

## **The pain of dialectics — lying on the floor, underneath the Grid.**

Can a fascist pattern of spacial organization orchestrate the democratic capital of the free world's economy? Theoretically, yes. Especially, if one were to consider the Marcusean view on Hegel's dialectics. Dialectical thought disables the a priori opposition of "value and fact" by understanding that all facts are stages of a "single process" where "subject and object are so joined that truth can be determined only within the subject-object totality" (Marcuse, p. 445). Thus, to answer this question, we must assess the current Manhattan as a democratically-fascist totality with its architectural patterns as a palimpsest (Powell, p.7) of the past, allowing for a presupposition that the fact of its fascism may be enveloped in the process of its history and inscribed in the language of its spacial organization. But answering this question in a purely theoretical way would imply succumbing to the instrument of the "instrumental reason" (tautology intended) that having become "autonomous" constructed the very phenomena under the investigation (Adorno, Horkheimer, p.29). Thus, in order to resist being subjugated by the uncontrolled instrumental reason, (and I hope to Adorno's joy), I insist on giving this critique a distinctly different — personal language. I propose a language of physically uncomfortable and emotionally charged auto-ethnographic elements that are impractical to a purely philosophical discourse. Thus, by employing this personalized kind of language I suggest a theory-praxis discourse. I offer this writing as alternative to the language used by Marcuse, because speaking in the words of uncontrolled reason seems redundant — it adds to the reification of knowledge that it promises to uproot.

Ideally, I would like to challenge the uncontrolled reason with my mouth closed and a brush in my hand, in order to minimize the accidental possibility of becoming an agitator myself. It is always a present danger with rebellions. This writing may become a prelude.

## **Rigor, Cadence, and Pace:**

Standing by the Flat Iron Building, I coveted to embody Manhattan. I desired to elope, away from the vernacular of the Vermont architecture and the student-lead curriculum of Bennington College, with the City of rigor, cadence, and pace. Or perhaps, I desired to elope with the City of my internal desire to Manhattan, with its rigor, cadence, and pace. In either case, I wanted to elope, and I desired for rigor, cadence, and pace. With much effort, consumed by my desire, and defying my immigrant odds, I entered the Cooper Union School of Architecture (that prided itself with a 3% acceptance rate that particular year for a reason), located on the lower east side of the City. Immersed in the rigor, cadence, and pace, inside and out, I managed to fulfill my wish either way.

The required twenty-one credits of the course work in Design, History, Theory, Calculus, Physics, Structures, Drawing, Geometry, and Wood Shop created the cadence, the German designers for teachers, who viewed students as disposable (due to the other 97%), created the rigor, and staying alive reinsured the pace. The City has circumscribed me with its Grid, and projected it inwards. The City desired rigor, cadence, and pace even more than I did, and it firmly demanded me to keep up. My body turned to dust in the flux created by the superimposition of reasons — the reason of me superimposed onto the syntax of the City. It was a kind of resonance that makes bridges collapse, unique curriculum of the Cooper Union (Pietig, p.46) augmenting the magnitude of my oscillations. In this way, the essence of the Grid became known to me.

For the City, employing the Grid was nothing personal. It was an instrument of desire in its insatiable race towards progress (Olick, Perrin, p. 157) — a perfect tool for control of all citizens, a kind of panopticum 3.0, the state of the arts in the industry of control. For me, the Grid was something similar — except my desire lied in some sort of a Faustian quest, and my control was focused on controlling mostly me. I quickly observed that this resonance resulted in my subjugation. I looked up to the City and didn't think to resist. This relationship grew

destructive. Having eloped however, and in order to behave adequately with a three and a half hundred thousand dollar scholarship, I was determined to proceed. It was impossible to argue with the City. I knew I will die, but I had to continue, if I wanted to keep up, progress, and succeed.

### **The being is round, and Bachelard is right:**

If Heidegger (2002) is correct and the hands are the eyes of the sculptor, than what does the sculptor see looking at the Island? If Merleau-Ponty (1968, pp. 148-149) is correct, and human skin sees the colors, than what does it see interacting with the buildings that define the Grid? If “being is round” and Bachelard (1994, p.233) is right, and all the lines and angles of steel that circumscribe the rectangles of glass and parallelepipeds of concrete are the words of “exterior thinking” that produce “outsiders,” (Bachelard, 1993, p. 234), than how does the Island feel about the superimposition of the Grid?

Taking a bird’s eye view on the Island, one may identify a distinctly different vocabulary of the lower side. For the most part its street layout developed organically in 17th century when it was a colony of New Amsterdam, prior to its British acquisition from the Dutch in 1664. The syntax of the roads in the lower side of the Island offers a palimpsest (Powell, p.6) of its past. The nuanced networks of short streets, random angles, and unpredictable patterns were naturally inscribed over time by Native American trails, animal paths, and country lanes (Grava, p.1252). These residues of movement became voids in organic order of the south part of the Island connecting it to the memory of its past. The rest of the island is uniformly subjugated to the unimpeachable syntax of the Grid.

The authorship of the Manhattan’s geometric pattern is attributed to five men: governor Morris, the lawyer J. Rutherford, the surveyor S. De Witt, and the twenty year old J. Randel Jr, who lead the creation of the Grid. These men, paid little attention to the original morphology or

the Island, when choosing to propose this highly rigid order. These men failed to reflect on the patterns of the old cities in Europe that organically evolved, with due respect to human movement over long periods of time. Rest assured, the commissioners did not look beyond the Europe's limits into the Eastern, or African cultures that are replete with examples of morphological richness.

The *gridiron* pattern, that is the technical term for the typology of the Island's Grid, has been used throughout the ages (Higgins, pp. 50–67). Yet, the particular topology of the gridiron produced by the commissioners exhibits characteristics that raise concerns in the light of the Frankfurt School theories and other experts in the metaphysics of space. If “the proposition that tools are prolongation of human organs can be inverted to state that organs are also prolongations of the tools” (Adorno, 2002, p.210), than the tool of the Grid, from the onset, reveals authoritarian thinking and aptness for control. It is designed to penetrate deep inside the bodies of its citizens in order to extract the fuel for its growth.

The Grid was originally commissioned by the Common Council of New York City that was searching to create a linear and regular geometry from 14th street to Washington Heights. Unable to execute such an omnipotent physical gesture over the Island, the Common Council turned to the New York City legislature to appoint a commission and equip it with the power to obliterate the natural topography and insert the Grid (Cohen, Augustyn, pp. 100–06).

The magnitude of this gesture alone suggest a character of authoritarian personality (Adorno, et.al, 1950, p.228) in charge of this process. The commissioner's plan was presented in 1811 and was called "the single most important document in New York City's development," (Cohen, Augustyn, pp. 100–06) as encompassing the "republican predilection" for “control,” “balance” and “distrust of nature" (Burrows, Wallace, pp. 419–22). Upper Manhattan, north of Washington Heights, was also subjugated to this process, some 57 years later, reinsuring that the only “undesecrated” remnant of the Island does not deviate from the established geometric norm (Koeppel, pp. 192–94).

In 1853, the New York State Legislature provided the only respite from the Grid. Central Park landscape was inspired by the ideals of pastoral cemeteries. These ideals were carefully inscribed within its rectangular parameter. The fabric of space that it provided is a manmade falsity of nature (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992, pp. 130–135). Thus, in itself, it became a 778 acre delusion. This only break from the rectangular geometry is a rectangle, which neatly fits between 59th and 110th street, and 8th and 5th avenues. Inside this rectangle of economic unproductivity lies a highly orchestrated simulacrum — very much in the spirit of the Grid.

Interestingly, there were alternatives to the current gridiron pattern. For example, a proposal by a surveyor duo deemed the Mangin–Goerck Plan that was rejected by the Commission Council. This variation, even though still reliant on a grid, was aimed at “synthesizing the [organic] patterns already established” in the lower side as well as at the fringes of the city, with the rest of the Island (Koeppel, p. 48) in an attempt to create a more nuances and socially responsive space. Despite the fact that it “seemed to be just what [the City] wanted”(Koeppel, p. 48) the Mangin–Goerck Plan was not approved.

The Grid that was approved lived up to the dream of creating a democratic capital of the free world’s economy upon this Island, reinsuring exorbitant returns on real estate. In 1807 the real estate of the Island had a total assessed tax value of \$25 million, it is \$1.398 trillion now, demonstrating unprecedented growth (Panero, J, 2012; Press Office, 2022).

## **Architecture.**

Architecture offers a lot of control. Architecture mediates a direct connection between the body of the architect and the body of the dweller that encounters the space, sometimes centuries later (Pallasmaa, p.67). The inner motives and predispositions of the architect generate external resonance with society, through the bodies of the dwellers across time (Pallasmaa, p.67). Unlike Fine Art, that one may choose to avoid by hiding away from

museums, architecture is omnipresent, silent, and often undetected in its power. An authoritarian architect can harm the society, suffocating it gently while remaining unseen.

Architectural act begins with the placement of the marker in space — the primary act of ownership, and of measure. Square marble markers were employed to inscribe the alphanumeric labels onto the body of the Island in order to outline its streets. Proper street names were not used. Where natural topography stood in the way of the marker, a gunpowder hole was blasted, six-inch long iron bolt inserted, and embedded with molten lead (Steinberg, pp. 60–61). It took a total of 1,549 marble markers and 98 iron bolts to inscribe the Grid upon the body of the Island demonstrating an authoritarian power of this architectural gesture. The houses that were in the way of the Grid were simply destroyed, the properties were “bisected, trisected, or completely obliterated” (Holloway, p. 145). Clement Clerke Moore, the writer whose property was razed, has reflected that “we live under a tyranny with respects to the rights of property, which ... no monarch in Europe would dare to exercise” (Koeppel, p. 136). The natural topography of the Island became fully subverted. The land was cleared, “hills were excavated, hollows filled in, the right of way was leveled and the street was paved” (Koeppel, pp. 138–43). Little of anything organic, including human settlements, has remained untouched.

Once inscribed, the Grid was erected upwards to maximize the use of the airspace in a similarly authoritarian fashion. The high rise towers emerged as a new form of religious architecture with capitalism and republic for a god. As opposed to the cathedrals in other religions that create open vertical spaces, these seemingly vertical volumes manifested themselves as repetitions of rectangular sites stacked upon themselves in claustrophobic flatness. One cannot experience the loftiness of a high rise tower on the inside. On the inside, it manifests itself as repetition of thin layers where an individual is vertically constrained. High rise manifests itself vertically only to an outsider, producing a sense of domination with its imposing scale. High rise tower is the projective language of the city that oppresses outsiders that it produced. This oppressive “constructed fiction” creates “the readers” of its syntax (De, Certeau, p.158). The urban literatis of monotone rigor are versed in perusing 2000 elongated

rectangular solids interrupted by narrow voids. At an even cadence of almost exactly 20 blocks per mile (Spann, p.588) this language defines the whole Island. The dwellers are the ultimate outsiders within the geometry of these straight lines and right angles elevated upwards and gridded up again as facades of their vertical constraints. “The timeless task of architecture is to create embodied and lived existential metaphors that concretise and structure our being in the world” (Pallasmaa, p.71). The dwellers find themselves in this sad metaphor of capitalist sameness. The ultimate never ending corridor — a perpetual rectilinear maze. This City is a race toward progress and desire for prosperity that one cannot ever attain. In this City shaped by the uniformity, “all structures and activities would look roughly the same” (Hartog, p.165). The distinctions between activities of culture, charity, economics, and domicile disappear, creating a formless mush of human existence that is placed into the rectangular boxes of the fixed, republican, spatial constraints (Hartog, p.165).

The Grid is the “machinery and the hero” (de Certeau, p. 159) — the facilitator of modernity’s progress, commodification and illusionary success. The Island located “between the two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) prides the tallest letters in the world compos[ing] a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production” (de Certeau, p157). The uniform geometry of these letters spells *isolation, hardening, control*.

### **The City of Anastasia.**

Italo Calvino wrote on the city of Anastasia. I took it as a compliment when it was meant as a warning. Hypnotized by the trans with the City, I myself became Anastasia — the Calvino’s city of me. In Anastasia, “one morning your desires waken all at once and surround you” professed Calvino, but I proceeded to keep ignoring his words. “The city appears to you as a whole where no desire is lost,” (Calvino, p12), one day, however, entranced by the progress, “your labor which gives form to desire takes from desire its form” (Calvino, p12) — it takes the form of the Grid. In this ultimate resonance of productivity and race towards progress the Grid

projected upon the Grid, like a snake swallowing its tail, it destroyed its own site — in this case the site happened to be me.

I read Calvino before encountering the City but ignored the dialectics in his words, or maybe I secretly wished to live in the city of me. “And you believe you are enjoying Anastasia wholly when you are only its slave,” concluded Calvino (Calvino, p12). In perfect resonance of the Grids I became Anastasia — an egoist in the city of her own desire, a Narcissus, a victim of the weak dialectical thinking. I failed to see that her name was spelled in the big geometric letters of the Grid.

Marcuse would have been delighted to see the prove of his work. Having ironically collapsed on the floor of the figure drawing studio in the Cooper Union building, with a BMI of 12 and a systemic organ failure, I realized that there is no longer any of me left underneath the Grid. It turned out that there are no fuses or safety features in this structure. Yet again, I succumbed to my own ambition — unintentionally, I resonated with the Grid.

Dying on the floor I discovered the power of dialectical thinking. I wonder how was it discovered by Marcuse. Laying there, I had a clear vision of the Grid — it was behind the window and within me, with its total efficiency and totalitarian control. Rigor, cadence, and pace proved futile — they were simply the geometric constraints.

By the virtue of me writing this critique, the drama of this moment is spoiled. Somehow I did not die, again. I assume there was a good reason, such as to write dialectic critiques of the Grid.

I exist now in the era of my Grid-informed dialectical thinking. I contemplate the City, fascism, and me (Frankl, 2006). Sometimes, there are uncanny parallels in our patterns — the linearity of forms, the loss of roundness, the straightness of angles, black the gray. These adjectives are documents of maleness that show exacerbated potentiality for life — future, present, and conceived. But through the power of dialectical thinking I discovered that attempt at integration of roundness is the best antidote for the totalitarian control.



## **The dialectics of the Grid:**

The essence of dialectics is in the act of the negative thinking (Marcuse, p.447) — the ability and the courage to deconstruct the whole, operate, and heal. It isn't a purely philosophical act even though it requires philosophical thinking. Dialectics produces a concrete call to action requiring a physical change. It is a call to recognize that the logic and the language fail as long as they are the constructs of the "mutilated whole" (Marcuse, p.449) requiring a change in the language in order to change the logic of the outcomes.

Round variations are necessary within the geometric patterns. Roundness is an adjective that describes architecture produced by the body that houses life. If being is round (Bachelard, 1994, p.233), then roundness is a prophylaxis of death.

The Grid is a dialectical whole — it structures the order, it is in itself an antidote for chaos; but roundness negates the negative of its totalitarian projection, the presence of the round variations is the key to the un-mutilation of the whole of the Grid. If the goal is to have a structured dialogue with society, but a dialogue nonetheless, then dialectically speaking, both are necessary — geometric order and round openness— not sure of the ratio and specificity yet. But whatever it may be, there must emerge some organic variation in the Grid.

A "unified ideology and a unified politics" (Hillier and Hanson 1984, p. 21) projected over the territory of the Island is the mutilated whole of the Grid (Marcuse, p.451). This mutilated whole cannot be interrupted with more words said in the tone of the uncontrolled reason and inscribed as the rigid architectural lines. The Grid cannot be augmented or reformed with more rectilinear thinking because it will support "the status quo" (Marcuse, p.449) and the "oppressive power" (Marcuse, p. 451) of factual reason. It has to be negated with a distinctly different language — mimetic language of space.

Louis Khan has famously asked a brick "What do you want, brick?" (Lesser, 2017) As any self respecting architect knows, the brick reported back to Louis that it wants to be an

arch. I wonder, why the commissioners did not follow Khan's example and asked the City "what do you want to be, City?" Informed by my experience, I think that any self respecting city would have responded "please, no more mutilation by the Grid."

The City does not enjoy being hardened against "all devotion" and physical mimicry of life (Adorno, 2002, p148) — the City desires round variations that interrupt the rigor of the Grid. It wants round, oval, and random open spaces, organic patterns, surprising turns, and color in its topos (Pallasmaa, pp. 60-63). The City desires to resonate mimetically with its dwellers eliciting joy. Perhaps the city would have simply answered, "I want to embody dialogue." Commissioners would have to invent a completely different language and consider obliteration of the Grid.

The City wants to remember being an Island where people walked in non-rectangular patterns. This is not a melancholic return to the past — it is an act of dialectics — a reflection that is necessary for the change. "The body knows and remembers" (Pallasmaa, p.60) the things of the past. The body of the human collective, the individual's body, the whole body of the Island remembers its natural form. Architecture is charged to be responsive to the traits of primordial behaviors preserved and passed down through the generations by the genes (Pallasmaa, p.60). The uniform Grid does not respond well to the genes because it is an inhumane method to arrive at the goals that are labeled to be democratic. The City wants to be in a conscious dialogue with its contemporary dwellers, while carrying the trances of the primordial mankind "concealed in the body" of its own past (Pallasmaa, p.60). The failure in finding the right language equates to the failure in both — the dialogue and dialectics. It arrives at the erasure of the body and thus the neglect of the entire human being.

### **The unique view of the City through the lens of the Frankfurt School.**

The uniform Grid is the tool of the agitator. The oversimplified and repetitive language of the agitator finds its perfect embodiment in this kind of Grid (Löwenthal, Guterman, p.77).

Unaware and unwilling to acknowledge the internal contradictions, the agitator escalates its oppressive power by the false employment of the words that signify democratic freedoms and progress, only to perpetuate their personal goals (Löwenthal, Guterman). Through this false projective (Olick, Perrin, 156) rhetoric of efficiency, the agitator propagates itself. It goes beyond the verbal language and defines the territory of space. Without the need for explicit indoctrination, it agitates the city-dwellers with the repetition of its geometric form. Robbed of self-reflective judgement and critical thinking they draw into the City, compelled by hypnotic promise of the economic gain. The language of progress produces the paranoia of competition, whispering to run faster in order to keep up. A new religion is created that venerates the veiled idle — economic gain, efficiency, control. The agitator — the false prophet with its untrammled hegemonic power, lurks in the shadows of control.

In this geometric landscape, a deviant liberal is a "utopian dreamer" who does not see in the proper light. The only 'right' way of thinking shall be turned to the "economic interest" and profit (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford, p. 154). This order renders people into commodified human substance (Adorno, 1972) neatly stored away on the vertical shelves with the rectangular constraints, and placed in their tiny cubicles of "small apartments [that] subjugate them only more completely" (Olick, Perrin, p94). People feel fear and isolation — the homogeneity of this geometric whole. The "mutilated people" fear the agitator that pretends to feed them, but it never does (Adorno, Horkheimer, p.29).

### **Mimesis and Projection.**

The negative in the dialectics of the Grid is projection. Through the un-negated linearity, authoritarian dictator "can project nothing except its own unhappiness, the cause of which, resides in itself" (Olick, Perrin, p.158). Unable to dialectically reflect on the self, or the needs of its citizens, it brands them like cattle with the schemata of the Grid.

The antidote to this self-perpetuating projection of reason is mimesis — the synthetic language of the body, with its primordial memory and the natural ability to reflect. Mimesis is the ability to resonate with another individual which requires “dephilosophizing ourselves” in order “to experience the shock” received “from new images” (Bachelard, 1994, p.236). Genuine mimesis reconstructs the senses (Pallasmaa, 2005, p.67) allowing to understand another person through the surface of the skin. It fosters dialogue with another being in a shared realm, honoring their individual entirety (Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., 2002, p.149).

Projection is the antithesis of the genuine mimesis. It is a function of the self-perpetuating reason, that casts preconceived notions on people. Projection of uncontrolled reason is physically manifested as the fixed rigidity of the uniform coordinate Grid. Projection is a false mimesis — it subverts its surroundings in order to propagate the self. If genuine “mimesis makes itself resemble its surroundings,” than “projection makes its surroundings resemble itself” (Olick, Perrin, p.154). If mimesis generates understanding, communication and dialogue, than projection denies singularity and subverts humane morphology to fit it into the rigidity of the immovable projection of the Grid.

If “architecture is frozen music” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749–1832), than music of authoritarian control has hardened as the architecture of the Grid. The syntax of the City is a physicalized monologue of the agitator, projected as uniform and linear manifestation of its uncontrolled reason; it is a false mimesis of the agitator’s self. It represses the genuine mimesis. “The reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death” (Adorno, Horkheimer, pp.44-45). In the body of the dweller the architecture of the agitator is comprehended as pain. It offers “spiritless nature,” false religion of fear, creating commodified “anthropomorphism” from human beings themselves (Adorno, Horkheimer, pp.44-45).

The ultimate rebellion against the agitator is genuine mimesis. It de-petrifies the rigid spacial geometry, creating unpredictable round variations that resonate with the bodies of the dwellers freeing them from the projected spell. The genuine mimesis facilitates interaction,

fearlessness, laughter, and joy. It allows for a dialogue with an alien, making them “intimately known,” preventing displacement of violence, refusing to brand an “intimate friend as foe.” (Olick, Perrin, p.154). Genuine mimesis allows citizens to rise above their status quo of human capital. It bursts through the boxes, it shifts the rectangles, it produces curvatures of resonance within the resistant and unyielding syntax of the Grid.

The unpredictable geometry resulting from genuine mimesis startles the agitator because it is unfit to house its projective monologue. It offsets 1,549 markers and displaces the 98 bolts of the Grid. Thus, in the space colonized by the agitator this “uncontrolled mimesis is proscribed” (Adorno, Horkheimer, p.148).

What is the ultimate goal of the agitator? Domination and absolute power are only the means. Through the “untrammelled projection” it propagates itself et infinitum, ultimately turning the “humanity's sharpened intellectual apparatus” against itself (Olick, Perrin, p,156). The projective instrument of the reason has no reason — its purpose is “purpose as such” — it is a “blind instrument of hostility“ (Olick, Perrin, p,156). It forces society to feel fear and return back to the worst kind of its primordial self — the ultimate violence. Pure violence is the telos of the Grid.

This final end is temporarily obscured by the versified instruments of the projective rhetoric of reason. The allusion of the geometric order is a prelude to the degradation and anarchy of destruction. “The paranoiac cannot stop” (Olick, Perrin, p.157), like a cancer, it will die along with the whole, having committed all violence, having destroyed the entirety of the Island, having mutilated the body — having fully projected the self.

## **Epilogue:**

This critique may appear unsettling and overly precarious in its faithfulness to the graphic nature of my personal experience. If this is the case, than I achieved my goal in generating the dialectical language aimed at unsettling the rigidity of the uncontrolled reason.

“A skillful soccer player plays the entirety of himself ... instead of merely kicking the ball.” (Pallasmaa, 2005, p.66). I played the entirety of myself, despite the discomfort, to embody a language of empirical physical reason in order to respond to Marcuse. He lamented that “as always before, the subject that has conquered matter suffers under the dead weight of his conquest” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 451). Not this time and not “his”. This time the dead matter of my body has resurrected (coincidentally belonging to me, Anastasia - trans. resurrection from the Greek).

Having arisen (thus far) I contemplate geometric variations and wonder about the Island. I wish, I could share with her this critic and my findings in dialectics, that allowed me to become the researcher, the participant, the victim, and the author of the Grid.

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