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Battery Park City: Desire for Isolation and Normalcy amid Tragedy; Impacts of 9/11 on a Planned Community

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Impacts of 9/11 On a Planned Community

This paper seeks to understand the social impacts of 9/11 on Lower Manhattan, specifically the neighborhood of Battery Park City. Battery Park City is directly adjacent to the World Trade Center, which was destroyed when two airplanes struck the buildings at 8:46 and 9:03 AM, respectively. September 11 was the worst terrorist attack in American history, causing 2,977 deaths. The physical layout of Battery Park City was designed to be exclusive, but 9/11 highlighted—and increased—the citizens of the community's desire to stay isolated. While in other neighborhoods in New York City people came together to support one another, residents of Battery Park City wanted to strengthen the preexisting values of the pre-9/11 community, while being distrustful of newcomers.

Throughout its history, Battery Park City has been a unique community in New York City. During the construction of the World Trade Center, excess soil was added to the banks of the Hudson River, enabling the creation of a new neighborhood that would be developed in the 1980s and called Battery Park City (Nancy Foner 2005; Lehmuller & Switzer 2002). Battery Park City is considered a model for a large-scale planning project, with lots of green space, residential areas, and a waterfront (Nancy Foner 2005, 9; Richard M. Froehlich 2012, 11). Additionally, Battery Park City is home to one of New York City's premier high schools (Nancy Foner 2005). Several architects were commissioned to make different style buildings to add to the diversity of the neighborhood and make the neighborhood echo the historic look of the larger City (Nancy Foner 2005).

Unlike the physical appearance of the neighborhood, from the beginning the population of Battery Park City lacked significant diversity, with a relatively wealthy, white, and educated

population predominating (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Seventy-five percent of the 8,000 residents in the neighborhood were white, and the median income in the neighborhood in 1999 was $107,617, significantly higher than the median income in New York City which was then $38,293 (Gregory Smithsimon 2010; Joseph De Avila 2011). The citizens and community of Battery Park City were unlike any other part of the city, due to Battery Park City's unique demographic and community makeup.

The physical separation of Battery Park City from nearby neighborhoods also helped to isolate its citizens from the rest of New York City. Battery Park City is bounded by the Hudson River to the West and West Street to the East. West Street, an extension of the West Side Highway, has insufficient crossroads and only three footbridges, creating a barrier between Battery Park City and Lower Manhattan (Nancy Foner 2005). There are no subways that run to and through Battery Park City, and the street system is difficult to navigate and different than the rest of the street system in Lower Manhattan (Gregory Smithsimon 2010; 2013). There is no street that runs from north to south through the entirety of the neighborhood, and many streets turn into residential cul-de-sacs (Nancy Foner 2005). Navigating the neighborhood on foot is equally challenging, with limited signage to guide pedestrians and few footpaths (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Because of the physical geography of Battery Park City, it is cut off from the rest of the City and is often called an island of its own (William B. Helmreich 2018). It is an exclusive neighborhood, with an isolated nature. Often referred to as "Suburbia in Manhattan" and the "suburbs of New York," Battery Park City distanced itself, both physically and emotionally from the rest of the city (Nancy Foner 2005).

However, during 9/11, citizens were not just residents of Battery Park City, but members of the grieving community of New York City. Battery Park City is nearly adjacent to the West

side of the World Trade Center, so citizens saw the Towers fall and victims jump to their deaths (Nancy Foner 2005). A sense of panic and confusion wafted through the neighborhood, followed by a cloud of ash and dust (Pierre Lehmuller and Anna Switzer 2002). The shores of Battery Park City served as an evacuation point for the City, and where tens of thousands of residents of New York were transported to New Jersey by boat (Nancy Foner 2005). All the residents of Battery Park City were forced to evacuate, and martial law quickly went into effect (Nancy Foner 2005). Residents reflect on the day, describing how: "Every leaf of grass, every leaf of the tree was covered with this gray—I don't know what you call it—pulverized building material. (. . .) What struck me when walking south on the esplanade, what really hit me were shoes. Shoes scattered on the esplanade." (Nancy Foner 2005). Residents were: "there; I heard the planes and saw it all. I think about it every day—how all those people died" (Setha M. Low, Dana H. Taplin, and Mike Lamb 2005). Battery Park City and its residents were directly impacted by the events of 9/11 to an extreme extent.

The isolated nature of Battery Park City made it extremely difficult for the residents who wanted to return to do so. All residents were forced to leave their homes for at least a week with most residents not returning until late October (Gregory Smithsimon 2013, 9; Nancy Foner 2005). About half of the residents of Battery Park City did not return, and school enrollment dropped to a record low of 215 students, down from 415 students the year before (Low, Taplin, and Lamb 2005). Residential buildings were between 25-75% vacant for 9 months after 9/11. Gateway Plaza, a residential building in the heart of the neighborhood, had 700 of its 1,711 units vacant (Low, Taplin, and Lamb 2005). The local economy simply stopped for several months after the attack, and unemployment rates grew to record highs. The community was suffering, and at a standstill.

Even when the residents returned, the neighborhood did not immediately go back to normal. Fires from the debris burned for three months after the attack, and first responders continued looking for missing people for weeks following residents' returns (Setha M. Low 2004). Many people reported a new sense of fear following the attacks (Low, Taplin, and Lamb 2005). Residents felt an eerie quiet settle in the neighborhood, with tanks in the streets and police barricades (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Even the local elementary school, P.S. 234, was turned into a staging area for rescue efforts, and students were forced to attend classes elsewhere (Pierre Lehmuller and Anna Switzer 2002).

Returning residents also not only had to deal with the emotional trauma of returning but also the lingering health effects from exposure to hazardous materials. Residents were told that it was safe to return, however, residents soon complained of respiratory issues and scratched corneas from dust still in the air (Crane et al, n.d.). A private consultant was brought in by the neighborhood and found residual contamination from the elevated levels of toxins from the attack (Setha M. Low 2004). The residents developed emotional trauma from the attack and developed a mistrust in the government's handling of its aftermath, including fears of developing cancer from the contaminated air (Low, Taplin, and Lamb 2005; Michael Crane et al, n.d.). Residents were put through the long and arduous process of trying to break leases or suing property owners for failure to thoroughly clean up (Michael Crane et al, n.d.). So, among its other impacts on Battery Park City, the 9/11 attacks entirely changed the community's perception into an “us vs. them” mentality.

Furthermore, the community's hostility towards outsiders' attitudes about 9/11 continued throughout the memorialization of the victims. A temporary memorial was erected in Battery Park City for people to leave flowers and pay respects to the fallen (Nancy Foner 2005).

However, residents complained that tourists clogged community spaces and felt that the crowds disrupted their daily lives (Setha M. Low 2004). As one resident put it: “I just want the tourists to go” (Nancy Foner 2005). Prior to 9/11, Battery Park City hosted memorials for fallen New York City police officers and victims of the Holocaust (Setha M. Low 2004). Residents did not want to live in a sullen and gloomy “cemetery” as a neighborhood (Setha M. Low 2004). Especially with all the long-term effects and trauma that resulted from 9/11, residents did not want a constant reminder of the horrors of that day. Battery Park City and its residents were battling with the desire for life to return to normal but also the need to remember and honor the victims.

Not only did Battery Park City felt invaded by tourists, but there was also an influx of new residents in the neighborhood. Half of the population was replaced after 9/11 by newcomers attracted by the neighborhood's parks, waterfront, and good schools (Joseph De Avila 2011; Low, Taplin, and Lamb 2005). There were also tax incentives created by the government to help booster rebuilding, and the rental assistance program gave up to $12,000 or three months rent-free for moving in (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Returning residents felt the newcomers' values to be different from their own and felt they were a threat to the community they had built, as the new residents were mostly young, single, and were less wealthy (Nancy Foner 2005; Setha M. Low 2004). In the neighborhood, there was a: “lingering sense that the newcomers are perhaps made of lesser stuff” (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Before 9/11, the residents were mostly families that were more committed to the fostering of a sense of community in the neighborhood. Now, returning residents “feared “others” who threaten the stability of the community” (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Returning residents wanted it to be as exclusive as before and have Battery Park City return to its old self. As one resident said: “it’s changed very much. Before September 11 we were a family, with warm, natural, sincere interactions. We knew each other,

asked after each other. The new people are young. They consider it a jumping stone for the next endeavor" (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). As a result of the shift of community values, the pre and post 9/11 citizens were very divided.

Not only did returning residents shun the new residents, but they also became much closer with other returning residents. Residents were only supportive of other residents who had lived there prior, as they felt the attack brought citizens together to help grieve and process the experience together. The returning community was a place to bond, heal, recover (Setha M. Low 2004). Residents are: "a lot closer with people we knew before and met going through this. It is sometimes hard to relate to nonresidents" (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). The community was strengthened, because: "with others who went through it, we can talk without feeling a stigma. We feel more connected. I don't feel a connection with any new residents" (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). As one resident put the new sense of community withing returning residents: "people who you waved to before 9/11. Now you hugged them" (Low, Taplin, Lamb 2005). The sense of community was strengthened by the common pain citizens endured, and the support system they created to help each other recover.

The most recent major change the neighborhood endured was the plan to bury West Street in a tunnel as part of a massive plan to redesign the areas surrounding the World Trade Center. Urban planners thought that the tunnel would reduce the barrier between Battery Park City and the rest of New York, making it a more walkable neighborhood for citizens (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Despite the planners' good intentions, residents vehemently opposed the tunnel, with 98% of residents who had lived in Battery Park City pre-9/11 opposing it and 67% of the general population having a negative opinion of the tunnel (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Residents wanted to maintain the isolation and exclusivity of Battery Park City and felt that they

needed to protect the character of the neighborhood (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Outsiders labeled the neighborhood as “dedicated defenders of exclusivity” (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). Insiders claimed that their neighborhood was special, and to not “try to integrate us into Manhattan, but rather replicate us in all of Manhattan” (Gregory Smithsimon 2010). The community opposition showed the strength of community, and the desire for exclusiveness.

The layout of Battery Park City introduced a sense of exclusivity from the rest of New York. September 11 resulted in many physical health effects and severe emotional trauma. One significant effect of 9/11 came later, however, when all the newcomers came in. The returning residents felt threatened. The community of Battery Park City showed its desire to stay exclusive in the resentment directed toward “outsiders” encroaching on their neighborhood. Battery Park City’s experience shows how the geography of a neighborhood can shapes its values and perspectives on population changes. It also shows how physical proximity to traumatic events can shape a community’s reaction to such events. Battery Park City was much more directly impacted by 9/11 than other communities in America due to Battery Park City’s nearness to Ground Zero. This can help to explain residents’ desire for normalcy, and inability to adjust, as their community was arguably one of the most changed. September 11 strengthened a sense of community in other Americans, but their lives were not immediately impacted, and their neighborhoods remained the same. Battery Park City is a small neighborhood in New York City, but its citizens’ reaction to 9/11 can help us understand how a major trauma can increase a community's detachment from newcomers and inability to accept a new normal.

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