Manila: patches of gated communities

An analysis of the effects of gated communities in Manila

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1 Factors Shaping Urban Shelter Design

Background

The sensory appearance of the built environment is the result of numerous natural and man-made features; but also political, economic and social organizational structures and their particular interaction with each other.

The location of a city, its internal structure, social organisation and build form are influenced by a number of environmental factors. For example, the geographical location of the city, the climate and the geology of the area all have a big impact on the above. Technological factors are used to overcome environmental challenges and human choices. Governance structures and policies that specific governments adopt can determine the interrelated concerns of urban form, the distribution of population groups and the appearance of a city as well as public health.

The aim of this paper is to discuss gated communities as a policy in reaction to the problems of megacities and how they affect the city as a whole.

In 2011 the ENHR Conference in Toulouse defined 'gated community' as "a group of houses, surrounded by fences or walls, from which the adjacent streets are closed off by gates, which may be either electronic or guarded. In between the houses, there is an inner network of streets as well as dead-end streets, the latter in

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order to prevent through-traffic. Residents have access to various services (such as security guards, maintenance, a school, playground, leisure facilities, etc), which facilitate their complete isolation from the surrounding environment. People living here often go to work by car, hence their lives are basically confined to two locations: the workplace and the residential park (disregarding the car in between)"

Contemporary town planners find consensus around the idea that "good communities should feature a mix of uses and people, open and connected streets, pedestrian networks and compact form" (Source: Magda Metwally, Sahar Soliman Abdalla). In accordance with this concept the European cities have been developed. In these kind of cities housing, utilities, land usage, transportation, sanitation and social aspects are closely interlinked to attain what we call a livable city.

Gated communities are against the city's basic principle of living together; they fragment a city by breaking the connection between groups of people, their activities and social relations. Further to this, they separate streets and public spaces physically from each other and they divide in smaller parts the compact form of the city.

Problems associated with open communities

In Manila gated communities exist because they represent an alternative lifestyle that avoids the problems existing in the open communities and unsolved by the public administration.

Firstly open communities are crowded and disordered; the streets generate activities and the pathways are occupied by legal or illegal sari-sari shops. Along with this, the streets are packed with parked cars and other forms of transportation and traffic. The high level of people and pollution annoys the inhabitants. (see figure 1). Secondly protection against sound and sight from the outside is missing in the open communities, and privacy within the homes is missing as well. Thirdly open communities present a lack of adequate spaces for recreation and social gathering; the main city park and few local public sport facilities are the only places where residents can freely gather for socialization and relaxation.

Finally the garbage management and road maintenance is entirely dependent on the poor capabilities of the local authorities. (see figure 2)

Figure 1 and 2. Open communities in Philippines. Author´s pictures.

Advantages of the gated communities

Gated communities are sold by private investors as a master-planned neighbourhood which are secure and boast a healthy atmosphere and adequate facilities.

Gated communities protect the inhabitants from crime but also from external noise. They develop a community as a whole evoking a group image, control the traffic and perform community functions.

As shown in figure 3, in Manila this phenomenon is extremely common.

Private subdivision
- < 10
- 10 to < 50
- 50 to < 100
- 100 to < 200
- 200 and over

N. of gated communities
- < 10
- 10 to < 50
- 50 to < 100
- 100 to < 200
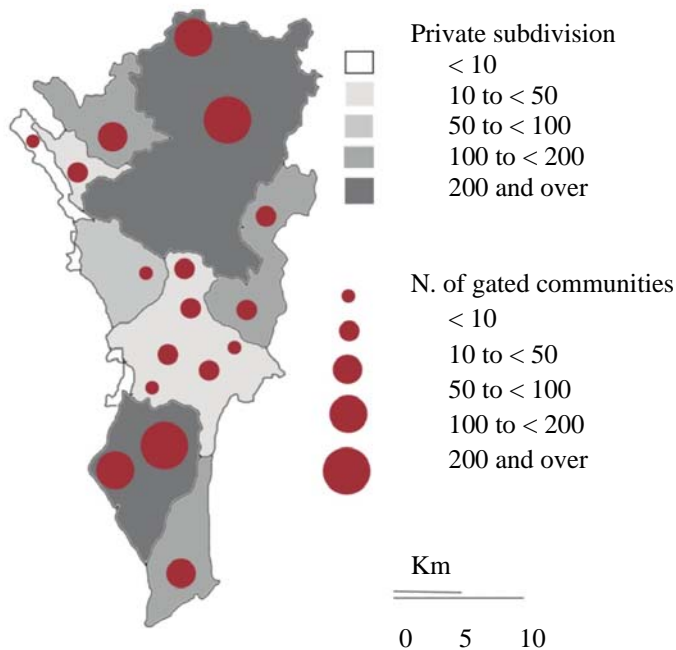- 200 and over

Km

0   5   10

Figure 3. General Distribution Map of Gated Communities

Source: Kenneth Tanate. Paola Tovini sketch

Around 1.3 million people of Metro Manila live within gated communities which occupy approximately 16% of Metro Manila's urban space. This is equivalent to an area of 101 square kilometres. The population density in this area is 12,883 people per square kilometre; considerably lower than in the rest of Metro Manila. (Source: Tanate Kenneth Verzosa, 2005)

<u>Effects of the gated communities on the city</u>

Despite the positive effect on the single user, gated communities create disastrous effects in the shape and in the functioning of the city's system.

Quezon City, for example, was mentioned in the report of MMUTIS (Metro Manila Urban Transportation Integration Study, 1999) to have severe problems on accessibility due to the existence of gated communities. Figure 4 is a satellite image of an area nearby Commonwealth Avenue where a lot of gated communities have been developed. The analysis shows how private subdivisions provide obstacles for the city's mobility; the streets change direction to turn around closed areas characterized by access restrictions that strongly decrease the city's mobility potential.

Figure 4. Map of Gated Communities next to Commonwealth Avenue, Quezon City

Source: Google Maps. Sketch analysis: Tovini Paola

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Figure 5 shows the difference between the pattern of houses inside and outside the gated community and how the walls cut every connection in between. No one except the inhabitants of the closed neighborhood can enjoy the peaceful atmosphere and the order created inside the walls. This practice of exclusivity causes social injustice because it connotes the segregation of society. In some ways, the restrictions in the form of gates and fences around neighbourhoods represent more than simple physical barriers, they manifest tension between outsiders and insiders, and the major problems of the city are left to the outsiders. This form of community development, as an enclosed neighborhood, has various issues contradicting the UNDP's propositions (United Nations Development Programm) for better Asian Cities. It does not help to reach the goal of poverty reduction and is against a democratic governance and sustainable development.

Figure 5. Zoom of Gated Communities next to Commonwealth Avenue, Quezon City

Source: Google Maps. Sketch analysis: Tovini Paola

Therefore, it is necessary that people abolish the selfish system that is the gated community and start to think of the city as a whole instead of focusing only on their private piece of land.

A city should be a common ground where life is able to develop without borders.

2 Design of Sustainable Shelter and Neighbourhoods

There are many ways that an architect can solve the problems of open communities without involving the creation of a gated community.

Considering for example the lack of security, the architect could introduce some reference points in the area that could work like landmarks – bright towers during night and rooms for facilities during day time and evenings.

To deal with the fear of foreigners, working with sociologist's and psychologist's can be an opportunity to relate new inhabitants with residents. It is important to organize meeting opportunities or activities before moving the new residents to the location.

With regard to noise and deregulation in the city, the architect can promote mixed income projects in order to develop a sense of control in the whole area and to promote dialogue between different people.

Considering the lack of facilities, the architect can plan a new area with high quality amenities that consider the need of the surrounding community on a bigger scale and maybe can attract people from gated communities as well.

Concerning the bettering of social relations, new spaces can be built to encourage meeting points for people from both new and existing communities but also for outsiders. This can also be achieved through better mobility in the city. By building connections between new and existing streets and having better public transport where people can also meet, people will no longer be confined to their area of the city which may perhaps lead to more social mobility.

Incentives and agreements can also be done to promote the breakdown of existing walls.

3 The Role of Architects

The developers in the city influence political decisions related to zoning, growth policies and infrastructure. Their primary goal is to achieve further economic growth and make money, but without regard for the actual needs of the city or its people. With the help of local politicians, media, and auxiliary institutions they are currently achieving this. The growth machine model highlights how the superior organization of growth elites coupled with suburban autonomy creates and perpetuates inequalities among residents of different places.

Even if the community organization in a government land is poor as in Manila and private investors only have a speculative role in the city planning, architects can deal with the problem of gated communities. They can take part in the urban planning by advising the city council to support a more egalitarian system. They can criticize the situation in Manila and in other megacities through different mediums such as the media or magazines and they can take part in national and international architectural events exposing the issue of gated communities and proposing design solutions (see point 2) that show an alternative way of living.
From a more practical perspective they can support poor communities by planning facilities and amenities for them and can provide access to gated communities by taking down existent gates. Perhaps more importantly, they can sensitize communities (gated or not) in collaboration with sociologist's and psychologist's to change the scale of the community feeling (from the neighbourhood to the whole city) and to make them conscious about the situation, focusing together on problem and solution. The focus in sensitization should be on the new generation, because young people represent the power of a society and are the biggest hope for a change.

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