

# Gated communities in Buenos Aires

**Guy Thuillier**.GRAL (Groupe de Recherche sur l'Amérique Latine) / Dpt. of Geography. University of Toulouse II-le Mirail, France

Gated communities in Buenos Aires have a long history. They first appeared as an imitation of the English way of life: since the XIXth century, the English were very present in Argentina, where they had dominant positions in commerce and industry. The first gated community established in Argentina was the Tortugas Country Club, founded in 1932 in the municipality of Pilar, about 40 km north of Buenos Aires. At first, the country clubs were leisure-oriented compounds, built around great sport equipments, such as golf and polo courses, or marinas, which were inhabited only for week-ends and holidays. The *countries*, as people still call them in Argentina, were a new form for an old tradition: yet in the XIXth century, and especially after the terrible epidemic of yellow fever of 1871, the wealthy *porteños* (habitants of Buenos Aires), used to spend the summer in their rural domains, called *quintas*, away from the crowded and polluted city.

It's only in the 1970's, however, that countries started to take off. The seventies were in Argentina a decade of social unrest and prerevolutionary troubles. Political murders, kidnappings, and brutal military repression created a growing feeling of insecurity and danger which led the upper classes to settle permanently in their countries. Most of them were built between 25 to 70 km from the capital, a distance that allowed daily commuting. But the real boom of gated communities in the Great Buenos Aires took place in the second half of the 1990's, for a conjunction of reasons. The 90's were for Argentina the time of insertion in the globalized economy. The Menem government led a vast program of privatization of old and inefficient public industries and services, attracting important foreign investments. This period of easy money – *plata dulce*– and strong economic growth was profitable for some sectors of the society, who could then afford to live in a home of their own away from the crowded and busy city center. Their dream of a US-like suburban way of life was encouraged by an intense marketing campaign aiming to persuade the citizens that "a new style of living", was now possible a few kilometers away from Buenos Aires. For the price of a small flat in a residential tower in the Recoleta, Belgrano or Palermo neighbourhoods – the traditional residence of the upper classes – one could enjoy family life in a securized environment, close to nature, in a house of its own surrounded by a garden and maybe – for the wealthiest of them – a view on the golf course. The improvement of the suburban motorways system, at that time, put this dream at reach.

As often when economic perspectives are bright, strong speculation added its effects to these factors, and gated developments multiplied in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. The old form of the country club spread and democratized, with the apparition of *barrios privados* ("private neighbourhoods"). Those are cheaper than countries, but their shared equipments and spaces are sharply reduced : *barrios privados* offer to their residents no more than a house in a gated space, with sometimes a tennis course or a small garden for children, but without the golf or polo courses of the countries.

According to the *Guía de countries barrios privados y chacras*, a guide of gated communities published four times since the mid-90's, there are today 351 gated communities in the Great Buenos Aires, occupying 300 km<sup>2</sup> of land! As a comparison scale, let's remind that the surface area of the city Buenos Aires is only 180 km<sup>2</sup>. One third of these 300 km<sup>2</sup> of land is dedicated to *clubes de chacras*, which are a form of farm-style secondary homes surrounded by one hectare of land or more. Those particular gated communities are far beyond the suburban ring: the 25 clubes de chacras of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area are localised at an average 80 km from Buenos Aires, when the others gated communities are only 45 km far. But even without the *chacras*, it is the equivalent of the surface area of the city of Buenos Aires which has been fenced.

In the year 200, before the great argentinian crisis, those 351 gated communities were divided in 83 000 lots, which average size was close to 1100 m<sup>2</sup> (not counting the *chacras*) at an average price of around 85 000 US\$. Only one third of the existing lots were built, with around 27 000 homes finished, of which only an half (13000) were inhabited in a permanent way. Even if there is no figure available for the population of those urban developments, it is possible, from the 13 000 homes built, to estimate between 40000 to 50000 the total permanent population of gated communities, given the fact that the typical buyers of homes in closed areas are young couples with kids. Taking now into account the owners of secondary homes, there are at a whole between 80000 and 100000 people concerned by gated communities in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires.

With the recent boom, the nature of gated communities has changed slightly. Today *barrios privados* are more numerous, with 206 units for only 115 country clubs. If countries are an older form, it

is massively *barrios privados* which have been built in the last years. But they are usually much smaller than countries, since they have no leisure and recreational facilities: if the average size of gated communities in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires is 86 ha, it goes up to 106 ha for countries but it is only of 23 ha for *barrios privados*. However countries, older, bigger, and more developed, are home to a majority of permanent residents : they still concentrate three quarters of the homes and 60% of the permanent population of gated communities in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. It has to be noted that there is a strong concentration of the population in a few big units: the 30 biggest gated communities in terms of permanent population concentrate 43% of the total permanent population of the 351 fenced developments of the Great Buenos Aires. Only 7 of the biggest 30 are *barrios privados*, the rest are countries.

This situation is the result of a fast growth. In 1995, there were only about a hundred of gated communities in the Great Buenos Aires, covering an area of 80 km<sup>2</sup>, offering 36 000 lots with 14 000 houses built, of which only 3 000 were inhabited in a permanent way. In five years, from 1995 to 2000, the number of gated communities in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires has been multiplied by 3,5, fenced areas by 3,7, the number of lots by 2,3, the number of houses by 2, and the permanent population by 4,3. The boom generated so much optimism, profits and speculation that new form of gated settlement were introduced, on larger scale : the *megaemprendimientos*. These are masterplanned communities including various central and semi-public spaces and services (shopping centers, universities...), surrounded by various gated neighbourhoods, designed to target to a wide range of social and economic profiles. Nordelta, the biggest of such projects, in the city of Tigre, is 1600 ha broad, and is conceived to house 100000 persons! Unfortunately those grandiose projects have been stopped by the late crisis in Argentina and seem today largely overdimensioned.

Now what are the consequences of gated communities for the people? For those who chose to live inside, it means access to a new way of life, imitating the north american suburban model. During decades, Buenos Aires had been a city where the upper class lived in the city center, in department flats, or in the northern outskirts of the city, the close and dense suburbs of Vicente Lopez, San Isidro and San Fernando. Leaving the city to settle in a gated community in Pilar, or Tigre, much further from the city center, implies a change in the urban culture. The dense city center, its concentration of activities, its busy streets and coffees, its active cultural and nightlife, are no more attractive to the successful Argentines. The new suburbanites now value space, nature, and family life, rather than the opportunities of recreation and contacts provided by the city. Now they want their own a garden, they appreciate to "leave the doors opened" and "have the children playing safely on the streets". But on the other hand, long commuting transports replace the stress of city life, and make the country residents reluctant to go to the city, which becomes slowly stranger to them. This is particularly true for their children: for some of them, Buenos Aires is an unknown, dangerous and awful place to go.

The migration of the wealthiest citizens of Buenos Aires from the city center also reshapes the metropolis. Central places tend to follow the rich to the gated suburbia : shopping centers and leisure malls are popping up along the northern highway, the access to the most densified zones of gated communities, as can be seen for instance at km 50 of the panamerican motorway in Pilar. There, close to a "Village" multiplex cinema and entertainment complex, two shopping centers, "Palmas de Pilar" and "Torres del Sol" are competing on each side of the motorway to attract clients. Those central places, where access is discreetly controlled, are anyway avoided by the poorest inhabitants of Pilar : they don't feel at ease in an environment designed to exclude those who can't afford consuming. A few kilometers away settled a Sheraton five star hotel and a brand new office building, sign that some professionals and service companies, usually localised in Buenos Aires, could now consider the Pilar option.

Changing places also means changing social links. Maybe more valuable than nature, gated communities residents will find new relationships there. They can be sure that their neighbours will be from the same social milieu than they are. The desire of social homogeneity is probably, with security and the lust for nature, one of the strongest magnet to gated communities. This dream of an absolute control on urban life and human interactions is also expressed in the regulations inside the gated communities, which are usually very restrictive. Construction of houses, use of public spaces and sport installations, access of guests : every aspect of life is regulated by strict covenants. These severe rules, aiming to guarantee a rigid social order, are often a source of conflicts between residents, for instance about pets, fencing of private swimming pools, noise, or speed limits, which are usually very low (30 km/h).

For those outside the gates, gated communities have more drastic consequences. As was said before, for long the richest *porteños* used to live in the capital city itself, leaving most of the suburbs to poor people, essentially immigrants from the interior of the country. Buenos Aires's city center, for the quality of its urban life and culture, was compared to the most brilliant european cities: Buenos Aires was long reputed to be the "Paris of latin America". But when leaving the city center for the suburbs, the

landscape changes slowly : housing and public spaces are more and more run-down from the center to the periphery. Poor immigrants from the interior of the country, which flocked to Buenos Aires by waves from the 1940's to the 1970's, have settled according to the principles of the *loteo popular*, or "popular settlement": poorly equipped lots in the outskirts of the city, which owners slowly built their houses themselves or with the help of familiar and neighbours. The *barrio* integrated little by little the city by the lobbying of local associations, fighting to get macadam roads, public lightning, and others improvements.

Today the installation of gated communities amongst this suburban landscape puts in presence –but not in contact– the two extremities of the social spectrum in Argentina. Opulent gated community are sometimes surrounded by slums. The social relationships between the two worlds are ambiguous. The gated citizens are aware of the misery around them : charity clubs, often led by women, raise funds to improve the situation of local poor public schools or hospitals –of course private hospital and colleges have followed the migration of the argentine upper class to the suburbia. But on the other hand, residents of gated communities are often reluctant to pay their share of local taxes, arguing that they already contract private companies to provide them the urban services they use, since gated communities are privately owned and runned. As in Argentina lots of people don't pay their taxes, which are anyway low, municipalities don't really get a financial advantage of the presence of gated communities on their territory. Pilar, for instance, with more than a hundred gated communities, is close from bankruptcy. Corruption and waste added their effect to low tax collection : it is estimated in Pilar that only one citizen out of four effectively pay their local taxes.

Even if they often disregard countries, the poorest residents of the periphery come from all the other suburbs of Buenos Aires to Pilar to try to get a job in the gated communities as construction workers or gardeners for the men, or as maids or nurses for the women. Sometimes, some of them try to get their share by force. As it is quite difficult –but not impossible– to go stealing inside the gated communities, car attacks have raised on the access roads to some countries. This makes the closeness to the motorway even more valuable for residents of gated communities : the more priced countries are stucked to the panamerican motorway. Paradoxicaly, gated communities create a strange mix of social distance –symbolized by walls and fences– and physical proximity between the richest and the poorest dwellers of the Great Buenos Aires. The gate himself summaries this double meaning, for it can be welcoming as well as exclusive. The presence of these islands of wealth amongst a sea of popular neighborhoods may create frustration and envy, and finally generate this insecurity and violence that gated communities were supposed to remove for their residents. Gated communities are certainly not the cause of the social crisis of Argentina, but they tend to carve and deepen in the urban landscape the fractures of a thorn society.

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