Communities behind walls? Exploring the actual and prospective social outcomes of gated communities

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Abstract: For those who can afford it, gated residential estates, known broadly as gated communities (GCs), have become increasingly popular in many cities around the world. Exactly how they shape urban geographies and impact the social outcomes for those within, and those without, has stimulated extensive research and some debate. Many argue that GCs create social segregation, exclusion and disparity, posing a threat to the social sustainability of the urban spaces they inhabit. By examining the underlying preferences and attitudes that draw people to GCs, this paper will discuss the arising social outcomes associated with an increase in their popularity.

Keywords: urban gating; accumulated privilege; social segregation.

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Introduction

In 2009, my partner was sent to work in Malaysia for 15 months. He was offered a choice of accommodation out of Kuala Lumpur’s two most luxurious gated estates. One option offered in-house cleaning and convenient access to Mid Valley City – a prestigious, master-planned work/entertainment precinct. The other was attached to an old golf course that had been transformed into an extensive private park complete with Koi fish farm, tearooms, the Performing Arts Centre and security patrols. The apartments in each case were larger and more extravagant than he was comfortable with, so he expressed his preference to experience Malay society residing at more of a ‘street’ level. This unexpected request panicked his hosts and it was soon clear it would be impossible to arrange. Eventually, he was convinced to settle for the private park option (Figure 1), with the reasoning that he could retreat and escape when the hectic city life and culture became too much.

I was lucky enough to join him for a year, there on the 27th floor, and never have I lived in such an opulent space set against urban poverty, disorder and decay – unlike anything in Australia. Our experience challenging the norms of the expatriate lifestyle in Malaysia revealed much about the intensity of the social constructs, such as privilege and class, associated with gating.

For those who can afford it, these kinds of residential estates, known broadly as gated communities (GCs), have become increasingly popular around the world. Exactly how they shape urban geographies, and impact the social outcomes for those within and without, has stimulated much discussion and research (Dowling et al, 2010;
Kenna, 2010). By examining the underlying preferences and attitudes that draw people to GCs, this paper will discuss the arising social outcomes associated with an increase in their popularity.

**Figure 1.** Infinity pool and gated park, KL, Malaysia. Source: CBD Properties (2012)

**Background**

When defining the contemporary GC, many refer to Atkinson and Blandy (2006) who establish two distinguishing elements: one, a physical barrier that could include walls, gates, monitored access and private facilities; and two, some form of private, governing body stipulating design guidelines, codes of conduct and the management of common space. In Australia, gating research also encompasses master-planned residential estates (MPREs) and ‘symbolically enclo’ed’ estates, where socio-economic status, property values or design specifications may create ideological gating from surrounding areas (Dowling et al, 2010).

Fortressing can be found throughout history. From the Middle East to Asia, people have sought defence from outside threats and enemies (Bagaeen & Uduku, 2010). Barricading was extremely important in colonial times, propagating segregation and exclusion. Howard’s *Garden City* in the UK is said to have informed the U.S. gating movement which is said to have appropriated the late 19th century concept essentially for private use (Bagaeen & Uduku, 2010; Glasze et al, 2006).

The U.S. has pioneered contemporary GCs in an attempt to provide a way for people to “disengage with wider urban problems and responsibilities … [and] to create a ‘weightless’ experience of the urban environment” (Atkinson & Blandy, 2006, p. x). Since the early 1980s, GCs have increased in intensity and diversity. For example in 1995, four million Americans lived in GCs (Helsley & Strange, 1999), and by 2001, 16 million people, or six per cent of all U.S. households were behind gates (Low, 2007). This spread and growth has been associated with the capitalist and neo-liberal movements; a shift in dynamics between state, market and society born out of the shrinking state, open markets and privatization.
Globalised work patterns and lifestyles have meant that people everywhere now have the desire and means to acquire space, security, privacy and freedom (Atkinson & Blandy, 2006). In Australia, the first exclusive GC, Sanctuary Cove, was opened in 1988 (Hayes, 2010). It is said that over 100,000 Australians now live in gated estates and, following international trends, numbers are said to be increasing (Hayes, 2010; Kenna, 2010).

**Social Outcomes**

Context will have the greatest influence on the social outcomes of GCs in the future, as “processes … play themselves out differently in different social, cultural, economic and institutional contexts” (Glasze *et al.*, 2006, p. 3). Accordingly, analysing the non-neutral structures that determine these outcomes presents immense complexity as variations can occur between countries, cities and even individual estates (Pow, 2007; Sardar, 2010). In different parts of the world people are attracted to GCs for different reasons.

**Fear of crime**

One of the primary attractions of gating is the promise of security and the minimization of crime. Even in relatively safe communities, a fear of crime maintains a presence, with people who haven’t even experienced an offence (Hay, 1995; Low, 2007). Helsley and Strange (1999) have shown that increased spending on security in one community can deter criminals and increase crime in other communities. This suggests that gating could prospectively cause a concentration of urban disorder in adjacent un-gated communities, which could have significance in poorer, urban areas. Here, the large plots of land required to develop estates are affordable, but crime rates may be higher (Thullier, 2006). From a different perspective, GCs in Buenos Aires have stimulated economic growth in the impoverished outer ring, through the development of high-end malls, universities, hospitals and schools. Though access to these facilities is discretely kept from poorer citizens, thousands of jobs are created in constructing and servicing the facilities for the rich (Thullier, 2006), which in turn may reduce the need for criminal activity as a means to survive (Helsley & Strange, 1999).

Residents in two Sydney based studies associated security with maintenance and the upkeep of appearances (Dowling *et al.*, 2010). Interviewees were more concerned with internal management, despite reported incidents of crime within the gates (Kenna, 2010). Where fear of crime does exist, physical security measures can be an ‘aggressively visible’ reminder of what must be defended against, and may in fact enhance fear (Helsley & Strange, 1999). Set against poverty, the need for safety, real or perceived, can seem easily justified, yet such justifications could accelerate social exclusion and feelings of insecurity, obscuring the underlying drive for elitism and affluence. By distancing themselves from the outside world, residents and their children may experience a buffered, distorted view of the cities they live in, which can manifest discrimination (Low, 2009). This may impact their future capacity to confront and manage change and ‘difference’ (Thullier, 2006).

**Protection of privacy and freedom vs. a sense of community**

Privacy and freedom have also been sought behind gates. In Shanghai, economic growth has occurred in the homemaker supply market as middle-class citizens strive to find a sense of identity in their newfound private, domestic space. Pow (2007)
suggests the gating phenomenon is not only increasing separation and shifting dynamics within the city, but also changing the roles of people within GCs as their domestic lifestyles change. Residents here welcomed an escape from the congested and communal neighbourhoods of their childhoods and largely preferred not mixing with their neighbours (Pow, 2007). Additionally, autonomy from the state was a welcomed element that could have significant social and political outcomes unique to China. Gating in the non-Western context seems to strive for Western capitalist ideals; with developers eager for growth and residents happy to consume, this promises to add to the disadvantage of those who already have less (Sardar, 2010). Ironically, the guarding and security measures used to achieve freedom seem more like surveillance and lock down (Hay, 1995); the means to achieve privacy from broader society somewhat eliminate the privacy desired (Pow, 2007).

In Australia, a strong sense of community is centrally promoted in GCs. Urban ‘villages’ are promoted as “a warm and welcoming place where a friendly wave or smile is common” (Lend Lease Mawson Lakes Pty Ltd, 2011). Developers assure a sense of security through constructing a community feel, yet privatism is thriving in Australian GCs (Dowling et al, 2010). Walter and Rosenblatt (2008) argue that people, with their busy lives, do not have time to build community. Furthermore, in some cases GC’s internal governance has led to resentment and significant conflict regarding shared space (Dowling et al, 2010; Low, 2009).

It does not necessarily follow that living in broader society lends itself to greater social ties within neighbourhoods. Bagaeen and Uduku (2010) propose research might reveal that even those who are most disadvantaged may enjoy a certain level of exclusivity as well. Making a cohesive community (however it may be defined) is ultimately up to individuals as “[s]ocial relations and … interactions within public space are fundamentally determined by the people who live there” (Manzi & Bowers, 2005, p. 11). This was certainly true in Malaysia – wealthy locals and expatriates could live between air-conditioned apartments, chauffeured cars and their favourite mall or they could dine with the locals or get caught in the rain waiting for the bus. What is key is that those living in GCs have the freedom to interact where and when they wish, while those living outside the gates generally do not. Consequently, gated residents can keep to themselves, accumulating the privilege and access that privatisation offers potentially at the cost of neighbouring areas. This could ultimately damage broader social cohesion.

Property Value and Niceness
People are also drawn to GCs for the predictability of gated living, and the assurance that property investments maintain their value. This has been achieved through the keen enforcement of common rules and the upkeep of buildings, landscaping and facilities. Similarly, MPRE developers have used the built form and landscaping to establish ‘distinction’ from surrounding residential areas. This not only entrenches social exclusion and polarisation (Dowling et al, 2010; Kenna, 2010), but can potentially add upward pressure to rates for members of surrounding, poorer neighbourhoods by increasing property values and government contributions towards ongoing upkeep. For example, golf facilities and footpaths linked to Lochiel Park green village in Adelaide have received upgrades worth over $440,000 (Campbelltown City Council, 2013). Though the small village accounts for less than 0.6 per cent of private dwellings in the Campbelltown LGA (Australian Bureau of
Statistics, 2011), these projects constitute over five per cent of the total 2013 – 2014 Council budget, 84 per cent of which is derived from rates revenue (Campbelltown City Council, 2013). Aspirations for accumulated privilege and niceness in the built form are also linked to the concept of ‘whiteness’, which has been defined as the ongoing reproduction of constructed social and racial privilege and power: “the systematic advantage of one group over other, where whiteness become[s] the location of advantage in societies structured by racial dominance” (Low, 2009, p. 81). Using examples from New Jersey and Texas, Low (2009) shows how the drive for homogeneity can subtly but powerfully grant allowance to eradicate and demonise anything that is different or below standards, not only outside but also inside CGs.

Kenna (2010) also discovered distaste for difference inside Macquarie Links estate, with negative feelings expressed towards renters. In this way, some gated residents may attract further power still. As with non-gated communities, those with the greatest wealth and cultural capital may be better heard by joining governing bodies or homeowner associations (Forster, 2004, pp. 156-157). I believe a danger exists in burying the power dynamics at play. By reinforcing privilege and sameness in built form, discrimination against the ‘other’, inside or outside the gates, is hidden in a psyche of normality. This can have dire, deep seeded social consequences in the future, adding to societal constructs of the acceptable and the intolerable, potentially creating resentment and stigmatisation.

**Conclusion**

Many share concerns that GCs create social segregation, exclusion and disparity, posing a threat to the social sustainability of the urban spaces they inhabit. However, gating has proven desirable, profitable and convenient for developers, governments and residents alike, therefore, their increasing popularity should not be expected to subside. I agree with Low (2009, p. 90) that GCs “make visible the systems of racial segregation and social exclusion that already exist in the suburbs … constructed in concrete”. Visible security measures can increase feelings of insecurity and distrust. Physical and ideological barriers can reinforce pre-existing fears, privileges and disadvantage. Gating could potentially boost economic growth in poor areas. Regardless, in the current economic climate, privilege seems impossibly indebted to the disadvantage it rides upon (Davis & Monk, 2007; Sardar, 2010). The underlying preferences drawing people to GCs, and their attitudes towards the ‘other’, can be hidden by the normalisation of gated conditions. As our experience in Malaysia proved, deep ingrained social structures are blatantly revealed when they are turned upside down. There could be future repercussions for managing conflict and difference to the detriment of social cohesion in cities. Current social trends will intensify somewhat at the discretion of gated residents meaning the privilege that few enjoy may come at a greater cost to many.

Despite much media and scholarly deliberation, many questions remain open for exploration (Dowling *et al*, 2010; Hay & Muller, 2012). How do exterior neighbours perceive gating? And to what extent do GCs and the elite shape global movements and trends? How can state regulation and private sector collaboration alleviate social disparity and improve the social sustainability of GCs? Like Sardar (2010), I believe the ultimate challenge, and perhaps the hope in improving the social outcomes of GCs lies in somehow addressing the wider value-laden systems, and economic structures, that seem to produce the perfect conditions for the proliferation of gating.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Gerti Szili for contributing encouraging and useful feedback on this paper, and to Iain Hay and GEOView for promoting the publication of undergraduate work. Much gratitude is also due to Michael who tolerates my stubborn focus and who gave me the opportunity to experience gated living in the first place.

References


