Shoestring Democracy: Gated Condominiums and Market Rate Co-operatives in New York

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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.
Gates Not Walls as a Securitization Strategy: Gated Communities and Market Rate Co-operatives in New York

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Abstract

This article examines “gating” as a neoliberal securitization strategy with a specific focus on the private governance structures embedded in two types of collective housing schemes found in New York City and the adjoining suburbs: gated condominium communities (gated communities) and co-operative apartment complexes (co-ops). Drawing from ethnographies of gated communities and co-ops in New York City and Nassau County, New York, we examine both the walls that define these two forms of collective home ownership as well as the gates where access is negotiated to examine the impact of private governance structures on these communities and the social relations of residents. The greatest differences were found in discussions of safety and security, in that gated residents have developed an elaborate discourse of the fear of crime and others to explain why they moved to their secured communities. Moral minimalism and a lack of structural and procedural knowledge may insulate residents from local conflicts and disagreement, but also may discourage civic participation. While acknowledging that gating practices are in many ways historically and culturally contingent, we argue that gating is foremost linked to the processes and practices of the neoliberal era.
INTRODUCTION

This article examines “gating” as a neoliberal securitization strategy with a specific focus on the private governance structures embedded in two types of collective housing schemes found in New York City and adjoining suburbs: gated condominium communities (hereafter gated communities) and co-operative apartment complexes (hereafter co-ops). Gates are broadly theorized in this article as those physical and metaphorical barriers constructed to organize and regulate people according to specific economic, social, political, and cultural ideals. While walls function as barriers demarcating one space from another and create fixed, enclosed territories (Janz 2005; Leonard 2006), gates uniquely function as points where access to such territories is socially, economically, and culturally negotiated. Drawing from ethnographies of gated communities and co-ops in New York City and Nassau County, New York, we examine both the walls that define these two forms of collective home ownership as well as the gates where access is negotiated to examine the impact of private governance structures on these communities and the social relations of residents. While acknowledging that gating practices are in many ways historically and culturally contingent (Grant et al 2009), we argue across different types of gating practices to show that the phenomenon of gating is foremost linked to the processes and practices of the neoliberal era.
In the United States, where private homeownership has been touted as the primary means for citizens to achieve financial security and social status (c.f. Saegert et al 2008), the governance structures that regulate collective home ownership are being privatized through various schemes and increasingly operated as corporations. A study of gated communities completed in 2005 by the first author found that the greatest impact on social relations within the residential development was the structure of 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 board and other elements of common interest development housing, better known as condominiums, changed the nature of home ownership and the so-called “American Dream.” They 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 physical and metaphorical walls as well as gates (Low 2003). To understand further the impact of private governance on homeownership and housing schemes, [this research group], under direction of the first author, began a study of another form of private governance, co-op apartment complexes, to determine if some of the same outcomes—desire for safety and security, fear of others, moral minimalism, lack of representation and civic engagement, and exclusionary and racist behavior on the part of residents—would also be observed.
This article begins with a summary of gated communities and market rate co-ops including a brief history of each. A review of the original gated community analysis is followed by a description of the recent study of co-ops and a summary of the make-up of research interviewees. Excerpts drawn from the ethnographies are then used to illustrate various dimensions of comparison, including new domains of discourse found in the co-op interviews and differences in the interpretation of safety and security, interpersonal conflict and interaction, as well as representation and civic engagement at each research site. The conclusion outlines our preliminary findings on these two forms of collective ownership and private governance and their impact on civic engagement and social relations within the different housing schemes.

We find that in terms of securing safety, the walls that physically protect gated communities are not as successful as the “gating” strategies employed by co-op boards to evaluate potential residents financially and socially. Gated community residents remain more concerned with safety and more fearful of others than co-op residents, who believe they live with people like themselves. On the other hand, the governance structures of both co-ops and gated communities were found to increase the amount of moral minimalism among residents. That is, residents of both gated communities and co-ops tend to turn to their elected governing boards as well as hired management, and not to each other, to resolve conflicts. Further, the lack of representation and sense that the board does not
reflect one’s values or concerns, occurs in both housing schemes. Thus, the gating strategies that limit access to each other and to residents outside the community produce similar social relations, while the physical walls have less impact in securing safety. As our findings developed, we saw a particular link between the trend of gating and neoliberalism. Specifically, the recent effort to “roll-out” neoliberal tenets of increased governmental regulation of intralocal affairs for the sake of supporting extralocal economic interests was prominent (Peck et al 2002).

Ownership Structure in Condominium and Co-ops in New York

The major difference between market rate co-op housing and condominiums within gated communities is the structure of ownership. In this paper we treat gated communities and condominiums as synonymous in that almost all gated communities are condominiums. 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. Fees covering maintenance, taxes and improvements are distributed to all residents in
both organizations. The scope of board management is therefore greater in co-op
buildings than in the condominium communities.

While members legally organize both condominiums and co-ops as
corporations, that is, with a private governance structure that includes an elected
board that makes all decisions about the finances and repairs and is protected by
corporate legal statutes against lawsuits, there is still considerable difference in
the way they operate. Each private housing scheme has a distinct history that
influences current practices: condominiums have evolved based on a planning and
design model, and co-ops have been predicated on the adoption of idealized
principles. But the most important difference, other than ownership type, is the
degree of control by the board over the market transactions of buying and selling
of apartments or houses. In the condominium arrangement found in most gated
communities, an individual can sell or rent his or her apartment without the
approval of other residents or the condominium board. While the condominium
board has the right of first refusal to buy any apartment that comes up for sale, if
the board does not buy the apartment, the seller is free to sell or rent it to any
prospective buyer or lessee. 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
that approval. Prospective buyers of an apartment or house are presented to the
co-op board by the seller and the real estate agent with an extensive financial
review including tax returns and pay stubs going back as much as five years. Co-
op boards are notorious for refusing prospective buyers who may have already
qualified for a mortgage and are ready to purchase the property, for reasons that
they do not have to disclose. Although co-op boards are not allowed to
discriminate by race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexual orientation, they are
allowed to refuse entrance to those who the board believes represent a financial
risk.

**Brief History of Gated Condominium Communities**

Gated residential communities in the United States (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, and as resorts
exemplified by New York’s Tuxedo Park, developed as a hunting and fishing
retreat with a barbed wire fence eight feet high and twenty-four miles long in
1886 (Hayden 2003). Another early resort was Sea Gate in Brooklyn established
with its own private police force in 1899. The architect and real estate developer
Julius Pitman designed the majority of St. Louis’s non-public streets between
1867 and 1905 borrowing from the English private square to create exclusive
residential enclaves for the business elite (Low 2003, Hayden 2003).

The creation of the “common interest development” (CID) provided a legal
and administrative framework for the consolidation of collective residential
privatization. “Common interest development” describes “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 in 1928 (McKenzie 1994).

Even though gated communities originated in the East, their greatest expansion occurred in large planned retirement communities, such as Leisure World in Southern California, built in the 1960s and 1970s. Gates then spread to resort and country club construction and finally to suburban developments. In the 1980s, real estate speculation accelerated the building of gated developments 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 gated communities were rare in the 1980s, but by the early 1990s almost every condominium development of more that 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. By 1997, the United States contained in excess of twenty thousand gated communities offering more than three million housing units. The
2001 American Housing Survey found that 7,058,427 or 5.9 percent of households reporting live in communities surrounded by walls or fences with limited access through a gate, and 4,013,665 households, or 3.4 percent, live in communities where access is controlled by entry codes, keys cards, or security guard approvals (Sanchez et al 2002). The West as a region 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).

**Brief History of Housing Co-ops in New York City**

Housing co-ops have been organized to secure homeownership for various groups within the U.S. for over 100 years. The first housing 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). Politically and socially progressive goals were reflected in the adoption of an idealized governance ethic known as the Rochdale Cooperative Principles. Established in England by the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844,
the Rochdale Cooperative Principles provides a set of standards for the governance of co-ops (Conover 1959).

According to Siegler and Levy (1986), the Finnish Home Building Association established the first true housing co-op in the U.S. in Brooklyn in 1918. The development 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. 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 (I.C.A.) four decades later in 1966 and included as part of its "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 (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 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 and subletting these units (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 with incomes below the poverty rate, so that the majority of coops are comprised of middle and upper income owners. Over 80% of U.S. coops are located within New York City (Schill et al 2004).

**Methodology**

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

This research began with gaining entry into upper middle and middle income gated subdivisions in 1994 and 1995: one in Nassau County on Long Island, and three in the northern suburbs of San Antonio, Texas. A middle income and middle to lower middle income community in the New York City area was added in 2000 and 2005, to answer questions about class and cultural differences that arose later in the project. Seven gated communities: three with single family housing (units were approximately 3500 square feet), three with attached townhouses (approximately 1200-1500 square feet), and one apartment complex (800-1200 square feet)–were studied in the two regions (Low 2003). 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 fifty households were interviewed over the first eight years, and another four more recently.

The two-hour open-ended interview was organized around a semi-structured residential history conducted in the home with the wife or single woman, husband or single man or husband and wife 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 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 from full-time employment.

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 provided 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 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, and data collection was completed in
September 2007 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. Unlike the gated community
study, it was less complicated to identify possible participants, but more difficult
actually to conduct interviews in that the interviewers 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 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 coops in New York City. 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 homosexual, fourteen as heterosexual, and four individuals did not identify their sexual orientation. All participants have completed college; most respondents noted that they had finished or were in the process of completing 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 Forest Hills in Queens to Park Slope in Brooklyn. Most participants reside in studios and 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, but a few were converted in the mid-1990s; 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 complicated application and interview process, and ten serve or have served on their co-op board.

The open-ended interviews were organized around a semi-structured series of questions that included the same residential history used in the previous gated community study with additional questions about doormen, the co-op board, the building conversion, and the application process. 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 undertaken 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: securing safety, people like “us,” and moral minimalism, were selected to compare the co-op findings to those from the gated community study. We conclude with a discussion of representation and civic engagement at co-ops and gated communities as they relate to each of these
three themes.

Findings

Securing Safety

To examine how “gating” functions as a neoliberal securitization strategy it is necessary to begin with a discussion of the securitization of safety among residents. In a neoliberal society, where market-based social control mechanisms are employed in lieu of social welfare programs, citizens are encouraged personally to adopt private securitization strategies to mitigate what are often local and global problems (c.f. Monahan 2006, Katz 2001). As such, attempts among residents to ensure a sense of safety exists in reciprocal relation to local and global conditions that produce a sense of fear and instability – both of which are reflected in structures such as private governance (Low 2008).

This section teases apart the intertwined feelings of safety and security, as expressed by residents of both co-ops and gated communities, and analyzes them in relation to the governance structure of the respective unit types. Although similar, and used interchangeably at times by participants, safety and security are not synonymous concepts. While security is expressed as a desire for stability, control, and homogeneity and is ensured by guarding something from threat, safety is expressed as a desire to protect something of high value – including oneself – and is often ensured by securitization practices.
Ensuring safety is a primary goal of gated community residents. All U.S. studies of gated community inhabitants report that between 70-80% of interviewees say that they moved because of their fear of crime (Blakey and Synder 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 gates make them feel safe, but then question how authentic that safety really is. In this context, gates are discussed as a strategy for assuring safety through the regulation of those individuals within the community. Donna for example commented:

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 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 resident noted, “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” was perceived as a breach of security that depressed feelings of safety. The heterogeneity introduced by the presence of these “workers” prompted such safety concerns.
Co-op residents seem less concerned with safety than those in gated communities, 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, secures a homogenous community that provides a 'safe' space in 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 [it] gives a little bit of piece of mind.

Like Vanessa, Kerry was 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.

For Sarah there was a disparity between the safety of her co-op and the streets and other buildings of the surrounding neighborhood. She attributed crime to nearby institutions, but still felt her building was 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 [in] that building. I’ve seen it. But they never bother me.

For some co-op residents a concern for safety is palpable and warrants additional securitization strategies. Yul’s Queens apartment building has security guards rather than doormen, and he has heard of problems such as 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.

If, as David Harvey (2005) has argued, the neoliberal state aims to maximize the social good by bringing everyday life into the domain of the market, then private governance structures such as gated communities and co-ops should be understood as neoliberal securitization strategies. As fears of global economic instability are stoked by geopolitical border disputes and xenophobic attitudes toward the other, citizens attempt to ensure their own safety, among other things, through the private securitization of their immediate environments. Privately employed doormen or management, unregulated housing markets, private governing boards that function much like a board of trustees, and the financial evaluation of prospective tenants become common strategies for securing personal safety within one’s home and local community. While residents’ feelings of and desires for safety are based on their own situated experiences, the private security strategies drawn on to address these feelings are rooted in neoliberal ideology.

Co-op interviews revealed a range of sentiment concerning the securitization of safety within the apartments, buildings, and neighborhoods of residents. Nonetheless, the majority of interviewees said they felt 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 had 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, and its relationship to feelings of security, is in sharp contrast with those of gated community residents. This 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 membership. Whether or not neoliberal securitization strategies actually enhance feelings of safety among residents, they do represent a prominent mechanism by which the market is brought into everyday life through private governance structures.

People Like Us

Low (2003) has argued 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 communities do not have many public places were strangers intermingle, and their relative isolation and homogeneity discourages interaction with people who are identified as “other.” M. P. 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 community residents
talk about their fear of others—“workers,” domestics, Blacks, Mexicans, and
“ethnics”—as part of their explanation for why they live inside a secured enclave.

While co-op apartment residents do not live in identical settings, a strong
measure of homogeneity is created through the application process. Co-ops often
only have shared lobbies, laundry rooms, and/or mailbox areas, while some have
roof decks; many of these spaces are small. As a substitute for physical gathering
spaces, many co-op participants with doormen noted that their relationships with
these gatekeepers were their primary interactions with those inside the building.
With little public space available to gather or meet and know other residents,
tenants consistently rely on the gatekeepers of the co-op board. As Vanessa
shared “there is a certain feeling like knowing that anyone else 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.” Trust then develops in
a similar way in both gating situations: a trust built upon sharing physical space
with those of the same sociocultural values and norms. However, the specifics of those values should be closely examined.

Even though some residents resent the financial vetting by the co-op board and even question it, in the final analysis, residents like Kerry suggested that it is probably “a good thing.” As she told her interviewer:

…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 also identified these patterns. Yul, a self-identified 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 he had successfully purchased and passed the co-op board interview for two apartments.

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 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” prompts measures of securitization by finding safety among others that not only can afford the same expensive homes, but also look like the predominantly white individuals who can buy them. “People like us” bears elements of “laissez-faire racism,” whereby economic and social structures such as housing, labor, and social status tend to perpetuate, i.e.
the mentality that I am not racist but the market is and therefore I am excused
from any implications of racism (Bobo et al 1997). 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 understand 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. 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.

This kind of merit is evidenced not only in race and class, but also in
regard to sexuality. Residents in one building used another resident’s fear of being
outed as a gay man to control how much access he had to garden space. This
individual acquiesced to these demands because he saw it as “preserving life in
the middle of danger.” These everyday events therefore are experienced as
tolerable, shared as anecdotal, and accumulate in the discourse of “people like us”
that extends beyond race and class to police most aspects of identity into an aim
of homogeneity. The desire to live with “similar” people and with individuals
who behave in a similar way is a normative dimension of housing preferences.
Gated communities provide this desired homogeneity by controlling for the price
of housing, extensive CC&R’s, and the containment and surveillance of
communal spaces with walls and limited access. For this reason, critics argue
gated communities increase spatial segregation. Co-ops, on the other hand,
provide homogeneity through the application and selection process, thereby
creating a social environment that is perceived as “safe” and where residents “feel
at home” without the imposition of spatial restrictions that affect others just like
them. Yet this supposed social and economic homogeneity also produces
environments in which minority residents feel singled out, and where racist
behavior can more easily be exhibited. This phenomenon of “people like us”
mimics the neoliberal state by privatizing assets in favor of free markets and the
right to private property; the fallout is an exacerbated process of othering
alongside a rhetoric of fear that divides an “us” from a “them.” Much as with the
securing of safety, resident strategies to secure homogeneity are representative of
the extent to which the market is embedded in everyday life through private
governance structures. As such, “people like us” is the underbelly of
governmental strategies that “trickle down” into home spaces as seen in moral
minimalism.

**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 these phenomena are not strongly linked, were they individuals, they could readily 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 loosely held 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 to 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 social control. This stance resembles the structures of autonomy, surveillance, and control exerted by corporations which are legally regarded as persons in the neoliberal state and the resultant processes whereby actual persons shoulder the responsibilities (and costs) the corporations refuse to address (Harvey 2005).

Gated condominium communities share many of the characteristics identified by Baumgartner. Condominium community 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 by Low (2003) said they were looking for an old-fashioned neighborhood where they knew and saw their neighbors, the corporate nature of the community’s governance created more “moral minimalism” than shared spirit. If there was conflict between neighbors, interviewees wanted 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 increases social isolation and, in the gated context, exaggerates residents’ sense of fear and insecurity. Not knowing or interacting with neighbors reinforces residents’ concern that even someone right next door might harbor a dangerous person in their house, or allow someone who is potentially dangerous through the gates and
into the community. The homeowners association (HOA) board, thus, provides a secondary kind of “gating” by reducing contact between residents and, in fact, restricting the kinds of encounters that can occur. The HOA board provides securitization from conflicts and neighbor intrusions.

Co-op board governance and extensive rules for such buildings produces a similar kind of moral minimalism and offers the same securitization gated community residents experience. In many ways, the very idea of “cooperation” seems lost in these modern-day, neoliberal co-op structures. Co-op interviewees report how they attempt to resolve conflicts by not confronting each other and resorting instead to indirect tactics. For example Larry observed:

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.

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 remarked, “I think I probably [would] rather have them get involved
(the board), I don’t want to be the one to make waves, I rather like [to] report it anonymously.” While Yvonne simply said, “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.”

In these seemingly small ways, a homeowners association or co-op board functions as a form of neoliberal private governance as it enhances the ability of residents to minimize interpersonal and neighborhood conflict; this is not to say that homeowners associations or co-op boards are inherently neoliberal, but rather that in these contexts they reinforce such practices. The complex CC&R’s or co-op rules and regulations guarantee that most problems are resolved before they start. On the other hand, those same strictures can reduce the amount of social interaction in the building and increase social isolation, much like that Low (2003) reported earlier occurs in some gated communities. In gated communities and co-ops, moral minimalism may work against members becoming involved and can reduce the possibilities of civic engagement, especially in larger apartment buildings. In cooperatives with few 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 co-op’s board. The relationship of moral minimalism to the number of units in a building needs to be studied further.
Conclusion: Issues of Representation

This article began by asking why gated communities are seen as increasing social segregation and civic disengagement, while coops are perceived as promoting sociability and politically progressive values when both are forms of collective private ownership and private governance. These broadly held perceptions were inconsistent with our data. Co-ops were found to provide a greater sense of safety and comfort of living with “people like us” than was found in gated communities in New York. But at the same time, co-ops still exhibited a certain amount of civic disengagement, particularly in larger buildings. Co-ops also tended to encourage residents to reduce their contact with other owners if there is conflict, as is the case in gated communities. In both settings, the phenomenon of gating reinforces the tenets of neoliberalism.

The greatest differences in the two housing forms were found in discussions of safety and security. Gated residents have developed an elaborate discourse of the fear of crime and others to explain why they moved to their secured communities. Co-op interviewees, on the other hand, generally felt safe in their buildings, often due to the gatekeeper effect of the co-op board and doorman, or because the building is located in a neighborhood perceived as safe. However, although minimal, there was variation in responses to how safe co-op residents feel due to the location of the building, the effectiveness of the doorman, and knowledge of crime in the area. It is possible that the comfort co-op residents
express about living with people like themselves contributes in some degree to this sense of safety. Unlike gated communities with a condominium structure, co-op interviewees express relief that they knew all prospective buyers would have to go through a rigorous vetting process to become a cooperative member. The financial credentials of all applicants are reviewed, such that co-op residents “know” that they will not be living with someone who was socioeconomically different, much less “freaky” or “an ex-murderer.” Interviewees, however, perceived the co-op application process as severely reducing diversity within buildings.

In gated communities, the “complex CC&Rs guarantee that most problems are resolved before they start” (Low 2003, McKenzie 1998, 2003). While the same can be said for co-ops, our interviews indicate these complexities also appear 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. Like “niceness” in Low’s (2009) analysis of how a sense of middle class whiteness 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.
One remedy, it seems, 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, homeowner association boards in gated communities make decisions that affect every aspect of community life, yet very few gated community residents in Low’s (2003) study became involved. George, who lives in a gated community in New York City, suggested there is considerable apathy that grows out of residents’ desire to let others take care of things:

> There’s a board of directors. We run this as a corporation, and there are bylaws and meetings. Apathy runs rampant in a homeowner 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:
Interviewer: So what would you consider it, if not a democracy?

Patricia: A fiefdom [laughter]! 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 communities and co-ops. 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 are not always considered apolitical “caretakers.” In describing his co-op board, Larry observed:

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,” doesn’t see this trade-off as much of a choice and rationalizes her nonparticipation as follows:

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 I.C.A. defines as an 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 cooperatives.” Without this dedication to education and a sense of inclusion, the participatory potential of co-op residents is limited (I.C.A. 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” working assumptions and may work against full participation by co-op members who might otherwise be more active. This situation only reinforces neoliberal ideals of privatization, surveillance, and private property, before community. Whether framed as a voluntary or forced trade-off between freedom and representation, the lack of participation works against community by isolating residents from one another and concentrating the maintenance of morals and values in a select few representatives. All of these characteristics, ironically, appears to reinforce fears and insecurity among residents over the unknown “others” in their midst.
References


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

Setha Low (slow@gc.cuny.edu), Gregory T. Donovan (gdonovan@gc.cuny.edu) and Jen Gieseking (jgieseking@gc.cuny.edu)
Public Space Research Group, Center for Human Environments
The Graduate Center of the City University of New York
365 Fifth Avenue New York, NY 10016-4309

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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.
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 co-operative 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.
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 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 comprehension 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 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 a CID) 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 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 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).

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
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 lead 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.

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 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 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 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.

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 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 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 were 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 had to go through the same agony to get by the co-op board…that my next door neighbor isn’t this ex-murder 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 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 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 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.

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:

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:

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 2007, 2009, Bagaeen and Udoku 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-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
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.
References


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 understanding the mutual shaping of informational environments and people’s work, play, self-expression and civic engagement. His dissertation, MyDigitalFootprint.org, is a participatory action research project focused on the interests and concerns of young people growing up in the increasingly regulated and policed digital environments of New York City.

Jen Gieseking is a Ph.D. candidate in Environmental Psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her research focuses on the everyday co-productions of space and identity, with a special concentration on sexuality and gender. 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 say about their changing experiences of justice and oppression.