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An Analysis of the Grid as a Nineteenth Century Hegemonic Tool of Urban Revival

From a presentist lens, the urban plan of the grid, that dominates both the majority of European and American cityscapes, appears normal and rational. Because the grid is naturalized into our fundamental understanding of the legible city, we fail to recognize the way that grid systems pervasively exert power over how we perceive the world. But prior to the long nineteenth century, the majority of our contemporary cities *lacked* this grid plan. The grid was a design construction utilized throughout the nineteenth century to intentionally purport a certain hegemonic control, stability, and order over urban space. In this paper, I will analyze how the language of urban sanitation was used to construct and legitimize the grid. Using the case studies of 1) Haussmann's plan of Paris and 2) Olmsted and Vaux's plan of Central Park, I will identify how grid plans operated as a source of hegemonic control that improved urban conditions for the bourgeoisie through the displacement of the working class.

Prior to Haussman's Urban Renewal Projects that reconstructed the city, Paris was experiencing an amalgamation of urban problems. Rapid demographic growth concentrated in the limited geographical area of France's capital created problems of health and sanitation that the existing infrastructures could not control. Such conditions led to crowded and filthy urban conditions. In 1596, an italian visitor remarked on the filth of the streets stating "Il circule dans toutes les rues de la villa un ruisseau d'eau fetide, o`u se déversent les eaux sale de chaque maison et qui empeste l´air (Filth runs through the streets where each household throws out its filthy waters that poison the air).[1] By the nineteenth century, these fetid street problems only worsened and in the context of industrial capitalism, the filthy streets and filthy air that outsiders had previously criticized, transformed from a condition of France to a threat to new bourgeois identity. Nineteenth century literature's criminalization of the *La boue de Paris*, or the smelly, sludged sewage that filled the streets of modern Paris[2], further exemplifies this shift in perspective where poor sanitary conditions became associated with the working class whose filth threatened the pristine bourgeois identity.

It was in this context of class clash tied to sanitary ideals that Napoleon III and Haussmann's Urban Renewal (1853-1871) that would redesign modern Paris began. In 1853, Haussmann began installing a grid within the center of Paris. Haussmann forcefully plowed straight lines through densely populated areas of Paris: with one line running in the north and south direction of central Paris, and two lines running through the east and west on both sides of the Seine River. As illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, Haussmann's plans refused to deviate from the straight lines of the grid. Additionally instead of attempting to alleviate the displacement and destruction instituted through the grid, Haussmann used radial roads to selectively connect bourgeois spaces in addition to diagonals which both shortened travel distances and also to deliberately dismembered working-class enclaves that were interpreted as a political threat.[3]

Haussmann's tabula raza of the grid acted ultimately as a source of control. Socially, the grid's cold inflexibility that refused to accommodate the housing of the working class suggested

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[1] *R´ecit de Fr. Greg. d'Ierni*, quoted in Henri-Jean Martin, *Livre, pouvoirs et soci´et´e a` Paris au XVII*e *1598–1701* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), 34.

[2] Karen Neuman, "Filth, Stench, Noise," in *Cultural Capitals; Early Modern London and Paris*, 76-89.

[3] da Costa Meyer, Esther. *Dividing Paris: Urban Renewal and Social Inequality, 1852-1870*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.

that the working class were not welcome within the new, modern Paris. Physically, Haussmann's construction that razored through and destroyed communities, communicated the message that the state could *and would* dismantle working class communities in the name of urban revitalization. And symbolically, the straight lines and geometric perfection that Haussmann's plan worked to achieve reflected the performative bourgeois ideals that modern Paris would strive to uphold.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate views of the straight, manicured *grands boulevarts* of Haussman's Paris. These *grands boulevarts* were very wide, with ample room for the bourgeois population of Paris to promenade in. In dramatic contrast to the tightly cramped slums that had preexisted these boulevards, the wide open space of Haussman's *grands boulevarts* promoted light, circulation, and fresh air. The Haussmannization of Paris had erased the social ills-filth and unsanitary conditions- of the working class, and the bourgeois class could fully bask in the comfort of the clean and modern, industrial city. Meanwhile, working class populations that had been displaced were priced out of the city, and forced to live in the same unsanitary, cramped conditions on the invisible periphery of the city.

Figures 3 and 4 also show how the *grands boulevarts* included double rows of trees on either sides of the boulevard. The use of trees added to the feeling of sanitation and cleanliness within the urban landscape. For individuals walking through the boulevard landscape, the trees provided an organic aesthetic, healthy to the mind, and freshly circulated air, healthy to the body.

The methodical, systematic organization of these trees into two straight parallel lines referred back to the grid organization of the larger plan of Paris. The arrangement and landscaping of pieces of nature (trees) symbolized control of the state over urban space. By organizing the boulevard in this grid-like manner, the hegemonic ideas of order and stability were reinforced in the everyday context of Paris living.

Another urban landscape built in the US, during the nineteenth century, also utilized the city grid to reclaim working class urban spaces for bourgeois urban renewal. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux designed Central Park (1858-1862) with the intention of making a lush green space that would both counter unhealthy urban conditions and allow New Yorkers to engage in refined and regenerative recreation.

Before Central Park was designated to be a park by the city commission, the park site served as the de facto residence for "1,300 African American, Irish, and German New Yorkers, who, during the 1840s, lived on the park site and subsisted by selling their labor. They fished, farmed, raised livestock, logged, boiled bones, and scavenged through the city's trash."[4] When the city commission decided to build a park on this land, they forcefully displaced these marginalized communities and outlawed the subsistence activities on the land.

Following this displacement of these de-facto communities in the 1840s, the city commission then utilized the law of eminent domain in 1853 to set aside 775 acres of land for the park. These 775 acres of land were a part of Seneca Village, a community of largely property-owning African Americans. Although the law of eminent domain provided some compensation to landowners (as opposed to Paris residents' displacement), the land was heavily undervalued and the 1,600 residents were all ultimately forced out by 1857, prior to Olmsted and Vaux's construction of the park.[5] In the case of Central Park, the existing New York City grid's

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[4] Fisher, Colin. "Nature in the City: Urban Environmental History and Central Park." *OAH Magazine of History* 25, no. 4 (2011): 27–31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23209954.

[5] The Central Park Conservancy. "Before Central Park: The Story of Seneca Village," *Central Park Conservancy*, (2018), https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/seneca-village.

hegemonic understanding of power displaced marginalized communities in a to make way for a space where the "public" could enjoy health rejuvenation and recreation.

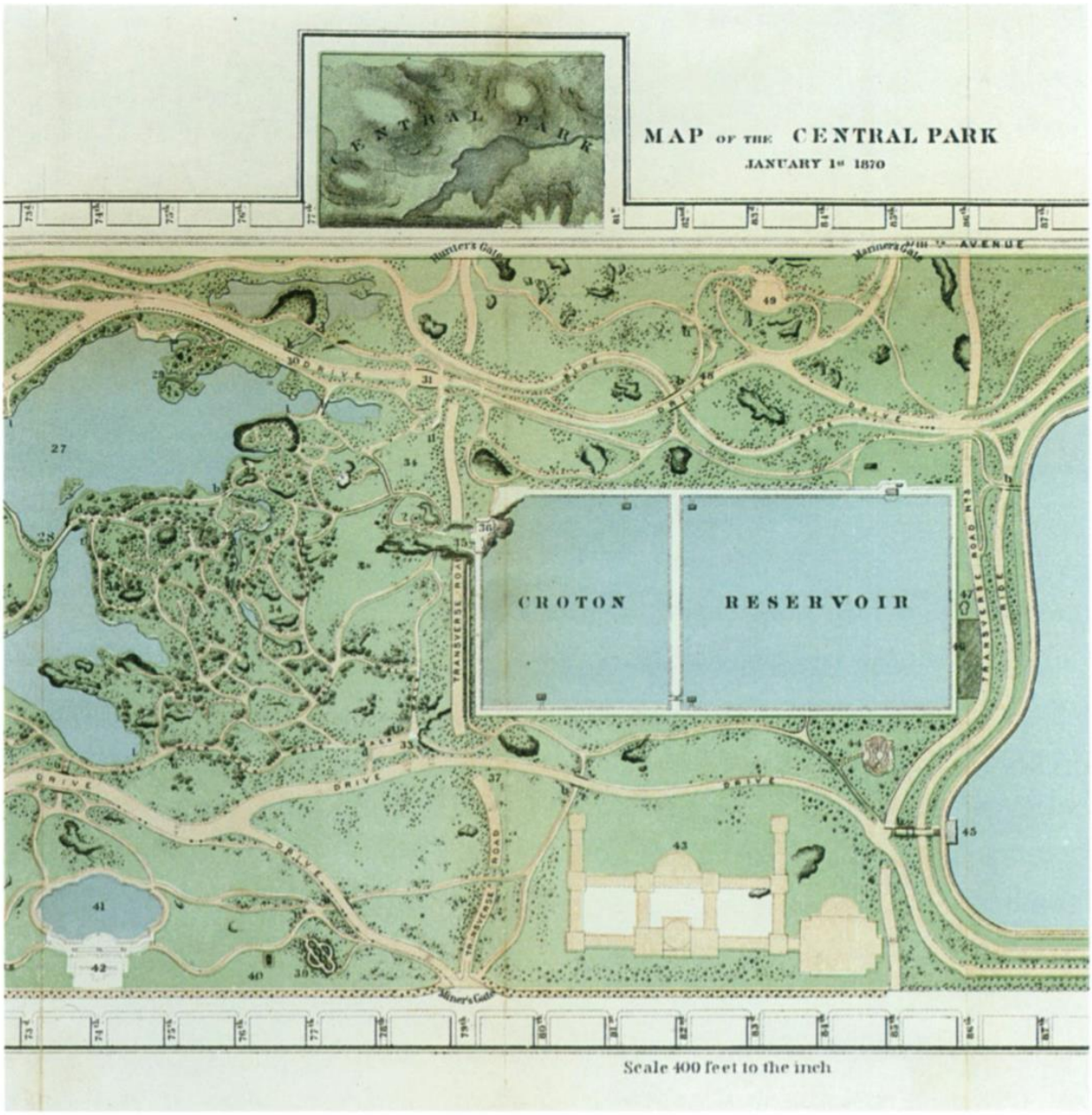
Figure 5 shows a map of Central Park with its sprawling, picturesque green landscape that spreads across a circumference of six miles. Although the internal plan of Central Park appears to be organic and picturesque with the curving trails and non-repeating paths, the bounds of the park remain restricted within the Manhattan grid (as demonstrated in Figure 6). This restriction of the park within the boundaries of the grid contributed to a social production of space, where park recreational activities fell under the regulation of the city government. During the early openings of Central Park Olmsted attempted to enforce his envisionment of the proper productions of recreational space because he personally believed that nature was most regenerative "if experienced quietly, contemplatively and through the eye."[6] Through the use of a park police force called "sparrow cops", the city surveilled park attenders to see if they were following the various rules that the architect outlined. Figure 7 depicts a comic that mocks this nineteenth century Central Park and its regulations.

Perhaps the tabula raza manner in which Olmsted and Vaux designed the park also contributed to the initial productions of space that seemed controlled and regulated. Fisher describes how the initial natural landscape of Central Park's appearance was far different from the manufactured urban landscape finished in 1862. While the contemporary landscape appears pastoral and picturesque with rolling green hills and serene lakes, the original landscape of Central park consisted of "rocky, uneven, and swampy sites." When constructing Central Park, Olmsted and Vaux destroyed fences, barns, and pieces of housing that had been left by the squatters that were displaced by municipal authorities. The architects moved massive amounts of soil around the park to construct their envisionment of a serene, park landscape, built artificial lakes around the manufactured park landscape, and transplanted thousands of trees and shrubs.[7]

The way in which the Central Park architects designed the urban landscape of Central Park reflected bourgeois ideas of what a park should look like and what recreation should compose of. Although the stakeholders behind the project of Central Park advocated that the park was being built to provide a diverse, and all-inclusive public with access to a park that could benefit their health, the reality of the experiences in early Central Park was far different. Most working class individuals lacked the leisure to go to the park and city regulation prevented the free enjoyment of the park outside of the normative, bourgeois framework. Nineteenth century Central Park essentially existed as another exercise of the grid's control over urban renewal.

As demonstrated in the history and construction of the urban designs of Haussmann's plan of Paris and Olmsted and Vaux's plan of Central Park, nineteenth century grid plans were used to purport a certain normative ideal of hegemonic control, stability, and order over urban space. As a result of these grids, nine

[6] Fisher, Colin. "Nature in the City: Urban Environmental History and Central Park." *OAH Magazine of History* 25, no. 4 (2011): 27–31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23209954.
[7] Fisher, Colin. "Nature in the City: Urban Environmental History and Central Park." *OAH Magazine of History* 25, no. 4 (2011): 27–31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23209954.


CENTRAL PARK
MAP OF THE CENTRAL PARK
JANUARY 1st 1870
CROTON
RESERVOIR
Scale 400 feet to the inch

THE CENTRAL PARK.

A delightful resort for toil-worn New Yorkers.

FIG. 3.2. Boulevard Saint-Antoine (now Beaumarchais), in the eighteenth century. Anonymous print. Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

FIG. 3.6. The Boulevard Henri IV from the Place de la Bastille with the Panthéon in the background. Roger-Viollet.