



Security Inside Out: The Danger of “Interiority” in a World of Inequality

Setha Low & Mark Maguire

To cite this article: Setha Low & Mark Maguire (2024) Security Inside Out: The Danger of “Interiority” in a World of Inequality, Anthropology Now, 16:3, 1-12, DOI: [10.1080/19428200.2024.2425572](https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2024.2425572)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2024.2425572>



Published online: 27 Jan 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 118



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

FEATURES



Security Inside Out: The Danger of “Interiority” in a World of Inequality

Setha Low and Mark Maguire 

Wealth inequality has produced various spaces of security throughout history. Today, as inequality within nation-states returns to early 20th-century levels, security capitalism is raising walls, dividing cities and littering the world with surveillance gadgetry—thus reinforcing social divisions both spatially and symbolically. Scholars and activists typically tie securitization to fear of crime, social upheaval and other insecurities.¹ People often accept securitization, perhaps even naturalize it, as a response to real or imagined fears rather than examining its cultural embeddedness. But if the link between securitization and fear of crime is broken or weak, what motivates people’s desire for security? Here, we add to previous anthropological work on spaces of security by attending to the ideas, embodied behaviors, desires and privileges that shape what we are calling “interiority.”²

Setha’s awakening to the production of interiority in a security context was in Caracas, Venezuela, 25 years ago. She was staying with her partner’s college friend in a middle-class, gated and guarded community that was located on a hillside overlooking the city. The first night they decided to go out for dinner and, to Setha’s surprise, were picked up in an armored van and driven to a nearby mall. The upscale restaurant was inside, and entry guards ushered them in. Once she had crossed this otherwise impenetrable boundary, the mall began to look more “normal.”

Setha was shocked at the level of armed security, but she was assured by her hosts that this was how *gente decente* (decent people, a coded class reference) lived. The next day when she wanted to go to a park, she was taken by bullet-proof van to a green, forested area far beyond the city, where men and women in expensive workout gear were jogging and where everyone seemed to know each other.

At the time, Setha’s understanding of securitized living in Venezuela was based on the high level of property crime and physical violence. She didn’t think to question what else might be going on. It was not until 5 years later when she heard similar “fear talk” on a visit to her sister in a crime-free, middle-class gated community in San Antonio, Texas, that she began to wonder whether safety was indeed the issue. Instead, she realized that the avoidance behavior, residential design, surveillance technology and private guarding she observed were attempts at insulation from the city and those perceived as

“Others” and a desire for interiority that had more to do with class boundaries, privacy and privilege than with security. This desire to live in a protected bubble separate from the rest of society proved to be more socially transformative than she had originally thought.

An ethnographic essay in our 2024 book *Trapped* captures Long Island, New York, residents talking about how good they feel once they enter their garages.³ They express pride in themselves for being smart enough to live in a gated community where they will not become victims of the “urban poor” (whether they are Black, Mexican, Iranian, or lower-income workers) who threaten their way of life by simply being present and visible. The visibility of these perceived “Others” working in their homes as domestic labor or constructing nearby houses or other buildings increases their anxieties. Living inside security-alarmed houses encircled by gates and walls, driving luxurious large SUVs and deploying guards and live surveillance cameras in the community’s common areas are ways to produce an ever-increasing interiority in their everyday lives, but it is never enough to calm their fears.

Indian Creek Village, a gated island near Miami with houses that sell for as much as \$49 million, illustrates how wealthy residents create environments to create an interior world.⁴ The island is noteworthy because it has water as a natural physical boundary, and it is also independently incorporated with its own government and police force. The exclusive golf club owns the private bridge and plans to implement a laser beam security system around the island to deter intruders.⁵ No one is allowed to access the island without permission from a resident. On an even larger scale, wealthy landowners in Montana stop people from accessing public lands by buying up the property surrounding U.S. Forest Service holdings and National Forest land, essentially privatizing the region.⁶



Image 1. Private security guards. Photo by Vlc Lic, licensed under CC BY 2.0.



Image 2. Artificial archipelago for the wealthy, Dubai. Photo by the Expedition 22 crew.

On Interiority

In anthropology, the concept of interiority and its relationship to security is typically found in ethnographic descriptions of “home” as a physical shelter, a sanctuary where culture may flourish, and as a cultural concept extending beyond physical walls, such as “household” or “lineage/family.” In 19th-century Europe when labor and family production moved out of people’s living spaces and into the factory and marketplace, notions of domestic privacy emerged.⁷ This new private realm secluded women and children from public life and “secured” middle-class women and their labor within the “castle walls” of the private home.⁸ Homemaking became intrinsically spatial, based on a layered—and sometimes enforced—interiority. A brief comparative anthropological discussion helps us to understand this historical process.

Some early, if rather inchoate, anthropological research explored family and home as an inner sanctum ringed by more distant kin and imagined communities, identified as “security circles.”⁹ Ideas, symbols and material culture connected the inner circles to those on the outside. For example, one might find images of military service in family photographs or a national flag flying on the lawn. If the family migrated, the connective tissue might contract, the home becoming a less embedded space for cultural expression and transformation.

Of course, just as security produces insecurity, a comfortable home may imprison a victim of domestic abuse, foster an oppressive normativity or be

the staging ground for rebellion. Indeed, Setha has written about the “new (negative) emotions of home” that displace the “hearth and home motif” of the American Dream when fear and anxiety are present due to the excessive security concerns and even paranoia of gated community families.¹⁰ Military scholars have long noted other contradictions: soldiers will substitute an idealized home for the homeland when they fight for their country, even though some may come from difficult familial backgrounds. This kind of scale jumping from home to homeland or nation explains why reactionary pundits enjoy baiting liberals by comparing their generosity to migrants to enabling a “home invasion.” At first glance, such scale jumping is opportunistic, perhaps even irrational. However, it plays well internationally by tying familial and homemaking sentiments to anti-immigration politics. Moreover, as we will later show, it taps into foundational thinking about privacy, “liberty” and the right to defend one’s home as if it were a castle. The weaponization of interiority occurs easily and often. In short, security has an intimate, dependent yet conflictual relationship with interiority in that the reality of the interior of a home can be experienced differently by individuals of different ages and genders who live together.

Pierre Bourdieu’s celebrated treatment of Berber home life merits a brief discussion in that he offers another metaphor for the relationship between security and interiority. The Kabyle house is a space of work and community activity yet is also a sanctuary composed of interiors, “dark” and gendered areas that reflect unwritten codes of practice. According to Bourdieu, security retreats to interiority yet is compelled to break out. Marriage surfaces this contradiction for households: “The choice between fission and fusion, the inside and the outside, security and adventure, is posed anew with each marriage.”¹¹ The Berber house expresses an uneasy reconciliation between interiority and openness to life’s dangers and vicissitudes.

There is no universal formula for correctly resolving this conflict. In our age of security capitalism, the desire for interiority is fed by a massive economic sector, which encompasses private security guards, surveillance gadgets, various purveyors of exclusivity and sensationalist media enterprises, and so it can outweigh the yearning for openness to new experiences and interactions. Today, security is everywhere because it is desirable, and, crucially, it involves more than just the provision of safety.

As we argue in *Trapped*, security is intrinsic to the dominant forms of global modernity, from institutional forms and cultural norms to architecture and design.¹² Michel Foucault’s genealogical work shows how security emerged as a governmental apparatus supporting an open society.¹³ In 18th-century Europe, he explains, towns were unruly and diseased places, poised to grow but constrained by the defensive walls enclosing them. Modern security expanded with capitalism to manage the intrinsic uncertainty of a world without walls, where

the property-owning classes possessed the right to “enjoy their assets” in peace—one of the cornerstones of privacy in common law.¹⁴ By the late 19th century, new bourgeois homes advanced into a still-dangerous world with harmonized façades, walls, gates and gardens. As is well-documented, internal changes were also dramatic, with prevailing architectural forms reflecting new cultural norms. Gendered notions of “respectability” and “politeness” were staged in Victorian parlors and drawing rooms, a “cultural podium” for women’s voices, as long as they avoided important matters of politics or business.¹⁵ This highly curated inner world became increasingly intolerant of difference and danger. With the rise of security capitalism, the supply of crime became uncoupled from the demand for security.

Today, walls are reappearing around the world, motivated by the return to early 20th-century levels of wealth inequality, frenzied media coverage of violent crime and policies promoted by law-and-order politicians but also a desire for security. From New York to Nairobi, the middle classes and especially the wealthy are retreating to interior worlds. Private security companies control access to spaces and privileges everywhere one looks, from luxury residences and exclusive clubs to private airports. We must now explore the inner space of security capitalism.



Image 3. New York City street scenes. Photo by Steven Pisano, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Inside Out

In 2023, Mark spent time with the director of an international training company specializing in “close protection,” more commonly known as bodyguarding. The director asked Mark to replace him as the “high-value client” for several days during a “live exercise,” thereby freeing him to perform more detached trainee evaluations. On the first day, the director gave Mark his new “background,” which cast him as a senior executive in a U.S. multinational energy company facing a credible threat to his life from criminals based in Ukraine, confirmed by local police sources. The director then introduced Mark to the members of his four-person “detail,” who discussed his travel plans and likely vulnerabilities. The team’s plans flowed from their understanding that VIPs inhabit shrunken worlds despite their frequent travel. Their homes are secluded and guarded, often by a live-in security staff. When they travel, security accompanies them—sometimes preceding them—to other safe spaces, such as exclusive restaurants and clubs, private airport terminals or the secluded homes of friends. It is assumed that to leave this inner world is to invite risk, so travel to a new location or foreign country poses problems for close protection staff.

On the second training day, the close protection team collected Mark at his modest suburban home by dramatically blocking traffic, glaring at his bemused neighbors and speaking into microphones in their lapels. Typically, a close protection team will have a driver schooled in “defensive techniques,” an armed “follow car” and, ideally, a female team member. Female bodyguards are in much demand because they “blend in” during formal events. The director stated that “blending in” was code for being mistaken for a personal assistant. The team drove Mark to and from a conference in a countryside hotel. They strove to maintain a sense of interiority from the moment he entered the armored SUV. They had prepared the car with personalized news media and beverages; they opened and closed doors for him, carried his bag and made room for him in crowded spaces.

When asked, protection officers happily discussed how they strike a balance between being “discrete” and yet “visible.” After all, they expect to encounter other security professionals at events. Hence, they and their clients are hyper-conscious about their cultural appearance. According to the trainee driver, an ex-Special Forces soldier, good close protection staff cultivate a “chill” atmosphere because the wealthy are always “relaxed.” He attempted to elaborate and struggled to do so beyond describing how wealthy people “glide” rather than walk. The female close protection trainee was outstanding at every task, anticipating problems and resolving them confidently. She confided to Mark: “This job will pay well. I have children, so I know how to treat the VIPs—just like my toddler!”

From an ethnographic perspective, we discerned several immediate features of security-interiority. It is thoroughly spatialized, even in motion, and is

supported by physical constructions and an extensive human infrastructure. It both emerges from and amplifies social distance, signaling class membership to some while turning a stony and potentially violent face toward unwanted Others. Interiority has affective qualities: spatiotemporal rhythms, anxious social signaling and desired atmospheres. Many of these features are expressed in code, from *gente decente* to, as one might expect, persistent references to privacy.



Image 4. Security and weapons exhibition, Germany, 2023. Photo by Mark Maguire.

Privacy and Interiority

Privacy is a topic that has long vexed anthropologists. Like interiority—and security, for that matter—it has only recently been the direct focus of ethnographic research. Anthropologists concur that privacy is an essentially contested concept that acquires meaning from adjacent concerns, such as the regulation of physical and social distance, aging or illness, guilt and shame, secrecy and suspicion.¹⁶ When anthropologists consider privacy in security contexts, they tend to collapse it into local life rather than explore how security capitalism deliberately recruits privacy in multiple contexts and sells it as interiority.¹⁷

From Africa to North America, we noticed mention of privacy when interlocutors sought to justify the procurement of security services and when they described related lifestyle and design choices. They sometimes offered the word in place of critical reflection. Raymond Williams's *Keywords* explains the usefulness of this essentially contested concept.¹⁸ In medieval Europe, he writes, privacy, from the Latin *privatus*, implied a withdrawal from public life, a chosen deprivation perhaps, such as seeking admission to a cloistered religious order. The association with intimacy and secrecy—a topic of traditional interest to anthropologists—is more recent, as is the “positive” association of privacy with property. In fact, according to Williams, the proliferation in uses of “private”—private schools, clubs, restaurants, views and so on—is best understood as both a reworking of the boundaries of public life and the “legitimation” of the capitalist desire for “seclusion and protection from others (the public); of lack of accountability to ‘them’; and of related gains in closeness and comfort.” For Williams, the discussion of privacy must necessarily include an examination of “privilege” as intrinsic to security.¹⁹

In our ethnographic research, privacy is the preferred term among wealthy and even middle-class interlocutors when discussing their homes, travel, leisure and other privileged lifestyle choices. For them, interiority is privacy given a physical, spatial, technological or architectural form. A secluded home bespeaks privacy as a privilege when ringed by security staff and gadgetry or elevated above street life with strict access control. Traveling from the safe interior of one's home to a private school, club or friend's residence is a complex undertaking that they prefer to leave to professionals. Of course, transit may be managed with a surveillance apparatus, citizen alerts or parents utilizing their children's phones and cameras to trace location and movement. However, the greater the level of insulation, we suggest, the more intolerant people become of uncertainty and the more they see interiority as normal, natural even.

Though one might subjectively experience security as a relaxed interior that one “glides” through, contemporary security can only be explained as part of a broader system of privilege. This form of privilege-based interiority reveals itself to be a strategy to manage interaction with a perceived as dangerous public and to remove oneself physically and spatially from the realm of social responsibility. Therefore, security-interiority falls into the anthropological category of “negative reciprocity,” a system based on taking more than one's fair share and expecting others to pay the price.



Image 5. Private and gated community in Ireland, 2024. Photo by Mark Maguire.

Dangerous Interiors

There are many places that offer the kind of security and interiority we are describing. Consider Fisher's Island off the Connecticut coast, administratively part of Southold, New York. Though not as expensive as the homes in Indian Creek Village, they offer even greater interiority through norms of generational ownership and country club membership that restrict sales and members to family, relatives and friends.²⁰ Dating back to the 1800s, Fisher's Island has become an exclusive enclave of "old money" families who value community and privacy over having amenities such as many restaurants, shops or markets that would attract outsiders. It is exceedingly private, with socializing centering on golf and tennis clubs and sailing. Some parts of the island are gated, and in some areas the roads are unnamed and the houses unnumbered, making it difficult to find someone's home without an invitation and directions. The focus on keeping out outsiders through generational family controls has kept prices much lower than in the Hamptons and other Long Island beach neighborhoods, and properties do not appreciate at the same pace due to the constraints of a limited market, few amenities to attract outsiders and golf and tennis clubs with years-long waiting lists.²¹

Mark Zuckerberg's Hawaii compound with a plan for a complete underground bunker is probably the most extreme example of wealthy interiority.²² Of course, bunker-building by a class of absentee billionaires reflects more than individual narcissism. There is much discussion today about the "offshoring" of wealth by those avoiding taxation and evading their societal responsibility. Moreover, some of these very wealthy individuals fund policies detrimental to the planet while safely insulated from the consequences.

We, and others, have theorized securityscapes as places that control and structure space by physical or metaphorical enclosure, technological monitoring, architectural infrastructure and an affective atmosphere of fear and anxiety. Our addition of the concept of "interiority" uncovers the underexplored outcomes of a society comprised of a sequence of securityscapes and consequences of the lived/embodied experience therein. In our analysis, interiority is the securityscape as seen and experienced by its producers and users—who only want more. Based on our ethnographic and historical examples, we argue that interiority is a sensibility that includes the physical and emotional sensations of being separate, pampered and protected while moving frictionlessly through any social or material milieu. It is the ideal user experience in a space of security.

Interiority can be characterized by its specific aesthetic qualities, design forms, affective resonances, rhythms and textures that communicate security and, as we argue, its veneer of privacy and privilege. Much more needs to be written to specify what emotions, rhythms, smells and sounds are most appreciated or effective. However, we can start by examining luxury spas, hotels and first-class travel that aim to deliver it. It can be bespoke or anonymous, but we find that it is the inner experience—materially and affectively—that is desired, and more security is thought to provide this.

Everyday forms of interiority are increasingly accessible. Malls and airports bring security to mass commercial markets. Not all forms of interiority are detrimental to society, just as not all forms of security are negative. After all, as the anthropological record shows, different cultures have struck their own balance between openness to the world and the desire for a safe interior world. One does not have to look hard to find alternative and emergent forms of interiority, perhaps rooted in care. As Andre Lorde said of homemaking among members of the gay community, especially Black women, our home became the "house of difference."²³ That said, our goal in this essay has been to expose the relationship between security and interiority, showing how privacy and privilege are necessarily implicated and pointing to how our vulnerability to the desire for a safe interior is open to exploitation by security capitalism. In this age of security capitalism, interiority pretends to balance danger and hope. However, too often, it takes the form of anti-social and dangerous trends, from privatizing neighborhoods to walling off regions, all of which present a moral hazard to society.

Notes

1. Russ Castronovo, *American Insecurity and the Origins of Vulnerability* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023); Astra Taylor, *The Age of Insecurity: Coming Together as Things Fall Apart* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2023); Elizabeth Seaton, "The Commodification of Fear," *Topias* 5 (2018): 1–19.
2. Setha Low and Mark Maguire, eds. *Spaces of Security: Ethnographies of Securityscapes, Surveillance, and Control* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).
3. Mark Maguire and Setha Low, *Trapped: Life Under Security Capitalism and How to Escape It* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024).
4. Hannah Towey, "Jeff Bezos Is Moving to Miami. Step Inside 'Billionaire Bunker,' the Exclusive Neighbourhood Where He Owns 2 Mansions," *Business Insider*, November 2, 2023.
5. Letter concerning Island Perimeter Security System from village manager. 22 September 2020.
6. Joseph Bullington, "How to Privatize a Mountain," *In These Times: Rural America*, February 12, 2024. <https://inthesetimes.com/article/crazy-privatize-mountain-montana-crazies-land-rural-west-gentrification>.
7. Setha Low, "The New Emotions of Home: Fear and Insecurity of Gated Community and Post 9/11 Battery Park City Residents," in *Indefensible Architecture*, ed. M. Sorkin (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 233–258.
8. Low, "The New Emotions of Home," 233–258.
9. See Williams, Francis Edgar. 1930. *Orokaiva Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; later, Sahlins, Marshall. 1963. "The Segmentary Lineage: An Organization of Predatory Expansion," *American Anthropologist* 63, no. 2: 322–345.
10. Setha Low, *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).
11. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 57–58.
12. Maguire and Low, *Trapped*. 1–35.
13. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
14. The 16th-century adage "an Englishman's home is his castle" originates in law—Pleas of the Crown—and articulates security and property rights, namely, the right to not flee if attacked in one's home and even justifiably commit homicide. With common law, the armed civilian became a problem of private rather than public security.
15. Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).
16. Lenore Manderson, Mark Davis, Chip Colwell, and Tanja Ahlin, "On Secrecy, Disclosure, the Public, and the Private in Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 56, suppl. 12 (2015): S183–S190.
17. For a full discussion, see Low, Setha, and Mark Maguire. "Writing Urban Security." *City & Society* 36, no. 1: 57–59. 2024.
18. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
19. Williams, *Keywords*, 172.
20. E. B. Solomont, "How Private Is This Community Off the Coast of Connecticut? No Comment," *Wall Street Journal*, September 7, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/real-estate/luxury-homes/fishers-island-new-york-e1888959>.
21. Solomont, "How Private Is This Community?"

22. Guthrie Scrimgeour, "Inside Mark Zuckerberg's Top-Secret Hawaii Compound," *Wired Business*, December 14, 2023. <https://www.wired.com/story/mark-zuckerberg-inside-hawaii-compound/>.
23. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982), 226.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributors

Setha Low is distinguished professor of environmental psychology, geography, anthropology and women's studies and director of the Public Space Research Group at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Dr. Low has an M.A. and Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley. She has been awarded a Getty Fellowship, an NEH fellowship, a Fulbright Senior Fellowship, a Future of Places Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship for her ethnographic research on urban public space in Latin America and the United States. Her most recent books are *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place* (2017), *Anthropology and the City* (2019), *Spaces of Security* (with M. Maguire, 2019), *Why Public Space Matters* (2023) and *Trapped: Life Under Security Capitalism and How to Escape It* (with M. Maguire, 2024). She has published over 100 articles and chapters and lectures internationally on public space, social justice and diversity in partnership with the UN Habitat Global Public Space Programme. Currently Dr. Low is working on a book on corporate/private governance in the domestic housing and public realms and its impact on everyday social life and neighborhood relationships.

Mark Maguire is a professor in the Department of Anthropology, Maynooth University, Ireland. For the past decade, his work focused on public behavior during terror attacks and the use of force in counterterrorism operations. He is author with Setha Low of *Trapped: Life Under Security Capitalism and How to Escape It* (2024) and is co-editor with Setha Low of *Spaces of Security: Ethnographies of Securityscapes, Surveillance, and Control* (2019).

ORCID

Mark Maguire  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2704-5359>

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Gilliard, Chris. "The Rise of 'Luxury Surveillance.'" *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/10/amazon>
- Kahlenberg, Richard. *Excluded: How Snob Zoning, Nimbysism, and Class Bias Build the Walls We Don't See*. New York: Public Affairs, 2023.
- Low, Setha. *Why Public Space Matters*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2023.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*. London and New York: Polity Press, 2013.