions- is an interesting complement to Koolhaas' reading of the city. After all, we cannot deny the fact that in addition to impersonal economic forces directing our lives, the influence of human plans and decisions, whether conscious or unconscious, is not to be underestimated. The de-industrialization of the inner cities, for instance, was no mere objective process, but a planned operation.

Most of all though, both authors taught me that to understand a city, any city, you have to love the city, accept it as “a city”, a living organism made up of an endless quantity of human beings. Cities are entities that have to be able to breathe, to develop, to be carefully watched and guided, for cities can all too easily become monstrosities, golems out of control.





*A dream city, closer to the heavens than any other place on earth...*

## MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

People need icons and every one needs dreams. For urbanites of the last century, that icon, that dream was New York City, and more precisely the island of Manhattan, which for most outsiders amounts to the same anyway. It represented everything people hoped to achieve: freedom, wealth, modernity. The skyscrapers, the subways, the lights and the cars... Manhattan became a symbol for the ideal 20<sup>th</sup> -century city. A dream city, closer to the heavens than any other place on earth. A dense concentration of every idea or project the 20<sup>th</sup> century stood for, the place where everything was happening. Not only faster, bigger and better, but prettier, more audacious and closer to perfection. It represented the hopes and the aspirations of Modern Man -something every urbanite longed to be.

When, on the other hand, from the late sixties onwards, New York's dreams would gradually turn into nightmares, the city would become the symbol of the failure of the urban project for cities around the world. This was not only due to the fact that New York's symbolical function was so powerful, but also because almost every city had tried to incorporate a piece of New York in its urban fabric, hoping this would make their city a wonderfully modern dream city too. The consequences of this *Manhattanism* -as I have come to call it- would add another dramatic element to the already bleak future of the city in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

But from the ashes, during the last twenty years, New York rose again and as it did, city planners, politicians, architects and real estate developers around the world were once again enthralled by the Manhattan example and started using this example as a blueprint for the future of their cities. The second coming of Manhattanism which Rem Koolhaas prophesied in the mid-seventies<sup>2</sup> has occurred. New York has at last claimed its place among contemporary city models. The question still remaining is whether this means the Culture of Congestion has become widely accepted too, or has the Manhattanist doctrine perhaps been turned into something else? This is an evolution that is taking place as we speak, in cities around the world. We cannot know what the future will bring, we can only try to understand the present evolutions by learning from our past. So I won't be writing about a long-lost yesteryear: behind the past tenses and images of time gone by, lies a story about today, on the way to tomorrow.

### Manhattan the Modern

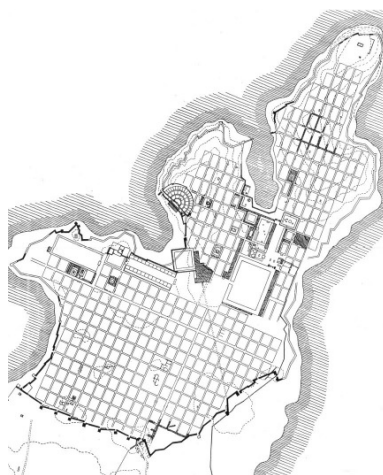
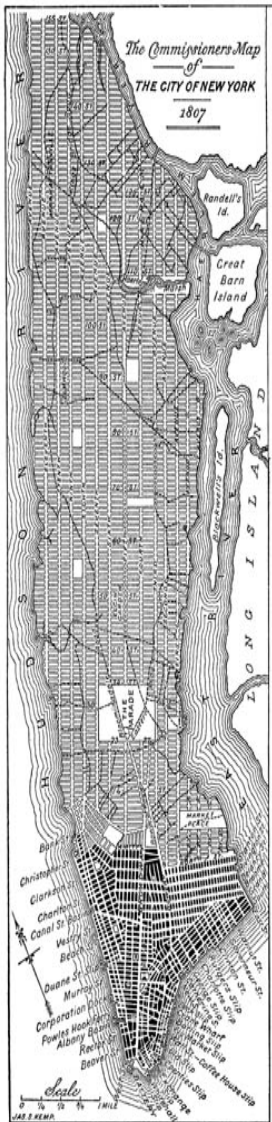
*Consecrated as no place on earth to the power of commerce and money, and un beholden to any outside force, it had made itself the supreme center of American Life. Then, [...] from 1919 to 1929, finished bringing into existence a ravishing dream city on the island of Manhattan, which had become the most modern place on earth.*

Ric Burns<sup>3</sup>

To understand where this Manhattanism, and the metaphor that brought it into existence, originate, we have to take a look at the elements that made Manhattan 'the most modern place on earth'. It is particularly important that we do so to see what it was in this ultra-modern city that could so enrage a European



*Then, from 1919 to 1929, finished bringing into existence a ravishing dream city on the island of Manhattan, which had become the most modern place on earth.*



*For more than 2000 years the grid has been the simplest, most practical and most rational model to plan a city, a state or even a country. (From left: Manhattan, Milet, Priene)*

Modernist like Le Corbusier. How could that which was so modern be considered the anti-modern? Once this apparent paradox is clear, the emergence of the Manhattan metaphor can only be seen as a natural reaction to this paradoxical situation.

### **Manhattan the Modernist**

In his introductory work to Modernism as a style in the visual arts, Charles Harrison provides us with a set of four characteristics of Modernism that can be perfectly applied to pre-WWII Manhattan.

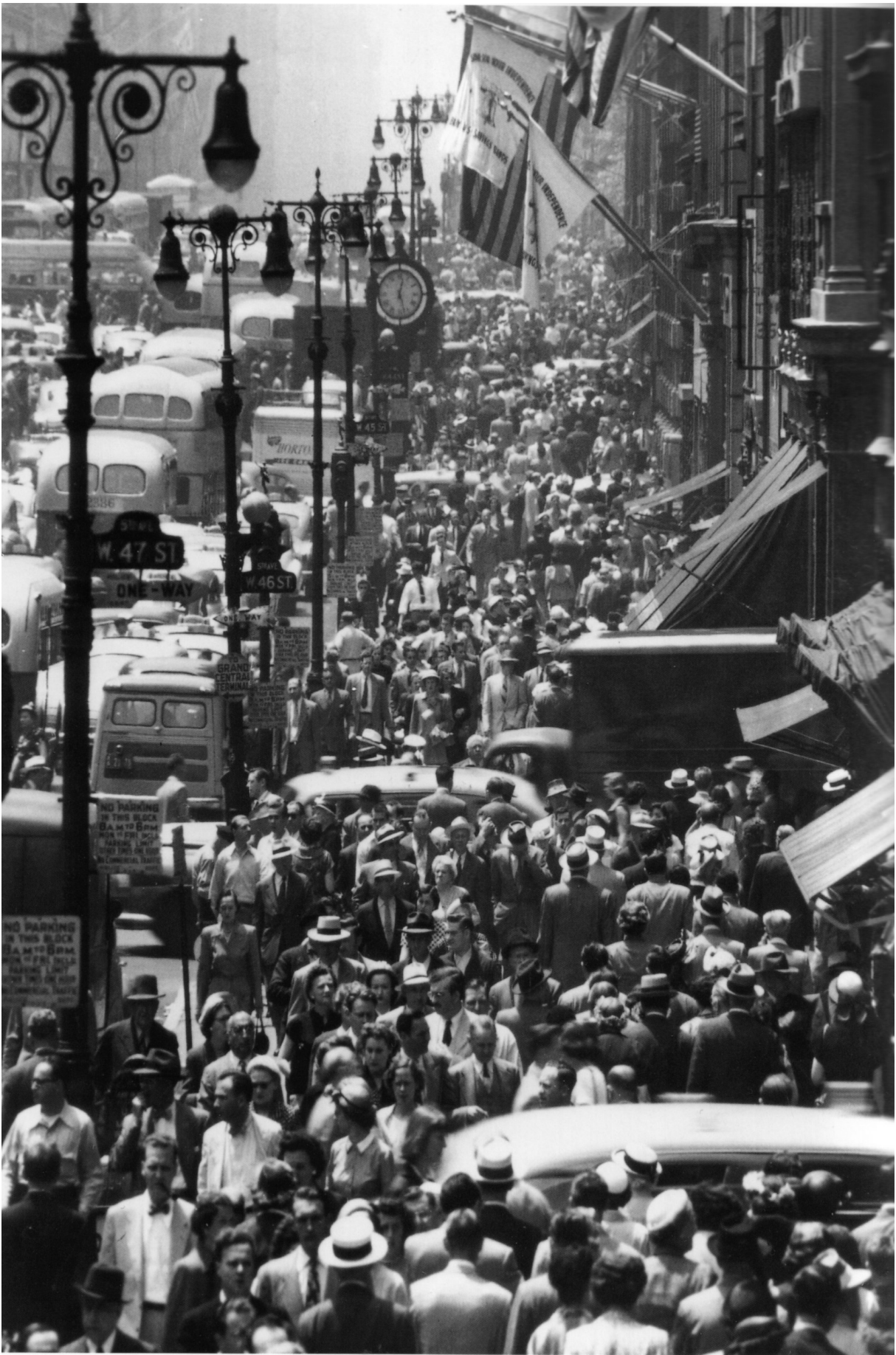
- Based on the confidence that human societies would know progress, mainly through technological inventions and rational principles
- Breaking with the aesthetic legacy of the 'classics'
- Skeptical towards what was commonly accepted to be the truth
- Stressing imagination as tool for self-liberation<sup>4</sup>

If Harrison had wanted to describe the character of New York City as it was in the century after 1850, he could scarcely have done a better job. The unbridled optimism, the near arrogance of being 'the most modern place on earth', the empire of fantasy and imagination that was Coney Island: it was all there. But it weren't just these elements which had made Manhattan the world capital of modernity. The Manhattan Grid, the Culture of Congestion, the Skyscraper and the industrial character of pre-WWII-Manhattan were the core elements of Manhattan the Modern, and the central points of the Modernists' critique on the city, each one an ever more painful thorn in their eye.

### **The Perfect Grid**

First conceived and applied in the Ancient Greek cities of Milet and Priene, the Romans afterwards developed the grid plan for their provincial cities (with perhaps as most famous example Apamea in Syria). A millennium and a half later, William Penn used it for his City of Brotherly love, after which it was exported all over what would one day become the United States of America. For more than 2000 years the grid has been the simplest, most practical and most rational model to plan a city, a state or even a country. It is easily comprehensible, accessible and, last but not least, perfect for real estate purposes. While it may not offer very beautiful or surprising vistas, it will make for a city that is absolutely useful.

There is however, one prerequisite. As it is a perfectly rational and abstract concept, the grid can't take any existing situation into account. Apamea's grid was constructed after an earthquake had all but annihilated the old Greek city. But New York already had its history when, in 1811, the Commissioners laid out the plan for the Manhattan Grid. The Indians and the Dutch of New Amsterdam had left their traces behind. That these, like Broadway, were incorporated in the Grid -and thus perhaps made it less perfect-, is not the point. The essence of the grid was that the Planner's Commission acted as if they were planning on an empty piece of land. Or, as Koolhaas put it into words: *the land it divides, unoccupied, the people it describes, conjectural*<sup>5</sup>.



*Noon rush hour on Fifth Avenue.*

The level of abstract optimism the Commissioners demonstrated, was astonishing. In the typical way of modern, capitalist minds they discarded all individuals, all existing social interaction, and dreamed up the perfect formal, abstract city: The Grid. In retrospect it is surprising to see how close the Commissioners' plan is to the ideals of the European Modernists of the 1920s and 30s, a fact that explains partly why the Modernists had so little influence on New York before the second World War. New Yorkers simply didn't need European theorists to tell them to do what they had already been practicing for more than a hundred years.

### **A Culture of Congestion**

Manhattan is a congested island. It has been so ever since the industrial revolution and will probably remain so until the end of the city's existence. Congestion is vital to the city, it is the lifeblood of the city's success and although everybody believed technological evolutions would render the proximity of others obsolete, 21<sup>st</sup> century Manhattan has proved them all wrong. Congestion still means life.

When thinking back to the congestion that must have existed in New York before WWII, we realize that it can't always have been all that pleasant and idyllic as one would imagine when reminiscing about 'the good old days'. The city must have smelt terribly, the constant physical presence of other human beings, hustling and bustling, shoving and pushing, by, past and against you must have been incredibly stressful. No doubt it was filthy, dirty, shocking and ugly, but, after all, so is life. This view, first propagated by urban thinkers like Koolhaas and Jane Jacobs, has been a marginal view throughout most of Manhattan's history. Congestion has almost always been considered a problem to be solved, an idea that became more and more widespread with the rise of Modernist thinking. Congestion was the enemy *par excellence* of Modernism: it was irrational, chaotic, unsanitary,... For them, congestion was the symbol of everything that was anti-modern. Again, we face the paradox: congested Manhattan, the ultra-modern, becomes anti-modern in the eyes of those who see themselves as truly modern.

### **Rise of the Skyscraper**

*A huge complex with the most modern facilities, based on the most daring ideas, the most futurist engineering... A real 'skyscraper of sorrows'!*<sup>6</sup>

Around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the invention of the elevator and the development of the steel skeleton made it possible to construct buildings higher than ever. In the context of the densely crowded island of Manhattan, this meant that from now on, the physical limits of the island no longer defined the inhabitable space of the city. Theoretically, the available building surface had become infinite. In the liberal, capitalist logic, skyscrapers were inevitable. The skyscraper was the solution for the problematic combination of *the supposedly insatiable demands of business and [...] the fact that Manhattan is an island*<sup>7</sup>. From then on Manhattan's real estate's primary concern was no longer the availability of square feet of island soil, but the endless possibilities that lay in the filling up of all the empty, useless cubic feet of sky. At a frenzied pace, vertical New York would grow, until *'...eventually, the only space not occupied by enormous buildings would be the streets'*<sup>8</sup>



*To Modernists, it was as if a telephone had been given to a primitive, who then, after having been told its use was communication, had put the telephone on fire to create smoke signals.*



*In the context of the densely crowded island of Manhattan, from now on the physical limits of the island no longer defined the inhabitable space of the city. Theoretically, the available building surface had become infinite.*

The skyscraper was also adopted by the Modernist movement as the perfect rational solution to their bitter enemy, congestion. And yet they despised the way Manhattan had made use of the wonderful skyscraper, like the teacher who berates the child who uses his beautiful box of crayons to color the sky green and the trees blue. The skyscraper city of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was more akin to the jungle that occupied Manhattan before the colonization than to the modern city Modernists had in mind. There had been *no manifesto, no architectural debate, no law, no ideology, no theory, [...] only – Skyscraper*<sup>9</sup>. To Modernists, it was as if a telephone had been given to a primitive, who then, after having been told its use was communication, had put the telephone on fire to create smoke signals.

Or, as F. Scott Fitzgerald put it: the great skyscraper boom was an expression of the wonderful hysteria of Manhattan city life. To Modernists, only the hysteria was visible, as an affection causing sudden, unexplainable, violent emotional outbreaks. Skyscrapers were a symptom of a disease that could only be cured by the rational treatment every ill city needed: order, rest and a fresh start.

### **Industry and pre-WWII Manhattan**

New York City's enormous growth, from the mid-nineteenth century up until the Second World War, can be attributed almost exclusively to its industrial capacity. Featuring the world's largest port, an endless supply of low-wage workers -mostly immigrants both from within and without the US- and a strong merchant tradition, it became the world's number one industrial metropolis. The city itself was an economic, efficient industrious machine, the physical incarnation of all the values of modern thinking and most of all of the two most famous modern economic ideas: liberalism and capitalism.

Yet, when Modernists in the 1920s and 30s reflected on the modern city, they judged Manhattan, prodigal child of all modern thinking, the decadent and derailed extreme of the urban evolution since the Middle Ages. In its quest for newness and cleanliness, Modernism convicted Manhattan's dirty, congested streets with their dark alleys and inefficient traffic– i.e. pedestrian and expensive public transport. New York was judged guilty of being unmodern, a crime for which only two sentences were possible: rehabilitation in society by adaption to modern(ist) standards, or total destruction. Sadly, both amounted to the same thing: the death of the city.

The individual embodiment of the heydays of this industrial city was Fiorello La Guardia, mayor of New York City from 1934 to 1945. His energetic, easily inflammable personality, his sometimes seemingly irrational way of dealing with city politics and his mixed ethnic background were New York at its finest. It was the chaotic mix that made it work. Under La Guardia New York reached the zenith of its power and prestige: with a New Yorker in the White House and one in the Governor's chair in Albany, New York City became the example of the victory over the Great Depression.

La Guardia, however, didn't only personify the zenith of city's glory, he also foretold its downfall. During the prewar years, La Guardia had formed a team with the young and promising parks commissioner Robert Moses. Although they were each other's complete opposites, Moses being very sober, orderly and rational, the synthesis of their combined forces could create wonders in Depression-ridden New York. Things would be different, though, after WWII. La Guardia, who had lived at the pace of his beloved city, disappeared





from the political scene while at the same time, unbeknownst to most New Yorkers, the economic center of the US started shifting away from New York. Robert Moses on the other hand had secured himself an untouchable place far away from the volatile and ephemeral world of politics. With the countervailing power of La Guardia out of the way, Moses soon became an *Epimetheus unbound*, whose Pandora's box of urban projects would all but kill the city<sup>10</sup>.

### **Manhattan the Unfit**

Considering all of the elements above, it becomes very clear that a very strong tension existed in Manhattan between the city's modern character and the modernity quested by Modernists. In the eyes of urban thinkers like Le Corbusier, Manhattan was the anti-modern, in every aspect the kind of city he and his colleagues had to change, correct, adapt.

Its history, its people and its social make-up made Manhattan the world's most perfect example of Harrison's characteristics of Modernism. To Modernists, however, these were not the elements of a city that mattered. Their cities weren't going to be built for Manhattanites, or *Parisiens* or Londoners for that matter. Their cities would be the cities of Mankind, an abstract humanity, alive only in theory and statistics. To that purpose, *the denial of history, of development, and thus of perspective, becomes the mark of true insight into the nature of reality*<sup>11</sup>.

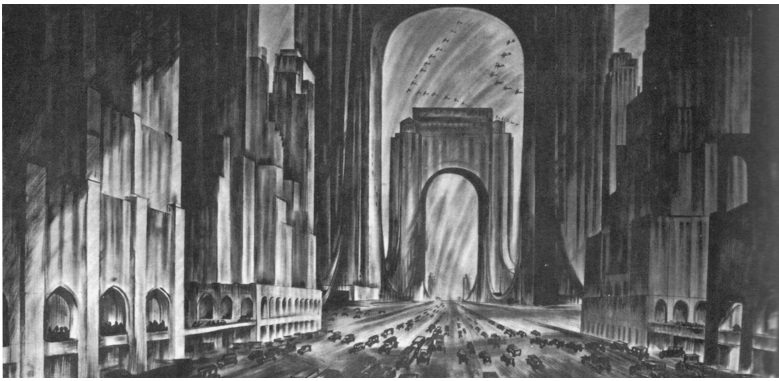
Having realized this, it is quite evident why in their eyes Manhattan had to adapt or be razed from the earth. If you take away a city's history -its life- nothing remains but filth and inefficient allocation of function and valuable space, an entity unfit for survival in a truly modern world.

### Manhattanism

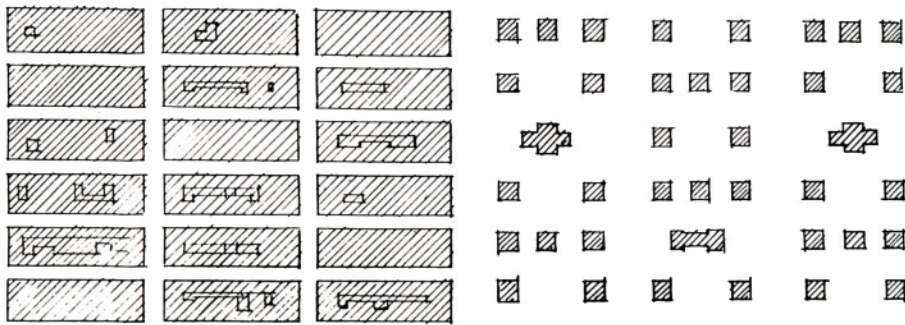
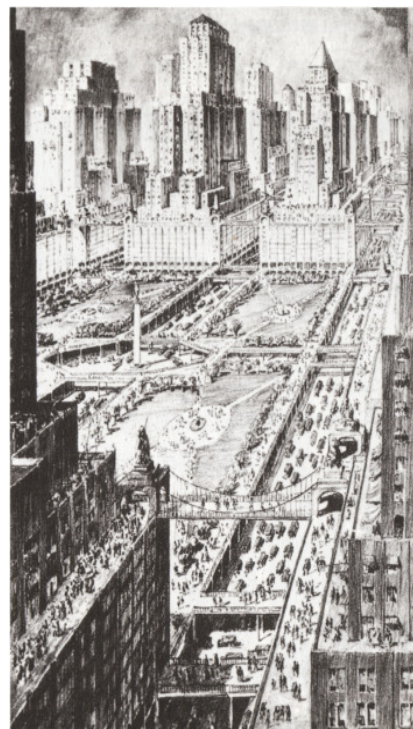
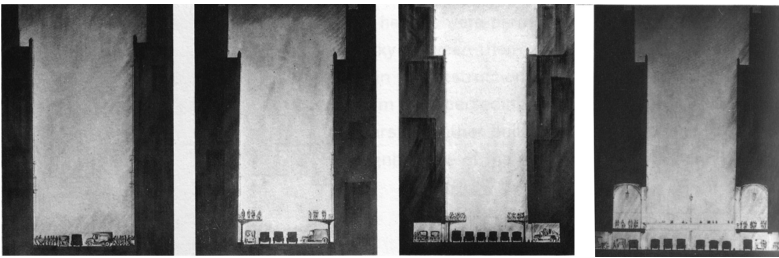
Before the Second World War, Modernism never really stood a chance in Manhattan. Being the center of the modern world, looked upon by the general public as the shining example of modern living, most New Yorkers were solemnly convinced that they lived in the one city that was already a step ahead of those European dreamers. Meanwhile, however, some urban thinkers and architects in New York had -consciously or unconsciously- been using certain elements of Modernism and combined them with Manhattan's pragmatic attitude, thus creating what I have called 'Manhattanism'.

### **Creating Manhattanism**

As New York City had grown and Manhattan had continuously become more densely crowded, the root of all urban problems seemed obvious: congestion. If only congestion could be solved, traffic jams, crime, health problems, general unhappiness and every other issue associated with living in the classic metropolis would automatically disappear. So both Modernists and urban thinkers about Manhattan started working on a whole range of congestion-solving theories and designs.



Harvey Wiley Corbett's 'solution' for congestion:  
separation of traffic.



A TYPICAL STREET PLAN OF  
NEW YORK OF TO DAY.

THE SAME DISTRICT WITH  
BUILDINGS REPLACED BY TOWERS.

Raymond Hood's City of Towers



Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin

One of the most important architects of a solution for Manhattan's congestion problem was **Harvey Wiley Corbett**. The central element of his proposal was the separation of traffic -indeed a very Modernist principle. Pedestrians and automobiles would have to circulate on different levels. The ground level would be reserved exclusively for cars, while pedestrians would have their elevated arcades, walkways and parks on different heights in Skyscraper City. *The arcades [carved out in the second story of the buildings] form a continuous network on both sides of streets and avenues; bridges provide its continuity. Along the arcades, shops and other public facilities are embedded in the buildings*<sup>12</sup>. Chaos would vanish, reason and order would take its place.

A new kind of city would be born, where everything, even the visual aspect of a *modernized Venice*<sup>13</sup>, would be subjugated to (automotive) traffic, which had to flow freely, like the water in old Venice's canals. Gondolas would no longer be needed, as the water, i.e. the cars, would transport everyone, invisible to the human eye. So the abstract notion of the 'flow' entered the world, which would later become one of the most powerful arguments to change, renew and destroy as Robert Moses would wield it as his main reason for all his gigantic public (highway) works.

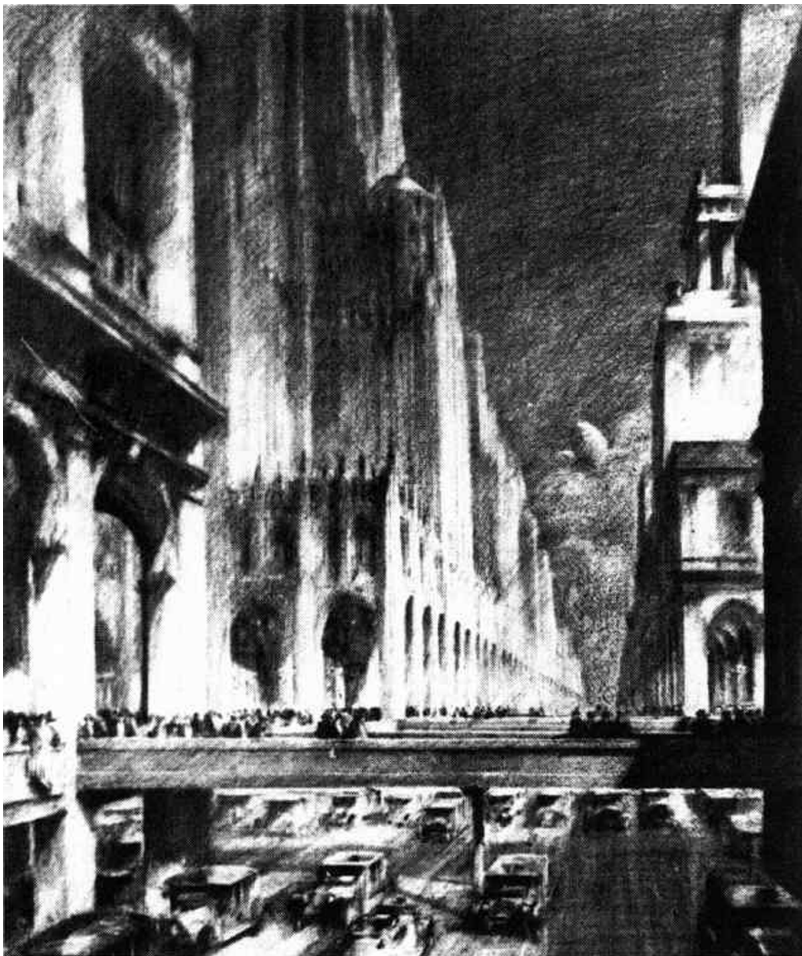
Corbett's plans, first launched in 1923, weren't realized before WWII, but they weren't forgotten either. Forty years later they would resurface again when Corbett drew the plans for a Mid-Manhattan Expressway. Meanwhile, he had created a visual plan, a powerful image that would settle deep in the collective unconscious, out of which it could reappear when the time was right. The question we will nevertheless have to ask -and answer- is whether Harvey Wiley Corbett intended his plans to come back the way they did.

Another visionary thinker and architect who worked on the frontier of Manhattan pragmatism and European Modernism was **Raymond Hood**. His plans for a City of Towers, overthrowing Manhattan's 1916 Zoning Law, came surprisingly close to a synthesis of Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* and Manhattan. Without referring to any theory or abstract idea, he redesigned the entire American City, using the only logic an American, and certainly a New Yorker, instinctively understands: business. *He enlisted the natural greed of the developer -who invariably wanted to build... the highest possible tower on the smallest possible site*<sup>14</sup>, and created a city which could have been drawn by a faithful pupil of Le Corbusier himself. Even the reasons he gave for his proposal could have come straight out of one of the radical European architectural magazines from the era: to solve the problems of light, air and traffic.

Naturally there had to be an organizational frame to provide the financial and political power to make such dreams possible. From 1922, when the **Regional Plan Association** or RPA was established as a permanent body of the Committee on a Regional Plan of New York, such a frame existed<sup>15</sup>. Uniting the powers of finance, transport and real estate and employing the talent and creativity of people like H.W. Corbett -and with the unique figure of Robert Moses as the one who could concretely realize their plans-, they would propose *a government-financed, highway, bridge and tunnel network unprecedented in size and expense*<sup>16</sup>. Their goal: solving congestion by decentralizing the region.

The RPA, however, didn't like using terms such as decentralization, because they went badly with the metropolitan public and reminded people of Modernism. RPA Directors were urged to use terms like

*Manhattan's pre-WWII-mix of old and new, of high and low, industry and finance: the hodge-podge which the RPA's plans had to rearrange.*



*The poetic metaphor, as drawn by Hugh Ferriss. Pragmatism so distorted it becomes pure poetry.*

*'better balance', 'distribution of building' and 'less friction of space'<sup>17</sup>*, to, as the RPA's chief economist put it, *re-arrange the hodge-podge and to put things where they belong<sup>18</sup>*. What these men desired most of all was control: control over the chaos, over the congestion, control over the flow, the flow of traffic and the flow of money. They did not want to find a real solution for congestion, because a de-congested Manhattan would have meant the end of the city's growth and consequently the downfall of their financial empires. They depended on all those millions of people taking trains and subways, paying tunnel tolls, renting an apartment and getting a loan to start their businesses. The main thing that did bother them about the city was the fact that, as the same chief RPA economist said, *some of the poorest people live in conveniently located slums on high-priced land<sup>19</sup>*.

Viewed in this light, we notice that even though Corbett and Hood use the same mix of Modernist terminology and imagery as the RPA, their politics were different. To the elite directors of the RPA, the idea was self-evident: re-arrange the city in a rational (i.e. efficient, following the straight lines of the capitalist logic) way, separate functions and traffic. Their objective wasn't a solution for congestion, they wanted congestion to grow, but within a controlled environment that would result in the largest revenue possible.

Harvey Wiley Corbett however was thinking and planning on a completely different level. We just have to take one look at the cityscapes he imagined and Hugh Ferriss rendered to understand that what he said he intended to do (namely solving congestion), was the exact opposite of what he was actually doing. His New York of the future is as congested a place as we've ever seen, a skyscraper city as far as the eye can see. Lane upon bridge upon lane of cars racing among gigantic towers thronged with pedestrians on countless levels of arcaded walkways. This is not a city where congestion has been solved, this is a city where congestion has been raised to an unforeseen level. *Congestion would suddenly become something mysteriously positive<sup>20</sup>*.

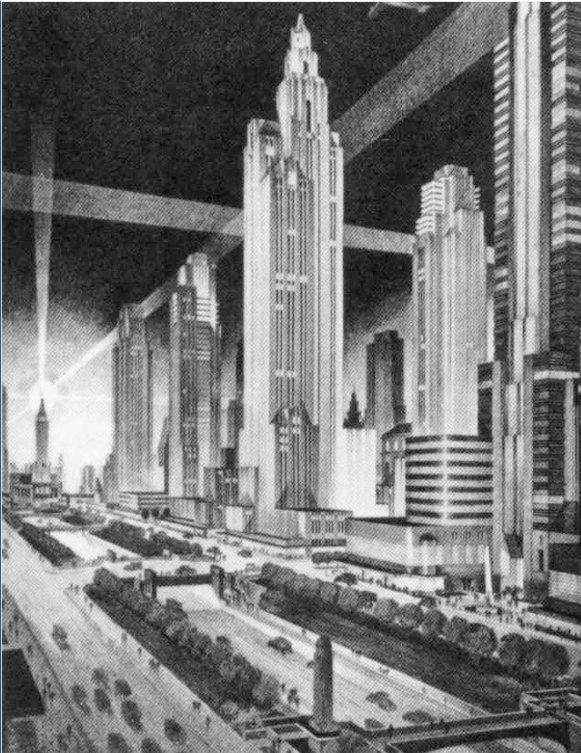
### **A poetic metaphor**

Corbett's plans for Manhattan can only be read as metaphorical. In a city where human reality is present in such a dense, overcrowded way as it was in pre-WWII Manhattan, a hyperreal environment is created, which can only be controlled and interpreted through metaphors and the language of poetry. In the congestion of the metropolis, there are just too many factors to take into account, too much concrete and steel, too many hopes and dreams and beating hearts, too many fumes and shrieks and sighs and blasts. The human mind cannot possibly grasp it in a rational way.

Corbett had practically no other choice than to say that he wanted to solve congestion, as it was the only rational way to handle the emerging metropolis. But at the same time he realized that congestion was the lifeblood of cities and therefore could not be solved. The only way left to deal with congestion was by being disingenuous: consciously propose a rational solution, while unconsciously planning its opposite.

(According to Rem Koolhaas, unconscious planning is a typical phenomenon in architecture, where dream and material reality often meet<sup>21</sup>.)

This *'pragmatism so distorted it becomes pure poetry'<sup>22</sup>* would have a strong influence on urban thinking in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although very soon the metaphorical character of Corbett's plans would be lost and planners would start using his plans as a literal solution for congested cities around the world,



*Harvey Wiley Corbett's 'Modernized Venice' was already included in the RPA plan of 1931. Manhattanism had been created.*



*Coney Island in the 1930s. Congestion taken to its extreme, soon to be replaced by Robert Moses' park(way)s.*

often with dramatic consequences. Ironically, already in 1931 the RPA would include his 'modernized Venice' in their Regional Plan for New York and its environment.

Although it would never be called that way, Manhattanism had been created: a concept of city planning in which Modernist images and ideas and New York pragmatism were joined with an important metaphorical component. The aim of Manhattanism was to create a city where congestion could be controlled and organized, without killing the city. In the hands of the right people, it would prove an immensely powerful tool which could be wielded for the good of cities but at least as easily to those cities' detriment.

The Manhattanist ideas that would reach Europe towards the end of the 1950s, had steadily gained influence on the other side of the Atlantic before the Second World War. One might even say WWII would serve both to postpone and catalyze the export of American goods and ideas. Especially towards the end of the thirties, as the Great Depression had almost been vanquished, two Manhattanist 'phenomena' would definitively shape New York's future forever: the 1939 World's Fair and Robert Moses' reign as Parks Commissioner.

### **Robert Moses, Builder of road, beach, bridge and housing Projects<sup>23</sup>**

*There rises the order, the power, the economic force. You shiver before this beautiful monster of inapproachability<sup>24</sup>.*

Albert Camus.

No figure in the recent history of New York City has had such a lasting impact on the urban structure itself as Robert Moses. Like no one else he relentlessly planned, schemed and fought to turn the city into his automotive utopia of modernity. He was the most paradoxical avatar of Manhattanism, its staunchest defender and most loyal servant of the ideals and powers it contained.

The public works on Coney Island<sup>25</sup> constitute one of the best examples of how early Manhattanist ideas found their place in political urban planning. Replacing Coney Island's dreamworld of fantastic attractions, most of which by the 1930s had already withered away, with parks -the most Modernist city element of all- was the symbolic act marking the end of Manhattan's Age of Wonders.

Parks were no goal in itself to Moses. On the one hand Moses could use parks to create a buffer for certain neighborhoods that wanted to be shielded from the spreading 'lower-class'-areas, dreaded by landowners because of the falling of property values these neighborhoods brought with them. In this respect, parks were also the perfect tool to achieve social segregation without drawing too much attention to it<sup>26</sup>. Coney Island had been a working-class wonderland around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a wonderland that had come unpleasantly close to the safe upper-class havens on Long Island. To know that instead of the obscenely congested theme parks and beaches, nice, quiet green parks would be built, must have given the Long Island bourgeoisie instant peace of mind. A park would be the bourgeoisie's perfect version of nature: controlled, planned and carefully maintained, the wonderful opposite of Manhattan's urban jungle.





*Randall's Island and the Triborough Bridge, under which Robert Moses had his headquarters, safe from the volatile and ephemeral world of politics.*

*West Side Highway, perhaps Robert Moses' most perfect creation of Manhattanist flow, would be closed in 1973. The irony of fate had caused a 60-foot section of the highway to collapse under a cement truck heading north to make repairs on that same highway. In 2001, the new West Side Highway was completed, marking the return of Manhattanism in the city.*



On the other hand, parks are the perfect environment to build major highway systems, therefore sometimes appropriately called parkways. This was a main concern of Robert Moses who would always see this as the vital part of his role as a park commissioner. To replace the congestion of Coney Island with parkways that would become central arteries in the project to solve Manhattan's congestion problem seemed a logical thing to do from his perspective.

In this project, we can already see the different elements that would make Moses the perfect exponent of Manhattanist thinking. If we follow Koolhaas' thesis on Coney Island -Coney as the mother island for all urban developments in Manhattan- Moses was using this project as a lab test for the projects he would eventually realize in Manhattan, most of which consisted of replacing congested urban areas with elements for the solution of that congestion: parks, parkways and highways. His RPA-steered urbanism nevertheless used the Manhattanist metaphor to achieve its real goal. The parkways he replaced all these congested areas with would and could never solve congestion: by nature their goal is creating more traffic, more congestion. Every parkway, every bridge he'd build would only cause more, and not less congestion. For Moses, '*cities are for traffic*<sup>27</sup>.'

The direct consequence of his -and the RPA's- planning was that, although they weren't able to solve congestion, they brought about *the virtual demise [of the Metropolis] and ...a new reality: the city as but a component of a superconurbation called Megalopolis*<sup>28</sup>. This evolution would lead Manhattan to suffer such a deep crisis that if the lifeblood of the city -congestion- had really been cut off, the consequences would have been almost the same.

When Robert Moses cited Erwin Rommel's '*If the end doesn't justify the means, what does?*<sup>29</sup>', what did he mean by 'the end'? Did he mean the people of the city, the satisfaction of his political and economic bosses on the RPA? It surely wouldn't have been 'the people'. For Robert Moses there was no such thing as 'people' where a city was concerned. There was only 'the public', the abstract and non-existent notion generalizing the common needs of the people. Robert Moses *loved the public, but he hated the people*<sup>30</sup>. Like most Modernists he could not take social and personal relationships into account when planning the city, as a rational analysis is completely unable to deal with all those variables. The only two options a rational mind has are to ascend to a metaphorical level where planning becomes a mysterious kind of poetry -as we've seen before- or to combine the uncountable variables into a limited number of statistical data. The statistical level is the level on which the engineer works, *the only level where there can still be control over the complexity of everyday life*<sup>31</sup>, however limited that control may be. As an engineer, Moses' general concept was the 'flow'. The flow of traffic that is the flow of money, the endless flow of glass, steel, information and invisible, all-powerful capital. The Flow would replace congestion as the lifeblood of cities, until the city in itself would become obsolete, the beating heart of mankind silenced by hundreds of thousands of roaring concrete arteries, moving, moving, without a center or an obvious goal. Just moving.

Every city wanted a Robert Moses. He seemed to be the only one who could still control reality. He got things done. Yet control was solely possible by using a purely formalistic point of view. For him, the Manhattan metaphor had no connection to reality: a plan only referred to itself and other plans, not to the physical world that was affected by it. Consequently, Moses, even though he must have been convinced highways were a solution for congestion -by replacing it with the Flow- was only increasing congestion. In

1939 New York World's Fair



*'Open spaces in cities will provide healthier living.'*



*Futurama: the literal interpretation of the Manhattanist metaphor.*

cities all around the world mayors have had their Robert Moseses, usually less talented, less megalomaniac too, perhaps. And everywhere congestion of the kind individual people produce was substituted for the thundering fumes of the millions of lonely cars and their drivers.

### **1939 New York World's Fair: The World of Tomorrow**

The other famous application of Manhattanism that needs to be mentioned is the 1939 New York World's Fair. The Fair was in itself an extraordinarily interesting case of urban planning: it is telling to see how the RPA's 1929 plans, which had been delayed because of the Depression, were to a large extent realized as necessitated by the Fair<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, it was not at all coincidental that it took place in 1939. Due to the War and its aftermath the realization of all the social (r)evolutions that were happening – the emergence of consumerism, the total liberation of the car, the notion that 'this finally was the modern age'- were postponed to the postwar period, and in most of Western Europe even to the second half of the fifties. But in 1939, most of these elements were already there, at the World's Fair. In this respect it would be very interesting to look at the similarities between New York's 1939 World Fair, the last one of the 'old age', and the one in Brussels in 1958, the first one of the 'new age', but also considered the last one of 'modern times'<sup>33</sup>.

Important for this subject however is how the ideas about urbanism that were presented in 1939 -which would be brought to Europe in 1958- fit in the project for Manhattan. Like General Motors' Futurama, the cityscapes that could be seen at the Fair showed the blueprint conceived for the postwar city. White, clean, radiant Democracy inside the Perisphere is Le Corbusier's final victory: through incorporation in Manhattanism, Modernism has reached and conquered the American planner's mind<sup>34</sup>. The City of Light, the 'perfect' version of New York visible at the Fair is an empty, clean, rational vision of an uncongested Manhattan. It is the literal interpretation of the Manhattanist metaphor. Here, for the first time, we see the fallacy that will define most of urban planning after WWII: if you take the Manhattan metaphor literally, congestion will be solved and the city will become a perfect, flourishing place. The rational naivety of this assumption will prove dramatically disastrous, as the story of our case-study will show.

### Elements and Politics of Manhattanism

First of all we have to reconsider just what the defining elements of Manhattanist thinking are that we will be looking for when attempting the case-study. What are the peculiarities one has to look for when investigating the history of urban planning in the light of Manhattanism?

### **A synthesis of Manhattan and Modernism**

As has already been mentioned, Manhattanism is to a large extent a synthesis of European Modernism and Manhattan pragmatism, where Manhattan is Koolhaas' place with *no architectural debate, no doctrine, no law, no planning, no ideology, no theory*<sup>35</sup>, *a mountain range of evidence without manifesto*<sup>36</sup>. Modernism can then be considered its exact opposite: a purely architectural program, a doctrinaire ideology that needed government support to be enforced, a theoretical dream



with no concrete evidence whatsoever to show for itself.

To many planners, politicians and economic power mongers in the US, Modernism might have seemed to contain a lot of ideas that could be useful to reshape the cities to their image of a perfect, controllable, clean city. Still, there were certain innate 'deficiencies' to the theory that had to be adapted to American reality first, most importantly the fact that real estate speculation has no place in a purely Modernist city. For a city in which the surface is divided according to rational principles like minimum floor space per person; and every building is exactly the same as the next one, built according to the same minimal requirements, loses all possibility for market speculation. As a consequence, liberal capitalism had to re-appropriate the Modernist language. In an extremely liberal economic system like that of the US, the first law regulating society is the market and not an ideological system based solely on the power of ideas.

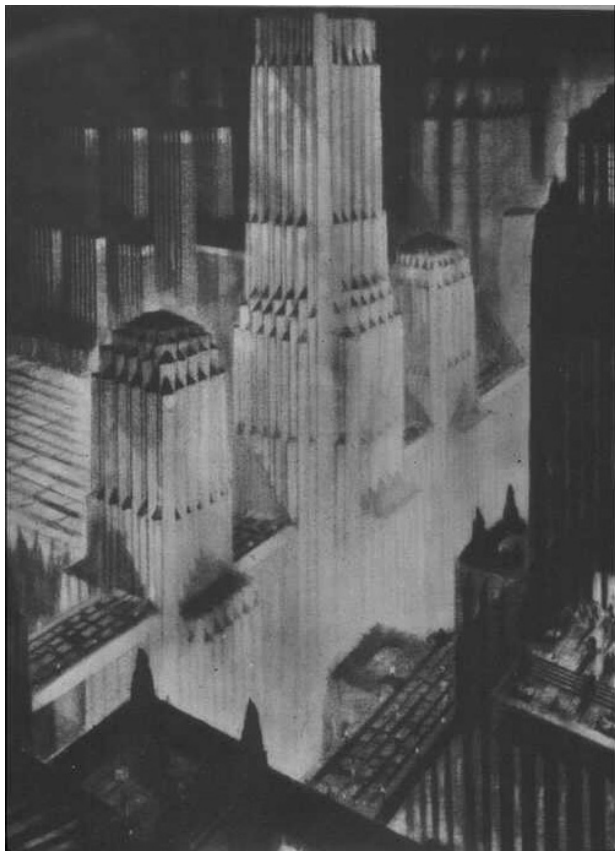
### **The split between planner and architect**

In order for the free market mechanism to function as well as possible, the influence of strong individual figures (and their theories) has to be limited. As a result, the classical architect, who in his person combined the ideologue, the social planner and the designer of the aesthetic form of the city, could have no place in America. Consequently, a split between the planner and the architect would be a necessary premise. At the 1932 MoMa exhibition on modern architecture it already became clear that the American architect's function would be limited to formal style, while the planner would become a pawn in the hands of the private interests driving urban development. *Architects and planners would no longer have a language with which to communicate*<sup>37</sup>. By limiting an architect to either the role of the aesthetic designer or, as in Le Corbusier's view, the engineer of efficient living, his function in the building of a city is greatly reduced. *Architecture and urbanism* were used to organize *the mere co-ordination of flow*<sup>38</sup>. The architect became the engineer of the efficiency of banality<sup>39</sup>, who, through the freedom of aesthetic adorning, can keep the illusion of truly creating something.

After WWII we then see that only the plans that were conceived by real estate developers and/or politicians were realized, with the helping hand of a planner and an architect to keep the project legal and marketable. The European architectural utopias of the interbellum would be looked upon as just that: naive utopias, dreams to be classified with that other utopian mistake, communism. It was not until of late that the Modernists' uncompromising social dream before WWII, would be revalued.

### **Creating the postindustrial city**

As we noticed before, the powers that controlled the city didn't opt for a Manhattanist strategy out of pure love for the rocky island on the Hudson. Their aims were primarily economic: since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the economy had started to change in an hitherto unforeseen direction. Everything was becoming massive: production, consumption, entertainment, transport,... The city, nerve center of all changes in human society, felt the full brunt of this evolution, becoming extremely chaotic and congested. To those in control, the message was clear: if they didn't get more control of the urban situation, the day wouldn't be far away when the masses would turn against



*The Daily News Building by Raymond Hood. The postwar interpretation of Hugh Ferriss' Manhattanist vision (top and bottom left) necessitated the complete removal of the old, industrial Manhattan (top right). Congestion, life and chaos are present in all but the bottom right picture, which was recently taken.*



those who controlled them. If however they could reorganize the cities so that control over the masses became possible again, their profits could raise all but infinitely.

To have an 'old' industrial city like the Manhattan of the 1920s and 30s meant to have a congested city. The mix of small and large businesses, the variety of commodities aimed at the factory workers, the smell and noise of the port,... For Modernist planners and the urban powers alike this amounted to a very unpleasant -because irrational and inefficient- situation. To quote the chief economist of the RPA once again : *On patrician Fifth Avenue, Tiffany and Woolworth, cheek by jowl, offer jewels and gimcracks from substantially identical sites.[...]A stone's throw away from the stock exchange the air is filled with the aroma of roasting coffee; a few hundred feet from Times Square, with the stench of slaughter houses. In the very heart of the 'commercial' city on Manhattan Island south of 59<sup>th</sup> street, the inspectors in 1922 found nearly 420,000 workers, employed in factories. Everything seems misplaced. One yearns to rearrange the hodge-podge and to put things where they belong*<sup>40</sup>. In this quote from 1923, we already hear exactly the same thing planners, economists and politicians around the world would tell the people after WWII: the industrial city (city of the Modern Age) has become a smelly, unpleasant, obsolete thing, we live a new age now (the post-Modern age), we need new cities. These new cities should no longer be based on industry but on the New Economy, on post-industry: Finance, Insurance and Real Estate (FIRE).

This economic evolution has to a large extent been driven by impersonal processes at the core of American society: the shift South(-West) and the changes in the production process which made necessary floor surfaces much larger than anything available in the inner cities<sup>41</sup>. But -as Fitch shows very clearly- the fact that New York City would eventually change from the world's industrial capital to a worldwide center of FIRE industry, meanwhile only barely avoiding bankruptcy, cannot be correctly explained when its personal, planned character is ignored.

Naturally there were very good reasons for politicians and the powers that be to prefer FIRE above 'old' industry. To name just one: *there is a 1000% spread between factory rent and class A office space rent*<sup>42</sup>. It doesn't require a lot of imagination to understand that to replace factories with office buildings equals a good investment. And the planned character of the shift to the post-industrial city becomes even more understandable if one adds the factor of '*minimal surface allocation per labor unit*'<sup>43</sup>, meaning that a typical white-collar worker requires a much smaller surface to work productively. Taking in those factors, it doesn't really come as a surprise that all these 'obsolete' factories, their machines and blue-collar workers had to be replaced with skyscrapers filled with story upon story of white-collar workers in their rows and rows of small cubicles. It was, after all, the rational thing to do.

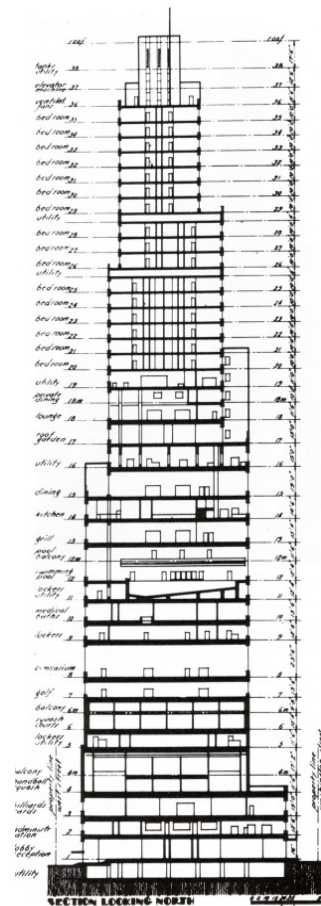
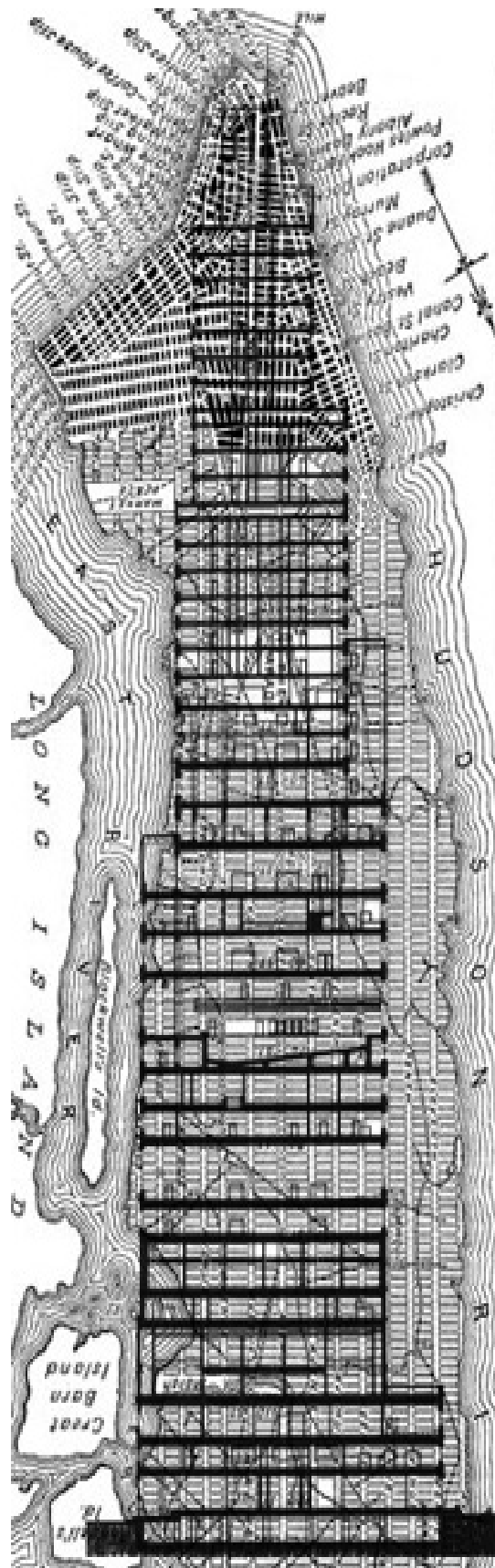
Rational, functional solutions to urban issues were the key elements of Modernism, and they were adopted easily by American pragmatists, who were always looking for the most efficient, rational solutions anyway. In Manhattanism -the literal, second-degree Manhattanism which had lost sight of the metaphorical character of its prewar solutions- the efficient rationale of the law of the dollar and the Modernist dream of a clean, modern city of the future found each other. A city without those anti-modern, foul-smelling, unhealthy, obsolete factories would rise! A city of clean, beautiful, new office buildings!





To be a place without contingencies, Manhattan had to become one giant Downtown Athletic Health Club. Stripped of a third dimension, with the

DAHC's elevators and its succession of floors as Manhattan's avenues and street pattern, the island/tower symbiont would be the perfect machine to turn men into Metropolitanites. In this two-dimensional world, absolute control over reality was possible, but at a high price: life, the third dimension.



The people would just have to accept that times had changed. Sentimentality would only obstruct Progress, the ultimate path to happiness.

And so, after WWII, through the intermediary synthesis of Manhattanism, Modernism conquered Manhattan. 1960 marked the decisive moment. It was the moment when the *Modernist city was institutionalized with real estate pragmatics*<sup>44</sup>. The 1916 Zoning law, which had been so revolutionary, was completely overhauled. The *revision of the zoning ordinance virtually legislated not only Modernist urbanism but also Modernist aesthetics*<sup>45</sup>. Rezoning was unavoidable: only a rational plan could result in the Rational City. *After 1960 the physical fabric of the city would never be the same again; not only would the character of the streets and blocks change, but also the very idea of community. And, of course, so too would the city's architecture be completely different*<sup>46</sup>.

The image of New York became that of a city which had always had offices as its backbone<sup>47</sup>. And it would be exactly that way Manhattan would be perceived abroad: it had become the *symbol of the city focused on FIRE economy, dominated by a forest of skyscrapers, where the old community life had been destroyed in favor of the international way of life*<sup>48</sup>.

#### **No more contingencies: zoning, social segregation and separation of traffic**

As Manhattan changed, so did its function as a city. A city had always been based on the *theory of taking the peasant and turning him into an industrial worker*<sup>49</sup>. In the Manhattanist city, however, there was no place for industrial workers, as there would be no more industrial jobs. So not only did the fabric of the city have to change, its population would too. Manhattan had to become one giant Downtown Athletic Health Club, where men were turned into perfect men: Metropolitanites<sup>50</sup>. It had to become *a place where there were no more contingencies, so that a new humanism could arise, where people really would have time for leisure*<sup>51</sup>.

A life without contingencies, a city without chance encounters: for the first time we can see so clearly what the Manhattanist objective is: take away the contingencies, precisely those things that make a city a city, that make life life. Manhattanism's aim is to kill the city.

To achieve this, three urbanist concepts which are highly interdependent, were used : (re)zoning, social segregation and separation of traffic.

Zoning could make a particular area of urban surface, on which in theory an endless diversity of functions can develop, suitable for just one application. This makes a city more predictable, and consequently less susceptible to eventualities and chance.

Social segregation also has a prominent role in reducing the contingencies of life. Much like the gated communities of the 1990s, Manhattanist city planning sought to create an urban environment that was *predictable, controlled,... without surprises*<sup>52</sup>. Although the term 'Fortress America' was not yet coined then, a FIRE industry-dominated Manhattan was thought to become in many respects a 'Fortress Manhattan'. *A safe, secure enclave in which people are protected from the 'vagaries of existence...falling property values, vandalism, violence, even an unplanned conversation with a person like oneself*<sup>53</sup>.



*By reserving the street level for automotive traffic and moving pedestrians to elevated and arcaded walkways, the street turns from a place of encounter into a place of passage, where the only ones circulating without the protection of a car's perfectly controllable private universe are the underclass, who find themselves banished to the open streets.*



*The vitality of ordinary life. Oak and New Chambers Street, 1935. These streets no longer exist. Cleared in 1959, the area remained undeveloped until the 1970s, as community groups and city government haggled over the expansion of the civic center. During the 1970s, the firm of Gruzen & Partners devised a complex of new buildings--police headquarters, courthouse annex, United States Attorney's office, correction center, and business high school--that were architecturally unified and largely closed to traffic. Although praised by critics, the complex is completely isolated from the hubbub of the streets. The spirit of everyday life, has been sacrificed to public grandeur. (Bennie Yochelson in Berenice Abbott, *Changing New York*)*

A powerful tool to put social segregation of upper, middle, lower and underclass into practice is the separation of traffic. By reserving the street level for automotive traffic and moving pedestrians to elevated and arcaded walkways, the street *turns from a place of encounter into a place of passage*<sup>54</sup>, where the only ones circulating without the protection of a car's perfectly controllable private universe, are the *underclass*, who find themselves *banished to the open streets*<sup>55</sup>. The arcades and elevated walkways become semi-private 'surrogate streets', to use Boddy's term<sup>56</sup>, the access to which can be easily controlled by private or public security enforcers.

In this respect the postwar evolution which turned our cities into passage zones for automobiles, was no neutral event, but an active use of the car as a tool to segregate the urban landscape, protecting the middle-class privileges and destroying the local, historical culture.

### **Social segregation again: city renewal**

Another powerful instrument to create and maintain social segregation is slum clearance or city renewal, the reshaping of the physical city. Whether to build an extensive urban highway system, a park, an office building complex or a civic center, 'slums' -houses that, like the factories, belonged to the obsolete and bygone era of the Machine Age- would be cleared. The readiness of the government in the decades after WWII to grant Robert Moses the right to use Title I is telling, as is the fact that it would invariably be the weakest population groups that were evicted first. Those immigrants, blacks and working class whites were not only the politically least interesting population groups, they were also seen as risk factors in the project for the Manhattanist city. As a consequence, they had to be either removed from the inner city or carefully controlled in housing projects designed especially to this purpose.

It would be naive, no doubt, to claim that Manhattan had no real slums; in large parts of the city, people had to live in inhumane and unsanitary conditions. Many people who advocated urban renewal had the best intentions. But the abstract thinking they inherited from capitalism and Modernism, so closely united in Manhattanism, obstructed their view on reality. The 'poor' they so desperately wanted to save were *an abstract group that never existed*<sup>57</sup>. 'Slums' they had only seen in statistics on their desk, were to be replaced by office buildings, which would then function as catalysts for urban renewal, as David Rockefeller saw it<sup>58</sup>, providing jobs, beauty, light and air. The radiant tomorrow-city was coming, gleaming in its newness, promising the future.

### **'For whom...?'**

The wind still howls its question, through the canyons of downtown Manhattan, through the tunnels of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, bouncing back and forth between walls of glass, concrete and steel. Like the ghosts of thousands who would now forever be home-less, living in a city that is no longer theirs.



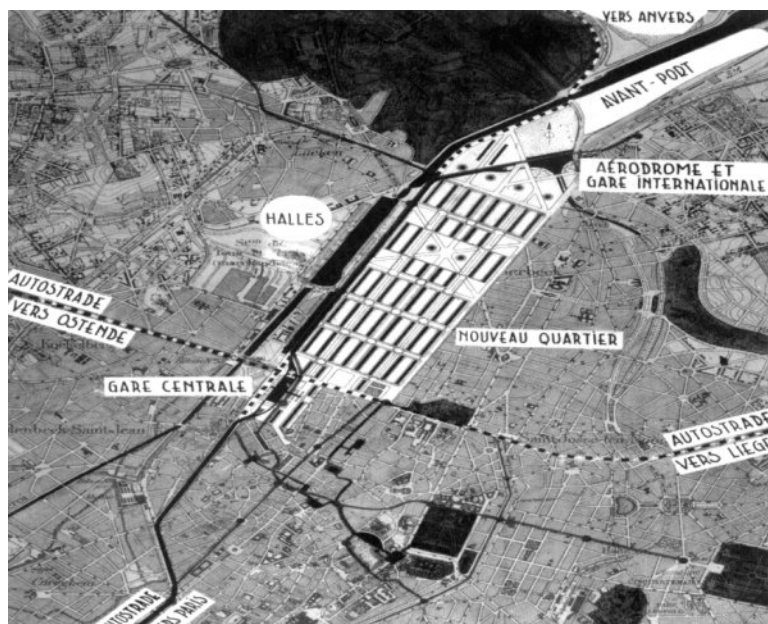
Manhattanism had started out as a metaphorical project: while pretending to offer a solution for urban congestion, it really would let Manhattan grow to unlimited heights and raise congestion to a level where it would mysteriously become something positive. It had been the ultimate glorification of the Metropolis. In Manhattanism the idealism of the European Modernists and the pragmatism of the New York capitalists had found a sublime synthesis. As times changed and the metaphorical character faded away, Manhattanism was rediscovered as a literal, rational plan for the city of the third Millennium. After WWII, to planners and real estate developers alike, it constituted the perfect paradigm for the ultimate city. Or, more precisely, for the ultimate middle-class, anti-urban city. Manhattanism had become the plan for the anti-Manhattan.



*Manhattan, Brussels: The Stupendous Manhattan*



*The Senne in the  
19<sup>th</sup> century*



*Victor Bourgeois' New Brussels: Le Nouveau Quartier*

## MANHATTAN, BRUSSELS

Up until now, I have alternately used the terms Manhattan and New York to describe the same location on earth: the island of Manhattan, one of the five boroughs of New York City. From here on, things will get slightly more complicated. For there is more than one 'Manhattan' on this planet<sup>59</sup>, and one of them is to be found in Brussels, Belgium. Or maybe it should rather say 'was' to be found, because of late its name has been changed. Why? A question which can only be answered if we know the story of this place, the other Manhattan, that has also been called 'The Stupendous Manhattan'...

### History and context

#### **The Cobblestone**

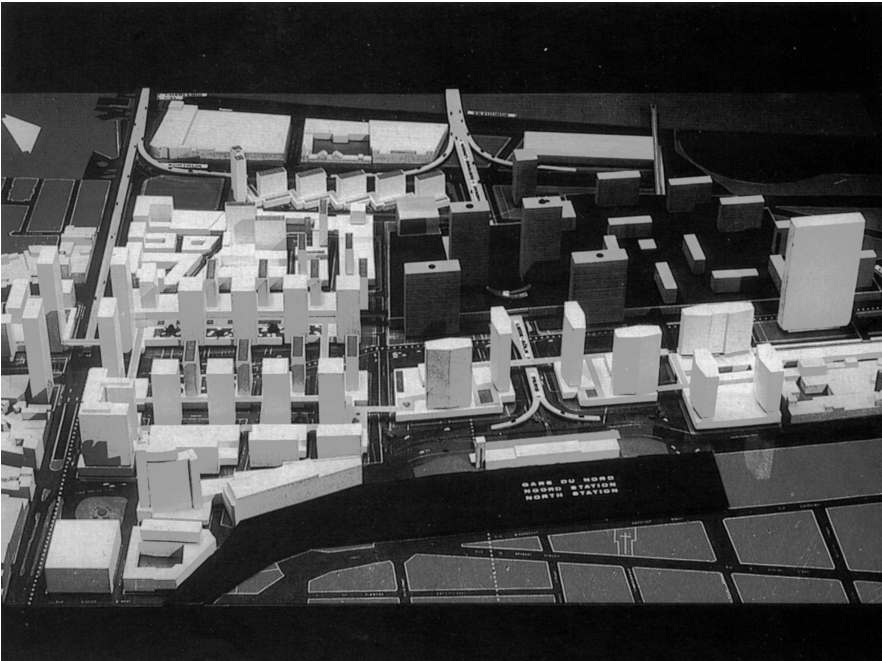
The Brussels neighborhood which until very recently was called 'Manhattan', was one of those typical districts which had grown out of the second industrial revolution of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. A working class neighborhood, limited on one side by the Senne -the river flowing through Brussels- and the Brussels canal, on the other by the northbound railroad, with which its growth had been linked very intimately. It was a mixed, lively and probably dirty and noisy neighborhood. The district was called 'The Cobblestone' ('De Kassei' in the Brussels Flemish dialect), named after the cobblestoned road to Antwerp that ran through it, or 'the North District' ('Noordwijk').

#### **New Brussels**

In the years 1927-1930, a radical Modernist Belgian architect called Victor Bourgeois started drawing the plans for a 'Greater Brussels', based on a strictly rational application of the principles of separation of traffic and rezoning<sup>60</sup>. Part of this plan was the 'New Brussels' district, which would be built on the location of the North District. This 'New Brussels' would be a strictly residential neighborhood, consisting of 320 apartment buildings of ten stories high. Although Bourgeois used economic arguments -raising land values- to justify this gigantic operation<sup>61</sup>, his real aims lay somewhere else. His vision of the New, Modern city was purely aesthetic and formal: redrawing the chaos into the beauty of rationality. To quote Bourgeois himself: *'In the Brussels of the future, skyscrapers will necessarily be built in the midst of vast empty spaces,..., to avoid the anarchy of New York and to satisfy the psychological needs of the people, limited spaces on a human scale [should be built], where people can come together...'*<sup>62</sup>. Bourgeois realized that a city stripped of all congestion has no chance of survival, that people need congestion to live, but he wanted to control it, keep it in clearly defined spaces.

His plans for Brussels, like the other *Modernist dreams about Brussels ... in the interbellum, remained theoretical exercises*<sup>63</sup>. Bourgeois' plan was a *condensation of economical and historical considerations about the city, a theoretical undertaking...*<sup>64</sup> In this respect, his plans were also metaphorical: they represented a visual representation of all the theoretical arguments ever made about Brussels. Nevertheless, the day when





*Victor Gruen and the group Structures devised an enormous project: 58 skyscrapers were to be built, with heights varying between 40m and 162m plus an additional 30 buildings with heights between 18m and 40m, for a total surface of 53ha. Everything would be centered around a World Trade Center which would consist of eight skyscrapers.*



he presented his plans, he had raised the sword of Damocles over the North District. It would only be a matter of time before someone would pick his plans out of the drawer again and see them, not as a condensation of, but as a solution for all of Brussels' economical and historical problems. One by one, families started leaving this condemned neighborhood.

### **Expo58**

As has already been indicated, the 1958 Brussels World's Fair played an important role in shaping the urban fabric of post-WWII Brussels. First of all, Expo58, as it was called, brought about a real construction frenzy in the city. Plans that had been in the drawer for decades suddenly all had to be finished before 1958, Brussels had to prove it was a modern city, apt to welcome the Fair that would herald the beginning of a new era. Expo58 would be the great celebration of Modernity, of hope and victory over all the wretched memories of the Second World War. Expo58, moreover, symbolized the fact that after twenty years of war and hardship, all the wonders that had happened to the people on the other side of the Atlantic were finally within the reach of Europeans. As a consequence, 1958 is the year of consumerism, of the liberation of the automobile,... 1958 marked the zenith of Americanism in Europe.

### **Manhattan I**

1958 was not only the year in which so many social changes became visible in Belgium for the first time, it was also the point in time that sealed the fate of the North District. In that same year the part of the Senne flowing along the neighborhood, the last part that was left open in the 1870s, was paved over, making the North District ripe for reconstruction plans<sup>65</sup>. *Structures*, a group of architects and urban planners, together with the American architect Victor Gruen, proposed the first version of the Manhattan plan -as it would later be called- in 1960. The plan, which picked up on a lot of elements proposed by Victor Bourgeois (especially his proposal for the location and the total razing of the old neighborhood) consisted of 10 office towers and some luxury apartment buildings of lesser height.

A plan of such an immensity, which would before that time have been seen as impossible and unrealizable in the Brussels context, was now rejected because it wasn't big enough! America, where big is beautiful, had become the shining example of progress and modernity and the locus of it all was Manhattan: Brussels, too, would have its *Stupendous Manhattan*<sup>66</sup>.

### **Manhattan II**

Gruen and *Structures* worked out a new plan. Based on four central elements of the Modernist CIAM doctrine (separation of traffic, building a district on a crossroads of two major thoroughfares, creation of job opportunities and residential facilities), they devised an enormous project: 58 skyscrapers were to be built, with heights varying between 40m and 162m plus an additional 30 buildings with heights between 18m and 40m, for a total surface of 53ha. Everything would be centered around a World Trade Center - a concept that had come into existence around 1960 with New York's Port authority- which would consist of eight skyscrapers. The Manhattan plan, as it soon came to be called, was accepted in 1967.



*MHBxl in the 1970s (top) and 1980s (right). One by one skyscrapers started to rise from the ruins, although every sense of a plan had been abandoned. 10,000 people had been displaced, a wasteland had been created.*



*...if you look closely enough, the references are still there...*



*In the metal curtain walls of Brussels glitters the mirage of the American city.*

## 1975-2006

What would follow was one of the most tragic episodes in recent urban planning. In 1970, the first of the eight WTC-towers was completed, but it could only find occupants for its millions of feet of empty office through generous benefits and dubious political constructions. Eventually, only three towers would be built. The former residents of the North District, who had been promised residential facilities as substitution for their demolished houses, would see the first housing project completed in 1975.

In 1979, the original concept of the Manhattan plan was questioned by Belgium's leading architects, after which nothing much happened until the beginning of the 1990s. An urban wasteland had been created, where halfway torn-down houses stood next to their towering, half-empty neighbors. During the nineties, as the economy picked up again, the idea for a business district in the North District revived. One by one skyscrapers started to rise from the ruins, although every sense of a plan had been abandoned. It became taboo to even mention the 'Manhattan' plan and the name of the district was changed from 'Manhattan' to 'North Space' (Ruimte Noord). But if you look closely enough, the references are still there<sup>67</sup> and the plan is still being realized. While most of the towers still stand empty, the building process goes on.

### A Manhattan(ist) project

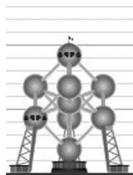
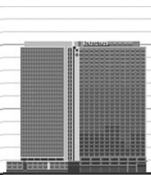

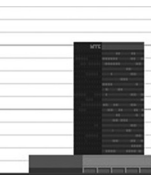
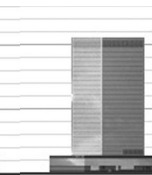
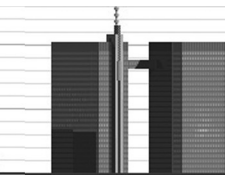
*in the metal curtain walls of Brussels glitters the mirage of the American city*<sup>68</sup>

It makes sense that the plan the group *Structures* and Victor Gruen -not coincidentally *the first godfather of the mall*<sup>69</sup>- dreamed up for Brussels' North District was named 'Manhattan'. After all, it was an almost literal interpretation of the Manhattanist city planning doctrine. That this doctrine was in fact a guidebook for planning an anti-Manhattan, adds a bitter and ironical ring to this statement. MHBxl (Manhattan, Brussels), could never be a second MHNy (Manhattan, New York), only a second-degree version, based on a second-degree theory derived from the real thing.

Let us take a look at the elements of Manhattanism in the plan which make such a statement defensible.

### **To become truly modern**

Like other postwar applications of the Manhattanist doctrine, MHBxl was chiefly a synthesis of Modernism and New York pragmatism, evidently aimed at solving congestion and other urban problems. However, the part of the theory which held that on a deeper level congestion was simultaneously raised to a sublime level, got lost by the 1950s. When politicians and real estate developers in Brussels in the late 1950s adopted this theory, they by no means wanted to create Harvey Wiley Corbett's Manhattan on European soil, on the contrary, they wanted to create Le Corbusier's Radiant City -with giant profits for investors! It had to be the Modern City, New New York, the city that had substituted its history for a permanent future. It had to be a fantasy city, *a world totally fabricated by man*<sup>70</sup>, where the organic chaos of the people and their history had made room for perfect law and order: the abstract logic of postindustrial capitalism.

					
Atomium	Manhattan Center	World Trade Center 2	World Trade Center 1	World Trade Center 3	Belgacom Towers
Brussels Br Belgium Marco Klatt built 1958	Brussels Br Belgium THEc built 1972	Brussels Br Belgium THEc built 1976	Brussels Br Belgium THEc built 1976	Brussels Br Belgium Himer built 1983	Brussels Br Belgium THEc built 1996
monument	30 hotel	28 office	28 office	28 office	28 office
102.7 m	102 m	102 m	102 m	104.8 m	134 m 102 m

*From left to right, the history of Manhattanism in Brussels: from Expo58's Atomium to the nineties' Belgacom Towers which heralded the comeback of MHBxl.*



*The design for the Brussels' WTC project, with in the center the international highway crossroads. Only three towers would be realized (cf. supra).*



*Charlie De Pauw behind the scale model of his WTC.*

Belgium, at that time, welcomed these ideas wholeheartedly: having been through an awful twenty years of war, social and economical crises. Desperate to keep the country's role as an international marketplace -which had been its glory for over a hundred years-, the Liberal party, who were in power since 1955, were all too eager to accept such thinking, especially if it came from America. Brussels, like New York, could be Headquarters' City<sup>71</sup>!

By adopting Manhattanism, the political leaders and the urban planners behind MHBxl were hoping to absorb the wealth, the modernity and the metropolitan character of MHNY. To become truly modern implied for them that they had to change the economical character of the city. As we've seen when studying the emergence of Manhattanism, an important part of modernity was renouncing the old, industrial economical order. Up until 1960, the industry still played a very important role in Brussels. A lack of adapted infrastructure and years of institutional neglect would however incite a very steep decline from then on<sup>72</sup>. The service industry, on the other hand, would know a real boom. While there was less than 1,000,000 m<sup>2</sup> of office space in Brussels in 1955, there was more than 4 million in 1975<sup>73</sup>. There is a strong connection with Brussels' role as the capital of a welfare state, but this also reflects the shift from an industrial to a postindustrial city, a city where *commerce* has been *industrialized*<sup>74</sup>.

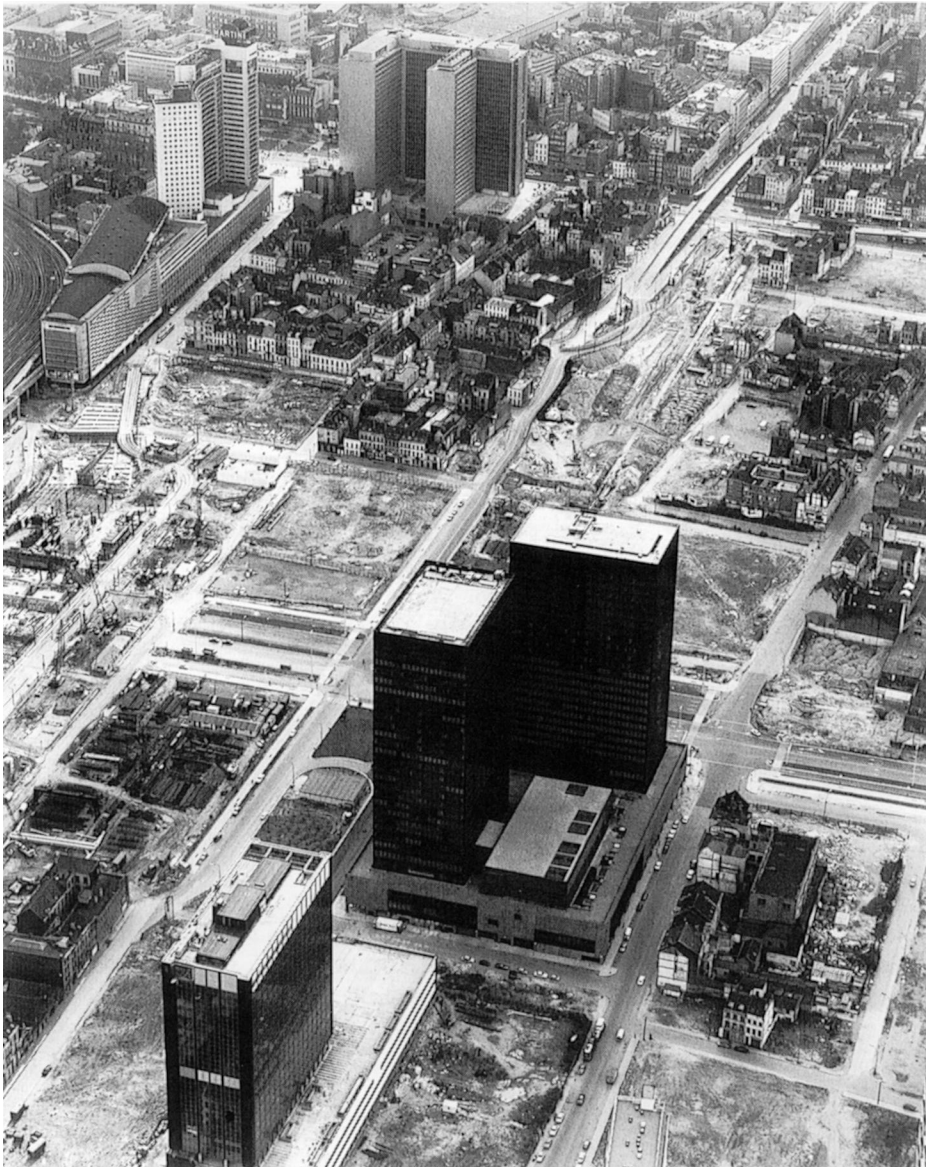
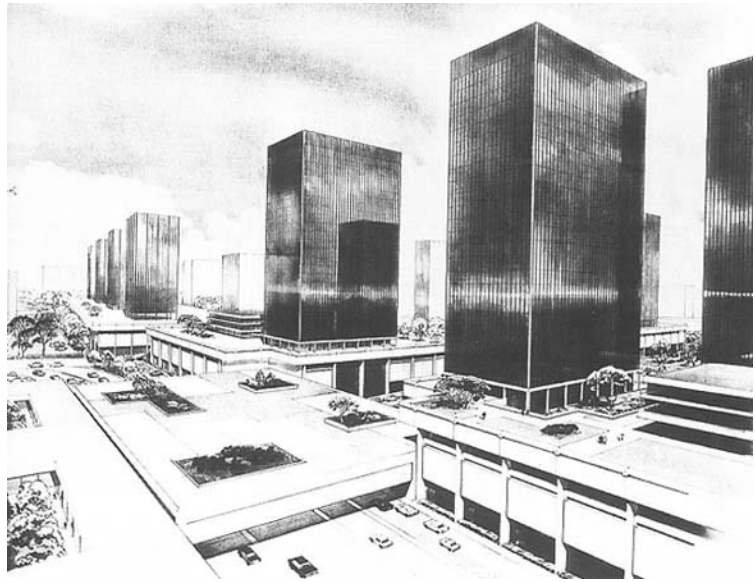
A 'Manhattanization' of the city also implied that Brussels would at last be able to step out of the shadow of Paris and grant its inhabitants the title of 'Metropolitanites'. Just like MHNY's Downtown Athletic Health Club<sup>75</sup>, MHBxl would have its Club too: the World Trade Center Club of Brussels<sup>76</sup>. Like membership of the DAHC, membership of the WTC-club would raise its members to the level of 'perfect men': *men without needs, with the liberty to choose the services they desire*<sup>77</sup>. There is, however, always a price to pay: sterility for the locker-room graduates of the DAHC<sup>78</sup>, billions of wasted *francs* and the haunting specter of 10,000 displaced poor people for the WTC-members.

Not only the theoretical concept of MHBxl, but the actual plan as well, was Manhattanist in nature. Almost tragic is the similarity of the methods used both in MHNY and in MHBxl for building the World Trade Center. *Expel the inhabitants, pave over the rivers,...., drive out the manufacturing, ring in the post-industrial age*<sup>79</sup>! Without further clarification, it would be impossible to tell whether this quote was about Brussels or New York. In this simple -and by no means very nuanced- statement, Fitch nevertheless perfectly indicates why Manhattanism, with the different WTC's as best examples, was so eagerly adopted in cities around the world: its attractiveness lies in its simplicity. Modernity -the promise of everlasting prosperity- is just four steps away! You want the future and you want it now? Four simple steps will do the trick...

### **The stupendous manhattan**

Significant is the article published in 1970 by Paul Van den Boeynants, former prime minister of Belgium, who was member of Brussels' city council at that time. Van den Boeynants had been the great driving force behind every great building project in Brussels during the fifties and sixties, together with his good friend and real estate developer Charlie De Pauw. In a way, we can compare the powerful private-public partnership that resulted from the combination of their forces with the power wielded by Robert Moses and the RPA before and after WWII. In this article, entitled *Le World Trade Center*, he defends MHBxl,

*'The European center of global trade':  
highways, skyscrapers, rolling  
sidewalks and helicopter taxis... In  
the Manhattan(ist) project New York  
capitalism and European  
Modernism found their perfect  
match. MHBxl's World Trade  
Center (right) looks almost like it  
was designed by one of Le Corbusier's  
students in the 1930s.  
The contrast with reality (below)  
could not have been greater: by  
taking Manhattanism literally, the  
anti-Manhattan was created, the  
poetry became prose and the dream  
turned into a nightmare.*



which by then was already severely criticized. To defend the project, which to a large extent was his brainchild', he calls in a lot of arguments which can perfectly be placed in the Manhattanist theory. The most interesting, even eye-defying paragraph is '*The Stupendous Manhattan*<sup>80</sup>'. In a couple of lines Van den Boeynants goes from the futurist Manhattan, which will replace the defunct neighborhood (which of course first needs to be completely destroyed), via rolling sidewalks and helicopter taxis to 'the European center of global trade'. It represents a Manhattanist vision: separation of traffic with a strong Corbettian touch: all pedestrian traffic will happen on a height of 13m, where elevated parks and shops will form the territory of the walking individual, while bridges will connect the different buildings. On the ground level, two major international highways would cross, totaling more than ten lanes of speedy traffic.

Need we mention that none of this was ever realized? No major highways, no residential facilities to replace the razed houses, no bridges to connect the buildings and certainly no helicopter taxis and rolling sidewalks. Still, there is always the possibility that Van den Boeynants was a dreamer, speaking on a metaphorical level, that he too wanted to raise congestion because he had realized it was the city's lifeblood. After all, he makes it very clear that what he intended to do was to increase congestion, bring more people, more traffic, more movement to the city. Van den Boeynants wanted to create 'Manhattan', but the city he uses as an example has never existed, was a metaphor, a dream, a theoretical exercise. By taking this literally, he created the anti-Manhattan, the poetry became prose and the dream turned into a nightmare.

In the end, Brussels' urban policy of the fifties and sixties proved to be so disastrous that the term 'Bruxellization'<sup>81</sup> was launched, and is still used, on the international architectural scene to describe an *urban planning policy made to fit real estate developers without taking any existing spatial or social structures into account*<sup>82</sup>. Bruxellization had replaced 'Manhattanization' as the example of anti-urban city planning. With what we know now, we can say that, as 'Bruxellization' is essentially an application of Manhattanism, they could have kept the term 'Manhattanization' after all.





## CONSEQUENCES OF MANHATTANISM

*You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs...*

David Rockefeller<sup>83</sup>

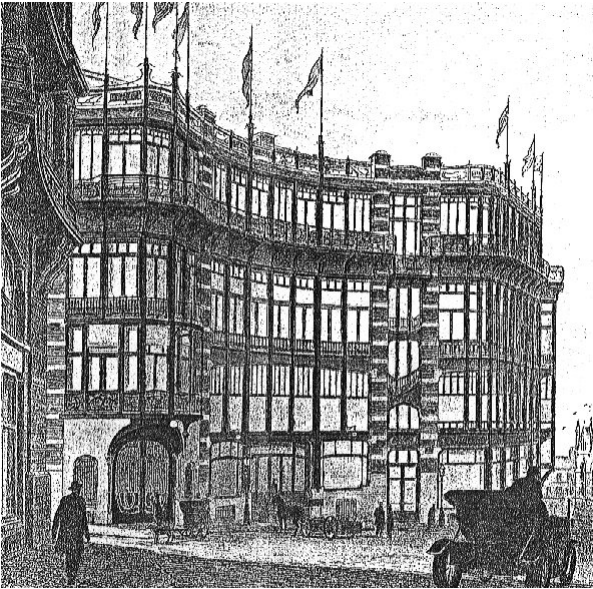
The application of Manhattanist theories in New York City as well as in other (European) cities like Brussels but also Rome (EUR Quartieri), Paris (La Défense) and Stockholm (Hötorget) has had far-reaching consequences in the physical fabric of these cities. Although all was done in the name of the greater good -Progress, i.e. the omelet-, we have to ask ourselves whether it really was worth all those 'eggs'.

### Overbuilding of Office space

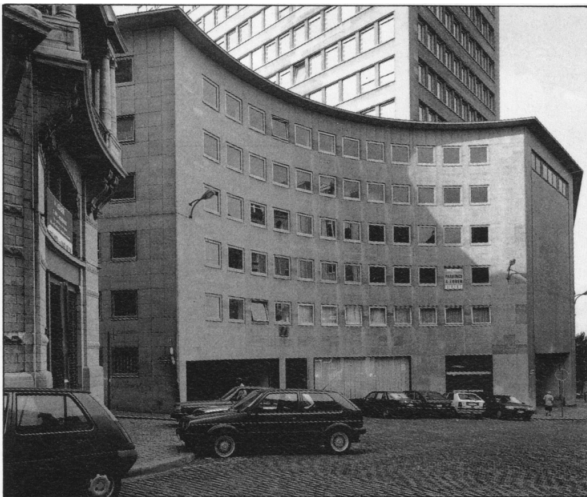
One parallel that can be drawn between MHNY and MHBxl is the fact that the Manhattanist evolutions always involved tremendous overbuilding of office space. A factor which has played into this evolution is the specific development of the economic cycles in history. The first consequence of every economic boom, like those in the early 1920s, the 1960s and the 1990s, is the investment of capital in the production of consumer goods, as the public's purchasing power will increase during boom years. Yet consumption has its limits, so after a while capital is no longer invested in production, but in the stock market or in real estate. This invariably results in two things: an overheating of the stock market and a crash (1929, 1969, 2001) on the one hand, and an overbuilding of office space on the other<sup>84</sup>. For in a period of great economic growth, especially in the second, post-production, phase the demand for office space grows tremendously and prices skyrocket. When the market crashes afterwards and demand shrinks rapidly, a lot of the newly built office towers stand empty for a long time<sup>85</sup>.

This explains why some of the world's most famous office skyscrapers like Rockefeller Center, the Empire State Building and the World Trade Center's Twin Towers were all built during depression years. And it also gives us insight into the question of the RPA's plans for New York always came out a season or so before a crash: a crash always happens at the peak of a boom, when many politicians and economists have become overconfident. It's precisely at such moments people start planning in the long term, as many have come to believe the economy has arrived at a *'permanent plateau of prosperity'*<sup>86</sup>.

Consequently, long anticipated schemes like the 1929 RPA plan and Bourgeois' plan for New Brussels were realized during boom years<sup>87</sup>. As these plans were conceived at or just before a time when the budget became really tight, they just patiently lay in their drawers, waiting until the next economic boom would come. However, if we add the fact that the (over)building of offices has never solely depended on economic cycles, but on the contrary has been subsidy-driven in MHBxl as in MHNY, we realize that this too was part of the plan<sup>88</sup>. The promise made by Manhattanism is simple: *'Overbuilding of offices is impossible'*<sup>89</sup>, because building offices will deliver the highest profit, which is the rational logic of capitalism. Thus, it is logically impossible to build too much office space. The building always goes on, through crises and crashes, only to be temporarily suspended when the public notices that all those offices remain empty while they have to



*Victor Horta's Maison du peuple: beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (top), before 1964 (center) and after 1964 (bottom left). His masterpiece of Art Nouveau had been replaced with an absolutely trite skyscraper, despite the first signs of public antagonism against Manhattanist destruction.*



*New York's Penn Station before its destruction in 1964. Its demolition would be the catalytic event that would end the unquestioned reign of Manhattanism, temporarily at least.*



fight over an affordable apartment. The developers will then admit that they were wrong, that they will change their plans, while all they really have to do is loosely tape plans for social housing and city restorations over their plans for new business skyscrapers. That way, when the economy recovers again -as it always does- they just have to tear those plans from their walls to find the perfect building plan for every economic boom period underneath: Manhattanism!

### Death of the old City

*modernization killed off the city of the flaneur<sup>90</sup>*

From 1950 onwards, as planners were preparing the ground to change the cities to fit their dream of the anti-urban ideal, (American) city centers were increasingly seen *as problems to be solved<sup>91</sup>*, as places to escape from, rather than places to live in. Most of the factors involved in the flight to the suburbs, like the automobile mania, the new frontier and highway construction, were closely connected with this changing public image of the city. In the span of less than two decades this postwar process of de-urbanization would result in the death of the old city.

In Manhattan and Brussels the death of the old city is symbolized by two very similar events, which also happened almost simultaneously. The first event was the proposition in 1960 of the first Manhattan plan for Brussels, in the same year as the passing of the new Zoning Law in New York, heralding the final conquest of Manhattan by Modernism. The second event was the destruction of Penn Station in 1964, which officially ended the Beaux-Arts era and at the same time meant the final victory of the car over public transportation. One year later in Brussels, Victor Horta's 'Volkshuis' (People's House), one of the great masterpieces of the Art Nouveau style, was demolished to make place for an absolutely trite skyscraper.

Manhattanism, and particularly the Modernist element in it, as implemented in the 1960 Zoning Law and in MHBxl, *legislated the disintegration of the traditional city, [and] with the collapse of traditional street architecture would come the collapse of traditional street life and perhaps the very idea of neighborhood<sup>92</sup>*. This should not really have come as a surprise as *Modernism is an ideology in which the belief in progress, modernity, technology, rationality and effectiveness suppresses the values connected with local history, location and culture<sup>93</sup>*. The old city needed to be destroyed in order to let the New City be born.

The result is still unbelievable. MHNy and Brussels are perhaps the two cities that have been most drastically altered after WWII without being bombed during the war. As a sharp observer remarked: *'In New York, who needs an atomic bomb? If you walked away from a place, they tore it down...<sup>94</sup>*'. Other equally sharp minds noted that in the New City, *social involvement was replaced with light, air and recreation,..., history with zoning, building angles and distribution of volume on surface, while historical centers had to be removed or reduced to museum pieces<sup>95</sup>*.



## Critique of Manhattanism

*to approach a city as if it were capable of being given order  
by transforming it into a work of art [...]. It's taxidermy*

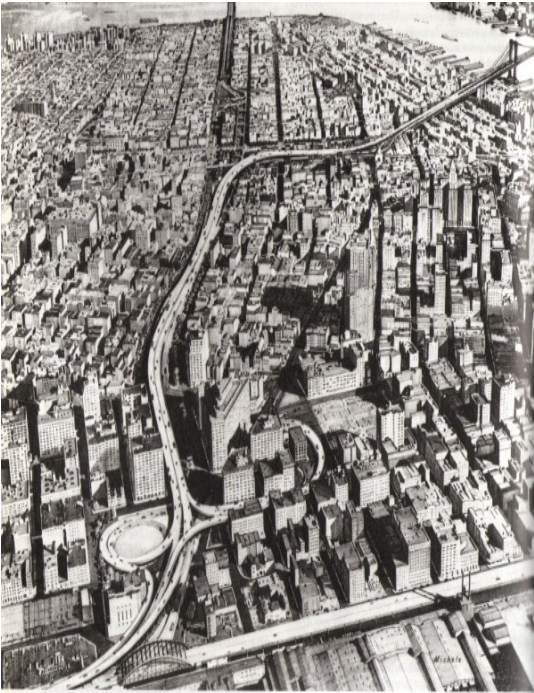
Jane Jacobs<sup>96</sup>

Another important effect of the political and economical success of Manhattanism from the 1950s onwards was the critique of 'Manhattanism', Modernism and city planning in general. Already in the fifties the first voices could be heard denouncing the entire CIAM-based project. Those first dissenters came from within the Modernist movement itself: a young group of architects who would later be called Team X. They were dissatisfied with the compromises Modernism had had to make to become accepted by the establishment, but even more disillusioned by the ideological dead-end street the movement had ended up in. Their main points of critique were *the sterility of the analytical rationalism, the priority for the quantitatively measurable, the obsession with the normative aspect, a lack of respect for the local context and the different human and social models, the split between architecture, idolization of technology,...*<sup>97</sup>. Many of these points have been mentioned in this paper as precisely the elements Manhattanism took over from Modernism.

In the 1960s, a whole new way of thinking about cities grew out of Team X's points of critique -and the alternatives they proposed- of which Jane Jacobs, with her '*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*,' was perhaps the most important figure, certainly in the context of New York City (and its offspring around the world). In this work, which was not coincidentally published soon after the ominous year 1960, she attacked the whole city planning ideology that had developed since the 1920s in which Manhattanism held a prominent place. She showed a remarkable insight in the currents of power that -invisible to the public- shape a city and *in a few daring pages [she] overturn[ed] the holistic urbanism that had dominated since [...] Le Corbusier*<sup>98</sup>. I will insert a few longer quotes of Jacobs' work which perfectly illustrate to which extent she had seen through the Manhattanists. In the first quote, she reacts fiercely to the claim that the death of the old city has been an inevitable result of our economic system's history. In the second she assesses the supposed benefits recent urban changes have brought the city's inhabitants.

*There is nothing economically or socially inevitable about either the decay of old cities or the fresh-minted decadence of the new unurban urbanization. On the contrary, no other aspect of our economy and society has been more purposefully manipulated for a full quarter of a century to achieve precisely what we are getting. Extraordinary governmental financial incentives have been required to achieve this degree of monotony, sterility and vulgarity. Decades of preaching, writing and exhorting by experts have gone into convincing us and our legislators that much like this must be good for us, as long as it comes bedded with grass*<sup>99</sup>.

*But look what we have built with the first several billions. Low-income projects that become worse centers of delinquency, vandalism and general social hopelessness than the slums they were supposed to replace. Middle-income housing projects are truly marvels of dullness and regimentation, sealed against buoyancy or vitality of city life. Luxury housing projects mitigate their inanity, or try to, with a vapid vulgarity. Cultural centers that are unable to support a good bookstore. Civic centers that are*



*Robert Moses' Lower (left) and Midtown (right) Manhattan Expressway plans were defeated: MHNy had rejected Manhattanism! Manhattan would remain one of the last places in the US where you can live your whole life without ever needing a car*

*avoided by everyone but bums, who have fewer choice of loitering place than others. Commercial centers that are lack luster imitations of standardized suburban chain-store shopping. Promenades that go from no place to nowhere and have no promenaders. Expressways that eviscerate great cities. This is not the rebuilding of cities. This is the sacking of cities<sup>100</sup>.*

The book completely changed people's outlook on modern(ist) urbanism, first of all in New York. The combination of Jane Jacobs' critique, the catalytic event that was the destruction of Penn Station and the general atmosphere in the era of the counterculture temporarily united the people of New York and gave them the collective strength to fight for their city. Robert Moses' Lower and Midtown Manhattan Expressway plans were defeated: MHNy had rejected Manhattanism! (Although we have seen that this victory would be just temporary and most plans would resurface again after the counterculture movement had been re-appropriated by the establishment, it would still succeed in keeping *Manhattan one of the last places in the US where you can live your whole life without ever needing a car<sup>101</sup>.*)

Others have equally pointed out elements of Manhattanist planning that have added up to the fact that this kind of urbanism is now considered as truly anti-urban. The fact that the globalized economy went at the expense of the neighborhood population made 'Manhattanism' a metaphor for the antithesis between 'city planning for the capital' and 'city planning for the people'. Moreover, most of these plans originally tried to achieve a certain equilibrium between office, retail and residential space, but as building went on, all the adjustments made to the plan favored the real estate developers, mostly resulting in a pure business district with some token housing facilities and commercially uninteresting stores. Besides, all the ad hoc adjustments to the plans created what has been called 'the planned chaos' of the post-WWII city<sup>102</sup>.

But out of all this critique, something else grew, a positive movement of new ideas, new approaches to the city, in which elements like community life, the symbolic nature of the city fabric, mixed zoning and the end of the automobile's absolute power were the core elements. This movement, which has been called New Urbanism, *was never really supposed to be new, but rather a refreshing antidote to the many errors of Modernism. Instead of alienating megaprojects, intimidating superhighways and isolating suburban developments, it promised human scale, pedestrian access and community-spiritedness* <sup>103</sup>. For the first time in almost half a century there was an alternative to Manhattanist city planning, an alternative that didn't see congestion as an illness to be cured, nor as a necessary evil to be strictly controlled. Congestion was at last seen as an integral part of city life, with its chaos, its unexpected encounters, its traffic, its occasional violence, its noise and smells, and the continuous shock experience of it all. Though sometimes irritating and tiring, these are the things that set the urban experience apart from any other form of communal human living. This doesn't mean cities should be zones of anarchy where the law of the jungle reigns. This simply implies that to take all that out of the urban heart of humanity, is cutting out the heart itself, leaving nothing but a dead, empty shell.





## CONCLUSION: THE CITY OF PLANS

*Ja, mach nur einen Plan, sei nur ein grosses Licht. Und mach dann 'nen zweiten Plan,  
gehen tun die Beiden nicht.*

Bertold Brecht

*Our cities have been planned so many times now, that we are left with an almost  
Freudian program, a shadow-play of unfulfilled dreams (and nightmares).*

Fred Schoorl

Cities are extraordinary places. 'City air liberates!', was the motto of the medieval cities in the Lowlands and is now again picked up by politicians to plead for a revaluation of the urban life. There is certainly something in the city air that frees people from their provincial restraints, something that lets the best, but also the worst, in mankind come out. Cities have brought forth some of the most beautiful things mankind ever produced, but have also provided the stage for some of the darkest episodes in human history.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century city has seen some of the highest and the lowest points in mankind's recent history. A shimmering, frantic place before WWII, struggling to get out of the limits of its pre-industrial cradle, it certainly wasn't a perfect place. But does a child have to be the perfect human being? Should it be able to go from the little bike with those cute little side wheels right on to winning the Tour de France? Some have pertained that they had to, our cities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, infants in the modern world.

They even devised a training schedule to achieve this goal and called it 'the Manhattan program'. They never realized that the real Manhattan itself was still a mischievous little brat, who just wanted to get up again the next day, see the sun shine and play some ball, go to school and find a way in life through fights and falls. Even Brussels which had a history of over a thousand years, was still an infant to modernity, even more so than New York perhaps, which had been born into it.

This 'Manhattan program for helping cities grow up', or Manhattanism, as I have called it, has had such a devastating impact on the development process of cities that some of its elements have even turned into symbols for an 'anti-urban urbanism'. But to attack all education on the basis of one misguided attempt of educational programming would be throwing away the good with the bad. However, one should never be afraid to attack (city) planning out of fear of being called an (economic) conservative, for what can be wrong with a little conservatism to counter the holy gospel of Progress which has led to the misery of so many?

We have to realize that we live in the world after Modernism, the world where all great plans have failed. The cities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century show the scars of many a wonderful plan, laden with good intentions. It is up to us now, to untangle the planned urban chaos we are left with, not to solve the chaos, but to be able not to make the same mistakes again. Cities need a certain amount of unrestricted chaos -which we've called congestion- for they need its energy, creative as well as destructive, to live, to thrive. But the chaos that grew out of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Plan-o-polis, is something else altogether. That chaos, the chaos we see now is that which ensued when dreams (plans and theories) were confused with reality (the physical, living city). It is



the chaos of the schizophrenic mind of Modernism which, like all radical rationalism, took its delusions for real in order to retain control over reality. The outcome was true chaos, the total confusion of values and priorities.

The automobile, once a useful and necessary part of urban congestion, became a priority, an end in itself. We need cars, and we will need them for years to come. But by surrendering our cities to King Automobile, we have practically signed the death-sentence of the city: not just because of the pollution or the threat to human life and security they pose, but because automotive congestion cannot be increased endlessly. Once there is too much of it, all movement stops and urban death inevitably follows. By making our cities automobile cities, we physically blocked the road to a positive kind of congestion, the human kind of congestion.

We've rid our central cities of their interior identity and inner dynamics, making them dependent on the rest of the world, its reasons and means of existence located outside the city. If we take a look around us nowadays, we have to notice that despite the revolutionary ideas of Jane Jacobs and others like her in the 50s and 60s, and the effect they had on city planning afterwards, the city of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is again being planned like the Manhattanist utopia Robert Moses, David Rockefeller, Van den Boeynants and Charlie De Pauw would have liked to see: on a stupendous scale. The change of the 1970s, with the focus on small scale planning and direct democracy, had no lasting effect.

Just like all the other manifestations of the counterculture in the sixties, the counter-city planning movement was prey to the mechanisms of liberal capitalism. To achieve its goals -maximizing profit- liberal capitalism requires the greatest social stability possible short of stagnation. The inherent mechanism it uses to achieve this goal is the (re)appropriation of critique into its own discourse, thus neutralizing the critique by turning it against itself. This is the innate and vital conservatism of liberal capitalism. In the context of this paper we have seen this mechanism at work twice. First we learned how Modernism, which was radical and progressive before WWII, was reappropriated into the established discourse through Manhattanism which then, after WWII, became the norm. Subsequently, the critique of the counter-discourse was aimed precisely at this Modernist element, which was by then seen as a reactionary force. This is what happened to the counter-planning movement as well. A powerful and revolutionary force during the fifties and sixties, it gradually became the norm during the seventies and eighties, in a time of economic and social crisis. As it became the norm, it was incorporated into the capitalist model, which diverted its aims to fit its own goals. Factories became lofts and art galleries, working class bars now house cappuccino-and-15\$-cocktails-serving lounge bars. Revitalization of neighborhoods for everyone turned into gentrification, while local history was preserved as an kind of seasoning for the new Metropolitanites, for whom an urban life is just another fashion statement.

All is not lost, however. Cities are living entities, whose goals and structures change daily. It is the people who live in the cities, the urbanites, who are still the beating heart of every city, who are its nerve ends, its brains and hands, with their hopes and dreams and millions of stories. These people will need new plans to get them through the plan-ravaged chaos of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century city. Yet they need a plan on a human scale, not an abstract theory that treats them as a percentage. They need architects, planners, politicians and



urban thinkers who dare to cast off Manhattanist Modernism, take a look at the real world out there and *reinvent a plausible relationship between the formal and the social*<sup>104</sup>.

They will see Manhattanism is back in full force now . They know where it will lead us -we've been down that road before. It is a road cities should not take again.

- 1 Manhattanism -the unspoken theory of life in an environment completely constructed by man- is also one of Koolhaas' key concepts. In my paper the term will be used with a somewhat different meaning: an urbanist concept which combined elements of Modernism and American pragmatism and the tendency to copy this concept in other cities.
- 2 Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, p. 10
- 3 Burns, *New York, a documentary*, Episode 5
- 4 Harrison, *Modernisme*, p.18
- 5 Koolhaas, o.c., p.19
- 6 Schuiten and Peeters, Brüssel, p.17 (my translation)
- 7 Koolhaas, o.c., p.86
- 8 Koolhaas, o.c., p.89
- 9 Ibidem
- 10 Most of the information on La Guardia I used can be found in Ric Burns' documentary and on <http://www.wikipedia.org>.
- 11 Boyer, *Dreaming the rational city*, p.283
- 12 Koolhaas, o.c., p.120
- 13 Corbett in Koolhaas, o.c. p.120
- 14 Koolhaas, o.c., p.166
- 15 For the history of the RPA, see <http://www.rpa.org>
- 16 Fitch, *The assassination of New York*, p.59
- 17 Ibidem
- 18 Fitch, o.c., p.XI
- 19 Ibidem
- 20 Koolhaas, o.c., p.123
- 21 Heidingsfelder, *Rem Koolhaas*
- 22 Koolhaas, o.c., p.125
- 23 From his New York Times obituary
- 24 Camus, *Reisdagboeken*, p.17. Camus wrote this observation while sailing into New York's harbor for the first time.
- 25 Described in Koolhaas, o.c., p.79
- 26 For the idea of city planning as a tool for social class segregation: Hannigan, *Fantasy City* p.189
- 27 Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_moses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_moses)
- 28 Stern, *New York*, p.8
- 29 Burns, o.c., Episode 6
- 30 Francis Perkins in Burns, o.c., Episode 6
- 31 Boyer, o.c., p.197
- 32 Stern, o.c., p.13
- 33 Some of the obvious similarities: The Trylon and the Perisphere v. the Atomium, and the link with Koolhaas' Globe Tower theory; World's Fairs as catalysts for urban planning; Robert Moses' role v. Van den Boeynants and Charlie De Pauw's,... I will address this issue briefly in the third part of the paper.
- 34 Koolhaas, o.c., p.277
- 35 Koolhaas, o.c., p.89
- 36 Koolhaas, o.c., p.8
- 37 Boyer, o.c., pp.285-286
- 38 Hal Foster, *Bigness*.
- 39 Koolhaas, o.c., p.271
- 40 Fitch, o.c. p.XI
- 41 Burns, o.c., Episode 6 gives a more detailed account of this evolution.
- 42 Fitch, o.c., p.XII
- 43 Lievens, e.a. *De grote stad*. p.14. (My translation)
- 44 Stern, o.c., p.129
- 45 Stern, o.c., p.9
- 46 Ibidem
- 47 Stern, o.c., p.65
- 48 Lievens, o.c., p.15 (my translation)
- 49 Fitch, o.c., p.VIII
- 50 Koolhaas, o.c., p.158
- 51 Van den Boeynants, *Le World Trade Center*, p.28 (my translation)
- 52 Hannigan, o.c., p.190
- 53 Ibidem
- 54 Lievens, o.c., p.10
- 55 Hannigan, o.c., p.191
- 56 Ibidem
- 57 Boyer, o.c., p.284
- 58 Fitch, o.c., p.29



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- 59 In fact, there were at least six 'Manhattans': in New York, in Brussels, in Illinois, Kansas, Montana, and one Manhattan Beach in California.
- 60 Vandenbreeden, *Art Deco en Modernisme*, p.207 (my translation)
- 61 Vandenbreeden, o.c., p.208 (my translation)
- 62 Strauven en De Kooning, *Hoogbouw in Brussel!?*(my translation)
- 63 *Brussel 175 jaar hoofdstad*, p.32 (my translation)
- 64 Vandenbreeden, o.c., p.206 (my translation)
- 65 Vanden Eede, *De Noordwijk* p.11
- 66 Van den Boeynants, o.c., p.30: '*le gigantesque Manhattan*' (my translation)
- 67 The web site, for instance, is still <http://www.manhattancity.be>.
- 68 *50 jaar architectuur*, p.14 (my translation)
- 69 Foster, *Bigness*
- 70 Koolhaas, o.c., p.10
- 71 Van den Boeynants, o.c. p.32; Stern, o.c. p.10
- 72 *50 jaar architectuur*, p.24
- 73 *50 jaar architectuur*, p.29
- 74 Van den Boeynants, o.c., p.28
- 75 Koolhaas, o.c., p.157-158
- 76 De Pauw, *Briefaan de heer Deconinck*
- 77 Van den Boeynants, o.c., p.28)
- 78 Koolhaas, o.c., p.158
- 79 Fitch, o.c., p.14
- 80 Van den Boeynants, pp.31-32 (*Le gigantesque Manhattan*, as already mentioned.)
- 81 'bruxellisation' (my translation)
- 82 *Brussel, 175 jaar hoofdstad*, p.40 (my translation)
- 83 Fitch, o.c., p.XV
- 84 Burns, o.c., Episode 7
- 85 This tendency has been taken to its extreme in new Asian cities like Shenzhen, where real estate is designed less for occupation than for investment. The tenancy of the skyscrapers there is extremely low, but there is a stock market dedicated to those buildings. (Foster, Bigness)
- 86 Fitch, o.c., p.58
- 87 Stern, o.c., p.10
- 88 Fitch, o.c., p.XIV; Martens, *Le Plan Manhattan*, pp.31 and following.
- 89 Fitch, o.c., p.56
- 90 *Brussel, een eeuw architectuur*, p.125 (my translation)
- 91 Burns, o.c., Episode 6
- 92 Stern, o.c., p.9
- 93 *50 jaar architectuur*, p.39 (my translation)
- 94 Burns, o.c., Episode 7
- 95 Boyer, o.c., pp.286-287
- 96 Jane Jacobs, *The death and life of great American cities*, p.373
- 97 *50 jaar architectuur*, p.40 (my translation)
- 98 Stern, o.c., p.43
- 99 Jacobs, o.c., p.7
- 100 Jacobs, o.c., p.4
- 101 Burns, o.c., Episode 7
- 102 *Brussel, 175 jaar hoofdstad*, pp.38-40; Lievens, o.c.
- 103 Charles Rosenblum, *Urbanist Myths*
- 104 Koolhaas in Foster, o.c.



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