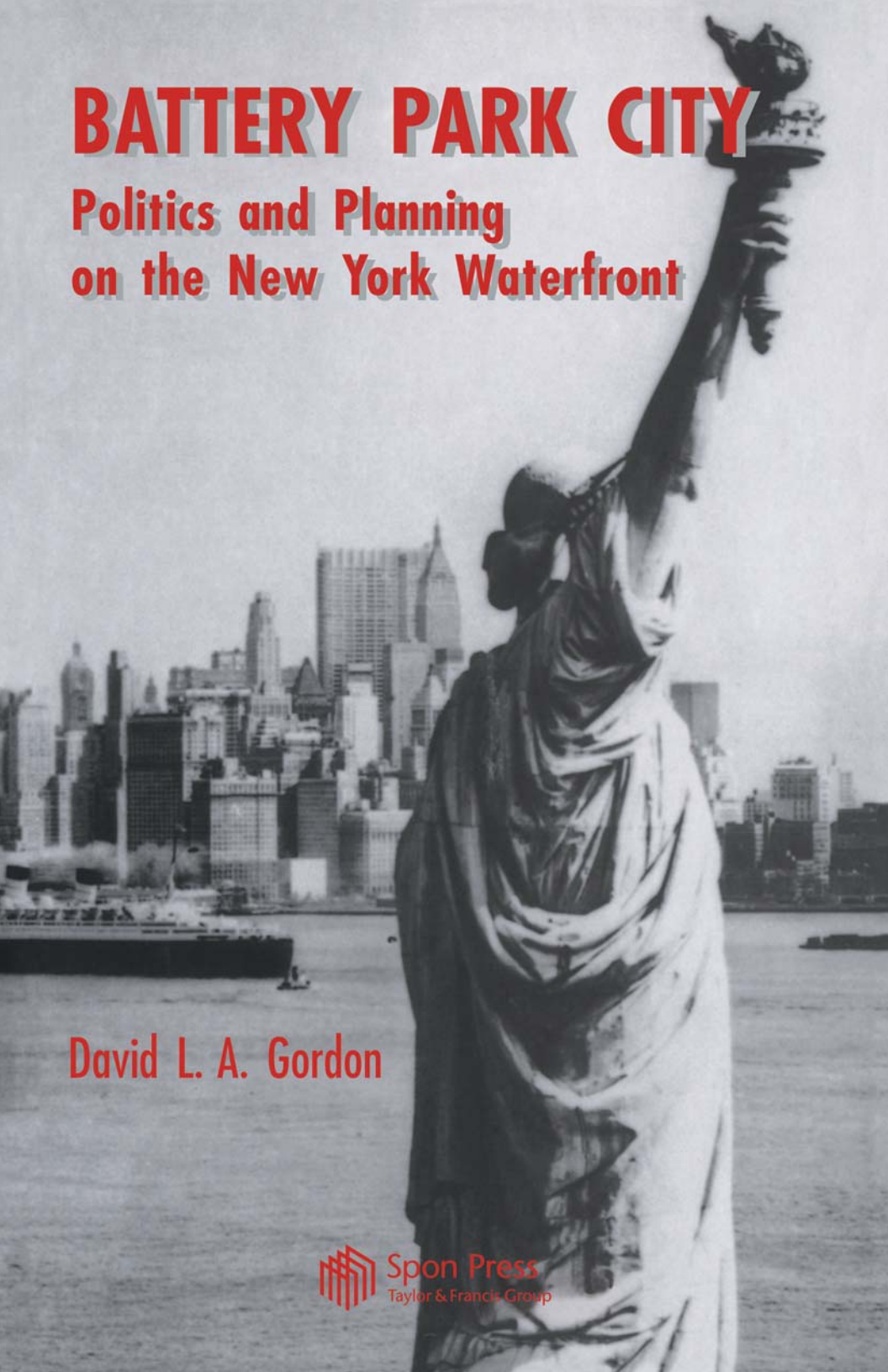
# BATTERY PARK CITY

## Politics and Planning on the New York Waterfront



David L. A. Gordon

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## Planning, Policy and Management

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**David L. A. Gordon**

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*A hundred times I have thought:*
*New York is a catastrophe,*
*and fifty times:*
*It is a beautiful catastrophe.*

— Charles Edouard Jeanneret
Le Corbusier

(inscribed in the pavement of Battery Park City)

*City of the world*
*(for all races are here,*
*all lands of the earth make contributions here):*
*City of the sea!*
*City of wharves and stores —*
*City of tall facades of marble and iron!*
*Proud and passionate mettle —*
*Some mad extravagant city!*

— Walt Whitman

(engraved upon the railing of the Battery Park City Esplanade)

# Contents

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# Introduction to the Series

*Cities and Regions: Planning, Policy and Management* is an international series of case studies addressed to students in programs leading to professional careers in urban and regional affairs and to established practitioners of the complex crafts of planning, policy analysis and public management. The series will focus on the work-worlds of the practitioners and the ways in which the construction of narratives shapes the course of events and our understanding of them. The international character of the series is intended to help both novice and experienced professionals extend their terms of reference, learning from "strangers" in unfamiliar settings.

*Seymour J. Mandelbaum*

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Despite the wonderful help listed above, I take full responsibility for any errors or omissions in this study. However, it only seems fair to share any credit with my family and Katherine Rudder, who provided the best distraction of all by marrying me halfway through the writing.

# INTRODUCTION

In October 1968, Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Mayor John Lindsay took a boat tour on the Hudson River to consummate their agreement on the development of Battery Park City. As they looked out at the rotting piers and landfill from the construction of the World Trade Center, they must have had visions of the modern urban project they would build on some of the most valuable real estate in the world. It had taken the pair two years to resolve their differences on Battery Park City, but progress was in sight at last. Expectations were high, now that money and the full weight of agreement of the state's powerful governor and the city's popular mayor were behind the project.

The two men were likely amazed and dismayed that no buildings arose for over a decade.

By 1996, Battery Park City was generally regarded as one of the most successful examples of urban waterfront redevelopment. It has been hailed as a triumph of urban design and a financial bonanza which funded affordable housing in New York's most needy neighborhoods. It was home to over 7000 residents, and 30,000 employees and thousands more people visited its splendid public spaces every day.

All of these benefits appeared as if by magic in the previous decade, but it is not generally understood that the project was conceived over thirty years earlier. As recently as 1979, its development authority faced bankruptcy and abandonment of the project, amid general dismay about its future.

Over the past three decades, the City and the State of New York have been directly engaged in the redevelopment of Battery Park City. Countless individuals, agencies and organizations have also been involved, but the Battery Park City Authority (BPCA) has been the central actor since the inception of the

project. As a result, the story of the renaissance of the Hudson River waterfront in Lower Manhattan is a rich and complex one, and can be told from several perspectives. This study presents an overview of Battery Park's redevelopment from 1960 to 1995. It focuses upon the experience of the central actor: the Battery Park City Authority.

The agency's plans changed over time in reaction to new urban design initiatives, changing political priorities and different market conditions. The study describes the sometimes painful process of adjustment which has taken place over the years, in response to these new conditions. Similarly, the changes in the project financing are briefly examined; the project turned the corner in the mid 1980's and is now regarded as a fiscal success and as a source of revenue for affordable housing in New York City. Finally, we will look at some of the current corporate structure and development issues for the future of Battery Park City.

## The Battery Park City Site

Battery Park City has one of the world's most prominent sites: the Hudson River waterfront at the tip of Manhattan (Figure 1). It is part of the vista that astounded sea-borne visitors from Walt Whitman to Le Corbusier as they passed the Statue of Liberty to get their first glimpse of the towers of Manhattan rising from the harbor (Figure 2). Although many visitors now arrive by air, the postcard view remains an important icon of New York. Battery Park City is an essential part of the urban ensemble around New York Bay viewed daily by hundreds of thousands from the Staten Island Ferry, the Verrazano Bridge or the great sweeping curve into the Lincoln Tunnel.

For the residents of New York City, the ninety-two acre site is perhaps best located by reference to the adjacent World Trade Center and Financial District. The site had previously been occupied by cargo piers and ferry docks which had been abandoned for some time.

The site is actually new land, since it was created by landfill from 1967 to 1976. Extending lower Manhattan by landfill was not a new idea. The tip of the island has expanded almost continuously since 1650 (Figure 3). For the first three centuries, most of the waterfront was devoted to shipping and industrial uses,

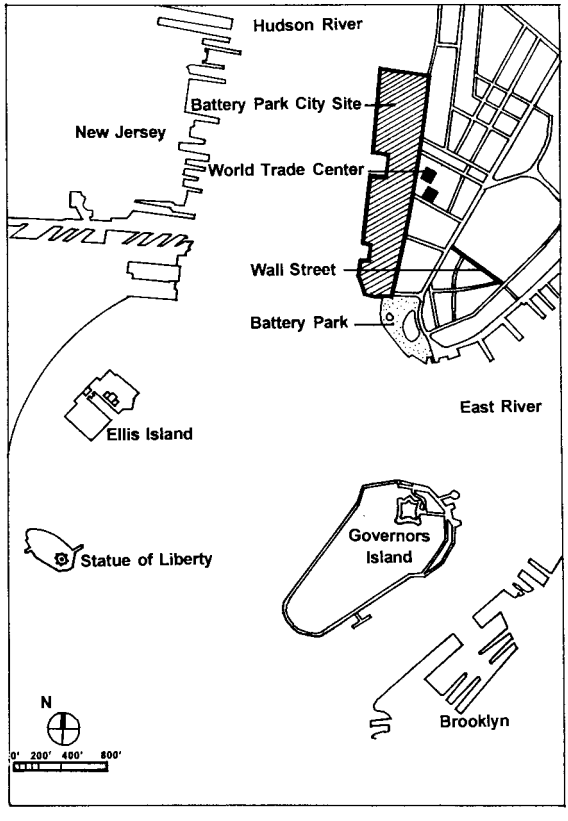


**Figure 1** Battery Park City Site.
*Source*: Based on Cooper 1979.

while the fashionable residential districts were in the center of the island. The Battery Park at the tip of Manhattan was one of the few waterfront public spaces in the downtown. The new idea was that the water's edge should be used for homes and offices rather than shipping.

In the late nineteenth century, larger vessels and new technology permitted piers to be built on the lower Hudson River. Manhattan was a busy port until after World War II, when the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey built modern docks at Port Elizabeth, New Jersey. With the advent of containerized

**Figure 2** The Battery Park City Site in the 1990s.
*Source:* Downtown Lower Manhattan Association.

shipping, expressways and trucking in the 1960's, cargo activity in Lower Manhattan came to a standstill [Moss 1976; NYC OLMD 1975:5].

The New Jersey ferry and the ocean liner terminals also became obsolete as passengers switched to the trans-Hudson subways and expanded airports operated by the Port Authority. The abandoned piers began to decay and collapse, and they became a highly visible symbol of Lower Manhattan's decline in the early 1960's (Figure 4). By the late 1960's many agencies


**Figure 3** Growth of Lower Manhattan Island by Landfill.
*Source*: Based on Wallace *et al.* 1965.

were examining how to make better use of New York's waterfront resources [Moss and Drennan 1976].

New York was not alone. The economic and technological forces which made the lower Hudson piers obsolete were also at work in most modern seaports from Tokyo to Rotterdam [Bruttomesso 1993; 1991]. The new container ports required large, vacant sites with good road and rail connections, so many were built miles away from the inner city waterfront [Hoyle *et al.,* 1988]. The pace of change would be dramatic. Oakland

**Figure 4** The Battery Park City Site in the 1960s.
*Source*: Battery Park City Authority.

eclipsed San Francisco five years after its new port opened, while the Port of London changed from the world's busiest harbour to Europe's largest redevelopment site in little more than a decade. The older port facilities were often located near the Central Business District and were tempting sites for urban redevelopment without the dislocation of the earlier urban renewal programs. These urban waterfront redevelopment projects became some of the most prominent examples of physical planning and urban renewal in the 1970's and 1980's [Breen and Rigby 1993]. New York simply got an early start in the worldwide urban waterfront phenomenon.

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