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Andrew Atwood & Anna Neimark

ABSTRACTION RETURNS:

A GRID PROPOSAL FOR THE ISLAND OF MANHATTAN

The Map of the City of New York of 1811 by the Commissioners superimposed a grid onto the Island of Manhattan (fig. 1). The drawing neither accounted for irregular edges of its shape nor the topography of the island. It rendered the lines of former streets, houses, and fields as dashed. Ordering the orthogonal grid of blocks independently of geography, history, and memory, the Commissioners defined an autonomous urban form.

Now consider Krauss’s emphatic description of the grid as one of modernism’s founding myths: “In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back to nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree...”ⁱ

By ordering the city to the shallowness of a gridded plane, the Commissioners unknowingly added urbanism to what would become central to the aesthetic discourse of modernism. They preceded the discipline of art by one hundred years. Their drawing brought abstraction to bear on the everyday lives of millions of people who would eventually inhabit that island. The map defined a distance, a sense of *estrangement*, between the city and its inhabitants through an object and concept of representational order.

In the two centuries that followed, the distance between the drawing and the city appeared to close. Although we purposefully interpret it as an aesthetic ordering system, the grid fulfilled the Commissioners’ pure instrumental reason: a parcelization of the city for the real estate market. The island was fully turned over to Capitalist speculation. What might have been abstract turned into kitsch.

“And so life is reckoned as nothing,” writes Victor Shklovsky. “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war...” And yet, “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*”ⁱⁱ

To reopen the Manhattan grid to abstraction through representation, we subject the island to conventions of orthographic drawing and projection that estrange its now familiar form. In the three studies that follow, the urban object is summarily reconstituted through a mechanical reduction of resolution: extrusion. What emerges is a template for urbanism, governed not by the figure-ground plan, but by the flattened, gridded skyline. The models project the city from the outside in, describing it as a monumental whole made up of discrete parts.

In the first model, Manhattan is divided into parcels according to variations and anomalies found in the original plan (fig. 2). Once the iconic districts are outlined in plan, each one is treated as an internally closed system, defined by two internal skylines – one on the southern, and another, on the eastern edge (fig. 3). The independent elevations, when projected through one another, reproduce a recognizable, yet inaccurate, model of the island (fig. 4). The irregularities tie this abstraction to quasi-real zones in the city, yet the union of the two projected skylines produces an uncanny sense of distance. Attached to its original reference, the exercise maintains as much as it alienates.

The second model takes Manhattan to its lowest level of resolution. While the most recognizable image of the city is the skyline, an extrusion along this line delivers a radical estrangement from the real (fig. 5). The seventeen parcels of the first abstraction are reduced to one undifferentiated block in the second (fig. 6). Describing Manhattan as one volume through its three faces, the island plan and its two skylines, produces a pure plaid (fig. 7). None of the exceptions preserved in the first model exist in the second. Extrusion does not average. It does something else, favoring extremes. The model of the city does not recover the original; the form only retains the character and name “New York.”

The final study gives the island a new form of discontinuity through a grid of evenly spaced two hundred acre parcels (fig. 8). As with previous models, each cube is then projected from three drawings only, crossing two hundred skyline segments through one another (fig. 9). When the cubes are placed together, the elevations do not match (fig. 10). Only the street grid lines up to connect the superblocks into a continuous urban fabric. There are visible seams. The cubic parcels resist being brought together into one unified model (fig. 11). Each one is a mini Manhattan, governed by its own internal logic.

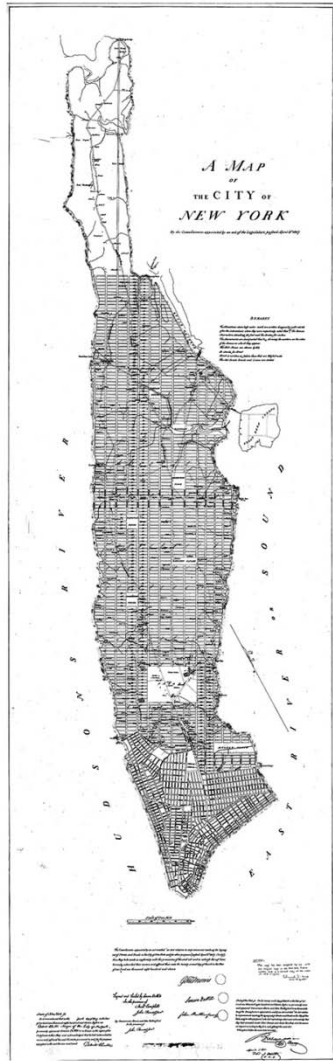
This final reduction estranges the island through an alienated form of its own composition – the grid. Yet the new blocks resist conforming to the effective standards of efficiency, property, and function. In gridding the grid of Manhattan once again, we revisit the moment of the Commissioners’ original abstraction.

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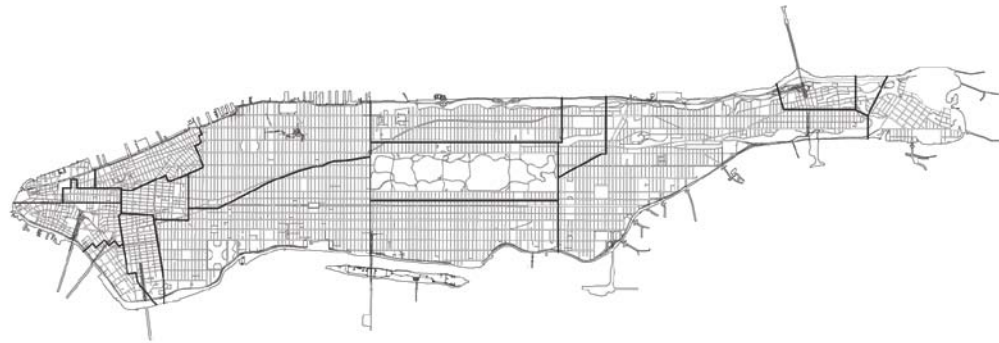
Andrew Atwood has lectured at SCI-Arc, Rice, UCLA, Cornell, USC, UVA, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and Michigan. He recently led an ACSA panel on “The Agency of Drawing and the Digital Process” at MIT. His installations include 5 Doric Columns at the Pacific Design Center and Cone Ceiling at the Beijing Biennale. He has worked and consulted for Belzberg Architects, mos, and BIG. He holds a BA in Political Science and Studio Art from the University of Richmond and an M.Arch from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design (GSD). His research can be found at atwood-a.com.

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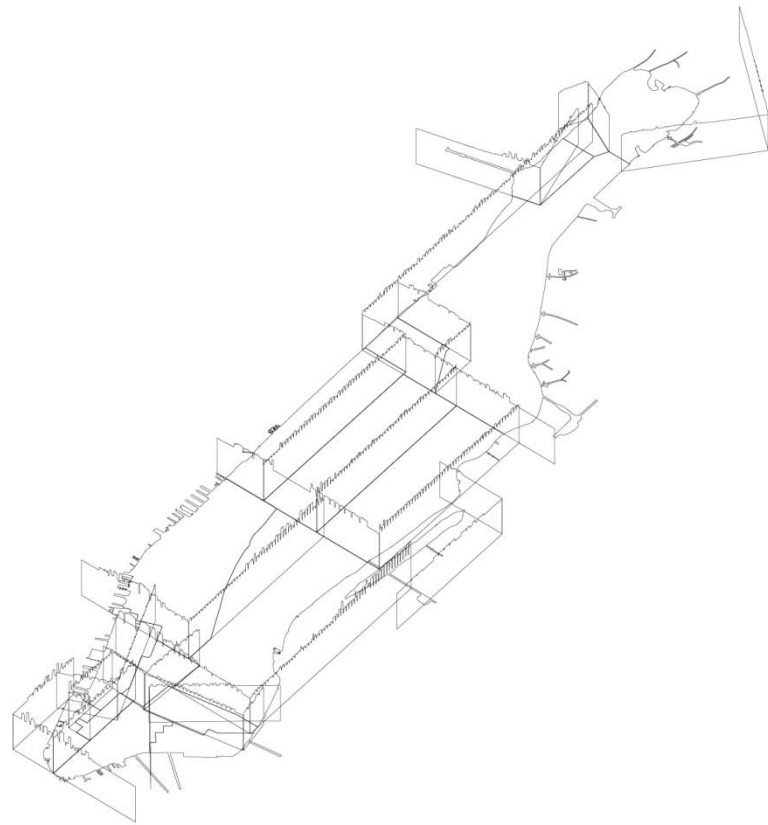
Illustrations:



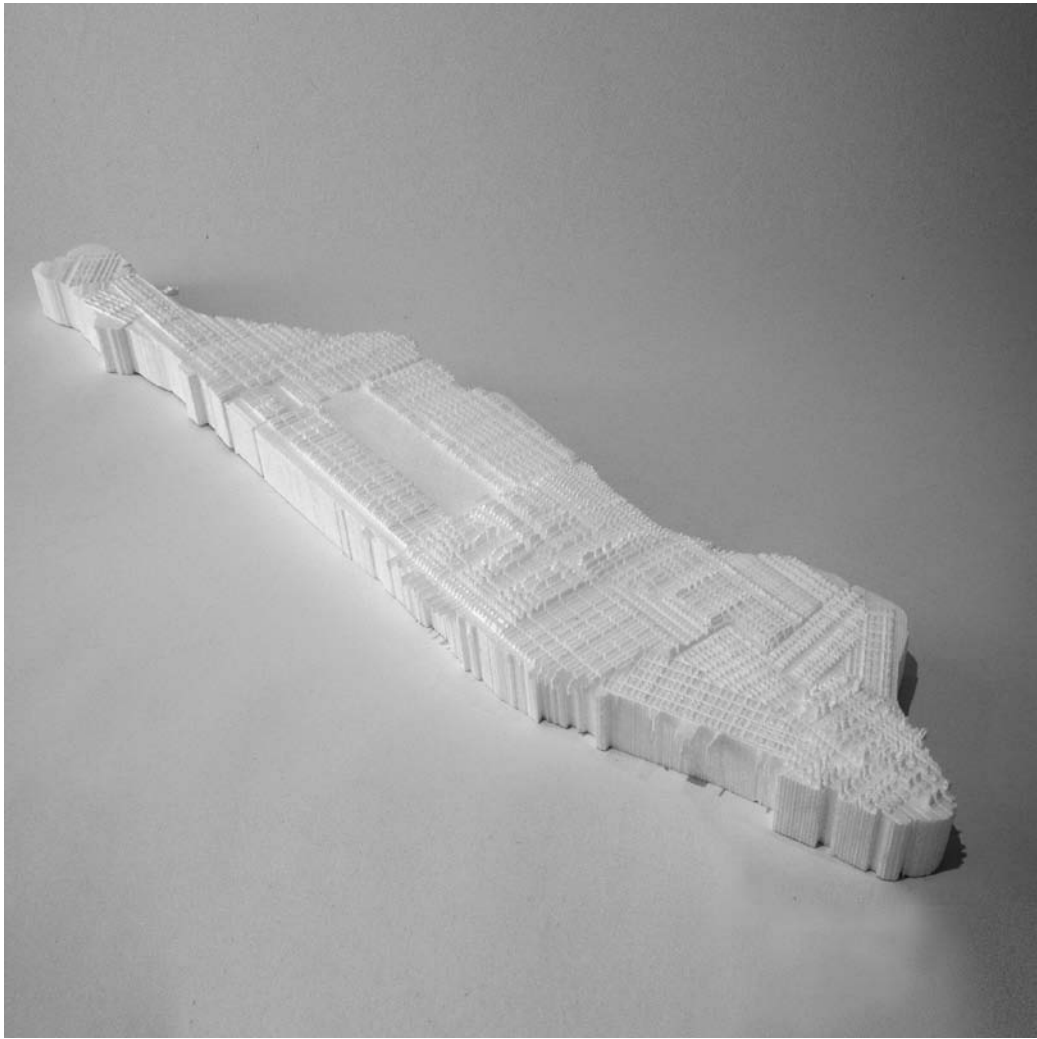
01 A Map of the City of New York by the Commissioners Appointed by an Act of the Legislature. 1811



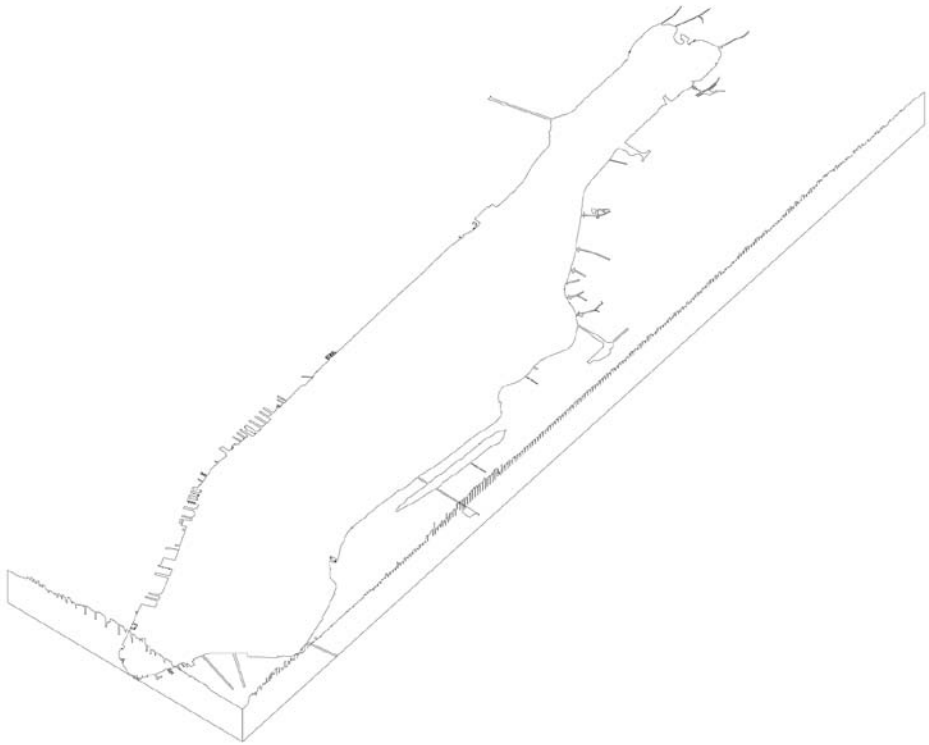
02 Manhattan divided into districts by grid orientation. Plan.



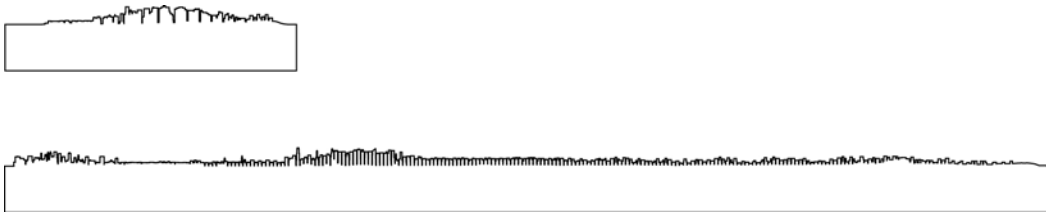
03 District elevations. Axonometric.



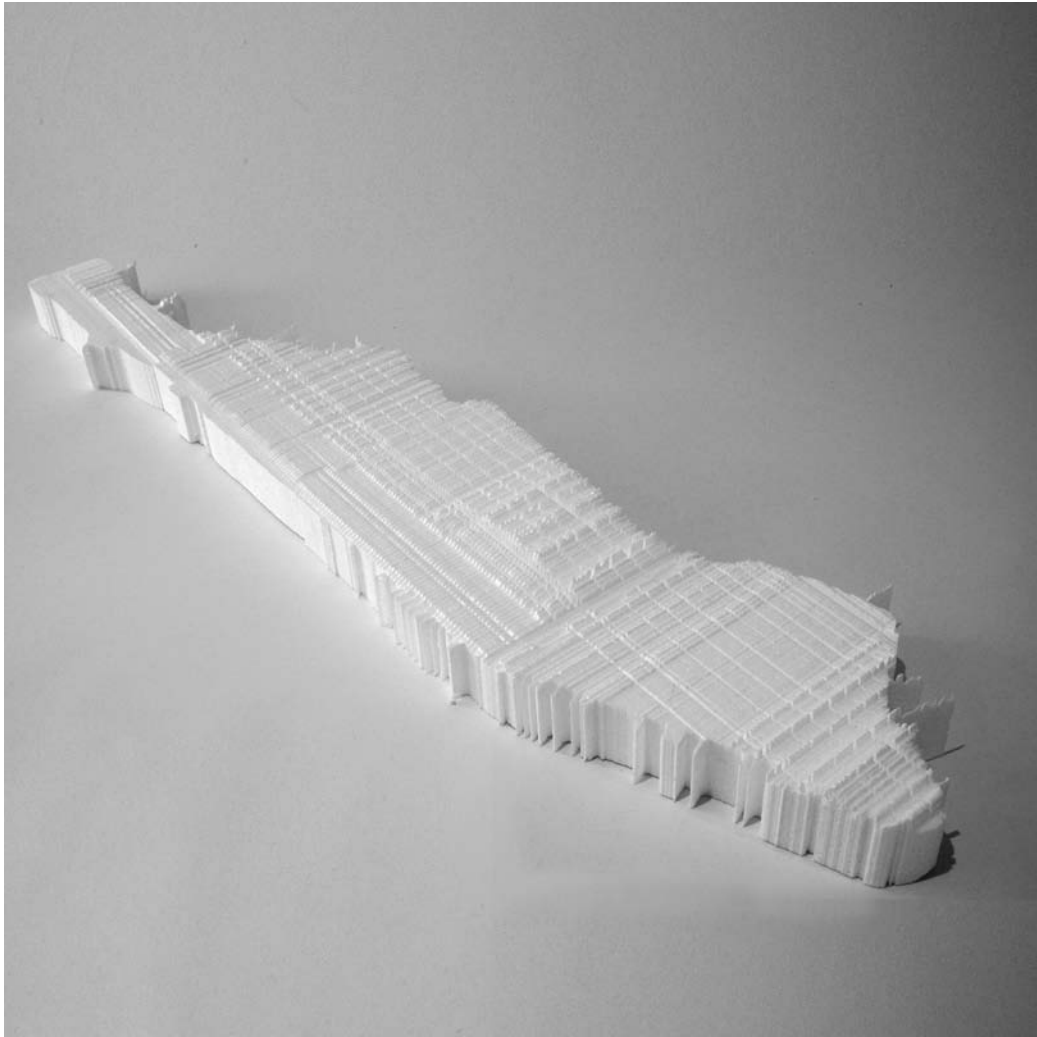
04 Manhattan reconstituted from district parcels. Model.



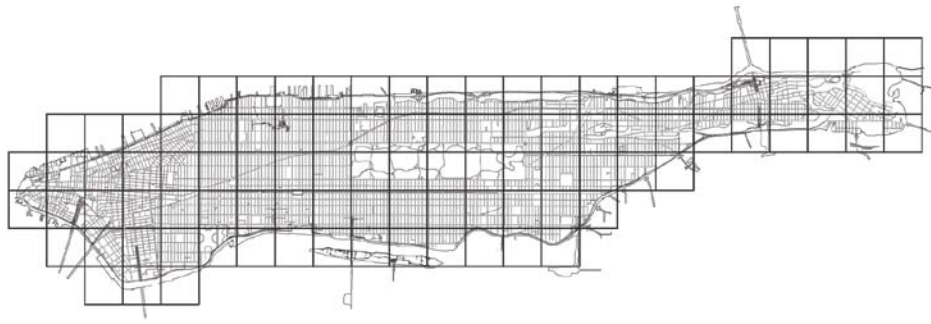
06 Skylines. Axonometric.



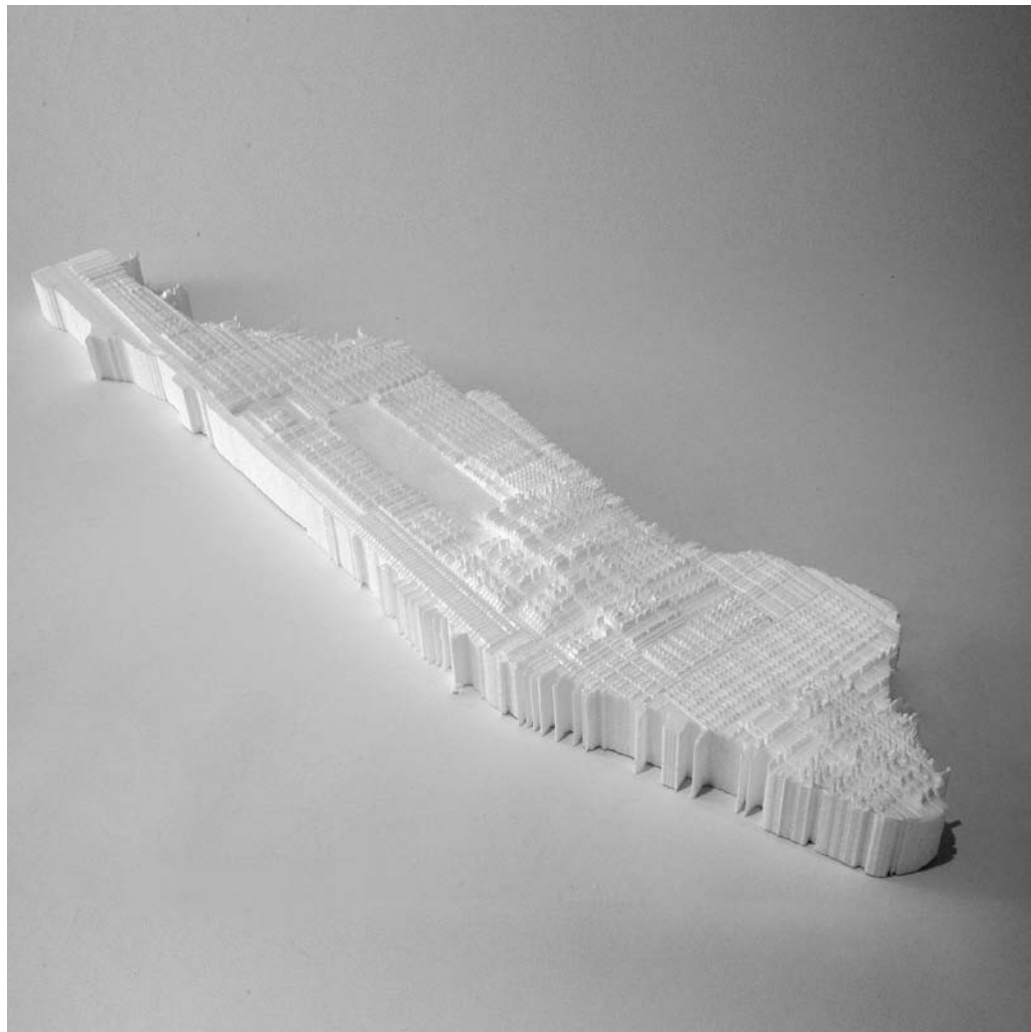
05 Manhattan skylines, east & south. Elevation.



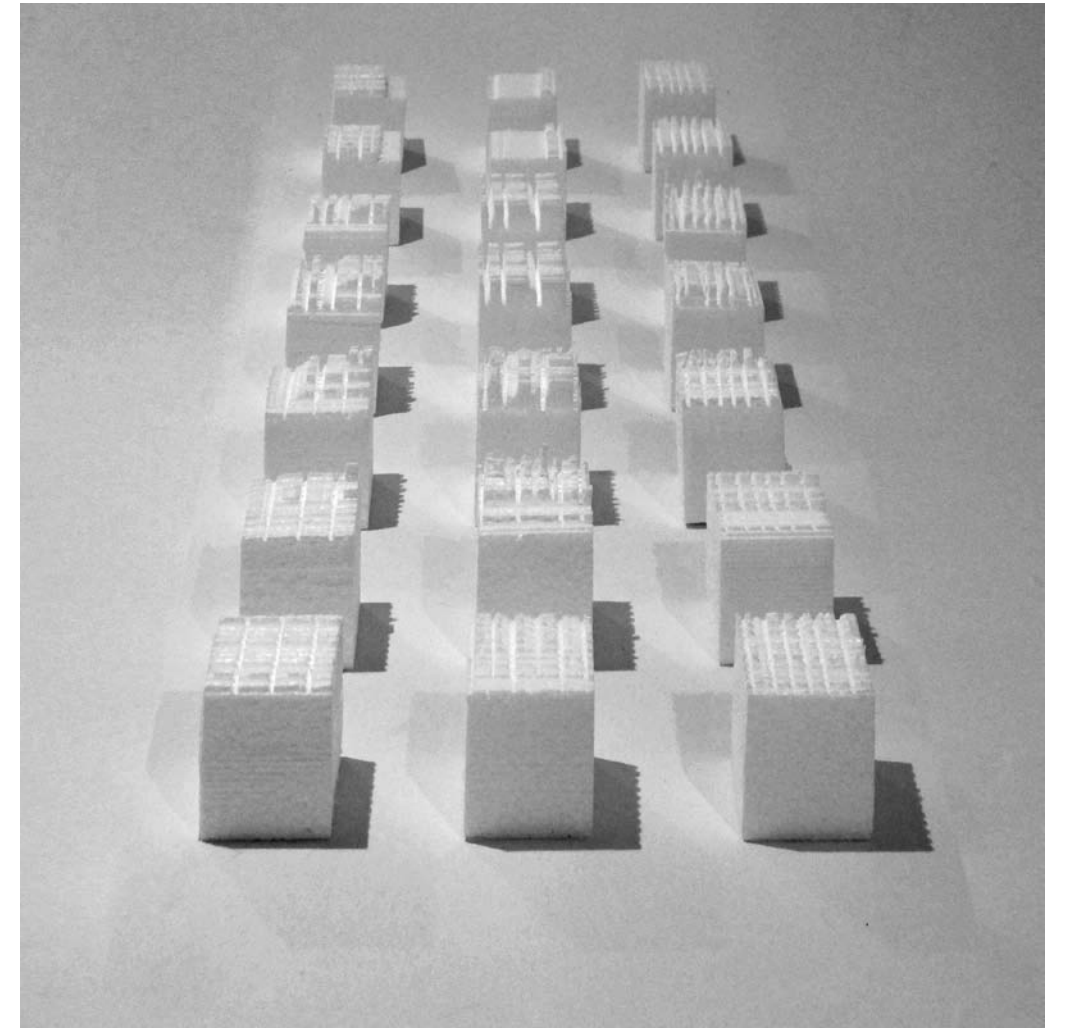
07 Manhattan reconstituted from skylines. Model.



09 Two hundred acre grid elevations superimposed onto the existing street grid of Manhattan. Axonometric.



10 Manhattan grid. Model.



11 Twenty-one of the two hundred acre Manhattan grid tiles. Model.

¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979), p. 50
² Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 1917, in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12

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