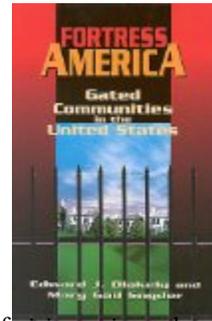


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

Reviewed by Margaret A. Shannon (Vanderbilt University)  
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*Fortress America* explains the ever-increasing popularity of gated communities in the United States. The authors also describe the different forms which gated communities take and their origins. Despite their differences, gated communities share common roots in fear of the “other.”

The authors, both specialists in urban and regional planning, begin by describing the history of gated communities. Next, they develop a taxonomy of gated communities: the recreation-oriented “Lifestyle Community,” the upper-income “Prestige Community,” and the barricaded “Security Zone Community.” Throughout, the authors analyze the nature of “community” in each area, although they do not define it.

The authors conducted interviews with residents of several gated communities throughout the United States, asking about the reasons for moving there, and the level of community involvement in local politics. The authors also conducted a massive survey of community associations. Despite their contention that there are as many as “20,000 gated communities in the United States,” and that “they are increasing rapidly in number in all regions and price classes,” the authors limit their analysis and examples to sunbelt communities. I do not question the accuracy of their conclusions, but these conclusions would be stronger if communities from a broader geographical area had been more explicitly included in the study.

Although the authors argue that residents of gated communities move there (or create them) for a variety of reasons, it seems that fear dominates all three types of communities. Blakely and Snyder correctly state that

people seek gates because of fear of rising crime, dangerous traffic, and falling property values, but they fail to acknowledge that “crime,” “traffic,” and “property values” can be racist code words. Many white people move to gated communities seeking racial homogeneity, but inexplicably, *Fortress America* does not address the problem of white flight.

Ironically, the gates only provide an illusion of security, as the authors demonstrate both through the testimony of interviewees and by demonstrating the permeability of gates by sneaking through them. Moreover, while residents idealize the gates as a means of creating community, they find that gates can actually promote divisiveness, as residents argue about gate policy and homeowner’s association policies. More ominously, Blakely and Snyder argue that gates lead to increasing polarization, us-against-them attitude of citizens, leaving cities bereft. The authors suggest that if future developments emphasized sustainable community, better crime prevention, and improved traffic control, the impetus for gates would disappear and so would the social ills accompanying them. In the process, people would gain the security that drove the construction of gates in the first place.

Otherwise, this is a very good book on a very important subject, and is sure to stimulate further discussion.

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