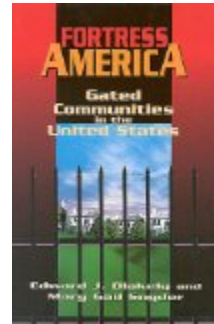


# H-Net Reviews

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Edward J. Blakely, Mary Gail Snyder. *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997. xi + 209 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8157-1002-8.

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## Gated Communities

The authors of *Fortress America* are from California where many gated communities have been planned and developed and many others have been created by barricades over the last twenty years. Dr. Blakely has served in the faculties of both the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Southern California. Ms. Snyder is a doctoral student in the University of California, Berkeley. The book is about gated communities and the people who live in them. It is also about the reasons people choose to live in them and just what this means in the broader context of the larger community and societal goals, norms, and mores. The book focuses the reader's attention on complex issues. Among these issues are private versus public rights and how citizen responsibilities play out in the practice of community life. The gated community can be reflective of society and culture and it can be said that the phenomenon "is a dramatic manifestation of a new fortress mentality growing in America" (p. 1).

Gated communities, and, indeed gated and walled towns and cities, have been long an artifact of urban development. However, only recently in the western and southern United States, gated communities have attracted much planning, development, political and press attention. Such proposals and developments have often been coupled with public controversy. In early 1997, this reviewer appeared as an expert witness in a case in Collier County, Florida. The case involved an privately owned road which provided the only access to a beach front county park and a state marine preserve. Public ac-

cess was assured by a public easement to the public facilities. The home owners association (hereafter HOA) built a gate house in the middle of the right of way. This was alleged to violate the provisions of the state and county easements and to at least psychologically deter free public access to public areas. Considerable controversy resulted and resolution is not soon assured.

There are concentrations of gated communities in California, Texas, Arizona and Florida. The authors estimate that one third of communities built with gates are luxury developments for the upper and upper-middle class and another third are developments for retirees. The history of gated communities in America is traced from circa 1870 with private streets in St. Louis to probably 20,000 communities in 1997 with more than 3 million housing units. In a recent survey in southern California, the data indicate that 54 percent of home shoppers wanted gated and walled development. Gated communities are essentially low to medium density residential areas with restricted access and generally privatized spaces that would be normally public. The study does not include multi-family urban developments.

Gated communities fall within the American tradition of suburbanization and tend to "harden the suburbaness" (p. 11). I'm not comfortable with the author's assertion that Frank Lloyd Wright "had more influence" (p. 12) on suburbanization than any other architect. Clarence Stein and others in concert with the American Greenbelt Cities Movement and Ebenezer Howard's

garden cities of England certainly fostered low density and single family housing in streetcar suburbs during the 1920s. Suburbanization was brought into full bloom after World War II by the automobile and easy access to single family subdivisions and single family residential mortgages.

American suburbs emerged differently than their English predecessors. Land was cheap and the primary focus of the American experience was to create residential precincts to be safe from the crime and dirt of the city, to be beautiful and green and to express an ideal rooted in Jeffersonian rurality. This land use paradigm has changed. No longer does location away from the central city alone assure security, so “perhaps it can be found in a development type—the gated community” (p. 15). Additional issues discussed in chapter one include perceived reality concerning residential property values in gated communities when compared with values in non-gated communities. The authors report, “In general, price differences were small, and gated communities even had a slight price disadvantage” (p. 17). Gated communities are governed by HOA and covenants, conditions, and rules (hereafter CC&R) which are often set in place by the original developers and unfold to be governed by citizen boards of directors elected from among community residents. Management of the gated community is professional. This reflects a gradual trend “starting with daily life and moving on to family life, civic life, social life, and now neighborhood and community life, people are increasingly ceding older forms of social responsibility to professionals” (p. 22). Gated communities reflect in a very dramatic way this trend. In addition, the trend toward privatization and withdrawal from the larger community (civic secession) can be styled as “governing by legal contract, not social contract” (p. 20).

This book deals effectively with substantive issues related to gated communities. It is safe to say this comprehensive research published by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and the Brookings Institute leads the way in focusing future research and much needed attention on the rapid emergence of gated communities as an urban development practice. The research is exploratory beginning with an extended reconnaissance of gated communities in 1994. It was found that gated developments differed substantially in the housing markets served and the sense of community experienced by residents within the walls. Growing out of this work a typology of gated communities was advanced by the authors to aid in understanding the social, economic and cultural issues embodied in a study of gated communities. It is offered not

as a “a firm taxonomy” (p. 39) but as a means of organizing the research.

The typology includes lifestyle communities, prestige communities and security zones. The gates of lifestyle communities provide security and separation for leisure activities and other amenities offered within. Lifestyle communities are often found in the Sunbelt: Florida, California, Texas and Arizona. There are three styles of such communities: the retirement community, the golf and leisure community, and suburban new towns. Each is distinctive but distinctions can become muddled. The second category, the prestige community, appears to be the fastest growing type. Prestige is symbolized by the gates. Thus the perception is “distinction and prestige and (it) create(s) and protect(s) a secure place on the social ladder” (pp. 40, 41). These are enclaves of the rich and famous, the top fifth in income, and corporate executives. The third type, gated security zones, are communities emerging as a consequence of fear of crime and outsiders. This is the least subtle example of the “fortress mentality” (p. 1). In many cases, neighborhoods have retrofitted with gates and barriers to limit traffic access and outside threats.

The typology is used as an organizing principle for the research. Using the typology in the following table the authors have suggested the importance of social values which provide criteria for home seekers choice. These criteria include sense of community, exclusion, privatization, and stability (p. 44).

#### Value Lifestyle Prestige Security zone

Sense of community	Tertiary	Tertiary	Secondary	Exclusion	Secondary	Secondary	Primary	Privatization	Primary	Tertiary	Tertiary	Stability	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
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These values provided the basis for discussions in organized focus groups of citizens in each of several lifestyle, prestige and security zone communities. The focus groups were guided by professional facilitators. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 serve as summaries of the discussions and provide anecdotal information and the data begin to portray feelings and perceptions regarding resident values, perception of security, perceptions of community life and reasons for choosing the gated community. Of equal importance are the relationships residents feel about the host community outside the gate, HOA governance issues and citizen participation in community activities. The authors also administered an opinion of community residents in association with the Commu-

nity Association Institute of Alexandria, Virginia.

In lifestyle communities, the exclusiveness, or prestige, maintenance free living, opportunities for exercise and reputation seem to be important factors in assessing the reasons for choosing to live in the community. Some argue that they are involved with the outside community and activities within the community. However, the author's survey indicates involvement is certainly not significantly greater than one would find in any community. One reason for limited activity is the expression that retirees tend to avoid long term commitments to serve on boards and committees. Comments also reflect antipathy toward the surrounding community. Gated community residents often appear to be "cynical about politics and tired of paying into community chests" (p. 60). The reality is that the gated community residents enjoy a higher level of community services than their ungated neighbors.

Community CC&R govern gated community physical systems and behavior of residents. The consequences are seen in the clean, green, uniform architectural idiom and components of the visual quality of many of the gated communities. Solicitations and traffic are usually limited to residents and guests. The CC&R seem to be generally supported and at least one desirable characteristic is "lack of chaos" (p. 52) and a sense of control lending the authors to conclude, "The world inside is sacrosanct" (p. 62). However, these gates and walls do not seem to create a sense of community within, or neighborliness, and clearly tend to separate residents from the wider community.

The gates are denoted as protective barriers of status to residents of prestige communities. Most people of all economic classes value status. It is, of course achievable only by the means available to status seekers. Household income is a basis for neighborhood choice. With the higher income, a family can broaden its choice of more exclusive residential precincts. Personal safety and protected property value are also significant factors in selecting gated communities. There are very early gated developments in the United States for the very rich. Near Lake Wales, Florida, Mountain Lake, a gated and guarded residential development adjacent to Bok's Singing Tower, was exclusive; even to the extent it had its own railroad depot. Other such developments were found along the coasts of Florida and California. People do seek communities of uniform economic, cultural and ethnic characteristics.

It is suggested by some residents of gated communi-

ties that the gate is not the only reason for choosing the place. In Cottonwood Valley, a gated community within the new town, Las Colinas, Texas, near Irving, the focus groups revealed some residents sought the gated community for security and others seemed to have sought it for its "lovely homes" (p. 79). The gate not such a critical factor. Residents of gated prestige communities seem ambivalent regarding the community outside of the walls. One resident of Cottonwood Valley referred to people in Las Colinas as the "Over the wall crowd" (p. 80) while a resident of Marblehead, San Clemente, California suggests, "If the surrounding community has a problem, the gated community has a problem" (p. 88). The sense of community and security is not necessarily a consequence of gated communities. A resident of Marblehead said, "You can run but you can't hide" (p. 90).

"The fortress mentality is perhaps clearest here, where groups of people band together to shut out their neighbors" (p. 99) in security zone communities. It is a manifestation of the fear of crime and separation from the surrounding community. Crime is a greater problem for the lower income people than for the better off. The incidence of crime in the central city is much higher than the suburbs. As a result, in some urban areas "the city perch, the suburban perch, and the barricade perch" (p. 42) are no longer necessarily reserved for the rich. Neighborhoods of all economic classes are barricading against surrounding crime, to control gang activity, drug dealing and access. Schemes of gates, fences, and street barricades emerge as artifacts of the fear of crime. Among several case studies, two reported by the authors, Miami Shores in Dade County (Miami) Florida and Whitley Heights, Los Angeles, California chronicle the development of community consensus for barricading and controlling access from the larger urban conurbation. The cases point out the very real physical and legal problems that emerge along the way to limit access, even when consensus among citizens is reached. Street barricades and street closings retrofitted in existing neighborhoods are burdened by legal interpretations of public access. The political issues can be divisive, both to the perch residents and residents in adjacent neighborhoods.

Often perceptions of the security advantages gained by closed-street neighborhoods are the only reality. In Fort Lauderdale, Florida the Police Crime Prevention Unit compared closed-street neighborhoods with the city as a whole. The conclusion was gates and barricades had no significant effect (p. 122). Fire fighters, emergency medical service personnel and police have found street closures slow emergency response time and may in the

long run be less protective of life and property. However, the authors conclude that even in the event closings and barricading may “have questionable effectiveness, community organization and initiative toward improving neighborhoods is a positive step” (p. 124).

The common scheme through the typology of gated communities advanced by Blakeley and Snyder is all of the communities “want control-over their homes, their streets, their neighborhoods” (p. 125). Seventy percent of respondents to the author’s survey of residents in 1995 indicated security was very important. The perception of less crime in gated communities attributed to the gate reached 80 percent of respondents.

The concept of community, a sense of belonging and good feelings or folksiness is compared with the more structural aspects of community life: organization and participation. In survey results sponsored by the Community Associations Institute, 1996 (Doreen Heisler and Warren Klein, *Inside Look at Community Association Homeownership: Facts and Perceptions*, p. 131) the data show that 68 percent of the respondents in gated communities rank friendliness highest among neighborliness and distance. The gated residents perceived the residents of surrounding areas sense of community about the same as their own. Regarding level of involvement in homeowner association governance, the author’s survey (p. 133) data indicate less than 10 percent of residents are active. That percentage is higher when asked about other social association activities. In another set of issues, Heisler and Klein sought to identify what factors contributed to community problems (p. 134). In comparing residents of nongated communities with residents of gated communities across a range of issues from strict HOA rules to apathy, the data reveal insignificant differences between the residents of the gated and nongated communities. The authors conclude, “Gated communities are no better or worse than society as a whole in producing a strong sense of collective citizenship” (p. 135).

America is increasingly divided by race and economic opportunity. The authors conclude that, “Gated com-

munities create yet another barrier to interaction among people of different races, cultures, and classes and may add to the problem of building the social networks that form the base for economic and social opportunity” (p. 153). They compound the dividing forces in a nation of people that need to grow together. Many towns and cities are beginning to address the issues of gated developments. Planners have often been more concerned with public safety, infrastructure and physical planning issues. There is a genuine equal protection argument that the larger community does not benefit from the gated community. In Plano, Texas a city official asks, “Why should you say anyone should have a second-rate security?” (p. 129). Balkanization of our cities is a manifestation of fear, selfishness and exclusion.

Planners and local officials have access to considerable experience in building better communities by means of environmental crime prevention, concepts of defensible space and traffic calming techniques. The techniques for better city building are well known and practiced in an increasing number of urban places. Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 made the most profound statement of our need for collective destiny. The authors paraphrase, “Working out how we live together is our rendezvous with destiny and the only thing that will make America a truly better place, today and tomorrow” (pp. 176, 177).

Planners should and must consider the future of gated communities as families grow and change, retirees die and pass property to heirs, and surrounding urban areas change. Cities, counties, and regions must engage in serious dialogue regarding gated communities. This book written by Dr. Blakely and Ms. Snyder is a solid beginning for that dialogue to begin. In their words, “gated communities are the protected zones on the battlefield where the internal ideological war over the American dream is played out” (p. 175).

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