

of any kind appears to be a rigid imposition on the natural landscape. It is this reaction against the grid that is voiced by Olmstead and Vaux writing in support of their design for Central Park in 1863: 'The time will come when New York will be built up, when all the grading and the filling will be done and the picturesquely varied rocky formation of the island will have been converted into formations for rows of monotonous straight streets and piles of erect buildings' (Reps 1965).

In their opposition to the grid, the relief from its monotony became a specific aim. Central Park itself is an attempt to imitate nature and to recreate wild scenery within the grid.[†] The garden suburb with its curving streets is one form of attack on the grid system, and an attempt to replace it. And at the end of the century, the Chicago Fair (1893), Cass Gilbert's schemes in Washington (1900), and the plans for San Francisco (1905) and Chicago (1909) by Burnham are another attempt to transform the urban desert by means of vistas and focal points, into the 'city beautiful'. However, we recognise at once a contrast. The various types of grid that have been described opened up some possible patterns for the structure of a city but left the building form free to develop and change within this. The plans of the garden city designers or those concerned with making the 'city beautiful' are an attempt to impose a form: and that form cannot change.

It is not possible to deny the force behind the criticisms of the grid. It can result in monotony: so can a curvilinear suburbia. It can fail to work: so can the organic city. What has been described is a process. It is now possible to extract some principles. Artificial grids of various kinds have been laid down. The choice of the grid allows different patterns of living to develop and different choices to be elaborated. The grid, unlike the fixed visual image, can accept and respond to growth and change. It can be developed unimaginatively and monotonously or with great freedom. There can be a point at which the original grid fails to respond to new demands (Fig. 8.3). As in Manhattan, it congeals. And it is at this point that we must try to discover from the old framework a new ordering principle that will open up new opportunities for elaboration by use.

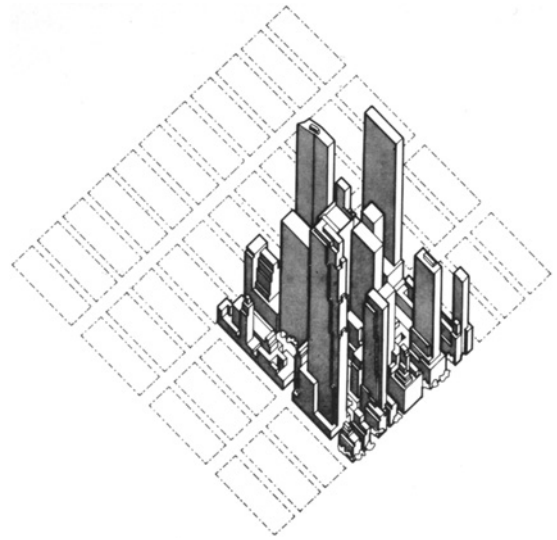


FIGURE 8.3
The illustration shows building plot development in its most intensive form.

It is precisely this that Le Corbusier underlined when he paid his first visit to New York in 1935 and made the comment: 'What about the road?' (Le Corbusier 1939, 1947.) The diagrams by which he illustrates this remark show the regenerative process that is necessary (Fig. 8.4). By increasing the size of the street net in Manhattan, Le Corbusier shows that the grid ceases to restrict. New building arrangements become possible and the balance between plot, building and street can be restored.

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In the case of these American cities the grid or framework can be regarded as an ordering principle. It sets out the rules of the environmental game. It allows the player the freedom to play with individual skill. The argument can now be extended by saying that the grid, which is so apparent in the American examples, is no less controlling and no less important in cities nearer home that would normally be

[†]This movement which began with gardens, was less appropriately applied to city layout. In Olmstead's words, 'lines of roads were not to press forwards'. Their curving forms suggest leisure and tranquility. Compare this with the almost contemporary (1859) statements by Cerda in his plan for Barcelona in which there is 'a reciprocal arrangement between that which is contained' (building plot and arrangement) and 'that which contains' (grid and street system). 'Urbanisation is an appendix to universal movement: streets are for movement but they serve areas permanently reserved and isolated from that movement which agitates life' (the environmental area).