

The Unfinished Grid: Call for Essays

How does the Manhattan street grid determine your experience of the city?

How does it affect your understanding of what a city is, what a city does, how you move through a city?

How does it embed itself in defining aspects of daily life in New York City: destinations, neighborhoods, intersections, commutes; where and how we live, work, explore or enjoy the city?

This year, the Commissioners' Plan, the framework that established Manhattan's famous street grid, celebrates its 200th anniversary. In honor of that event, and in connection with two exhibitions on the history and future of the grid, *Urban Omnibus* is soliciting essays that reflect on the Manhattan street grid as paradigm, rubric or muse for urban life. A jury of prominent designers, urbanists, writers and thinkers will review submissions. Up to three winning entries will be published on *UrbanOmnibus.net* and will receive a monetary award (\$500 for first place; \$250 for up to two second place winners). The essays submitted to this competition may reference either New York City's speculative futures or its storied past, but in either case, essays should reflect on its contemporary reality. A strong personal voice is encouraged. Essays can range from stories that take Manhattan's numbered streets and avenues as points of departure to journalistic descriptions of place-based urban subcultures to theoretical treatises on infrastructure, property or density.

The prize-winning essays selected for publication will complement a pair of exhibitions presented by **the Museum of the City of New York** and **the Architectural League of New York** that commemorate the Manhattan grid and explore its evolving legacy. The exhibits' premise is that the grid has been subject to countless adaptations and transformations over the past 200 years and will be subject to more urban innovation in the years to come. *The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011*, curated by Hillary Ballou, explores the 200 years since the creation of that foundational plan through the lens of the grid's enduring impact on land use, real estate and the public realm. *The Unfinished Grid: Design Speculations for Manhattan*, curated by Gregory Wessner, displays eight design proposals – selected from a pool of over 120 submissions from around the world – that project ways “to act on and within the grid to respond to the challenges and opportunities... that New York faces now and into the future.” The essays will contribute personal, reflective and contemporary voices into this conversation about the past, present and future of New York City. Writers interested in submitting work are encouraged to view the exhibitions as they shape their essays.

With this competition, *Urban Omnibus* seeks to advance its dedication to redefining the culture of citymaking by inviting writers to interpret a system that influences so many aspects of urban life, and yet is rarely considered in evocative or creative non-fiction writing.

AWARD:

The jury will select one first-prize essay, whose author will receive an award of \$500. Up to two second place winners will receive prizes of \$250 each.

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SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS:

Essays should be between 800 and 2000 words; suggestions of imagery that supports or illustrates each essay are strongly encouraged.

Email submissions as attachments to info@urbanomnibus.net with GRID: ESSAY SUBMISSION as the subject line. Please include your name at the top of the document.

Submissions must be received **by 5:00pm on Wednesday, February 1st, 2012 at 5pm.**

Questions about this call for essays can be sent to info@urbanomnibus.net.

JURY (list in formation):

Ken Chen, Executive Director, Asian American Writers' Workshop

Rosalie Genevro, Executive Director, Architectural League

Sina Najafi, Editor, Cabinet

Michael Sorkin, architect, urban designer, writer

Nicola Twilley, author, *Edible Geography* and Co-Director, Studio-X New York

Cassim Shepard, Editor, Urban Omnibus

Varick Shute, Managing Editor, Urban Omnibus

Gregory Wessner, Special Projects Director, Architectural League and curator of *The Unfinished Grid: Design Speculations for Manhattan*

ELIGIBILITY:

Staff and board members of the Architectural League and the Museum of the City of New York are not eligible for this competition.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITIONS:

The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011 celebrates the 200th anniversary of the Commissioners' Plan of 1811, the foundational document that established Manhattan's famous street grid. Featuring an original hand-drawn map of New York's planned streets and avenues prepared by the Commission in 1811, as well as other rare historic maps, photographs and prints of the evolution of the city's streets, and original manuscripts and publications that document the city's physical growth, the exhibition examines the grid's initial design, implementation, and evolution. *The Greatest Grid* traces the enduring influence of the 1811 plan as the grid has become a defining feature of the city, shaping its institutions and public life.

The Unfinished Grid: Design Speculations for Manhattan On the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the Commissioners' Plan, the Architectural League, in partnership with the Museum of the City of New York and Architizer, issued an international Call for Ideas, inviting architects and designers from around the world to speculate about how Manhattan's grid might be adapted, extended or transformed in the future. How might the grid accommodate growth or make possible new types of buildings; how could it be modified to respond to climate change or new transportation technologies? *The Unfinished Grid* presents eight proposals, selected by a jury of architects and historians, which offer provocative speculations for the future city. Proposals range from inserting a new north-south avenue, in order to introduce new street-level public spaces, to appropriating intersections as sites for new kinds of development, to envisioning fantastical vertical cities that claim the sky above Manhattan as a new realm for inhabitation. Together the proposals do not describe a literal vision of the future, but suggest the immense possibilities and catalytic power the grid still holds, after two hundred years, for organizing urban life and stimulating the imaginations of architects and urbanists.