

CITY  
ON A  
GRID

HOW  
New York

BECAME

New York

GERARD KOEPPPEL

AUTHOR OF *Water for Gotham*



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## CITY ON A GRID

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Endpapers: The 1811 Commissioners' Plan, the founding document of modern New York. Nearly nine feet long and defying easy print reproduction, the map appears here on the front and back endpapers, enclosing this book in a firm embrace, as the rigid linear grid plan itself did to Manhattan. (*New York City Municipal Archives*)

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HOW **New York** BECAME **New York**

Gerard Koeppl



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For Diane, Jackson, Harry, Kate, and Scrappy



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## PREFATORY NOTE

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THIS BOOK GOT its start after the attacks that brought down the World Trade Center towers in 2001. The original trade center was built in the 1960s over a wide area of its neighborhood, in particular the intersection of Greenwich and Dey Streets, where, at the northwest corner one January midday in 1810, a mother helped her child pump water from a public street well. The scene was painted in watercolor by a French émigrée, Anne-Marguerite Hyde de Neuville, a prolific artist of early America who then lived across the street. This casual—and my favorite—glimpse of Old New York showed modest wood and redbrick homes, dirt streets, bare trees, and a scattering of other New Yorkers—a lumberman, a housekeeper sweeping her sidewalk, two men talking, a few ladies walking, and other neighbors going about their business on what appeared to be a mild winter day. (Have a look online; the image, *Corner of Greenwich Street*, is easy to find.) Over a century and a half later, the intersection of Greenwich and Dey disappeared beneath the plaza of the first World Trade Center.

Then, in the rebuilding after 2001, a smaller trade center emerged and, with it, the long-lost segments of Greenwich and Dey streets, ironically just for foot traffic, much as they were used centuries earlier. This got me thinking that the street arrangement of now densely urban Manhattan is more plastic than I imagined. Streets and corners can come and go, and come back again.

Next, I thought what if it was not the World Trade Center but, say, the Empire State Building—not at an edge of the island but at the city’s physical heart—that came down: a trauma to daily life in the very center of the city. (This was a depressing thought but no longer unimaginable—New York has joined the family of existentially traumatized world cities.) How would *that* rebuilding go? Should the rectilinear street grid conceived in the early 1800s to accommodate animal transportation be rebuilt as it was? Or should new or modified forms be introduced—radials, curvilinears, green spaces, water features—better suited to a mass-transporting, post-industrial, resource-conscious city?

How, I thought, could I be involved in a conversation about possible change—change prompted by malevolent intention, devastating accident, or enlightened choice—to the urban fabric of New York City? I’m not an architect, an engineer, an urban planner, a politician, or even an environmentalist who might claim direct input. I’m just an historian. (Historians are like people who yell fire in empty theaters: no one gets hurt, often no one hears, and sometimes the building burns down.) I could, as an historian of the city, examine its oldest and most essential piece of infrastructure—its famous rectilinear street grid—which shapes everything else about the city, and offer the findings to anyone interested.

What I found is that “the great grid” had a very humble, almost embarrassing, even unworthy, birth yet, like a common object fetishized over time, it resists attempts to change it. This history of two centuries and counting, I reckoned, may be of use when and if the time for change comes. It is easier to move forward after the grasping fingers of the past have been pried open, often revealing that the extraordinary is ordinary and not so difficult to change. In the meantime, what follows can also be taken as just another story in the epic of how New York became New York.

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## INTRODUCTION

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There will come a time . . . when nothing will be of more interest than authentic reminiscences of the past.

—Walt Whitman, *Brooklyn Daily Standard*, June 1861

But in analysing history do not be too profound, for often the causes are quite superficial.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, journal entry, November 1836

**I**F A PICTURE is worth eighty thousand words or so, one image captures what this book is about. And if every picture tells a story, this image tells two. The photograph was taken during the winter of 1882–83 from the roof of a millionaire brewer’s new brownstone mansion at the crest of Prospect Hill, on the east side of Fourth Avenue between 93rd and 94th Streets. This was an evolving neighborhood of New York City, which then consisted of Manhattan only (the boroughs came a little bit later). The avenue and streets on this segment of the island had been laid in the 1850s, but development had been stalled by the loud and dirty locomotives of the New York and Harlem Railroad, running since the 1830s on surface tracks through what was then and for decades after countryside. Only after the tracks were sunk belowground and covered during the mid-1870s did scattered squatter shacks, small factories, and aging farms give

way to merchant piles and developer dreams. The broad and freshly landscaped boulevard over the tracks would soon be renamed Park Avenue. And the hill's high prospects would soon transition from referencing the natural view to reflecting broader social expectation: Carnegie Hill, appropriating the name of the neighborhood's richest new millionaire.

The image that tells this book's stories, an albumen print by Bavarian-born Peter Baab, looks south from beer baron George Ehret's gabled roof at a city rising from the distance. On the right is the new avenue, airy and clean, visible for several blocks as it recedes into the sooty background; a scattered few of what will be solid walls of imposing apartment buildings front the avenue. Running across the middle ground is 92nd Street, intersecting the avenue as streets generally meet avenues on Manhattan: at a right angle. On the south side of the street, facing the camera, is a varied cast of structures representing the local past and future. From the corner stretches a new three-story brick row house with a half dozen entrance stoops greeting fresh sidewalk: a herald of comfortable multifamily living. Mid-block is the past: four modest but well-tended whitewashed wooden houses, each with a fenced yard and covered porch. The houses are relics: new construction in wood will be banned on Manhattan in a few years. Reaching high above the attic of the leftmost house is a side-yard tree, possibly the oldest thing in the image.

Only half of the house with the big tree is visible. The rest is obscured by a new neighbor across the street, with its back to the camera: the first of what promises to be a row of attached three-story brick apartment buildings. We know there will be more of them because this one has no windows on its western elevation, which will soon enough be mated with the eastern wall of the next new building very much like it.

And yet most of the space captured by the photographer is empty. The whole space from 92nd Street in the middle ground

to 93rd Street just under the camera's view in the foreground, and from the avenue on the right to the new building at the left of the frame, is an expanse of open ground, as yet unimproved real estate. We know the void's days are numbered. Just as it will be filled from the north side of 92nd Street with brick buildings, much of the space along the avenue between 92nd and 93rd is ready to be filled with something even bigger: a large, deep rectangular pit has been excavated for the foundation of what will be a major Park Avenue address (now 1175 Park). Spied in the left foreground is the shadow of the first in a series of buildings that will fill any remaining space along 93rd Street.

At first glance, the image is no different from any that might have been captured of dozens of similar rectangular blocks in the city rapidly filling northward. Aside from the obvious visual juxtapositions of old and new, of empty and filled space, the chief value of the image for many observers is local and historic, or merely archival: information for a catalogue of urban development, land largely cleared of nature and prepared for permanent dense occupation. Seeking deeper meaning, some observers might focus on the redundant geometry, the thickening assemblage of rectangular shapes in different planes: the blocks of streets, the block-shaped new buildings, the rectangular building walls. The dominant new shape on the land will be replicated repeatedly in the air above it. In fact, the built forms are such a dominant theme that when this image has been occasionally reproduced over the generations, the lower half—the “empty” space—is usually cropped out. But this space too tells a story.

The main story of this book is the creation and long life of the iconic street grid of New York: the rectilinear plane of many parallel streets crossed at right angles by relatively few parallel avenues laid on the map of rural Manhattan two centuries ago that defined the urbanism of a rising city and nation. The grid was ordained in 1811 by a state commission, appointed in 1807, of three men—headstrong Founding Father Gouverneur Morris, longtime New York State

Surveyor General Simeon DeWitt, and major area landowner John Rutherford. Their grid, which started far south at the then suburban edge of the settled city in the 1810s, arrives before our eyes in the shot from Ehret's roof three-quarters of the century later.

The other story of this book is in the cropping of Baab's shot. In that empty space that reproductions usually edit out, the photographer—inadvertently, unwittingly—captured two faint but evident footpaths, formed in the dirt. One path runs from mid-block on 92nd Street through the center of the empty space toward the corner of 93rd Street and the avenue. The other path runs from the corner of 92nd and the avenue to mid-block on 93rd. The paths cross, not by design but by choice. No people were on the paths when the photographer took his shot, but in the compacted earth unknown New Yorkers had clearly marked a deep desire of living things: to reach their destination by the shortest possible route. Not by two lines around a right-angled corner, but by a direct path.

In that empty space and the urbanizing space framing it are the mystical and the magical: the organic, free, mystic movements through what remained of nature, and the autocratic, abstract, magical geometrics of the planned city. "Magical peoples, because of their rational spirit, arrive at geometric city formations," observed urban planner (and Nazi exile) Ludwig Hilberseimer in 1944, while "mystic peoples, in accordance with their principle of growth, arrive at organic city formulations." Geometric and organic formulations don't take precedence or priority over each other. They exist, thought Hilberseimer, as contemporary impulses, in different groups of people and within each person. Any city is made up of magic peasants and mystic nomads, willingly urbanized and willfully roaming. Manhattan, though, with more right angles than anywhere else in the world, is a profoundly magical place. It will be, for better or worse, until the rectilinear street grid is replaced, if it ever is.

In the 1800s, New York's grid, and the hundreds of thousands of rectangular lots, building forms, and interior spaces it inevitably

produced, gave a sense of stability and rational purpose to a young city evolving into greatness. The pathways in the packed earth of verging Carnegie Hill are evidence of something more. As the emptiness is gradually filled with brick and masonry buildings, the paths will disappear, and the people who used them will experience loss. Though the shortest distance between two points is not around a right-angled corner, New Yorkers must navigate thousands. Perhaps this is what makes New Yorkers run, rushing from loss toward gain, around corners of street walls that protect private space from the public sphere.

The grid favors private interest over public convenience. The right angle values its interior space. Diagonal or nonlinear routes—dirt footpaths through an empty lot, curvilinear forms traversing natural topography—celebrate public space, the civic interest. A rectilinear-grid dweller moving from one point to another that is not on the same axis is obliged to go out of his or her way, to turn corners. Axial streets are urban moats guarding rectangular castles framing interior lives; these streets are pedestrian, common, subordinate. Diagonal or curving streets force private space into accommodations of shape; diagonals and curves make urban life a promenade, a public display, beautiful, grand, mysterious, mystic. This is not Manhattan.

It is often said that the street grid created by the commission of three respectable gentlemen represented the death of Old New York and the birth of the modern city—Old New York being the quaint, low-slung, but notoriously dirty and disorderly place of jumbled colonial and post-Revolutionary streets that sprouted from the southern tip of the island for nearly two centuries, modern New York being the rigid plain of rectangular blocks that brought order going forward. But death and loss are not the same thing. Something dead can't live again; something lost can be found. Someday, Manhattan may look different.

This book tells mostly of the creation and long life of the great grid, “the greatest grid” to some, who generally don't specify whether



the superlative relates to quality or merely quantity. Weaving through this narrative of the great grid, like a New Yorker navigating Midtown at midday, is the lingering sense of loss: lost time, lost place, lost pathways in the packed earth, earth that's there beneath the asphalt, brick, concrete, steel, glass, and plastics, earth that of course will outlast all its human burdens.



FOR THE TIME being, New York is all about numbers and pretty much has been since the 1620s, when Dutch trappers and traders became market makers in exportable beaver pelts by the thousands. The numbers game called Wall Street opened for business here seventeen decades later. For nearly four centuries New York has been a commercial enterprise, with generations of gainers and losers. As Mark Twain (a numbers runner himself!) and others roughly put it, in Boston it's what you know, in Philadelphia who you are, and in New York how much you're worth. The New Yorker triumvirate appointed in 1807 to "unite regularity and order with the public convenience" announced a street plan four years later that converted Mannahatta—the Lenape "island of hills"—into a flattened landscape of numbers. If number crunchers dream of mythical cities, New York is what they look like.

Just inside their four-year deadline, the Commissioners\* and their scrupulous chief surveyor mapped out 155 parallel streets crossing the island from river to river and intersecting at right angles with twelve parallel avenues running along the island's length, making for a ruthless, rigid, rectilinear grid of nearly two thousand largely identical blocks. The short, crooked streets of organic Old New York to the south had names of mostly topographical, geographical,

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\* To keep straight the various commissions that appear throughout the narrative, our 1807 Commissioners and their Commission will be capitalized (as they usually were in contemporary materials) and all others will not.

biographical, or cultural allusion, of Dutch, English, or local origin. Every one of the future city's scores of straight new streets and avenues beyond then aptly named North (now Houston) Street would be endowed with no more than an ordinal number and a cold Cartesian relationship to its linear kin.

The Commissioners placed their streets, from 1st to 155th, roughly two hundred feet apart and commanded that they all be made sixty feet wide, except fifteen that would be one hundred feet wide, at (mostly) regular intervals. The Commissioners' avenues, 1 through 12, were all to be one hundred feet wide, with mostly regular distances between them: after 1st and 2nd were placed six hundred fifty feet apart and 2nd and 3rd six hundred ten feet apart, it was nine hundred twenty feet between each avenue from 3rd to 6th, and eight hundred between all the avenues west of 6th. The only anomalies in the Commissioners' numerology were the abbreviated avenues A through D, which girdled the otherwise lanky island's short but ample eastern hip below 14th Street. Within a few generations, the bulk of Manhattan was covered in long straight lines of numbers. "Like the streets," observed city walker William Dean Howells, the avenues "are numbered, rather than named, from a want of imagination, or from a preference of mere convenience to the poetry and associations that cluster about a name, and can never cling to a number, or from a business impatience to be quickly done with the matter."

But Manhattan also remained a poetic place of names. Wall, Water, and William; Beaver, Bridge, Broad, and Broadway; Mott, Mercer, and Mulberry; Spruce, Cedar, and Pine: all remind us that New York was once and is still something more than just numbers. While numbered streets vastly outstrip named streets in total *mileage*, the nearly four hundred streets with names far *outnumber* the streets with numbers. Indeed, ever since the number and mileage of numbered streets and avenues peaked with the completion of the grid in the late 1800s, names have been gaining. From 1880 to 1890,

in addition to 4th Avenue becoming Park, long uptown stretches of the numbered avenues to the west got proper and more marketable names: 8th became Central Park West; 9th, Columbus; 10th, Amsterdam; and 11th, West End. Riverside Drive had an immaculate conception, as did Madison and Lexington, added through the efforts of a real estate developer two decades after the plan was announced. Later, the geographic extensions of Avenues A and B emerged from the East River uptown as Sutton Place and York Avenue and East End Avenue. In recent decades, dispirited avenues and wide streets above Central Park have been reimagined as nominal boulevards: upper 6th Avenue, first named Lenox Avenue in 1887 for Scottish-born philanthropist Robert Lenox, was officially redesignated Malcolm X Boulevard a hundred years later; 7th Avenue has been named for Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. (1974), and 8th Avenue for Frederick Douglass (1977). The wide cross streets have been adorned with wishful boulevard status: West 106th Street for elegant Duke Ellington, who (like me) had lived there (1977); the four easternmost blocks of 116th for Luis Muñoz Marín, Puerto Rico's first governor (1982); 125th Street for Martin Luther King Jr. (1984); and 145th Street for early labor and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph (2009). This is to name just a few of the major streets and avenues born with numbers and turned to boulevards with names; hundreds of other plazas, places, corners, and squares have been given official or honorary names where numbers or no designation appeared before. It seems we long for more than just numerical attachment to place. Like anxious parents wishing that toddlers would use their words, we want our places to have names like we do.\*



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\* Accordingly, but mostly for narrative clarity, from here on in I'm going to use words rather than the Commissioners' figures for the numbered avenues, and retain figures for the numbered streets.

“It’s FUN AND it’s cathartic, it’s, I dunno, it’s entertaining to . . . look to the past,” said recent New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, “but it doesn’t do anything for the future.” He was commenting in 2011 on blame for the nation’s mortgage crisis: “We’ve just got to focus on how we move [on] . . . rather than why we got here and who did it.” Sure, Bloomberg was speaking as a politician, but if the 108th mayor of New York genuinely believes that history is irrelevant, then he—who among other endeavors vainly sought to relieve the city’s venerable and notorious street congestion that is a by-product of the grid—will have little interest in this book. This book explains, among other things, how the iconic street grid of Manhattan, proclaimed exactly two hundred years before Bloomberg’s historical antipathy, helped make it such a congested place. At the same time, this book shows how the grid made New York, like the new American cities that copied it, an orderly place of energy and industry, a great and famous orderly place where history has been a step-cousin to commerce.

The Manhattan grid is loved, passionately, today mostly by people who need a city that is easy to comprehend, from tourists to transplants to spatially challenged natives. But the grid and the Commissioners and their surveyor who made it have appalled the sensitive and the cerebral from the get-go. The earliest of the outraged—Clement Clarke Moore, Edgar Allan Poe, Frederick Law Olmsted, and others with just two names—saw the grid plan become reality through the 1800s. “Our perpetual dead flat,” mused Walt Whitman in 1849, “and streets cutting each other at right angles, are certainly the last things in the world consistent with beauty of situation.” The gridded, unbeautiful city continued to distress through the generations. Henry James deplored his city’s “primal topographic curse, her old inconceivably bourgeois scheme of composition and distribution, the uncorrected labor of minds with no imagination of the future and blind before the opportunity given them by their two magnificent water-fronts.” James’s gal pal Edith Wharton recoiled from “rectangular New York . . . this cramped

horizontal gridiron of a town without towers, porticoes, fountains or perspectives, hide-bound in its deadly uniformity of mean ugliness.” “We are all agreed—all of us, that is, who pay any attention to such things—,” wrote Gilded Age architecture critic and *New York Times* editorial writer Montgomery Schuyler, “that the Commissioners . . . were public malefactors of high degree.” Urban scholar Lewis Mumford spent a professional lifetime railing at New York’s “civic folly,” its “blank imbecility” and “long monotonous streets that terminated nowhere, filled by rows of monotonous houses.” Mumford protégé Jane Jacobs lamented her city where “a street goes on and on into the distance . . . dribbling into endless amorphous repetitions of itself and finally petering into the utter anonymity of distances.” Frank Lloyd Wright feared the “man-trap of gigantic dimensions” and its “deadly monotony.” Igor Stravinsky gazed sadly from his last apartment at the “filing-cabinet architecture” of corporate Sixth Avenue. If he walked quickly, Jean-Paul Sartre felt at ease in post-war New York, but “if I stop, I get flustered and wonder, ‘Why am I on this street rather than on one of the hundreds others like it?’” He found himself lost at the seemingly unambiguous intersection of Lexington and 52nd: “This spatial precision is not accompanied by any emotional exactitude.”

Most recent urban scholars have been brutal critics. Cornell’s John Reps: plagued by “mechanical dullness,” topographical ignorance, too few avenues and too many congesting intersections, yet copied compulsively by new settlements rising across the spreading nation, New York’s grid became “a disaster whose consequences have barely been mitigated by more modern city planners.” Yale’s Vincent Scully: with their “implacable gridiron” of puny public space, the 1807 Commissioners inaugurated the “American tendency toward private luxury and public squalor.” Columbia’s Peter Marcuse: a plane of real estate development instead of a textured urban form, Manhattan’s grid is “one of the worst city plans of any major city in the developed countries of the world.” Marcuse noted

that *grid* is shorthand for *gridiron*, the medieval torture rack. And, of course, *gridlock*, the harsh neologism for urban and political impasse, was born in New York, during a 1980 transit strike that brought Manhattan street traffic to a standstill. “Even in 1811, the gridiron did not work well,” says New York housing historian Richard Plunz. For one thing, “the solar orientation of the gridiron was reversed from the ideal. Had the long dimension of each block faced east-west, both front and rear facades of each house would have received sunlight each day.” Instead, south facades got and get all the sun, north facades none. In addition, Plunz notes, as many others have, the lack of service alleys congested the overburdened streets. At its best, “the Manhattan grid was substandard.”

Yet many smart people have embraced the grid. James Kent, the supreme scholar of law and politics in early New York, judged it brilliant. “The map and plan of the Commissioners,” he wrote in 1836, “laid out the highways on the island upon so magnificent a scale, and with so bold a hand, and with such prophetic views, in respect to the future growth and extension of the city, that it will form an everlasting monument of the stability and wisdom of the measure.” “The streets are at right angles to each other and the mind is liberated,” gushed Le Corbusier a century later. “I insist on right-angled intersections.” Mondrian found the geometric grail in his adopted grid city. Roland Barthes declared in 1959, “This is the purpose of New York’s geometry: that each individual should be *poetically* the owner of the capital of the world.” In the 2011 exhibit celebrating two hundred years of the “Greatest Grid,” Uruguayan-born architect Rafael Vinoly said the grid of his adopted home “is the best manifestation of American pragmatism in the creation of urban form.” Back in 1978, the Dutch architect (and non-New York transplant) Rem Koolhaas, echoing Kent, deliriously pronounced Manhattan’s grid “the most courageous act of prediction in Western civilization.”

This book doesn’t judge. This book presents the story of the grid’s creation by the primary men—three gentlemen Commissioners and

their single-minded young surveyor—and the events in its lengthening life, and suggests you come to your own conclusion.

In the two hundred years of New York's grid, no one has written a book about it. In the same two centuries, dozens of books have been written about the other great and contemporaneous feat of anticipant design and engineering that enabled New York City's rise: the Erie Canal. Many of the same people were involved with both: brilliant but reckless Gouverneur Morris; preeminent if passionless surveyor Simeon DeWitt; and DeWitt's exacting but eventually deranged protégé John Randel Jr. The now long irrelevant canal remains the topic of endless books—recently one by me—while the most famous urban design of a living city, a design that defines daily life in this thriving city, has found not one biographer until now.

Why has the grid, which the New York essayist Phillip Lopate calls “a thing impossible to overpraise,” never had a book—of praise or not—and why is now the time? Here is what I think. I think 9/11 shocked New York from young adolescence to the pimply insecurities of early adulthood, from a relatively young and untroubled existence, compared with the much longer lives and disordering traumas of other great world cities, to the first contemplation of its own mortality, from blithe self-assurance to the first pricks of introspection and wisdom. The vulnerability exposed by 9/11 has aroused a deeper examination of their city's past than New Yorkers have previously been willing to indulge.

I once wrote in a book review that “New York is a city that eats its history,” where new readily replaces old that cities with deeper historical self-awareness would preserve or adapt. New York was founded as a commercial place and has remained so for centuries. “Unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts,” observed the French scholar of modern life Michel de Certeau. “Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future.” De Certeau was writing in 1984, in a paean to

Manhattan's "wave of verticals" as he viewed them from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, then "the most monumental figure of Western urban development."

But the towers are gone and, with Western-style urbanism now spread wide and high throughout the world, New York is unlikely again to be the supreme place of global monumentalism. For most of ten decades starting in 1870, the city was home to the world's tallest building, from the Equitable Life Building to 1 World Trade Center. The competition has moved elsewhere. Only six of New York's eleven onetime titleholders remain, yet the survivors suggest that the city is shifting from unadulterated, reckless, breakneck commerce to something more introspective and longer lasting. The Beaux-Arts icon Singer Building was demolished in 1968 at the tender age of sixty, the last former champion destroyed as a business decision. The city's now half-dozen ex-champs are all protected city or national landmarks. The Woolworth, Chrysler, and Empire State Buildings will never be the world's tallest again but they might eventually be the city's oldest, providing rare contemplation for many future generations of New Yorkers about how a city ages gracefully.\*

Meanwhile, shipless river piers and abandoned freight railways are being transformed into inspired parks and public places. Baby strollers are pushing out brokers on Wall Street. ("There are some far-seeing people," it was observed way back in 1875, "who prophesy that when the present flood-tide which is carrying the population of New York further and further up town shall begin to ebb, its receding will bring the Battery again into favor as the dwelling of the wealthy and refined.") Traditional symbols of commercial energy—the Empire State Building, the fish market, the meat market—have

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\* Back in 1946, long before landmarking, Sartre caught glimmerings of a certain permanence and destiny: "I see in the distance the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings pointing vainly to the sky and it suddenly occurs to me that New York is on the point of acquiring a history and that it already has its ruins." Sartre, "New York, Colonial City," 133.



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