

Guest editorial

The global spread of gated communities

One of the most striking features of recent urbanisation is the rise in popularity of privately governed residential, industrial, and commercial spaces. In many rapidly urbanising countries, gates and guards appeared at a time of double-digit economic growth and generated little public or academic commentary—they were simply part of the surreal economic and spatial transformation that engulfed so many countries in the last two decades of the 20th century. In more established urban economies, proprietary developments seem more obviously to enclose what were previously regarded as public domains. This led to widespread discussion about the implications for civic society, fiscal solvency, social exclusions, and efficient service delivery and about the impact of global capital and real estate markets on urban social and spatial structure.

In a study that compared condominiums in São Paulo with gated communities in Los Angeles, Caldeira (1996, page 320) concluded

“The Garden City model, modernist design and city planning, and now the fortified enclaves, ‘outer cities’, and theme parks are part of the repertoire from which different cities around the world are now drawing.”

Developers, landowners, investors, and consumers have together shaped a new genre of modern urban habitat. An increasingly sophisticated mass market has emerged in entire neighbourhoods, comprising homes, community infrastructure, services, and microuban governance. Gates and guards are just one part of a bigger package. The phenomenon is a spontaneous one and it has spread rapidly within and between countries. Its significance lies not so much in the physical impact of gated developments, though this may pose challenges to urban designers, but in their underlying sociology, politics, and economics. In short, they challenge the spatial, organisational, and institutional order that has shaped modern cities.

Up to now, discussion about the causes and consequences of proprietary developments (also called club communities) has been largely inspired by observations in the big cities of the USA. In their much-cited study, Blakely and Snyder (1997) estimated that up to 9 million US residents live in 3 million units in around 20 000 proprietary residential communities bounded by walls and entrance gates. By 1999 Phoenix, Arizona had 320,000 of its citizens, or 12% of the Metro Phoenix population, living in 641 gated communities (Frantz, 2001). Using data from the Community Association Institute, in figure 1 (see over) we sketch the boom of gated and guarded condominiums and communities in the USA.

More significant is the rise in the number of community associations. These are contractual associations that deliver some form of neighbourhood-level governance in the form of regulations and local civic goods and services on the basis of assessments (fees) collected from members. The Community Association Institute estimates that by 2002, 47 million Americans were living within 231 000 community associations and that 50% of all new homes in major metropolitan areas belong to community associations (CAI, 2002). In 1965 there were only about 500 of these private neighbourhood governments.

Anecdotal evidence and research from other regions of the world (including the papers in this theme issue of *Environment and Planning*) suggest that the global growth in private communities has been influenced by the US experience. It would be wrong

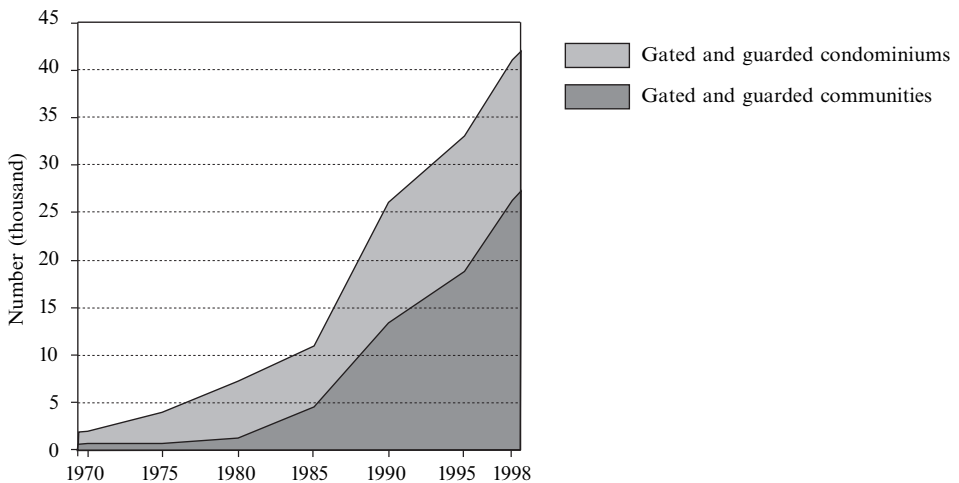


Figure 1. The rise of gated and guarded condominiums and communities in the USA.

to assume, however, that there are no indigenous innovations contributing to the global phenomenon. Nor should it be assumed that the drivers of local markets for private neighbourhoods or the developments they produce are uniform between (or within) countries and regions.

As with the US phenomenon itself, the US debate is well established, mapped around a variety of ideological and practical issues. There is a danger, however, in exporting the debate without considering the institutional, social, economic, and cultural contexts in which gated communities are emerging elsewhere in the world. One of our objectives in bringing together an international collection of papers on this subject is to help internationalise and contextualise discussion.

Urban growth involves the chaotic coevolution of organisations, spatial structures, and institutions and is distinct and path dependent for every city. There are regularities, of course, but regularity of design in the built environment should not obscure more profound underlying differences in the processes that govern urban life and economy. A development plucked from an international repertoire of concepts and designs may serve a subtly different purpose in Beijing than it does in Baltimore. Its significance for the future pattern of urban development or for the stability of the urban economy or society may also be quite different.

Because cities are complex systems it is also true that the system-wide impacts of gated communities in a city or in a system of cities are likely to be different at different points in time. Ebenezer Howard, father of the British Garden City Movement, proposed the idea of a proprietary community, funded by private investment capital and managed by a 19th-century version of a community association. His famous book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (first published in 1898) was written as a prospectus for would-be investors. The context into which the innovation was floated a century ago gave rise to the unpredictable result of a hundred years of building publicly planned and funded new towns throughout the world.

Each of the papers in this theme issue seeks to interpret the regularity—the gates, the owners' associations, and the shared facilities—in the context of the local. In the Lebanon modern gated developments first emerged during the civil war (Glasze and Alkhayyal). In South Africa secure communities were an inevitable consequence of institutionalised racism (Jürgens and Gnad). Modern gated developments in Johannesburg, however, are inhabited by all races and not only by the rich. Land and property markets help

structure and are structured by postapartheid society. In Saudi Arabia gated compounds of linked houses provide family groups with a sense of privacy and identity (Glasze and Alkhayyal). The recent phenomenon appears to be a reaction against villa-style development imported during the kingdom's modernising years—an evolutionary adaptation of elements from the global real estate repertoire to meet local requirements. There are also large master-planned enclave developments in Saudi Arabia, developed to house the large community of expatriate workers. These are broadly accepted as a means of containing expatriate culture to the benefit of those inside and out. The sprawling gated suburbs of Latin America serve a different purpose (Coy and Pöhler). The divisions they represent and create are starker than most of their US counterparts, but they arise from individual needs that have to be taken seriously. Like the residential club communities scattered through Southeast Asia's cities, they offer a growing professional class a relatively secure lifestyle in the face of social and fiscal poverty. Their long-term consequences for social fragmentation are different from those in the USA and vastly different from the long-term consequences of gated developments in Europe.

In Europe there are so far relatively few private residential neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, an increase in this kind of housing is apparent in some countries. Starting in the 1980s guarded residential complexes appeared on the Mediterranean coast of Western Europe (Spain and France), offering exclusive second homes as well as all-year dwellings. At about the same time, complexes started to appear in major cities. Numbers of suburban gated settlements were rising in Madrid and in Greater Lisbon during the 1990s. In Britain, Webster (2001) distinguishes three forms of complex: upgraded social housing estates transformed by gates, concierges, and innovative local management institutions; smart city-centre condominium-style developments; and small gated suburban developments of no more than 300 homes. In the metropolitan regions of Vienna (Paal, 1998) and Berlin (Glasze, 2001) developers have attempted to introduce gated housing projects to real estate markets. Anecdotal evidence suggests that guarded residential complexes are emerging in Central-east and Eastern European, sometimes as developments of former exclusive compounds of the ruling elite. This phenomenon remains largely unexplored.

These trends notwithstanding, it is hard to foresee a time when gated suburbs or gated city-centre developments could reach the critical threshold at which the US issues of secession and tax withdrawal become a problem for European societies.

Townsend's paper addresses the niche-market explanation of gated development in a different way, focusing on retirement communities. His Canadian analysis shows how one segment of the population has taken from the gated repertoire a form of development that suits its particular needs. He also illustrates the tensions that arise as consumers and producers interact to create new forms of urban living. Consumers do not always get a good deal. This is either because they are the relatively powerless partner (when the product is new and collective knowledge about it not well developed) or because the innovation was poorly designed in the first place. Retirement developments look set to stay, however, so one assumes that there is a process going on by which the concept is refined, as the niche market becomes more competitive and consumers, developers, and government regulators become better informed.

Webster's paper is a theoretical contribution aimed at provoking an institutionalist perspective in the international study of gated communities. It does this by challenging the popular notion of *public* and *private* often underlying the debate. The paper discusses three ideas central to an analysis of gated communities: *public goods*, *public realm*, and *public domain*. It argues that exclusion is inevitable in all forms of shared urban consumption and that cities are, in reality, made up of many publics.

The consumption of neighbourhood resources lying in the public domain incurs high competition costs, and gated communities, as with other formal assignments of property rights, can reduce these costs. They do not do so, however, without creating new forms of social costs and these costs may need regulating.

It is significant that the papers in this theme issue had their origins in a conference of geographers, predominantly European and with research interests in developing countries. The German meeting (held at the conference of the German Middle East Studies Association in Hamburg in the Autumn of 1999) led to a panel session at the 2001 American Association of Geographers meeting in New York and to a major international conference (5–9 June) in Mainz, Germany. The 2002 conference brings together commentators from a diversity of perspectives and analytical approaches.

We conclude by distinguishing between three perspectives (Glasze 2002) found in the gated community debate and variously interpreted in the papers which follow.

(a) Social-spatial polarisation

Authors such as Friedman and Goetz (1982) and Sassen (1996) argue that global economic restructuring has led to command-and-control functions being increasingly concentrated in global cities. At the same time, intense international competition leads to many workers in low-value-added services being affected by stagnating wages and unemployment. Economic restructuring leads to a new class structure: a transnational elite and a growing number of economically excluded. In the metropolises, social polarisation leads to a dual-city structure—the *global city–dual city* hypothesis (Harloe and Fainstein, 1992) and the guarded enclaves are the places in which transnational elites organise their administration, consumption, production, leisure, education, and housing. Friedman and Goetz speak of citadels (1982) and Marcuse (1997, page 323) of touching down places.

Interpreting gated housing as a physical manifestation of the dual economy offers an explanation of the international dimension of the phenomenon and of its timing. However, the approach is weak in allowing for or explaining regional differentiation. It is also weak in explaining the spread of gated developments within domestic markets including nonelite markets. A well-founded theoretical perspective needs to address questions such as: Why are guarded residential complexes also established outside of the ‘global cities’? Why do some global cities, for example, Tokyo or Paris (so far), have few gated developments? And how can we explain the emergence of private residential complexes that are not homes of the elite? The *global city–dual city* hypothesis can be criticised as being reductionist, modernist, and Anglo-American ethnocentric (White, 1998). We would also add that it ignores regional inventiveness and the processes by which global influences are adapted by domestic markets for the benefit of domestic market participants. It also ignores the institutional evolution that such imports stimulate as local markets and governments negotiate to handle third-party social costs (fiscal impoverishment due to secession, social exclusion, and civic fragmentation).

(b) Changing tastes and values

There is a strong tradition of empirical studies examining the relationship between housing and locational choice and urban form (Orford, 2002; Rosen, 1974). The search for personal security, quality local public goods (water, energy, services, open space), a socially homogeneous neighbourhood and prestige, naturally leads to clustering and segregation (Jürgens and Gnad in this issue; O’Neill, 1986). Authors researching cities of the developing world often stress the influence of Western tastes on local elites. This is clearly a complementary story to the *global city–dual city* story but one that allows for the emergence of indigenous gated housing markets with their own locally constructed rationales.

A focus on individual preferences stands in the tradition of urban microeconomic research. The emergence of proprietary neighbourhoods is attributed to the decisions of individual households. The strength of this approach lies in its behavioural orientation and its ability to identify factors (including images of the American suburban dream) that motivate householders to buy or rent in a private neighbourhood. One can link these images with the hypothesis of an accelerated global diffusion of consumer preferences by electronic media and international migration (Appadurai, 1996). However, there is a danger in constructing explanations of gated developments on the basis of narrow conceptualisations of demand and markets. At one level, households evaluate housing and location options on the basis of a given set of housing and locational attributes. More dynamically, however, markets evolve within specific cultural contexts, and the offerings of housing entrepreneurs will reflect the social context in which markets work. There may be compelling international trends in taste, but these may transform differently, in the context of locally specific social and environmental capital. Important in this respect are local variations in the institutions (rules) that govern housing; capital and labour markets; local variations in entrepreneurial abilities and cultures; and local values governing interpersonal and intergroup relationships.

Economic capital should not be seen as deterministically shaping cities. Social institutions govern the manner in which individuals cooperate via markets, governments, and voluntary organisations. In order to understand why certain groups in certain regions of the world choose to live in residential clubs and in order to understand how those clubs function, one has to conceptualise the institutional context in which their consumption decisions are made and the institutional context in which gated housing markets emerge.

(c) Institutional evolution

Other approaches draw attention to the complex cooperation between public and private actors in urban development and therefore stand in the tradition of the various institutional approach to urban studies. Modern proprietary developments such as shopping malls, retirement communities, condominiums, and science parks are viewed as an institutional reform—a new form of territorial organisation. Some are critical of the trend (Sennett, 1986); some view it as a positive evolutionary step, delivering civic services more efficiently (Foldvary, 1994). Others stress that judgment should be informed by facts and that the balance of private and social costs and benefits may be different in different local contexts and at different times (Webster and Lai, 2002).

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