Introduction

LOWER MANHATTAN BROILED while Battery Park City was balmy. The contrast was evident in the tempo and temperature of the streets, sidewalks, and parks of the two adjacent neighborhoods. I pushed my daughter’s stroller along the crowded sidewalks, making my way from Lower Manhattan to Battery Park City. It was a hot May day eight months after the Trade Center attacks of 2001. The narrow streets of downtown New York City clattered with the area’s daily rhythms. Delivery trucks clogged Chambers Street, filling the air with dry exhaust. Heat reflected off the asphalt rutted by the constant passage of buses and taxis. Battery Park City was very different on days like this; a strong breeze blew off the Hudson River across the park and promenade and continued along largely traffic-free streets.

Though the two neighborhoods were intimately connected, their physical and social organization differed. Lower Manhattan, like much of the city, had long presented inequality at closer quarters, adjoining rich and poor, powerful and powerless. In the street-level mall of a bank office tower on Wall Street, bank employees hurried toward a subway entrance while heavily dressed homeless men took an air-conditioned respite at café tables. On the southern tip of Manhattan, American and foreign tourists picked their way through immigrant vendors selling New York City T-shirts, art, and souvenirs to wait under the sun for a ferry to the Statue of Liberty or Ellis Island. The heart of the Financial District, in front of the New York Stock Exchange, was preternaturally quiet behind roadblocks, security, and newly arranged concrete and steel barriers. Occasionally a trader in a color-coded suit jacket emerged from the Exchange for a cigarette. On Nassau Street, the most racially diverse street in the Financial District, workers from the surrounding financial firms, Pace University, and government buildings walked down the narrow pedestrian street, past mobile phone and jewelry stores to the lunch shops on the corners. Well below ground level at the vast World Trade Center site, construction equipment roared and beeped as it continued the slow process of clearing rubble from the site in anticipation of an ambitious redevelopment program. Each image was a reminder
that typical New York streets not only included a wide diversity of occupations, nationalities, races, and classes but also displayed substantial inequality in resources and privilege from block to block.

We rounded a corner, and the office towers and apartments of Battery Park City several blocks away came into view. The neighborhood was physically and socially organized on a different principle than the rest of Lower Manhattan. Rather than including the city’s inequality in its tableau, it was nearly entirely affluent; the poverty that was dialectically attached to that prosperity had been shunted off to neighborhoods in Harlem and the Bronx. I found that the distinctive spatial organization of inequality that had produced Battery Park City shaped the community, its people,
Top: A stylish gate from the Downtown Alliance closes Nassau Street to cars. Bottom: Shops along Nassau cater to more middle- and working-class New Yorkers than the stores of the Financial District or Battery Park City.
and beliefs. Place mattered not only in the provision of resources but in the construction of community and local politics.

Over the past forty years Battery Park City (given the name to distinguish it from, and associate it with, the venerable Battery Park just south of it) emerged as a comprehensive, state-planned development project of luxury apartments, financial sector offices, parks, stores, schools, and museums that was tucked to the side of the Financial District, stretching in the shadow of the Trade Center for a mile along Lower Manhattan’s Hudson River waterfront. The neighborhood had drawn much attention, both positive and negative. It had enjoyed accolades as a rare urban development success story thanks to its supposed use of traditional, nineteenth-century urban street plans and architectural details. At the same time, it had been criticized in the literature of postmodern urbanism for being a “citadel”—a state-subsidized, exclusive neighborhood where the global corporate elite lived and worked, a luxury planned community.\(^1\) Affordable housing was pushed to the outer edges of the city. To this controversial reputation had been added Battery Park City’s experiences on September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center towers, which were directly across West Street

In March 2002, reminders of September 11, sacred and banal, were ubiquitous in Lower Manhattan.
from both the office buildings and the largest apartments of Battery Park City, were struck by two planes. Right before residents’ eyes, the towers burned ferociously for an hour and a half and then collapsed, killing nearly three thousand, temporarily choking out the sun and air for those who had not yet fled the neighborhood, and driving shards of the towers, their dust, and human remains through the windows of Battery Park City and into every crevice of residents’ lives.

Like the ten-lane highway that separated Battery Park City from the rest of Manhattan, a wide swath divided opinions about the neighborhood’s distinctiveness. Residents cited the area’s visual beauty, its waterfront promenade and other pedestrian spaces, and its successful parks program as features they loved about the neighborhood. These aspects of Battery Park City’s physical design, by drawing residents to congregate in public spaces, fostered public social interactions and the development of strong ties among community members. The neighborhood’s isolation, both physical and socioeconomic, from the rest of New York, compounded by their shared experiences of September 11, further reinforced such ties. Yet as the urban planner Raymond Gastil accurately observed, Battery Park
City, in part because it was a wealthy neighborhood built with state subsidies, had “generated more bile from the design community than any other project in New York.” Critics and defenders often used the same descriptor to embrace or deride this residential enclave of the Financial District: that it seemed like “a suburb.”

This book is an ethnographic study of Battery Park City in the three years after the September 11 attacks, examining how residents used the rich social and physical infrastructure of the neighborhood as a basis to reestablish their community, and how in so doing they also reestablished the exclusive and privileged basis on which the community was founded. Though Battery Park City has been held up as an example of a “citadel” for a city’s global elites, I find that this image suggests an earlier model for maintaining and defending an enclave of privilege from its immediate surroundings via barricades and surveillance. It is less prevalent today than what I call the “suburban strategy,” which separates different social and racial groups by vast distances through programs of large-scale relocation and redevelopment. And while earlier critiques identified the role of corporate and government elites in shaping exclusive enclaves, the interplay of the community and the spatial organization of this elite neighborhood creates an even more dedicated group of advocates for exclusivity: residents. I find that the exclusive space of Battery Park City interacts with the neighborhood’s socioeconomic profile to influence residents’ definition of the community, their positions on local issues, and their relations with people outside their community. This project contributes to the growing movement in sociology that recognizes space as a revealing product and producer of social relations and brings to critiques of the global city a detailed ethnographic account of the effects of exclusive urban spaces on community. The suburban strategy that Battery Park City represents is a paradigm of contemporary spatial organization in the service of segregation. Nonetheless, by understanding Battery Park City’s spatial and social form we can see the potential to use urban space as the foundation of more inclusive and egalitarian social organization.

Entering Battery Park City

I eased the stroller down and up curbs. As my daughter and I headed toward Battery Park City, the neighborhood was still struggling to regain its footing, transformed into a staging ground for the recovery effort next door
and cluttered with temporary power lines, tired rescue workers, improvised memorials, debris-filled barges, and still-boarded-up windows. But amid this disorder, residents were already trying to rebuild their neighborhood, physically and socially. Battery Park City’s public spaces had long been widely criticized as historicist imitations of real urban parks and street life. But they would play a central role in the social processes that would unfold during the years of redevelopment planning. I had first researched Battery Park City two years before the Trade Center attacks to understand the workings of an upscale neighborhood with a reputation for seclusion, and to grasp how the design of exclusive public spaces shaped the social interactions that went on within them. I returned in the months after September 11 to conduct an ethnography of Battery Park City’s public spaces, both to assess the original critique of Battery Park City as an ineffective imitation of real public space and a symbol of the stratified global city, and to observe how residents in this affluent neighborhood struggled to recreate a viable and hopefully vibrant community in the wake of considerable destruction. For the next three years I followed intense debate and planning by residents, community groups, local government, and real estate interests over the redevelopment of Battery Park City and Lower Manhattan. I interviewed private residents and community leaders, and attended meetings of the Community Board, local groups, and agencies related to the area’s redevelopment. In the ensuing years I continued to follow up regularly. In observing the community, its political priorities, and its self-conception, I recognized a reciprocal relationship between the spaces and the people of Battery Park City as each reproduced elite social relationships by molding the other. The outcome of that spatial-social relationship was a distinctive neighborhood strong enough not only to recover after a devastating tragedy but also to serve as a model of spatial and social exclusion, catalyzing further development along the same lines and reshaping the entire city. To understand the interplay of public space and community, then, I was taking my daughter to the playground; Battery Park City has some of the best in New York City.

Before we reached Battery Park City, however, we had to walk past the World Trade Center site, which remained freighted with emotion. Construction workers and firefighters filed in and out. From across the street, I could see the staging area packed with stored equipment and construction trailers. Hundreds of visitors spread out along the construction fences to seek out views. What they saw was anticlimactic: everyone had come to see something that wasn’t there. Still needing a souvenir of towers that no
Top: The popular waterfront playground in Rockefeller Park, in the northern half of Battery Park City. Bottom: “Pumphouse Playground,” named for the World Trade Center water intake pumps beneath it, provided play space in between the World Financial Center (in background, left) and Gateway Plaza (right). It has since been renovated.
longer existed, visitors faced each other on the busy sidewalk and, at the moment a gap opened up in the stream of pedestrians pushing past them, snapped pictures of each other standing in front of open sky.

I could not pass the site easily. Whenever it came into view I felt a wash of emotions: sadness, which seemed maudlin on a sunny day, and embarrassment or guilt over that remorse. Beneath that, frustration, grief, and anger over what had happened. And always, always, a tone, beneath that, of reverence that New Yorkers instinctively felt toward the people who were—here the jingoists have the term right—heroes that day. Having read heartbreaking obituaries of parents who would never see their children again, and accounts of employees who had given their lives to help coworkers, I thought of them, too, but I always thought of the firefighters, whole squads of firefighters who had died. I don’t know how long it was before I could see firefighters without tearing up, even in the most banal setting, as when they would pull a truck up and all get out, half in their bunker gear, to shop at my local grocery store. On the southern edge of the Trade Center site, along Liberty Street, not only were firefighters assisting in the recovery effort but more firefighters were standing outside the renovated Ten

Break dancers practice in the park near Stuyvesant High School, the city’s pre-eminent high school.
House, the fire station that had been destroyed in the collapse and was now a stop on visitors’ pilgrimage around the Trade Center. Walking past the site when I had somewhere else to go was a fraught process of trying to pass slowly enough to pay due respects, slowing down a bit more to gawk guiltily at the destruction or the progress of the cleanup, and hurrying up to avoid either seeming ghoulish or letting the emotion and tragedy of the place soak in so deep as to suck the wind out of me and demand that I detour from my trip to stop, take a deep breath, reflect on the events I had already reflected on too many times, and start walking again.

To get to Battery Park City after exiting a subway stop not far from the Trade Center site, I walked down Liberty Street toward the rickety steel steps of one of the Trade Center’s restored pedestrian bridges, which crossed the daunting highway called West Street. Battery Park City lay on the other side. The windows of the enclosed pedestrian bridge provided the clearest view of the Trade Center site, and visitors, tourists, local employees, and others stood looking out. From there we could see heavy construction equipment, indistinct far below us, removing beams, concrete, and debris. Yet even the void itself lacked visual drama equivalent to what had happened there: although, as press accounts often explained, the pit went down a full six stories below ground to bedrock, the site was so big—several city blocks in each direction—that it didn’t look particularly deep, and one could only partially estimate the scale of each floor by seeing workers or vehicles all the way at the bottom or by counting the floors from the remnants of I-beam framework at the edges of the site. There was never any satisfaction to be had in visiting the site. From that view it was evident that cleanup was nearly complete, but the private and public developers overseeing the project expected that construction would continue for a decade or more.

Across the bridge in Battery Park City the pace was more relaxed, but few people took up the challenge of finding a way from Lower Manhattan across the broad lanes and fast-moving traffic of West Street. The few crosswalks on West Street were so long that the lights left people stranded halfway across the highway-sized road; others were stymied by the pedestrian bridges’ elevators, which rose so slowly most people assumed they were broken.

The difficulty in reaching Battery Park City meant that it remained significantly apart from the rest of Lower Manhattan, even when tourists were crowded just across the street around the World Trade Center. Battery Park City’s seven thousand luxury high-rise apartment units therefore sat
in comparative serenity on the waterfront. The neighborhood’s brick- and stone-clad rentals and condominiums were situated around exceptionally well-tended parks and public spaces. On entering, one immediately felt that Battery Park City was quieter, cooler, and cleaner than the rest of Lower Manhattan. The wind was still warm but made the air bearable in the tree-lined waterfront parks. Taxis dropped people off and trucks came and went, but less traffic made its way through the area, which had no streets that led anywhere else. Abundant parkland, trees, covered promenades, and air-conditioned mall walkways made passage through the neighborhood more leisurely than in the rest of Downtown.

Nearly every household was connected to New York’s “FIRE” economy (Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate). The parks and promenades were not just for recreation but were part of people’s daily commutes. In most households, at least one person walked to a high-paying job in the Financial District. Ninety percent of men, and over 80 percent of women, worked in business, management, finance, the professions, or sales. Before the September 11, 2001 attacks, about one in five households made a quarter-million dollars a year or more. While the median household income was $41,994 in the United States and $38,293 in New York City, in Battery Park City it was $107,611. (The average family income was over $192,000.) Over half of households benefited from investment income, compared to a third of households in the United States, while only 15 households out of 4,452 received public assistance, less than a tenth the percentage in the nation as a whole. The high wages were in large part accounted for by Battery Park City’s proximity to Wall Street, and 20 percent of adult residents worked in the World Financial Center right in Battery Park City. Seventy-five percent of adults in Battery Park City had at least a college degree (compared to 25 percent of all Americans and 50 percent of all Manhattanites), and 42 percent had some form of postgraduate education. Business and professional degrees were particularly well represented, even in comparison to other wealthy neighborhoods nearby, like Tribeca. A small number of moderate-income people lived in apartment buildings whose landlords took advantage of a mortgage tax credit program that required them to provide a small percentage of their apartments to moderate-income New Yorkers. But as the census figures bear out, the community was overwhelmingly one of well-educated, well-employed, wealthy households sustained by the financial industry.

Just as Americans often normalize their specific economic position, so many white Americans in particular normalize the segregation of the
communities in which most Americans live. And like most white communities, Battery Park City is racially exclusive. In 1999 New York City was 35 percent white, 27 percent Latino, 25 percent African American, and 10 percent Asian. Battery Park City’s 7,951 residents were 75 percent white, 18 percent Asian, 5 percent Latino, and 3 percent African American. (The places that Latinos and Asians in Battery Park City identified as their family’s origins were largely the same places as those identified by the other Latino and Asian inhabitants of New York: China, India, Japan, and Korea for Asians, and Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia for Latinos. However, countries with large working-class immigrant communities in the city, like the Dominican Republic and the Philippines, were comparatively underrepresented.) Considering racial exclusivity in terms of black residents, the fact that only three in every hundred residents were African Americans was not simply a result of Battery Park City being a wealthy community and African Americans being underrepresented among the wealthy. Citywide, 7 percent of households in the top income bracket (over $200,000) were African American, and nationwide 4 percent were. But in Battery Park City only 2 percent of households making over $200,000 were African American. In virtually every income bracket African Americans were underrepresented in Battery Park City, whether in comparison to the same bracket in New York City as a whole or to the same bracket in the nation (table I.1).

Of course, the disruption of September 11, 2001 altered the population of Battery Park City substantially: several people who knew the neighborhood well estimated that half of all residents had moved out in the next two years, an estimate corroborated by surveys that found building vacancy rates of 25 to 75 percent in the year after the attacks. The impact of September 11 was difficult to quantify further, however, because as a young, mobile population the community already had a relatively high turnover rate. The fact that only the decennial census provided data at the level of a single community stymied researchers’ attempts to quantitatively compare populations before and immediately after September 11. On the basis of my qualitative research on Battery Park City, I found that the first new residents after September 11 did tend to be younger. Some were attracted, at least in part, by temporarily more affordable rents, but moving to Lower Manhattan at that time still required a serious commitment. (Some longer-term residents saw it as opportunistic that newcomers benefited from subsidies offered by the government.) But the neighborhood’s demographic profile did not appear to be permanently altered by changes after September 11,
2001. When rental subsidies expired two years later, rents remained high, and the neighborhood continued to be extremely expensive.\textsuperscript{12}

Entering Battery Park City meant entering a world very different from the rest of Manhattan. Built on landfill that had covered over the docks along this stretch of the Hudson, Battery Park City physically embodied the ascendance of the financial industry over New York’s history as an economically diverse, working-class port city.\textsuperscript{13}

Battery Park City also reflected how the financial industry had gained dominance not by private market power alone but by public financial assistance. It had been conceived in the early 1960s by banking elites who, in hopes of shoring up their position in the Financial District, had convinced government officials to finance the planning and initial construction of a project that would become a home for both major corporations and the managers and executives who worked in them. Observers had noted that

\begin{table}[h]
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Tract & Median Household Income ($) & % Black & Total Population & % White & Location \\
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9 & 105,456 & 5.9 & 1,111 & 74.6 & Downtown (Exchange Pl.–South St.) \\
145 & 102,582 & 4.0 & 4,411 & 78.0 & Columbus Circle (58th–62nd Sts. to 10th Ave.) \\
69 & 128,295 & 3.1 & 2,341 & 87.6 & Greenwich Village (Houston–Christopher Sts.) \\
317.01 & 107,611 & 3.0 & 7,951 & 75.0 & Battery Park City \\
21 & 128,384 & 2.8 & 2,407 & 78.1 & Tribeca (Vesey–Reade Sts.), Broadway to West \\
167 & 93,335 & 2.3 & 6937 & 89.5 & Upper West Side (78th–82nd Sts.) \\
149 & 96,588 & 2.3 & 5956 & 86.5 & Upper West Side (62nd–66th Sts.) \\
153 & 94,583 & 2.0 & 9040 & 88.3 & Upper West Side (66th–70th Sts.) \\
33 & 113,332 & 1.9 & 3,696 & 86.5 & Tribeca (Hudson and Broadway) \\
120 & 115,430 & 1.9 & 3,965 & 92.8 & Upper East Side (53rd–70th Sts.) \\
158.01 & 92,940 & 1.8 & 5804 & 90.3 & Upper East Side (91st–96th Sts.) \\
86 & 110,330 & 1.7 & 7,267 & 83.2 & United Nations (Tudor City, 33rd–53rd Sts.) \\
57 & 97,765 & 1.3 & 2535 & 88.9 & Greenwich Village (48th–10th Sts.) \\
122 & 105,573 & 1.1 & 3,914 & 94.4 & Upper East Side (63rd–70th Sts.) \\
114.01 & 105,107 & 0.9 & 1,484 & 94.5 & Upper East Side (59th–63rd Sts.) \\
160.01 & 152,728 & 0.9 & 4172 & 94.5 & Upper East Side (91st–96th Sts.) \\
140 & 97,450 & 0.8 & 7754 & 93.3 & Upper East Side (77th–84th Sts.) \\
128 & 109,336 & 0.7 & 6,639 & 94.6 & Upper East Side (70th–77th Sts., Park–3rd Ave.) \\
106.01 & 102,149 & 0.6 & 7,968 & 94.4 & Upper East Side (54th–59th Sts., 1st Ave.–East River) \\
142 & 145,979 & 0.5 & 4980 & 94.8 & Upper East Side (5th Ave.–Park, 77th–84th Sts.) \\
150.01 & 127,126 & 0.4 & 2,247 & 95.1 & Upper East Side (5th Ave.–Park, 84th–86th Sts.) \\
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\caption{Median Household Income and % Total Population of Tracts Compared to Battery Park City} \\
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African Americans are underrepresented in Battery Park City by any measure. Even so, compared to the twenty Manhattan census tracts with the most similar median household incomes, Battery Park City ranks near the top for percent black and has virtually the smallest percentage of whites. \textit{Source:} 2000 Census.
The Financial City buries the Industrial City: 1971 plans by the Army Corps of Engineers show construction of part of Battery Park City from landfill from the World Trade Center. North of the landfill, new land is created by the building of a deck over the Hudson River PATH train tunnels. North of that, outlines of the existing piers are shown. The size of the neighborhood was determined by the length of the piers, as shown by the border of the U.S. Pierhead line. (Army Corps of Engineers, Battery Park City Authority. Hudson River, New York. November 15, 1971 [Springfield, VA: National Technical Information Service, 1971])
it was something previously thought to be an oxymoron: welfare for the wealthy, a state-subsidized luxury housing project. To maintain this privileged situation, the state first financed the project, then structured local taxation to exempt residents from regular property taxes but provide lavish funding to maintain the neighborhood. New York State retained tight control over the neighborhood by establishing for Battery Park City its own separate zoning regulations and tax revenues and by retaining ownership of the land, carefully vetting the developers it hired to build there, and leasing lots gradually enough (over thirty years) to allow only buildings constructed for New York’s comparatively small luxury market. Since the neighborhood’s inception, critics had been outraged at this oasis of wealth, state largesse, and unique private privilege and public oversight that ignored pressing needs elsewhere in the city, and they were frustrated that state officials bestowed on the already-wealthy Battery Park City privileges that no other neighborhood enjoyed.

Since Battery Park City’s creation, scholars who have critiqued “global” cities like New York, London, or Los Angeles as strategic locations for the global concentration of wealth and power created under contemporary capitalism have pointed to the neighborhood as the preeminent example of a “citadel.” The term evokes medieval Europe, where a citadel was a fortified stronghold that could command the surrounding city, and today refers to a physically and symbolically defended enclave in which managers of global capitalism—those that oversee its “command and control” functions—live, work, and play. As a redoubt for corporate power and a barrier to democratic interaction, citadels like Battery Park City are often rhetorically and literally at the center of critiques of global capitalist cities.

The classification of Battery Park City as a citadel draws on the “citadel and ghetto” typology of John Friedmann and Goetz Wolff’s pathbreaking writing on “world cities.” Elements of their description of a citadel are reflected clearly in Battery Park City: “With its towers of steel and glass and its fanciful shopping malls, the citadel is the city’s most vulnerable symbol. Its smooth surfaces suggest the sleek impersonality of money power. Its interior spaces are ample, elegant, and plush. In appropriately secluded spaces, the transnational elites have built their residences and playgrounds.” The citadel is a concentrated enclave defended by private security forces, physical barriers, and economic and racial exclusion. The ghetto presses against its borders. A product of the “inequality and class domination” of globalization, citadels are designed to host the functions, residences, and recreation of the class that manages the global economy. This dialectic of a
bifurcated city has become a recurring theme in writing about global cities. Both Saskia Sassen and Manuel Castells, for instance, see elites’ creation of segregated residential areas as a defining element of the new global, or informational, city. Mike Davis has concluded that citadel elites wage class warfare against ghetto residents primarily through their physical restructuring of the contemporary city. Sharon Zukin has argued that property rights, rents, zoning laws, transport systems, and symbolic systems of control are used to create central locations in cities that are themselves spatial reflections of the market economy.

The primary means of entering this citadel have been the pedestrian bridges over West Street. Initially they connected Battery Park City directly to the World Trade Center. In the years since September 11, pedestrians have unceremoniously entered one reconfigured bridge (eventually, two new bridges) from the streets surrounding the Trade Center construction site. The pedestrian bridge that my daughter and I crossed on that day in 2002 led to the World Financial Center, which occupied the middle of Battery Park City. The World Financial Center was the economic core, even if not the social center, of the residential community that flanked it to the north and south. Before September 11, the managers of global capitalism had worked inside its four connected towers (plus the New York Mercantile Exchange building next door). Some of the buildings were occupied again, and all would eventually reopen. The World Financial Center, a contradictory mix of granite opulence and shopping mall–style normality, was one of the “command-and-control centers” described almost mythically in critiques of the global city. People whom the author Tom Wolfe famously dubbed the “Masters of the Universe” worked here in the large offices of companies like Merrill Lynch, American Express, and (before its spectacular bankruptcy) Lehman Brothers.

I had conducted field observations in the public spaces of the mall and its outdoor space in 1999, when the Trade Center still towered over Battery Park City. At the time, the towers were connected by the Winter Garden Mall, a luxurious if underused shopping mall whose major function was to provide a range of themed lunch options to the office workers upstairs. The west sides of the buildings faced the North Cove Marina, and the open-air seating of restaurants on the ground floor gave the financial workers a view of the water at lunch and dinner. Beyond the restaurant tables were chess sets on outdoor tables to allow lunchtime games. In the mix of office workers, men outnumbered women. People sauntering down the waterfront promenade and through the pristinely maintained parks set a breezier
tempo here than in the rest of Lower Manhattan. Their conversations were thick with references to financing, planned credit card promotions, “financial officers,” and “IPOs.” “Concierge just means ‘janitor’ in French,” one well-dressed man explained to another.

The World Financial Center exemplified the contradictory nature of Battery Park City in the years after September 11: the epitome of corporate power, in 2002 much of it remained seriously damaged and unusable. One manager at a consulting firm that had employed three thousand people at the World Financial Center before September 11 described the scene when he returned to oversee a small group of employees from the firm who salvaged documents, materials, and employees’ personal effects from the office a week after September 11. “It looked like a war zone. Unbelievable. There were no windows. The destruction that was in the space—it was very, very sad.” In the beginning they worked in the dark. “There was no electricity. No running water . . . Some of the things were on the thirty-seventh floor, and no elevators. You really didn’t even have security.” He remembered seeing the bodies of firefighters pulled from the rubble of the Winter Garden. Working in the shell of the building was difficult. “For the first six months I came here, I kept feeling like I was coming back to a different location, and eventually I’d be able to come back to my location where the Trade Center was at and where my buildings were at . . . Everything was so turned upside down.” In a place that was (before and after September 11) synonymous with luxurious corporate power, employees, construction workers, and rescue workers encountered a landscape of destruction during the months and years of recovery work.

From a part of the World Financial Center that was already reopened, I walked to the adjoining North Cove Marina. The docks in the marina had been a showplace for the largest yachts in New York Harbor, luxury boats registered in the Caribbean that prominently carried small submarines, mock helicopters, and other vehicles on their decks. Those ships were no longer in the marina, a result of both Battery Park City’s widespread disruption and the marina’s leasing difficulties. But some large sailboats, as well as smaller ones used for sailing classes, had refilled the North Cove. The portable volleyball court, damaged by heavy equipment during rescue and recovery, was once again being used by nearby office workers. At the south edge of the marina, a temporary memorial to fire, police, and other emergency service workers attracted a small but steady audience to a white tent under which people pinned pictures, notes, and mementos. To the east side of the marina, joining two towers of the World Financial Center, was
the arched glass-roofed enclosure of the Winter Garden Mall. By the first anniversary of September 11 it would reopen and once again be a tightly controlled, palm tree–shaded oasis whose glass walls and security guards kept out bad weather and homeless people while welcoming shoppers, office workers, and mothers and babysitters looking for a place to bring the infants they cared for. But in the spring of 2002 it remained closed after the interior was partially buried by the collapsing North Tower of the Trade Center.

Though the mall was closed, other neighborhood stores had already reopened. The grocery store, Chinese restaurant, nail salon, and others were back in business. And the “multiethnic managers of the global economy” I had observed in 1999 were eating lunch once again at the open tables of restaurants around the marina, their conversations once again focused on financial products and corporate strategies. By day, these office workers in open-necked dress shirts and khaki pants seemed harmless enough. But one night during my research I saw a dozen of them led out in handcuffs for currency fraud.19
Frequent visits to such a site can lend a sense of the “ordinary” to physical concentrations of economic power that are not ordinary at all. Hannah Arendt has commented on the banality of the face of evil, and for me, an avowed anticapitalist (though one who had paid the bills with more than a few temp assignments in offices much like these), a location like the World Financial Center was simultaneously damningly opulent and disarmingly mundane.

Exclusion by Design

There have been few in-depth studies of Battery Park City. The most provocative claims about its citadel effects are found in works that hold it up as representative of a larger trend in cities or capitalism. First, critics have linked Battery Park City’s physical exclusion to its economic exclusivity. The novelist and commentator Phillip Lopate, for instance, has related the neighborhood’s elite status to the exclusionary effects of its spatial organization: “How public is public space, when it has been embedded in a context that raises such formidable social barriers that the masses of ordinary working people (not to mention those out of work) would feel uncomfortable entering it? How many poor families may be expected to cross the raised bridge into that citadel of wealth, the World Financial Center, and wander through the privileged enclaves of South End Avenue and Rector Place before reaching their permitted perch along the waterfront?” Lopate found that Battery Park City excluded poor families in two concurrent ways: by pricing them out of the neighborhood and by encircling it with a moat that one could cross only by challenging the ramparts of wealth and privilege. Economic and physical exclusion went hand in hand.

Other critics take this argument further by linking the class exclusivity and spatial exclusivity to a larger, intentional restructuring of space in the service of an increasingly harsh global capitalism. In M. Christine Boyer’s account, for example,

The traveler is blocked from the river by streams of roaring traffic on West Street or arrested in the subterranean maze of the massive platform that serves as the base for the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Just beyond reach, jutting out from the Hudson River waterfront, lies the new development called Battery Park City. The pedestrian is really not welcomed to this new public space, for she or he has to painstakingly and cautiously
cross lanes of highway traffic with no obvious point of entry in sight. . . . Battery Park City stands as yet another isolated city tableau in the contemporary game of spatial restructuring.22

Francis Russell similarly concludes that the physical barriers to Battery Park City were designed in the master plan to create a protected, elite neighborhood. “The physical isolation of Battery Park City from the rest of Lower Manhattan, its uniformity of appeal, and its economic exclusivity all work to remove its occupants from any meaningful contact with the adjacent authentic urban experiences. This can only be seen as intended and expedited by the development controls.”23 For Russell, Battery Park City’s carefully designed exclusivity was too artificial for the neighborhood to be an organic, authentic part of the city.

Russell, like many other critics of Battery Park City, concludes that the neighborhood’s high rents, its physical isolation from the city, and its residents’ presumed social isolation must all equally reflect developers’ exclusionary preferences. Similarly, for Boyer, elites both created a wealthy community and isolated it for the same purpose: to restructure the city to serve the demands of postmodern capitalism.

Battery Park City, in these views, is much more than a wealthy neighborhood. Because it was built to house the wealthy, it was made into a filtered space that would allow access only for the privileged, a space carefully designed as a defensible garrison from which to direct global capital, but one that revealed the ruling class as ultimately too insulated to engage in the real life of the city. Sympathetic as I was to these views when I first entered Battery Park City, I soon found that while elements of exclusivity were real, the community was far more engaged, complex, and promising than any of these critiques allowed.

In recent years, urban sociologists have studied the spaces in which social processes play out to better understand social phenomena.24 But the most influential research on space has sprung from architectural critiques presuming that physical space reflects social relations in clear, legible ways: physically exclusive spaces produce social exclusion, whereas open designs create a more democratic polity. In this view, a building’s facade alone can legibly communicate the intent of its owners or the social conditions of its creation.25 Likewise, a physical barrier like West Street would be evidence of elites’ desire to establish a barrier. But the city is not a text. If it were, the building facades alone would contain enough information to reveal the purpose of the built environment. Instead, understanding the meaning
of the built environment requires an examination that combines the text with context, the façade with the actual history of its design and construction. Then the relationship between space and the people who inhabit it becomes evident.

Continuing our walk, my daughter and I moved north from the office towers and shopping mall of the center of Battery Park City. Residential neighborhoods of high-rises occupied the spaces both north and south of the World Financial Center. The apartments were built to design standards so exacting that a Battery Park City official had to approve the color of each order of bricks. Those standards ensured that, to someone walking along the quiet streets, the buildings would look much like the late nineteenth-century luxury apartment buildings of the Upper West and Upper East Side neighborhoods of Manhattan. The newest building guidelines established standards for environmental sustainability, so in the North neighborhood we could see the city’s first “green” apartment building under construction. Called the Solaire, it was a luxury project due to include not just solar panels on the sides but bamboo floors, low-odor paint, a “green roof” with gardens to catch rainwater, and a second set of water pipes to use recycled water in toilets. Just across the street from the construction site for the green building, in Governor Nelson Rockefeller Park, which ran along the edge of the river, was the largest and most popular of the neighborhood’s three playgrounds.

The playground put on public view both the long-standing stratification in Battery Park City and new anxieties. My daughter and I entered through the steel gates. It was crowded, as it was most days. Nannies, mostly black women who had emigrated from “the Islands” of the Caribbean, sat in the shade of a trellised seating area at one end, feeding infants in eight-hundred-dollar strollers, or stood near the sandbox playing with their charges. A white college-aged woman hired to care for children, her blonde hair pulled neatly back, interacted little with other nannies or with parents, though she was often mistaken for a parent herself. Stylish and casually dressed mothers and a few fathers moved around the playground, playing with their kids and talking with neighbors. I regularly brought my own daughter here so that she could play and I could catch up with people I knew in the neighborhood. I had recently joined a larger research project of the Russell Sage Foundation on the effects of September 11 by submitting a grant proposal for what I hoped would be an effective example of research multitasking: a study of Battery Park City’s public space that would begin by my taking my
one-and-a-half-year-old daughter to the playground and simultaneously gaining entrée with parents and other residents. I hoped the project would allow me to do field research even though I didn’t have child care. Experience elsewhere had already taught me that parents were much more comfortable starting up conversations with each other than with other strangers in a park.

As it turned out, the playground was revealing, even though in the spring of 2002 many residents did not socialize as easily as I had expected. The mood was lighthearted, but the shadow of September 11 could flit faintly across the sky at unexpected moments. I exchanged greetings with a young mother who had attended a recent Community Board meeting. She worried about the health risks of the exhaust from the ferries that docked within sight of the playground. Two other mothers stood by the sandbox discussing their workout routines, which included personal trainers and combinations of different styles of yoga, then went on to talk about their children’s food allergies. Just as they neared the subject of asthma and environmental allergies, there was a break in the conversation. There was plenty in the busy park to distract them. But there were also worries about ongoing contamination of apartments in the neighborhood from the toxins and heavy metals blown into homes on September 11, and those parents who had already decided it was safe to move their families back into Battery Park City generally steered their conversations away from that topic. Shadows of September 11 appeared again when a gray, low-flying military helicopter zoomed along the same Hudson River flight path taken by the planes that morning the previous September, and parents turned their heads to see what was causing the noise, attempting the casualness of people who don’t want to be caught looking at their watches to see how late it has gotten. A four-year-old playing nearby began talking to my daughter, and then to me. “I used to live in Battery Park City,” he informed me, “but now we live on Abbey Street.” Many families who had moved away after September 11, either because their apartments were uninhabitable for months or because they no longer felt safe living in Battery Park City, returned to the playground to meet up with friends from their former neighborhood, comparing life in the city to the suburbs, or praising their new Brooklyn neighborhood. Socializing in the playground was hardly child’s play. Parents had to navigate their conversations around topics like environmental risks that might offend other parents, avoid commenting on anxiety-provoking aircraft so as not to sound overly anxious, or explain their move out of town
without sounding defensive or critical of others who had stayed. The children had fun, but parents had to be cautious.

Evidence of Battery Park City’s affluence showed up not only in its landscapes but also in its special resources for children. The park house just past the playground was so well stocked it would be the envy of any other park in the city. Staff invited children to play table hockey or borrow balls and toys. On the grass, toddlers pushed and climbed foam-rubber blocks as big as themselves. A rack offered parents picture books to read to their children. The ones in Spanish went largely unused. Beyond the park house, students from nearby Stuyvesant High School, the city’s preeminent magnet school, lounged in small groups and played in the handball courts.

After lunch in the playground, we packed our things back in the stroller and headed home, taking a long walk down the waterfront promenade that ran the length of Battery Park City along the Hudson River, to see what was happening in the always-active neighborhood, and to observe the latest physical changes to a place that would still be in the process of restoration more than a year after September 11.

As I left the neighborhood at the end of my visit, the rest of the city felt simultaneously more difficult and more welcoming. I always enjoyed visiting Battery Park City but liked it most when I brought friends there. There was a particular satisfaction in introducing the neighborhood to newcomers who didn’t know about the riches it concealed. At the end of most visits, it was hard to leave the soothing calm of landscaped gardens and tree-shaded walkways. Trading the sounds of sailboats clinking in the marina for a subway car banging into the nearest station was a jarring transition. But the train and its passengers were a welcome connection to a much larger city.

Overview

Several themes evolve over the course of this book. At the most general level, this project examines how elites initially shape space and how people and place then reciprocally affect each other. The suburban strategy ultimately employed in Battery Park City fostered spatial segregation and a vibrant exclusivity. These features set the stage for the neighborhood’s approach to recovery after the devastation of September 11, when residents made intensive use of the neighborhood’s public spaces and organized to reproduce the spatial exclusion that shaped their community. Each chapter examines a cycle of the reciprocal relationship between Battery Park City’s
people and the space that they collectively occupy, and considers the social implications of suburban space in the global city.

Chapter 1 examines the urban planning history that led to the creation of Battery Park City to show how the exclusive plans that elites endorsed for urban development have evolved over the past fifty years. The sequence of plans reflects the changing social context in which they were designed, and thus indicates how physical design, when studied alongside debates from that period and the broader historical context, can illustrate the vision of the city held at a particular point in history by the coalition of prodevelopment interests that the urban scholars John Logan and Harvey Molotch call the “growth machine.” In particular, the history of plans for Battery Park City reveals four consecutive stages in elites’ attitudes toward New York that are reflected in New York’s public spaces and elites’ projects. The earliest plans reflect Battery Park City’s working-class origins, but that history was soon eclipsed by plans to privatize, then filter, and finally suburbanize the neighborhood’s design. Each stage reflects elites’ shifting views of the city: first as a place of disorder from which they needed to defend themselves, then as a site that could be selectively gentrified, then as a city that could be recolonized on a large scale. At each turn Battery Park City, its plans, and its public spaces give early indication of these evolving approaches to elite urban planning.

Battery Park City’s planning history also explains how the forces of global capitalism created particular physical forms in global cities. Just as important, it lays out the historical contingencies that shaped the contemporary neighborhood. Strangely, Battery Park City long had a reputation for lacking history. In 1989, journalist Richard Shepard noted urbanists’ complaint that Battery Park City was a simulated neighborhood because (in contrast, for instance, to the storied past of monument-rich Battery Park) it lacked any real history of its own. Shepard sought to present the blank slate that so troubled postmodern critics as an asset. “What’s exciting about this landfill is that history is just beginning.” In fact, as chapter 1 demonstrates, by the time ground was broken for the first building, Battery Park City already had a long and contentious history.

The outcome of these plans—a demographically exclusive place with distinct but less extreme spatial exclusivity—accounts for what I describe as “vibrant exclusivity.” Battery Park City demonstrates the importance of histories of social conflict in shaping space and provides a framework for understanding how the design of a neighborhood’s space shapes the community that occupies it.
The history of elite plans for Battery Park City that I examine in chapter 1 also reveals the first stage of a reciprocal relationship between space and social relations that runs through the book. The reciprocal relationship is a cyclic one in which people shape space, then space shapes people, and then people shape space again, so that space is constituted by social actors seeking to reproduce their own particular social position, and the space then reproduces and constitutes social relationships that take place within it, setting the stage for a new round of social actors to attempt to mold space once more to reflect their social position. Thus, in this first stage of the reciprocal relationship, elite Downtown actors sought to shape the area that would become Battery Park City into a space that would reinforce the privilege and objectives of the executives in the Downtown-based financial industry. Actors were intuitively aware of this relationship and therefore hoped that their shaping space would allow them to reproduce the particular relationships of social privilege of which they were beneficiaries.

Chapter 2 continues the examination of the suburban strategy that shaped Battery Park City, using ethnography’s extended-place method both to identify the major privileges bestowed on the neighborhood and to assess the contributions Battery Park City has returned to the broader city. An examination of New Settlement Apartments, Battery Park City’s “twin” project in a low-income neighborhood in the Bronx, presents the shortcomings of assumptions that state-sponsored luxury projects can adequately contribute to the larger community. While the financial advantages Battery Park City has enjoyed have been real and substantial (including its ability to get city services without paying taxes and to put its property assessments into local projects rather than city coffers), the much-touted public benefits of Battery Park City for the rest of the city (particularly the plan to use surplus Battery Park City revenue to fund affordable housing...
elsewhere) have been largely illusory and have even reinforced racial and economic segregation. The special privileges that accrue to Battery Park City residents are significant because subsequent chapters show how these privileges interacted with the neighborhood’s spatial organization in such a way that residents defined their community through exclusion.

Chapter 3 looks at residents’ opinions about their neighborhood to document the ways in which they have developed an exclusive attitude toward the community, outsiders, and the relationship between Battery Park City and the city beyond. This attitude turns out to be the product of both the privileges of the neighborhood and the spatial organization of the place, so that programmatic elements and design elements contribute to the socially shared conception residents have of their community. In particular, the protection of privilege and definition of the neighborhood by physical boundaries leads to a spatial definition of community, a particular way of defining community that reflects both space and social position.

While earlier critiques of the global citadel have blamed the machinations of global forces and anonymous planners for constructing an enclave for the global elite, this chapter demonstrates how residents become highly invested in reproducing their citadel’s exclusivity. Residents, while working hard to create their community, not only explicitly defined their neighborhood as secluded and exclusive but played an important and previously unrecognized role in preserving Battery Park City’s isolation. In this way, the reciprocal relationship has continued as residents are shaped by the isolation of their community and define their community in exclusive terms.

The collapse of the World Trade Center towers showered debris onto Battery Park City and forced the evacuation of the neighborhood. Chapter 4 examines how residents recovered from the devastation of their social community and their physical surroundings. More than any other community, Battery Park City residents experienced the attacks of September 11 as a prolonged dislocation of their normal lives. The collapse of the towers literally cut them off from the rest of the world. While this made life in Battery Park City practically and psychically more difficult, it demonstrated how the unintentional creation of isolated, “community-only” space actually facilitated residents’ recovery, for they relied on the shared spaces as places where they could socialize, talk over the trauma with others who had experienced it, and rebuild the community networks that had been disrupted by the attacks. In this way, community space, though less accessible and less public, proved immensely valuable to the people who lived there. The contested nature of public space that a community claims as its own
remains evident, however: the sense of a community united against outside threats simultaneously set the stage for conflicts between residents and the rest of the city as recovery and redevelopment plans progressed.

Chapter 5 examines some of those conflicts within Battery Park City as residents approached the one-year anniversary of September 11. Residents were concerned about the way it would bring outsiders—whom they called “tourists”—into their enclave. Their opposition to a public role for Battery Park City after September 11 was likewise on display in their opposition to a series of memorials in Battery Park City. In both cases, residents’ anxieties about changes to the neighborhood and its use by a larger public were experienced and expressed spatially.

In chapter 6, the reciprocal relationship comes full circle: people shaped the space, then the space shaped residents, and now residents work to shape the space anew. Initially, elites conceived of the neighborhood as an exclusive citadel. Then the neighborhood’s spaces contributed an exclusive perspective to residents’ definition of their community. Finally, during debates over Trade Center redevelopment, residents sought to reproduce that spatial exclusivity by endorsing redevelopment plans that would ensure another generation of physically exclusive designs. After state agencies unveiled plans that would have made the thoroughfare that separated the neighborhood from the rest of the city less of a barrier, residents banded together to oppose the changes. Soon after, they lobbied to build a bus parking garage on top of the footprints of the Twin Towers in order to keep visitors and their buses out of Battery Park City. Ultimately, residents sought not to eliminate nuisances like the parking garage and the highway but to strategically deploy them, right in their backyard, to achieve exclusive community objectives. This approach to space reflected not a NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) approach to nuisances, but DIMBY (Definitely in My Back Yard), in which residents mobilized in favor of disruptive urban elements because (as described by the reciprocal relationship) those structures could be used to concretely reproduce existing exclusive social relationships. The positions residents took on both issues can be understood only with an appreciation of the social contribution that space made to the community, demonstrating the need to consider the role of space in the study of community conflicts.

Battery Park City is a vibrant, cohesive, yet exclusive community of residents who enjoy social and municipal benefits that all New Yorkers deserve but many are denied. The neighborhood’s totality—its popular parks, its orphaned affordable housing in the Bronx, its residents’ need to be
separated from other neighborhoods—provides a new and more accurate portrait of the shape contemporary cities are taking and proposes spatial perspectives for studying community conflicts. While traditionally citadels have been described as isolated outposts of opulence surrounded by hostility and deprivation, today adjoining citadels form larger, contiguous, affluent areas. Contemporary elite neighborhoods fit into a new urban model that replaces block-by-block diversity with the suburban strategy of expansive, homogeneous, unequal developments. The impact—on urban culture, on citizens’ willingness to support public expenditures, on local and regional politics—is already proving to be substantial. Battery Park City is less an example of what is to come than a powerful part of what already is.

Studying Up

Ethnography has long been used in urban sociology to develop in-depth insight into the social organization of communities, the wrenching effects of community disruptions, and the process of constructing shared meanings and culture. I had the good fortune to train with exceptional ethnographers, and when I began my fieldwork ethnography seemed like a natural way to approach the subject. But in using ethnography to contribute to the literature on the exclusive design of global citadels like Battery Park City, I applied ethnography in two ways it is not typically used.

First, this is a public space ethnography. Adding to the many ethnographies that study intimate domestic spaces, workplaces, and other private areas is a tradition of “street corner” ethnographies that study social interactions in public settings. My project, however, specifically sought to study not just the social interactions in a place but the physical place itself. Like Mitchell Duneier’s Sidewalk, it examined not only what went on in the space but how certain social spaces allowed certain kinds of social relationships to develop and be sustained. For this reason, my observations were not only of the people but of the places and, most importantly, the interaction between the public spaces and the social interactions that occurred in them and reshaped them.

Second, ethnographies are rarely of elite communities. In urban sociology, ethnography is most often used to present a socially richer, more fully formed view of disadvantaged communities of people, including African Americans, immigrant and ethnic groups, and poor and working-class communities—all people whose lives and stories are given short shrift or
mercilessly distorted in political rhetoric, casual conversations, and public policy discussions. In addition to researchers’ other specific goals, ethnographies have often been successful in presenting the lives of people who are often disrespected, stereotyped, or ignored, and in chronicling the ways that social inequalities imposed by more powerful groups affect people who bear the brunt of such inequalities.

In contrast, this study was an *elite ethnography*, an effort to look up the social ladder, not down. Battery Park City residents’ incomes rank the area the twenty-first highest out of New York City’s 2,200 census tracts, sharing the top 1 percent with neighborhoods such as the Upper East Side and Upper West Side, Greenwich Village, and Tudor City near the United Nations. Battery Park City’s status posed several challenges beyond the fact that the high cost of housing prohibited me from living in the neighborhood, as ethnographers often do for ethnographic community studies. It is, frankly, difficult to get to know people well and remain publicly critical of them, even when they deserve honest criticism, and I found myself naturally cautious in leveling criticism at people whom I was close to and who were socially superior to me in age, rank, wealth, and status. Maintaining an appropriately critical or analytic stance while conducting an elite ethnography is inherently challenging.

Balancing a critical perspective while remaining true to residents was challenging for other reasons as well. Like most people, I have never lived in a wealthy neighborhood. While the wealth and privilege of Battery Park City were not normal to me, they were not utterly unfamiliar. I had attended Ivy League universities for college and graduate school, felt as though I had assimilated well, and had made many upper-middle-class friends there. Thus when I was in a place like Battery Park City I imagined that I visually fit in with the residents and that I could “pass” as one of them. Unlike most of the nannies, for instance, I was white, as were most residents, and my education put me in the upper socioeconomic quintile even if my income, wealth, and occupation did not. Further, I assumed that plenty of Battery Park City residents had not come originally from wealthy families, so our social distance was further reduced. This bifurcated sense of belonging and not belonging would continue throughout my research. Though I felt I fit in for the reasons I have described, I was not a resident, in a community where residence was the central marker of belonging. I was generally younger than other parents there, and I had different interests and career goals than most residents. I came to know many residents quite well, to like them a great deal, and to care about them and what they felt. But we were
not so close that we socialized, with some important exceptions, outside the context of my research. I spent time in people’s homes, but to interview them, not to participate in their lives. (Mine was, after all, a public space ethnography, not a study of their domestic lives.)

At the beginning of the project, it also felt uncomfortably opportunistic to study Battery Park City. I had wanted to study public space in New York, and from earlier projects I recognized that people articulate their views about public space only when there are plans afoot to alter it. During the economic downturn after September 11 it gradually became apparent that the only public spaces that would be under heavily contested redevelopment would be those surrounding the World Trade Center, where, along with Battery Park City, I had already conducted preliminary fieldwork. So many researchers had swooped down on the neighborhood in the year after September 11 that at one meeting that summer, when I introduced myself, a member of the group (who was also active on the Community Board and in other organizations) asked the group’s leader, “So I just want to know. Is it now the group’s policy to let every academic in to study us?” He felt fellow residents were allowing themselves to be put on display. At the time I had no response, already feeling like a rubbernecker on the highway who slows to view an accident scene. I had come to Battery Park City in the midst of an ongoing tragedy, to watch. As more time passed and my investment in the community grew, I no longer felt like an interloper. But in the beginning, residents felt they were under a spotlight, and I felt intrusive even being there.

I had begun with the intention of writing a critique of it as a privatized space and faux-urban citadel, expanding on the postmodern urbanists’ critique with observations from an in-depth study of the place. But as I got to know the residents more fully and personally, the aggressiveness of the critique became both less supported by what I learned and more difficult to level at a social structure that was composed of actual people I knew and liked and whose opinion mattered to me. It was as I became enmeshed in my field research that I realized that ethnography had almost always been used by urban sociologists to study disadvantaged people they wished to valorize, not privileged people they sought to criticize, and for good reason: such an intimate method is ill-suited to invective.

My critique of Battery Park City (and this book remains a critique of it, and of the inequality rooted in the spatial organization of global cities that Battery Park City represents) was further complicated by the conflicted nature of Battery Park City’s recent history: while it is a citadel of global
capital’s wealth and power, it is also a neighborhood that has suffered one of the greatest acute tragedies in recent U.S. experience. Residents suffered on September 11 and for a long time afterwards, and a community that had otherwise been exceptionally fortunate and privileged had to struggle—though struggle is a word rarely used for communities with incomes nearly three times their city’s median—to prevent its own destruction, to reestablish community ties, and to have its voice and preferences heard above those of even more powerful actors. Yet testing outsiders’ sympathy, even during that earnest struggle the community sought to keep excluding other people from their gilded enclave. Thus the criticisms in this book exist in tension with sympathy, both justified and not, toward residents. Rather than delete either that empathy or that criticism, I hope that the result is the most honest portrayal possible: one that presents the community and the problems it has faced, while insisting that the neighborhood was initially structured by plans that sought to continue economically and racially polarizing the city, and that residents have acted to reinforce rather than challenge that separation.

The fully rounded portrait that ethnography forces upon the researcher means that this book is still not as singularly critical as many other books written about the global elite and the polarization of New York City. I hope that readers, rather than faulting me for seeming to pull my punches, will appreciate that this view of an elite community is less polemically useful but still valuable—even for advocates of social change—to the extent that it provides a closer, more complicated portrait of a community at the opposite end of the economic spectrum from those that progressive activists work in solidarity to strengthen.

This project presents both the challenges facing a strong, supportive community and a critique of the elite, inequitable, undemocratic approach to building today’s city that the community represents. Employing the model of the reciprocal relationship replaces a static view of space with a dynamic understanding that highlights both the role of elites in shaping space and the ability of that space to influence the actors who will occupy it. The reciprocation between actors and space over time underscores that, even for a relatively new community, an ethnography benefits immensely from knowledge of that community’s history. To that end, chapter 1 sets the stage with an examination of Battery Park City’s origins and the first cycle in the relationship that would shape the neighborhood, its residents, and the city for decades to come.