

Gated communities in Manila, the Philippines, and its limiting consequences

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I. Introduction

While visiting the Philippines¹, one thing immediately drew my attention; since the first encounter with the city of Manila the streets have been full of people and the use of this public place seems limitless. Streets in Manila are the collectors of public activity, they are the backbone of the public life. I have tried to think of reasons why the streets would be used this much and in such a variety of ways. One reason I found was that almost all traffic is dependent on streets, there is almost no network of trains or metro. As a result of commuting through streets only, potential clients for any kind of business can be found along the intensely used streets. This, in my point of view, is one of the reasons why basically all of the plinths along the publicly accessible streets are filled with commercial functions. Another reason I found was the size of housing and the lack of smaller public areas in the dense urban pattern of the city. As a consequence, the street becomes one of the only areas to go to. Not weirdly is the street and pavement not only used for transport, it is also the place for market stands, tricycle parking, outside dining, cleaning, playing children, any kind of vending trolleys, religious rituals and of course meeting up with friends and family.



Picture 1.
The public streets in Manila are used intensively and for many purposes. Here we see a street market in Queson City, Metro Manila.

¹ I followed the design course Urban Shelter, given by the Architecture faculty of Lunds Technical University, in the spring semester of 2016. The design project was about providing housing for the urban poor in Manila, The Philippines. We went on a field trip to Manila for 3 weeks in order to get a thorough understanding of the culture and the housing conditions.

While the roads are publicly accessible, are many of the residential areas excluded of public life by a wall that separates them from the outside activity. The gated communities are a reality in any class of the society, from the urban poor to the most wealthy neighborhoods. The difference in public activity between the two, public streets and the gated communities, is huge. Due to the gate the area becomes self-dependent and doesn't contribute as much to the surroundings any more. The gated area also becomes unattractive to visit by any stranger, hence there is no reason for him to enter the gated community. Because basically all of the new built areas we have visited² in Manila are closed communities do I see a future development where bigger parts of the city solely exist of closed housing areas. This will cause an effect on the use of public, and because of the gates semi-public, areas which in my eyes can trigger problems in the development of an healthy urban structure in the future because a healthy network of roads is blocked by these gates.



Picture 2.
In contrast, no much activity takes place in the streets in a gated community we visited.

² During our field trip in Manila we have visited many residential neighborhoods. The families living in these residential areas were mostly replaced by the government because they lived in the poorest conditions before, all of them are considered informal settles. The majority of the projects were planned by the National Housing Authority, the responsible governmental organization.

In this essay I would like to examine the effect of a gated community, a housing area excluded from the public life, on the flow, variety and intensity of public street activity. By using existing literature on the essence of public space and their use I can find the pros and cons of gated communities and what effect a gated community would have on the overall urban flow. With the literature review (II) I should be able to form a conclusion (III) on the effects of a gated area and how this affects the overall public use of streets. This should give me enough evidence to create an advice for the urban shelter design (IV) and the role of the architect (V).

II. Literature Review

One of the most fundamental books on city planning is *The Death and life of great American cities* by Jane Jacobs. Most of the book is focussed on the public connections in streets and neighborhoods, also the way publicly accessible streets and other freely accessible areas function are subject to the book. The book relates very accurately to the subject of the essay and will therefore play a big role in the essay. Also *Life between Buildings: Using Public Space* and *Cities for People* by Jan Gehl are fundamental literature on the topic. These three sources will form the main body on which the essay will rely.

Jacobs starts with an analysis of the importance of streets (and sidewalks) in cities, according to her streets and its sidewalks are the city's most vital organs and thus of big influence on the functioning of the public life. She names three essential functions of streets to maintain a healthy neighborhood in an urban setting; safety, contact and assimilating kids. The first function is the feeling of safety, which is created by the people using and living in the streets. A certain control over the streets is being kept by its inhabitants, they fulfill the role of constantly having 'eyes on the street'. Also a social network between the inhabitants ascertains the control over the streets, incidents are passed from one to another and makes every one aware of the things happening. Keeping the city streets safe has, according to Jacobs, much to do with the intensity in which they are being used. Streets which are full of people tend to be clear of incidents, while deserted streets are certainly more vulnerable to crime. Strangers are naturally attracted to intensely used streets and will form an asset to the street safety when they are making use of them. Another function of a street is its acceptance of casual public interaction. When the street allows public interaction to happen a certain sidewalk life arises. Interaction between stranger and persons known to the neighborhood occur regularly. According to Jacobs a so-called web of public respect and trust with strangers and residents involved exists in the streets. Getting into contact with strangers creates bands of trust with people from other classes of the society. Also the last function of the street that Jacobs names, assimilating kids, has to do with contact with others in streets. When kids play on sidewalks and streets they learn to take 'public responsibility of each other'. By countless minor interactions the children learn that the sidewalks natural proprietors are invested in their safety and well-

being. These lessons can only be learned naturally and there is no other place than public streets where this can be institutionalized. (Jacobs, 1961)

Later, Jacobs digs deeper into the role of neighborhoods, which are divided into three scales; city, district and street neighborhoods. Most importantly to her is the size in population and the possibility of self governance on every scale. However, she also clearly names the disadvantages of isolated districts and streets. The boundaries of isolated districts and streets are clearly defined and they don't take part in the bigger picture of the neighborhood or city. This also counts for their capability of collective action, due to their physical isolation. Jacobs therefore clearly states: "Successful street neighborhoods, in short, are not discrete units. They are physical, social and economic continuities" (Jacobs, 1961). While they only exist in a very small scale do they play a vital role in the bigger picture. The tendency of isolation also occurs on a district or neighborhood scale. Due to the lack of reliability from neighboring areas is nobody but the neighborhood itself dependent on solving their possible occurring problems. Moreover the neighborhood is not able to protect itself over time and If the neighborhood is in decline there is no sufficient body of resistance to rely on to solve the problem. This problem can be evaded by effective city planning instead of the conventional planning and zoning theories which Jacobs is strictly against. Jacobs names several purposes which effective neighborhood physical planning should aim at. First, to foster lively and interesting streets. Second, to make the fabric of these streets as continuous a network as possible. Third, use parks and squares and public buildings as part of this street network; use them to intensify and knit together the fabric's complexity and multiple use. They should not be used to island off different uses from each other, or to island off subdistrict neighborhoods. (Jacobs, 1961)

Another subject Jacobs touches upon is the urge for diversity in cities. She clearly states that cities are driven on diversity, it is a vital factor for successful cities. Several factors are given by Jacobs which must assure a realization of a district's best potential. Multiple primary uses of a district is of big influence of its economic vitality, but especially on its social and safety terms. Multiple primary uses attract different users during different hours of the day, the streets are therefore also more occupied which results in social safety. A variety of people which are in the district for a variety of reasons attracts secondary supporting uses as restaurants and cafes as well. The economic potential for the district is what naturally follows. Small businesses which are used by a small amount of people are more profitable in districts which attracts foreigners because of another primary

reason to come to the district. The kind of variety we are talking about now is close to the need for concentration Jacobs names as another factor. The additional part besides the variety of people is the density. The right density leads to a healthier amount of commercial uses and variety in a district or neighborhood. (Jacobs, 1961)

One last aspect which clearly hits the subject of the essay is ‘the curse of border vacuums’. Borders created by railroads for example are the creators of physical as well as social barriers and leave a vacuum of less used space behind. The border creates dead ends on both sides which are way less used and therefore also less of interest for any commercial uses. The liveliness of the district is thus strongly affected due to the physical border. (Jacobs, 1961)

Where we have already seen the urge for lively and much used streets in the book of Jacobs tells the book *Cities for People* by Jen Gehl exactly the same. He names recreational and social activities mixed with room for necessary pedestrian traffic as well as the opportunity to participate in urban life as the needs for a lively city. Also the factor of the users come into play. The people should have a purpose to use the public space in order to make them successful. (Gehl, 2010)

The importance of street activity and the relation between public space and activity have been named earlier by Gehl. In his influential publication *Life Between Buildings*, originally published in Danish in 1971, he takes the relation between public activity and the physical space where it takes place as main subject. He divides outdoor activities in public spaces in three categories: necessary activities, optional activities, and social activities. Especially the amount of optional activities happening is dependent on the quality of the exterior space. Critical for street activity is the possibility of contact, interaction between people using the public space. When the physical existence allows interaction with one another, between friends, but also spontaneously, the space becomes easily lively. Interaction between people stimulates changing situations like nothing else and this makes the space very attractive to perform optional public activities. Even the most colorful and interesting architecture cannot compete with human interaction simply because the changing situation never gets dull. (Gehl, 1987)

III. Argument, Critique or Discussion

While one of the main goals, overall control over the residential area, is achieved by creating a gated community does the gate around the neighborhood obstruct many other things. If we look at safety, which is one of the main beneficiary results of creating gated areas according to the taken interviews in the Philippines³, much is achieved in the way of creating a gated neighborhood. Looking at the arguments Jane Jacobs names as essential for street safety is much been achieved by controlling the area by introducing a gate, since the situation is completely manipulated. The users of the area are known and a strong social network between the inhabitants makes it easy to find the culprit. Excluding strangers from the neighborhood, or having control over the visitors plays a big part to ascertain control over the safety situation as well. A somehow safe environment is created by using a gate around the residential area, it is therefore one of the possibilities when a secure neighborhood is wished for.

The circumstances under which safety is created in publicly accessible streets differs enormously from the situation in gated communities and are therefore inadequate to juxtapose. On the other hand does it seem to me like all of the aspects Jacobs sums up in order create safe public streets are present in very much all of the streets we have been using in Manila; they stimulate a big variety of use (thus users), a mix of residents and strangers is constantly occupying the streets and children are clearly part of the social network. I am mostly referring to publicly accessible streets (the public spaces in gated areas are a different category) we have either crossed by bus or walked through. The publicly accessible streets have always felt safe from my own perspective, although I am aware of the fact that my own experience is far from sufficient to form a representative view on this topic.

It is now clear that by enclosing the residential area control over the neighborhood is assured and a feeling of social safety is acquired. The way this feeling of safety is created within gated communities does not very much relate to the situation Jacobs describes since the accessibility of the area for unknown people is highly affected by the enclosure. The control over the people using the area may be a beneficial part of the gated community, however assuring a feeling of safety is not the consequence of creating a gated

³ We have had the opportunity to take interviews during our visits of the different residential areas. These Interviews gave us the possibility to get a better understanding of the people who lived in the housing areas and their backgrounds. Also lots of interviews gave us a better insight in the use of the living units and the public space within the area.

community which I want to criticize. This might be the point where the main beneficial aspects of gated communities are being named. The critique I have on closing off a residential area relates mostly to the limitations in social, economical and physical aspects that are being created as a consequence of the border between the enclosed area and its surroundings.

When we go back to Jacobs we can find a first potential threat for gated communities when she talks about the functioning of neighborhoods. Every part of town, large or small, depends on the bigger area it is located in. This is true when it comes down to self protection, but also economic vitality. Gated parts of a city will find themselves into an isolated situation when looking at the bigger picture and are therefore dependent on themselves. In the case of overall decline or other problems occurring within the gated community there is no support from the surroundings since they are not dependent on the gated area. Serious problems therefore will form a bigger threat in gated communities than other areas.

In order to overcome isolated areas, districts or even streets Jacobs proposes several purposes effective neighborhood planning should aim at. Of these purposes none is being accomplished within a gated community. The streets in a gated communities are rarely as interesting as the streets on the other side of the border, the streets are far from a part of continuous networks and the public spaces and buildings are not being used to knit together the fabric's complexity and multiple use. They are overall solely used by the inhabitants of the area and are never aimed to make a connection with the neighboring areas.

Also in *Life Between Buildings* we find reasons why gated communities are limiting the possible use of public space. Gehl states that it is very well possible to influence the amount of public activity that takes places and for how long. This can be influenced by the physical environment and the activity patterns in public spaces. The physical border around the residential area influences the activity that could take place within the residential area enormously. In my opinion is the lack of a primary reason to use the public space in gated communities the biggest reason why it is not been used intensively. The inhabitants have not much of a reason to use the public space besides playing basketball or hang around, we could say that the activity pattern is very monotonous.



Picture 3.
The lack of different uses of the public space and the monotonous image of the gated area becomes very clear.

This all has much to do with the enormous lack of diversity, or better, the discouragement of diversity in general. Jacobs and Gehl are both repeatedly coming back to the urge of lively streets and cities. Much of this liveliness relies on the variety of users and purposes in and around the public areas. Both writers also agree on the need for multiple primary uses in an area to assure people in the public space during different hours of the day. The right density and mix of residents also attracts different uses within the area. A last thing mentioned by Jacobs is a mix of old and new buildings to assure economic affordability for the different uses. (Jacobs, 1961, Gehl, 2010)

Clearly none of these interpretations of diversity are present in gated residential areas and this might be considered as one of the main concerns. Since close to all gated residential areas are built for just one specific target group is the population far from a diverse mix of people. Diversity in units or a healthy mix of old and new buildings are not existing in gated areas. This all has a lot of negative consequences. Since overall outsiders are not playing a role in the enclosed neighborhood will the neighborhood never become attractive for businesses that want to reach beyond the neighborhoods borders. A market, restaurant, shoemaker, corner store, laundry service or school to name some depend solely on the residents of the neighborhood and will never be able to compete with stores that are open to any stranger. A mix of use within the neighborhood area is hence very unrealistic, a thing that will have its consequences on the future neighborhood development as well. Public spaces and facilities also solely depend on the people from the area itself, which will seldom lead to intensely used public space. Any potential for development or future diversification is ruled out because of the enclosure. Any flourishing of the neighborhood

itself is also taken away, the neighborhood will be as it ever was since the first moment it was realized. Besides a limitation of diversity in housing, population, users and uses is also the durability of the neighborhood itself very limited, all because it is a gated community.

Although a gated community creates a controlled environment is the border itself in multiple ways extremely limiting. The border leaves the neighborhood isolated, it is self dependent as it comes to protection, economic vitality and problem solving. Also the continuity of the urban network is brutally blocked by the gate. No traffic will go through and no stranger will enter, the streets and other public spaces are solely used by the inhabitants. The streets are far from a part of continuous networks and the public spaces and buildings are not being used to knit together the fabric's complexity. The public space becomes dull and boring since there is no primary reason to use the public space to begin with. The activity pattern is very monotonous. As a consequence is the economic potential of the neighborhood very limited, as well as any potential activity in the public spaces. Much of this relates to the lack of diversity, or better, the discouragement of diversity. There is no diversity in population, a lack of other users of the area or a variety of purposes to use the area. No diversity either is found in housing or the physical existence of the streets or building blocks. Any potential development or diversification in the future is ruled out because of the gate, the durability is thus also very limited. The summed up limitations due to the gate around the residential neighborhoods in Manila are not only problematic for the inhabitants of the area itself but also form a threat for the development and continuity of the urban network. Gated communities are therefore in the end too limited to become a successful neighborhood.

IV. Urban Shelter Design

Since the theory spoken about above should be applied on the housing design⁴ would it be good to look very closely to the exact situation where the design will be implemented. Also studying the condition of the surroundings is beneficial for the decisions to be taken in the design. Understanding the context will be of big importance in order to come up with the right decisions for the newly proposed neighborhood.

The location for the design of the new residential area is situated in the outer north border of the city Caloocan, Metro Manila. The district is known for its high density and relatively poor inhabitants. Within the existing residential areas we find schools, roofed sports fields, a cemetery, markets, churches and governmental facilities. The publicly accessible streets are filled with small shops, sari-saris and small businesses. The location is facing the Marilao River which also determines the border of the city itself. On the other side of the river we find bigger houses, resorts, private schools and a lot of new residential development.



Picture 4.

An example of a gate that can be closed off during the night but still allows strangers to enter when it is open.

If we look at any kind of enclosed areas in the neighborhoods do we find a lot of new typically gated residential areas on the other side of the river. These are of a relatively big scale and are mostly extremely monotonous in urbanism and architecture. There are

⁴ All the gathered information in the Philippines, together with our personal observations and findings, gave us a solid background to start the design exercise. In the project we are asked to design a residential area with a similar situation as the ones we have seen and visited in the Philippines.

endless amounts of the same houses next to each other in the same streets all over the neighborhood. The effect on the urban development of the area is seriously affected by these gated communities. The continuity of flows is disrupted and interaction between gated community and the outside is lacking. On the Manila side of the river we don't see any of the monotonous gated residential areas. In order to secure safety we have seen gates on the outer limit of streets which can be closed during nighttime. In daytime we were able to access multiple of these streets which proves that they are accessible for strangers during daytime. This manner of some single gates in between building blocks is much more subtle and in consequences not comparable with a solid wall or fence around a residential area. The effect of several gates in-between buildings or a fenced off area is directly visible when we look at the urban pattern. Development, diversity, flows and interaction within the area are all preserved while these are all fiercely affected in gated communities. Above all, the public accessible areas are not affected by the gates which allows streets and public space to serve in the manner they are suppose to.

The first and foremost decision for the design of the residential area is clearly to avoid closing off bigger residential areas by walls or gates. The whole idea of isolating residential parts from the city should not even be taken into consideration. Preserving the urban flow and continuity whilst creating a safe and secure feeling for the residents should be endeavored in the design. The concept of having the possibility to close off smaller parts of semi-private space along which the residents have their entrances to their livings is the most suitable solution and has proven itself in the area already. It is of big importance that only semi private space can be closed off so non of the public accessible space is been affected. The streets and public areas and buildings can continue to work as venue for public activity, continuity of flows and interaction between users.



Picture 5.

The green plot in the middle is the given site. North of the river are the standardized monotonous gated communities clearly visible. South of the river a continuous urban network.

Limiting the areas that can possibly be closed off to only small semi-private space opens up a lot of possibilities where low income residents can benefit fully from. In our design proposal⁵ we work with building blocks with a central semi-private courtyard from where the units are accessed. This allows us to make the public facilities and streets accessible for anyone. With the public spaces we want to attract strangers from the neighboring area instead of denying them access. Also we will create a better connection with the other side of the river to improve the continuity of the urban networks. With opening the neighborhood up for anyone who wishes to enter we hope to make the streets and public spaces more interesting, we hope to create a big variety of public activity and give the area more economic potential. The diversity of people using the public space will increase and in the future hopefully also the population will be more diverse. The neighborhood will be fully part of the urban structure instead of an isolated, self dependent and monotonous residential area.

⁵ A group of me and three other students have made an urban design proposal for the assigned two hectare plot where we have made new plans to provide housing for the urban poor. Instead of making this a closed off residential area we wanted to make the neighborhood accessible for anybody who wishes to enter.

V. The Role of Architects

While concentrating on the consequences of gated communities only I have found that most of the severe and influential decisions are made in planning on urban scale. The choice of developing a gated community might be taken by the developer and the consequences are possibly unknown to them. However, urban planners, urban designers and architects should all be aware of the effects their design decisions have on public space. The functioning of a city itself and the public space that connects every bit of it should be known to any designer involved in the development of the city.

The difference between the final goals set by the developer and the role of the architect is possibly one of the gaps that causes problems. However, the consequences of the taken decisions affects many of users in the end. The decisions by the architects, urban planners and urban designers should therefore be taken very seriously especially when it affects the public space.

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