

Islands of Status and Seclusion

The complex issue of gated communities for the urban poor in Metro Manila



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Introduction

During field studies of housing for the urban poor in Metro Manila - taking place as part of the course Urban Shelter at Lund University – a number of observations were made regarding the prevalence of gated communities throughout the city.

First and foremost, the gated community seemed to be a common type of housing development, not only for middle and high income families, but also for urban poor families. This is in stark contrast to countries in the global north - such as Sweden or the United States - where living in gated communities is usually reserved for the upper classes, and often associated with a luxurious detachment from the city at large.

Secondly, the gated communities that were part of this field study all seemed to operate differently from each other, in regard to how they kept their communities separate from their surroundings. Some communities had a guard in post at all times, while others only closed at night, letting people pass in and out during the day.

Lastly, throughout the city, there were very few public spaces, such as parks or squares, where people from different gated communities could gather and interact.

The aim of this essay is to investigate how the gated community serves the urban poor population in Metro Manila, and what consequences a large quantity

of gated communities can have on the urban texture. The history of the gated community – both in the global south and in Metro Manila – will be explored, as well as what kind of purpose it serves for its residents. The knowledge gained from such an exploration gives a deeper understanding of the effects the gated community have on urban poor families, and Metro Manila at large. In turn, that understanding can be used to produce design guidelines for new developments, that can help balance positive and negative aspects of this type of housing project.

Gated Communities – History and Purpose

The first modern examples of gated communities were products of the United States, and were later exported to, and spread in the global south. Gated communities can be divided into three subcategories, relating to their main function for the community: Lifestyle – which supports the inhabitants to share in a certain lifestyle. Prestige – which means that the inhabitants get status from living within that specific development, in contrast to the people not living there. Security – the gated community provides the inhabitants with certain safety measures to make them feel more secure living there as opposed to outside of the gates. A gated community often serve more than one, or all, of these purposes for their residents (Duren, 2012).

Anthropologist Teresa Caldeira likens gated communities to fortified enclaves, and defines them as being “privatized, enclosed, and monitored spaces for residence, consumption, leisure, and work”. The fortified enclaves, she says, is for those wanting to escape the public streets - full of marginalised people – to an enclosed space that is perceived as being safer. Fear of others, and the need for security measures, are often used as arguments when developing new gated communities. The poorer population becomes associated with criminality, and so the upper classes try to distance themselves. Caldeira argues that fortified enclaves are part of a new aesthetic – an aesthetic of high walls and distance, revolving around security and surveillance – “the aesthetics of security”. It is an aesthetic that signals high status in the areas where it is deployed, the distance in and of itself making these areas exclusive (Caldeira, 1996). When public space becomes little more than the void in-between walled developments, it changes in nature. Walking the streets becomes reserved for the people that have no other options, while those better off are swiftly transported from one point to another by

car. Social interactions are mostly limited to the rather homogenous groups that inhabit the same enclaves. What is typically associated with public life, at least from a western perspective - spontaneous interactions, having people from different social backgrounds meeting and co-existing in the same space – does not exist in a city defined by fragmentation and fortifications. To quote Caldeira, these new public spaces “reject the principles of openness and equality, and take inequality and separation as their values” (Caldeira, 1996). Everyone living in a city like this is limited by it. Feelings of exclusion and restriction touches all groups of citizens, just by the simple fact that borders in-between social groups are so heavily fortified and guarded. Some people are restricted to their own territory, while others might not cross the social divide, even though they technically could, since crossing such borders come with a great sense of unease and fear. This fear contributes to increase social inequalities (Caldeira, 1996). According to Caldeira, different social groups must recognize each others’ rights as citizens. If not, the conditions needed for a working democracy are not fulfilled. This recognition of rights become nearly impossible in a city characterized by walls and voids, since different social groups rarely interact, and the structure of the city in and of itself fortifies their division (Caldeira, 1996).

International studies show that there is no clear correlation between perceived safety and actual safety in any given area. Some people feel very safe living in crime-ridden neighbourhoods - due to a good community or familiarity with the area – and sometimes it is the people living in the safest parts that report feeling the most unsafe (Björkemarmen, 2007).

In Metro Manila, the gated community is traceable back to Spanish colonial times, and it has continuously been woven into the structure of the city ever since. To quote architect Felino Palafox Jr in the Strait Times, “Urban planning-wise, our obsolete practices have not progressed from the 16th-century practice of Intramuros and extramuros. You live inside the walls (Intramuros) if you’re rich and powerful, and outside the walls (extramuros) if you’re a peasant”. The urban planning of Manila is segregating rich from poor by sorting them into different areas of the city. The “haves” get to live in protected enclaves, gated communities, while the “have nots” are left to appropriate the open and public city streets (Dancel, 2015).

In the article, *Beyond Manila: Walls, malls and private spaces*, Metro Manila is likened to an “archipelago whose islands are interconnected by bridges”.

The *islands* refer to Manila's many gated communities, and the *bridges* to the freeways connecting them. These tendencies - the middle-class fencing off themselves to increase their social status and escape the street, with the government paid road network facilitating the development - are part of a pattern recognisable from other parts of the global south (Duren, 2012). To quote Connel, "Place of residence is (...) a defining characteristic of the extent to which individuals have become successful." In contemporary Manila, almost all public space has been eradicated, and private malls serve as replacement. The street has become a place to avoid, unless you are poor, or even homeless. There is no glue holding the urban fabric together (Connel, 1999). According to Connel, the main reason Metro Manila has developed this urban structure and organisation is due to the city's weak public sector, absent metropolitan government and lack of public planning. Instead of a consistent development plan for the whole city, neighbourhoods have been the result of the work from private developers. The city has been left to expand unregulated (Connel, 1999).

Status Shifts and Urban Fragmentation

Based on the literature review, it is possible to discern that the issue of gated communities is a complex one. The gated community can have both a positive and negative impact on the city and its citizens.

In some cases, the gated community can provide both security and social status to its residents, as well as strengthening their sense of belonging. If the street is associated with poverty and crime, and gates and barriers with status and prestige, it is understandable why the lower classes would want their neighbourhood to be gated, just like the upper classes' are. The different subcategories of gated communities, presented by Duren, were all applied on communities with a middle to high income. However, the responses garnered during interviews with relocated informal settlement families (ISF's) in Metro Manila, regarding their living situation, suggest that gated communities serve similar purposes for them. Many of these families note that they not only feel safer in their new neighbourhoods, they also get treated with noticeably more respect by people outside of their community, and have better chances of securing a good employment. Living in a gated community gives them notable status,

although the real cause of their status shift is hard to determine. It could just as well be a response to these families no longer residing in informal settlements - and thus having a more stable living situation, making them more attractive to employers – as it could be a consequence of the gated community itself.

Negative consequences of gated communities include an impenetrable and fragmented urban landscape, as well as deepening the social divide in their surrounding areas. The streets become places associated with underprivilege, poverty and low status, which in turn is quite devastating for public life in the city. As people become more concerned with life inside of their compounds, rather than what is taking place outside of them, the public streetscape is bound to be neglected by citizens and politicians alike.



Public Street in San Juan, Metro Manila. Narrow sidewalks, closed facades and walls contribute to this public space not being used as more than a transportation route (author's picture, 2020)

The only parts of Metro Manila where the streetscape has been consciously developed as a public space in the city planning are the areas where essentially no one from the low to middle class can afford to live, such as Bonifacio Global City and Makati. Here, pocket parks and pedestrian zones are the new markers of status. These areas are not formally gated - no guards patrol the district edges, no walls have been raised to keep people out - but they are still made quite unavailable in their exclusivity.



Pedestrian zone designed as a linear park in Bonifacio Global City's shopping district (KMC MAG Group, 2014)

Even though gated communities contribute to increase the social divide between different groups of people, it would be hypocritical to demand that the development of them should cease when it comes to providing new housing for the urban poor and ISFs in Metro Manila. These families have had very little in terms of both secure housing and social status. To tear down their walls and letting the upper classes keep theirs would be counterproductive if the aim is to level the social inequalities in the city at large. And as touched upon by Caldeira, even the upper classes have something to gain from dismantling the walls and make public life more attractive. The issue must be tackled both at city planning level and at local development level at the same time. Without making the public city more available and attractive to all inhabitants, one non-gated community will not make a difference, and might, in fact, be worse for the urban poor residents living there, than a gated community would have been.

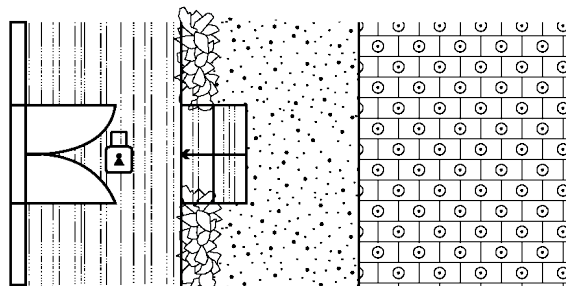
Gated communities weaken democracy and contribute to a society filled with fear and inequality. To strive for a city without dividing walls, and with meaningful public space, must be the ultimate goal for planners and architects alike. However, it seems quite impossible to tear down already existing walls in Metro Manila, at least when looking at how the city is structured today. Thus, the issue of the gated communities is complex, and cannot simply be resolved by just removing the walls, however tempting. Reintegration of citizens into public life is a process that must be handled carefully and sensitively, and be given an appropriate amount of time.

Reintegration into Public Life

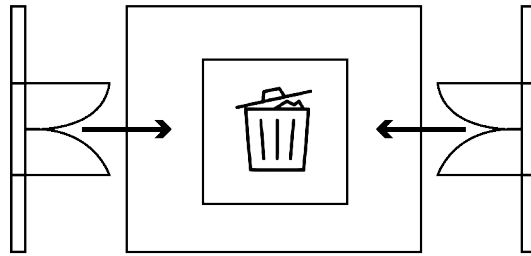
If the main reason Metro Manila largely consists of gated communities and neighbourhoods today, is a lack of public planning, then city-wide measures must be deployed to change this trend. A holistic plan must be developed to make sure that the dismantling of the walled enclaves is equal throughout the city, and not determined by residents' income level or location. A city-wide plan for public space could help to ensure a certain level of quality wherever in the city a project might be launched. A plan could also provide guidelines for private developers, and could facilitate collaboration between different developers working in the same part of the city, so that neighbouring housing developments could be connected through shared public space.

When reintegrating citizens into the public spaces of the city, one should consider doing it gradually. To initially only soften the border between residence and public space. The purpose of this would be to change the association between public life and unsafety and low status, to something more attractive. Below are some strategies that could be used to softening the border between public and private space. The aim is to start connecting the two different zones visually, and gradually increase interaction.

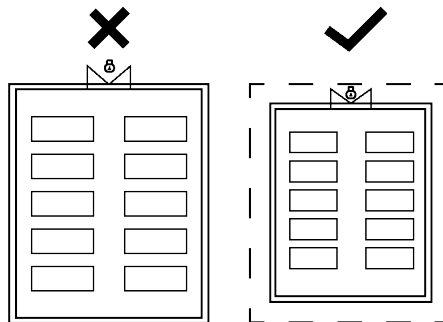
1. Mark different zones by using materiality, rather than by using walls, for example, divide public and private space by introducing a semi-public zone in-between. The materiality could refer to paving, different levels, hedges or stairs. It is flexible, depending on the context. This way, the gate can be pushed back – so that it doesn't interrupt public space – while still keeping strangers and unauthorized people from entering the private zone.



2. Place some facilities, for example garbage collection, in public space, and make neighbouring communities share them, to increase everyday usage of public space, as well as to increase interaction between residents from different communities.



3. Make it mandatory for private developer to leave a certain amount of their lot to develop public space. That might entice them to make that space meaningful, as well as collaborating with the city and other developers.



Working Globally as an Architect

Gated communities are still rare in Sweden, and the Swedish urban context differs radically from the global south in general, and Metro Manila in particular. As an architect it is important to remember that the whole, complex context of an unfamiliar area might not be accessible to an outsider. However, that does not mean that the architect can not propose new ideas and strategies as solutions to local problems. In fact, it is the responsibility of the architect to always aim to make the

built environment more equal and functional for all people. The advantages gained from having architects working in different contexts and cultures than they are used to, is that they might be able to provide a new perspective for that context, both in design and ideology, and to question a potential consensus.

To achieve change while still remaining sensitive to local complexities, the architect must always let their design be informed by the local context. Ideally, the local community should be involved in the design process so as to ensure that their best interest is served. Research, collaborations with local professionals and an inclusion of the local community are all parts of the process of grounding an architectural design.

Any architect working internationally must strive for a balance between proposing change and remaining sensitive to the culture and context in question.

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