

Gated communities and the right to safety

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Gated communities have become a common type of neighbourhood in many cities around the world. They are closed residential areas where public space has been legally privatised, limiting free access. They include individual private houses, and common private property collectively used like sports facilities and clubhouse. They have high standard quality infrastructure and services. They also have security devices such as walls, fences, gates, barriers, alarms, guards and CCTV cameras. Being conceived as closed places since their inception they are designed with the intention of providing security to their residents and prevent penetration by non-residents. Law reinforces their closure as private places, which distinguishes them from other places in the city. Their residents must follow a code of conduct concerning social behaviour and building's regulations. Regarding their management, gated communities have usually a residents' association that runs the administration of the neighbourhood and establishes and enforces rules. They appear as homogeneous places in comparison to the heterogeneity of the open city. Most of their residents are affluent families. Law and regulations, in addition to price of the land and residences, underpin this homogeneity.

Their arrival is related to different causes. However, the most important ones are the rise of insecurity and violence in the city and fear of crime, the increasing trend towards social polarisation and the desire of getting social homogeneity within the neighbourhood and status. The advance of insecurity is the most frequently mentioned cause as it is probably the easiest to support with statistical data and the least controversial. The rise of the crime rate in many cities cannot be denied. As Bauman points out "paradoxically, the cities originally constructed to provide safety for all its inhabitants, are these days associated more often with danger than security" (Bauman, 2003: 29).

The state is overwhelmed by urban insecurity and does not have enough resources to provide security efficiently. Consequently, the hire of private security becomes a common situation in the city, which implies that the state loses the monopoly of the legitimate use of force, considered as one of the features of the modern-nation state (Caldeira, 2000).

Security becomes a very profitable service. Those citizens that can afford it want to have private security. Different security devices appear in the city: barriers, guards-houses, fences, alarms, and gated communities. Gated communities spread successfully in urban and suburban areas. Moreover, many residents from "open neighbourhoods" start asking their local governments for authorisation to close them due to insecurity.

Providing safety is the most valuable feature of gated communities. As Blakely and Snyder say, they are "the newest form of fortified community that places security and protection as its primary feature" (Blakely, E. and Snyder, M.; 1997, 2). Although they do not modify crime rates, these closed housing developments make their residents feel safer. This is called the "symbolic nature of gated communities" (Lang, R. and Danielsen, K.; 1997: 872) as it is more about the perception of safety than the real protection against crimes: gated communities do not guarantee safety, they only limit undesired surprises of traditional urban life, such as strangers at the front door. In terms of Lang and Danielsen, "gated communities offer their residents the perception of a safe haven in the new, often chaotic metropolis" (Ibid.: 869).

Gated communities represent a challenge to local authorities and their planning strategies, with the threatening possibility of transforming the city into a labyrinth. The development of this type of residential compound has different kinds of impacts. Regarding the built environment, gated communities privatise and close places and streets fragmenting the urban space. Nevertheless, they also have positive effects as there is an upgrade concerning the provision of services and infrastructure in the areas where they are built.

In addition, they have political impacts as they arguably undermine the concepts of democracy and citizenship. Citizens do not perceive having all equal rights. Different social groups belong to separate universes and have different claims. Moreover, private governance is encouraged by the appearance of the homeowners' associations as organs of control and regulation of everyday life within the boundaries of the gated community that weaken the role of the state.

Gated communities have economic consequences as well. They increase land values, as the area becomes more appealing, attract new services and create low-skilled jobs in addition to the rise of tax

revenues for the local governments. Furthermore, they have social impacts as they encourage the process of urban social segregation, which influences social life and especially social relations. Social differences and divisions become more evident and there is less possibilities of social integration and mixture in the city.

The city becomes more fragmented and divided into different areas with different types of security. The issue to consider relates to the fairness of this privatisation of security. Who has the right to be safe? Is it only a right for affluent citizens or is it a universal right? What is the role of the state regarding urban security? And finally and most importantly, what kind of city we want to live in?

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