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Re-arranging public-private partnerships: The case of South Street Seaport New York

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ABSTRACT

The South Street Seaport, a historic district located at the southern tip of Manhattan, has been the subject of a massive redevelopment scheme. While local actors have opposed the new vision of the developer, the latter, in partnership with the New York Economic Development Corporation, has imposed its own narrative for the district’s development so far. This paper looks at the development of a historic district being managed by private parties. Unfolding past events, it critically investigates the district’s space production and examines how the different actors have framed the values and narratives over the place. It shows how partnerships have become unbalanced over the years and how it finally led to reactions and the rearrangement of the partnership. The paper aims at contributing to the current debate on the public–private partnership by discussing their implications and bringing in the example of an alternative setting for more open collaboration and negotiation between developers and local actors.

Introduction

While conducting research on the South Street Seaport, the historic merchant port of New York City, located in the southern tip of Manhattan, I have been struck by the multiple references the current private developer, the Howard Hughes Corporation (HHC), makes to its history while at the same time engaging little with the actors who shaped it. The South Street Seaport was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. Although redesigned and transformed during the course of history, the seaport holds a strong and symbolic connection to the history of New York City and represents a place of collective memory for New Yorkers (Foster, 2013). Different values led to its preservation. Namely, the historic mercantile architecture styles such as Georgian, Federal and Greek revival, but also the agreement that it was a distinct cultural and historical section of the city that needed to be preserved and shared with the public (Landmarks Preservation Commission of City of New York, 1977, p. 39). Since the port’s decline in the 1950s, the area has been undergoing important transformations led by successive partnerships, each of them encapsulating the place in its own historic narrative.

Historical references have become a common feature in redevelopment projects as marketing and branding tools and local anchors because they address audiences on a variety of levels (Guinand, 2015; Jensen, 2007). Many of these discourses provide opportunity for identity-building, collective bonding, and space appropriation, contributing to the project’s realization success (Collie, 2011; Ruggeri, 2018) while also subjecting it to power (De Certeau, 1980) and manipulative issues (Pojani, 2018). The South Street Seaport is such a case, which entails symbolic features that still play out in New Yorkers’ imagination while they are, in fact, harnessed to memories and histories resulting in layers of not-for-profit and private corporation management and interventions. Moreover, the seaport is a historic district, institutionally identified as a public resource with a common legacy and public space whose streets are open to visitors. These critical
arguments make the Seaport, its specific nature as a historic district (with a public mission) and setting in
consecutive public–private partnerships, particularly worthy of investigation. This paper critically looks at
the space production of a historic district in the hands of, and developed by public–private partnerships over the years. It examines how these different actors have over a long-term period framed the places’ values, which have in turn shaped its function, its uses, its tangible and intangible environment.

The research shows that developers (private for-profit parties) play a crucial role in shaping the tangible and intangible dimensions of this historic urban environment. It points out the unbalanced partnership that has overlooked local interests and demands (among whom elected officials) and led to reactions and the rearrangement of this same partnership. The paper thus claims that partnerships should be a real negotiation process with local actors (especially local institutions and elected officials) rather than a tool that allows developers to promote their own interests.

The paper aims at contributing to the current debate on public–private partnership (PPP) by discussing the implications and outcomes of partnerships and by bringing in the example of an alternative setting for more open collaboration and negotiation between developers and local actors. In order to do so, the paper is organized around five sections. The first section sets the theoretical framework discussing public–private partnerships in historic settings and what this entails. The second section describes the methodology. Sections 3 and 4 critically discuss: (1) how the partnership shifted from a locally nonprofit-based institution to a deal with commercial and growth-oriented developers; (2) what it means in terms of space transformation (tangible and intangible dimensions) and (3) how local narratives and demands have been taken into account (or not) in the successive partnerships. In Section 5, the paper critically investigates what I designated as an ad hoc partnership set by local actors in reaction to the continuous dismissal of their demands by the developer. The paper ends by summing up the discussed elements and by bringing in some conclusive remarks.

**Partnerships and historic sites**

Partnerships can be characterized as a set of negotiated interests that frame decisions. In urban redevelop-
ment settings, these arrangements shape the values, principles and goals put in the forefront, sometimes at
the cost of the public (Fainstein, 2008; Haila, 2008; Squire, 1989) since decisions can be undertaken behind closed doors. In literature on redevelopment projects, PPP outcomes have been investigated looking at the nature of places being produced and delivered (Fainstein, 2008; Olds, 2001; Reigner, 2013), the type of social practices and structures induced (Lehrer & Laidley, 2008; Morange & Quentin, 2017), or their regulations (Haila, 2008; Peyroux, 2012). However, in the existing literature on PPP, little has been said and investigated on partnerships aimed at managing and developing historic urban areas institutionally designated as such. Authors having scrutinized these cases have often stressed the significance of space privatization versus the public and its underlying consequences, such as “control and sanitization.” (Bloom, 2004; Boyer, 1992; DeFilippis, 1997; Metzger, 2010). Although these districts can be critically investigated under the lenses of new “branding” for inner-city promotion (Hurley, 2010), commodified landscapes of consumption (Boyer, 1992; Zukin, 1995), or amusement parks (Turner, 2002), there are only a few references to the long-term processes leading to the “collective memory” to be disclosed. The process of collective memory is part of, and produced by, social context (Marcel & Mucchielli, 1999). History (as a social construct) and its expressions through discourses, events or the built environment can, thus, interfere with memory and its collective dimension, stressing here the common legacy. For instance, in their investigation of Toronto’s waterfront redevelopment, Lehrer and Laidley have pointed out, the changing outcomes brought by public–private partnerships (PPP) as an internally contradictory but exclusive public participation process (2008, p. 789). In their work, Haila (2008) and Fainstein (2001) have seemingly pointed out the limits to the traditional democratic process that partnerships’ regulation entails, either through the establishment of private contracts or the implementation of a quasi-private entity. In the U.S., historic districts are increasingly being managed by “partnerships.” Their institutional recognition and designation as “historical” places comprise historical and cultural (symbolic and identity
driven) features that require better scrutiny, also because these places are often defined as a resource that comprises a public mission for the general public.

Unraveling the seaport’s intangible dimensions

This piece stems from a larger research project on festival marketplaces conducted during an 18-month period (2014–2016). It is based on 25 semi-directive interviews conducted in 2015 with key informants (Maginn, 2004) such as institutional actors, members of Save our Seaport and Friends of the Seaport, residents, users and business owners identified through Community Board 1 (CB1) meetings, the press and interviews. In a triangulation perspective (Maxwell, 2009), the interviews were completed by content analysis (Flick, 2014) of official documents (plans, reports, letters and memos) retrieved from the New York City Archives, the Municipal Art Society, and the public library. This was meant to anchor the participants’ discourses and narratives to historical and factual elements or events and analyze institutional official discourses from past actors, linking them to the thematic structure followed for the interviews. Non-intrusive public space observations were also conducted every 2 weeks at different periods of the day for 3 hours.

Observations were compiled in a notebook accompanied with photographic surveys that gave a clear understanding of the contemporary uses as well as the functional and socioeconomic transformations that followed the Howard Hughes Corporation’s interventions. Finally, participation in Save our Seaport (4) and Community Board 1 hearing and meetings (6) were undertaken as a means to better understand contested issues, stakeholders, reasons for contentions, and divergent narratives, and to observe the position and discourse from official community board members toward the Howard Hughes Corporation, users and residents but also the seaport historic district more generally.

Successive partnerships and legacy

The presence of the Howard Hughes Corporation in Lower Manhattan is rooted in a partnership that started with the establishment of the South Brooklyn Bridge East urban renewal plan in 1968. Contrary to the regular urban renewal plan ethos at the time, the plan recognized the role of history as contributing positively to the transformation of the area (Foster, 2013; Housing and Development Administration, 1968). The story could have, however, been much different, had intellectual figures not been involved in the fight for the seaport’s preservation. Indeed, the area and its buildings would have been erased (as was most of Lower Manhattan) under the call for progress and modernity. In 1966, at the urging of a growing number of preservationists and maritime enthusiasts, such as Peter Stanford, his wife, and Ada Louise Huxtable, editorialist at the New York Times, the state of New York passed legislation for a state-sponsored maritime museum to be located in Schermerhorn Row in the seaport. The fundraising for the museum was however stalled by the opposition of the Downtown Lower Manhattan Association (DMLA) headed by David Rockefeller to the landmarking of any structures in the area (Metzger, 2010, p. 28), as it would block any future realization of the Lower Manhattan plan. This plan aimed at redeveloping the Lower Manhattan waterfront, including the seaport, with luxury housing and plazas (Willis, Willen, & Rossant, 2002).

In 1967, with the help of friends concerned with maritime and New York history Peter Stanford put together South Street Seaport Museum, a nonprofit corporation meant to preserve the area around Schermerhorn Row, landmarked in 1968. The idea was that it could provide “the telling of a valuable story and the addition of a valuable amenity to the city life” (South Street Seaport Museum, 1968, p. 1). As capital value from the buildings was decreasing (not the land), pushing for their demolition, many believed in their safeguarding as witnesses and collective memory, contributing to urban history and a valuable legacy for the city. They thought that the seaport conveyed a strong symbolic function with its successive layers of history and considered it as being part of the cultural and social system constitutive of the city (South Street Seaport Museum, 1968). The district was designated as an urban renewal area a year later (Southeast Brooklyn Bridge Urban Renewal Area). At the time, Mayor John Lindsay’s administration was
trying to engage more with communities (Chronopoulos, 2011) as preservationists had become more vocal and contestations over real estate forces erasing old urban fabrics were growing (Jacobs, 1961).

The urban renewal plan was approved by the city council (1968). It aimed at restoring and rehabilitating the area southeast of the Brooklyn Bridge, to be transformed as an “Old New York,” including the seaport. It was believed to be, for the first time, key to preservation and restoration of landmarks (South Street Reporter, 1968). The plan proposed a mix of functions including new commercial, and pedestrian experiences, the preservation of clear views to the waterfront and the Brooklyn Bridge (Metzger, 2010) and residential development compatible with the surrounding community and the buildings’ scale. Lindsay’s administration left the area to the South Street Seaport Museum by making it, without any financial help, the sponsor for the Brooklyn Bridge Southeast Urban Renewal District (Lindgren, 2014; South Street Reporter, 1968).

Economic actors were, however, not left aside and the influence of the DLMA played out in an unexpected way. An amendment to the renewal plan (1970) restricted building and urban design rules on the sector around Schermerhorn Row, while the rest of the renewal area could be developed with high-rise apartments and commercial buildings by developers. The South Street Seaport Museum’s was no developer, nor was it acquainted to these business practices. Nevertheless, Mayor Lindsay predicted that the revitalization of the seaport through private funds would open new possibilities for creative urban planning (Lindgren, 2014; South Street Reporter, 1969).

In the 1970s, the oil and fiscal crisis put a drastic halt to any development plans. The Seaport Museum was in acute financial trouble, owing millions to the banks, among them CHASE. By then, it was clear that the Seaport Museum could not financially support the rehabilitation and development of the district, at least not of the type expected by the middle-class, city government, the Lower Manhattan development office, and the DLMA. Having identified global-city status as the hallmark of economic advantage, they fostered those forms of development (Fainstein, 2001, p. 81). For the seaport, this implied a new set of normative prescriptions on its aesthetic, its uses, and its functions that would target a new public. The new social order it wished to establish started to look at the public that had long been using the place as elements of the “extra-social” (Banerjee, 2001; Berque, 1997; Schillings & Vormann, 2013). For instance, the fish market, the fishmongers, and their surrounding populations conveyed an image and reputation that did not correspond to the ideal imagined by public authorities and economic actors for a new space developed for middle-class leisure and activities. The representation it had then was that of a marginal area: “different, not pretty” (Interview with Helen, 2015).

A business-friendly growth strategy had by then become a pursued policy. There were nice hopes that private entrepreneurs could turn the waterfront into an attractive, clean, safe and pleasant place. Tourism facilities, high-end services, upper class housing, and offices were deemed necessary through the Landing Plan (1972) to create a 24-hour community (Metzger, 2010) and redesign this part of Lower Manhattan’s urban landscape. The banks (among them CHASE) purchased the air rights in a favorable deal with the seaport. The city took over Schermerhorn Row and the blocks held by the museum (Lindgren, 2014). Still considered a partner, although secondary, Stanford was asked to come up with a new project to fit into the new development schemes.

This account only partially illustrates how the district was preserved from complete destruction. It shows that recognition of historic values came along with the economic dimension (Special Committee on Historic Preservation, 1999). Moreover, awareness of the district’s intangible dimension as a place of collective memories and legacy only reached public opinion and government authorities through the mobilization of a well-connected intellectual White middle class. Before then, the piers and their related economic fabrics were considered of no use in preventing development. For the preservationists, the history of the seaport was thought of as being a valuable asset contributing to the city’s identity. By defining it as an open-air “live” museum, they hoped to harness the history to the buildings and the district’s people. They saw history as a dynamic process to be shared. For others, the corporate businesses and political leaders, history deserved a better “treatment” and (re)framing. Its material elements needed to be refurbished cleaned and made pleasant.
The Rouse Company: When historic districts become fun destinations

At the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, James Rouse, a retail developer, and his festival marketplaces on waterfronts had become increasingly popular. His concept, which used recycled historic urban settings, operated as a sign that cities could be fun and recapture White middle-class attention. In the 1980s festival marketplaces became the most popular urban strategy pursued by U.S. city governments (Hall, 2002).

The Seaport area was to become James Rouse’s new playground when the new chairman of the board of the Seaport Real Estate Committee approached him. This growth-oriented project was supported by the DLMA and city government (Lindgren, 2014). The expected orientation called for a profit-oriented and a market-based project with the removal of the fish market, considered as having an “adverse impact” on the future development (Office of Lower Manhattan Development, 1975). The district’s specific ecological environment was to become a “magical magnet for tourism and culture” (Office of Lower Manhattan Development, 1975). This type of area just needed “adjustments and upgrading to become productive” (Rouse, 1976).

In a complex negotiated deal process (1977–1980) among the South Street Museum, its corporation, the state, and the city, Rouse managed to have public money invested for a new Pier 17, new streets, walkways, and a clean facade for Schermerhorn Row, while his company would erect a festival market on Pier 17 and refurbish Fulton market. Implementation and negotiations were then conducted through meetings between the state, UDC (city urban development corporation, former EDC), and Rouse. Public participation once praised by the Seaport Museum had been dismissed (Lindgren, 2014). Many among the public at the seaport opposed the new development (City Planning Commission, 1977). They feared it would threaten its actual socioeconomic environment (South Street Reporter, 1973a). The Rouse Company headed by Rouse and city government promised that residents and leaseholders, such as the fish market, would not be adversely affected (Lindgren, 2014). After the deal was signed, Rouse opened the New Fulton Mall in 1983 and the retail market on Pier 17 in 1985.

Although the festival market had been presented in the media as having largely preserved and “recycled” the old historic structures and fabrics associated with the port contributing to the historical depth of the site and its “originality,” numerous scholars have given critical accounts of the project and of festival markets as models for (re)development (Bloom, 2004; Boyer, 1992; DeFilippis, 1997; Hurley, 2006; Metzger, 2010; Sawicki, 1989). The Rouse Company had imposed its own agenda on the design and framed the whole district without–apart from the mandatory regulation–in-depth consultation and public participation. References to social conflicts and the industrial past were deliberately ignored (Boyer, 1992; Hurley, 2006) while storytelling around festival marketplaces idealized their social geography: “It is very important that there be a place where people can go to just be with other people and experience the delight of a continuous festival” (Rouse, 1983).

The seaport was in fact never “charming” (Interview, Briget, 2015). It used to be a multilingual neighborhood where one could hear shouting and swearing, where the hard labor of loading, and unloading, and piling packages and barrels were part of the ordinary (Dean, 1976). Rouse’s seaport, however, had been carefully (re)composed and aestheticized. The upgrading and rehabilitation of the buildings, the design of the urban space, the choice of the outdoor furniture, the use of colors, the delimitation of public space and the signs, all contributed to a sense of harmonization and normalization which in turn contributed to the smoothening and safeness of the historic district (Goss, 1996; Figure 1):

Malls and courts must be free of trash and clutter, spotlessly clean, like Disneyland is clean, but not cold, sterilized like a museum. There should be an over-all feeling of festival of which the shopper feels a part rather than an observer. Everything matters in creating and reinforcing this kind of environment, landscaping, benches, fountains, banners, graphics, signs, merchandise, merchants … (Rouse, 1976)

After its financial disarray of the 1970s, the Seaport Museum had lost its leadership in the district’s management of affairs. It, however, continued its historical mission under the auspices of The Rouse Company (South Street Seaport Museum, 1995). The sanitization of the district was completed with
the move of the Fulton Fish Market in 2005 (but planned as early as 1975) to the Bronx. “The place lost its flavor although the smell remained for much longer” (Interview with Amy, 2015).

If contestation was palpable around the proposed (re)development, no major concerns arose around the leadership taken over public domain by private for-profit interests, namely a developer whose first projects were the enclosed environment of shopping malls that contributed to the rise of suburbia. More than ever, with the withdrawal of public investments, developers and private interests were perceived by the general public and authorities as major contributors to improving urban space quality (Banerjee, 2001). Public spaces were to be reclaimed and become “clean,” “safe,” and “diverting.” For Mayor Ed Koch and its followers, the seaport needed to be incorporated as an engine for economic development. This meant slowly downplaying the role of the Seaport Museum. As a consequence, a fringe of the population was losing its symbolic connection to the place and its voice in the partnership process. These people were slowly symbolically and physically excluded from the area. These functional and social transformations diverted the public from the political and the power issues at stake, which in turn shaped a new political economy of spaces (DeFilippis, 1997) and its normative precepts.

The Rouse Company was sold to General Growth Property (GGP) in 2004. The new owner took over the seaport lease with the plan to redevelop it. It proposed moving the landmarked Tin Building and replacing it with a view obstructing, 495-foot-tall hotel and apartment tower (Lindgren, 2014, p. 281). Although the Landmark Preservation Commission was strongly opposed to it, Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s government was very much in favor of the project. The 2008 debt crisis that witnessed the bankruptcy of GGP, and Hurricane Sandy (2012) put an end to the festivities on the waterfront. The flood seriously impacted the Seaport Museum. Much of the buildings’ core infrastructure was destroyed, leaving it with $20 million in damages and the loss of its potential institutional partner, the Museum of the City of New York. The museum partially reopened at the end of 2012. It had however lost its independence being under city stewardship at the board level since its bankruptcy. It only recovered its independent board of trustees in 2018 (South Street Seaport Museum, 2018). It also appointed a new director in 2015, who together with his team, managed to get FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and HUD (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) grants to restore the Museum.
Today, as the restoration process is under way, the Seaport Museum rents the top floors of Schermerhorn Row for its exhibits, Pier 16 for its ships, and a few other buildings to the city. As GGP did not manage to sell its properties, and the city was not interested in directly intervening in the area, the Howard Hughes Corporation (HHC), a spin-off of GGP, became the new owner of the site in 2010. A new lease agreement was signed between the EDC (for the city) and the HHC. The later holds the rights to the commercial properties and is responsible for the commercial management of the whole district (Lindgren, 2014), while the Economic Development Corporation of New York City is responsible for the leases and land management of the Seaport.

The Howard Hughes Corporation partnership

When I first arrived at the seaport, I expected to see Rouse’s festival marketplace. What I found instead was Pier 17 under construction and rubble. I was witnessing the destruction of Rouse’s building. The Howard Hughes Corporation had been reworking the area with the trendy New York architect firm SHoP. The redevelopment plan built on the idea of a new shopping venue on Pier 17 at the place of the former festival market, consisting of a five-story glass block building with a designed rooftop for events. The developer also planned to revamp the Fulton market building on the Fulton pedestrian street, to include an iPic movie theater and a host of high-end Italian firms selling dining and “retail experience” (Schneider, 2018). At the time, the Howard Hughes Corporation’s development vision stated:

Pier 17 will feature a contemporary design … which will honor its historic roots as a bustling marketplace and influential port of trade. The revitalization will also include lush open spaces, a rooftop venue and a retail environment complete with premier fashion brands, restaurants and a world-class market. Pier 17 and the South Street Seaport will create an unparalleled New York experience and the most vibrant retail and lifestyle destination in Manhattan. (http://www.southstreetseaport.com/development-vision, accessed 15 December 2014)

The Howard Hughes Corporation (HHC) is a Texas real estate development agency. It has roots in the financial success story of Howard Robard Hughes Jr., a business magnate, pilot, and film director who invested in real estate in Las Vegas. The HHC is active in commercial, residential, and mixed-use real estate throughout the U.S. It is, however, a newcomer in redevelopment projects in New York City and within historic district landscape environments. In 2013, it launched the program SEE/CHANGE in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. This program, presented as socially oriented, aimed in fact at luring back Wall Street white-collars and newly settled residents from adjacent neighborhoods in order to support local businesses (http://www.howardhughes.com/our-company, accessed 26 November 2017). Retrofitted with refurbished shipping containers, Fulton Street hosted a pop-up landscape of retailers, bars, and food purveyors from local businesses. Rent proceeds were reallocated to the Seaport Old Alliance, a nonprofit organization constituted in the wake of Hurricane Sandy to promote community and local businesses.12

As many scholars have shown, social and cultural events are a good means to create a sense of the collective, especially when they are bound to elements and memories and refer to history or tradition (Ben Hounet & Guinand, 2016; Di Méo, 1996; Guinand, 2015; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2004; Veschambre, 2007). Moreover, this sense of collective identification is a necessary aspect to community building and empowerment (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990) that perfectly fits within neoliberal participation trends (Jouve, 2005) and place-making strategies. Redevelopment projects use place-making as an identity driver. It is thus not surprising that the HHC roots its project within historical references to the district and mimic local actors’ discourse such as the Old Seaport Alliance. As the seaport’s history (no matter how it is imagined and represented) represents a core value for a constellation of actors, the Howard Hughes Corporation imbeds itself in this history by presenting itself as “a steward of the Seaport district of NYC to help usher the dynamic neighborhood in the 21st century … helping the District to reclaim its role as the heart of Lower Manhattan” (https://www.southstreetseaport.com/vision.html, accessed 26 November 2017). The district’s position the corporation is referring to, is obviously one of the thriving economic centers and destinations, as was the seaport in its heyday (Interview with Barrow, 201413; Young & Meyers, 2014).
The Old Seaport Alliance, which at the time held connections with Community Board 1 (Simko, 2015), provided the corporation with a partners’ network and helped federate a community that would later show itself supportive of its interventions. Support and identification from local businesses to the project were, for instance, witnessed during the Community Board 1 meetings (CB1, March 2, 2015; CB1, June 16, 2015). One could, for example, hear the following comments: “Great unprecedented project that will create jobs for the locals and upgrade the decaying pier” (Workers’ Union representative); “Lots of stuff before was bad. But now we get a chance to put our stamps on the project” (resident); “I am excited about the project. There is an open-door policy and the developer is open to dialogue” (Old Seaport Alliance representative).

Although identification with the seaport’s history is commonly shared, its interpretations and representation may differ. Analyzing the underlying tensions in place-identity shaping, Massey (1994) explains that identity is a fluid and changing concept that cannot be fixed in a place, as it is the outcome of social relations that juxtapose themselves on new ones (p.168). Often, attempts to establish this identity are made through the use of history recourse as exposed by Wallace’s account on Disney (Wallace, 1996). This discourse usually takes the form of storytelling (Salmon, 2007). It creates a normative set of references, which in the case of the seaport frame the past and design how a place should be today and in the (near) future.

A closer examination shows that the historical references chosen by the developer (on his website or on the adds that punctuate the seaport public space; Figure 2) are the noble, prosperous and dynamic moments. This association offers the opportunity to restore and legitimize its interventions. Indeed, the Howard Hughes Corporation’s actions are presented in a positive relationship with the history of the seaport. This process however essentializes the seaport’s history. For instance, one could pay attention to alternative positions and, for example, (re)consider the seaport as home of the Lenape and Delaware Native American tribes, who were eventually forced out by settlers and removed to Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Ontario. Although nostalgic, in the Lenape oral tradition, Manhattan and its surrounding areas are still referred to as the “lost” homeland (Oestreicher, 2009). One could also talk about how

Figure 2. New York’s oldest new neighborhood, 2015 © S. Guinand.
the thriving merchant port was a set of opportunities for some, while at the same time strongly affecting “small tradesmen, common laborers, journeymen, seamstresses and their families” as they were very vulnerable to seasonal trade fluctuations (Burrows & Wallace, 1999, p. 351).

**Contestation on the waterfront**

If Rouse’s festival marketplaces were proposing new experiences, new urban redevelopment projects combine these experiences today with emotions directly derived through interventions associated with storytelling processes. Before even engaging too much effort in transformations and constructions, the HHC activated the district’s space through cultural, culinary, sports events and arts installations (SEE/CHANGE, Seaport of Tomorrow, Seaport Culture District, Smorgasburg, etc.) to create a sense of community and belonging. The narration was written in a way to associate the Howard Hughes Corporation with progress, growth, new amenities and improved life quality. A motive that was heard in the discourse of pro-growth at the seaport: “Amenities have not kept pace down here. We need an iconic building, infrastructures that present the seaport as a new destination for Lower Manhattan” (resident). The different testimonies of new residents and businesses (see previous quotes) clearly demonstrated a positive identification with the new project (CB1, March 2, 2015; CB1, June 16, 2015).

But this vision is a contested one. The built environment is the support of stories and narrations and, as stressed by Dickinson and Aiello, “contributes to transform and reproduce major ideological and structural conditions that mediate the everyday lives of individuals and communities” (2016, p. 1295). These stories and memories, in the seaport case, are multiple. The physical environment, its setting, still supports valuable intangible dimensions as the two-part *Catch — & — Release* project, undertaken by the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA)/New York, a New York-based chapter of the not-for-profit professional association for design, illustrates.

The group was very active in collecting stories and memories of the seaport after Hurricane Sandy (AIGA/NY, 2014) as a means to create an interactive storytelling tool that would benefit the community. The project’s goal was to bring designers to work with the notion of city processes and place-making mainly by making the district’s identities more visible and accessible (Interview with AIGA/NY designer, 2018). This was meant to reveal the salient features of the district and the main elements linked to place’s attachments that could be useful for the district’s further development. The ambition was indeed also to feed the developer’s redevelopment proposal by bringing in a collectively built, shared vision and social network for the seaport (Interview with former Vice President of AIGA/NY, 2015). Interactive exhibitions were held at the seaport to collect and present stories. Community Board 1 was one among the places where the project was presented. However, none of this work has been valorized or taken into account by the developer. By denigrating these intangible ordinary traces (Veschambre, 2008) that also “make” the seaport, it erases the symbolical capital (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 161) held by a segment of residents and users. This, in turn, acts on the individuals’ recognition and their presence and participation in the place’s transformation and appropriation. This also questions the role of residents and users in the partnership and its setting.

The vernacular dimension of the seaport does not seem to gain much traction as it is often associated to a fixed, obsolete, and outdated past captured through representations of old ships, a museum, and its crowd of volunteers (Interviews, 2015). Dealing with this past could thus, for some, appear as a regression, a step backward as for example presented by the co-president of Rose Associates, a real estate and management firm: “a stagnant memorial to an earlier era. Everything has changed in the way that we socialize and shop, and the Hughes proposal will provide a vibrant destination for many people, including our 1,200 residents” (Cuozzo, 2014).

Contestations to the proposed development might appear for the HHC’s supporters as a resistance to change at the seaport, when opponents are in fact not against all economic and service improvements in the district: “There should be progress but not at the cost of anything” (Resident). They also are aware that the dusty images the ships and the Seaport Museum carry do not work as a magnet for visitors: “The
museum is not flashy enough” (SOS member); “We need to bring tourists back, but they certainly will not come for the museum” (SOS member). The main issue is how this redevelopment is being undertaken in terms of symbolic representations and values, and how much latitude the public has in the decision-making process. The Community Board 1, among other opponents and project skeptics, has been demanding that historical features (tangible and intangible) be better taken into account in the redevelopment. They have also asked that open public space be preserved and accessible for residents and users. Finally, they have required the developer to quit segmenting the project (when presenting it to the public) by providing the board and the City of New York with a comprehensive plan (CB1, March 2, 2015; CB1, June 16, 2015).

When the Howard Hughes Corporation took over General Growth Properties, a new contract was established with the city through EDC, whose clauses have remained unknown to the public, as it falls under the private domain. Although requested on many occasions, the developer has always been very evasive about its intentions and, to this day, has not provided the public and local officials with a complete master plan (Loeb Kreuzer, 2013b; Pristin, 2012). The opacity around the developer’s actions and intentions is the result of the specificity of the partnership’s setting. The New York Economic Development Corporation is a quasi-public actor. It presents much of the public features and power leverage of public agencies but as a corporation falls in the private domain. This means that it can act as an economic actor and is thus not subjected to requirements from the public sector such as holding of public meetings, filling in reports of its activities, publicly disclosing plans or documents, or providing an arena for community participation (Fainstein, 2001; Guinand, 2015; 2017). Economic development corporations act like private actors and pursue strong development objectives (Interviews with EDC employee, 2015). This means that the HHC can hide behind EDC as long as it follows the rules to its minimum and has EDC’s support.

For instance, the Howard Hughes Corporation first proposal to transform the Rouse festival marketplace into a three-story retail and entertainment center (Pristin, 2012) meant changes in heights, setbacks and uses on Pier 17 that required going through an Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) (City Planning Commission, 2013). The developer however asked for change in land use outside the perimeter of the projected retail building, touching adjacent areas (Loeb Kreuzer, 2013a). When the project was presented in front of Community Board 1, local representatives were concerned with providing a master plan to get the full developer’s picture for the seaport’s redevelopment. The Howard Hughes Corporation however never provided these elements (Fusfeld, 2012), as they are not mandatory in the ULURP procedure. Testimonies of local actors, such as SOS members, warned that if approved without securing guidelines for future developments, the faith of the adjacent area might be jeopardized. CB1 recommendations were passed over to the next step of the ULURP procedure. But as not forcible, they were not necessarily integrated. The plan was approved by the city council (2013) without a request to provide further elements such as a master plan or general guidelines.

A few months after the ULURP was adopted (City Planning Commission, 2013), the developer proposed a new development for a residential tower next to its commercial building. This had not been known to the public and CB1. It drew on previous plans that the firm SHoP Architects had designed in 2008 for General Growth Properties (Bagli, 2013). The tower was then presented by the Howard Hughes’s chief executive as an “economic engine” to revitalize the district (Bagli, 2013). It was supposed to comprise a plan to financially put afloat the Seaport Museum, deliver social housing in Schermerhorn Row (where the museum is located) and provide school infrastructure.

**Partnership rearrangement**

The arrangements behind closed doors that had been ongoing since the Rouse period (Lindgren, 2014) were this time denounced by elected officials such as the Manhattan borough president, a city council member, an assemblyman, a state senator, and a Congressman. They wrote EDC, deploring its secrecy and urging it to employ a “collaborative, community-based planning process” for the seaport (Loeb Kreuzer, 2013b). Not getting any constructive response from EDC, the City or even the HHC, they21, together with
CB1, formed the Seaport Working Group in February 2014. Its purpose was to correct the balance of power in the partnership by engaging in a community-driven dialogue about the development in and around the Seaport Historic District. It was also put together to respond to concerns raised by the local community and CB1 for the mixed used development plan for the New Market Building and Tin Building site that comprised the tower (Seaport Working Group, 2014, p. 2).

As such EDC, the New York City Department of City Planning, Department of Cultural Affairs, and the HHC were asked to participate. The group convened 11 times over a 9-month period. It came up with guidelines for assessing the development of the district. EDC had been asked to guide the process (like in a partnership). It did so with facilitators that helped draft the guidelines. However, it did not get much involved in the negotiations nor did it position itself when the guidelines were publicly presented in June 2014. EDC’s spokesperson mentioned waiting for a clear consensus between the developer and the community before acting (Rogers, 2014).

The developed guiding principles emphasized the Seaport Museum as the area’s cultural anchor with ships defining the waterfront and added that both needed support. The recommendations insisted on the fact that the area’s vitality had to be maintained and future development should respect the historical context and building heights. This meant for instance that the scaling of buildings around the district was to be carefully planned to avoid creating a dramatic rupture with the existing urban fabric (as was the case with the projected tower on Pier 17) (Davidson, 2014). Finally, the group advised the city government to consider shifting control of the district’s city-owned properties (under leases) from EDC, and thus the Howard Hughes Corporation, to an organization that would better represent the community’s voices (Seaport Working Group, 2014). Although the developer was supportive of the process and agreed to some of the recommendations, it did not do much to implement them (Interview Waterfront Alliance, 2015).

These guidelines were a locally based response to the lacking public master plan that the community and elected officials had been longing for. It was an important step toward the federation of a common vision for the seaport, which had been dramatically lacking in the developer’s proposal. These guidelines were however not legally binding and could not be forced onto the developer. Nevertheless, this ad-hoc partnership had managed to put stakeholders with very different views (including Save our Seaport and the Hughes Corporation) into the same room to work through their difference. It had set up a local arena that could be (re)activated for future issues and raised much publicity around the seaport’s faith.

In 2015, the seaport was added to America’s list of most endangered historic places (https://savingplaces.org/places/south-street-seaport#.WMamCoczV9B, accessed 10 February 2015). That same year the seaport was also put on the New York Municipal Art Society 2015 “watch list” which identifies neighborhood and local issues that will have the most significant impact on the built environment in the upcoming year (http://www.mas.org/watchlist2015/accessed 10 February 2015). In December 2016, after years of tensions and mobilization of local elected officials, CB1, associations and historic institutions, the developer ended up canceling its plan for the tower arguing that it would develop a small commercial building instead. The public, the elected officials and the association representatives won a battle over public historic land. However, the district still remains under the control of EDC and the Howard Hughes Corporation.

In 2018, news mentioned the dismantling of the New Market Building of Fulton market by EDC without proper public review (Warerkar, 2018). Once again, CB1 and the rest of the community had not been notified of this new scheme. This pushed the community to ask for the reactivation of the Seaport Working Group. If the faith of the New Market Building is still pending, local leaders such as SOS members and CB1 have started to look for ideas for the future development. They want to defend and secure propositions for a project that respond to community advancement since the building is located on the public realm (Fenton, 2019). Moreover, in spring 2019, the HHC announced the setting of a series of workshops on the future development of the seaport that would start in the fall (Glassman, 2019) and lead to a master plan. Although closed to the public, CB1, elected officials and parent members from adjacent schools are part of the process. Depending
on the outcomes and the mechanism, this could be viewed as a first step toward a more progressive and balance partnership in which local stakeholders have a say in the development narrative.

Conclusion: Where is the “public” in a partnership?

“When we inherited this place six and a half years ago, we thought, ‘How do we bring the New Yorkers back to the seaport?’ It had lost its significance and relevance to locals,” stated the chief executive of the Howard Hughes Corporation (Stapinski, 2017). This quote well illustrates how the Howard Hughes Corporation perceived the seaport when it inherited it after a succession of corporate ownerships. It also shows its lack of understanding of the relationship the public and the locals had established with the historic district. It presents the district as unattractive when, in fact, for a majority of institutional actors, including, Community Board 1, the Waterfront Alliance, the Municipal Art Society, Manhattan borough president, city councilmember, etc. its significance and relevance as a historic and socio-cultural trigger has never been lost (Interviews, 2015; Brewer, 2016; Haigney, 2017).

This paper analyzed the management and development of a historic district set in successive public–private partnerships. It raised concern over the place of the “public” in these partnerships. It underlined for instance how in these partnerships the voices of the public and urban democratic processes have slowly eroded in favor of economic development. By unfolding the district’s past events, it showed that the partnerships and leases are central to the past, present and future development of the district. It emphasized how actors on different levels, their values and relations to the district have impacted its tangible and intangible dimensions.

For instance, when the Howard Hughes Corporation took over, the seaport district was run down and had few residents. Visitors were scarce and businesses closed. This downturn could have been used as an opportunity to reflect on the historic district’s mission or look at what components (tangible and intangible) were constitutive of its symbolic dimension. The corporation could have, for example, taken advantage of the outputs provided by communities, such as Catch — & — Release, or capitalized on existing cultural features such as the community around the seaport’s museum or advises from elected representatives of CB1. These actions would have provided a social continuum for the redevelopment of the area. Instead, the Howard Hughes Corporation has mobilized its own narrative for development through media discourses, space activation and images without much consultation, resulting in physical and social disruptions. The latter resulted, the paper showed, in a strong reaction from local elected officials. They took action by rearranging the partnership with the creation of an ad hoc structure, the Seaport Working Group.

The paper aimed at contributing to the current debate on public–private partnership (PPP) by discussing the implications and outcomes of partnerships set in a historic district by bringing in the example of an alternative setting for more open collaboration and negotiation between developers and local actors. As private investments grow stronger, the story of the seaport underlines the necessity to be vigilant of the expected development and processes, especially for historic districts that hold core values. The paper thus claimed that partnerships should be a real negotiation process with local actors (especially local institutions and elected officials) rather than a tool that allows developers to promote their own interests and narratives. It showed that such arrangements are possible and do exist. It underlined the power of local actors (elected officials, but also local institutions such as associations) when brought together around the same issue (coalition of cause). For instance, the Seaport Working Group and its guidelines have been instrumental in the choice by the HHC to abandon the tower project. Ad hoc partnerships are alternative processes that merit further attention for a more balanced conduct of urban affairs.

Notes

1. The sources (interviews and documents) I consulted at the local level confirmed such connections.
2. In the course of this paper, I refer to partnerships and public–private partnerships interchangeably. I define partnership as cooperative institutional and contractual arrangements between government and business-related actors.

3. The rehabilitation of Williamsburg, Virginia, for example, is often cited as the first historic district (1960). It was financed by oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (Hurley, 2010).

4. See for example the Ellicott City Partnership in Maryland, created in 2013 through the merger of the Ellicott City Restoration Foundation and the Ellicott City Business Association (https://ecpartnership.org/ accessed 14 April 2016).

5. The seaport had signed a 99-year lease with the city government on the three blocks of the district (South Street Reporter, 1973b).

6. Peck Slip, John Street, Water and Front Streets bound the area.

7. During the 1960s and 1970s, the South Street Seaport witnessed the installation of various artists. It was also a place for prostitution and the mafia was well known for holding part of the Fulton fish market’s economy.

8. Resident of the seaport. All the given names quoted in this article were changed in order to make the informants’ name anonymous.

9. Resident of the seaport.

10. Resident of the seaport since 1975.

11. The Rouse Company was sold to GGP in 2004. The 2009 GGP’s bankruptcy was the most important in U.S. retail history.


14. The Community Board 1 (CB1) plays a consultative role in the urban design and planning process. It is composed of 50 volunteer members, most of who serve on various committees with focus on specific issues relevant for Lower Manhattan (e.g. Land use, zoning and economic development committee, Landmarks and preservation committee, etc.). The local Borough President appoints members each year for two-year terms. They are selected among active and involved people of the community and must reside, work, or have some other significant interest in the community. Recommendations of CB1 are not mandatory for the developer, especially if the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) of the City of New York and the Urban Planning Commission do not back them up.

15. Among local actors, I witnessed the support of the Old Seaport Alliance, the Association for a better New York, the New York Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Alliance, New York Economic Development Corporation.

16. During my fieldwork, I noted that most of the supporters among residents and businesses were newcomers in the area.

17. See also http://yejuchoi.com/CatchandRelease2.html.

18. Person in charge of the Design Relief Project’s design and construction.

19. The coalition includes Save Our Seaport (SOS), Downtown Independent Democrats, The Historic Districts Council, Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance, Southbridge Towers, the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council and the New Amsterdam Market as well as other organizations and individuals.

20. The tower had been planned just outside of the historic perimeter.


22. It included Borough President Gale Brewer, City Councilmember Margaret Chin, Assemblyman Sheldon Silver, State Senator Daniel Squadron, Congressman Jerrold Nadler, members of CB1, Departments of the City of New York, EDC, The Howard Hughes Corporation, South Bridge Towers representative, four local residents, Lower Manhattan cultural council, Old Seaport Alliance, Seaport Speaks, Save our Seaport, Downtown Alliance, Blue School and Manhattan chamber of commerce. The Seaport Museum was not part of the discussion as it was under City stewardship and only received a new director in 2015.

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