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GATED COMMUNITIES AND URBAN SUSTAINABILITY: TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FUTURE

Karina Landman

CSIR Building and Construction Technology

Tel: +27 12 841 2084

Fax: +27 12 841 3400

Email: klandman@csir.co.za

Abstract

In many instances the urban future is shaped by specific and powerful ideas. "Gated communities" is one such an idea, which has the potential to radically transform the urban environment in the 21st century. As a strong and influential urban type, it has the potential to influence the juxta-positioning of the urban rich and poor, social and economic opportunity and the decision-making process of both national and local governments. It could have a dramatic impact on the long-term sustainability of cities. This paper will take a closer look at gated communities and its potential impact on urban sustainability in the future.

Recognising that urban sustainability is one of the goals for urban planning and management, all urban development must be considered in relation to the dimensions of urban sustainability. Within this framework, the appropriateness of gated communities as a type of development for the urban future needs to be carefully considered.

Key words: Urban sustainability; gated communities; integration.

INTRODUCTION

In many instances the urban future is shaped by specific and powerful ideas. "Gated communities" is one such an idea, which has the potential to radically transform the urban environment in the 21st century. As a strong and influential urban type, it has the potential to influence the juxta-positioning of the urban rich and poor, social and economic opportunity and the decision-making process of both national and local governments. In this sense, they could have a dramatic impact on the long-term sustainability of cities. This could be especially true for developing and transitional countries. This paper will attempt to take a closer at gated communities and its potential impact on urban sustainability in the future.

GATED COMMUNITIES IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

Defining gated communities

Gated communities refer to a physical area that is fenced or walled off from its surroundings. Entrance into these areas, are prohibited or controlled by means of gates or booms. It includes residential areas with restricted access, as well as controlled access villages for work, recreational, and/or commercial purposes. Gated communities can include both *enclosed neighbourhoods* and *security villages*.

Enclosed neighbourhoods refer to existing neighbourhoods that have controlled access through gates or booms across existing roads. Many of these neighbourhoods are fenced or walled-off, with a limited number of controlled entrances/exits. Security villages refer to private developments where the entire area is developed by a (private) developer. These areas, for example secured golf estates, townhouse complexes, office parks, etc. are physically walled- or fenced off and usually have a security gate or controlled access point.

The growth of gated communities

Contributions to a recent workshop held in Hamburg in December 1999, showed that this type of development is rapidly growing in many different regions across the world. In the USA, as well as in some countries in South America and Asia, a considerable part of the population lives in these settlements. An increasing number can also be found Europe, the Middle East and in South Africa.

The USA experienced the rapid rise of gated communities in the nation's metropolitan areas. Blakely and Snyder¹ estimate that there are over 20 000 gated communities with more than three million units enough for an estimated eight million people. These new developments mainly occur in the metropolitan areas of the Sunbelt States. These types of developments range from gated communities around golf courses to entirely enclosed cities that feature guarded entrances².

Gated communities are also increasing in other countries, for example Spain, Portugal, Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Indonesia, Argentina, Brasilia and South Africa. In the suburbs of Greater Buenos Aires, gated communities are flourishing. In the 1990's it became a large-scale form of permanent housing, accessible to the middle-class and today more than 300 of those fast-growing closed neighbourhoods host an estimated 20 000 residents³. Gated communities are also a rapidly growing phenomenon in South Africa and have especially taken off since the mid-nineties. One substructure of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council has recorded more than 360 road closures⁴ in their area.

The nature of gated communities

By their nature gated communities are separate and enclosed areas: isolated from the broader urban environment and enclosed through physical barriers. Whether the purpose is to enable a specific lifestyle within the enclosed area or to protect the residents from possible

intruders, gated communities reflect an urban entity that is physically and often socially and economically differentiated from the surrounding urban environment.

THE CONCEPT OF URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

Defining urban sustainability

The UN Habitat's Programme for Sustainable Cities, define "a sustainable city is a city where achievements in social, economic and physical development are made to last. It strives for:

- Economic efficiency in the use of development resources (including goods and services provided by the natural environment)
- Social equity in the distribution of development benefits and costs (with special emphasis on the needs of low income groups)
- Avoidance of unnecessary foreclosure of future development options.”⁵

This description incorporates the three pillars of sustainable development, namely economical, social and environmental, to describe the [ideal/envisaged] performance a city, i.e. how the city should function, what it should provide for its citizens and what the relationship should be with the natural environment⁶.

Dimensions of urban sustainability

The United Nations Development Programme has promoted the notion of Sustainable Human Development as development that centres on people's choices and capabilities, that generates economic growth while distributing its benefits equitably, and that generates the environment rather than destroys it. In addition, it promotes development that empowers men and woman rather than marginalizing them⁷.

Given this framework, Hall and Pfeiffer have extended this notion to the idea of "multiple sustainability"⁸. Applied to the city, they have come up with a number of key dimensions or aspects of sustainability. These are:

- A Sustainable Urban Economy: Work and Wealth
- A Sustainable Urban Society: Social Coherence and Social Solidarity
- Sustainable Urban Shelter: Decent Affordable Housing for All
- A Sustainable Urban Environment: Stable Ecosystems
- Sustainable Urban Access: Resource-Conserving Mobility
- Sustainable Urban Life: Building the Liveable City
- Sustainable Urban Democracy: Empowering the Citizenry⁹

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT THE URBAN FUTURE

One cannot be concerned with the legacy and resources you leave future generations without considering the long-term impact that certain types of development in urban areas have on our urban future. The purpose of the following discussion is to consider the potential long-term impact that gated communities can have for urban development. This will be done by evaluating a number of key issues regarding gated communities against the dimensions of urban sustainability as defined in the previous section.

Evaluating gated communities against the indicators of urban sustainability

Our research has clarified six key issues relating to gated communities¹⁰. These issues are:

- A sense of community
- Safety and security
- Social exclusion

- Urban fragmentation and separation
- Urban planning and management
- Financial implications.

Evaluating these issues against the dimensions of urban sustainability reveals a particular image of gated communities' potential future impact.

- *A sense of community*

International and South African studies have indicated that gated communities can either enhance or reduce a sense of community. In South Africa, a number of residents and homeowners' associations have said that the establishment of an enclosed neighbourhood contributes to a stronger feeling of community in the area. Although others have indicated that there was a very active involvement of residents in applying for the enclosure, the feeling of community is not strong. Others still complain that the drive to enclose neighbourhoods in their own area or surrounding areas is causing increased conflict between residents and has created an atmosphere of tension and hostility¹¹.

A reduced sense of community, coupled with increased conflict, can lead to negative relations between neighbours. This could have a significant impact on the quality of life in an area and on building a liveable and vibrant city. It could also lead to the formation of political pressure groups and attempts to pressurise the local government into making certain decisions. It could not only influence the notion of local participation, community democracy and the daily management of the area, but also urban democracy in general.

- *Safety and security*

In relation to gated communities, the issue of safety and security touches on three aspects: reduction of crime, displacement of crime and response times. There are various opinions on whether gated communities do in fact reduce crime. While some are adamant that crime has been reduced in their area, others maintain the opposite. An international study by Blakely and Snyder in the United States found that some security-zone communities do report reductions in crime after the streets have been closed. Others, however, report only temporary reductions, and some no change at all¹². The authors also state that gates and fences are not impenetrable to serious criminals and that they do nothing to reduce crimes committed by residents.

Gated communities can also lead to crime displacement. In many cases the displacement of crime has been of such a nature in parts of Johannesburg, that residents of neighbouring communities have also been forced to consider "gating" to protect themselves¹³. The long-term snow-ball effect of this could have a negative impact on urban sustainability in terms of the spatial arrangement, as well as effective management and functioning of urban environments.

A further issue relates to that of response times. For instance, in many cases the shortest route to a specific point in need of attention is blocked or gated and this forces police to take a more circuitous route. In some cases, residents close routes without informing the police, which causes them to end up in dead-ends. Both of these aspects have major implications for response times in cases of emergency and could mean the difference between life and death. Similarly, other emergency and maintenance vehicles also experience problems in this regard. Fatalities could result if the response time of emergency vehicles, such as ambulances and fire-trucks, is impaired¹⁴.

One of the requirements of a sustainable urban economy is public safety for all. In addition, safer environments should also be well-performing and vibrant living environments and in this sense Hall and Pfeiffer cites Jane Jacobs' model of mixed-use and neighbourhood interaction as an example¹⁵.

- *Social exclusion*

For many, gated communities provide an illusion of stability and control. It allows those who can afford it to opt out of shared public services and places. Many residents are solely concerned with taking care of themselves and their immediate neighbours. This reflects a stance of social segregation and exclusion. Neighbourhoods have always been able to exclude certain classes of resident through discrimination and housing costs. But now, as Blakely and Snyder point out, with gates and walls they can exclude not only undesirable new residents, but even casual passers-by and those people from surrounding neighbourhoods¹⁶.

This could have a harmful effect on urban sustainability in terms of the urban economy, social coherence and solidarity, building liveable cities and democracy. Economic growth is not enough as an objective of a sustainable urban economy: there is also a need for equitable income distribution, democratic participation and empowerment¹⁷. Gated communities can create a barrier to interaction and may add to the problem of building social networks that provide an opportunity for social and economic activities. They could also add to social and political exclusion, which touches on the social dimension of sustainability. "A city that prospers economically, but fails to distribute the wealth with some degree of equity, runs the clear risk that it disintegrates into civil war between the haves and have-nots, a war in which both sides are losers"¹⁸. There is no substitute for an inclusive city with supportive neighbourhoods and integrative labour markets. Therefore, social and political exclusion is harmful both for the included and excluded and such a society is likely to have severe tensions when experiencing such fundamental social divisions¹⁹.

Fundamental social divisions will have an effect on vibrant urban life and urban diversity, where shared facilities and opportunities will gradually fade as tensions grow. This also touches on the issue of individual rights to public space and the fundamental principle of democracy. Gated communities have the potential to impair the rights of fellow residents and to be detrimental to long-term urban sustainability and political stability. It could just be that the very measure that is implemented to address crime and instability after a while becomes a major source of conflict²⁰.

- *Urban fragmentation and separation*

Gated communities physically separate a specific area from its environment and create zones or pockets of restricted access within the urban fabric. This forces motorists and pedestrians to take alternative routes, which often take longer. Gated communities have an impact not only on the daily activity patterns of people, but also on the urban form and functioning²¹.

Physical barriers and divisions, however, do not only establish physical exclusion, but can enhance social and political exclusion as well. This has an impact on urban sustainability, including social coherence, sustainable urban access, and sustainable urban life. Increased travelling distances can lead to increased discomfort for those who are dependent on public transport or pedestrian access. In addition, gated communities encourage car-ownership and use, which again has various consequences. Apart from contributing to unacceptable levels of congestion and pollution, they also decrease opportunities for a sustainable public transport system. They also increase the occurrence of suburban car-based residential sprawl, which in itself can prove to be detrimental to urban sustainability, leading to longer commuter journeys and congestion²². With the issue of suburbia, the future sustainability of these areas in terms of urban management and functioning, as well a quality urban life, are questioned.

- *Urban planning and management*

Gated communities affect urban planning and management issues. They include the nature of roads and traffic congestion, general urban maintenance and the traditional role of local

authorities. Local authorities have expressed concern about damage to service vehicles, problems with fire-fighting, waste removal and the reading of water and electricity meters, when having to deal with enclosed neighbourhoods. The closure of existing roads also leads to changes in traffic patterns. This results in longer routes and traffic congestion, and secondly, many of the roads left “open” were not designed to accommodate an increased number of vehicles. This causes problems in terms of maintenance and long-term planning²³. In some cases the rapid deterioration of roads within enclosed neighbourhoods could negatively effect long-term planning and induce additional maintenance costs²⁴. Both these issues could have an added affect on a sustainable urban economy and access.

In addition to the technical aspects, there are also the concerns about the management and control of gated communities. This raises questions in terms of the powers allocated to the residents’ association and/or private security firm managing areas on behalf the residents. In the USA homeowners’ associations have grown at a rapid rate, from less than 500 in 1964 to more than 150 000 in 1992. These organisations govern an estimated 32 million people²⁵. Homeowners associations are a powerful lobbying force. In many cases they resist taxation or demand tax rebates. Many also refuse to accept any major spending for citywide initiatives they may not directly benefit from. McKenzie states that “those paying for and receiving the private services can be expected to resent paying for duplicate public services they do not need...for this and other reasons, this ‘privatisation for the few’ has the potential for creating and amplifying social division and conflict between...residents and local governments”²⁶. This raises concerns about the traditional role of local government and the potential impact on urban governance in the future. Private governance and control could assume such proportions that they threaten urban sustainability and more specifically sustainable urban democracy in the future.

- *Financial implications*

Private governance, leading to increased demands for tax rebates and privatisation of services could also have a significant impact on a sustainable urban economy, including cross-subsidisation of urban areas, distribution of resources, shared public facilities and amenities, etc.

There have been claims that “gating” areas increases property values, as well as that insurance companies might consider a reduction in premiums for residents of enclosed neighbourhoods. Such actions could also lead to rapid increases of gated communities. However, these claims have not been substantiated.

Another key consideration concerns the costs involved in the establishment and maintenance of gated communities. In addition to the initial capital costs (application fees and costs of physical infrastructure), residents are also liable to pay ongoing running costs for the management and maintenance of the area²⁷. These costs differ from situation to situation, but could involve a substantial amount, for example in one area in Pretoria it was estimated that each household will have to contribute an amount of R8240 to get the project started and an additional levy of R280 per month²⁸. This could result in a burden to those residents with lower incomes in the area and in turn could result in increased internal conflict and a loss of capital investment. It could negatively impact on long term urban sustainability, including a sustainable economy, urban society and urban democracy.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The following table summarises the relationship between the key issues regarding gated communities and the key dimensions of urban sustainability.

Gated communities: key issues							
Key dimensions of urban sustainability		A sense of community	Safety and security	Social exclusion	Urban fragmentation & segregation	Urban planning & management	Financial implications.
	A Sustainable Urban Economy: Work and Wealth		X	X		X	X
	A Sustainable Urban Society: Social Coherence & Social Solidarity			X	X		
	Sustainable Urban Shelter: Decent Affordable Housing for All			X			
	A Sustainable Urban Environment: Stable Ecosystems				X		
	Sustainable Urban Access: resource-Conserving Mobility				X	X	
	Sustainable Urban Life: Building the Liveable City	X	X	X	X		
	Sustainable Urban Democracy: Empowering the Citizenry	X		X		X	X

Gated Communities are a growing phenomenon worldwide are not only restricted to developed countries. Increasingly, they are occurring in transitional and developing countries. It is a powerful idea, which has the potential to influence the urban future in the 21st century. It could just become the “new garden-city” model of the 21st century and the new paradigm for city planning and urban design.

In essence urban sustainability calls for a holistic and integrated approach towards city-making, considering not only the parts, but emphasising their relationship to each other and importantly the sum total of the parts. Thus sustainability is concerned with the city as a whole, and this includes the city of today and tomorrow. This evaluation revealed several critical concerns and indicated that gated communities have the potential to negatively impact on the goal of urban sustainability relating to all seven key dimensions. Although the impact is likely to be more severe in terms of certain dimensions, such as a sustainable urban economy, urban society, urban life and urban democracy, it is also clear from the discussion that gated communities touches on all aspects of urban sustainability.

It is not likely that gated communities will decrease or disappear overnight. In fact, they will probably increasingly grow in the next two to five years. However, while many are considering the short-term implications of this type of development, few are thinking about the long term implications of gated communities, and it is especially in the long term that they could have their greatest impact.

Although the new millennium offers the opportunity for exiting new ideas to be implemented, urban decision-makers and professionals have to work within the reality of what exists in our cities. Recognising that urban sustainability is one of the goals for urban planning and management, all urban development must be considered in relation to the dimensions of urban sustainability. Within this framework, the appropriateness of gated communities as a type of development for the urban future needs to be carefully considered.

¹ Blakely and Snyder 1997 *Fortress America. Gated communities in the United States*. Washington, D.C. Brookings Institution Press, p 37.

² Ibid.

³ Thuillier 1999. "Buenos Aires: gated Communities in greater Buenos Aires: the New Suburban Utopia". Paper delivered at the conference "Gated Communities as a Global Phenomenon", Hamburg, 1999.

⁴ A "road closure" refers to the physical closure across a road, i.e. a boom or a gate, and not to an enclosed neighbourhood, which could have several road closures.

⁵ UN Habitat 1996, Sustainable Cities Programme.

⁶ du Plessis, C. 1998. *The meaning and definition of sustainable development in the built environment*. Submitted in fulfilment of part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture in the faculty of Science, University of Pretoria, Pretoria. November 1998.

⁷ Hall, P. and U. Pfeiffer 2000 *Urban Future 21: A global agenda for twenty-first century cities*. London, E & FN Spon. p. 17.

⁸ "Multiple sustainability" refers to the multiple dimensions of sustainability.

⁹ Hall and Pfeiffer 2000.

¹⁰ Landman, K 2000 *An international review of gated communities*. CSIR Publication, Pretoria and Landman, K 2000b *An overview of enclosed neighbourhoods in South Africa*. CSIR Publication, Pretoria. These two reports were done as part of the first phase of a long-term CSIR project investigating the potential impact of gated communities in South Africa.

¹¹ Landman, K. 2000b

¹² Blakely and Snyder 1997 *Fortress America. Gated communities in the United States*. Washington, D.C. Brookings Institution Press.

¹³ Landman, K. 2000b

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hall and Pfeiffer 2000 p. 32.

¹⁶ Blakely and Snyder 1997 *Fortress America. Gated communities in the United States*. Washington, D.C. Brookings Institution Press.

¹⁷ Hall and Pfeiffer 2000 p. 20.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 23.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Landman, K. 2000b

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hall and Pfeiffer 2000.

²³ Landman, K. 2000b.

²⁴ Case studies, done by Local Authorities in San Antonio, USA, as well as in Johannesburg, South Africa, have both proved this to be a fact.

²⁵ McKenzie, E. 1994. *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government*. Yale University Press, New Haven, p. 11.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 186.

²⁷ Landman, K. 2000b.

²⁸ "Getting back to the laager in Lynnwood". 2000 *Pretoria News*. January 26. <http://www.pta-online.co.za/pn2000/jan00/n260102.htm>. p. 1.