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# New York: the revitalization of public space

## Recent interventions in the Manhattan grid

### EURAU'12

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#### ABSTRACT.

*During the past 200 years, New York´s grid has been a format for new approaches to "making city". This past decade has been profitable for New York´s public space. Recent events such as 9/11 and the new Bloomberg administration's commitment to sustainable growth have provided a driving force behind the revitalization of urban life in the city. This revitalization could not have been possible without the existing elements that foster public space: the grid, public legislation and the citizen. The citizen plays a role as user, critic and promoter of the public space in the city he lives, works and plays in. In some cases, it is not so evident for whom the public space is created. This can be seen through three different types of users in the city and the creation of public space for each of them: the neighbor, the citizen and the visitor. According to Jane Jacobs, "The cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody." (JACOBS, 1961. 238)*

*KEYWORDS: New York, Manhattan, revitalization, public space, grid, superblock*

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## 1. New York. The revitalization of the public space

In 2011, the New York grid turned 200 hundred years old and NYC celebrated its new public spaces that grew from its influence. 2011 saw the realization of interventions in Hypar Pavilion at Lincoln Center; New York's first Urban Design Week in the BMW Guggenheim Labs pavilion and throughout the city, the opening of the second section of the High Line and the long awaited inauguration of the WTC Memorial. New York has become a world-renowned city yet it continues its struggle with congestion and lack of public space, especially when considering Manhattan. During the last decade, Michael Bloomberg's administration launched PLANYC 2030 to transform New York into the most sustainable city in the world within thirty years. The Plan projects that New York City will grow by one million inhabitants in the coming years, increasing congestion and the need to provide for more open public space. The Plan is promising in its attempt to address a multitude of issues. Parks and public space are a part of the overall plan with an ambitious intervention that would "ensure all New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of a park by 2030."

Sustainability has become taboo for the large metropolis but New York intends to change this image and to provide a sustainable quality of urban living. However, there are pending issues. Elisabeth Yeampierre, director of Brooklyn's oldest Latino community, believes that true sustainability should begin by educating the citizen and revitalizing relationships within the community. According to Yeampierre, "without a keen awareness of how to truly include the diversity of the communities we serve, our plans are destined to fail". (YAMPIERRE, 2008)



Fig. 1

The past decade has fostered projects that have transformed areas of the city. The more well-known interventions include: a more pedestrian friendly Broadway and Times Square, the renovation of Lincoln Center and the High Line. These projects have produced dynamic social and economic improvements in certain areas of Manhattan. Michael Sorkin who directs the Graduate Urban Design Program at the City College of New York asks if New York will have to sacrifice the diversity that characterizes it, to become more hospitable. Setha M. Low, anthropologist and director of the Public Space Research Group at the City University of New York, states: "we're becoming more homogeneous in our neighborhoods –not less- while the city is becoming more heterogeneous over all". (LOW, 2008) Affluent residents and tourists appreciate heavily policed public spaces, while citizens from lower social classes seem to avoid them. A city that is a kaleidoscope of cultures and social classes should be critical of some of these public space interventions. How will it affect everyone and who will be the end users?

## **2. "Making city": the grid, public legislation and the citizen**

The contemporary public space in New York is in a state of good health. The last ten years have seen a number of public space interventions that have been well received by citizens and tourists alike. These new user-friendly spaces have become a vital part of the city's public infrastructure. Events that have framed this decade; such as, the terrorists attacks on 9/11 and the new administration of mayor Michael Bloomberg, have been the impetus for these new urban revitalization projects and have reactivated the existing generative factors for "making city." Analogous to previous decades, these generating factors of public space in New York continue to be the grid, legislation that advocates public space and the private investment put forth by the citizen.

For the past 200 years, the grid has been the guiding format for new theoretical experimentation, providing a context for exploring the construction of new types of public space. The grid was first introduced to New York City in 1811. Known as the Commissioner's Plan, it was visionary in that it introduced an urban model for the decongestion of the dense pre-existing colonial city. The grid was by no means a new formula. It had already been introduced to the New World by Spanish conquistadores, Francisco de Echave and Assu, as seen in Lima, Peru, as well as in other North American cities like Philadelphia and Albany. What made the grid so innovative in the case of New York was its provision for the future through its flexibility. The original plan projected 155 streets running east to west and 12 avenues running north to south. The city block measured 200 feet between streets and could vary between 610 and 920 feet between avenues. Originally the allotted public space consisted of five small squares, a large central parade ground used for military training (currently Madison Square) and an open peripheral space along the river to be used for commerce and trade. The fact that so small a provision was made for public space was justified in two ways: the high cost of land and the little need for open space since the perimeter of the city, bordered by two rivers, was considered an open area for recreation. NYC's urban growth has confirmed that the space originally set aside for public use was insufficient to meet the growing needs of its citizen's and visitors.

The second generator of public space has been the municipal legislation. The rapid growth in population and an increase in congestion during the 19th century sparked the need for more public spaces. The addition of extensive parks and areas of recreation to the grid were now being considered to meet this need. Manhattan's Central Park and Brooklyn's Prospect Park are the largest of these public parks. Also on a whim of European nostalgia, the boulevard was being introduced into the grid with its "green" public space; however, it did not prove to be successful. What it was successful was the advancement in 20th century architecture and engineering allowing for the construction of the Manhattan skyscrapers. As owners took full advantage of the value of their property by building taller and taller, the grid became more accentuated. All of this made it necessary to modify the plan of 1811. As a result, the first zoning regulations were established to guarantee a minimum level of quality for the surrounding public space.

The first zoning resolution of 1916, divided the city by uses, height and area. The combination of these requirements produced a building typology in the shape of a "ziggurat" or "wedding cake". Examples of this new form can be seen in the Empire State building and Chrysler Building. The zoning resolution of 1916 improved on the original 1811 plan, but it did not benefit the public space. Since it was not profitable to create open space at street level, the owner built to the extent of his lot, sacrificing open public space. Once again the congested city would need new formulas to create small open spaces easily accessible to the citizen.

In 1961, NYC's Department of Planning published a new zoning resolution. The new code provided an innovative change by rewarding owners with a "bonus" building height if they incorporated public space in their plan. The bonus added an extra ten square feet to the building for every square foot of public space provided. The bonus was inspired by successful projects such as the Lever House and the Seagram Building. According to the study by Jerold S. Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space: the New York City Experience*, the new law would allow for the construction of 20 million square feet of extra floor space in exchange for the construction of 500 public plazas, arcades and interior public spaces or the equivalent of 10% of the area of Central Park. Even though the resolution showed promise, it had to be modified in 1975 to regulate the incorporation of urban furniture and landscaping in the privately owned public spaces. Although the results were not always what was hoped for, the catalyst for new formulas of public space had been introduced into the grid for future interventions.

Last but not least, the third generative factor is the citizen. He is user, critic and even developer of public space. The private sector, through means of donation, purchase, allowance for temporary use and other means, has made possible the use of privately owned public space and its maintenance. An intermediary figure between the private sector and the public, that educate the public on the importance of urban awareness, are the urban platforms. These organizations include PPS (Project for Public Space), MAS (Municipal Arts Society), among others.

### 3. New contemporary interventions in New York's public space

New York is a Mecca for a multitude of activities: working, living, recreation and culture. From a broad perspective, we can identify three types of users: the neighbor, the citizen and the visitor. The neighbor needs a public space close to home for sitting, walking; space for children to play or just a place to escape the noise of the city. The citizen needs a public space close by to eat or relax away from the office. The visitor looks primarily for a public space that identifies with the city being visited, but can also be a user of both the neighbors and citizens public space. The health of a city public space is reflected in the equilibrium of the space for the three types of users. As Jane Jacobs explains, "*The cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody*". (JACOBS, 1961. 238) What recent intervention in New York's public space reflects the profiles of these three user groups? To illustrate this, we will look at three projects for the revitalization of public space in three of New York's superblocks: the neighbor's superblock, the citizen's superblock and the global superblock.

#### 3.1. The neighbor's public space: Teardrop Park

The projects for public space incorporated into the housing superblocks in New York were never very successful as seen in examples from the 60's and 70's in the Lower East Side, Harlem and the Bronx. Recently the landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh designed a small public space inside a superblock of housing units. The new space, called Teardrop Park (Fig.2), is found in the center of a superblock in the north western part of Lower Manhattan, known as Battery Park City. The peculiarity of the site is that it is land reclaimed from the river during the construction of the original World Trade Center. Perhaps based on this external condition, the innovation in Teardrop Park is the incorporation of a new topography in the city, sinuous, with lush vegetation, almost as if there was a desire to return the New York grid to its original landscape of hills. The origin of the name Manhattan comes from the Native American word Manna-hatta, which means island of hills. Van Valkenburgh defines the space as a sanctuary that satisfies the need for the interaction between children and nature. The park clearly makes homage to Olmstead, almost as if a piece of Central Park was moved downtown. The organization of the nearby housing and the park opens the block at central points leaving the housing to occupying the corners.

The public space is partially visible and accessible from the adjacent streets; however, the space is very secluded making it unknown to the rest city. Ethan Kent, member of the organization of Project for Public Space, argues that the location of the park between the buildings and its steep topography, in his opinion makes the space hard to access and insecure. (KENT, 2006) The project of 1.8 acres (7.280 m<sup>2</sup>) has been marked as a format that does not fit in the city. It is too closely intertwined with the surrounding apartment buildings and its surprise effect makes it unknown to the majority of New Yorkers, unlike the neighboring Rockefeller Park, a large open green space adjacent to the water. Are these possible formulas only for locally oriented space and not space created for and known to the masses that live in New York? For Michael Sorkin the answer comes in the form of a question: "what is a great city if it is not full of serendipity and surprises?" (SORKIN, 2010)

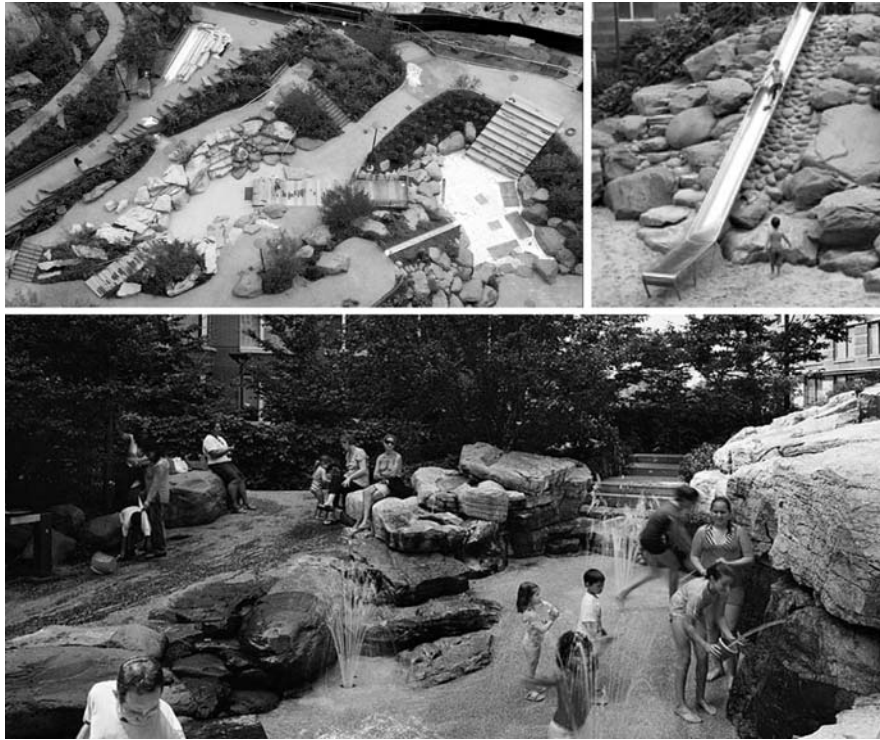


Fig.2

### 3.2. The citizen's public space: Lincoln Center

The transition between the scale of the neighbor and the scale of the citizen can be seen in a superblock that is ingrained with the history of New York: Lincoln Center. The project for Lincoln Center took place during the 50's at a time of convulsive urban development in Manhattan with two great figures at the forefront: Robert Moses, the commissioner of Parks and Recreation and Jane Jacobs, the urban activist. Lincoln Center was a product of Robert Moses' suburban-oriented urbanism. The project included the destruction of a preexisting neighborhood of Latin-American immigrants. It is here where the second figure, Jane Jacobs, appears. As a critic of 20<sup>th</sup> century urbanism, she rallied for a revision of the values of neighborhood and social diversity in a dense city. Jacobs pushed for the different layers of the city going against the large interventions that homogenized and destroyed the city. In the end, Lincoln Center has become an example of urban regeneration through a cultural facility.



Fig. 3

In 2009, during the center's 50th anniversary, the architects Diller & Scofidio and Renfro were asked to redesign the public space of the original super block (Fig.2). The complex was built on a "large base or plinth" as Elizabeth Diller calls it. Diller continues: "The plinth contains parking, but it also raised the center both physically and metaphorically above the city, creating a huge monolithic blank wall on the center's back side. Worse, access to the plaza favored the automobile, including a taxi lane that brought traffic directly to the plaza level, bisecting a pedestrian zone." (World Architecture News, 2010) The redesign of the public space offered a dynamic formula for making city. The idea was to extend the spectacle into the banal public space, connecting the vestibules with the adjacent streets. On one side, approaching the main plaza, there is intent to minimize the impact of automobile traffic by means of a subterranean lane. The plaza is extended to the street through two platforms with glass canopies and a staircase that welcomes the citizen into the public space. On the other side, in the north plaza, the intervention offers a greater variety of public space for the citizen. In front of the Julliard School of dance, the architects introduced a new access to the center adjoined by a new restaurant and green space, the Hypar Pavilion (Fig.3).

"Hypar Pavilion's moment of invention came when we discovered how to design a destination restaurant without consuming the public space on the Lincoln Center campus. The roof became a new kind of interface between public and private, with an occupiable twisting grass canopy over a glass pavilion restaurant". (World Architecture News, 2010) The new green topography of the Hypar Pavilion opens up to the interior of the superblock creating a bucolic landscape that is reflected in a shallow pool containing a sculpture by Henry Moore rather than towards the noise and chaos of the city. The design is completed by a small grove that fills the area located just beyond the reflecting pool. This space is unique because it is a public space inside a private space, Lincoln Center, and donated by a private entity, Barclays Capital. This is another formula for creating public space through a sponsorship that is not linked to a building bonus but instead publicity. Altogether, the northern plaza contains a diversity of spaces defined by trees for shade, movable and fixed seating, a reflecting pool and a restaurant with a green roof where one can lay in the grass and enjoy the sun. Water, shade, movable seating, trees, food and a green lawn: all the elements seen in successful small public spaces in the city, such as in *pocket parks*, like Paley Park and Greenacre Park. This philosophy for "making city" through the reintroduction and improvement of an existing place has breathed life back into the site, once again making it an inviting place for the citizen.

### **3.3 The public space for the visitor: WTC Memorial**

After the attacks on September 11th, 2001, the collapse of the World Trade Center provoked the destruction of one of New York's superblocks. The severity of the acts sparked the need to rebuild the physical space as well as uplift the spirits of the city, America and the world. For a time there was a lot of public debate over what should be done with the site. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) announced a competition for the master plan of the site. In 2003 the design presented by the office of Daniel Libeskind was selected. For Libeskind the hole created needed to be transformed into something that responded to the tragedy but also to be something positive. In the words of Libeskind: "The project is the balance between tragedy and hope, the balance between the memory of what happened and using the opportunity to create a new center for a 21st century New York". (Rising, 2011)

The first change made by the master plan was to break up the existing 16 acres (64.750 m<sup>2</sup>) superblock to reconnect the surrounded streets Fulton y Greenwich, restoring the urban life at street level. Secondly, the main idea was not to build in the footprints of the towers: this space will remain empty as a memorial. Libeskind divided the remaining program between five buildings that took on the shape of a spiral. The spiral is based on the gesture embodied by the Statue of Liberty. After the master plan, the city launched the Memorial competition. The winning proposal (Fig.4) came from a young architect Michael Arad. Arad's design together with landscape architect Peter Walkers emphasized the absence of the two towers by carving the memory of the towers into the site. The project marks the footprints of the two towers with two man-made waterfalls that descend below street level. The idea is to transmit to the visitor a sense of absence. The Memorial is surrounded by an eight acres public space that reproduces a linear tree rhythm through a minimalism composition made up of a granite plaza and public benches.





Fig.4

The new public space has elements in common with other public spaces in the city: water, trees, shadow, and sitting. The repetition and uniformity of the public space projects a sense of solemnness and prelude to a monument, making it different from other public space in Manhattan. Peter Walker instructed arborists to trim the branches of the 442 oaks to a uniform 11 foot height (3.75 m). That horizontal expanse under the leaves draws the eye to the low, dark granite parapets of the Memorial pools. (RUSSELL, 2006) The chance to make a dynamic and lively public space for the city has been replaced by a text-book plaza adjacent to a monument. The public space is a well rounded design thought for the relative's victims, as well as those who lost something as consequences of 9/11. This space has a global impact. Currently, while the rest of the master plan is under construction, the public space adjacent to the Memorial is not perceived as such; instead it is grouped with the Memorial. The future of the 9/11 Memorial's public space will confirm if this was a successful way to "make city" and for whom.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this past decade, different formulas for intervening in the public space have had a great response in New York and have had a real impact on the urban life of the city. Three projects within the typology of the superblock have been analyzed for three users: a park for the neighbors, an urban oasis connected to a cultural facility for the citizen and a memorial for the visitor. In a city such as New York, the variation of program, the flexibility and the integration of the different users is crucial in designing for social diversity. In 1980, William H. Whyte looked to answer how the citizen interacts within the city: "People do not seek to get away from it (the city) all. If they did, they would go to the lonely empty spaces where there are few people. But they do not. They go to the lively places where there are many people. And they go there by choice – not to escape the city, but to partake of it". (WHYTE, 1980. 100) A well designed public space is a magnet for the user, but it is the interaction of the user with the space that really "makes city".

#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> A superblock is a large commercial or residential block barred to through traffic, crossed by pedestrian walks and sometimes access roads, and often spotted with grassed malls. (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2012)

#### Legends

(Fig.1) GRYNBAUM, M., 2012. Times Square. [electronic print] Available at: [www.nytimes.com/2010/02/12/nyregion/12broadway.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/12/nyregion/12broadway.html). [Consulted in June, 2012].

(Fig.2) VALKENBURGH, M. V. Teardrop Park. [electronic print] Available at: [www.mvvainc.com](http://www.mvvainc.com). [Consulted in June, 2012].

(Fig.3) DILLER SCOFIDIO + RENFRO. Lincoln Center. [electronic print] Available at: [www.dsrny.com](http://www.dsrny.com). [Consulted in June, 2012].

(Fig.4) SQUARED DESIGN LAB. WTC Memorial. [electronic print] Available at: [www.squaredesignlab.com](http://www.squaredesignlab.com) and [www.blognajezykach.blogspot.com.es](http://www.blognajezykach.blogspot.com.es). [Consulted in June, 2012].

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## Biography

Ana Morcillo Pallarés (Cieza, Murcia. 1980) is an architect, graduated from the School of Architecture of Valencia (ETSAV, Spain) in 2004. She is partner of Morcillo + Pallares Arquitectos established in Cieza (Murcia) in 2005. The studio won various design competition in both Spain and abroad, including a performing arts center for the Region of Murcia (2008), a bike garage in Brooklyn (2008) and an international ideas competition for a hotel in Cieza (2011). In addition to her involvement in the studio, Ana Morcillo is working on her PhD at the School of Architecture of Madrid (ETSAM). Her dissertation involves the study of public space in New York City between 1950 and the present.