Gated communities in England as a response to crime and disorder: context, effectiveness and implications

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Abstract

Gated communities, meaning residential developments which restrict access by non-residents and have a specifically collective legal framework, are a recent global phenomenon. The paper discusses aspects of neo-liberalism which may explain their growth: increasing fear of crime alongside commodification, the movement from community to individualism, and from informal to formal systems of social control. Research into gated communities in England has shown that residents' motives are varied and complex. However, although security and fear of crime was an important issue, the major motivation for purchasers was maintenance of property values.

The paper concludes that gated communities are not an effective response to current issues of crime and disorder in terms of physical security and collective efficacy; nor do they assist in regenerating deprived areas, or tackling problems of disorder on large social rented estates. Indeed, any further growth in the collective fortification of affluent homes and retro-gating of social rented estates is likely to contribute to increased social divisiveness.

Keywords: Gated communities; fear of crime; residents' motivations; social divisiveness; collective efficacy

Introduction

This paper is based on a national study of gated communities carried out for the ODPM New Horizons programme (Atkinson *et al.*, 2004) and on a small-scale project funded by the British Academy, researching new purchasers in a suburban gated community (Blandy and Lister, 2005). It addresses the issues of why gated communities have emerged as a

global phenomenon, and focuses on gated communities as a housing response to current issues of crime and disorder, questioning their effectiveness and bringing out the implications of the growth of this type of fortified housing development.

In this paper I will adopt the definition used for the ODPM New Horizons research, which encompasses the two essential aspects of gated communities. First, in physical terms, a gated community is a fenced or walled residential area, to which access by non-residents is either restricted or controlled by CCTV and/or security staff. A gated community is served by private internal roads, and may include facilities such as a gym for the use of residents only. This definition makes it clear that apartment or tower blocks are not included - developments only meet the gated community definition if space which would normally be accessible to the public is restricted to residents only. The other essential part of the definition is legal: residents of a gated community are tied into a common code of conduct, and there is generally a degree of self-management of the development by the residents.

Context for the growth of gated communities

Initial theories about the global growth of gated communities included assumptions that this was in response to increasing crime and disorder caused by socio-economic restructuring; a reflection of a growing disillusionment with the ability of government to provide services and security; and/or a result of the globalisation of American taste and aspirations. However, based on more recent research undertaken into gated communities in different countries, the current view is that gated communities are extremely diverse, and this diversity reflects the historical and other contexts of each country in which they appear (Blandy, 2006).

This paper now looks at some of the underlying context and potential reasons for the growth of gated communities in England, before setting out our research findings. Neo-liberal governments in the last quarter of the twentieth century have brought a move away from previous ideals of social justice and equality, from community to individualism, and a trend from informal to formal systems of social control. Values of consumerism and the market-place have replaced ideals of public spending and local services, and we have a more divided society with an increasing gap between rich and poor. Huge social and economic changes have led to a loss of kinship networks and local communities, and in turn to increased fear of others and a perceived need for segregation and withdrawal. It is harder to feel confidence and trust in the rootless, urban world in which a "void yawns at the spot once occupied by 'society'" (Bauman, 2001, p.112).

Accompanying the decrease in feelings of security which can be derived from community and neighborhood, Garland (2000) has identified what he terms the crime complex. This is characterized by a fascination with crime, institutionalised in the media and dominating public policy, and a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system which has resulted in a growth in private defensive routines and privatised security. The crime complex goes some way to explaining why the fear of crime and anti-social behavior grows, despite successive British Crime Surveys showing a fall in the crime rate and also that perception and experience of anti-social behavior have now stabilised. We are increasingly less likely to trust others, and increasingly more likely to want to live with other people 'just like us'. England is witnessing a movement from an *inclusive* to an *exclusive* society (Young, 1999), illustrated by current trends in choice about residential location which confirm what Reich (2000) has termed the 'sorting mechanism'. In North America, at least,

people who have that choice are moving to "more and more finely distinguished "lifestyle enclaves", segregated by race, class, education, life stage, and so on" (Putnam, 2000, p 209).

There are obvious links between individualism, the exercise of choice, and the crime complex. The academic literature on governance and responsibilisation completes this overview of the context which goes some way to explaining the appeal of gated communities. The concept of governance refers to the controls exercised by an increasingly diverse set of agencies more or less loosely associated with the state, developed as government at a national and local level is forced to acknowledge that it can no longer maintain direct control. One aspect of governance is to encourage individuals and communities to become actively self-governing, through a process of responsibilisation. Thus, as regards household security, 'protection against risk of crime through an investment in measures of security becomes part of the responsibilities of each active individual' (Rose, 2000, p 327). This leads to the fortification of homes, either individually or in groups as gated communities, and to the establishment of parallel police forces including private security guards, wardens, and neighbourhood watch schemes. Where a gated community provides collective security, legal agreements become necessary to ensure that each household contributes to the upkeep of gates and walls and to the wages of security guards. The legal documents for a typical gated community also include covenants prescribing how the residents must conduct themselves both in their private dwellings and in the shared space, an example of contractual governance designed to control behaviour and set common standards (Crawford, 2003).

Research findings for gated communities in England

In 2003/04 a survey of English planning authorities was carried out, to collect factual details about gated communities in each district (Atkinson *et al.*, 2004). The survey achieved a 93 per cent response rate; those who had not returned the postal questionnaire were followed up by telephone. Some methodological problems must be acknowledged: as gated communities are not classified as such in the planning system, no systematic records are kept, so many of the respondents relied on local and anecdotal knowledge; planners do not have responsibility for the private internal roads which are a defining aspect of gated communities and which are dealt with by highways departments; and finally, despite sending out photos and the above definition with the survey questionnaire, it became obvious in the follow-up telephone calls that many planners found it difficult to identify gated communities, particularly developments in the social rented sector.

Bearing these caveats in mind, the survey found upwards of 1,000 gated communities in England, predominantly in London and the south-east, although all regions had some gated communities. Therefore gated communities are not a large housing sector in England, and certainly not in comparison with North America, even allowing for undercounting. Only one third of district authorities reported having gated communities, and only 29 of those had more than five. English gated communities are small developments (only four authorities had one or more gated communities with over 300 dwellings) and they are mainly located in suburbia or in the centre of towns and cities. Planners estimated that the vast majority of gated communities were built by private developers; a very small proportion by social landlords; and the remainder (around 10 per cent) developed through a public/private partnership.

The majority of gated community residents were reported by the survey respondents to be 'affluent' or 'middle market', rather than the 'very rich'. In a study of purchasers of dwellings in a suburban gated community, the residents' reasons for moving there were found to be varied and complex. However, the major motivation for purchasers was that they believed property in a gated community would maintain its value, rather than a need for security, although this was an important issue for many (Blandy and Lister, 2005).

Gated communities as a housing response to crime and disorder

In a risky world, purchasing a property in a gated community represents a good consumer choice. Such developments comply with many principles of Secured by Design, the government-approved police architectural liaison scheme for 'designing out crime', and they provide defensible space (Newman, 1972). Newman advocated the reduction and surveillance of public space, which he saw as a potentially dangerous no mans' land. In gated communities this is provided by CCTV, allowing residents to feel protected without having to perform the surveillance themselves. The physical exclusion of potentially dangerous 'outsiders' has great appeal, and here the gates substitute for more informal systems of social control, enabling non-residents to be identified and excluded. High property values in gated communities serve as a proxy for homogeneity, guaranteeing a community of 'people like us'.

In terms of the government agenda, it is now recognised that crime and anti-social behaviour is concentrated in deprived urban neighbourhoods, that stigma attaches to marginalised and residualised social housing estates, and that these areas often suffer from a breakdown of informal social control. Analysis of the British Crime Survey 2003/04 indicates that lack of 'collective efficacy' in an area is a strong predictor of anti-social behaviour (Wood, 2004). It is therefore not surprising that David Blunkett, among others, has included gated communities as one of the 'appeals to community' so characteristic of government strategies for dealing with anti-social behaviour and urban disorder (Crawford, 1998, p 262).

When serving as Home Secretary, Blunkett suggested that establishing gated communities in deprived areas would 'make available to the many what is currently available to the few'. He emphasised the collective nature of resident self-management, which he considered would lead to a sense of identification with the neighbourhood and of belonging to a community. In his view, the legal framework establishing management by residents would further help to engage 'people in making decisions, and to reinforce the message that they are part of the solution' (Blunkett, 2004).

Assessment of the effectiveness of gated communities

Is the physical security of gated communities effective in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour?

The best-known study which has compared both perceived safety and actual crime rates between gated and non-gated areas, in both high income neighbourhoods and public housing projects in California, found no significant differences between these neighbourhoods (Wilson-Doenges, 2000). These findings echoed those of Blakely and

Snyder (1998) which found no difference in crime rates between gated and non-gated neighbourhoods in the same area of North America. This study made the point that gating could hamper police response rates and could also give residents a false sense of security, so that opportunistic crimes were facilitated by doors and windows left open. In the English national study, most police officers interviewed stated that crime is rare within gated communities, but the point was made that when the police were called out, the response rate is slower because 'the gates are locked and we need to get the security codes to gain access' (interview with Police liaison officer, Atkinson *et al.*, 2004).

The retro-gating of social rented estates is an under-researched aspect of gated communities. As stated above, very few of these developments were picked up in the national survey although, for example, the London Borough of Camden is gating many of its estates at the request of tenants. According to an urban designer recently interviewed, if the estate is small (about the same number of dwellings as in a tower block), and particularly if one tenant is prepared to act as concierge, retro-gating and restricting access to residents does work to reduce fear of crime. However, on larger estates which are fitted with gates, there tends to be no sense of ownership: the gates are propped open and the key panels get broken. Further, as it is now established that neighbourhood dissatisfaction and fear of crime disproportionately affect people on low incomes and living in rented housing, who exactly is being kept out - or locked in? Further research is needed on gating in the social rented sector before important questions about the effectiveness of gates can be answered.

Finally on this point, it has not yet been established definitively whether or not gated communities cause the displacement of crime to neighbouring areas.

Do gated communities enhance collective efficacy amongst residents?

It might be posited, as David Blunkett has done, that gated communities would improve both informal and formal social control, for the benefit of their residents. In the national study, however, a very varied picture emerged. The residents of some gated community residents spoke appreciatively of social events and neighbourliness, while in others there were complaints about 'a number of cliques' or 'there is no community spirit here' (interviews quoted in Atkinson *et al.*, 2004). One purchaser in a suburban gated community described classic weak ties between residents: 'almost every day people pass and say hello, and so on' (interview quoted in Blandy and Lister, 2005).

The lease of the gated community replaces shared, negotiated, social norms and sanctions with their legal equivalents, but these are of course not negotiated by the gated community residents themselves, being drafted by lawyers acting for the developer. Research found a high degree of ignorance about both the covenants in the lease, and about the resident management arrangements; most residents were not motivated to participate in the committee structure (Blandy and Lister, 2005). The residents' management company is responsible for enforcing the covenants, ultimately through the sanction of forfeiting the perpetrator's lease. Interviews with gated community residents for the national study found many who were dissatisfied. These residents either felt frustrated that firmer action was not taken on breaches of covenant, or alternatively that a 'power-hungry' group of residents had taken control and was running the development with 'a rod of iron' (Atkinson *et al.*, 2004).

Does the security provided by gated communities encourage middle class residents to 'colonise' more deprived areas and thus enhance their regeneration?

Advocates of this position argue that gating a middle-class enclave surrounded by a deprived area reduces social segregation 'in areas that otherwise would have accommodated [...] multi-deprived households exclusively' (Manzi and Smith-Bowers, 2005, p. 357). This may be true, but Manzi and Smith-Bowers' own research case study could not be described as a successful, socially mixed neighbourhood. The owner-occupiers remained fearful of their tenant neighbours, installing further security measures in their properties, and tended not to walk around the estate. Local shops did not benefit from the presence of more affluent residents, who were too scared to visit them.

Recent national planning guidance acknowledges that:

Gated communities may increase the sustainability and social mix of an area where problems of crime and image could otherwise lead to the development's failure. The Government believes, however, that it is normally preferable for new developments to be integrated into the wider community and that the gating of developments should only be considered as a last resort (ODPM and the Home Office, 2004, p. 30).

Implications of gated communities

The above analysis indicates that gated communities do not provide an adequate response to crime, in terms of physical security and collective efficacy; nor do they assist in regenerating deprived areas, or in tackling problems of disorder on large social rented estates. This section examines some of the implications of the growth of gated communities for the different housing sectors, and across sectors.

Secession of the wealthy?

It is unlikely that the UK will see, as the USA has done, gated communities incorporating as municipalities; the two countries have completely different legal foundations for local government. However, the growth of gated communities represents a choice by those who can afford to buy into such developments, to withdraw into a protected homogeneity which limits contact between different socio-economic groupings. This must raise concerns about the loss of urban variety and the ideal of a society to which all contribute.

More retro-gating of social rented estates?

Various tools in the fight against crime and anti-social behaviour, such as target-hardening initiatives, neighbourhood wardens, concierge schemes, and CCTV, have become standard on many social rented housing estates. Perhaps gating and restricted access are just another logical step. Analysis of the 2001 American Housing Survey found a prevalence of low-income, racial minority, renters in gated communities; tenants are nearly 2.5 times more likely than owners to live in these developments (Sanchez *et al.*, 2005). In the UK, a telephone survey carried out for the RICS in 2002 found that younger people were more attracted to gated communities than older respondents; tenants more than owners; and those on lower incomes more than the better paid.

Contributing to social divisiveness?

In interview, a planner suggested that the physical architecture of gated communities must inevitably create resentment amongst those denied entry, while a local resident who lived just outside the walls suggested that the gated community was 'rubbing our noses in it' (interview quoted in Atkinson *et al.*, 2004). Certainly, letters to the local newsletter indicated that residents of the suburb surrounding a gated community felt very critical of the new development's purchasers; for example:

> *By shutting themselves in, and thereby excluding us local 'undesirables', they have failed to realize that life in [name of suburb] is also about people; about sharing and caring; about the rich variety of culture in our local community, the inclusion of those who have different values and beliefs. Inclusion will not make life more insecure, exactly the reverse.'*

(quoted in Blandy and Lister, 2005)

Conclusions

Gated communities are an understandable, complex, but regrettable housing response to the fear of crime. These developments reduce public space and the permeability of the town or cityscape. Their physical security measures alone may lead to social divisiveness. There is little evidence that gated communities enhance collective efficacy, while they may engender only a 'destructive, negative cohesion [...based on] a nervous determination to exclude people seen as outsiders' (Urban Design Alliance, 2003).

Gated communities conflict with the national planning framework, which encourages freedom of movement and inclusive, mixed communities. It is not surprising that the majority of planners surveyed were opposed to gated communities (Atkinson *et al.*, 2004), but in practice local planning authorities are often out-manoeuvred by determined developers (Blandy and Parsons, 2003). The purchasing choices of the more affluent, and the retreat by hard-pressed social tenants into fortified defensiveness, seem to be leading towards '[p]lace making based on exclusion, sameness or nostalgia [which] is socially poisonous and psychologically useless' (Sennett, 1997). Sennett's may be an extreme view, but it is certain that gated communities are part of the trend towards a "clear spatialisation of danger into safe zones and risk zones", referred to by Osborne and Rose (1999, p.754). It is time to consider whether that is too high a price to pay for what is a largely ineffective response to the fear of crime.

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