Gated communities: a discussion of the reasons and the consequences of housing choices towards increasingly secure or fortified spaces in Western cities.

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Abstract

Today’s capitalist markets proclaim gated communities to be safer, friendlier communities, as consumers yearn for private utopias. However, many issues including the privatisation of public space, social control, urban governance, social exclusion and social capital are of concern for those questioning this new phenomenon. Evidence suggests that the safe, caring gated community ideology is not only misleading but can also lead to the creation of landscapes of exclusion, loss of social capital and community tolerance, and increased social exclusion.

Key words: gated communities, social control, social exclusion, public space, urban governance, security

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Gated communities are a radical urban form where housing developments restrict public access, usually through the use of gates, walls and fences. In addition, closed circuit television systems and other security devices are often integral features of the ‘community’. The definition possibly also includes socio-legal agreements which “tie the residents to a common code of conduct and (usually) collective responsibility for management” (Atkinson and Bandy 2006, p. viii). Gated communities can be seen as a response to the fear of crime, and researchers are now studying this physical
embodiment of public fears about private fears. However, privacy, status and investment potential may also be significant factors, and these issues include the privatisation of public places and the fortification of urban space (Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. viii). This essay will discuss why and with what consequences have people chosen to segregate themselves, including whether gated communities are merely a form of housing or attempts to create control, predictability and personal safety, which may have negative or external outcomes on the broader community (Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. viii).

Gating is not a new concept. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, towers, moats and drawbridges were a common sight, providing protection for the families of royals, as a reminder of class distinction (Dillon 1994, p. 10). Only in times of conflict were peasants and serfs allowed entry, mainly in return for produce. Today, however, in the age of capitalism and globalisation, gated communities are marketed as accessible to all, for the right price.

Gated communities are springing up all over the western world. In the UK, it has been suggested that there are more than 1000 gated communities (Dillon 1994), and in the US, corporations are building more and more “spatially-separate communities” where residents are carefully chosen (even by race) (Gough et al 2006, p. 116). Other locations in this growing trend include Latin America, Africa, Asia, Turkey, France, Spain and the Russian capital, Moscow (Glasze 2003, p. 35). Interestingly, at this stage, the European welfare states appear to be opposed to this kind of development due to strong public planning policies and a deeply rooted concept of public space (Glasze 2003, p. 40).

So what has brought about this new trend? Capitalist forms of production and consumption have had a “profound impact on the ways in which we live and interact in the urban environment” and space has now become a commodity with economic ramifications (White 1996, p. 38). Economic realities, for example the loss of manufacturing, may lead to marketing for a different gentrified consumer. These economic changes, however, affect the structuring of landscapes which in turn can lead to economic, social and political marginalisation. Previously, poverty and unemployment created geographically concentrated poor suburbs causing spatial
segregation based upon socio-economic status (White 1996, p. 39). Housing policies implemented programmes that attempted to ameliorate such inequalities, and Forster (1991, pp. 57-58) argued that residential segregation needed to be addressed by diversifying the housing stock to achieve the right social mix (Sarkissian et al, in Forster 1991, p. 58).

The decline in the role of government, however, alongside with the continued rise of ‘market forces’, neo-liberalism, and the tendency towards privatisation have encouraged unimpeded development, including the housing market. As government housing intervention has declined, developers have stepped in. Using marketable ploys such as the desire for status, privacy and investment, developers are able to effectively ‘sell’ gated communities to the ever-consuming consumers. This age of modernity and individualism encourages the “pursuit of utopian aspirations through privatisations of public life” (McKenzie 2003, p. 3).

Often socio-spatial control is shaped by ‘commercial’ decisions and corporate selling tactics (White 1996, p. 47). Such decisions may affect policies that determine how space is regulated and developed. More often than not, the construction of urban space is about commercial and property interests, and not about assisting the disadvantaged to make ‘legitimate’ claims on their own consumer spaces (White 1996, p. 42). The winners are the wealthy, the consumers and the investors. The issues about urban governance and the privatisation of space need to be addressed, and the lack of acknowledgement of problems caused by this phenomenon is “at the heart of the democratic decision-making process” (White 1996, p. 45).

Another important theme relates to the issues of fear and security. In the era of globalisation, social roles are continually subject to modification (Furedi 2002, p. 68), causing people to feel insecure about their future. The issues of crime and personal security correlate highly with survival (Furedi 2002, pp. 66-7). Here the mass media play a vital role in (re)producing mistrust and fear. It can heighten vulnerability, reduce confidence in the justice system and heighten perceptions of personal risk and feelings of fear, though exaggeration and repetition (Hay 1995, pp. 257-271). Helsey and Strange (1999, p. 82) argue that gated communities are “at least in part a response to the fear of crime, real or imagined”. Today’s society is about ‘safe
community’ strategies and broad ‘crime prevention’ agendas (White and Sutton, in White 1996, p. 42). Intensive systems of surveillance and control are apparent in certain city sites such as shopping centres and recreation areas (Shearing and Stenning, in White 1996, p. 42). Gated communities are a personal reaction and physical embodiment to this fear, as residents attempt to displace crime with private access and security. Developers exploit their projects as friendlier and safer than traditional neighbourhoods, including in the rhetoric concepts of ‘sense of community’, ‘lifestyle’ and ‘security’ (Forster 2004, p. 123).

Americans in particular appear obsessed with security. Private security guards outnumber public police three to one and private communities and businesses “spend nearly twice as much on security as city governments” (Dillon 1996, p. 10). In one gated community in Florida, bollards rise to impale non-resident traffic, and obviously these measures may lead to lawsuits and civil litigation (Dillon 1996, p. 8).

While many just seek security, good property values and a chance to make their own separate pockets of individualism inside the boundaries, security and rules can also become an issue. In some instances, standards of behaviour are set out in the lease. For example, children can only play in designated areas; windows must be cleaned once a month; and pot plants cannot be placed on exterior window sills (Blandy and Lister 2003, p. 107). Accordingly, there are increasing numbers of disputes between residents and management, and 41 percent of associations suffered from major problems with rule violations (Barton and Silverman, in Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. ix). This can only lead to hostility and possible affordability issues regarding property maintenance (Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. ix).

The question also arises as to the impact and effectiveness of surveillance and security. Interestingly, Atkinson and Blandy (2006, p. xi) point to research that “suggests that the shelter from fear that gated communities appear to represent soon fades once residents move in”, and that fear is actually promoted by the unknown social contacts outside the gates.

Another factor to consider is closed circuit television (CCTV), which is advocated to be a deterrent of deviant behaviour with the possibility of rapid intervention when required (Fyfe and Bannister 1996, p. 39). Fyfe and Bannister (1996, p. 39) however,
also cite the alternative Foucauldian perspective of social control, which uses technology to produces obedient individuals in public spaces. Hence, in gated communities, who is actually being monitored and controlled – outsiders or residents?

Other areas of dissatisfaction with CCTV are the displacement of crime (to disadvantaged areas) and the argument that this surveillance is only interested in the prevention of crime. The purification of space of ‘troublesome others’ does nothing to assist social conditions (Fyfe and Bannister 1996, p. 42). It also shifts responsibility for policing and controlling crime from the central state to local civil society (Fyfe and Bannister 1996, p. 44), and the surveillance itself may increase bystander indifference and reduce public reporting to police (Fyfe and Bannister 1996, p. 43). Moral issues include who is ‘observing the observer’ (Fyfe and Bannister 1996, p. 44), and who decides what is right and what is not when viewing. All of these considerations do not reflect the caring and vigilant community ideology that gated communities so vehemently market.

Discussing further the issue of crime, Helsey and Strange argue that gating diverts crime to other communities and “imposes a negative externality of residents there” (1999, pp. 82-83). Whilst private access to security allows the affluent to displace crime, those with fewer resources are denied such safety (Hope, in Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. x). This displacement of crime from selected urban areas can promote higher concentration of crime in areas where surveillance and security are poorer. Consequences may include vicious circles where, due to crime, certain business districts may have legitimate employment opportunities reduced, leading to further crime (Helsey and Strange 1999, p. 83). Crimes in areas ‘outside of the gates’ (particularly involving young people) may just reflect attempts by the offenders to reclaim their own space (White 1996, p. 44), as the areas they are able to access become smaller and smaller.

Another issue concerns whether gated communities may have “injected patches of more expensive housing into previously low-status areas” and gentrification has produced more diversity, “mixing at the local government area may not necessarily reduce inequality” (Forster 2004, p. 137). Power is still expressed in the “monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker groups … to less desirable
environments” (Sibley 1995, p. ix). Who belongs to a group or community and who does not, contributes to the shaping of social space (Sibley 1995, p. 3), and the distancing from (negative) others creates landscapes of exclusion (Sibley 1995, p. 15). Hence, gated communities are not necessarily about who is inside the walls, but who is left outside.

Spatial boundaries are partly moral boundaries. Discourse plays an important part in reaffirming moral judgments, and these judgments are often individualised and personalised. In gated communities, the ‘good’ citizens are inside, hence the ‘bad’ people are outside – the ‘deviants’ who threaten disorder – the people who must be kept at a distance for the safety of ourselves and our families. Poverty is now viewed as deviant and threatening (Sibley 1995, p. 55), and ‘mutual obligation’ implies weakness on the part of those unable to become the respectable consumer (particularly in regard to the ‘great Australian dream’). The fear of crime further shepherds ‘good’ citizens (particularly women and the elderly) into their private landscapes, safely locked away behind the walls. Nevertheless, inside the home, messages of (pre)caution still bombard consumers via the mass media.

Militarisation of the landscape is also a common tactic to reaffirm the ‘capture’ of space. Normalized enclosures and fortified spaces (gated communities) are part of the battle to revive urban economies (McLeod 2002, pp. 604-07). Rhetoric about moral order on the streets, threats to family in the risk-filled paradigm of modernity (Beck in McLeod 2002, p. 609), and moral panics fuelled by the media, contributes to protected spaces becoming more appealing and even being perceived as essential for survival. However, the discourse also marginalises and demonises those on the outside, further displacing the already disadvantaged.

Despite all these ‘threats’, there is still another hotly debated problem that relates to all of society – the issue of social capital or “the ability and capacity of ‘communities’ to engage with each other” (Rowlands and Card 2007, p. 294). Gated communities are marketed as ‘community’ and ‘like-minded’, ensuring social homogeneity (Thuillier, in Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. 74), where members share collective norms. However, often these collective norms only relate to standards of behaviour stated in
the legal framework (Blandy and Lister, in Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. 108). In their study Blandy and Lister (2003, p. 102) found that residents of gated communities have weak social ties, and that property values and security were more important reasons for moving to a gated community than ‘moving into a community’. Indeed, residents’ desire for anonymity and privacy may actually cause ‘segregation within segregation’ (Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. xiv).

Even if trust and social and moral cohesion are achieved in gated communities, this may not necessarily equate to agency with the wider community. Because gated communities are not usually socially diverse, it is unlikely that understanding for people of different social backgrounds and experiences will be forthcoming (Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. ix). Indeed, social, economic and political empathy may be greatly hindered by spatial segregation, if not further reinforced with an ‘us/them’ mentality. The middle-class fear of the ‘underclass’ that lives ‘outside’ could intensify, further exacerbating the exclusion and exclusiveness. Urban policy makers need to be aware of the possibility of the erosion of social capital when using demolition, displacement and replacement as socio-spatial solutions (Beider 2007, p. 330).

Therefore, as feelings of insecurity about identity, territory and power continually shift, it appears that boundary erection (particularly in the physical landscape) will continue (Sibley 1995, p. 69). The outcome will be the “worsening of conditions of the poor through their ghettoisation” (Gough et al 2006, p. 116). As areas become poorer, those that are able to move on do so, and economic, social and political resources are further drained in a vicious circle. In some gated communities residents pay for services, such as security and garbage collection, and future problems with local governance may arise if residents do not wish to pay twice for these services (Atkinson and Blandy 2006, p. xv).

In conclusion, gated communities are an increasing phenomenon. In an individualist, capitalist world, where social roles are continually subject to modification, consumers are bombarded with the concept of ‘safe’ neighbourhoods in a vigilant community. Fear of crime, heightened by the mass media, adds to an ‘us/them’ mentality.
The regulating of public space can lead to economic, social and political marginalisation, with the disadvantaged being further excluded. Even those living inside the walls may experience difficulties with the moral and physical restrictions placed upon their freedoms, and the question may be asked - who is being watched – those outside or those inside?

While gated communities may still offer a haven for personal security and a chance for pockets of individualism, many are concerned with the possible loss of social capital as communities become further segregated. The displacement of crime also creates a further vicious circle that can only increase disadvantage. Urban governance and the privatisation of public space need to be addressed, and the ever-complex problem of social exclusion needs to be acknowledged and taken seriously, not viewed only from a ‘mutual obligation’ perspective. A good living environment for most people that is affordable and diverse is problematic when based on the principles and practices of social exclusion.

References


