Many thought New York would never be the same when its audacious grid was planned 200 years ago. They were right.

by Kevin Fallon / CAS ’09
Outside the writer’s window, the din of construction rang as a constant distraction from his work. The newly graded street kicked up dust and gravel, and he feared that what he loved best about New York City would soon be lost to this new development. “[T]hese magnificent places are doomed,” he lamented. “The spirit of Improvement has withered them with its acrid breath.”

The writer was Edgar Allan Poe, who, in 1844, managed to compose “The Raven” in a farmhouse at what is now 84th Street and Broadway, despite the full-scale overhaul of Manhattan happening just outside his door. The grid—that sprawling series of parallel avenues running north and south and streets unfolding east and west—had arrived on what would become the Upper West Side. As it crept closer, Poe mourned the loss of the island’s natural, rugged beauty, and the homes dotting its rolling hills. “Streets are already ‘mapped’ through them, and they are no longer suburban residences, but ‘town-lots,’” he continued. The farmhouse where he sat would soon be demolished to make way for the grid.

Today the tune has changed, the grid may be the most important and ingenious planning decision in New York City’s history: Two hundred years ago, the crux of the city was crammed south of Canal Street. In 1811, commissioners Simeon De Witt, Gouverneur Morris, and John Rutherfurd announced that they would transform the overcrowded area by imposing an orderly system of roads stretching up through the island’s rural and rocky reaches, from Houston Street to what would become 155th Street.

It was a brazen undertaking, and the ensuing decades have seen further pushes: skyward, toward the water, underground, and with added flourishes, from residential plazas like Washington Square to radical additions like Central Park. The framework helped Manhattan’s population balloon from 130,000 to 1.6 million. As Mayor Michael Bloomberg has mused, “It is almost as impossible to imagine New York City without the grid plan as it is to comprehend the
behind the grid proposal.

For 50 years. He was a major force as New York State surveyor general. He was a mapmaker to George Washington during the American revolution, and the marsh was drained to make the East Village. But the city balked, aimed to consolidate wholesale food buildings, while sweeping avenues are graded and paved around them. The grid took 60 years to finish, and Poe was not the only naysayer. The project required the redrawing of property lines and many New Yorkers saw this as a ploy to steal their land, though they were eventually paid handsomely for their parcels.

According to biographer James Parton, John Jacob Astor sold a lot near Wall Street in 1810 for $8,000, and the purchaser celebrated that he would soon make a killing. As the book recounts: "'Why Mr. Astor,' said he, 'in a few years this lot will be worth twelve thousand dollars.' 'Very true,' replied Astor, but...[with] eight thousand dollars.'

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"Someone says, 'I'm at a crossroads,' and a person directionally within the city, details the character of a neighborhood, and signals whether someone needs to travel north, south, east, or west to get there. "Someone says, 'I'm at Second and Third,' "Ballon says. "How does one know where that?" Which is the avenue?" We know. We know.

For many New Yorkers, it's also how we plot our lives. Ballon's father worked on 57th Street and Fifth Avenue—she grew up in Westchester. Her first New York apartment was on Eighth and Broadway. She married her husband on 60th Street and Fifth, and her current office is on Washington Square North—which, though not an area on the original 1811 grid (it was the site of a cemetery), would eventually become part of the park.

Perhaps it's because these coordinates tell so many stories that the exhibition attracted the largest audience in the history of the museum, earning a three-month extension and only closing this past July: "I am a New Yorker," Ballon says. "You don't have to be a geometry major to love the book, praising that just as the grid "imposed a Cartesian orderliness on the city, "it's kind of like looking at those childhood pictures of your best friend, seeing what she looked like as a child. That revelation of something utterly familiar."