

Gated communities: utopian vision or necessary evil?

by Dr Karina Landman

Architects and urban planners have often wondered what the ideal settlement would comprise. From the planned Renaissance cities of the sixteenth century to the new garden cities or modernist suburbs of the early twentieth century, urban designers have grappled with a new utopian vision for the city of the time.



→ 1. Entrance to a gated community in Bloemfontein.

In less prosperous, more insecure times, wealthy landowners combined forces to create safer settlements (the typical medieval castle or bastide towns). Remnants of these remain today as gated communities in the urban landscape.

Alongside the emergence of the 'cappuccino society' (Pacioni 2004), gated communities have become a prominent development across the world. From the sprawling North-American and Canadian cities to the diverse Latin American agglomerations, a variety of developments emerge, spreading their influence to Africa, Europe, the Middle and Far East. These vary from large-scale gated towns in the Americas to smaller gated compounds in the East. What is increasingly clear is that gated communities have become a dominant global feature of cities in the 21st century.

A gated community is a physical area that is separated from its surroundings by a fence or wall, prohibiting or controlling access by means of gates or booms. It can refer to a residential area with restricted access, so that public spaces are privatised or their use is restricted. It includes controlled access areas for work, commercial and/or residential purposes.

In South Africa, gated communities generally include enclosed neighbourhoods (existing neighbourhoods that have been closed off in retrospect) and security villages (a range of private developments that have been planned in this way) (Landman, 2003).

Although there have been some examples of walled developments in South Africa, modern-day gated developments emerged in the late 1980s. The late 1990s saw an explosive growth of these developments, and today they make up a large proportion of new housing developments. Enclosed neighbourhoods are predominantly located in metropolitan municipalities, but are also found in larger cities or towns with higher levels of property crime. Large security estates are located in metropolitan and coastal municipalities, as well as in areas with natural amenities such as Hartebeestpoort Dam (Landman, 2003).

Those who have questioned this trend would immediately probe to find the answers for such a significant pattern of growth. Although levels of crime have stabilised or decreased in recent years, they remain at very high levels and contribute to growing levels of insecurity (Mistry, 2004;

Burger, 2007). Local research has confirmed that the need for safety and security remains a major driving force behind the growth of gated communities in this country, especially in the case of enclosed neighbourhoods (Landman, 2004).

Gated communities represent a growing search for a new utopian vision for the ideal neighbourhood in fast-growing, diverse and polarised cities. New gated urban villages are built every day in response to the growing market demand. Those who can afford it, wish to experience a rural-like lifestyle in close proximity to urban facilities.

Gated communities in South Africa draw on a wide number of international historical and current planning and design concepts. Local research has highlighted that many of these approaches may not be relevant in the South African context. Firstly, a collection of new gated urban developments does not necessarily lead to greater integration between neighbourhoods and groups if this is not also supported by functional integration. While neighbourhoods in the current South African city may be spatially closer to each other compared to those in the past, they now incorporate different mechanisms of separation: fortification and privatisation. Secondly, different types of gated communities manifest the implementation of 'anti-urbanism' (Madanipour, 1996:200) through enclosed neighbourhoods, and 'micro-urbanism' (Ibid, 201) through security estates. Both of these approaches focus on the development and design of the neighbourhood, without necessarily paying attention to the relationship of different neighbourhoods to each other and the city as a whole. Therefore, while these neighbourhoods may facilitate integration and community cohesion, the focus is internalised. These new development models often negate

attempts at greater integration and may not be appropriate for metropolitan planning, as they often impede socio-spatial justice and equity, benefiting some groups at the expense of others (Landman, 2008).

New research on affordable housing in the country is starting to reveal interesting trends. In these medium-density mixed developments, the majority of residents identified safety and security as the most important factor for the success of these developments. This raises interesting questions regarding the future of gated communities. Is this a reflection of the growing sense of insecurity that is prevalent in society or is it a representation of the new ideal neighbourhood in South Africa? How often have new planning trends saturated the market and covered cities in an attempt to address the ills of the time? If gated communities are perceived as a working solution to address crime, who are current planners to deny their existence or proclaim their negative impacts? Should gated communities not be accepted as a working solution for all urban residents? Or should planners learn from the past and realise the impact of uncontrolled growth and how difficult it is to change the urban landscape once it has been constructed? These questions highlight the dilemma surrounding the growth of gated communities in South Africa and illustrate the difficulties faced by local authorities in trying to balance current needs (safety and security) with future aims advocated in current development policies (integration and equity). This is especially pertinent in the light of a growing demand emerging among middle and lower income groups for gated housing developments.

What the future holds is uncertain. As levels of crime and insecurity remain high, it is important for city planners and urban designers to consider

design approaches for urban safety and regulate mechanisms that would minimise the negative impacts of some types of gated communities, while still contributing to safer environments for all residents. 🌐

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