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The social and spatial implications of community action to enclose space: Guarded neighbourhoods in Selangor, Malaysia

Peter Aning Tedong [a,*], Jill L. Grant [b], Wan Nor Azriyati Wan Abd Aziz [a]

[a] Department of Estate Management, Faculty of Built Environment, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
[b] School of Planning, Dalhousie University, Box 15000, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 4R2, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the social and spatial implications of guarded neighbourhoods: resident-generated enclosed areas in urban Malaysia. Neoliberal government practices provide a regulatory context within which residents organise associations, levy fees, erect barricades, and hire guards to control formerly public streets and spaces. Citizen action to create guarded neighbourhoods concretise emerging class boundaries and reinforce social segregation within cities already noted for having significant ethnic disparities. Guarded neighbourhoods in Malaysia simultaneously reflect social exclusion—of non-residents, lower classes, migrants, and ethnic 'others'—and cohesive social action of the politically and economically powerful to produce neighbourhood identity and community coherence through enclosure.

Introduction

Gating, enclosing, or privatising residential areas has become increasingly common throughout the world (Atkinson & Blandy, 2006; Glasze, Webster, & Frantz, 2006). Some authors see such processes as reflecting growing social polarisation (Marcuse & van Kempen, 2000, 2002) while others describe enclosure as a by-product of neoliberal urbanisation, in a time when states have reduced their regulatory role (Genis, 2007; Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 2005). Whatever the factors producing them, enclosed residential environments universally generate social and spatial implications for the cities that have them.

Malaysia has two types of enclosed developments (Tedong et al., in press-a): developers market gated communities in upscale suburban areas, while residents in older districts erect their own barricades to create guarded neighbourhoods. In this article we examine the social and spatial implications of the guarded neighbourhoods, which are increasing rapidly in Malaysia's largest urban region. Guarded neighbourhoods are self-organised residential enclosures produced through residents' actions and investments in older urban districts. Residents have banded together to create associations with the mandate of controlling space in ways that control and potentially exclude non-residents. National government decisions to roll back housing programs generated a context within which residents turned increasingly to private markets to address housing needs (Tedong et al, in press-b); at the same time government initiatives to roll out guidelines to govern enclosure of urban space framed specific types of market responses to fears of crime and urban growth (Tedong et al., in press-a). The emergence of guarded neighbourhoods in Malaysia reflects the simultaneous operation of what Swyngedouw (1997) called global, local, and regional processes. Within a global context of neoliberalism and a state seeking to use its influence in the region to improve the situation for ethnic Malays, the Malaysian government created conditions that encouraged local citizen action groups to self-organise to control urban territories. That process has inscribed class on top of ethnic, racial, and religious differentiation in the city. As a consequence, Malaysian urban space has become fragmented: that is, less socially and spatially permeable and accessible.

We begin by briefly reviewing the literature on the production of gated and private communities to consider how enclosure contributes to social and spatial fragmentation. We then turn to discuss a case study of Selangor state, near Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, where guarded neighbourhoods are proliferating. We argue that examining enclosure practices in urban Malaysia provides an opportunity to explore 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner & Theodore, 2002) at work facilitating the social processes of spatial fragmentation.

* Corresponding author. Tel./fax: +60 3 79677620.
E-mail addresses: peteraning@um.edu.my (P.A. Tedong), jill.grant@dal.ca (J.L. Grant), wyati@um.edu.my (Wan Nor Azriyati Wan Abd Aziz).

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The production of enclosed residential neighbourhoods

Although enclosed and fortified settlements have a storied history (Bagaeen & Uduku, 2010), contemporary gated communities began to emerge in large numbers as states adopted the political philosophy of neoliberalism—that is, the notion that the state should reduce its role to allow the market to operate more efficiently and effectively. Enclosure became common in the United States (Blakely & Snyder, 1997), Latin America (Caldeira, 2000; Thibert & Osorio, 2013), and parts of the Middle East (Glasze, 2006a, 2006b; Güzey, 2014) during the 1980s, and in Eastern Europe (Kovács & Hegedűs, 2014; Smigiel, 2013) and China (Miao, 2003; Pow, 2007) after the fall of the Iron Curtain. As enclosed communities have become more common in urban development, scholars have become increasingly interested in documenting the processes producing them and the social and spatial implications they generate.

The urban processes that accompanied neoliberal economic restructuring during and since the 1980s expanded the role of market forces in the housing and real estate sectors, privatised urban and social services, and increased the role of elites in shaping landscapes (Genis, 2007; Harvey, 2005). Partnerships between the state and private sector often privatised and commercialised public spaces and institutions (Hackworth, 2007), undermining access to the public realm. In some countries, such as the United States, private communities became the norm for new developments (Kohn, 2004; McKenzie, 1994). Wood, McGrath, and Young (2012) argued that neoliberalism increased inequality in cities and created new forms of exclusion. The results produced uneven geographies of urban development (Walks, 2009, p. 346).

Increasing isolation, boundaries, and separation between social groups characterises contemporary urban environment (Walks, 2006). Hodkinson (2012, p. 505) described urban enclosure as the 'modus operandi of neoliberal urbanism' as it privatises spaces, destroys use values, and seeks to displace and exclude the urban poor from parts of the city. Making space private allows authorities to use physical and social technologies to control access (Bottomley & Moore, 2007). Spatial ruptures generated by neoliberal urbanism may be visible (as in walls and gates) or ephemeral (as in policing and access policies). The Malaysia case will illustrate some ways in which state policies and local history influence how neoliberalism manifests in particular locales.

Several agents can generate urban enclosure. In some situations governments have adopted policies that encourage or require enclosure. For instance, in China (Miao, 2003; Pow, 2007) and Singapore (Pow, 2009) the state has used enclosure as a strategy for compliant management and social control. McKenzie (2005) noted that some U.S. jurisdictions effectively require private communities by insisting on self-management of quasi-public elements such as streets and vegetation. Government deregulation often allows private development markets greater opportunities in producing housing. Gating offers a niche market for developers, and has become the dominant practice in some countries. Changes to legislation to permit condominium or strata ownership facilitated the rise of private communities in the 1980s in the U.S., Canada, and Europe (Kohn, 2004; McKenzie, 1994). Homeowners', residents', and condominium associations have provided mechanisms for resident initiatives to enclose and control space (Nelson, 2005). Neighbourhood actions to enclose older districts are common in places such as South Africa where crime rates are high and authorities accept such community action (Landman, 2006), but rare elsewhere. Malaysia thus offers an uncommon example where resident agency produces enclosure.

Enclosures differentiate space for those inside from those outside. By definition, barriers imply a level of social segregation and spatial fragmentation. In the neoliberal city, those inside the walls are more commonly affluent than those outside: they use enclosure to exclude others. In many cases, gated communities privilege middle-class lifestyles and conspicuous consumption (Pow, 2009). Gated communities are often blamed for exacerbating residential and social segregation (Blakely & Snyder, 1997; Caldeira, 2000), although they may enable mix by providing security for higher income residents living near lower income neighbours (Clement & Grant, 2012; LeGoix, 2005; Manzi & Smith-Bowers, 2005). The nature of social fragmentation—who is inside, and who outside—varies from context to context.

The spatial implications of enclosure on mobility and accessibility in the city vary depending on the scale of enclosure and management policies around entry. Large gated areas and robust mechanisms of enclosure and policing limit access, fragment space, and disrupt urban mobility (Grant & Curran, 2007). Enclosures that reduce access to public goods and amenities, such as beaches or parks, are likely to prove socially as well as spatially disruptive (Clement & Grant, 2012; Grant & Rosen, 2009). Assessing the nature of restrictions provides insight into the extent to which enclosure fragments the city.

Spatial planning and urban development in many regions address the needs of those benefiting from the 'neoliberal turn' (Tasan-Kok, 2012). In Southeast Asia, enclosure provides privacy and exclusivity for emerging elites (Leisch, 2002; Huong & Sajor, 2010). Like other nations in the region, Malaysia reveals the influence of neoliberal urbanism and globalisation, and has seen the rise of new elites (Bunnell & Nah, 2004; Bunnell & Coe, 2005). Facilitated by the liberalising policies of the state, enclosure is creating a new landscape of control in contemporary Malaysia (Tedong et al., in press-b). Guarded neighbourhoods—with enclosure produced by residents on public streets—illustrate the political efforts of urban middle classes to wrest control of spaces in the city. Within the context of Malaysia's already racially-inflected social divisions (Gomez, 2004; King, 2008) enclosure adds social and spatial fragmentation based on class.

Locally contingent histories and cultural processes produce unique expressions of neoliberal urbanism (Grant & Rosen, 2009; Peck & Tickell, 2002). As we try to understand the changes in urban structures and processes wrought by contemporary economic and political conditions exploring diverse circumstances and responses proves informative. In the sections that follow we consider some of the social and spatial implications of guarded neighbourhoods in Selangor state in urban Malaysia. We argue that resident actions to barricade streets increase social and spatial fragmentation. Case studies of practice, such as that documented here, enhance understanding of the processes generating increasingly divided cities.

Malaysian urbanism: a legacy of polarisation

The unequal geographical distribution of indigenous, ethnic, and migrant groups characterises Malaysian urbanism (Gomez, 2004). Malaya society was racially segregated during British colonial rule[1]: ethnic communities of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Europeans were physically and socially segregated (Hirschman, 1975, 1986; Khader, 2012). The rubber and tin industries, which thrived from the late 1800s to the early 1920s, responded to labour shortages by importing migrant labour from India and China (Chin, 2000; Tajuddin, 2012). By 1931, migrant groups outnumbered indigenous Malays (Hirschman, 1975), but inter-ethnic social interactions proved rare (Tajuddin, 2012). Colonialism produced a demographically distinct and socially segregated landscape. Europeans, Chinese, and Indians lived in urban areas, while impoverished Malays occupied rural regions (Haque, 2003; Stark, 2006; Chakravarty &

[1] British colonialism began in Peninsula Malaya in 1874. In 1963, Peninsula Malaya became the independent Federation of Malaysia: Singapore seceded in 1965.