EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT

The politics of gating (A response to Private Security and Public Space by Manzi and Smith-Bowers)

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The politics of gating
(A response to Private Security and Public Space by Manzi and Smith-Bowers)

Introduction

Gated residential developments, neighbourhoods to which public access is restricted, continue to generate academic, policymaker and public curiosity. Why do people want to live in these places and should public interventions be directed towards either their prevention or tacit acceptance? In a recent paper in this journal, Tony Manzi and Bill Smith-Bowers (2006) attempt to provide what they see as a more subtle approach to these developments, arguing, by way of a critique of some of my earlier work (centrally that of Atkinson and Blandy, 2005), that hostility to gated communities is misplaced on several grounds. I argue here, in return, that there are several problems with the positions they adopt, and that these should be considered if we are to effectively discuss how planning practice and housing systems should work with or against these new trends in the built environment.

I argue that the key 'problematic' raised by gated communities is less one of empirical evidence on their impacts, since much work already points to a range of problems, and rather what these developments forecast for the character and dynamics of the urban spaces and societies we wish to live in. At the heart of my position lies a concern that either bolstering the case for gated communities or seeing them as neutral objects in the landscapes around us risks amplifying the further construction of impermeable boundaries. Critically then the risk is that ignoring the political and normative aspects of gating, as I believe Manzi and Smith-Bowers do, may lead to further and deeper socio-spatial segregation that itself excludes the voice of social groups least able to challenge or, indeed, reside in gated developments and the additional security that they appear to offer.

Contact details of the author:

Rowland Atkinson, Housing and Community Research Unit, School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia
e-mail: rowland.atkinson@utas.edu.au

1. The problem of gating: A response

Manzi and Smith-Bowers (2006) set out by arguing that a taxonomy of gating and walls in residential areas is better expressed through the term gated residential development (GRD), rather than the more confusing 'gated community'. There is much to recommend this approach given the heated debates and arguments that regularly spring up over questions of their definition. While the hallmark of gated communities may be seen as the conjunction of physical features (gates and walls) with socio-legal frameworks and codes of governance (the contracts governing the conduct of residents and their management bodies) the core issue in relation to the actual *effects* of gating is indeed the physical hallmark of walls and gates. In short, it is primarily the physical attributes of GRDs that have the power to exclude, to confer status on residents and to offer the prospect of refuge from perceived and significant problems associated with urban life.

While it is possible to agree on this important issue we also need to recognise that the precise terminology (i.e. the term gated community) used is reflective of corporate interests. It represents the attempt by developers to sell a residential oxymoron – a place that is gated and exclusive (of minimal interference by other residents and outsiders) as well as being a cohesive social entity (a community). What we now know about such communities is that they, in fact, interfere significantly with the lives of their residents, that many residents do not interact and indeed seek the kind of moral minimalism that exists in other high income communities (for a comprehensive review of the international literature see Blandy *et al*, 2005). Contained within this representation of space as sanctuary is a deeper connection to fear and security, which lies at the heart of *rationales* for gated developments (Low, 2003). This leads me to focus more closely on the arguments presented by Manzi and Bowers:

What is really new about the new enclavism?

A well-worn argument for proponents of gated communities lies in acknowledging that medieval forts and gated areas of cities have existed for many years. There are two important responses to this argument. First, the existence of a precedent does not, in fact, mean that such enclaves are acceptable. Second, and more importantly, when we (Atkinson and Blandy, 2005) argued that gated communities were at the forefront of a 'new enclavism' we did so on the basis that they were in fact qualitatively different to what had preceded them. In numerical terms gated communities have become the norm for some cities and regions, particularly in the US, and this is clearly a marked step change from earlier phases and styles of urban development. These types of neighbourhood also reflect a deepening physicality to existing levels of segregation.

What is worrying in this respect is that gated communities might be seen as unproblematic because they tend to house high income residents. In fact our idea of a new enclavism was put forward to bring such development firmly back into the frame of studies on segregation, arguing that concentrations of affluence are implicated in a broader 'socio-spatial contract' that can be located between poorer and more affluent neighbourhoods and mediated through local and central states. A worrying logic of gating, as McKenzie has noted (2005) is that the attempt to secede may threaten local fiscal sovereignty as the affluent try to opt out of public service provision and its attendant levies. In short, concentrations of affluence are problematic, but in different

ways from areas of concentrated deprivation – they may represent not only exclusive areas, based on price mechanisms, but also a threat to the ability of the state to redistribute resources to poorer social groups.

We also argued that this enclavism is marked by its appearance in a broader epochal background characterised by the appearance of a late, risk (Beck, 1992) or liquid (Bauman, 2006) modernity in which understandings of risk are mediated in large part by a media industry which focuses on significant problems and disorder. This adds a significant dynamic to gating that moves beyond a sense of personal volition and more firmly into a more systemic interpretation of their genesis and further impacts. Gating has resulted then not only from personal choices, to be secure or to seek relative distinction, but is also a feature of the way that social systems now tend operate in generating a sense of the insecurity of self and household, a fixation on crime and disorder and on the growing privatisation of responses to social welfare.

These points connect with a point raised by Manzi and Smith-Bowers; that gated communities should not be seen as representative of such a culture of fear and risk avoidance. Such a point seems highly contentious. In various studies it has been shown that residents are fearful of outsiders and that safety attracts them to these places. These views have been deepened by intensive and in in-depth anthropological accounts like that of Low (2003) and Caldeira (2000). There seems little reason to believe that shifts in patterns of urban crime, victimisation and broader fears in the climate generated since 2001 have not fed ontological anxieties about the place of home and its role as a place of refuge. A key point in more recent work (Atkinson and Blandy, 2007) has been to argue that home is in fact a central focus of such anxieties, as it is seen as a site under siege from a broad array of unwanted visitors (from sales people to paedophiles in chat rooms). It is not clear what we gain from Manzi and Smith-Bowers rejection of these broader viewpoints.

Gated communities include a range of income groups

It is certainly possible to agree with Manzi and Smith-Bowers that gating now includes a broader range of income and social groups and research evidence in the US backs this up (Sanchez and Lang, 2002). Yet this is to miss the more general point that GRDs put walls around areas of relatively similar income, thus, there is a risk that such boundary building is used to keep groups both out of, and locked into, particular spaces. Gated communities may offer a place of apparent sanctuary from harm and unwanted social contact as the affluent withdraw from the civic spaces and institutions of urban areas.

In this latter respect we might cite the desire by the British Member of Parliament, Frank Field, who argued that gated developments could be constructed under motorways to maintain anti-social tenants. The creation of gated public housing might then offer benefits to residents, yet what would happen if it is the very residents of these areas that are causing the problems? In addition it is possible to see such a move as the relative incarceration of public renters and the insulation of more affluent groups outside from contact with these poorer groups.

Gated communities offer social participation and social cohesion

Manzi and Smith-Bowers suggest that gated residential development may offer a form of local governance that offers distinct advantages in relation to local service

provision and social connectedness. However, the extant literature on these issues appears much less optimistic and, in relation to my preceding comments, there remains significant concern that the costs of access to gated development prohibit access to any such benefits by less advantaged groups. The authors argue that the *Blairite* agenda on public services was important because it saw local governance as central and that GRDs responded to these needs. Yet it is far from clear either that this agenda really offered greater empowerment or that gated communities create such advantages for their residents. Earlier work, by McKenzie (1994), has highlighted how resident committees have regularly behaved in ways that are tyrannical for those buying-in to gated communities. This comes in the form of restricting covenants on behaviour, such as the keeping of animals, colours of homes and so on. Equally it is possible for such organisations to behave in ways that discriminate or focus on particular residents, such as families with children, which the 'community' deems problematic in some way. In short, the accountability and potential for excessive governance has been more apparent than any sense of autonomy that might come from governance within gated developments.

The belief that such governance in GRDs is better is also undermined by regular evidence showing that people are often unaware of what forms of regulation they are buying into or, more problematically, are subjected to a resident committee managed by a disinterested property developer (Blandy and Parsons, 2003). It is possible to argue that GRDs should be understood as club goods (Manzi and Smith-Bowers, 2006). Yet in understanding how these mechanisms work we also need to ensure that explanation is not simply taken as justification. In particular it is important to focus on how the operation of club goods is revealing of the way in which unequal distributions of financial resources are made manifest in similarly unequal access to private governance that creates bubbles of security. Those with greater resources are thus able to band together to access goods which are cheaper, when collectively provided, but to which access is sought on the basis of ability to pay and to exclude non-residents. That such mechanisms are effective for the affluent does not mean that they are useful in a broader context, or that they are any the less exclusive and problematic in generating inequalities of security and access to essential services.

2. The politics of gating

If we believe that people should simply be able to choose where and how they live without impedance then gated communities might appear as a fairly straightforward residential choice. Yet it is clear that this is only a superficial understanding of such choices and requires a critical interrogation. In fact the peculiar feature of gated development is not only that people want to live in such compounds but also that they have longer-term social and political consequences. If gating leads to transport access inequities, the displacement of (or indeed increases in) crime, promotes little real social cohesion and is seen by those outside as unnecessary and divisive then what place should it have in a vocabulary of planning and construction? People may choose to live in these places but as public commentators how do we reconcile a system-wide appreciation of these impacts with the role of public bodies to ensure a greater common good. Of course this assumes that a public good is in fact something that local and central states are there to arbitrate and ensure; certainly we need to accept this premise for intervention to become possible.

If we descend into pure economic rationalism and social libertarianism a world of fortification, partition, and securitisation awaits us. Fear is already cemented into the built environment in such a way that lower income groups are excluded; non-consumers are made irrelevant and public spaces degraded. All of this is to say that we need to second-guess how gated development will fuel further social anxieties, increase social separation and reflect broader social inequalities in exclusive and physical ways. This may be seen as the basic political and critical commitment required of analysts of all development. The results of laissez-faire theorisation will be a built environment that both cannot be physically undone and which may further amplify the social and material split between rich and poor. As the South African experience has highlighted, removing the gates is very difficult to achieve.

Who can deny that feeling safe is a core need of human life? This misses the point that what is more important is to understand how economic inequalities combine with uneven distributions of such fear producing a built environment and social context which supports the exclusion of those who cannot pay. Should everywhere ultimately be gated? We must recognise that in doing so we cannot exclude 'internal' social problems, like domestic violence not directly linked to social inequalities. While GCs may address certain fears, others and their prevalence are unlikely to be challenged.

Finally, Manzi and Smith-Bowers question whether gated development increases segregation and whether, indeed, segregation itself is problematic. To each of these questions a response is required. First, while the work of researchers like Le Goix (2005) has shown many gated communities exist in already affluent areas this should not be taken as evidence that segregation is not increasing. The critical point is that physical boundaries solidify existing patterns of social advantage – providing visual evidence and physical barriers wrapped around the social geography of cities. Second, it seems odd to question whether segregation is problematic. The key to this issue lies in whether the social composition of areas itself reproduces disadvantage in addition to that generated by the economic systems we live within. In fact the keystone works in this area, by Wilson (1997) and Massey and Denton (1996) highlight the ways in which concentrated poverty has the capacity to damage individuals and thus reproduce disadvantage. In short, concentrated poverty *is* problematic, in addition to highlighting the existence of broader material inequalities and access to resources. Since gated communities extend the reach of resources to those with the money to live in them, it seems distinctly curious to question whether such built forms are problematic.

3. Conclusion

Gating offers a relatively new, problematic (based on the empirical evidence) and deeply unpalatable logic of urban development (based on particular political positions and the assessment of that evidence). Its democratisation, through cheaper copies, and extension, through the growth of real incomes for perhaps the top two thirds of the population, presents a distinctive challenge for public policy. In this respect gating raises the need for a planning system capable of articulating a common good espoused around ideals of free movement, social diversity and inclusivity in the built environment.

6

On the basis of the evidence and of my own political beliefs I would argue with conviction that gated communities are problematic and that they lay ever-greater pressures and problems onto those people who are left outside their boundaries. Power and prestige resides with those who are seeking to partition cities and exclude certain groups – political and economic capital is thereby driving the deployment of this segregatory 'tool'. If concentrations of poverty are problematic then we must also ask what problems concentrated affluence generates for our urban areas. The answer is that gated developments reinforce a social and spatial split between the 'have lots' and 'have nots' and that the latter are excluded from such spaces both physically and by their lack of resources to access security. If we are to move forward on debates about gated residential development we need to recognise these impacts and critically think about the kind of socially equitable and justifiable public responses they logically entail.

References

Atkinson, R. and Blandy, S. (2005) "Introduction: International perspectives on the new enclavism and the rise of gated communities." *Housing Studies* 20. 2, 177-186.

Bauman, Z. (2006) *Liquid Fear.* (Cambridge, Polity)

Beck, U. (1992) *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity.* (Cambridge, Polity)

Blandy, S. and Parsons, D. (2003) "Gated Communities in England: rules and rhetoric of urban planning", *Geographica Helvetica,* 4, pp. 314-324.

Blandy, S., Lister, D., Atkinson, R. and Flint, J. (2003) *Gated communities: a systematic review of research evidence, CNR Summary 12.* (Sheffield Hallam University & University of Glasgow, www.neighbourhoodcentre.org.uk)

Caldeira, T. (2000) *City of walls: crime, segregation and citizenship in Sao Paulo.* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

Le Goix, R. (2005) "Gated Communities: Sprawl and Social Segregation in Southern California," *Housing Studies*, 20, 2, pp. 323-343.

Low, S. (2003) *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America.* (London, Routledge).

McKenzie, E. (1994) *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government.* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press).

McKenzie, E. (1994) "Constructing The Pomerium in Las Vegas: A Case Study of Emerging Trends in American Gated Communities," *Housing Studies*, 20, 2, pp. 187-203.

Manzi, T. and Smith-Bowers, W. (2006) "Private Security and Public Space: New Approaches to the Theory and Practice of Gated Communities," *European Journal of Spatial Development* (http://www.nordregio.se/EJSD/refereed22.pdf)

Massey, D. and Denton, N. (1996) *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass.* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).

Sanchez, T. W. and Lang, R. E. (2002) *Security versus State: The Two Worlds of Gated Communities.* (Virginia, Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech).

Wilson, W. J. (1997) *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor.* (New York, Vintage).