

AN UNHEMMED DRESS:

Popular Preservation and Civic Disobedience on the Manhattan Waterfront from the 1960s-2010s

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Abstract:

This article examines preservationist attitudes towards the derelict Manhattan waterfront from the early 1960s to the present. It explores the complex relationships between civic disobedience, selective public engagement and 'proper' metropolitan citizenship that have characterised the constantly-shifting urban geography and built landscape of Manhattan for over two hundred years and have been complicated at the island's perimeter. Looking at popular preservationist writing by *New Yorker* staff writer Joseph Mitchell, the photographer Walker Evans, and the *New York Times* architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable, among other sources, I argue that Manhattan's identity as a city of, in novelist Henry James' words, "restless renewals" (1907: 111), is cast in relief at its watery edges. A study of the waterfront's particular place in Manhattan's public imagination and popular culture, provides a unique vantage point from which to consider the city's complex and exclusive notion of public access and acceptable citizenship, its longstanding disinclination to archive itself in its promotion of urban developments that tend to resist the renewal of existing buildings and landmarks, and the commitment of its citizens to engaging Manhattan's past in the service of its present and future.

Keywords:

New York City; Manhattan, waterfronts; preservation; urban Studies; maritime History

Introduction

The great American city is as unattainable as the great American novel. The figure of the city itself is about as archival as a trade paperback whose spine is meant to be broken by mass transit consumption. (Bordowitz, 2004: 180)

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries New York City owed much of its economic power to its ports, particularly those located on the Lower East and West Sides of its primary borough, Manhattan. Positioned at the mouth of the Hudson River and the Atlantic Ocean, the area's strikingly hospitable estuary made it a natural port. These features impressed New York's early settlers, such the Florentine explorer Giovanni da Verrazano, who first landed in New York Harbour in 1524, and Henry Hudson, who

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landed there in 1609. Owing to its geological advantages, Manhattan was an ideal location from which to penetrate the interior of this 'New World' and retain commercial and political links with the 'old country.'

Manhattan's international prominence as a port town dates back to its earliest settlement, when docks along the tip of Manhattan Island were first built, but the bulk of its development as a harbour of note occurred in the early-to-mid-19th Century. This was the real heyday of the Manhattan waterfront; the accessibility of the harbour for both European cargo ships and deliveries from the country's interior via the Erie Canal rendered it "the dominant American seaport" prior to the civil war (Betts, 1997: 39). Warehouses were originally located on the east side of Manhattan, but relocated to grander and more accessible Hudson River wharves by the 1840s. This maritime utopia was, however, plagued by theft, piracy, and organised crime. A report by the city's police chief in 1850 estimated that almost five hundred river pirates were active in lower Manhattan, and an estimated one million dollars of merchandise was stolen from the docks each year (Santé, 1991: 204). Racketeering, and the smuggling of contraband liquor and narcotics became a growing problem as Mafia presence on the waterfront increased, and in August 1953, the Waterfront Commission was formed to combat this mounting riverside crime. Grand warehouses and piers were then left abandoned as shipping industry in the city declined and air travel increased. Manhattan's financial focus had moved inland to Wall Street by the mid-1960s.

In his opening remarks to a conference on the future of the Manhattan waterfront in 1966, newly elected Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton lamented the fact that the once-bustling riverside had:

fallen into decay and disuse despite the development of several modern piers. Suffering from years of neglect and divided authority, it has too long been regarded as marginal land, a dumping ground for industries, highways, rotting piers and raw sewage (Buttenwieser, 1987: 203).

Since its initial economic decline in the late 1950s, multiple municipal bodies had tried and failed to determine a homogeneous public function for the waterfront. Each had discovered, in turn, that the size of the port and the persistence of its rich history in the collective imagination of the city's public made such large scale regeneration almost impossible to achieve successfully. Capitalising on a growing national concern for protecting sites of historic interest and seeking to attach the city's harbour to the surge in protective legislation that followed President John F. Kennedy's Urban Renewal Program earlier in the decade, Sutton accentuated the relevance of waterfront preservation to Manhattan against the backdrop of its declining commercial function and argued that any new development policy for the space must take note of its potential as an area for public recreation: "The public has been and continues to be denied access to the waterfront" (Buttenwieser, 1987: 203). Similarly, in 1967 the Mayor's Task Force noted that, "[t]he city is almost 25% water, with no less than 578 miles of waterfront within the city limits. This presents opportunities for both lyricism and liveliness that have largely been ignored" (Boyer, 1994: 465). The author of a later *New York Times* article complained that the under-utilised riverside rendered the island of Manhattan like "an unhemmed dress" (Boyer, 1994: 465). The incompleteness that the architect Le Corbusier had celebrated on his visit to New York in 1935, delighting in "a city in the process of becoming," was no longer considered a positive feature (Page, 1999: 17). The conception of the waterfront as "marginal land," along with the vague language, like

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“lyricism and liveliness,” in which building proposals were rendered in this era of confused urban preservation, made commercial redevelopment of Manhattan’s waterfront deeply problematic.



Figure 1. Map of lower Manhattan and Brooklyn Shore (2014 – Google Maps, adapted by author).

In this article, reading preservationist activity on the waterfront from the early 1960s to the present, I explore the complex relationships between civic disobedience, selective public engagement and ‘proper’ metropolitan citizenship that have characterised the constantly-shifting urban geography and built landscape of Manhattan for over two hundred years and have been invariably complicated and made more explicit at the island’s perimeter. In Max Page’s analysis, Manhattan’s landscape has been shaped across two centuries by a characteristic practice of “creative destruction” (1999: 2), a positive recasting of Michel de Certeau’s criticism in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, of New York as a “city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental relief,” that “invents itself, hour by hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future” (1984: 91). The liminal, transitory qualities of the waterfront, as the domain of ships, peripatetic sailors, temporary labourers and changing functions,

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have been augmented by the incompleteness of the city that it fringes. The area's preservation has also, always, been a complex negotiation of the city's engagement with its past. To Kenneth Jackson, "historic preservation was a preoccupation of social factions that were losing out in the contest to control New York's future" (in Mason: 2009: xiii), and waterfront renewal was dependent on a socio-politically exclusive conception of the general public - 'the people of the city' - and a false representation of the extent of the waterfront's abandonment; a complicated understanding of civic engagement in the urban context that leaves its full history scattered between articles in the *New Yorker*, op-ed pieces in the *New York Times* and personal diaries. A study of the topos of the waterfront provides a vantage point from which to consider the city's complex and exclusive notion of public access and acceptable citizenship, its longstanding disinclination to archive itself in its promotion of urban developments that tend to resist the renewal of existing buildings and landmarks, and the commitment of its citizens to engaging Manhattan's past in the service of its present and future.

At the Water's Edge

As the city neared bankruptcy in the mid-1970s, municipal focus moved once again towards developing the commercially neglected, antiquated waterfront into open, public spaces. The opportunities for public recreation presented by the post-industrial harbour had, for the most part, been ignored by an underfunded Parks Department, which had suffered a fifty-percent cut in personnel since 1968. In 1978, \$25 million was set aside for capital investment in public parks and beaches (Wagner, 1980: 78). As Robert F. Wagner Jr., then Deputy Mayor for Policy, noted in 1980: "The least desirable activities (the Department of Sanitation) were assigned to the waterfront... [It] suffered serious neglect, to the point where an observer approaching many parts of it today would think the nation's leading port a South Bronx-by-the-Sea" (1980: 80). In a speech marking the fortieth anniversary of the City Planning Commission in 1979, recently-appointed Mayor Edward Koch remarked that:

if there is one thing that I want my administration to be identified with, it is that we brought the harbour back to the city of New York, that we built on our greatest treasure, that we opened the waters to the people of the city (in Buttenweiser, 1987: 205).

Wagner and Koch were representative of a broader push for waterfront redevelopment across the United States in the late 1970s - as seen in San Francisco and Boston - and symptomatic of what Ann Buttenweiser describes as a shift in public attitudes towards Manhattan's rich maritime history, epitomised by the popular tall ship tours and riverfront festivals held across the country in celebration of the national bicentennial in 1976 (1987: 204). Wagner advocated that "[t]he waterfront must be viewed as a mosaic, made up of a variety of elements, each of which exists by its own character and strengths and yet are united by their strong ties to the heart of the City," while also supporting Robert Moses' multi-billion dollar Westway project, which would have seen four and a half miles of abandoned piers on the Lower West Side destroyed and replaced by 182 acres of landfill (Jacobs, 1980: 96). The proposal met with extensive public opposition and struggled with mounting costs and court actions. In 1982, for example, a District Court judge blocked an important permit on the grounds that the road would harm local fish, that had returned to the Hudson in the wake of the 1972 national Clean Water Act. Campaigners objected most strongly to the prioritising of highways over mass transit

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services, like the city's beleaguered subway network. By the time of the bicentennial, the plans were so unpopular that Koch made scrapping the Westway a prominent feature of his mayoral campaign, arguing that the government funds were being misappropriated to provide opportunities for private developers. Once in office, however, Koch, advised by Wagner, backed down on this promise, but popular opposition to Westway continued and the project was finally abandoned in 1985. Various municipal conflicts and financial ineptitude fueled widespread public disapproval and effective public protests, leaving Koch's earlier pledge to reinvigorate Manhattan's 'greatest treasure' unfulfilled.

Even in its abandoned state, the harbour captured the imagination of the city's residents and policy makers. A hotbed of crime and commerce, the waterfront enjoyed an enduring fame that, as Samuel Delany has observed of the city's Times Square, "hinged upon an image of the illicit and the perverse as much as it hinged upon" its history of legitimate maritime trade (1999: xi). As early as 1892, the social reformer Helen Campbell noted that in Manhattan's "curious" waterfront spaces "no one is turned away, and sailors, negro longshoremen, marketmen, and stray women, come and go, and fare alike (1893: 251). The waterfront was, after Times Square, an ideal location for what Samuel Delany has described as "cross-class contact," both social and sexual, fear of which lurked behind "the positive foregrounding of 'family values' (along with, in the name of such values, the violent suppression of urban social structures, economic, social, and sexual)... a wholly provincial and small-town terror" of the mixing of publics (1999: 153). Indeed, Delany employed a maritime metaphor when describing the ideal environment for this kind of contact:

thinking through the problem of where people, male and female, gay and straight, old and young, working class and middle class, Asian and Hispanic, black and other, rural and urban, tourist and indigene, transient and permanent, with their bodily, material, sexual, and emotional needs, might discover (and even work to set up) varied and welcoming harbors for landing on our richly variegated urban shore (1999: xx).

The harbour had not been without multiple subcultural appropriations by marginalised citizens. From the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, the years preceding the HIV/AIDS epidemic, hundreds of gay men cruised the vast crumbling piers and warehouses nightly in darkness, and, with only the most cursory policing, embracing this peculiar hybrid zone of private and public space. The artist and writer David Wojnarowicz documented this appropriative waterfront sexual culture and "the gradual decline of these places as... poverty spread throughout the country" in the 1970s (1989: 118). His writings depict busy "sexual hunting grounds" in a space "as far away from civilization as (one) could walk," that had lain derelict and without any commercially or politically legitimated function for close to two decades; a space effectively outside any civic jurisdiction; inaccessible, but not unknown, to many of the city's residents (Blinderman, 1989: 54). Wojnarowicz noted that "(c)ity officials as usual were indifferent to the death of minorities, sexual and otherwise" on the piers and a lack of policing meant gay bashings and muggings were commonplace (1989: 118). As Robert Dowling argued in his recent study on 'slumming,' what was most threatening about the waterfront district to civic authorities and most appealing to marginalised citizens was that it "appealed to no one ethnicity, class, race, or gender," and in so doing, fostered a heterogeneous conception of civic identity, welcoming a diverse citizenry to border the city, the 'marginal land' that Sutton lamented (Dowling, 2007: 20). Like Wojnarowicz, Adonis Baugh, a homeless man from Brooklyn who lived at the piers in the 1970s and 1980s, remembers a populous

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utopian space where “you (could) go, no matter what age you were, and be you... Drag queens, transgenders [sic]... Everybody not considered the norms could go there and be themselves and not looked at any other way” (Shephard and Smithsimon, 2011: 110). Creating a fiction of total abandonment, writing out the waterfront’s unsanctioned social and sexual appropriations was a municipal strategy of social exclusion. The harbour’s unsanctioned appropriations - its other stories - resurfaced in the city’s press, its popular non-fiction, and on film, and were policed through the same cultural apparatus.

Representing the waterfront

As trade through the port boomed in the 1930s, a number of Hollywood films explored the harbour’s criminal underbelly and its effects on the city’s residents, employing stories of labour unrest and organised crime on the harbour as metaphors for positive and municipally-approved public engagement. *I Cover the Waterfront* (James Cruze, 1933), was based on the writings of Max Miller, a reporter on the San Diego waterfront for the city’s *Sun* newspaper during the Depression. *Port of New York* (Laslo Benedek, 1949) told the story of a customs official out to prevent the distribution of smuggled opium. The multi-Oscar-winning *On the Waterfront* (1954), written by Budd Schulberg and directed by Elia Kazan, starred Marlon Brando as Terry Malloy, a longshoreman and daring Mob informer, and was based on a series of articles for the *New York Sun* by Malcolm Johnson, detailing corruption on Manhattan and Brooklyn’s “waterfront jungle” (Ward, 2010: xx). “Murder on the waterfront is commonplace,” Johnson wrote, and “a logical product of widespread gangsterism” (Ward, 2010: xvii). Like *I Cover the Waterfront*, Kazan’s film was based on recent historical events and popular journalism. As recent studies by Nathan Ward and James T. Fisher have demonstrated, waterfront corruption and union rigging was widespread and seemingly impossible to control; it was “no Hollywood invention” (Ward, 2010: A17). In *On the Waterfront*, the harbour and its longshoremen’s unions were represented as ‘spaces’ in which the parameters of civic engagement and national identity were cast in relief and thoroughly tested. As such, the heroic characterisation of Malloy, the informer, ‘on the waterfront’ must be considered within the controversial political context of the film’s production. Kazan had appeared as a witness before the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1952 and was heavily criticised by many of his industry peers for naming a number of alleged communists in the film business. The film’s original scriptwriter, the playwright Arthur Miller, was replaced by Schulberg, another HUAC witness, after Kazan’s appearance before the Committee, and shortly before Miller was blacklisted as a Communist. Miller’s ‘A View from the Bridge’ (1955) was developed from ‘The Hook,’ an unfinished script he produced with Kazan in the early 1950s, is a tragic representation of the kinds of familial and social breakdown fostered by the corrupt culture of waterfront unions in the post-war period. The play is a tragic representation of the kinds of familial and social breakdown fostered by the corrupt culture of waterfront unions in the post-war period. “America,” Miller wrote after visiting a hiring at working piers in Brooklyn, “stopped at Columbia Street” (Ward, 2010: xix). The edge of the land was the edge of American civility.

Hollywood’s focus on criminal activity at the waterfront declined as the area’s commercial eminence waned in the late 1950s, but fond depictions of the harbour in literary culture increased and had a clear preservationist motive. More nostalgic than their filmic counterparts, these representations tended to memorialise past waterfront labour as “honorable sweat,” and urged their readers to identify as public protectors of

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this disappearing space (Evans, 1960: 145). As John Tunbridge observed in his study of waterfront revitalisation strategy, “the withdrawal of port functions” from the late 1950s was considered “an exceptional opportunity to restore the historic links between the populace and the waterfront, to reclaim a heritage resource, and to exploit a prime reserve of inner-city redevelopment land” in the face of economic decline (1988: 68). Early urban American restructuring projects, like that of the Manhattan harbour, were often framed carefully as processes of renewal, rather than redevelopment, prompted by concerns following public disapproval of some ‘new frontier’ building programmes, like the 1961 Area Redevelopment Act, and slum clearances, undertaken as part of the Kennedy’s administration’s Urban Renewal Program. Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was first published in 1961, and presented “an attack... on the principles of aims that have shaped modern, orthodox city planning and rebuilding,” and in particular the increased urban roadways proposed by Robert Moses (1965: 13). The ‘new frontier’ housing projects of the early 1960s, Jacobs argued, “sealed against any buoyancy or vitality of city life,” and were filled with “civic centres that are avoided by everyone but bums” (1965: 14).

In November 1960, a year after Moses proposed the East River harbour’s designation as an Urban Renewal Area, *Fortune* magazine published a photo-essay by Walker Evans entitled ‘On the Waterfront.’ It featured photographs by Evans of warehouses, sidewalks punctuated by weeds, and signs for declining storage companies on the Brooklyn, South Street, Lower West Side and New Jersey waterfronts (see online version). There was no mention of the criminal ‘jungle’ that had captured the imagination of the city’s film-going public only six years earlier. Evans’s failure to note the Mafia-led unions that had once dominated port activity highlighted the declining numbers of longshoremen on the waterfront and the harbour’s transition into the post-industrial. “The warehouse operators’ chief headaches,” Evans wrote in his accompanying text, “are voluminous paper work, floods of inspectors, petty thievery, breakage, and the animal and insect world. A bug in a rug is a serious matter” (1960: 146). Evans’s tone is difficult to ascertain; the solemn photographic depictions of what he describes as “obsolete” warehouses, rusting and empty, conflict with the text’s earnest description of “booming” trade (1960: 146). While white-collar trade further downtown was developing successfully in the 1960s, port activity was faced with almost total shutdown. Increased building in the vicinity of Wall Street, adjacent to the South Street waterfront, had cast the future of all residual maritime architecture into doubt. It even threatened the relocation of the Fulton Fish Market, which had been based at the East Side harbour since 1822. Indeed, the East River waterfront was intended to form the base of the World Trade Centre’s original site, before it was relocated in 1962, through the efforts of the city’s Port Authority, to the Lower West Side of the island.

The riverside buildings featured in Evans’s photo-essay are described in anthropomorphic language as “gaunt, exhausted,” but he is careful to acknowledge that these “simple old warehouses” developed an “unearned beauty” in “late-day sunlight,” a double-edged commentary on both ruthless waterfront redevelopment efforts and nostalgic preservationism (1960: 145). Evans sensed multiple temporalities coexisting in the “ponderous” buildings “down by the docks,” that were awakened by the most basic gestures and interactions (1960: 145). “After a tour of such a building,” he wrote, “you are bluntly reminded of an eternity of honorable sweat. The only whiff of the factitious might come from a cracked phial, in Lot #48629 Case 47, of Schiaparelli Succés Fou” (1960: 145). Evans’s language has a distinctly cynical tone, in its description of warehouses filled with the “factitious” smell of ‘Wild Success.’ However, this irony is

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superseded by the visual emphasis on rust, shadows, emptiness and decay. In his closing lines, Evans writes:

these venerable barns are not so obsolete as they look, because space is in short supply near the docks. But there are signs that their day is over. For example, the Housing and Redevelopment Board of New York has published plans to replace twenty-nine acres of Manhattan riverside warehouses (1960: 146).

His multi-media project was a memorial to the architecture of “paradigmatic Americana” found on the disappearing seaport and an urgent call to Manhattanites to see the island and its pasts, its restless renewal, in a new light; to view the harbour as something other than the locus of a criminal underworld or temporarily inaccessible real estate (1960: 146).

New Yorker staff writer Joseph Mitchell, memorialised in the *New York Times* as “the poet of the waterfront, of the limelight of New York’s greatness as a seaport,” framed his nostalgic vignettes of New York waterfront life with allusions to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (Severo, 1996). Mitchell’s celebratory work on the waterfront, like Evans’, represented a shift in waterfront writing from reportage (like that of Johnson and Miller) to nostalgic, creative non-fiction, a subtly politicised effort to engage the city’s public in protective urban activism. In ‘Up in the Old Hotel,’ published in the *New Yorker* in 1944, Mitchell begins by noting the psychological benefits of a trip to the East Side harbour, that “(e)very now and then, seeking to rid my mind of thoughts of death and doom, I get up early and go down to Fulton Fish Market” (2000: 3). The story that follows is, as with so much of Mitchell’s writing, both literal and allegorical: a portrait of a man who wishes to be buried in an abandoned cemetery in a plot with his late wife, and a eulogy for a forgotten landscape. Mitchell wrote portraits with a socio-political, preservationist agenda; he was a founder member of the South Street Seaport Museum and served five years on the board of the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission. Mitchell’s response to the destructive renewal of these spaces was one of archival interest, and, motivated by an “archontic principle” in the Derridean sense, a concern with “consignation, that is, of gathering together” the life stories of others in his tableaux (Derrida, 1995: 10). The impending redevelopment of the New York waterfront was to Mitchell an attack on a certain American way of life that was cast in his writing as both a personal and physical loss. Mitchell quotes the eponymous Mr Hunter, for example, as he describes his own imminent death and the abandonment of the Staten Island graveyard: “When the time comes the dead are raised, He won’t need any directions to where they’re lying. Their bones may be turned to dust, and weeds may be growing out of their dust, but they aren’t lost... Stones rot the same as bones rot” (2000: 158-9). In ‘Up in the Old Hotel,’ Louie, the proprietor of the no-frills seafood restaurant occupying the ground floor of the ‘old hotel,’ tells of his pleasure in discovering the history of the property and the possibilities for economic gain provided by this rich past. “[T]he simple fact that my building was an old Schermerhorn building,” he said, “it may sound foolish, but it pleased me very much. The feeling I had, it connected me with the past. It connected me with Old New York. It connected Sloppy Louie’s Restaurant with Old New York” (2000: 29).

As Mitchell’s writing and its positive popular reception in the *New Yorker* demonstrates, public interest in the city’s colourful maritime past was growing as redevelopment efforts for the region gained momentum and government approval, however short-lived these

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renewal plans proved to be. The harbour's historicisation in popular film and literature was an effort by those opposed to its radical transformation, but it tended towards a narrative that highlighted New York's faded maritime economy in nostalgic terms and thus supported certain kinds of historical or quasi-archaeological redevelopment, like the South Street Seaport Museum. Located among an eleven-block area by the East River waterfront, the project was viewed as an opportunity to commemorate "(t)he last vestiges of New York mercantile history" in a time of economic uncertainty for traditional harbour industries (Boyer, 1994: 425-6). If New York had been, as the novelist Henry James described it, a city of "restless renewals," then the South Street project seemed to fit with this characteristic developmental inconstancy, while remaining in keeping with the preservationist ethos of the late 1960s and changing sentiments towards programmes of urban development, exemplified by the ratification, under President Lyndon B. Johnson, of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 (Page, 1999: 15). Prompted by a report of the same year by the United States Conference of Mayors and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, entitled *With Heritage So Rich*, the Act initiated "a veritable orgy of legislative activity" designed to protect sites of historic significance (Cullingsworth and Caves, 2003: 186). In light of the perceived failures of the Urban Renewal Program, multiple city projects focused instead on processes of reevaluation and recycling, through which, however, as Christine Boyer notes, "every city began to look like everywhere else" (1994: 425). As Susan Fainstein has observed of Battery Park City, much of the waterfront redevelopment in New York City in the 1960s (and 1970s) was "the antithesis (to) the naturally developing, heterogeneous urban district prescribed by Jane Jacobs" (2001: 171). Instead, it represented "an artificial diversity, with carefully selected tenants and idealized versions of the city of memory" (2001: 172). Waterfront development in Manhattan depended on a complex notion of civic participation that was based around an exclusive conception of the 'general public' and of acceptable urban citizenship, a discriminatory policy hidden beneath a guise of bureaucracy and municipal ineffectiveness. As early as 1930, New York City's Regional Planning Association had noted that, "it is not within the power of any one body to carry into effect a plan for any proportion of the waterfront of Manhattan" (Buttenweiser: 1987: 210). The push for a homogenous, commercial function, typified by Sutton's approach to this 'marginal land' by the water, severely limited public access to the space and popular disapproval of redevelopment plans meant that authorities employed a number of underhand tactics to avoid review and referendum.

In 1966, freshman New York State Senator Whitney North Seymour sponsored a bill to create a New York Maritime Museum (what would eventually become the South Street Seaport Museum) that passed the State Legislature successfully and, after some debate, with support from then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Seymour was one of the founding members of the Friends of South Street committee, along with Peter Stanford, who served as the first President of the Museum, and his wife Norma. Stanford was keen to create "a living museum," designed "to preserve the historic character and buildings of the area and to renovate a few 19th-century square-rigger ships" (DeFillipis, 1997: 407). In 2006, Seymour recounted the political contingencies at play in landmark preservation in Manhattan, and how these problematised his efforts to designate the East River Seaport a museum. Simultaneously, Seymour faced opposition from David Rockefeller and the Downtown Lower Manhattan Association and from competing preservationists on the board of the Museum of the City of New York. The museum that emerged from this complex set of political and commercial interests was of an equally divisive character and plagued by economic and legal conflicts. Shortly after the area's designation as a 'Special District,' the board of trustees created Seaport Holdings

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Incorporated in order to more effectively negotiate the purchase of Schermerhorn Row. The corporation found itself in a legal battle with real estate developers Atlas and McGrath, who owned one-third of an adjacent block. In December 1968, Jacob Isbrandsten, then chairman of the museum's board, convinced the New York Landmarks Commission to confer landmark status on the entire Row in forty-eight hours, prompted Atlas and McGrath to sue the city "for depriving their company of their development rights" (Boyer, 1994: 430). In 1972, however, city authorities rezoned the district to permit office development in areas of architectural interest and in need of historic preservation. Financial problems led Atlas and McGrath to drop the case and sell their property to the city, who sold it on to Seaport Holdings, who then sold it to the state, under Seymour's maritime museum bill.

In 1977, ten blocks around the Seaport were also designated an historic district, but the museum faced continued financial trouble. John Hightower, a former director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was made chairman that same year, and was far more amenable to the commercial direction the museum had taken than Peter Stanford, who had resigned earlier that year. "The commercial development is all trash," Stanford complained, "it's international airport-style junk" (Stamler, 1998: np). In 1981, the lease of the district and control of the project was transferred by the city to the Seaport Corporation to help increase revenue for the museum. "The fact is," Hightower argued, "that shopping is the chief cultural activity in the United States" (DeFillipis, 1997: 405). The museum that developed from this newly commercial outlook commemorated New York's mercantile past through the simulation of 'history,' encouraging contemporary trade in a fabricated display of imagined old Manhattan, a pseudo-historical tableaux antithetical to the preservationist writing of Mitchell and Evans. In 1990, Rosalyn Deutsche argued that redevelopment projects like the South Street Seaport in fact "engineer wholesale changes in the area's uses," but "try to lend an aura of authenticity... by emphasizing the restoration of 'real' historical elements. Primarily, however, they invoke a past existing only in the realm of the imaginary, eliciting from readers and viewers nostalgia, bound up with objects, for a flawless environment" (1990: 151) Once again, New York's economic future was seen as being contingent upon a teleological notion of progress that rejected a wholly commemorative, or even educational, urban museology, and insisted upon homogeneity. The harbour's past could only exist in service to its future. As M. Christine Boyer has noted, along Schermerhorn Row:

a new public-private partnership arose, and now the meaning of 'historic' was stretched beyond preserving the rich history of New York's nineteenth-century maritime development to a concept that hopefully would reintroduce economic vibrancy to the area as a twenty-four hour tourist, residential, and commercial district (1994: 432).

By the time the South Street Seaport opened officially in 1983, three-quarters of its exhibition space had been reassigned for retail and "95 percent of the material acquired for Seaport exhibits remained in storage" (1994: 433). Stanford and Seymour's vision for a "living museum" had floundered, and New York's maritime history was commemorated in a mall-museum complex that was oriented more directly towards tourism and contemporary trade than its initial focus on the preservation of some of Manhattan's oldest buildings. The past was 'for sale,' to both individual shoppers and large corporations for waterfront-adjacent office space. "A retail shopping center," Boyer commented, "with a historical maritime theme" (1994: 432).

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Waterfront development on the West Side was also fraught with bureaucratic complications and underhand tactics. In 1972, the Battery Park City Authority issued a number of 'moral obligation' bonds to finance the demolition of several piers and the building of a number of offices on newly created landfill on the West Side harbour without the usual referendum, on the condition that a proportion of the space would be earmarked for the building of low-income housing. Despite the BPCA's fast track approach, the developments were not completed until 1976, by which time the city was on the brink of bankruptcy and "the office market glutted with space" (Fainstein, 2001: 165). The New York State Urban Development Corporation condemned the site and bought it from the BPCA for a dollar, rendering the Authority a corporate entity further exempt from city regulations and public review procedures. Architects Alexander Cooper and Stanton Eckstut were commissioned to transform the landfill into a commercially appealing office complex. The Authority's earlier commitment to generating revenue for lower-income housing was scrapped. Cooper and Eckstut's plan claimed to "draw on familiar New York neighborhood images and (assemble) them in a street and block pattern which extend (as view corridors) the Lower Manhattan streets to the waterfront" (Fainstein, 2001: 166). Yet as Susan Fainstein has observed, the finished development was little more than "a recreation zone for the relatively well-to-do," lacking "the spontaneous contrasts of the real twentieth-century metropolis" (2001: 166). The late 1970s also saw the failure of the Westway project, which would also have required substantial landfill creation in the Hudson River. The Westway was intended to alleviate the gridlock caused by the closure of the West Side Highway following a partial collapse in 1973 (Savitch, 1988: 80). The damaged roadway subsequently lay abandoned, and as Douglas Crimp noted in an article on Alvin Baltrop's waterfront photographs, came to represent a psychic boundary as much as it formed a physical one, remaining "as a ghostly barrier between 'civilized' Manhattan and the Hudson River," and its undeveloped waterfront (Crimp, 2008: 269).

Careful management, and perpetuation, of abandoned spaces and empty buildings was key to municipal strategies of "urban neglect" and exclusionary public access and citizenship in the late 1970s and early 1980s and central to the civic disobedience these legislative tactics engendered (Savitch, 1988: 97). For example, in 1984, the city owned 60% of property on the Lower East Side by way of tax defaults and abandonment by incompetent or insolvent landlords. As Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan noted in 'The Fine Art of Gentrification' (1984):

contiguous lots (were) put together to form what is known in the real estate business as 'assemblages'... sold for large sums of money at municipal auctions to developers who thus amass entire blocks for the construction of large-scale upper-income housing (1984: 95).

The push for commercial redevelopment of the almost entirely defunct port can be read as part of this wider policy of gentrification being implemented across Manhattan in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This was not simply a consequence of national 'Reaganomics,' but the cumulative effect of decades of mismanaged industrial decline. As Deutsche and Ryan have argued, city authorities effected an "immiseration of the working classes" through a nostalgic return to the economic policies of the 1950s, much like the campaign for the commercial revivification of the redundant waterfront in the preceding two decades (1984: 95). Concomitant with the disappearance of "over 100,000 blue-collar jobs from the city's industrial base" between March 1977 and March

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1984, when over 215, 000 financial and business positions were generated, this policy of gentrification was realised by “creating neighbourhoods and housing that only the white-collar labor force [could] afford... systematically destroying the material conditions” for low and middle-class income residence in Manhattan (1984: 95-6). Urban neglect was not simply the product of negligence, but a considered and widespread political strategy, “abandoning buildings, harassing and evicting tenants, and rapidly turning over neighborhood property in order to escalate real-estate values” (1984: 96). One ‘general public’ was being evicted to accommodate another.

Fond farewells

By the late 1970s, opposition to commercial waterfront redevelopment in the national media was strong and is captured in the debate between urban sociologist Herbert J. Gans and architectural critic Ada-Louise Huxtable on the op-ed pages of the *New York Times* in 1975. Dolores Hayden cites the debate in the opening pages of *The Power of Place* (1997) as she argues the significance of subtle “traces of time embedded in the urban landscape of every city” in “offer(ing) opportunities for reconnecting fragments of the American urban story” (1997: 13). As Hayden observes, Gans and Huxtable were debating “the public meaning of the built past” as the work of the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission gained momentum in the mid-1970s (1997: 3). The Preservation Commission was established by Mayor Robert Wagner in 1965 in response to public criticism surrounding the demolition of the original Pennsylvania Station to make way for the construction of the current Madison Square Garden in 1968. Gans criticised the Commission for what he saw as the preservation of “the elite portion of the architectural past... allow(ing) popular architecture to disappear... This landmark policy distorts the real past, exaggerates affluence and grandeur, and denigrates the present” (1997: 3). Gans continued by asserting that, “when preservation becomes a public act, supported with public funds, it must attend to everyone’s past” (1997: 3). In contrast, Huxtable warned: “to stigmatize major architectural monuments as products of the rich, and attention to them as elitist cultural policy, is a perverse and unserviceable distortion of history” (1997: 3). Yet neither model was to be successful in effecting any long-term preservation policy for the New York waterfront until the following decade. As the failings of the BPCA and the example of the Westway project have demonstrated, tensions between private and municipal ownership, and funding and preservation possibilities for public and private use, meant that much waterfront redevelopment remained unfunded and unfinished into the mid-1980s, further condemning the area as the ‘marginal land’ Sutton had lamented almost two decades earlier.

Writing in the *New York Times* in 1979, almost contemporaneous with Koch’s early mayoral proposition to “(open) the waters to the people of the city,” Huxtable bade a bittersweet farewell to the “shabby” waterfront, appearing to invoke Hayden’s notion of embedded “traces of time” (1997: 3), as she criticised Donald Trump’s emergent plans for a commercial restructuring of the still-abandoned riverfront:

I guess what I am really doing is saying good-bye. Because what will surely be lost is the spirit and identity of the area as it has existed over centuries – something that may only be important to those of us who have loved the small, shabby streets and buildings redolent of time and fish, or shared the cold sunlight of a quiet Sunday morning on the waterfront with

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the Fulton market cats, when the nineteenth century seemed very much alive (Buttenweiser, 1987: 206).

Huxtable's nostalgic writing acted, as Joseph Mitchell's did, as a public mourning ritual. Her sense of loss in the face of the physical redevelopment of the waterfront reveals the difficulty of reconciling past with present in the context of the multiple requisitions by various urban authorities for commercial redevelopment of the abandoned port and the gentrification of contiguous neighbourhoods. Her impression of "buildings redolent of time" is suggestive of the "past resuscitated in (partial) reconfigurings" explored in Boyer's *The City of Collective Memory*; "reinforcing our sense of loss and detachment" as "the spatial form of the contemporary city reveals a patchwork of incongruous leftover pieces alongside a set of artfully designed compositions" (1994: 9). While Henri Lefebvre has argued that for progressive urban politics to be successful, "the most important thing is to *multiply* readings of the city" (1996: 159); Huxtable's farewell to "the spirit and identity of the area" speaks to the "artificial diversity" of historical referencing and appropriation in much waterfront redevelopment, like that which Susan Fainstein observed in Cooper and Eckstut's 1979 plan for the redevelopment of Battery Park City, to "draw on familiar New York neighborhood images" in "viewing corridors" that mimicked the gridded avenues of the 1811 Commissioners' Plan, an earlier effort to direct the movement and character of the city's public (2001: 165).

Dirty words: the waterfront and social cleanliness

In December 1985, the Real Estate Board of New York took out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* that asked: "Is Gentrification a Dirty Word?" (Smith, 1996: 29). In the advertisement, the benefits of gentrification were cast in terms of positive change, through a rhetoric of flux that praised the "enduring vitality" of the city: "examples of gentrification are as varied and distinctive as New York itself and reflect the city's enduring vitality. That vitality is expressed in terms of change... for neighborhoods and people" (Smith, 1996: 29). This kind of language celebrated New York's propensity for 'restless renewal' as a defining characteristic of the city's identity, but only in the sense of linear progress, a teleological renewal rather than a genuine historical revisitation or a convergence of past and present. As Neil Smith argues, the framing of downtown redevelopment efforts as welcome transformations through a "language of revitalization, recycling, upgrading and renaissance (suggested) that affected neighborhoods were somehow devitalized or culturally moribund prior to gentrification" (1996: 30). Similarly, in 'Architecture of the Evicted,' Deutsche argued that the ideal city must be viewed as socio-economically "flawless," which "exact[s] a cost in representational violence: the city can only be constructed as a coherent entity by expelling the conflicts within it and, more importantly, those that produce it" (1990: 160). Retrospectively, 'Is Gentrification a Dirty Word,' with its emphasis on positive "displacement" and "rehabilitation" (Smith, 1996: 29), serves, in fact, to confirm the persistence of heterogeneous cultures in downtown Manhattan, negative public reactions to the borough's redevelopment, and the impossible fantasy of the "flawless city" and citizen (Deutsche, 1990: 160).

In both 'The Fine Art of Gentrification' and Smith's *The New Urban Frontier*, critiques of renewal projects in downtown Manhattan are framed by the enduring dichotomy of

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preservationist thought and urban development in the city: between a static past and a ruthlessly forward-looking future. The language of gentrification, Smith noted, from the renewal programs of the early 1960s to the gentrifying downtown developments of the 1980s, was designed to appeal to an American 'pioneer spirit,' with real estate brokers and white-collar home buyers as 'cowboys,' "middle-class pioneers" on the 'urban frontier,' accentuating the racist dimension of many real estate developments and renewal projects in New York (1996: 29). Deutsche and Ryan observed that the language of renewal and renaissance, featured in the Real Estate Board's advertisement in the *New York Times*, was also invoked by art critics promoting East Village artists and galleries and celebrated the same values of authenticity, cohesion, and progress: "These 'East Village critics - who are, in fact, not critics but apologists - celebrate the scene with an inflated rhetoric of 'liberation,' 'renewal,' 'ecstasy'" (Deutsche and Ryan, 1984: 92). This vocabulary also recalled Le Corbusier's description of Manhattan as moving towards a superior future, praising the borough as being "overwhelming, amazing, exciting, violently alive - a wilderness of stupendous experiment toward the new order that is to replace the current tumult" (Page, 1999: 17). Urban planning in New York in the 1980s resisted a narrative of completeness, as it had in the 1960s and 1970s, by emphasising the importance of revitalisation and Manhattan's shifting appearance, while, at the same time, insisting upon it, favouring wholeness and homogeneity within these new projects. Gentrification efforts in Manhattan manipulated the idea of metropolitan incompleteness by positing renewal as a desirable characteristic of a modern city in flux, thus 'excusing' the expulsion of undesirable residents or the disappearance of low-income housing projects. The majority of the empty warehouses on the Lower West Side were demolished in 1983, but continued failure to determine a homogeneous role or a suitable 'public' for the space meant it remained abandoned into the early 1990s, appropriated instead as a makeshift shelter for homeless transgendered New Yorkers, documented in interviews by queer activist Benjamin Shepard (Sycamore, 2004).

Into the 1990s, the future of Manhattan's harbour remained a point of mayoral significance. In the summer of 1998, echoing Percy Sutton and Ed Koch's waterfront renewal claims over twenty years earlier, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani signed the Hudson River Park Act into law, empowering a state-owned corporation to transform the still largely derelict West Side waterfront into a series of public parks and sports venues, "replacing a once unsightly and deteriorating waterfront with... a five-mile riverfront esplanade that will be enjoyed by New Yorkers and tourists alike" (1998). The then-Governor George Pataki echoed Giuliani's grand claims with nationalistic hyperbole, as a 'public' city space integral to the country's democratic claims. The river park, he argued, "is in every sense a renewal of New York's commitment to open space, the Hudson shoreline and the very history of our state and nation" (1998: n.p.). This Hudson River Park legislation came after almost five years of a rigorous 'quality of life' campaign that saw an increased and increasingly aggressive police presence throughout Manhattan, and numerous anti-vagrancy and public order laws ushered in under Giuliani's mayoralty. Brutal police crackdowns on loitering, unlawful assembly, and public urination, and strongly enforced curfews continue to push unwelcome guests out of the near-ghetto of the waterfront whose queer hospitality was fostered by decades of municipal neglect of the city's perimeter. The activist groups Sex Panic! and FIERCE have battled with wealthy neighborhood associations like Residents in Distress (RID) against police harassment and racial profiling of waterfront visitors. Former FIERCE leader Jay Dee Melendez described such associations "putting water, piss and garbage out of their windows onto the youth" during a 'Save Our Space' rally in October 2002

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(Shephard and Smithsimon, 2011: 103). Mayor Michael Bloomberg's aggressive removal of the anti-capitalist occupation of Zuccotti Park in November 2011 employed the same rhetoric of public safety and public hygiene that characterised the clearance of the waterfront in the early 1980s and the enforced closure of gay bathhouses by the New York State AIDS Advisory Council in 1985: public protest and resistance as infecting the positive socio-economic whole. The removal of spaces where supposedly private activities - sex, political and social dissent - could be performed in public was and is a key regulatory tactic to waterfront renewal and urban renewal more broadly.

This rhetoric of renewal and exclusive access is essential to the success of present-day development of the waterfront and characterises contemporary popular literature on the topic. In various media, the history of the space is rewritten as a desperate and accidental neglect, its regeneration a moral imperative. Nathan Ward's recent history of organised crime on the waterfront, *Dark Harbour* (2010) was heralded by an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* in which Ward praised the development of spaces for "sane recreation" at the harbour until Giuliani and Bloomberg (2010: A17). While in *Dark Harbour*, Ward mused on "a forlorn beauty to the slow dilapidation" of the space, in the more public space of the *Times* he praised "former Williamsburg beer plants... reborn as luxury condos; and Brooklyn's old Pier 6, where many a sailor once stepped ashore... now filled with playing children" (2010: A17). The city, he argued, "has celebrated the reclamation of the waterfront. But the effort, laudable though it is, obscures a not-so-insignificant historical misunderstanding: we are in fact *claiming* the waterfront, not *reclaiming* it" (italics in original) (2010: A17). Ward's support for the efforts of the River Park Trust is based on a false conception of the extent of the waterfront's abandonment and a misunderstanding of the city's attitudes to its harbour and its rich past. Ignoring the multiple post-industrial 'mis-uses' of the waterfront as a non-regulated public space and sexual interzone, Ward's description of the harbour after industry as "a place most people never wanted to be," is part of the long-running misrepresentative re-imagining of New York's public, the character of its citizenship, that has been paramount to constructing the contemporary waterfront as a space for "sane recreation" (2010: A17). As contemporary conflict over the piers demonstrates, the renovated waterfront remains the scene for a bitter battle over the preservation of public space, the meaning of open access, and the boundaries of public and private citizenship on the contested island site of Manhattan.

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