

Guest Editor's Introduction: Gated Communities for a Frayed and Afraid World

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Introduction

Gated communities are residential areas with restricted access, such that spaces normally considered public have been privatized. Physical barriers—walled or fenced perimeters—and gated or guarded entrances control access. Gated communities include both new housing developments and older residential areas retrofitted with barricades and fences.

The latest drive to redefine territory and protect neighborhood boundaries is being felt in communities of all income levels. In the past 20 years, gated communities have been springing up all over the United States and across the world. Millions of Americans and increasing numbers of Europeans, Latin Americans, and Asians are turning to walls and fences around communal residential space that was previously integrated into the larger shared civic space.

Gated communities represent a different phenomenon from apartment or condominium buildings with security systems or doormen. In the latter, a doorman precludes public access only to a lobby or hallways—private space within a building. Gated communities, by contrast, preclude public access to roads, sidewalks, parks, open space, and playgrounds—resources that in earlier eras would have been open and accessible to all. The best estimate is that more than 3.5 million American families, or 8 million people, have already sought out this new refuge as a solution to the problems of urbanization. There is no estimate of how many people around the world live in gated communities. However, gates and walls are more prevalent in Latin America than they are in the United States.

The evolution of gated communities

Gated and walled cities or residential areas are as old as community building itself. According to archeological evidence, there is little doubt that early human settlements in the Nile River valleys were walled against the

hunter-gatherer tribes that roamed the deserts foraging for food. Early kingdoms in Mesopotamia were known for their walls, and many Greek cities were also walled.

But the Romans were the masterminds of the walled personal enclave. Rome was a sea of humanity from various conquered territories. The wealthiest Romans built compounds for their families and entourages outside the smelly polyglot city. Their walls protected “real” Romans from the potential dangers emanating from the lower classes that inhabited the city and kidnapped and stole from the wealthy. As Rome deployed its armies ever farther afield, it eventually could no longer afford to bring all of its soldiers home at the end of a campaign. Moreover, many soldiers did not want to return to Rome, where they had been slaves or members of the lowest class; they preferred to remain in the conquered territories as occupying settlers. As occupiers, Roman soldiers were rewarded with land and a small amount of other resources, including slaves. Because the occupiers were a minority, they had to fortify themselves against their external wards, so they built compounds similar to the walled villas of suburban Rome. This was especially true in England.

This system of fortifying the landed estates of the royal and wealthy became the pattern of development in England even after the Romans left. As a result, a system of walls and class divisions was deeply ingrained in English settlement patterns. In continental Europe, a similar pattern was evident: The early Church was supported by abbeys, settlements of believers who lived under monastic rule and worked behind walls that protected them against the heathens who occupied the hinterlands. This system of walled compounds with gates can still be seen throughout England, France, and Germany in abbeys, manor houses, and castles.

In the New World, the Spaniards built walled settlements almost immediately after they arrived in the Caribbean for protection against the local population. However, not until the late 19th century did the notion of creating walled compounds for the merely well-to-do (as opposed to the nobility) come into vogue.

Gated communities in the United States go back to the 1870s and the era of the robber barons, when the very rich built private streets to insulate themselves from the less fortunate masses. Later, more gated, fenced compounds emerged during the 20th century to serve the needs of the movie and auto aristocracies. These early gated communities were very different from the gated subdivisions of today—they were uncommon places for uncommon people. The first gated communities available to the wider population were gated retirement developments built during the late 1960s and the 1970s.

In the United States, gated communities in their contemporary form emerged first in the southeastern and southwestern portions of the country, and they remain most common there. However, they can now be found primarily in urban areas, because they are mainly a phenomenon of metropolitan agglomerations and racial and ethnic diversity. They are rarities in rural areas except in resort settings. Increasingly, gated areas are also cropping up in metropolitan Australia and the coastal areas of Spain, Portugal, and France. They have always been common in Latin America, with its entrenched income disparities.

A walled world

Gated communities can be divided into three main types. First are the lifestyle communities, in which the gates and walls mark off and protect an area for the pursuit of leisure activities. Lifestyle communities include golf and country clubs, as well as retirement communities and resort developments. The second type is the prestige community, where the gates symbolize distinction and prestige; gates attempt to create and protect a secure place on the social ladder. Prestige communities include enclaves for the rich and famous, executive subdivisions, and developments for the wealthiest 20 percent of the population. Finally, there are the security zones, in which community safety is the primary goal. These may be in the center of a city or they may be in the suburbs; they may be second-home developments on the coast or in the countryside; they may be for the rich or poor. In lifestyle and prestige communities, the gates are no more than an amenity; they help create an image that helps sell houses or promotes the resort area. In security zones, the residents themselves build the gates or retrofit their low-income neighborhoods to shield themselves from the surrounding world.

Lifestyle communities: New towns

A noteworthy type of lifestyle development is the new town. The suburban gated new-town developments are large scale; they may contain several thousand housing units and attempt to incorporate both residential and commercial (or industrial) and retail activities within or adjacent to them. New towns are not new, but the gating of their residential areas is. Living in these large planned communities has always reflected a certain lifestyle choice; now more of them are offering the option of totally gated subdivision cities, particularly in Southeast Asia.

New-town walled cities are very popular in places like Bangkok, Jakarta, and Mexico City, where the civil authorities can no longer adequately protect the population from armed and dangerous groups. It is reported that large walled compounds are emerging in Russia for many of the same reasons, as wealthy and upper-middle-class groups combine resources to maintain local security.

Prestige communities

Prestige communities are among the fastest-growing forms of development in the world. They feed on exclusionary aspirations and the desire to differentiate. The services of gate guards and security patrols add to the sense of exclusivity; residents value the simple presence of a security force more than any service it actually provides. Except in the case of the oldest developments, prestige communities tend toward ostentatious entrances and showy facades. They differ from lifestyle communities in that they do not boast extensive recreational amenities, although they do have carefully controlled aesthetics and often enviable landscapes and locations.

Prestige communities are increasingly found among the rising upper middle class in the developing world. These new residential gated areas can be seen in the new suburbs of nearly all of the world's global cities, including Tokyo, London, Rome, Paris, Sydney, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York. In these cities, rapid demographic change and very large gaps in income have created a new need for social as well as economic security. As a result, developers have responded by building developments that combine prestige with physical security.

Security zones

In security zones, the fear of crime and outsiders is the foremost motivation for defensive fortifications. By marking their boundaries and restricting access, residents are often trying to build and strengthen the feeling and function of community in their neighborhood. Gating and street closures occur at all income levels in the inner city. In some ways, the old courtyard compounds found in much of Europe are built on this form. However, the latest wave of the security zone form of development can be found throughout the Western world in both inner-city and suburban areas. It is common in the coastal second-home developments in Portugal, Spain, and other Mediterranean countries, where incomes are mixed and both part-year and full-year residents live near one another.

The articles in this issue

In this issue of *Housing Policy Debate*, we discuss both U.S. and international dimensions of gated communities. Each article represents one aspect of the frayed and afraid community described earlier. In some cases, the fraying of community is by imitation, as Grant reveals. She describes Canada's movement into both New Urbanism and gated forms of living as imitations of the new American form of settlement. Danielsen shows that the American form is deeper and richer than the original portrayals of gates as merely exclusionary. Rental and lower-socioeconomic-end properties make up a substantial portion of the gated market across the United States.

At the very lowest end of the market are the poor people who now mix with gated communities' higher-income people in the same suburban space in South America, as depicted in Chile by Sabatini and Salcedo. Both Libertun de Duren and Silva analyze communities in Brazil and present a more complex picture of gates. These authors show the walls both fragmenting the populace and becoming a new form of governance. The Brazilian gated community is creating a new system of internal militia to protect itself in a fragile government system that cannot protect or advance social and economic rights.

As Richter and Goetz show, gates in U.S. cities like Denver, which view themselves as utopian democracies, tell a different story of the emerging socioeconomic landscape.

All in all, gates present new problems and few answers to the deeper issues that are at the core of the deepening divide between the haves and the have-nots across the world.

The future

Gated communities have become increasingly popular in the late 20th and early 21st centuries because citizens feel that they can no longer trust civil society or the government to protect their economic and physical security. Whether they continue to be popular will depend largely on what alternative solutions can be offered for the problems that have caused people to turn to them in the first place.

Author

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