

“If it should be asked why was the present plan adopted in preference to any other, the answer is, because after taking all circumstances into consideration, it appeared to be the best...”

*Gouverneur Morris, Simeon DeWitt, John Rutherford,
“Remarks of the Commissioners for Laying Out Streets and Roads
in the City of New York, Under the Act of April 3, 1807”*

THE GREATEST GRID: A Call for Ideas

**Organized by the
Architectural League
of New York**

**In partnership with the
Museum of the
City of New York**

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In 1807, frustrated by years of uncontrolled development and a decade of public health epidemics attributed to lower Manhattan’s cramped and irregular streets, New York City’s Common Council (the predecessor to today’s City Council) petitioned the State Legislature to develop a street plan for Manhattan above Houston Street, at that time a rural area of streams and hills populated by a patchwork of country estates, farms, and small houses. The adoption in 1811 of the Commissioners’ Plan for New York laid out in a single bold stroke the Manhattan street plan up to 155th Street (leaving the area north of there for future planners to address). Though it would take the rest of the 19th century to build, this gridiron of twelve north-south avenues and 155 east-west streets would fundamentally shape the future of New York and become an emblem of the city itself.

In celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of the Commissioners’ Plan, the Museum of the City of New York will present *The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan*, a major exhibition curated by Hilary Ballon that traces the origins and evolution of the grid over two hundred years. As inevitable—or perhaps invisible—as it may seem to New Yorkers today, the Manhattan street plan was an act of breathtaking vision and ambition on the part of city officials and citizens alike, one that required the mobilization of vast resources and decades of sacrifice and inconvenience. Grid plans, of course, were not new; Annapolis, Philadelphia, and Savannah, to name just a few colonial examples, all used a grid in one form or another. What was notable about the Commissioners’ Plan was the relentlessness with which the grid was deployed: 2,028 seemingly identical blocks with little provision for public space and none of the expressive urban gestures then fashionable among city planners—the “circles, ovals, and stars” that, in the commissioners’ own words, “certainly embellish a plan” notwithstanding “their effect as to convenience and utility.” Moreover, the plan displayed a complete disregard for the existing topography of Manhattan, transforming what had been an island of hills, valleys, and streams into the (relatively) level plane necessitated by the straight lines of the plan’s streets and avenues.

Alternately vilified and celebrated over its two hundred years, the Manhattan grid has nonetheless demonstrated a remarkable flexibility to accommodate the architectural gestures and urban planning theories of successive generations of architects, urban designers, private developers, and city officials. Central Park and the super-block housing developments of 1960s urban renewal; Broadway and Madison and Lexington Avenues; the automobile and the subway; the skyscraper and the sliver building; the water system and the electricity grid; zoning resolutions and preservation districts—these are just some of the amendments and additions that the Commissioners’ Plan has accommodated since 1811. Given the grid’s capacity for reinvention, how might it continue to adapt and respond to the challenges and opportunities—both large and small—that New York faces now and into the future?

THE CHALLENGE

The Architectural League announces an international Call for Ideas that invites architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and other design professionals to use the Manhattan street grid as a catalyst for thinking about the present and future of New York. The League will select up to ten proposals for an exhibition that will be presented at the Museum of the City of New York beginning in December 2011, concurrently with *The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan*.

What challenges and possibilities face the city today and how might innovative solutions emerge out of (and in turn modify) the existing street grid? We are already seeing new approaches to street use in the Bloomberg Administration's bike lanes and pedestrian plazas. What other possibilities exist for rethinking streets that might either increase public space or encourage new kinds of uses? What new infrastructures will the city require—or what existing infrastructures might be rethought—and what impact will they have on the grid? How might responsive technologies interact with the grid to imbue it with a radically new kind of adaptability, one that changes from morning to night, or day to day? Are there ways to make more dynamic connections among the different layers of Manhattan, from the subway to the street to the tower? How can blocks be reconfigured to impact density levels or generate new building typologies? What ways can we use New York's existing topography to better address climate change and sea level rise? Alternatively, what small-scale interventions or insertions might positively impact a single block or neighborhood? At a moment when the city's economic and demographic diversity are under threat, how could actions on and within the grid work towards counteracting the prevailing forces that are transforming Manhattan into a pleasure ground for the rich and a tourist mecca?

Drawing on the grid's enduring power as muse and metaphor, the League invites architects and designers to consider how the grid might provide the intellectual and creative framework for thinking about new possibilities and directions. Two hundred years ago, the Commissioners' Plan was an act of astonishing ambition. What kinds of equally bold, visionary ideas and plans should New York undertake to sustain itself as a world capital—and what trace will they leave on the street grid?

The goal of the project is to propose new ways for thinking about how the street grid shapes life in New York, speculate on how it could continue to accommodate and respond to any number of urban imperatives, and, most importantly, to acknowledge and celebrate the fundamental contributions the Commissioners' Plan has made to defining New York's character and identity.

SUBMISSIONS

The League welcomes a range of proposals, from the visionary to the practical, large scale or small. Proposals may imagine new configurations of the elements that compose the grid (super block, block, lot, intersection, street, sidewalk, etc.); propose small scale insertions; suggest new building typologies or public spaces; consider the grid's role as a node in a regional or global network; among other possibilities. Participants are welcome to focus their projects on a specific site or to address the grid as a whole. Given that the exhibition is organized to celebrate the anniversary of the Commissioners' Plan, some part of the proposal must fall within the area of the 1811 grid (Houston to 155th Street, from river to river). Entrants may participate as either individuals or teams, but no one may submit more than one proposal.

(Continued on next page)

All entrants should submit the following:

- A Cover Sheet (PDF format), with the project title and the names and email addresses of all team members, with one team member designated as the primary contact. The donation ID (see below) for your entry fee should be included on the cover sheet.

- A Design Statement (PDF format) of no more than five hundred words that describes the project. (The cover sheet and the design statement may be one document.)

- A Design Proposal, a high-resolution (300 dpi) PDF of two pages of 24" h x 36" w (landscape format). Submissions may include process drawings, photos, maps, plans, sections, perspectives, and other visual imagery, but all submissions should include at least one view that incorporates or is based on the Manhattan street grid. Please note that depending on final exhibition requirements, some entrants may be asked to reformat their submissions for size and orientation.

ENTRY FEE

There is a required entry fee of \$25 per submission. Entrants should pay the fee online [here](#), after which an automatic receipt will be emailed to entrants with a transaction ID. Please include transaction ID on the cover sheet for your submission.

ELIGIBILITY

This Call for Ideas is open to all architects, urban designers, landscape architects, and all other design professionals. Students are ineligible for participation.

DEADLINE

All submissions must be emailed via **yousendit or comparable file sharing service** to grid@archleague.org no later than 11:59 p.m. on September 26, 2011. Please put the project title in the subject line.

SELECTION AND AWARDS

Up to ten submissions will be chosen by the jury for exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York. The selected teams will receive an honorarium of \$1,000 each. Winners will be announced in mid-October. The exhibition will open in early December.

JURY

Amale Andraos, WORKac

Hilary Ballon, Curator, *The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan*

Sarah Henry, Chief Curator, Museum of the City of New York

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Gregory Wessner, Curator, *The Greatest Grid: Call for Ideas*; Digital Programs and Exhibitions Director, The Architectural League

Sarah Whiting, Dean, Rice University School of Architecture

INFORMATION/RESOURCES

Click on the links below for articles and resources about the Commissioners' Plan.

["Remarks of the Commissioners for Laying Out Streets and Roads in the City of New York, Under the Act of April 3, 1807"](#)

["City of New York, North of Canal Street, in 1808 to 1821," John Randel, Jr.](#)

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"The Greatest Grid: The New York Plan of 1811," Edward Spann in *Two Centuries of American Planning*, ed. Daniel Scheffer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 11-40 [Link not available]

"Designing the City of New York: The Commissioners' Plan of 1811," Artis Wright, Map Division, The New York Public Library (July 30, 2010)

"200th Birthday for the Map that Made New York," Sam Roberts, The New York Times (March 20, 2011)

"How Manhattan's Grid Grew," Jeremy White, Matthew Ericson, Ford Fessenden, Micah Cohen, Joe Burgess, and Archie Tse, The New York Times (March 20, 2011)

"200 Years on the Grid," Phil Patton, aiga.org (March 22, 2011)

"On Grid's Birthday, Beautiful Manhattan Maps," Zachary M. Seward, Wall Street Journal (March 22, 2011)

"The Bicentennial of the Manhattan Street Grid," Tracie Hulme, wnyc.org (March 22, 2011)

"Happy Birthday, Grid!" Brian Lehrer Show, wnyc.org (March 22, 2011)

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions, please email Gregory Wessner at wessner@archleague.org by July 18, 2011. Questions and responses will be posted on the Call for Ideas page on the League's website, www.archleague.org, beginning July 22, 2011. Entrants should read through the questions and responses before emailing their submission.

CREDITS

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www.archleague.org

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www.mcny.org

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