

# The sense of safety in gated communities

A discussion on the development of enclosed neighbourhoods in the global south

*Johannes Rydbo*



## Introduction

The most common impression of gated communities (GCs) seems to be as luxurious enclaves in the society. Constructed for celebrities like Kim Kardashian or Leonardo DiCaprio, where the wealthy live secluded from the rest of us (a view previously shared by myself). This view is also supported by a majority of the literature on the subject. According to Evans (2017), the subject of GCs is mostly dominated by the writings on the western forms on GCs; where people of higher socio-economic status shield themselves off. After spending three weeks in Metro Manila, Philippines as part of the course *Urban shelter* at Lund university and interviewing (mostly) former informal settler families, my understanding has become more nuanced. It seems that *also the urban poor live in gated communities* (Boonjubun 2019).

When visiting different communities within Metro Manila, it was clear that almost all of them were more or less gated, regardless of status and that the inhabitants seemingly preferred it this way. The majority of the interviewees told us that they *felt safe* in their neighbourhood *because* of the gates and the (sometimes community employed) security guards. This seems troubling; What

types of societies and cities do we create if communities and neighbourhoods are fenced off from each other? And then what happens with the *life between the buildings* (Gehl 2011) and walkable, human scale cities and neighbourhoods that dominate the discourse within the planning community (at least in the west)?

A further discussion surrounding the subject is the question of how we define gated communities, and what they are. The way most of the buildings in the city cores are structured in Sweden for example, with the perimeter block typology, we are also gating our communities. To get into the building I live in, I have to go through a gate to get into the stairwell, and to get into my apartment I need to unlock my locked door. It is a gradient of gates to distinguish what is public, semi-public and private. And if we understand building with physical gates as *the same* expression of wanting safety as how we structure the buildings, the discussion might reach a higher level. How do we define the distinction between public and private adequately to help develop safe environments, both on a neighbourhood level but also in the whole city?

This paper aims to discuss the subject of gated communities with a focus on safety and will also raise the question of what the gating does to the city as a whole.

## Literature review

### The concept of gated communities

The definition of gated communities used in this paper, is by Vesselinov (2008). For Vesselinov, a GC is a residential area that has a *physical barrier* that prevents entrance. This could be fences, walls or landscaping restricting entry to an area including streets, potential parks and other public space along with individual residences (Vesselinov 2008:538). Makinde (2020:6) agrees and adds that a GC has a controlled access, meaning a surveilled entrance. Within GCs there are usually residential streets and shared amenities, of course with restricted access to only residents. GCs are usually run by homeowners organisations (HOAs) with electives who oversee the daily operations, maintenance and regulations. The HOAs become “private governments” (Vesselinov 2008:538). This was also observed during the field study in Manila, where all of the visited communities had their own HOA.

What is the reason behind gating communities then? Well, Vesselinov (2008:539) list three motives behind GCs: *security, property values* and *the sense of community*. In this paper, the focus will mainly be on gated communities and the perception of safety, mainly because of this seemingly being the biggest reason for creating GCs in Metro Manila.

The concept of gates and gated communities is a world wide phenomena (Boonjunbun 2019:4) but seemingly more significant in countries where the safety of the inhabitants is a general problem. The occurrence of gated communities is especially large in cities in Latin America, where Argentine and specifically Buenos Aires stands as an example; from 90 gated communities in the city in the nineties, to 541 in 2008 meaning an increase of gated communities with 500 percent. And at the same time, according to studies, 86 percent of the Argentinians live with a feeling of insecurity in their day to day life (Mocanachie & Deneulin 2014). The same pattern can be seen in the United States where for example in Tampa, Florida, 80 percent of all homes sold (for 300 000 us dollars or more) are in gated communities. Tampa is also an area where crime is a large problem (Low 2001:46). One could argue that there could be a correlation between the level of crime, the sense of safety and the occurrence of gated communities.

It is important to note though, that GCs take on different expression in the physical environment depending on the context. As Boonjunbun (2019:4) points out, the GCs in “the global south” (where we can count the Philippines) takes on another form. They are usually more *urban* than *suburban*, meaning that they are usually apartment buildings. This is different from e.g. United States where the GCs are usually individual detached houses. This is also what I noted in Metro Manila.

### Urban fear and the sense of safety

Even though crime and violence is decreasing, people seem to be more afraid. According to Low (2001:47) the media coverage on topics regarding crimes has been increasing, and is always present. This has led to an “culture of fear”, meaning that people feel unsafe and afraid of being victimized even though violent crimes are decreasing. Makinde (2020:5) also touches upon this. The context of Low's studies is the United States and the decline of violence and crimes is not necessarily the same everywhere in the world. Nigeria for example, has seen an increase of crime in the recent decades (Makinde 2020:2). But what

can be said for both of the countries and contexts, is that there is an increase of unsafety among the citizens and the occurrence of GCs. And this also seems to be the global trend (Makinde 2020:4).

The cornerstone of a well-functioning society is safety and by making sure our societies are safe, communities are strengthened. This leads to communities being able to better take care of themselves and increase well being (Makinde, 2020:4). And, as Makinde (2020:3) points out, wanting physical safety is not unique for humans; defending territoriality is also common within the animal world. It is, so to say, in our nature to want safety and more specifically, a safe neighbourhood (or territory). And this is where the GCs enter the picture; by putting up walls and gates the perceived danger can be kept outside of the neighbourhood. It makes the otherwise invisible border between public and private visible and concrete (Low 2001:55).

### The effect on the city

If the gating of communities is mostly done with the argument of creating safety for the neighbourhood, what are the effects on the rest of a city? According to Boonjunbun (2019:3) it does affect in multiple ways. When the seminal class isolate themselves, the city will struggle to carry out the public services. Low (2001:45) argues that the walls encode segregation more permanently in the built environment. It becomes a clear divider between different classes etc. The building of GCs can also be seen as an expression of the so-called *fortress city* and the militarization of cities. A city where the urban poor can strategically be controlled (Low 2001:46). In a city built upon fortresses, the social encounters between classes disappears. The inside of the fortress is the place for “comfort and security” while the outside is “chaotic and insecure”. This might lead to a directed suspicion where the ones on the inside are suspicious towards the ones outside and vice versa (Boonjunbun 2019:3). UN Habitat (2016:131) is at the same time pressing on the importance of public space in cities available for all and refers to public space as “the vibrant, beating hearts of the world’s towns and cities” and means that it is a necessity for a city’s liveability. It is also included in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development which states: “universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public space[...]”(UN Habitat 2016:131–132). The growth of GCs could be seen as a development in another direction, with a larger focus on private (public) spaces within enclosed areas.

It is not only the rich who seclude themselves from the public, it is also the poor. Boonjunbun (2019:10) shows that in Bangkok, there are GCs for the urban poor (which in his article is defined as people earning less than 2900 USD/year). The compounds have both walls and gates with security guard and usually consist of one high rise building, set in an urban context. Apparently, a property without gates is hard to market, which has led to almost all new high-rise residential projects in Bangkok being gated (Boonjunbun 2019:11). Boonjunbun (2019:13) also makes a point of discussing the environment in which a gated community is embedded. In the cases he studied, some of them seem to have more interaction between the residents of the GC and the “outsiders”. His conclusion is that it’s because of the surrounding environment. If the GC is surrounded by a hectic street life where people interact across classes, it is also more likely that the inhabitants of the GC take part in this. He calls for a further discussion on this subject, within the literature, where most of the focus is on the “high-end” gated communities.

### History of gated communities in the Philippines

The setting for this paper is, as established in the introduction, Metro Manila. Therefore, it seems reasonable to describe the historical context of the relationship between Metro Manila and the gated community and how the GCs are often interwoven with the barangays. The barangay is the smallest form of government unit in the Philippines, smaller than the municipality and its official function dates back to the Marcos regime but was systemized in 1991. They originate from the earliest settlers, where they formed villages with around 30-100 houses and were self-sufficient, generally isolated from each other even though there were occurrence of trade (Lorenzo et al. 2019:50, 56). Some of the most important duties of the Barangay is to: “make and enforce laws, request and receive funds that they may allocate for infrastructure projects or other community activities, maintain public order, and promote economic development. One of the most interesting functions of the barangay is the existence of the Barangay Justice System (BJS), which aims for amicable settlement of family and community disputes.” (Lorenzo et al. 2019:56).

GCs are increasing in the Philippines and there seems to be a link between the gated communities and the Barangays and sometimes they even are the same (Lorenzo et al. 2019:45). The concept of GCs in the Philippines stretch back to the Spanish colonialization and when Manila was planned and built, it was gated right from the start. This fortress-like development was implemented all around the

Philippines by the Spaniards and when the United States later purchased the Philippines from Spain, they continued to develop fortresses for "their" people, discriminating the native Filipinos (Lorenzo et al. 2019:51–52).

Under the influence of American urban planning and with American cities as models, new planning ideas were implemented. Quezon city for example, is heavily influenced by the layout of Washington D.C. with wide avenues and monumental public spaces (Lorenzo et al. 2019:54). The GCs also derives from the American context and the first to be built in The Philippines was in Makati, Metro Manila. This was named Forbes Park and was made exclusively for the upper class, with exclusive amenities.

With the barangay being a small form of governance and the gated communities sometimes stretching over such large land areas, it became only natural that they became interwoven and that some GCs were seen as barangays (Lorenzo et al. 2019:56). As with HOAs the barangays work more frictionless with a clear boundary.

## Discussion

Earlier in the paper, three reasons for gating a community were defined: security, property values and the sense of community (Vesselinov 2008:539). After interviewing residents of multiple areas<sup>1</sup>, I can conclude that the main reason for gating in these communities (urban poor/lower middle-income) was the issue of safety. A majority of the interviewees (a total of 16 interviews were conducted) were asked if they felt safe in their area and the majority answered that they "felt safe because of the gates and security guards". They also implied that there were rules of conduct to be followed which seemed appreciated by the residents. Most of the families interviewed had been resettled from informal settlements, where they had not been protected, I think this had an impact, with interviewees witnessing previous troubles with disturbance. They had lived without gates before, but liked their new situation better. They could actually compare to a previous situation. People seems to feel safe when they are surrounded by walls and gates, because it keeps stranger out. In that sense, the gates had the same

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<sup>1</sup>Interviews with residents in multiple areas in Metro Manila 17 February – 6 March 2020

function as the door with a door key in Sweden or the doorman in New York city. This function is a clear division of public and private.

Drawing from the interviews and Vesselinovs definition, one could also say that the safety issue goes hand in hand with the sense of community. The rules and regulations within the community and the sense of belonging the walls created seemed to be effective ways to also create a strong sense of community. Many of the interviews witnessed that they had a strong community just because of these factors. From the interviews we also learned that many families had moved to the city from more rural areas. One could imagine that a gated community might produce a village-like environment where you have a larger control of who moves around within the area, eventually recognise everyone in the community.

But the gated community also keeps strangers out from streets and spaces that could have been public. These semi-public spaces (available for the residents of the GC) are used by the residents of that certain community, maybe instead of the public spaces available for all. We then end up with *life between the buildings* (of perhaps high quality) that is secluded from the rest of the public. If public space is what UN Habitat (2016:131–132) argues, the fundamental ingredient for a liveable city, what happens when that space becomes privatised, does the city die? It also strengthens the feeling of the outside being a dangerous world which one needs to be protected from. We get scared of the messy and unsecure outside (Boonjunbun 2019:3).

The key issue here is the conflict between creating an integrated city with public space for all and the wish for a safe neighbourhood (seemingly meaning no strangers). According to Madanipour (2003:3,11) it is even the key feature of how our society organizes itself as it regulates our behaviour in specific spaces, even in one of the first ever cities (Ur), the distinction between private and public is present. It seems reasonable enough, that by understanding what situation one is in, one behaves accordingly. The public street belongs to me in another way than your private yard. And the dichotomy of public and private does mean that they cannot exist without each other, we need their relation. The modernist project that swept over the world tried to integrate the public and private space leading to a lot of underused undefined spaces. It clearly did not work either. There seems to be a need for defining spaces and dividing them into private and (semi-)public. We then have to solve the question of *how?*

St.Hannibal in Metro Manila was one of the areas visited that made the biggest impression on me. It was a well functioning neighbourhood situated in a not-so-safe area dominated by informal settlements, leading to both gates, walls and guards, understandably one could say. St.Hannibal really was like an island, a fortress. The inhabitants in the neighbourhood seemed very pleased but were basically confined within the area, apart from leaving for work or going to school. The outside was not *safe enough*. It is a telling example of what gating leads to, the inhabitants within the community being scared of the outside. It is a practical example of what Low (2001:45–46) means with the construction of the fortress city. What the informal settler families (ISFs) living just outside St.Hannibal feel in regards of the gated community is yet to be explored.

## Urban Shelter Design

I think the key is to get people to meet in the public space created for all inhabitants. Instead of letting private developers develop gated communities with high quality public space only available for the inhabitants, make sure the municipality creates public spaces around the city for everyone. The municipality must make sure that the public spaces created within the GCs do not take over the role of public space for the inhabitants that the general public space should fill. That would hopefully mean that residents in GCs would seek the public spaces around the city instead of within their neighbourhood. The public spaces within the GC still have to be of high quality, but not of the kind that should exist in the public realm instead of the private. Same goes for stores, by allowing official stores within a GC, you create an incitement for people to stay within their compound, instead of exploring the city. By only staying within the GC, the outside gets more scary.

Design solution needs to be site specific and taking into consideration the context in which it is situated. The example with St.Hannibal, where you have an island of new development situated in informal settlements, the wall might be necessary unless you regenerated the whole area. So, starting with the gate and wall as an alternative, what can we do with it and how can we incorporate it in the design? Firstly, variation in building heights and typology can create a compound that still feels interesting but at the same time creates a border. We could aim for the perimeter block typology, like a lot of development in Sweden, and it would be relatively easy to create the feeling of a GC. But other typologies are also



possible with just the right design and layout. Two parallel linear buildings can have a smaller building at the edge facing the street connecting the two. The edges meeting the street could have the ground floor activated with commercial use for example. The use of buildings as walls or gates seems like a softer way than an actual wall. Another possibility is to use actual walls but have them set back a couple of meters from the edges of the buildings facing the street, thus creating smaller pockets along the roads that could be used as both public parks and spaces. These walls would then need to be designed so they are not concrete walls but for example covered with greenery or being permeable in an interesting material. The wall in itself can be seen as an asset, creating a nice environment for the outside. This goes for the designing of buildings as well, they need to relate to the street they are facing. There needs to be a human scale, meaning not too high to not lose the connection to the street. Feeling the presence of people creates safety on the streets (so called eyes on the street).

## The Role of the planner

What the urban planner/designer proposes and designs, will have a long-term effect on the city; A new neighbourhood or building might stand for hundreds of years. What decisions are taken will have a large impact and it is crucial that architects and planners understand this, the physical environment is important for social issues. The creation of physical borders (gated communities) in the city has a huge impact on the society. Can segregation get a more physical form than a concrete wall with guarded gates?

The problem of people feeling unsafe is spreading across the world is of course to be taken seriously, but as a planner it is important to pose the question if putting up walls will improve the situation now and in the future? A society filled with suspicion towards each other can not be healthy. We need to create more acceptance towards each other. But it is important to have a continuous discussion with the people and to find *consensus*, as Habermas would have wanted. Creating a planning process discussing the wants and the wishes of the future residents is the key. If the issue of safety is lifted, the planner needs to constructively meet their concerns and together with the participants figure out a good solution. If it means gates, in what way can we make them as soft and flexible as possible?

I think that the definition of public and private is important and there needs to be a division between them. But what is key is to divide it in a *soft* way,

because casting suspicion will not create a better environment in the society. The gradual gating, that was mentioned in the introduction, is a concept worth discussing. In the way we usually structure buildings in Sweden, we have a gate leading in to the courtyard and the entrance of the building, keeping “strangers” out. You usually need a code to get in. I think that by intergrating the division between public and private in the architecture, it can be done adequate. Plan for active facades facing the street, making them become the wall that shields. This creates a dialogue between the territorialised private space and the public space (e.g. the street).

Finally, I think it is important for the planner to try and see the bigger picture (literally). The GCs are usually private developments popping up like islands in the city. A pro-active planning with strategical planning aiming at creating an inclusive city can not tolerate small enclaves of (semi) self-governing areas. A strategical plan that better connects different neighbourhoods with high quality public spaces and parks and that tries to break down segregation would benefit this. However, planning cannot do it alone, this is a question of a larger perspective where policy making and policy implementation is as important.

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## Interviews

Interviews with residents, *Multiple areas*. Metro Manila: 17 February – 6 March 2020