

## Gated communities: coming soon to a neighbourhood near you!

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**Abstract:** For many centuries, gated communities have housed the rich and famous in countries around the world. However, in recent decades, they have become a way of life for millions of Americans. On a much smaller scale, some neighbourhoods in Canada are mimicking the functional and symbolic gating and walling of neighbourhoods in the United States. In smaller cities like Winnipeg embryonic versions already exist. Yet despite the trend to “fort-up,” the implications for cities and their citizens have gone largely unnoticed.

### Introduction

Since 300 B.C. gated communities have been built in towns and cities worldwide (Blakely and Snyder, 1997). While their popularity has varied significantly, their evolution and emergence have been until recently slow. Although there have been minor design changes, their *raison-d’être* has stayed the same. The desire for prestige, increased safety and community organization remains responsible for the existence and growth of these developments.

In fact, fortification by homeowners is currently one of the fastest and widespread trends altering the city and countryside. More than eight million people live in gated communities in the United States, a statistic that continues to accelerate at an astounding pace (Blakely and Snyder 1997). The trend to fort-up has long been a part of American planning but is relatively new in Canada. However, gated and semi-walled enclaves have already crept into Canadian cities like Winnipeg. While they may be embryonic versions of their American counterparts, their repercussions are still far-reaching, spilling into the political, economic and social

arenas of cities. In political terms, gated communities illustrate the blurring of lines between public and private designation on an individual and governmental basis. In social terms, they represent the fragmentation of communities nationwide.

## Classifying Gated Communities

For the purpose of discussion, gated communities must be defined and classified. . Edward Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, authors of Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States (1997), have developed a classification system for gated communities. First are the **lifestyle communities**, where the gates provide security and separation from the leisure activities within. They include *retirement communities*, *golf and country club leisure developments*, and *suburban new towns*. Residents are attracted to the organization, recreation and built-in social life that these communities offer within their boundaries.

Second are the **prestige communities**, which lack the amenities of the lifestyle communities, but where the gates still symbolize distinction and status. These include *enclaves of the rich and famous*, *developments for high-level professionals*, and *executive home developments for the middle-class*. These two main categories are primarily suburban in location and developer-built.

Third are the **security zone communities**, which include the *city perch*, the *suburban perch* and the *barricade perch*. The term perch refers to the erection of the gates or barricades by residents, thereby restricting access to their neighbourhoods. Such closures occur in the inner city and suburbs, in neighbourhoods of great wealth and in areas of great poverty. In all security zone communities, the perceived or real fear of crime and outsiders is the underlying motive for fortification. While the location, prosperity, demographics and other variables may vary from one development to the next, there are basic elements that set gated communities apart from similar types of developments. (Developments such as ghettos, panopticon malls, prisons, mental health institutions and high-rise, high-density constructs like

apartment buildings are not included in this discussion on gated communities as described in this article.)

## **Characterizing Gated Communities**

Two elements can be used to characterize and define gated communities. First is the Homeowners' Association (HOA). Basically, a homeowners' association is a political body with legal clout that attempts to relocalize governance and prevent public access to local resources by privatizing its grounds, facilities and services. The association's job is to collect assessment fees, to provide community services, to determine and pursue the best interests of the community and, most important, to enforce the rules as stated in the association's declaration. The monies collected by the association help to finance and maintain the privatized community services such as garbage collection, recreation, lighting, beautification and security.

Overall, homeowners' associations are usually "non-profit" organizations, made up of board members, officers and volunteers. These board and committee members, and at times lawyers and accountants too, meet regularly to discuss appropriate details concerning the operation of their community. When necessary, the association will hold a vote but not all votes are equal. The voting power can vary from house to house, from one association to another, and may even vary according to the market value of a house. Often, the voting turn-out is minuscule. Therefore, to call these developments democratic is misleading.

Just as important as their organization is their significant power. Like in a state legislature, their rules are part of a constitution enforceable by law. These rules are known as covenants, conditions and restrictions (CC&Rs). Dating back to fourteenth century England, the CC&Rs are tools that permit the seller of land to retain control over how the land is used after its sale. They are also meant to protect property values by ensuring uniformity in the development. (While the credibility of this point is often debated, a study by Blakely and Snyder found no evidence to suggest they maintain or increase property values (Blakely and Snyder, 1997).)

Any deviation from the *thousands* of rules in each gated community (which can range from architectural controls, to indoor window treatments, to the weight of pets) can result in a fine, a lien against his house or jail time. Such measures are warranted because the sale of a house is conditional on the buyer's agreement to comply with the rules. While an overwhelming number of HOAs have been or are in litigation with residents, the outcome is unequivocally skewed in favour of the associations. With so many disputes between associations and their residents, this shows that many gated communities may seem like a utopia in the beginning but are not as attractive after one becomes a resident.

A second attribute of gated communities is the security mechanisms. Depending upon the location and prosperity of an area, a gated community is likely to have one or more security features. All three types of gated communities and their subtypes share some kind of defense mechanism but the security features within each can vary significantly. At the poorer end of the scale, neighbourhoods may have street barricades or iron-rod fences that help reduce the number of entrance ways into the community. In wealthier neighbourhoods, electronic gates with coded entrance panels and security cameras may help deter unwanted visitors. Lastly, in neighbourhoods of the rich and famous, the entrance may have multiple security mechanisms such as 24 hour armed guards and dual gates. As demonstrated in Table 1, the more numerous and more sophisticated the security devices, the less accessible the neighbourhood becomes. Furthermore, as the level of security increases, the wealthier the residents, the larger the housing and the more homogeneous the community.

Whether sophisticated or simple, the security features are meant to enhance the *perception* of safety rather than guarantee security. By having symbolic gates or walls, this lets the public know that the community is a united neighbourhood, one that will protect the integrity of its area against undesirable visitors and activity.

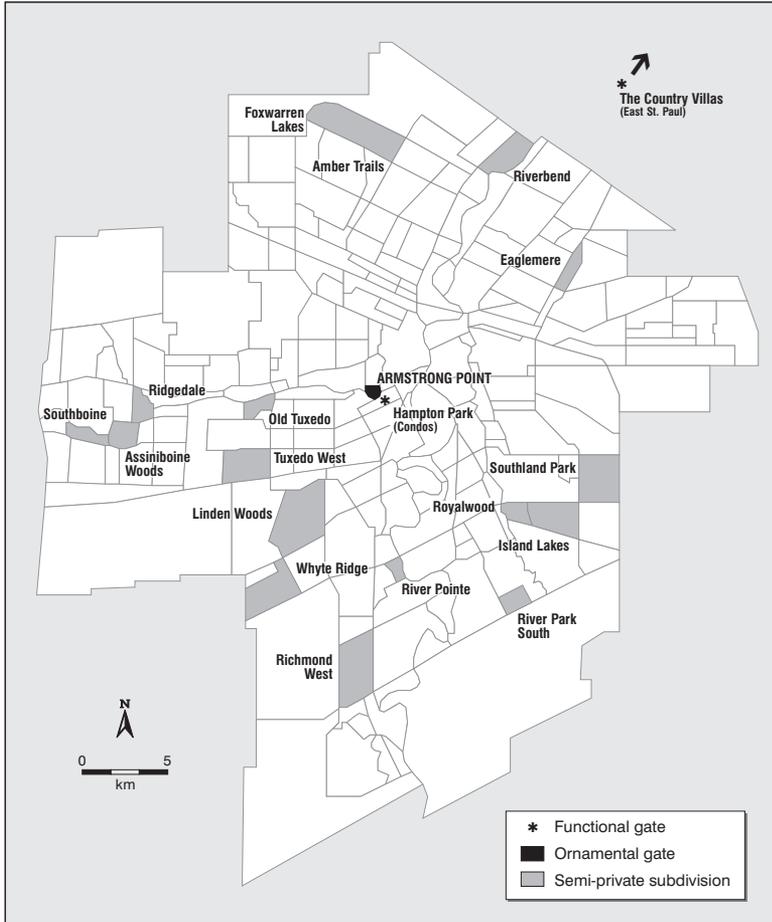
**Table 1: Security features and accessibility in gated communities.**

| FEATURES  | ACCESSIBILITY  | COMMUNITIES   |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•concrete barriers</li> <li>•semi-walled</li> <li>•street barricades</li> <li>•iron rod fences</li> <li>•non-gated</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•easy public access</li> <li>•not all entrances gated</li> <li>•not completely walled</li> <li>•1 or 2 entrances/exits</li> </ul>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•mixed demographics and family size, house types</li> <li>•lower income</li> <li>•ie. city perch, barricade perch</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•unguarded electronic gate</li> <li>•mechanical arms</li> <li>•completely walled</li> <li>•security cameras</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•access by security pass /card (with or without entrance code)</li> <li>•tailgating</li> <li>•accessible to pedestrians and cyclists</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•less income and housing variety</li> <li>•middle, upper-middle incomes</li> <li>•ie. lifestyle communities</li> </ul>       |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•electric gate</li> <li>•part/full-time guard</li> <li>•guardhouse</li> <li>•security cameras</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•not accessible to pedestrians and cyclists</li> <li>•restricted access</li> <li>•tailgating possible (no guard)</li> </ul>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•large houses, multiple garages</li> <li>•upper-income</li> <li>•ie. security zone communities</li> </ul>                    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•elaborate gatehouse</li> <li>•monumental entrance</li> <li>•24 hour armed guard</li> <li>•security patrols</li> <li>•high fences and gates</li> <li>•security cameras</li> <li>•electric gate and mechanical arm</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•access extremely limited</li> <li>•heavily defended</li> <li>•no tailgating</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•celebrity mansions</li> <li>•rich and prestigious residents</li> <li>•ie. prestige communities</li> </ul>                   |

This chart shows the variety of security features, accessibility and type of community in terms of family make-up, income level and house type.

## Winnipeg’s Embryonic Gated Communities

While gated communities are a relatively new phenomenon to creep into Canadian cities, the groundwork has already been laid. For example, many of Winnipeg’s newer residential developments are embryonic-like versions of gated communities in the United States. In numerous middle to high-income areas of the city, and more recently in peripheral areas, semi-walled and gated subdivisions are quickly becoming the neighbourhood of choice (Figure 1). Winnipeg has three gated communities that stand apart from the semi-walled communities scattered throughout the city: Armstrong Point, Hampton Park and the Country Villas.



**Figure 1:** Location of semi-walled and gated subdivisions in the Winnipeg area.

Armstrong Point was the first gated community to appear in Winnipeg. Originally, it was an exclusive neighbourhood that housed the wealthy and prestigious in grand residences. Today, the value of the houses has remained relatively high-priced but the prestigiousness of the residents and the community has decreased. Generally, the houses range from the average two-storey house with a dual-port garage to the monumental estates built long ago. Furthermore, the make-up of its residents includes high-class



*Figure 2: Middle gate at Armstrong Point.*

professionals and middle-upper class families with dependent children.

As in the past, the gates remain the most important feature of the neighbourhood. Three Classical Revival style gateways were built in 1911 and remain unchanged to this day, with the exception of restorative work. Their form consists of simplified pillars with wrought-iron grillwork (Figure 2). Fortified at the will of the residents, the gates were constructed to separate the enclave from the neighbouring streets that fell into the grid-iron pattern and to keep out wandering livestock. To this day, Armstrong Point's symbolic gates remain a "psychological barrier" to the people that make up the lower strata of Winnipeg's population (Rostecki 1994).

Hampton Park is Winnipeg's second gated community. Built in 1983, it is located across the Assiniboine River from Armstrong Point. It is a ten-unit, gated condominium that caters to wealthy professionals and retirees. Each unit is currently priced at approximately \$250,000 and is 2,400 square feet (Lipson 1997). Residents are singles and couples, aged forty and older. Fortified on the street-side by a wall and by an electronic gate at the entrance and exit, entry is gained to the grounds and the underground parking by remote control or by key. Like many other gated or walled



*Figure 3: Gatehouse at the Country Villas.*

developments, Hampton Park is well camouflaged and is usually unnoticed by the common passerby.

The most recent gated community, the Country Villas, is Manitoba's first resort inspired adult community. Located in the rural municipality of East St. Paul, and built in 1998, this upscale residential area is an exclusively low-density community where 163 detached, single-family homes are nestled on private landscaped sites. However, because it is an age-restricted development, persons younger than 55 need not apply. Residents include singles and couples who are looking for a safe, close-knit community setting where social organization is built-in. As for the houses, residents have a choice of eight different styles of villa homes, starting at \$145,900 (Viklund 1999).

The site planning highlights include a number of features: a professionally landscaped feature entrance with a gate house and electronic security system, a grand entrance boulevard, perimeter landscape and fencing, a central park with a distinctive clubhouse and English-style gardens, and recreational vehicle parking. As shown in Figure 3, the picturesque gatehouse is the most distinctive security feature in the entire community. The mechanical arms are activated by a coded-panel and can be controlled from each site. Other security features provided include the theme privacy walls surrounding the development, remote camera surveillance for the

entrance, an optional security bungalow package and extensive lighting.

As in many other cases, despite being an ineffective barrier to criminals, pedestrians or cyclists, the gate's purpose is to create the illusion of safety and to restrict all but its own vehicles. Residents belonging to the Country Villas have also confirmed statements made by residents of gated communities in the United States: the presence of a gate *did* have an impact on their decision to move into the development and residents do *feel* safer.

### **To Gate or Not To Gate: The Debate**

As more citizens are made aware of or are affected by community fortification, the controversy increases. Proponents and opponents of gated communities have strong opinions and real concerns. Yet despite the lack of attention given to fortification, the initial discussion has produced more shortcomings than advantages. Two of the most commonly debated issues are crime/safety and community. The third issue, the effect on the city, is one seldom mentioned in the literature but is increasingly important to recognize and discuss.

Safety is perhaps the most controversial of all debates. It is true, in some instances, that street closures and gates reduce crime that is likely to arrive by automobile (Whoriskey 1999). The most persuasive statistical evidence of success comes from gated communities in which every vehicular entrance is safeguarded around-the-clock. Although less compelling, the same may apply to areas with street closures. Therefore, by gating and walling communities, some crimes are pushed off private streets and into more public streets.

However, this does not mean that gated communities do not experience crimes, nor does it solve the problem. Rapes, domestic disputes, thefts and other crimes are as likely to occur in gated communities as in non-gated communities. The reality is that crimes like thefts are committed by residents of the same community. While mechanical security devices are in place, security checks are not performed on potential or existing residents of gated

communities, nor are searches done to visitors and their vehicles, even in the presence of a guard. As David Guttersen points out, George Hennard (killer of twenty-three people in a Killeen, Texas cafeteria) was a resident of the gated community of Green Valley just months before his rampage (Guttersen 1992). This example and many others prove that crime does not discriminate. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that “fortress-building responses” deal adequately with the problem of increasing public violence or crime (Wekerle et. al 1996).

Another highly controversial topic of discussion is the notion of community. Many residents of gated and non-gated communities across the country are searching for a sense of community as it was in the fifties. Neotraditionalism (a philosophy that believes ideals of the past, especially those of the 1950s, should be adhered to in the 1990s) is alive and well (Dowling 1998). While no definitive concept can be given to describe “community” most scholars can agree that it encompasses a geographical entity and a sense of social responsibility. However the real debate is whether gated communities create more community participation and are more neighbourly than a non-gated community.

Proponents of gated communities argue that by allowing neighbourhoods to build and maintain their boundaries and to control access to their tract, they develop a sense of identity and security. The physical borders can help govern interaction, reduce conflict, and stimulate feelings of territoriality and ownership that bond people together and create grounds for interdependence and mutual action (Lang et. al 1979). Because the community is homogeneous, in terms of its lifestyle or life stage, its residents feel as though they belong to one large family, albeit headed by Big Brother (HOAs). Arlene Fishbein, supporter of gated communities, summarizes the feelings of proponents in general:

We cannot go back to earlier years. Gated communities have been successful. Residents like them; future homeowners want them. It is not an ethical issue or a moral issue. People want to feel secure and have that right (Debating Urban Barricades 1999).

On the other hand, Blakely and Snyder, along with many other scholars, argue the opinion that gated communities create a coerced sense of community, where formal social controls have been substituted for informal social controls. In their study, most members of gated communities were content to have a limited sense of neighbouring (Blakely and Snyder 1997). They may not know each other but assume that each person is a resident within the same development. (This may be why a burglar's disguise could consist only of a business suit, to give the appearance of belonging.) Clearly, "the mere fact that a group of individuals lives in a single street is no guarantee of common action, mutual sentiment or eye contact" (Cater and Jones 1989). If this is the case, perhaps these developments should be called gated neighbourhoods rather than gated communities.

Lastly, one area that has been absent from discussion is the effect privatizing and fortifying neighbourhoods has on the city. One of the most favourable arguments is made by Gary Pivo. He states that gated communities may actually slow the pace of ex-urban growth. If people are given the alternative to gain control over their locality using fortification, rather than to relocate in an attempt to escape the "urban" illnesses, it may lead to a decreased spatial distance between the rich and the poor. If this were to occur, gated communities would increase the heterogeneity of the municipality while they increase the homogeneity of their own population. The result would be interspersed pockets of concentrated wealth amongst poorer areas (Lang et. al 1997).

While the theory offered by Pivo is plausible, the negative effects of residential fortification seem to dominate most discussions. Perhaps the most significant problem identified by planners and scholars is the detrimental effect on the city. The privatization of more and more government services and public spaces caused by gating and walling neighbourhoods has created an island-like environment where the rich get organized and the poor get left behind. As the wealthy flee the city to live in isolated, fortified communities, the not-so-fortunate people are left in the city with little political representation and a limited ability to meet their needs. With a decreased tax base, vital physical and social infrastructures cannot be maintained. The effect snowballs until

the city becomes a place of decay and despair. Little by little, the price of exclusivity is the price at which cities are decaying. But, it is only a short time before all gated communities must deal with the problems they have paid to avoid.

## **Conclusion**

Observations from Winnipeg's embryonic gated and walled communities can be extended to the rest of Canada. With the exception of a few rich enclaves, the gated communities in Canada that most resemble their American counterparts are the retirement or golf and country club communities in British Columbia. Yet in cities like Vancouver and Victoria, where there are increasingly more gated retirement communities than any place in the country, the subject of gated communities is rarely discussed. While the phenomenon has yet to catch on in Canadian cities as it has in the U.S., the potential for gated communities to spread and mature is a reality that planners and governments must face in the years to come. Citizens need to recognize the fortress mentality begins in our own yards.

From a social and planning perspective, gated communities are not models of good planning. From a human geographer's perspective, their biggest flaw is the inability of an elite, homogeneous population, able to buy security and privacy, to relate to the "outside" world in social terms. When such a group focuses their money and attention inward and disregards the life beyond their wall or gate, the result is social fragmentation and alienation.

From a planning perspective, fortification of neighbourhoods is also detrimental to the prosperity and growth of a city. When the wealthiest portion of the population privatizes its own services that were once public, the middle-to-lower strata are left to support a greater portion of public infrastructures and services. Such fortification of residences and neighbourhoods is not a solution to "urban" problems. Rather than attacking the root causes of the forting-up phenomenon, gated communities are attempting to remove themselves from the problems felt in all cities. It is this cloning and mass-production of gated communities that is killing creativity and destroying cities.

By adding to the literature on gated communities in Canada, the topic can be better introduced into planning and political circles so that we can ensure the same kind of large-scale fortification will not occur in Canadian neighbourhoods. By learning from the American example, it is hoped that planners and citizens can develop better solutions to the ills that push residents into these types of developments. Although it will be a significant task, involving participation from people from all arenas, Canada has a huge advantage in the race.

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