

# Gated communities in South Africa

Karina Landman.CSIR, Building and Construction Technology.

South African cities are changing dramatically. The first all-inclusive democratic elections in 1994 marked the turning point and introduced a new era of democracy in a country with a strong apartheid legacy. The road to democracy is however not without challenges. In the aftermath of political transition, the country faces many social and spatial changes, as well as challenges.

Dramatic political transition is often followed by social, economic and spatial transition as well. Comparisons<sup>1</sup>[1] of the links between political transitions and the growth of crime have indicated remarkable links between political transition, rising crime levels, and socio-economic and spatial changes (Shaw 1997; 2000). South Africa faces huge challenges in terms of poverty, unemployment and high crime levels. It is estimated that more than 50% of the population lives below the poverty line and that more than 30% of the population is unemployed. Overall crime levels increased by almost 5% between 1997-98, 7% in 1998-99, and 7.6% in 1999-2000 (Shönteich 2002).

South Africa also bears a legacy of segregation, which manifested in the development of separate areas for different population or race groups. This resulted in the exclusion of large sections of the population from economic, social and environmental benefits. The present government faces two particular challenges in this regard: to upgrade existing underdeveloped areas through provision of adequate infrastructure and services and to integrate these areas with the rest of the city. This would also indirectly contribute to crime prevention as the government acknowledges in a number of crime prevention strategies, promoting crime prevention through planning and design as part of local crime prevention strategies (White Paper on Safety and Security 1999). Meanwhile, many citizens are responding in their own way. High levels of crime and the fear of crime, are giving rise to major changes in the urban landscape, such as defensive architecture and urbanism. Gated communities are transforming the face of South African cities.

Despite the growth in gated communities, there is no coherent understanding of what is meant by it. In South Africa, some authors make use of the term "gated communities" (Hook and Vrdoljak 2001; Landman 2000). In addition, a number of other terms are also used, such as "suburban enclaves" (Lipman and Harris 1999), "urban fortresses" and "security-parks" (Hook and Vrdoljak 2001), "security villages" (Bremner 1999; Landman 2000) and "enclosed neighbourhoods" (Landman 2000). A number of local council policies in South Africa also refer to "road closures", indicating actions towards enclosed neighbourhoods. There is not always a consensus on the hierarchical structure or interpretation of these terms. Based on previous discussions and despite the lack of general consensus, one can broadly distinguish between security villages, which are private developments, and enclosed neighbourhoods, which are existing neighbourhoods that have been closed off in retrospect (Landman 2000).

*Security villages* in South Africa comprise a number of different types of development with different uses, ranging from smaller townhouse complexes to larger office parks and luxury estates. By definition, these areas are purpose-built by private developers, with security being the uppermost requirement, although lifestyle requirements are also important. Secure townhouse complexes, which are mainly for residential purposes, and office parks, are located throughout the cities, from central neighbourhoods to the higher income neighbourhoods on the urban periphery. Larger security estates are mostly located on the urban periphery where bigger portions of greenfield-sites are available, as well as many natural elements such as rivers, dams, patches of trees, etc. that are important features of these types of development. These estates offer an entire lifestyle package, where the features to be enjoyed in a secure environment include a range of services (garden services, refuse removal etc.), as well as a variety of facilities and amenities (golf courses, squash courts, cycle routes, hiking routes, equestrian routes, water activities, etc.). Most of the luxury security estates occupy only between 10 and 50 hectares, while two more ambitious estates occupy larger areas, namely Heritage Park in the City of Cape Town (200 ha) and Dainfern in the City of Johannesburg (350 ha).

A recent survey conducted by CSIR Building and Construction Technology (2002) indicated that security villages in South Africa tend to be located in either metropolitan areas (around large cities such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town, etc.) or in coastal towns (such as Plettenberg Bay, Knysna, Mossel Bay, Port Elizabeth, Margate, Richards Bay, etc.). Other areas with a larger numbers included recreational sites or alternative living places close to natural amenities, but still close enough to commute to major centra, such as Hartebeespoort Dam north west of Pretoria.

---

The second major type of gated community in South Africa are *enclosed neighbourhoods*. An increasing number of existing neighbourhoods, which were designed as open neighbourhoods, are being closed off through gates or booms extending across the road, as well as fences or walls around entire neighbourhoods in some cases. Access into these neighbourhoods is restricted and controlled by a few access control points, either in the form of remote controlled gates or security manned gates or booms. The size of enclosed neighbourhoods varies from small cul-de sacs with fewer than 10 houses to large neighbourhoods with up to 4000 houses. Residents must apply for the right to restrict access to their local municipality and can only do so for security reasons.

The CSIR survey indicated that the highest number of road closures is occurring in the metropolitan areas, including large cities such as Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town. It is estimated that there are presently approximately 300 legal road closures in the City of Johannesburg (established in December 2000). Due to increasing backlogs resulting from a re-consideration of the current policy, as well as applications brought over from the previous transitional local council, there are currently 547 applications pending (September 2002). It is also estimated that there are more than 500 illegal road closures in Johannesburg. These often give rise to many local disputes and have even resulted in a number of court cases.

Not all local municipalities in South Africa, however, allow this kind of neighbourhood enclosure. When comparing the number of municipalities who have approved road closures to the number who have received applications, the number of applications exceeds the number approved, indicating that despite the demand, not all applications are necessarily approved (CSIR Survey, March – June 2002). Some Local Authorities refused permission due to problems related to traffic control, urban management, accessibility, discrimination, etc. Despite this, and given the growing demand, it is likely that enclosed neighbourhoods will continue to grow, both in numbers and in size.

Gated communities, however, pose a number of challenges to local governments, both in terms of (and possibly also because of tensions between) spatial planning and land use management. These challenges are also directly related to the roles and responsibilities of local governments as outlined in The White Paper on Spatial Planning and Land Use Management (2001). Despite this, the number of gated communities in the country is growing daily. The major reason is the high levels of crime in the country. The perceived normality of high crime rates, together with the widely acknowledged limitations of the criminal justice system, have begun to 'erode one of the foundational myths of modern societies: namely, the myth that the sovereign state is capable of providing security, law and order, and crime control' (Garland cited in Landman and Shönteich 2002). One of the consequences of the recognition that the state cannot protect the life's and property of all citizens – especially in developing high-crime societies – has been the development of private alternatives to crime prevention and control. Gated communities are one such popular alternative.

Yet, despite the limitations on what the state can do in terms of crime prevention, it still has a responsibility towards collective action where applicable. Dealing with urban spaces is one such affair in need of collective action, rather than allowing a *laissez-faire* approach where all (including the private sector) are left alone to do what they please. Many social problems, such as social exclusion and spatial segregation, which will not be solved on their own can be exploited by societies' powerful. Experience from Brazil suggests that a lack of intervention from local governments, and the uncontrolled growth of gated communities, can exacerbate existing patterns of spatial segregation and social exclusion. This, in turn, undermines democratic consolidation in a country that is still recovering from years of authoritarian rule (Landman 2002).

Democracy is not only dependent on political democracy. Although the first step towards complete democracy (if one can call it that, considering that true democracy is arguably never 100% possible) is clearly political democracy, it can only be a first step. It is the first phase of a much longer process required to achieve a true or more balanced democracy. Thus democracy cannot only be political, but should also be institutional, socio-economic and spatial (Landman 2002). There is a need for democracy on a spatial level as well. This can be interpreted in two ways, either as spatial democracy or democratic space.

*Spatial democracy* refers to the democratic distribution of facilities and services, such as infrastructure, sanitation, water, etc. to all urban areas. This is very closely related to socio-economic transformation. It also requires a paradigm shift institutionally (that is, institutional democracy). It requires constructive institutional reforms and strategies to guide urban development practices in such a way that these do not raise the needs of one group above those of another. It also necessitates the careful evaluation of all types of urban development according to the principles promoting spatial democracy.

*Democratic space* refers to open, secure and well-developed public urban spaces for all urban residents where people should be able to mix with various groups and experience the benefits of urban

environments. Again, the local authority has a major role to play in promoting and supporting the development of democratic urban spaces throughout the city. It is also needful to reconsider the contribution of security agents and private management bodies to democracy and the promotion of human rights within these spaces, as well as the role of public private partnerships in promoting democratic space (Landman 2002).

In many aspects, South Africa has reached a respectable level of political democracy, where all people can vote and where there is a focus on addressing discrimination and promoting human rights. However, the danger is that increased crime, together with particular responses to crime, may in fact start to undermine the political achievements of the past seven years and undermine existing policies pointing towards spatial democracy and the development of democratic spaces. This in turn can create opportunities for questionable practices inside “controlled” spaces regarding the violation of human rights. Are gated communities likely to produce democratic spaces and will they contribute to spatial democracy? Signs from initial research and comparisons with similar countries raise serious concerns, pointing to a preliminary conclusion that most types of gated communities in South Africa are building barriers to democracy on many levels.

#### REFERENCES:

- Bremner, L. (1999) “Crime and the emerging landscape of post-apartheid Johannesburg” in H. Judin and I. Vladislavic, *blanc\_architecture, apartheid and after*, Rotterdam: Nai Publishers.
- Garland, D. (1996) The limits of the sovereign state, *The British Journal of Criminology* 36(4), Autumn 1996, p 448.
- Hook, D and Vrdoljak, M. (2001) ‘Gated communities, heterotopia and a “rights” of privilege: A “heterotopology” of the South African security-park.’ Paper presented at *WITS Housing Seminar*, 17 May 2001.
- Landman, K. (2000) *An overview of enclosed neighbourhoods in South Africa*. CSIR Publication: Pretoria.
- Landman, K. (2002) “Crime, political transition and spatial transformation in Brazil and South Africa”. *SAIIA Paper* (19), Johannesburg.
- Landman, K and Schönsteich, M (2002) “Urban fortresses: gated communities as a reaction to crime” in *African Security Review*, Volume 11, Number 4, November 2002.
- Lipman, A and Harris, H. (1999) ‘Fortress Johannesburg’ in *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, Vol. 26, pp. 727 – 240.
- Schönsteich, M (2002) “Crime levels in South Africa, its provinces and cities”,
- Shaw, M. (2000) “Crime and Policing in transitions: Comparative Perspectives”. *SAIIA Paper* (17), Johannesburg.
- Shaw, M. (1997) “South Africa: Crime in transition”, *ISS Paper* 17, Institute for Security Studies, Halfway House, March 1997.

---

[1]South Africa is but one of a number of countries that experienced political transition in the last decade or two. Other countries include several in Latin America, such as Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Peru, the former communist regimes of Eastern and Central Europe (for example Russia, Ukraine and Poland) and other African countries such as Nigeria and Mozambique.