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# Shoestring Democracy: Gated Condominiums and Market Rate Co-operatives in New York [pre-print]

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**Shoestring Democracy: Gated Condominiums and Market Rate Co-operatives in New York (draft revision for Journal of Urban Affairs)**

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## **Abstract**

This article develops the concept of shoestring democracy as a way to characterize the resulting social relations of private governance structures embedded in two types of collective housing schemes found in New York City and the adjoining suburbs: gated condominium communities (gated condominiums) and market rate co-operative apartment complexes (co-ops). Drawing from ethnographies of gated condominiums and co-ops in New York City and neighboring Nassau County, New York, we examine these two forms of collective home ownership and the impact of private governance structures on residents and their sense of representation and participation in ongoing community life. "Shoestring democracy" encompasses a broad range of behaviors utilized to insulate residents from local conflicts and disagreements, and limits rather than promotes political participation. The greatest differences were found in discussions of safety and security, in that condominium residents have developed an elaborate discourse of the fear of crime and others, especially racialized others, to explain why they moved to their secured communities. Co-op interviewees, on the other hand, generally felt a sense of safety in their buildings, often due to the gatekeeper effect of the co-op board and doormen. In gated communities, covenants, contracts, and deed restrictions (CC&Rs) guarantee that most problems are resolved before they start. While the same can be said for co-ops, these interviewees find that these rules and regulations seem to mystify everyday governing practices for the average co-op resident. Moral minimalism and a lack of structural and procedural knowledge may insulate residents from local conflicts and disagreement, but also may discourage civic participation. Exploring the apathy residents' expressed about participation and a lack of representation suggests that although the Rochdale Principles of cooperation that are the legal and social basis for co-ops may have been important at one time, current practices of private governing boards do more to restrict participatory democratic practices than encourage them. The policy implications are outlined with suggestions of how to make homeowners associations and co-op boards more accountable and encourage greater adherence to the original co-op mandate.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the United States, where private homeownership has been touted as the primary means for its citizens to achieve financial security and social status (c.f. Saegert et al 2009), the governance structures that regulate collective home ownership are being privatized through various schemes and increasingly operated as corporations. In a study of gated condominium communities (hereafter condominiums) completed in 2005 by the first author, it was found that the greatest impact on social relations within the residential development was the structure of the private governance, and not simply the physical walls and gates that stimulated the first author's initial concern. In fact, the governance structure of the homeowners' association (hereafter HOA) board and other elements of common interest development housing—better known as CIDs that include condominiums, planned urban developments and co-ops as alternative planning forms--changed the nature of home ownership (Barton and Silverman 1994). These gated condominiums used an extreme form of social segregation to monitor and control "community," raising important questions as to whose economic, social, political and cultural ideals are enforced by both the physical and metaphorical gates (Low 2003). To understand further the impact of private governance on homeownership and housing schemes, the research group, under direction of the first author, began a study of another form of private governance, market rate housing cooperative apartment complexes (hereafter co-ops), to determine if some of the same outcomes would also be observed. These outcomes include desire for safety and security, a desire to be among "people like us," moral minimalism, and lack of representation and civic engagement on the part of residents. This article draws upon exemplary interviews collected from 1995 through 2005 and theoretical findings to frame and compare to the co-op interviews collected from 2006-2010. These new findings do not replicate the published findings of Low (2003, 2007, 2008); instead they extend this work into the more nuanced concept of "shoestring democracy." This concept is a way to characterize the resulting social relations of private governance structures embedded in two types of collective housing schemes found in New York City and the adjoining suburbs. "Shoestring democracy" encompasses a broad range of behaviors utilized to insulate residents from local conflicts and disagreements, and limits rather than promotes political participation.

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The article begins with a summary of gated condominiums and market rate co-ops including a brief history of each. A review of the original condominium study is followed by a more extensive description of the recent study of co-ops and a summary description of the methods and interviewees. Excerpts drawn from both studies are then used to illustrate the various dimensions of the comparison, including the new forms of discourse found only in the co-op interviews and the differences in the interpretation of safety and security, interpersonal conflict and interaction, as well as similar representation and civic engagement at each. Shoestring democracy is a concept that best characterizes the findings from this comparison of governance strategies and their impact on civic engagement and social interaction within the different housing schemes. The conclusion retraces the argument and suggests what policy considerations can be drawn from this comparative study.

In brief, we found that by comparing the two studies certain similarities and differences were highlighted. Gated condominium residents remain more concerned with safety and security and more fearful of others than co-op residents, who feel that they live with people like themselves. On the other hand, the governance structures of both market rate co-ops and gated condominiums were found to increase the amount of moral minimalism among residents. That is, residents of both gated condominiums and market rate co-ops tend to turn to their elected governing boards as well as hired management, and not to each other, to resolve conflict. Further, the lack of representation and sense that the board does not reflect one's values or interests, occurs in both housing schemes. What was most surprising was the development of shoestring democracy in the co-ops where the Rochdale principles for the promotion of democratic practices and cooperative behavior are historically foundational and institutionally still in force.

### **Ownership Structure in Gated Condominium and Market Rate Co-ops in New York**

While market rate co-op housing and gated condominiums share many similarities in terms of their interest in safety, security, and retaining investment value, their greatest difference is the structure of ownership. Each private housing scheme has a distinct history that influences current practices: condominiums are based on a planning and design model, and co-ops are derived from wealthy New Yorkers' "home clubs" and the adoption of the idealistic Rochdale

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principles. In co-ops, residents become members of a corporation or limited partnership that collectively owns an apartment building or group of houses. Residents become shareholders and purchase shares that entitle them to a long-term "proprietary lease." Individual shareholders do not "own" their units, but own a percentage of shares within the co-op. Condominiums, on the other hand, are real property, with fee simple (individual) ownership of the house or apartment, and common ownership of facilities, land or buildings (see Barton and Silverman 1994 for a more comprehensive discussion). Fees covering maintenance, taxes and improvements are distributed to all residents in both organizations. Both condominiums and co-ops are legally organized by their developer and/or owners as corporations, that is, with a governance structure that includes a board made up of elected residents and the developer and owners if they still retain property, that makes all decisions about the finances and repairs and is protected by corporate legal statutes against lawsuits. The scope of board management is legally greater in co-op buildings because all property, including the individual housing units, is under the control of the board.

The most significant differences are to be found in the ways these housing schemes operate, namely the degree of control held by the board over the market transactions of buying and selling of apartments or houses. In the condominium arrangement, an individual can sell or rent his or her apartment without the approval of the other residents or the condominium board. While the condominium board has the right of first refusal to buy any apartment up for sale and to ask to review the financials of the purchaser, the seller is otherwise free to sell or rent it to any prospective buyer. By contrast, in the co-op housing scheme, the co-op board must approve every buyer or renter and has the power to grant or withhold approval. Prospective buyers of an apartment or house are presented by the seller and the real estate agent to the co-op board. This involves an extensive financial review including tax returns and pay stubs, among other materials, going back as long as five years. Although co-op boards are not allowed to discriminate by race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexual orientation per U.S. housing law, they are allowed to refuse entrance to those who the board feels are a financial risk. Co-op boards do not have to disclose their reasons for acceptance or refusal, and they are notorious for refusing

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prospective buyers who may have already qualified for a mortgage and are ready to purchase the property (Latt and Haughney 2011).

### **A Brief History of Gated Condominium Communities**

Gated residential communities in the U.S. first originated for year-round living on family estates and in wealthy communities such as Llewellyn Park in Eagle Ridge, New Jersey, built during the 1850s. Such gating was also exemplified in resorts such as New York's Tuxedo Park which developed as a hunting and fishing retreat in 1886 with a barbed wire fence eight feet high and twenty-four miles long (Hayden 2003). Another early resort, Sea Gate in Brooklyn, New York, was established with its own private police force in 1899. The architect and real estate developer Julius Pitman designed the majority of St. Louis's private streets between 1867 and 1905 borrowing from the model of the English private square to create exclusive residential enclaves for the business elite (Hayden 2003; Low 2003).

In 1928, the creation of "common interest developments" (also known as CIDs) provided a legal and administrative framework for the consolidation of collective residential privatization. A CID is "a community in which the residents own or control common areas or shared amenities," and that carries with it reciprocal rights and obligations enforced by a private governing body (Judd 1995, p155). Specialized covenants, contracts, and deed restrictions (CC&Rs) that extend forms of collective private land tenure and the notion of private government were adapted by the lawyer and planner Charles Stern Ascher to create the modern institution of the homeowner association (McKenzie 1994). In 1961 the CIDs-based condominium law was modified to allow collective ownership of vertical property, that is, multiple apartments could be built and independently owned on the same parcel of land, which accounts for the ease of high-rise apartment expansion in Vancouver and throughout most the urban U.S. (Harris 2011). In New York City, however, co-op apartment developments were already well established and for many years the preferred form of apartment ownership as is discussed in the following section.

Even though gated communities originated on the East Coast, their greatest expansion was in large planned retirement communities such as Leisure World in Southern California built

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in the 1960s and 1970s. The phenomenon then spread to resort and country club developments, and finally to suburban developments. In the 1980s, real estate speculation accelerated the building of gated developments of condominiums around golf courses and other amenities designed for exclusivity, prestige and leisure with the majority located in California, Texas, Florida and Arizona. On Long Island, New York, and other parts of the Northeastern U.S., gated communities were rare in the 1980s, but by the early 1990s almost every condominium development of more than fifty units had a guardhouse.

The number of people estimated to be living in gated communities in the U.S. increased from four million in 1995, to eight million in 1997 and to sixteen million in 1998 (Low 2001). By 1997, there were in excess of twenty thousand gated communities with over three million housing units (Blakely and Synder 1997). The 2001 American Housing Survey found that over seven million or 5.9 percent of households reporting live in these communities surrounded by walls or fences with limited access through a gate, and over four million households, or 3.4 percent, live in communities where the access is controlled by some means such as entry codes, keys cards, or security guard approvals (Sanchez et al 2002). The Western section of the U.S. has by far the highest number of households living in gated communities (11.1 percent), followed by the South (6.8 percent), the Northeast (3.1 percent) and the Midwest (2.1) (Sanchez et al 2005). The soon to be analyzed data from the 2010 census will reveal whether the proportion of gated developments has increased or remained the same.

### **A Brief History of Co-ops in New York City**

Housing co-ops have been organized to provide homeownership for various groups within the U.S. for over 100 years. The first co-op in New York City was established in 1876 and was known as a "home club" (Sazama 1996). These "home clubs" provided wealthy individuals with all the benefits and security of homeownership while mitigating the individual responsibilities involved (Siegler et al 1986). Although at first rare and intended primarily for the wealthy, co-ops became more working class and common by the twentieth century as well as "more politically and socially progressive in their motivations" (DeFilippis 2003, p 89). These politically and socially progressive goals were reflected in the adoption of a governance ethic

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known as the Rochdale Cooperative Principles. Established in England by the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844, these Rochdale Cooperative Principles are a set of standards for the governance of all cooperatives including limited equity and market rate co-ops (Conover 1959, Freeman 2002, Eisenstadt 2010).

According to Siegler and Levy (1986), the first housing co-op in the U.S. (rather than a home club) was established in Brooklyn in 1918 by the Finnish Home Building Association. This co-op was organized according to the Rochdale Cooperative Principles and, by 1926, was one of 25 such co-ops in the Sunset Park area of Brooklyn (Eisenstadt 2010). The basic principles of "open, voluntary membership," "democratic governance," "limited return on equity," "surplus belongs to members," "education of members and public in co-op principles," and "cooperation between cooperatives" were officially adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance (also known as the ICA) in 1966 and included as part of their "Statement on the Cooperative Identity" as recently as 1995 (I.C.A. 2006).

During the Great Depression of the 1930s many member-sponsored co-ops folded, and were not revitalized until 1950 when the National Housing Act provided mortgage insurance for the buildings and residents (Sazama 1996; Goodman 2000). Starting in the 1970s low-income co-ops, known as limited equity co-ops, became more popular in New York City as a strategy to counteract disinvestment and abandonment in certain neighborhoods (DeFilippis 2003). Luxury co-ops did not become popular again until the 1980s when an inability to profit from price-regulated rental units motivated landlords and tenants to convert their buildings to co-ops (Goodman 2000). By the 1990s, homeowners became more interested in purchasing condominiums because of fewer restrictions in applying to buy and subletting these units, although the pre-World War II co-ops continued to be very desirable because of their superior construction and large room size (Goodman 2000).

According to the American Housing Survey (USHUD 2005), 0.6% of all owner-occupied homes in the U.S. are co-ops. Only 7.3% of these co-ops include residents below the poverty rate, so that the majority of co-ops are comprised of middle and upper income owners. Over 80% of U.S. co-ops are located within New York City (Schill et al 2004).

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## **Methodology**

### **General Methodological Considerations**

These two research projects on middle-class and upper-middle class gated communities and middle-class and upper middle-class market rate co-ops are the first ethnographic studies to be completed in the United States. For this reason, the goal was to elicit the widest range of issues, resident attitudes and concerns possible. The first study had an exploratory research design that relied on a convenience sample of residents living in gated communities who were willing to talk with us. In the co-op study, we interviewed individuals from different size buildings (small, medium and large) to search for emerging themes that varied by building size and location and not just governance structure. We often worked through family, friends, real estate brokers, development managers, board members, doormen, and any other person to contact the broadest range of interviewees in terms of gender, age, profession, length of time in the building, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. As is common in studying up, it was difficult to convince people who fiercely guard their privacy to become involved in a one to two hour long interview. Because of the difficulty of entering gated communities and market rate co-ops, and our lack of knowledge of what the base population was, a random sampling strategy was not feasible. Further, we did not have the ability to identify a "control group" for a population about which little to nothing was known.

While these findings must be considered exploratory and considered as a basis for more extensive study, we think our evidence provides a strong theoretical framework for further research. The strength of this research is in the internal consistency of the interviews, the recurring themes that emerged, the number of interviews collected, the length of time of the lead researcher spent in each community, and the large volume of corroborating evidence that has been collected by other researchers using quantitative methods. As is often the case with ethnographic research, the ecological validity of the evidence—that is the fit between what people say, their meanings, and the context of those meanings—is very high in this kind of fine grained and in-depth study. We have used ethnographic vignettes to illustrate many of our points; however, these examples reflect only one of many interviews that express a particular point of view. Further, we returned to the gated condominiums and many of the co-ops in a

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second round of research in 2008-2010. Ethnographic site visits and a new set of original co-ops interviews were completed to determine whether time and history have influenced the attitudes and concerns that we initially found. We found that gated condominium residents continue to worry about their safety and security—financial as well as personal—while co-op residents struggle with the increasing rate of speculation that led up to the financial crisis and their current concern with possible foreclosures on their properties.

Another aspect of this kind of study was the amount of time and consideration that was spent protecting the confidentiality of interviewees and informants. An extensive IRB procedure was completed at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. All interviewees signed informed consent forms, understood that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and in the gated community condominium study were offered the opportunity to read the transcript of the taped interview before publication. All names and place locations were changed for publication. Every effort was made to protect the interviewees so that their privacy and research confidentiality was maintained.

### **Ethnography of Gated Communities in New York and Texas**

The research began with gaining entry into upper-middle and middle income gated subdivisions in 1995: one in Nassau County on Long Island, and three in the northern suburbs of San Antonio, Texas. A middle income, and then a middle to lower-middle income community in the New York City area were added in 2000 and 2005 to answer questions about class and cultural differences that arose later in the project. Thus we worked in seven gated communities in the two regions: three with single-family housing (approximately 3500 square feet), three with attached townhouses (approximately 1200-1500 square feet), and one condominium complex (800-1200 square feet) (Low 2003, 2007, 2008). Primarily utilizing family contacts and real estate agents to gain entry to these communities, the research group employed a snowball sampling technique using each interview respondent to lead to the next. It was a slow process to recruit interviewees: a total of 50 households were interviewed over the first eight years, and another four households more recently.

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The one- to two-hour open-ended interview was organized around a semi-structured residential history conducted in the home with a partnered or single woman, partnered or single man or a couple together. The majority of the interviewees were heterosexual European Americans and native born couples; however, four interviews were conducted in households in which one spouse was from Latin America, West Africa, Asia, or the Middle East. Interviewees were 18 through 75 years of age. The absence of minority residents, particularly Hispanics in San Antonio, is indicative of the middle and upper-middle class composition of their gated communities. The men interviewed were mostly professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers and those working in industry as businessmen, managers, and foremen; or retired from these pursuits. The majority of the women were married and self-identified as stay-at-home mothers and those that worked were employed part-time. Of the three single, widowed or divorced women, two worked full-time and one was retired.

Participant observation was ongoing in the shopping, transportation, and recreational areas near each development. The analysis of participant observation field notes focused on identifying empirical evidence of changes in the local environment. Further, it produced data on naturally occurring conversations and everyday observations that provide a test of ecological validity for the interviews. Field notes and interviews were coded by emerging themes throughout the research process. A thematic content analysis of the interviews and documents collected from the media, marketing, and sales materials provided the documentation of the range of discourse available.

### **Ethnography of Market Rate Co-op Apartment Buildings in New York City**

The study began in July 2006, with data collection completed in September 2008 after interviewing 24 co-op residents in 23 buildings in New York City to compare with the 25 gated community residents interviewed in the New York area. A total of 22 of the interviews were with single participants while the twenty-third was with a couple. Through personal contacts and interested colleagues the research team located residents willing to be interviewed. In some cases a key informant referred others who might be willing to speak to us. As opposed to the gated communities study, it was less complicated to identify possible participants, but more

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difficult in that the interviewers often could not contact multiple residents in any one building or apartment complex. Instead, every effort was made to sample small to large buildings in three of the five boroughs (i.e. counties) of New York City: Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, and to include a variety of age, marital status, sexual orientation, ethnic and/or racial, and gender characteristics to capture a broad range of resident experiences, opinions and attitudes.

The sample includes only participants who own and reside in market rate co-ops in New York City. Previous studies of limited equity co-op residents have been undertaken, however, their financial and governance structure is distinct from the buildings studied here (Leavitt and Saegert 1990). An attempt was made to solicit participants with varied backgrounds when possible, yet they remain fairly homogenous. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 71 years of age; seven of the interviewees identified themselves as men. Eighteen of the participants identified as white or Caucasian, and six identified themselves as African-American, Latino, Filipino, and Asian. Six of the participants identified themselves as gay or lesbian throughout the course of the interview, 14 as heterosexual, and four individuals did not identify their sexual orientation. All participants had completed college; most of the participants noted that they had finished or were in the process of finishing an advanced degree. Occupations included lawyers, professors, artists, graphic designers, computer programmers, corporate vice presidents, and research directors. Interviewees live in apartment buildings throughout the city: from trendy SoHo to the family-oriented Upper West Side, and from the more remote Forest Hills in Queens to child friendly and popular Park Slope in Brooklyn. Most participants reside in studios or one or two bedroom apartments ranging from 400-1700 square feet, averaging around 900 square feet. Seven buildings had fewer than 30 apartments, fourteen had 90 to 140 apartments, and three buildings had over 150 units. Participants had occupied their present co-op for six months to 20 years, with a median of 6 years of occupancy. Most buildings became co-ops in the early 1980s and a few were converted in the mid-'90s; few participants had been in their buildings long enough to have experienced the conversion process. A total of 17 participants were aware of some rental apartments in their building, two were unsure if there were any renters, and five interviewees' buildings no longer had rental units. Almost all participants experienced a

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complicated application and interview process, and ten serve or have served on their co-op board.

The open-ended interview was organized around a semi-structured series of questions that included the same residential history used in the previous gated community study. We also incorporated additional questions about doormen, the building conversion, and the application process which are specific to the co-op structure, as well as the co-op board to replace questions about the HOA. Interviews were conducted in the home with the individual or the couple together, and ranged from 40 minutes to one hour and 45 minutes. Audio recordings of the interviews were conducted for accuracy and transcribed before the coding process commenced. Field notes were also taken on site by the interviewer to account for visual cues that could later be used to help contextualize the analysis of interviewee responses.

A similar process of searching for emerging themes and theoretical coding was used. For this article, three thematic areas: safety, people like "us," and moral minimalism, were selected to compare the co-op findings to those from the gated community study. We then review the findings on representation and civic engagement in co-ops and gated communities as they relate to each of these three themes. What follows is a discussion in how these findings are reflected in our concept of shoestring democracy.

## **Findings**

### **Safety**

A sense of safety is a primary goal of gated community residents. U.S. studies of gated community residents report that between 70-80% of interviewees say that they moved because of their fear of crime (Blakey and Snyder 1997). This finding is similar for Latin American, South African and Chinese gated community residents as well, even though the amount of crime in these contexts varies tremendously (Low 2007). More paradoxical, however, is that many say the practices of gating make them feel safe, but then question how authentic that safety really is. For example, Donna comments:

That's what's been most important to my husband, to get the children out here where they can feel safe, and we feel safe if they could go out in the streets and not worry that

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someone is going to grab them...we feel so secure and maybe that's wrong too. You know, we've got workers out here, and we still think, "Oh, they're safe out here". Another gated resident comments when talking about people who work as employees or construction workers, "It's like they can slip in and slip out. Where there's no record of these guys at all. They're here today and gone tomorrow." Here, as with other residents, the relative anonymity and inconsistent presence of "workers" evokes fear and a concern that they are dangerous. The heterogeneity introduced among residents by the presence of these "workers" prompts such safety concerns.

Co-op residents seem less concerned with safety than those living in gated condominiums, yet most single women interviewed still identified safety as a prime reason for selecting their current building and neighborhood. The combination of a screening process and gate-like actors, such as doormen, creates a homogenous community that provides a 'safe' space within the urban environment. As Yvonne puts it, "I've seen them stop people at the door whom they don't recognize and so you feel kind of safe, you know, you're going to be in the building with people that are supposed to be here." However, Vanessa is not sure the doorman really makes a difference: "You have the security of the doorman, which I don't really believe is all that secure. [Giggles.] I think anyone can just walk in, but, gives a little bit of piece of mind." Like Vanessa, Kerry is also unsure of how important the doorman is in keeping unwanted intruders out:

...this guy calls me and he said, "I'll be over in a little bit." They did not call up! He was—he said to the doorman—and maybe the doorman recognized him from before or something... All of a sudden, there's a knock on my door! I'm like, "How did you get past security?" You know, I thought I was gonna [sic] get my little warning.

Although feelings of insecurity are discussed, they are often presented as humorous acknowledgments of a desire for infallible protection. This suggests relative trust in the consistent homogeneity of co-ops, a trust that ensures a 'safe' space, at least within the walls of their own building.

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For Sarah there is a disparity between the safety of her co-op and the streets and other buildings of the surrounding neighborhood. She attributes crime to nearby institutions, but still feels it is safe for her family:

And there [is] no crime that I know of in the building. But on the street: oy! Now I don't know crime on the street at all but we have a Salvation Army and a SRO leftover from the old Upper West Side, which I sort of approve of. And there was someone shot in Riverside Park one morning. Um, the police go to that building [points across the street]. I mean, I'm sure things go on that building. I've seen it. But they never bother me.

The notion of not being "bothered" represents also how co-op participants are constructing a form of community that ends at their threshold, a form of participation quite unlike the aims of the original Rochdale Principles.

For some co-op residents a concern for safety is palpable and warrants additional protective strategies. Yul's Queens apartment building has security guards rather than doormen, and he has heard of problems within his building including apartment break-ins. He has taken some steps to barricade his apartment:

Actually, when I moved in there was a break-in but I think it was an inside job. Someone on the third floor, in fact... Somebody went in through the hallway and then they, they came in through the kitchen window. Then they ransacked the place. ... Yeah. So I make it a point to lock my windows in the kitchen and, I have a fire escape here and I make sure that's locked.

From the analysis of co-op interviews there is a range of sentiment concerning safety within the apartments, buildings, and neighborhoods of residents. Nonetheless, the majority of interviewees say they feel safe, regardless of crime that may occur in their building or on the street. This sense of safety may be attributed to doormen, although five of the interviewees have intercom and buzz-in entrances. It also might be attributable to the perceived safety of the neighborhood, although, a number of residents think their buildings are safe even though they are aware of local criminal activity. This sense of safety is in sharp contrast with those of gated community residents who never seem to feel completely safe and are always trying to convince themselves that their gates help protect them from intruders and other dangers. This sense of

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safety among co-op residents may be attributable to a number of facets of co-op living including social homogeneity, community meetings and communication, a strong board presence, and a sense of communal financial membership.

### **People Like Us**

Low (2003) argues that the fear of crime expressed by gated community residents is not just about incidents of burglary, but also about those who are thought to perpetrate it. Gated condominiums do not have many public places where strangers intermingle, and their relative isolation and homogeneity discourages interaction with people who are identified as "other." Baumgartner's (1988) study of an upper middle class suburban town outside of New York City illustrates how this social isolation is transformed into moral expectation, and then becomes a yardstick by which residents measure the social order and safety of their neighborhood. Outsiders even appearing on residential streets upset local residents, and strangers by virtue of their race or unconventionality are singled out as "suspicious" if merely walking down the street (see Manalansan 2005). Residents explain their behavior by citing their "fear of crime," by which they mean "predatory behavior by strangers." Thus, most gated condominium residents talk about their fear of others often at the intersection of race and class—"workers," domestics, Blacks, Mexicans, and "ethnics." This notion of living with "people like us" was part of their explanation for why they live inside a secured enclave, and their desire for residential homogeneity underlines shoestring democracy in the sense that if everyone looks and seems the same, there would be no need to account for difference through more vibrant democratic and participatory practices.

While gated condominium developments have large areas of common space including roadways, swimming pools, and playgrounds, co-ops usually have only shared lobbies, laundry rooms, and/or mailbox areas; and while some have roof decks, many of these spaces are small. With little public space available to gather or meet and know other residents, tenants consistently rely on the doorman or the co-op board to deal with other residents. Thus, for co-op residents a sense of homogeneity is not created through seeing one another, but indirectly through the application process. As Vanessa shared: "there is a certain feeling like knowing that anyone else

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had to go through the same agony to get by the co-op board...that my next door neighbor isn't this ex-murderer or that they are not paying their rent by selling drugs [laughs]." Similarly, Patricia said, "I really trusted the homogeneity of that building, that I was not going to find someone so very different from me."

Even though some residents do not like the financial vetting by the co-op board and even question it, in the final analysis, residents like Kerry decide that it is probably "a good thing." Her meandering thoughts show the way "people like us" works in a variety of ways to regulate co-ops:

...first I'm thinking, like you know, "oh, that's a drag. Who are they to say?" ... But – but how do you know how to vet people? ... if you're vouched for by an employer or two and you have the money to pay for it, you should be in no matter who – ...unless you're clearly on – like a freaky, you know, person – although I don't know who's supposed to be the judge of that. ... I think that's... a good thing, probably.

While an applicant's financial standing is often the reason for access to purchase a property, socioeconomic class and norms are interlocked with financial status in the vetting process.

Others residents perceive the application process that produces the social homogeneity most residents find comforting as simultaneously having racist implications. Without attributing the selection process to overt racism, we found numerous incidents where people of color felt they were treated differently and White residents identified these patterns as well. Yul, who identified as Filipino, talked about what he perceived as racist questions during his application interviews, "things they won't ask in a job interview that you could sue for... [including] 'Do you cook any ethnic food that smells offensive?'" Yul went on to explain how this angered him but that he passed the co-op board interview.

Similarly, Yvonne, a Korean-American, explained her concerns about how the co-op board's ability to reject applicants without explaining their reasons can lead to a perception of racial and ethnic discrimination: "I think co-op boards can get away with discrimination without ...doing it outwardly because they don't have to tell you what they like and what they don't like." Yvonne explained a situation where she was called "you Chinese woman" by another resident because she "was the only Asian person around here." She ended by adding that "there

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will be days." Attributing this behavior to "days" makes the racism they experience in their buildings, made up of "generally...older white" people, appear as rare occurrences. Whiteness becomes a systematic and institutionalized form of merit while all other races embody the lack and detriment that is bound to that advantage (see Fine 2007; Powell Pruitt 2007).

The phenomenon of "people like us" creates a sense of safety among people that not only can afford the same expensive homes, but also look like the predominantly white and middle class individuals who can buy them. Thus, "people like us" reflects elements of "laissez-faire racism," whereby economic and social structures such as housing, labor, and social status perpetuate a racist status quo that residents' rationalize by saying to themselves "I am not racist, but the market is, and therefore I am excused from any implications of racism" (Bobo et al 1997). For example Gary, a White male, told us:

'Cause first of all, there's an income screen. By the time you enter a building like that, people have at least, can afford to rent and they can mortgage for a million dollar condo. Like the apartment, I bought this for six-fifty [years ago]. The one that's identical to this just got sold, and she was sold for a million two. And the person that bought it, was not acceptable to the board. Then it got re-sold for approximately a million. So, by the time you're at that level, uh, you're color blind but you don't see that many colors.

White co-op residents we interviewed recognize their sense of safety and notion of living with similar people as being produced by this pattern of laissez-faire racism within the people-like-us framework that does not "see that many colors." Co-op residents of color we interviewed tended to go along with the "people like us" framework when they could find ways to count themselves within the "us" through their purchasing power.

The desire to live with "similar" people who behave in a similar way is a normative aspect of housing preferences. Gated condominiums provide this desired homogeneity through the control of the price of housing, extensive CC&R's, and the containment and surveillance of communal spaces with walls and limited access. For this reason, gated communities are viewed by critics as increasing spatial segregation. Co-ops, on the other hand, provide homogeneity through the application and selection process thus creating a social environment that is perceived as "safe" and where residents "feel at home" without the imposition of spatial restrictions. Yet

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this supposed social and economic homogeneity also produces environments where minority residents feel singled out, and where racist behavior can more easily be exhibited.

### **Moral Minimalism**

Baumgartner (1988) argues that upper middle and middle class suburbs in the U.S. are moral systems, organized to promote what she calls "moral minimalism," a cultural system of controlling community conflict by external and structural means. Upper-middle class suburbs are physically and socially structured to provide privacy and separation, and households maintain considerable social distance. Neighbors have "weak ties" to other people in the community, similar to the "people like us" phenomenon we identified; although not strongly linked they can recognize one another. Residents monitor their environments closely to identify "those who do not belong," yet at the same time are sheltered by the privacy made possible by these tenuous relationships.

Upper middle class suburbs, then, are a distinct kind of neighborhood that combines diffuse interpersonal associations, homogeneity, autonomy, and independence with an absence of strangers. While this pattern of social organization may not characterize all suburbs—there is quite a range of suburban types—when it does exist it allows suburbanites to keep conflict at a minimum and to manage problems that do arise by avoidance rather than confrontation. In these circumstances, moral minimalism results in distaste for the pursuit of grievances or censure of wrongdoing. Only when the resident can be assured that someone else will bear the burden of moral authority, and enable them to remain anonymous and uninvolved, do they approve and/or practice any overt exercise of social control.

Gated condominium communities share many of the characteristics identified by Baumgartner, and residents, in fact, search for intermediary institutions so they do not have to talk to their neighbors. And while at least half of the people interviewed in condominiums said they were looking for an old-fashioned neighborhood where they knew and saw their neighbors, the corporate nature of the governance created more "moral minimalism" than community spirit (Low 2003). If there was conflict between neighbors, they want it handled by the homeowners' association board, not by themselves. Moral minimalism changes the nature of community by reducing the amount of conflict and contact residents have with each other, but it also tends to

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increase social isolation and, in the gated context, exaggerates residents' sense of fear and insecurity (Low 2003). Not knowing or interacting with neighbors encourages residents' concern that even someone right next door might harbor a dangerous person in their house, or allow someone who is potentially dangerous to enter into the community.

Choon-Piew Pow (2007) theorizes this fear of others and desire to exclude outsiders in another set of moral concerns found while studying gated communities in Shanghai, China. Rather than the moral minimalism we observed in the U.S., he observed that Shanghai's gated communities are shaped and justified by a moral discourse around residents' concerns with the intrusion of "uncivilized threats". In the Chinese context, gating is a form of social control that uses a moral framework to exclude rural immigrants who are perceived as defiling residents' pristine environment (Pow 2007: 1540). While similar to the U.S. discourse about the fear of others, in which the others can be Mexicans, Iranian Jews, Blacks, or working class Whites, Pow (2007) argues that gating is a distinct form of territoriality and encodes a moral code of who deserves to live within its walls. He argues that moral geographies of exclusion are a dominant component of urban segregation in housing and urban development in Shanghai. In Pow's analysis, moral ordering plays a different role than what we observed in the U.S., nonetheless, this cross-cultural example suggests that moral ordering and cultural codes play an important role in gated resident expectations and behavior.

Co-operative governance with co-op boards and extensive rules produces a similar kind of moral minimalism to what gated residents in the U.S. experience, but without the moral discourse of the "undeserving other" or "dangerous other" found in the gated communities in the U.S. and China. Co-op interviewees report how they attempt to resolve conflicts by not confronting each other and resorting to indirect tactics. For example Larry suggests:

I think the best way to live in a co-op in New York City is to maintain as friendly a relationship with people, with pleasantries and so forth, but live your quiet life because I don't know, what's the Italian expression, "Don't shit where you eat." You shouldn't, you know, have a very involved life with people.

Lost to participants then is the possibility of community, collaboration, and cooperation in that involvement with neighbors is imagined negatively.

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When Yul mentions a problem with another resident he recounts the series of steps he tried: "I told my friend the captain [of the building] and she brought it to the board's attention. And they said when you catch him doing it, call the security guard and he'll come up and stop the guy." Vanessa is worried about ever bringing anything up with her neighbors because of how they might view her as she told us, "I think I probably rather have them get involved (the board), I don't want to be the one to make waves, I rather like report it anonymously." While Yvonne simply says, "I always feel like someone's watching over my shoulder and I don't like that feeling you know and I think this building is particularly strict." These forms of moral minimalism are conflicting and overlapping at the same time.

In these seemingly small ways, private governance such as the use of a HOA or co-op board, allows residents to keep interpersonal and neighborhood conflict at minimum. The complex CC&R's or co-op rules and regulations guarantee that most problems are resolved before they start. On the other hand, they can reduce the amount of social interaction in the building and increase social isolation that Low (2003) reports occurs in her gated communities. Moral minimalism may work against members becoming involved and can reduce the possibilities of civic engagement especially in larger apartment buildings. In buildings with fewer units, there is markedly less moral minimalism in that all residents know one another, and in a few cases, almost a majority of residents participate or have participated on the board. The relationship of moral minimalism to the number of units in a building is important and needs to be studied further.

### **Issues of Representation and Civic Engagement**

One remedy to these deteriorating social relations that might change these social dynamics would be to promote better tenant participation and representation on these private boards, as emphasized in the Rochdale Principles. For example, HOA boards make decisions that affect every aspect of community life, yet very few gated residents in Low's (2003) study became involved. George, who lives in a gated community in New York City, suggests that there is considerable apathy that grows out of residents' desire to let others take care of things:

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There's a board of directors. We run this as a corporation, and there are bylaws and meetings. Apathy runs rampant in a homeowners' association like this. People just don't show up for meetings. So people who do [show up for meetings] become caretakers for the community. Because [it is a] volunteer board of directors, there are always questions like, "Why are they doing that?" Well, why aren't you there to say anything? It's kind of like you snooze-you-lose type of approach here. So...you have to go along with what the majority rules.

While co-op housing has a more explicitly democratic approach to private governance, co-op residents rarely participate in their building's governance choosing instead to defer policy and decision making to the co-op board. Asked if her co-op board adequately represents its residents, Patricia responded to the interviewer's question "So what would you consider it, if not a democracy?"

A fiefdom [laughs]! No, I'm not sure. A co-op is not a democracy, someone is on the board, someone runs it, and you have to have someone if you are not going to do it your self and you accept what they do and that is pretty much it.

Governance is thus often framed as a trade-off between freedom and representation among residents of both gated condominiums and co-ops in that "a co-op is not a democracy." Civic participation is seen as an undesirable and time consuming practice that a community can choose to outsource to a third party at the expense of direct representation.

However, the morals and values of third parties may be incongruent with the majority of residents and they are not always considered apolitical "caretakers." In describing his co-op board, Larry states:

I think that at all co-ops, and I hate to make a generality. But I think at these co-ops in New York that the people who run and generally end up running the board of the co-op, uh, in a very liberal and democratic city, tend to be conservative tyrants about how they run their, the stuff.

While Kerry, after describing her board as "all very rich, white men who would intimidate me," does not see this trade-off as much of a choice and rationalizes her nonparticipation as follows:

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Maybe if I knew that the board was comprised of people who were sort of like me, or at least they tried to have different kinds of people on the board, and that that was a requirement, that like the board be comprised by a representative of – representatives – like it would be, uh – a microcosm of what the building is.

As opposed to gated communities, that have no mandate to provide for member participation and education, co-op housing strives to fulfill the fifth Rochdale Principle, that the ICA defines as the obligation for co-ops to “provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives.” Without this dedication to education and a sense of inclusion, the participatory potential of co-ops is limited (ICA 2006).

The lack of structural and procedural knowledge that we found among co-op residents appears to reinforce both the moral minimalism and “people like us” ideals, and may work against full participation by co-op members who might otherwise be more politically and socially active. Whether framed as a voluntary or forced trade-off between freedom and representation, the lack of participation works against community by insulating residents from one another and concentrating the maintenance of morals and values in a few representatives.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This article compares gated condominium communities that are generally seen as increasing social segregation and civic disengagement, with co-ops that are perceived as promoting sociability and politically progressive values. Yet, both are legally organized through a corporate form of collective private ownership (CIDs) and have private governance structures (homeowners associations or co-op boards) that are similar. While we found that co-ops provide a greater sense of safety and comfort of living with “people like us” than in gated condominiums, co-ops still exhibit a certain amount of civic disengagement, particularly in larger buildings, and a tendency to reduce contact with other residents if there is conflict.

The greatest differences were found in discussions of safety, in that gated residents have developed an elaborate discourse of the fear of crime and others to explain why they moved to secured enclaves similar to other gated communities findings (Blakely and Synder 1997, Low

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2007, 2009, Bagaeen and Uduku 2010, Pow 2007). Co-op interviewees, on the other hand, generally feel safe in their buildings, often due to the financial vetting of the co-op board and the supposed protection of doormen, or because the building is located in a neighborhood perceived as safe. However, there was some variation in the responses to how safe co-op residents felt due to the location of the building, the perceived effectiveness of the doorman, and knowledge of crime in the area. The comfort co-op residents express about living with people like themselves contributes in some degree to this sense of safety. Unlike gated communities that have a condominium structure, co-op interviewees express relief that all prospective buyers have to go through a rigorous vetting process to be a co-op member. The financial credentials of all applicants are reviewed, such that co-op residents "know" that they will not be living with someone who is socioeconomically different, much less "an ex-murderer." This same application process, however, is perceived as reducing diversity, and encouraging the expression of racism within the building.

In gated condominiums, complex CC&Rs are written by the initial developer and modified by the homeowners association to restrict activities and behaviors that might cause conflict or reduce investment values (Low 2003, McKenzie 1998, 2003). While the same can be said for co-ops, the interviews indicate these complex rules and regulations also appear to mystify everyday governing practices for the average co-op resident. Moral minimalism and a lack of structural and procedural knowledge appear to insulate residents from local conflicts and disagreement, but also discourage civic participation. Further, like the discourse of "niceness" in Low's (2009) analysis of how a sense of middle-class privilege is maintained among gated residents, the co-op environment of restricted economic access and living with "people like us" reinforces social relations and structures that can discriminate against minority applicants and produce an uncomfortable environment for minority residents who live there.

Sennett (2001) suggests that this pattern of mutual disassociation is one manifestation of a new way to accommodate new waves of migrants and the increasing social and cultural difference found in U.S. cities and suburbs. But, he cautions, this mutual disassociation also means the end of certain kinds of citizenship practices and impacts urban civil society. The residential disengagement and lack of participation found in both gated condominiums and co-

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ops illustrates Sennett's contention, and while it might be socially adaptive in some urban contexts, proves to be deleterious especially in co-ops. Bagaeen and Uduku (2010) also question the sustainability of socially and spatially segregated private housing schemes such as gated communities, and conclude that it depends on the ability to maintain barriers between those inside and those outside both physically and psychologically. Our findings indicate that there are a number of psychological and physical strategies used to maintain this separation, but that these same strategies—fear of others, desire to live with "people like us" and moral minimalism—also contribute to the observed disengagement with everyday community life.

Our comparative analysis of the multiple forms of mutual disassociation found in both housing regimes, due in part to the private governance structure of the corporate governing board (HOA or co-op board) and legally mandated C.C.&Rs, has encouraged us to search for a concept or metaphor to better describe our findings. If a shoestring budget suggests a small amount of money dedicated to a certain purpose, or doing something by a shoestring, that is, just barely doing it or making it happen, then the term "shoestring democracy," reflects a limited amount of energy, money and time dedicated to community participation and governance activities. Thus, shoestring democracy characterizes the minimalist form of collective governance we found in both co-ops and gated condominiums. Conceptually it suggests a form of governance in which everyone has the technical means and political rights to participate, but only a self-selected few actually govern, vote and attend meetings. With the notable exception of small-sized co-op buildings, we found that only a few residents in a co-op or gated condominium governs on behalf of the majority. This process of shoestring democracy was found to insulate residents from local conflicts and disagreements, yet was also found to alienate residents from the governance process and, particularly in regard to safety and diversity, reproduce the morals and values of the board or HOA within the community.

In conclusion, we outline some proposals for making homeowners associations and co-op boards more accountable to their residents and to encourage greater adherence to the original aims of collective governance established by the Rochdale Principles. While early co-ops were developed on principles supporting social equality through participatory governance, both co-ops and condos demonstrate similar ways of working around such principles to concentrate

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governance among a few residents. This concentration of power is particularly problematic with regard to co-op boards financial vetting of prospective buyers that can take on racism overtones. For example The Dakota, a legendary New York co-op apartment building known for being restrictive, is currently being sued by a former board member who is accusing the building and several of its board members of racial discrimination and defamation (Latt and Haughney 2011). We feel that this type of excessive exclusionary behavior can be addressed by requiring co-ops to provide a reason for refusal to those whose applications are denied. Greater transparency and accountability would help to remedy the outsourcing practices of "laissez-faire racism" (Bobo et. al. 1996).

We also think that requiring co-ops and condos to make their processes and policies more transparent will allow their constituencies to participate more fully in the democratic policies that founded co-ops and should also support condo environments. Finally, more asynchronous communication among residents regarding governance issues would greatly enhance resident knowledge and thus encourage participation. A number of residents interviewed in co-ops and gated condominiums talked about online message boards, blogs, or listserves that were used by residents to discuss issues pertinent to the community or building. This communication allowed residents to stay informed about local issues on their own time and, in some cases, participate in governance matters outside of scheduled board meetings.

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### **Autobiographical Sketches**

Setha Low is Professor of Anthropology, Geography and Environmental Psychology, and Director of the Public Space Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her most recent books include: Politics of Public Space (2006 Routledge with Neil Smith), Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity (2005, University of Texas Press with S. Scheld and D. Taplin), Behind the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America (2004, Routledge), The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture (2003, Blackwell with D. Lawrence-Zuniga) and On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture (2000, University of Texas), Dr. Low was the President of the American Anthropological Association from 2007- 2009. She is currently working on a collaborative project with Dolores Hayden on Spatial Methods and Public Practices funded by Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences and writing a book on "spatializing culture."

Gregory T. Donovan is a Ph.D. candidate in Environmental Psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His research focuses on the political ecology of informational capitalism. His dissertation, [MyDigitalFootprint.org](http://MyDigitalFootprint.org), is a participatory action research project with New York City youth that explores the everyday experiences of young people developing in proprietary digital environments. He has held fellowships at the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics, the William E. Macaulay Honors College, and the Stanton/Heiskell Center for Telecommunication Policy. He is also the founder and current coordinator of the [OpenCUNY.org](http://OpenCUNY.org) Academic Medium.

Jen Giesecking is a Ph.D. candidate in Environmental Psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her research focuses on how co-productions of space and identity in urban spaces support or prevent sociospatial justice, with a focus on sexual identity and gender identity. Her dissertation focuses on the production of lesbians' and queer women's urban spaces and places in New York City from 1983 to 2008 in order to understand what the shifts in these spaces say about their changing experiences of justice and oppression. She is a 2010-11 Alexander von Humboldt German Chancellor's Fellow / Bundeskanzlerinstitipendiatin in Berlin where she is conducting comparative research on lesbians' and queer women's urban spaces. She received the CUNY Graduate Center Proshansky Dissertation Award and has been a Fellow with the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics.