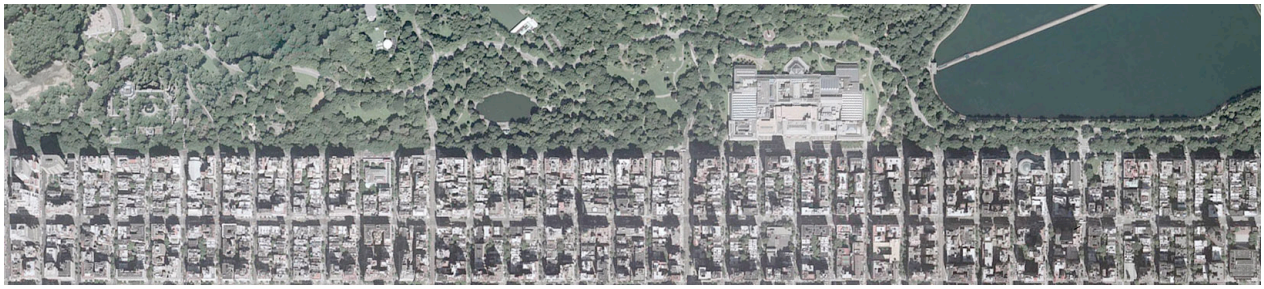
Grid and Anti-Grid

A landscape dialectic of socioenvironmental ideals



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In the center of Manhattan Island, 8th Avenue, 110th Street, 5th Avenue, and 59th Street border out a rectangle of 341 hectares known as Central Park. This rectangle is, of course, a physical boundary on the landscape—a morphological border between parkland and city, a property border between public and private, and a usage border between recreation and commercial-residential. But the rectangle surrounding Central Park also constitutes a conceptual border. To cross from one side of it to the other is to pass from the kingdom of the grid to that of the anti-grid. These four roads form a thin asphalt membrane which separates the regular, rectilinear cris-cross of the rationalized city from the rolling, ruralesque prospect of the romanticized park. This is not merely a juxtaposition of forms, but also a juxtaposition of ideals and of epistemologies. Hidden behind the grid and the anti-grid as modes of *looking* are the grid and the anti-grid as modes of *thinking*.

As Simon Schama observes, "landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock."[1] Thus when we probe the history of the grid and the anti-grid as elements of the syncretic built environment, we are *already* probing cultural history, already trafficking in lines of anthropological inquiry. Cities, parks, estates, and developments are constructions of mass semiosis in which the grid and the anti-grid perform symbolic functions with valences beyond the merely functional.

This essay attempts to understand the ways in which the grid and anti-grid in the built environment have come into opposition, and, more importantly, how this tension reveals rhetoric about landscape as a mediated rhetoric about nature and society. It follows the development of the anti-grid more thoroughly than the grid taken alone, since the grid

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[1] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 61

is implied within the anti-grid's own inner logic through an operation of inversion.[2] By acknowledging the protest of the anti-grid one must apprehending the existence and legitimacy, if not the meritoriousness, of the grid—the *not-thing* is an antecedent of and thus contains within it the *thing*.[3] This essay traces the genealogy from the eighteenth century Picturesque tradition of the English landscape garden to the generalized picturesque vision which was employed by both landscape designers and urbanists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This tradition has historically manifested itself as an orthogonal force to the gridded, regular landscape. In doing so, it has registered a set of cultural imperatives about how individuals and societies ought to relate to their environmental milieux.

What is at work, however, cannot be reduced to a convenient binary in which the partisans of the two sides are engaged in polemical and antagonistic opposition. The grid and anti-grid are oftentimes employed as different means to the same end. Because they are conceptual, as well as built, frameworks, both exhibit a high degree of plasticity which allows their proponents the ability to employ them in the service multiple, and sometimes contradictory, ideological programs. This is most critically exposed when trying to match the grid/anti-grid opposition with any other that seems to parallel it—urban/rural, human/natural, *inter alia*—since each one turns out to have sites of transposition. What is needed instead is a dialectics of the grid and anti-grid, a hermeneutical understanding of their applications to theory and to the landscape which joins them together in a common solvent.

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[2] In this there is an echo of the recursive semiotic dialectic which Pierre Bourdieu discovered in the houses of the Kabyle people of Algeria. The Kabyle established a gendered relationship between the house and the field, but within the female-gendered house there existed an internal female-male and female-female which mirrored the binary between the indoors and outdoors. In this way the Kabyles were able to achieve "the maximization of magic profit" by the construction of "an inverted reflection, a world in reverse" which "cannot counterpose without simultaneously uniting." So too with the centrifugal-centripetal equilibrium of the grid and anti-grid. See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Kabyle house, or, the world reversed," in *Algeria 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979): 133–153.

[3] Or, as Jean-Paul Sartre puts it: "… even though being can not be the support of any differentiated quality, nothingness is logically subsequent to it since it supposes being in order to deny it, since the irreducible quality of the *not* comes to add itself to that undifferentiated mass of being in order to release it. … The use which we make of the notion of nothingness in its familiar form always supposes a preliminary specification of being." In *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 48.

Urban suspicions, English identity, and the development of the Picturesque.

The Picturesque tradition found its original impulse in a popular reaction to the changing face of English cities in the seventeenth century as commercial expansion, social upheaval, and industrial technology began to transform the medieval royal center into a crowded, dehumanizing urban catastrophe. The shocking spectacle of urban deterioration prompted many observers to comment on the unseemly state of affairs, particularly in London, where filth and high density appeared hand-in-hand with crime, licentiousness, and social chaos. John Evelyn complained in 1661 that "*Catharrs*, *Phthisicks*, *Coughs* and *Consumptions* rage more in this one City than in the whole Earth besides." He suggested that the problem could be ameliorated by planting a greenbelt around the city which would be "diligently kept and supply'd, with such *Shrubs*, as yield the most fragrant and odoriferous *Flowers*, and are aptest to tinge the Aer upon every gentle emission at a great distance."[4] In addition to this early proposal for a natural remedy for pollution, Evelyn collaborated with Christopher Wren on a plan for rebuilding London after the Great Fire. Their plan relied on a "spider web pattern" which subordinated the grid to a network of boulevards and plazas.[5]

Increasingly the logic implied by Evelyn's nightmarish depiction of London entered English public discourse as a self-evident commentary of geographic preference. As early as 1579, one author remarked that the "English manner" was "to make most abode in their country homes."[6] By 1748, William Shenstone could state with conviction that "no one will prefer the beauty of a street to that of a lawn or grove."[7] Those with the means to do so—

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[4] John Evelyn, *Fumifugium, or, The inconveniencie of the aer and smoak of London dissipated together with some remedies humbly proposed* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, Digital Library Production Service, 2001).

[5] John William Reps, *The Making of Urban America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965), 15.

[6] Qtd. in Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), 247.

[7] Qtd. in Thomas, 244.

among them Sir William Temple and King William III[8]—vacated London, and in 1724 Daniel Defoe described a precursor to the suburb: "'Tis very frequent for [tradesmen] to place their families [in Epsom] and take their horses every morning to London, to the Exchange, to the Alley or to the warehouse and be at Epsom again at night."[9] As the engines of economy whirred in London, those who profited by it, and, to a greater degree, those whose social status *predated* the mercantile explosion, turned away from the city and towards the "polite" world of the countryside.

It was into this set of cultural imperatives that the first practitioners of the Picturesque tradition began to outline their style. At the center of this movement was a desire to create landscapes which appeared "natural" even if a great deal of artifice was required to produce that appearance. This meant rolling back the regular morphology of the intensive agricultural landscape, which in turn meant the invocation of the anti-grid as an emblem of naturality. Ironically, as Keith Thomas observes, it was England whose standard, unvalorized landscape had become the most geometric by way of agricultural practices, and thus "it was there, accordingly, that the opposite quality of informality made its greatest aesthetic appeal."[10]

Thus when William Gilpin stated that "all the formalities of hedgerow trees and square divisions of property [are] disgusting in a high degree," he was contributing to a rhetoric of the anti-grid as a way to escape from the monotony of an overly-formalized landscape, and, by homology, an overly-formalized society.[11] Capability Brown, perhaps the most famous figure in the Picturesque movement, took anti-gridding to its most radical extent, eliminating almost every remnant of the regularized garden in favor of a design

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[8] Thomas, 245–246.

[9] Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. P. N. Furbank, W. R. Owens, and A. J. Coulson (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991), 64.

[10] Thomas, 262.

[11] Qtd. in Thomas, 262.

which "rediscovered the forms of the landscape itself."[12] He transformed places like Longleat, Wiltshire from gardens which were "formal" in the sense that they relied on the application of the conceptual form of the grid into vistas which were "formal" in the sense that they embraced the existing form of the land. In doing so, Brown "alerted his clients, their friends and visitors to the natural capabilities of the countryside that lay beyond their estates."[13]

Humphry Repton, the self-styled successor to Brown, became noteworthy for his publication of "red books" which typically included a flap designed to show a client how the the landscape would look before and after he operated on it. In almost every case, this transformation involved a shift from geometric orderliness to a "natural" design of opened vistas, dotted trees, and, oftentimes, grazing animals. Repton's anti-grid rhetoric also gave voice to a growing concern amongst the English gentry over the vulgar mercantile power of the newly wealthy and their simultaneous nostalgia for the organic balance of aristocratic life. In his painting "Improvements," Repton ruefully contrasts the rationalized, fenced roadway to the traditional open landscape of the estate. The grid, as Stephen Daniels observes, came to represent a landscape which had been "ruthlessly mobilized for the production of rent, for the making of money," and which had "dissolved the rootedness of an old hereditary domain."[14]

In many ways the Picturesque style was indeed an attempt to assert a unique English cultural identity against Continental styles, as well as an effort to carve out a repository of traditional aristocratic value. The countryside had come to be seen as the quintessential natural heirloom of the British Isles; roots in the English land thus became a metonymic expression for roots within *Englishness* itself. William Blaine explained in 1788 that "in this

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[12] John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis, eds., *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620–1820* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 31.

[13] Ibid., 32.

[14] Stephen Daniels, "On the road with Humphry Repton," *Journal of Garden History* 16, no. 3 (1996), 185.

island, from the nature of our government, no man can be of consequence without spending a large portion of his time in the country."[15] The anti-grid therefore took on elements of anti-Continentalism, a sense of exceptional English sympathy with the natural world. (France in particular had become famous for its ornate, rigidly ordered formal gardens with geometric parterres laid out with rectilinear regularity, known eponymously as *jardins à la française*.) At the same time as the anti-grid put up a defense against foreign culture, it put up a second defense against the intrusions of commercialism which had come to be typified in the gridded regularity of trade and the bourgeois class. "The growing criticism of the artifice of refined society and its recreations, the distancing of a growing number of town dwellers from rural life, together with provincial sentimentalism," writes John Brewer, "made nature and the images it called forth all the more compelling."[16]

To classify the anti-grid rhetoric of the Picturesque as an expression of naked antiurbanism, then, is too blunt. It invoked a vision of organic public equilibrium like that expressed in the works of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Early of Shaftesbury, whose sentiments were certainly critical of city life, as in the following excerpt—

> We see the enormous Growth of Luxury in capital Citys, such as have been long the Seat of Empire. We see what Improvements are made in Vice of every kind, where members of Men are maintain'd in lazy Opulence and wanton Plenty. 'Tis otherwise with those who are taken up in honest and due Imployment, and have been well inur'd to it from their Youth. This we may observe in the hardy remote Provincials, the Inhabitants of smaller Towns, and the industrious sort of common People; where 'tis rare to meet with any Instances of those Irregularitys, which are known in Courts and Palaces, and in the rich Foundations of easy and paper'd Priests.[17]

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[15] Qtd. in Thomas, 247.

[16] John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 617.

[17] Qtd. in Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London's Geographies, 1680-1780* (London: The Guildford Press, 1998), 83.

—but whose ultimate faith lay in "a particular arrangement of urban space appropriate to classical notions of republicanism."[18] Morphologically, this meant the replacement of the vulgar commercialist grid by the enlightened republican anti-grid.

The countryside's invasion of the city.

By the opening of the nineteenth century, the anti-grid ideals which had been cultivated in the English countryside began to penetrate back into thinking about the design of the city. This was the first time, in fact, that urban planning could operate with anything resembling the Panoptic control of the landscape designer working on a country estate. Only with the establishment of a steady tax base, a centralized and powerful urban government, and a technocratic class of designers and professionals could detailed urban plans be executed at all. All at once, instead of being limited to crudely laying down a grid of streets and hoping for the best, urban bureaucrats had the political and economic power to rework the city in a more idealized image. It so happened that Picturesque forms were entering the common imagination as picturesque styles just as these reservoirs of power were becoming accessible.

Three developments in the first quarter of the century, all undertaken in the same part of London, exemplified this importation of the anti-grid into the city. St. John's Wood, Marylebone Park, and Regent's Park each showed that "the mixture of city and country, which people had become used to in a holiday or health-resort context in Bath or elsewhere, could be introduced into a major city."[19] These developments consisted principally of semi-detached villas for wealthy urbanites laid out in a serpentine fashion amidst rolling greenery which would be privately maintained. Thus the rural typology which Defoe's merchants once had to leave London for Espsom in order to find could be imported into the city. As

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[18] Ogborn, 83.

[19] Mark Girouard, *Cities and People* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), 279.

Mark Girouard points out, one "way of giving a neighbourhood a rural air was to abandon both grid and geometric road systems and lay out an estate with winding roads, on the model of the winding paths in the parks."[20] The anti-grid became a value of urban aspiration, a way to build a city which escaped from its typical social and physical ugliness.

One of the most striking examples of the many schemes to insinuate the anti-gird in the city was John Claudius Loudon's radial plan for rebuilding London that was to be used in the case of a revolution or catastrophe. In his design, the city would consist of concentric belts of urban space and parkland. The former would be laid out according to a strict radial grid; the latter would be anti-gridded to keep the menace of the city in check. Herein lies the crux of Loudon's urban theory: that it was necessary to interleave picturesque, anti-gridded spaces throughout the city in order to combat problems which scaled according to density and complexity. Echoing the sentiments of Shaftesbury, Loudon wrote that "we would rather see, in every country, innumerable small towns and villages, than a few overgrown capitals."[21]

For Loudon, this process of introducing natural space into the city and keeping scale small was not simply an expression of aesthetics. After traveling in southern Germany in 1828–1829, Loudon had been exposed to what he understood as an Arcadian society grounded in an democratic education involving agricultural practice.[22] Taking a stance that was still quite radical in early nineteenth-century Britain, Loudon advocated for reforms aimed at the working classes, publishing his ideas in pamphlets and newspapers. Through all of this, Loudon remained a committed advocate of the landscape—specifically the naturalistic one—as a socially progressive tool.

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[20] Ibid., 282.

[21] Qtd. in Ulrich Maximillian Schumann, "The Hidden Roots of the Garden City Idea: From John Sinclair to John Claudius Loudon," *Journal of Planning History* 2, no. 4 (2003), 307.

[22] Melanie Louise Simo, *Loudon and the Landscape: From Country Seat to Metropolis* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988), 11

After all, the grid had become representative of the iconic urban social system: the highly-stratified and grossly-unequal separation of classes. It was seen as an exploitative and dehumanizing, shackles designed into the built environment. Loudon insisted that the landscape could be designed to assert the commoner's dignity, particularly through the equalizing activity of leisure. He wrote:

> The humblest and most laborious individual, after fulfilling all his duties to his employer and to his family, has still a portion of leisure, and with him, as with man in every class of society, happiness will be found to depend much more on the manner in which this leisure time is spent, than on the nature of his professional or mechanical occupation.[23]

It was in through the concept of leisure, specifically through the mechanism of parkland, that the anti-grid first came to be culturally exported out of England in any significant way. In Paris, the Haussmannian renovation of the city included the major reconstruction of several parks, including the Bois de Boulogne, the Bois de Vincennes, and the Parc des Buttes Chaumont. Each were designed with elements borrowed from the Picturesque, and each were constructed with at least some social design in mind—though oftentimes this design was merely the inflation of property values and the gentrification of the surrounding areas. In the Bois de Vincennes, it is still possible to see the remaining major axes of the old, geometric hunting ground which predated it. On top of this, though, Haussman's planners added a layer of winding anti-gridded paths to bring the park into line with nineteenth century park development.

Olmsted's social views and the American pastoral.

Nowhere did the anti-grid as a twin tool of landscape design and social advocacy come into a more complete expression than in the work of Frederick Law Olmsted. He remains one of the most-cited opponents of the grid, and his opposition runs throughout his

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[23] Qtd. in Simo, 14.

theoretical output on design, his physical output of projects, and his literary output on society and the environment. He is an axiomatic figure in the historical crusade against griddedness.

There can be little doubt that Olmsted loathed the grid. He called it "the epitome of the evil of commercialism."[24] In another long jeremiad, he described its stubborn inflexibility in Manhattan:

> Some two thousand blocks were provided, each theoretically two hundred feet wide, no more, no less; and ever since, if a building site is wanted, whether with a view to a church or a blast furnace, an open house or a toy shop, there is, of intention, no better place in one of these blocks than other … Such distinctive advantage of position as Rome gives St. Peter's, London St. Paul's, New York under her system gives nothing … The rigid uniformity of the system … requires that no building lot shall be more than 100 feet in depth, none less. The clerk or mechanic and his young family, wishing to live modestly in a house by themselves, is provided for in this respect not otherwise than the wealthy merchant, who, with a large family and numerous servants, wishes to display works of art, to form a large library, and to enjoy the company of many guests.[25]

We have already mentioned Central Park; in addition, Olmsted's design for the Riverside development in Illinois is another of the most famous examples of the anti-grid in the American landscape, and has often been used as the typological model for all manner of projects similar to it. Almost every one of his projects employs the anti-grid in some fashion, and many of them are superb ideal-types of anti-grid planning. To reduce Olmsted to a recalcitrant opponent of the grid based on a merely aesthetic fancy for curvilinearity, however, is to miss the complex ways in which Olmsted articulated his relation with the grid and to the grid's ideological handmaidens.

Olmsted's invocation of the anti-grid butted up against grid orthodoxy most obviously in political process surrounding the construction of Central Park. The image of

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[24] Qtd. in Peter Marcuse, "The grid as city plan: New York City and laissez-faire planning in the nineteenth century," *Planning Perspectives* 2, no. 3 (1987), 303.

[25] Qtd. in Marcuse, 287.

the anti-grid, with its curvilinear road network and wide prospects, did not get dropped down into the heart of enemy territory—the unrelentingly gridded heart of Manhattan—without difficulty. Many of Manhattan's established businessmen wanted either no park at all or an unambitious park that would not conflict with the city's existing grid structure. Peter Marcuse outlines the ideological split:

> In many ways the contrast between Olmsted and [head of the Central Park Commission Andrew Haswell] Green … symbolizes the contrast between two currents running through the reform movement of the late nineteenth century: a Jeffersonian, rural-oriented, aesthetically informed view, with roots in the aristocratic tradition of the gentry, in whom Olmsted explicity placed his confidence; and an urban, industrially and commercially oriented, businesslike approach concerned to minimize governmental interference in the private conduct of business, the essentially laissez-faire view which Green espoused.[26]

It is important to realize that Olmsted's faith in the anti-grid was unflagging in part because it was freighted with a strong social ideology. Olmsted grew up in rural Connecticut, and his early experience with the morphology and culture of the New England town profoundly imprinted his thinking. He fretted that the United States faced a "triple frontier" consisting of the unjust slave society of the South, the anarchy of the West, and the nightmare of the Metropolis—and, as such, he "hoped to counteract the social forces, including individualism and materialism" which were perpetually eroding a Shaftesbury-esque republican dream.[27] Thus much of his landscape design was refracted through an ideological prism which was angled towards the "desire to extend to other parts of the country the New England values that he had absorbed and embraced."[28]

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[26] Marcuse, 302–303.

[27] Charles E. Beveridge, "Regionalism in Frederick Law Olmsted's Social Thought and Landscape Design Practice," in *Regional Garden Design in the United States*, ed. Therese O'Malley and Mark Treib (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), 211.

[28] Ibid., 210.

Olmsted is clear in his own writings that his landscape design was riveted to social design. As such, it relied on a growing tradition of thought in the nineteenth century that the physical environment could direct society down an idealistic course which was elementally (if not admittedly) utopian. "The main object and justification," Olmsted wrote of his park-building activities, "is simply to produce a certain influence in the minds of people and through this to make life in the city happier and healthier. The character of this influence is a poetic one."[29] After traveling in England, Olmsted observed some of the first truly public parks, and increasingly he dedicated the ideology of his designs to ideals of accessibility, democracy, and equalitarianism. His parks, as George Scheper puts it, were "experiment[s] in social democracy and transcendentalist nature-philosophy."[30]

Still, in certain cases Olmsted betrayed a very real sentiment of *noblesse oblige*. Most populists simply could not be bothered by concerns as seemingly-superficial as the landscape—Tammany Hall cared about Central Park only for the jobs it would provide during construction—leaving even the most forward-thinking park projects surrounded by a haze of perceived luxury and frivolity. "Whether beauty and general convenience," questions Marcuse, "as opposed to more mundane consideration of practicality, land values, and a certain aristocratic snobbishness, were decisive in Olmsted's attitudes is hard to say."[31] Even Freud was aware of the sentimentalism and fantasia at play in the valorization of nature: "a nature reserve," he noted, "preserves in its original state which everywhere else has to our regret been sacrificed to necessity."[32] A portion of Olmsted's reform was in fact directed against the "uncouth" habits of the working classes that threatened the "original state" of American life. Of Central Park he wrote with an approvingly patriarchal air that "it

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[29] Frederick Law Olmsted, *Forty Years*. Qtd. in George L. Scheper, "The Reformist Vision of Frederick Law Olmsted and the Poetics of Park Design," *New England Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (Sept. 1989), 372.

[30] Scheper, 395.

[31] Marcuse, 303.

[32] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. Qtd. in Thomas, 242.

exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and lawless classes of the city—an influence favorable to courtesy, self-control, and temperance."[33]

Yet even if they was grounded in a somewhat romantic vision that looked back to a past that was perhaps chimerical, Olmsted's anti-grid designs were not stuffed full of gaudy ornament. Indeed, George Scheper somewhat controversially suggests that Olmsted's designs were an early-modern example of "form follows function" that would later come into maturity in the works of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright.[34] Moreover, Olmsted's designs—particularly the plan for the Back Bay Fens in Boston—were highly technocratic in their plan and execution. Their anti-gridded morphology should not disguise the fact that they are all intensively managed, scientifically engineered, and, at their core, highly rationalized landscapes.

In the end, though, Olmsted's anti-grid rhetoric was pregnant with the same kind of urban critiques that have run through all the other anti-grid practitioners encountered thus far. Timothy Davis puts Olmsted's link between social design, leisure, and the anti-grid plainly:

> Olmsted maintained that the best way for designers to combat the 'harmful influences of ordinary town life' was to produce landscapes characterized by 'gracefully curved lines, generous spaces and the absence of sharp corners.' Such configurations, he claimed, would 'suggest and imply leisure, contemplativeness and happy tranquility.[35]

The anti-grid, just as before, is here intimately bound with both a suspicion of urban social problems and a hopeful belief in progress through environmental molding.

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[33] Frederick Law Olmsted, *Public Parks.* Qtd. in Scheper, 385.

[34] Scheper, 371.

[35] Timothy Davis, "Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway, Washington, D.C.," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 19, no. 2 (1999), 140.

Completing the trajectory of the "culture of decongestion."

In her 1999 essay "Defying the Grid," Gabrielle Esperdy offers a "counter-manifesto" to Rem Koolhaas's manifesto of the grid found in *Delirious New York*. The "culture of decongestion," as Esperdy terms it, is a hypothesis that a coherent tradition of decentralization, naturalism, and anti-griddedness has run through American planning in tandem with the conventional narrative of densification, urbanization, and gridding.[36]

Indeed, at its most abstract level the anti-grid presents itself to the grid as a logic of decongestion, an assertion not so much that cities in and of themselves are bad but that their primary characteristic, high density, is objectively inhumane. The anti-grid assumes the aura of the city's antipode, the countryside, and thus offers a syncretic vision built of equal parts imagination and apparent sociological positivism.

The true efflorescence of the decongestive culture came with the creation of the New Deal and the unprecedented control over the built environment which it offered to a new bureaucratic élite. These intellectuals were committed to fixing the structural problems that caused the Great Depression by reshaping the morphology of the American landscape. This was in many ways the culmination of the momentum which Olmsted had instigated, a scientific and sociological expression of many of the same ideals which had been building up since the development of the Picturesque in the eighteenth century.

Clarence Perry provided a theoretical trial run for the New Deal emphases on the decongested anti-grid with his typological concept developed in the 1920s of the "neighborhood unit," which abandoned the grid on both aesthetic and practical terms—Perry expected that a curvilinear plan would cost significantly less than a grid.[37] Clarence Stein and Henry Wright collaborated together on projects like Radburn, New Jersey, which introduced the concept of the cul-de-sac—a quintessential anti-grid feature—into American

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[36] Gabrielle Esperdy, "Defying the Grid: A Retroactive Manifesto For the Culture of Decongestion," *Perspecta* 30 (1999): 10–33.

[37] Esperdy, 21.

planning. Stein identified the superblock layout and the park (both of which took shape in anti-grid forms) as axiomatic concepts of new towns.[38] All of these concepts were indebted to the trailblazing done by Ebenezer Howard and Patrick Geddes in England in the decades immediately preceding. Howard's "garden city" concept—strikingly similar in form to Loudon's plan for the radial city—was an attempt to empty the gridded city into a dispersed countryside of smaller nodes. He envisioned communities "of a size that makes possible a full measure of social life, but no larger."[39]

When the Great Depression hit the United States, intellectuals were eager to put such plans into practice. Title II of the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act allocated $3.3 billion to "provide for aiding in the redistribution of the overbalance of populations in industrial (mostly urban) centers."[40] This often meant a social agenda which was related to "an embrace of Jeffersonian agrarianism, a belief in the psychological benefits of contact with the land, and an espousal of pioneer virtues and traditional family values."[41] While looking out at a city in 1933, M. L. Wilson, a member of Roosevelt's brain trust, exposed the sentiment at its most raw:

> This is no way for people to live. I want to get them out on the ground with clean sunshine and air around them, and a garden for them to dig in, if they like. I want to get all these children off of streets, out on the land again. Spread out the cities, space the factories out, give people a chance to live so they'll know what life is all about—that's what I want.[42]

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[38] Peter Walker and Melanie Simo, *Invisible Gardens: The Search for Modernism in the American Landscape* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 47–48.

[39] Carol A. Christensen, *The American Garden City and the New Towns Movement* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986), 48.

[40] Qtd. in Esperdy, 23.

[41] Esperdy, 24–25.

[42] Qtd. in Russell Lord, "The Rebirth of Rural Life," *Survey Graphic* 30, no. 12 (December 1941), 687. Reprinted at http://newdeal.feri.org/survey/sg41687.htm.

This decentralizing, decongesting ethic, just like those before it, was transacted in the language of the anti-grid. Plans like the Jersey Homesteads or Hale Walker's design for Greenbelt, Maryland "banished" the grid "in favor of a hierarchical curvilinear scheme."[43] Albert Mayer produced an instructional diagram showing the "old way" of gridded, unvarying streets compared to the "new way" of an organic center surrounded by an agricultural greenbelt. In Manhattan, William Lescaze "rent the Williamsburg Houses from the surrounding gridded urban fabric."[44] It was not a phenomenon limited to America: between 1946 and 1949, England designated eleven "new towns" based on Howard's garden city concept.[45]

In a kind of ideological Ouroboros, however, the endpoint of the culture of decongestion promoted by the anti-grid was, in fact, the grid. Esperdy notes in her manifesto that to follow the course of the anti-grid is to arrive eventually at "the recuperation of the Grid … as a laboratory of decongestion."[46] And, as it so happens, the grid *did* become reanimated with an ideology sympathetic to that originally promoted by the anti-grid. The Modernist superblocks of Le Corbusier invoked the same class of environmental determinism—letting light and air and nature into the city—that early anti-gridders hoped would cure the nineteenth century city. Vast public housing projects of regular, geometric forms were designed to express an ideology of democracy and equalitarianism in the same rhetorical mode as Olmsted's democratizing urban parks. The grid and anti-grid had looped back upon each other.

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[43] Esperdy, 26.

[44] Ibid., 31.

[45] Chistensen, 52.

[46] Esperdy, 11.

Outlines of a dialectical interpretation.

Thus we are left in the tricky position of finding, at the end of it all, a binary between grid and anti-grid which is not nearly as dichotomous as we might like for convenience's sake. How are we to treat this so that we are not left at a theoretical dead-end?

The Modernist period is a particularly problematic hive of crossed signals. Consider the following assessment of the arch-modern landscape architect Garrett Eckbo, who stressed, in the tradition of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, the importance of unornamented plainness and functional mechanism in garden design:

> This emphasis on a formal expression of democratic values grounds Eckbo in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., who also viewed their design work (at the University of Virginia and Central Park, respectively) as statements of democratic values.[47]

What are we to make of such a statement? It amalgamates Thomas Jefferson, acolyte of the American land grid and prominent ruralist; Olmsted, inveterate enemy of the grid and aesthetic rural ideologue; and Eckbo, techno-futurist obsessed with geometric humanism, into the same historical lineage. Each had quite different views on the grid. Is it possible, then, to say that the democratic values that they each espoused (often *through the mode* of their disparate grid rhetorics) binds them together?

The tricky ideological glosses of the Modernist project constitute only the most obvious of many places where the grid and anti-grid simply do not line up neatly and acquiesce to the ideological subscriptions attached to them by both latter-day commentators and the original practitioners. We can isolate several conceptual discontinuities where our understanding of grid and anti-grid becomes problematic.

The first is the problem of democratic rhetoric, as acknowledged above in the case of Eckbo. The grid has been used to express democratic equality due to its lack of hierarchy,

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[47] Reuben M. Rainey, "'Organic Form in the Humanized Landscape': Garrett Eckbo's *Landscape for Living*," in *Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review*, ed. Mark Treib (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 187.

and yet so has the anti-grid due to its connections with agrarianism. At the same time, the grid has been labeled anti-democratic due to its connection with the spatial inequality of the industrial city, and the anti-grid has been labeled so due to its affinity for an organic-republican social form that retains a veneer of *noblesse oblige*. Christensen suggests that

> the 'democratic' neighborhood so conceived [by Howard and the garden city theorists] was not *the diverse urban* neighborhood [but rather based on] an *assimilative* model where 'community' was sustained by commonality and sameness. It was a model designed to avoid pain and acceptance of 'otherness' which perforce must be encountered in cities.[48]

but this too seems overly reductive and too saturated with a kind of cryptnormative assessment of urban cosmopolitanism as the sole standard of diverse tolerance. After all, the anti-gridder Andrew Jackson Downing, a contemporary of Olmsted, once issued the command: "Plant spacious parks in your cities, and unclose their gates as wide as the gates of morning to the whole people."[49] There is no way around the conflict here; it is simply a place where the conceptual mapping is highly imprecise.

A second zone of contention is found in naturalism and universalism—the ways in which the grid and anti-grid display a scientific-humanistic belief in the natural world. Here again there are dueling claims by both sides. A third zone is the concept of social enlightenment through landscape mechanisms. As we have seen, partisans of both sides argue that their methods yield superior social results. In each of these, as in others, there is simply a misalignment of stereotypes, an evasion of totalizing schemes which would form neat analogies between jxutaposed binaries.

An escape hatch out of this problem is opened if we conceive of the grid and the anti-grid not as calcified opposites, but as *ideological orientations carried by morphological forms* which may be put in the service of many different holistic ideological constellation. In such

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[48] Christensen, 65.

[49] Qtd. in Carl Cramer, *The Hudson* (Fordham UP, 1989), 185.

a view the grid and anti-grid form a dialectic, not a binary. Historical development of the built landscape—and of the semiotic cultural systems which enliven it and make it meaningful—is thus precipitated out from a constant interaction balanced between the two.

This dialectical mode also keeps us from bluntly assuming that the scopic designs of planners and theoreticians are translated exactly into the world of microprocedural practice. Leslie Martin suggests that "the pattern of the grid or roads in a town or region is a kind of playboard that sets out the rules of the game. The rules outline the kind of game; but the players should have the opportunity to use to the full their individual skills while playing it."[50] Ultimately, he argues, reality evades the ideology of planners. "It is not possible to deny the force behind the criticisms of the grid," he writes. "It can result in monotony: so can a curvilinear suburbia. It can fail to work: so can the organic city."[51] Making much the same argument from the anti-grid side, Jason Kosnoski suggests that Olmsted shares a theoretical class with Michel de Certeau in that both seek to "foster the unconscious, autonomous, somatic movement through space that counteracts the discipline inherent in other parts of the urban environment."[52]

We are consequently left with a vision of the grid and the anti-grid as an agonistic (rather than antagonistic) interplay of cultural forces; two concepts which are inert in-and-of-themselves but which which constitute the raw material by which debates over socioenvironmental ideals are transacted. Like the "two kingdoms of force"—the "dynamo" and the "virgin"—which Leo Marx famously counterpoised against each other in the cultural history of the American pastoral ideal,[53] these two kingdoms of gridded and anti-

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[50] Leslie Martin, "The grid as generator," *ARQ* 4, no. 4 (2000), 312.

[51] Ibid., 314.

[52] Jason Kosnoski, "Rambling as Resistance: Frederick Law Olmsted, Michel de Certeau, and the Micropolitics of Walking in the City," paper presented to MPSA Annual National Conference. Reprinted at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/6/5/7/6/p265763_index.html

[53] Leo Marx, "Two Kingdoms of Force," *Massachusetts Review* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1959): 62–95.

grid ideals exist in perpetual equilibrium, and they secrete out a landscape history which cannot be apprehended without acknowledging both.

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