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CONDOMINIOS FECHADOS AND *BARRIOS PRIVADOS*

The rise of private residential neighbourhoods in Latin America

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Abstract

Private and gate-guarded residential neighbourhoods have sprawled in all major Latin American city regions during the last two decades. The aim of this text is an analysis of the spatial and social implications of the 'condominisation' of the urban landscape within a theoretical and empirical frame. Starting from a historical background, the actual patterns and consequences associated with the distribution of gated communities are discussed and presented in a model of the current Latin American city structure. Further attention will be focused on the relation between urban insecurity and the spread of the private neighbourhoods based on empirical data gathered via narrative and biographical interviews with inhabitants. From our results we conclude that insecurity and crime rates are not the driving forces motivating life behind gates but rather the achievement of an ideal lifestyle.

Introduction

Buenos Aires' inhabitants proudly introduce their city to visitors by enumerating records. Taking a taxi from the international airport to the city centre, everyone will learn that the Plate River is the broadest river crossing an agglomeration in the southern hemisphere or that 9th of July Avenue is the widest urban avenue crossing the densest central business district (CBD) in South America. By the late 1990s the Argentinian capital had notched up two more records: the widest metropolitan motorway on the subcontinent (16 lanes) links the dense city centre with Nordelta, Latin America's largest gated development. As we shall indicate, the so-called town-village (*CiudadPueblo*) of Nordelta contrasts with the rest of the 14-million-inhabitant mega-city, in which approximately 60 per cent of the population live on a daily income less than one euro.

> An avenue surrounded by palms. Great green areas and parks. Lime trees, spruces, willow-trees and magnolias. An enormous and silent water surface. And everything that design and comfort can nowadays introduce to achieve a better life. A place like this does exist. And it is not at the end of the world. It is exactly in the geographical centre of Nordelta. Its name is the Island.
>
> (Nordelta 2002)

Although Nordelta is far from being an isolated island, the marketing target is based on selling an image of a grand, self-sufficient garden city completely detached from the local and national economic and social setting. The 1,600-hectare development for about 80,000 inhabitants contains, among other facilities, a huge sports complex, its own private schools, a technical school and a private university. Despite the proximity to commercial and leisure facilities in nearby suburbs, Nordelta has its own mall and urban entertainment centre and also a Civic Centre (figure 7.1). These spaces have a pseudo-public character. Common spaces are available to Nordelta residents and help create a sense of local citizenship and social interactions, which is otherwise inhibited by the access controls at each of the 30 or so planned neighbourhoods inside Nordelta (eight of which are functional as of 2001). Public life in this sprawling urban club is well controlled, however, distinguishing it from equivalent spaces outside. Surveillance cameras monitor the use of public space and the unusual has a strong chance of being detected. Every point of the development can be reached by security or service vehicles within a 90-second response time.

Analysing the wish to attain distinction and the citizenship-building processes occurring in Nordelta, it is easy to conclude that this is not only an official strategy of the real-estate companies to improve the sale of the properties. Individuals living inside also follow a personal strategy that stresses the change in personal lifestyle that took place after moving to Nordelta. Many inhabitants refer to themselves as *Nordelteños*, in contrast to the local characterisation of Buenos Aires' inhabitants as *Porteños* (Janoschka 2002a: 90). Education institutions pick up the same nuance, such as the Catholic Cardinal Pironio College's promise of a 'new education for a new civilization'.

Nordelta is still the biggest and most complex private urban development in Latin America, but it is not alone. With the exception of Cuba, gated and access-restricted neighbourhoods have become a key part of the real-estate market throughout the whole continent. In this chapter, we comment on the historical evolution and contemporary importance of gated communities for Latin American city regions. The discussion focuses on the reasons for the proliferation of access-restricted neighbourhoods and the controversial question concerning urban insecurity. A comparative analysis based on empirical evidence from the authors' case studies in different cities and countries is used to characterise common aspects and differences in the phenomenon. We use a lifestyle-based analysis derived from our empirical work with inhabitants of gated communities. The likely political consequences for local administration

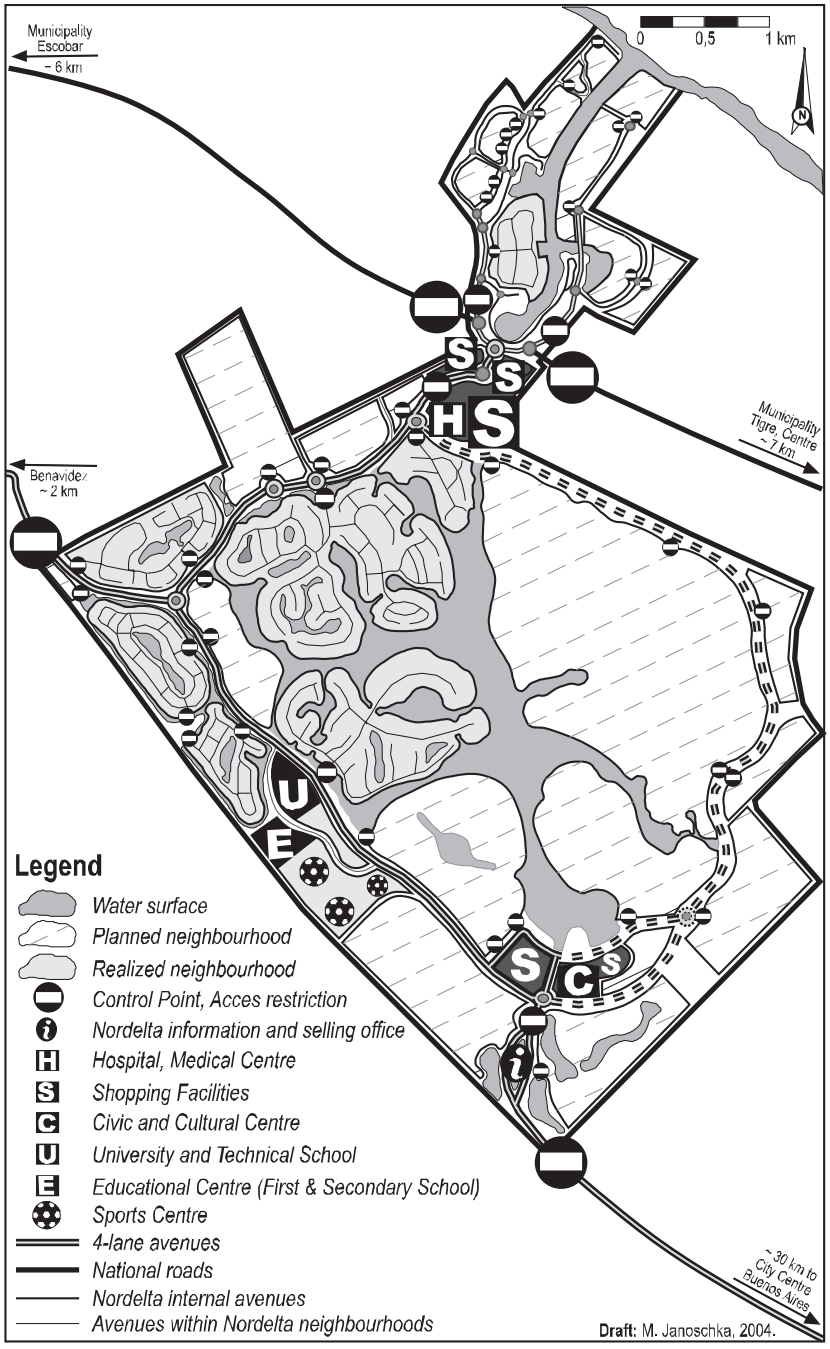

Figure 7.1 Town-village Nordelta, the major gated development in Latin America. Source: based on Janoschka 2002a, Janoschka 2004 and Nordelta 2002

and social contract between different classes are addressed in the conclusion. We begin with a short introduction to the socio-political and urban transformation processes in Latin America.

From polarised city to fragmented agglomeration

Massive changes have been taking place in Latin American societies since the early 1980s, when re-democratisation processes started to replace the military regimes of the previous decade. Regardless of the ideological orientation of the new democratic governments, capitalist and neo-liberal politics were implemented. That time marked the end of the development strategies employed since the start of the post-war period, strategies that were based on the substitution of imports by domestic industrialisation. This industrialisation was accompanied by import restrictions and active economic intervention by the public sector. From the 1980s this development strategy began to change towards one of integration into world markets, with subsequent lowering of tax barriers. Privatisation of state-owned companies and former state-organised services and a new pro-market ethos led to a complete reorientation of Latin American economic activity. Foreign direct investment and subjugation to open market laws led to a reduction of the importance of the public sector and in many countries induced a deindustrialisation process due to the greater competitiveness of imported products. In the social sphere, the results of the neo-liberal economic trend included a substantial increase in social polarisation (cf. Ciccolella 1999) and the rise of unemployment, despite high economic growth rates experienced by most Latin American countries in the 1990s.

Following the finance market crisis of the late 1990s, Latin America's economic panorama notoriously changed. With the exception of Chile and Mexico, the latter country profiting from NAFTA integration with the USA and Canada, the dynamics of Latin American economies became negative. Reverse capital flows were experienced from 1998 and still continue. Economic growth has been low and the income per capita has been slowly decreasing. Some countries, such as Argentina, Uruguay or Venezuela, suffered strong economic depressions accompanied by internal political problems. Under such conditions, social polarisation has accelerated (Ocampo 2003; Ruiz 2003).

In South American cities over the last 15 years, there has been a rapid modernisation of the urban infrastructure, driven in many cases by foreign investment. This investment was concentrated partly on basic urban services such as telephone and water provision, which are now owned by international companies providing an international standard of service for the middle and upper classes. However, investment also took place in the trappings of modern globalised cities: tolled motorways, private industrial parks, international hotel chains with integrated business facilities, shopping malls and hypermarkets, urban entertainment centres, multiplex cinemas and gated and access-restricted residential quarters in the city and the suburbs (Janoschka 2002b). The absence of state intervention in urban planning led to most new private

investment being directed towards an exclusive urban form, based on private transport. A new car-based lifestyle flourished, encouraging fragmentation and spatial segregation. While earlier decades of urban growth were driven primarily by lower-income migration from rural areas, the pattern has changed since the 1980s, with migration strongly declining. In the last two decades urban expansion has been substantially a result of the greater use of space per capita, chiefly driven by changes in residential areas of the upper and middle classes.

A model of fragmented agglomeration

During the period of development strategies led by import reduction, ending in the 1980s, one of the distinctive features of Latin American cities was the strong polarisation of urban spaces. Differentiation in social status was heavily bound to location within the city. Urban space was divided into polarised sectors creating a strongly differentiated rich city and poor city (Gilbert 1998). This has changed during the last two decades. Settlements of poor and rich people moved closer to one another due to the occupation of suburban and formerly poor areas by high-income populations. Poor families also installed themselves in abandoned, formerly homogeneous, middle- and upper-class districts. This process has been accompanied by a stronger delimitation of small areas (micro-neighbourhoods) often accompanied by private security services. This helps explain the function of gated communities in Latin American cities. They are homogeneous, highly segregated and protected areas allowing the middle and upper classes to cohabit increasingly scarce space. They are reshaping the physical and social ecology of urban space (Sabatini, Cáceres and Cerda 2001; Parnreiter 2004; see figure 7.2). They have become the new model of Latin American urban agglomeration.

In 1976 German geographers Bähr and Borsdorf published two independent models of Latin American city structure which were the starting point for an intense discussion in Europe and North America (Griffin and Ford 1980; Gormsen 1981; Deler 1992; Crowley 1995; Bähr and Mertins 1981; Borsdorf 1982). Following this, the dramatic transformations which occurred in Latin American city regions from the 1980s, were related to new theoretical insights in the work of Ford (1996), Meyer and Bähr (2001) and Borsdorf (2002a), who redesigned the traditional models or developed new models (Janoschka 2002b, 2002c), derived from new empirical data. Borsdorf, Bähr and Janoschka (2002) suggested a model which integrated the different arguments of the other authors (figure 7.3). City development in Latin America is characterised in four phases, which correspond to different modes of state intervention (urban planning) in the real-estate market.

In the early phase, the colonial time, the dominant planning principle was compactness of the urban body and a social gradient according to distance from the central plaza. Social status was higher close to the plaza due to the central social and political functions concentrated there and the high cost and the time of travel under available technology. This pattern gained importance

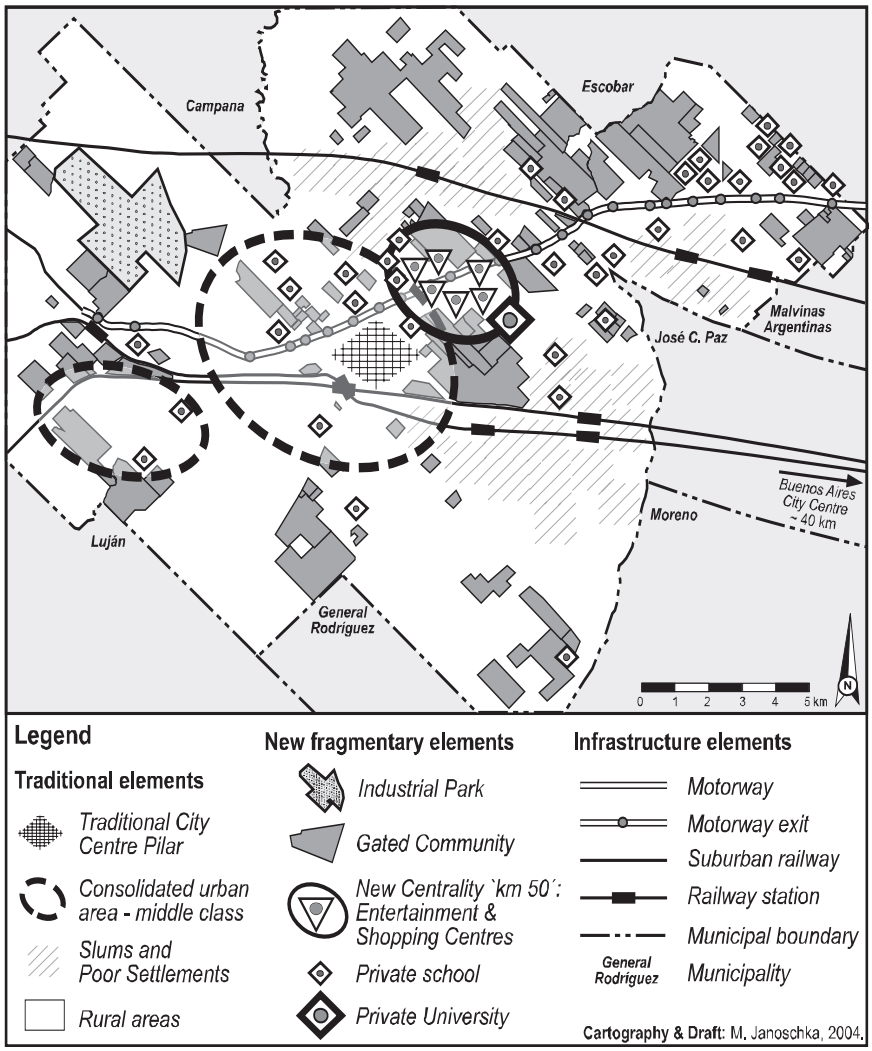

Figure 7.2 Fragmented urban space in the suburban municipality of Pilar in Buenos Aires, 2004. Source: Janoschka 2004

due to royal instructions for the foundation of cities, the subsequent location of the higher-order urban functions in and around the central plaza and the settlement of the colonial elite around the plaza.

After independence, linear structures began to gain in importance. The upper classes moved to new houses extending along the main street – the *prado*. The most important streets then became the location for market gardening and artisan activities and, later on, early industrial activity. These sectoral patterns did not completely change the older ring structure, but strongly transformed the urban format.

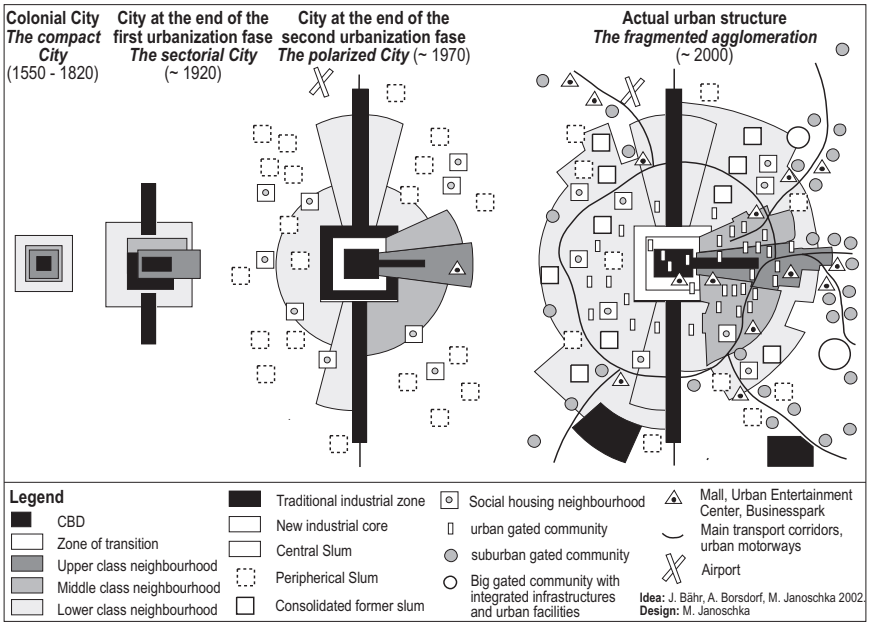

Figure 7.3 Borsdorf, Bähr and Janoschka's model of Latin American city structure. Source: Borsdorf, Bähr and Janoschka 2002; adapted

From the 1930s onwards movement from rural areas to urban centres caused a massive population increase, and the agglomeration process began to display intense polarisation between rich and poor areas, implying a development pattern typical of the modern industrial city (Marcuse 1989). The upper-class areas transferred from the centre towards the suburbs, but the main feature was the expansion of poor neighbourhoods. Formal urban political institutions became less and less able to set the guidelines for urban development, not only due to high growth rates, but also because of corrupt and polemic policies which alternated with authoritarian regimes during phases of dictatorship. The sectoral principle of urban growth remained broadly intact but was overlaid by the polarisation principle. Only some time later in this period did a process of cell-type growth begin in the peripheries. In suburban or outer urban areas there began to emerge neighbourhoods of low-income housing such those in illegal marginal areas (*favelas*, *villas miserias*), creating a cellular pattern, which started to gain importance.

During the last two decades, as we have indicated, urban expansion took a different direction. To be more specific, contemporary development can be characterised along the following lines (Janoschka 2002c: 65f):

- Gated communities for the upper and middle classes are appearing throughout the whole metropolitan area, breaking with the sectoral concentration of upper-class areas.
- The dispersion of malls, shopping centres and urban entertainment centres is taking place across the whole agglomeration, no longer concentrated in the upper-class sectors.
- Gated communities occupying a larger area and integrating more and more urban functions are becoming more common. Complexity and size of major gated communities are passing the level of small cities, particularly in São Paulo and Buenos Aires, but also in smaller cities such as Córdoba in Argentina.
- New transport infrastructure is helping shape this dispersal, with proximity to a motorway entrance being the most important influence shaping the spatial pattern of demand for detached housing areas.
- Industrial production is becoming suburbanised and logistical activities located in peripheral industrial or business parks.
- Lower social groups and marginal areas are increasingly segregated through walls or more informal barriers to access.

The crucial spatial influence on the new fragmentary and nodal urban structure is the transformation of the transport system, especially the motorways. These have been transformed from insufficient and saturated low-capacity highways to modern and effective ones. This has chiefly been made possible by private investment and so the stimulus for widespread private-led urban development under the neo-liberal political and economic governance regimes has been private-led modernisation of the transport infrastructure. Strong reduction in commuting times made suburban locations newly interesting to the middle and upper classes, whose valuation of time is that much greater.

As a result of the increased accessibility of the urban periphery, the cellular developments there, which in former times were predominantly in marginal areas, are becoming more integrated into the market sphere and increasingly interesting investment areas for real-estate enterprises. Another feature of the fragmentation process relates to the location of different urban functions. This is especially notable in the retail sector. Although the urban centres have gained new importance due to renovation programmes and other upgrading intervention, they cannot compete with suburban malls, which represent a North American lifestyle of rising popularity. Social exclusion works here not through the construction of walls but by accessibility. These islands of consumption and leisure are generally accessible only to those who have access to a car. However, while the first malls were clearly oriented to the upper-class market in the urban upper-class sector, such facilities are now found in the whole urban area due to the dispersion of the upper and middle class. This implies a degree of improvement in the access of the poor. Poorer areas also have been transformed during the last two decades. Marginal areas have been integrated into the city and in some cases have been upgraded. On the other

hand, there are numerous cases of marginal areas which have resisted any integration and are now almost inaccessible nodes of criminality.

This discussion of the transformation of Latin American city structure shows that urban enclosure of the environment and the resulting fragmentation of accessibility is not only the preference of the high-income population, but a more general societal principle. In order to understand the specific case of Latin America better, a historical analysis of the rise and diffusion of gated residential neighbourhoods is presented in the next section.

The history of gated residential neighbourhoods in Latin America

Discussion about gated communities in Latin America is dominated by characterisation of the new aspects of urban dynamics (Meyer and Bähr 2001; Coy and Pöhler 2002), the growing importance of a North American-dominated lifestyle and the impacts of global real-estate firms and a globalised elite labour force and consumption sector. Globalisation and the fear of criminality are two central arguments used to explain the proliferation of gated communities. These aspects should not be neglected, but analysing the appearance of gates from a historical point of view tempers the macro-explanations with local specificity. It is possible to find important lines of explanation in the typical behaviour of the Latin American elites through decades if not centuries.

The Spanish colonial cities of Latin America were open and without city walls. But this openness was accompanied by strong internal closure. The residential buildings – atrium houses with internal patios – were closed towards the street with heavy wooden doors, and until the mid-19th century windows were small and located to guarantee privacy. Even inside the buildings, different grades of segregation and privacy were established; guests never had access to the second or third patio, which was reserved for women or for garden activities (cf. Borsdorf 2002b). Also in the colonial epoch, enclosed neighbourhoods for multiple households, notably widows, orphans or priests, are reported in cities such as Santa Catalina in Arequipa or the Hospitolio Cabañas in Guadalajara (cf. Borsdorf 2002b: 239). During the nineteenth century, another form of access-restricted neighbourhood emerged – company towns for the workers and employees of mining companies. These were highly segregated and in many cases walled or with other public-access restrictions. These examples show that the principle of gating has occurred in Latin American cities throughout history, but this does not differ so much from what is known about European cities.

The more significant precursor to the modern closed neighbourhood was the presence of poor households in the atrium houses of central areas. This occurred from the late 19th century, when the owners of such houses moved towards the latest fashionable areas of the expanding city. Single-family atrium houses were subdivided, and each room rented to a low-income family. This transformation occurred in all bigger Latin American cities. The housing areas were called *tugurios* in Peru or *vecindades* in Mexico. In Chile and Argentina the

term *conventillo* semantically connotes the concept of the walled sacred communities already referred to. The wooden entry gates of the former patio houses were transformed into 24-hour, guarded entrances to prevent the entry of new neighbours who did not pay rent. When the historical building stock was filled, this kind of structure was also reproduced in new lower-income areas, for example in Chile during the 1920s and 1930s or in Mexico until the early 1950s. Hidalgo (1999) and Rovira (2002) point out the similarity of these neighbourhoods to the gated communities of lower-income groups in the late 20th century. In a context of political instability, military regimes and the loss of state control, the gated communities of these groups become comprehensible presently and historically.

A parallel exists with many Latin American slum areas on city outskirts, called *favelas* in Brazil and *villas miserias* in Argentina. In most cases, the origins of these settlements, which sprawled in Latin America from the 1950s, are irregular if not outright illegal. The lack of legality led to a series of hardline state interventions including mass evacuations and demolition in the 1960s and 1970s. This followed and exacerbated a rising criminalisation of these areas (headquarters of drug dealing, organised criminality) and it induced the creation of internal organisation structures to prevent the access of persons living outside. These were not created in the same way as modern entrepreneurial gated communities but the effect is very similar. The public cannot enter and a part of the city has become enclosed and locally governed.

There are also historical precursors to gated communities for the upper classes. Some authors have suggested that the origin of the 'wealthy' gated communities can be traced to the country clubs or golf club model. Borsdorf (2002b) describes the case of Mexico City, where, at the beginning of the 20th century, golf was imported by wealthy English immigrants and became rapidly popular among the European upper class. In the case of Buenos Aires, the first country clubs were built in the early 1930s, also emulating the lifestyle of the English-oriented bourgeoisie (Janoschka 2002d). At the time of their foundation, such clubs were still far away from the city, but the rapid growth of the agglomeration brought them within the urban core during the second half of the 20th century. Clubs found it necessary to guard their territories and secure the entrance due to low occupation during the week and the close proximity of potential trespassers. Up to the early 1970s the number of these clubs was low and they were still mostly used for vacation and weekend activities. From that time, however, a first wave of diffusion of such clubs was observable. As an example, about 70 country clubs for the upper and upper middle classes were founded in Buenos Aires in the mid-1980s, mainly for sports activities in a quasi-natural environment.

Gated neighbourhoods in the last two decades

Linking today's wealthy gated communities with their historical antecedents, advertisement remains focused on connecting gated housing with an elitist

lifestyle, as the quotation from a Nordelta publicity leaflet shows clearly at the beginning of this chapter. Until the mid-20th century, European elites provided the reference points; now it is North America. Many advertisements, especially in Colombia and Brazil, offer a recipe for achieving this target lifestyle. Photos and remarks about lifestyle in Miami accompany the discourse of fear and insecurity which is especially strong in those two countries. The result is the construction of exotic habitats, including a range of temperate-zone plant species not naturally occurring in Latin America.

Constructing a typology of these developments begins with a problem of definition. Throughout Latin America, a range of terms are in common use. The meaning of the same word may substantially vary in different countries. *Condomínio fechado* (Brazil), *barrio privado* (Argentina) or *fraccionamiento cerrado* (Mexico) stand for different products of the real-estate market in the different countries, and even the term *barrio cerrado* (closed neighbourhood), used in various countries such as Chile, Ecuador and Bolivia, has a wide range of meanings. Therefore we adopt a consistent language using English terms.

Three main types of gated neighbourhood can be differentiated by structure, location and size. The three groups are defined as follows:

- Urban gated communities, which can be defined as groups of attached houses or tower blocks with few common facilities. The target of these developments may be middle- or lower middle-class families in intermediate locations (even social housing projects) or upper middle- to upper-class families in central areas where land shortage limits the development of common facilities. This category also includes the enclosure of existing areas, in most cases upper-class single-family housing areas in central or intermediate locations.
- Suburban gated communities, predominantly for the middle and upper classes with single detached houses. These developments share a wide range of common facilities including sports and community facilities and landscaped gardens. There are also suburban gated communities without common facilities and these may be oriented to lower middle-income groups.
- Mega-projects with integrated cultural and educational facilities. Although there are still only a few of these projects, the dynamics and the internationalisation of the real-estate market make this the most rapidly growing segment.

All three types have boomed throughout Latin America. Between 1990 and 2001, in Mexico City, around 750 new gated neighbourhoods with almost 50,000 housing units were launched on the market (Parnreiter 2004). In the Argentinian capital Buenos Aires more than 450 suburban gated communities currently exist, 80 per cent of them were started between 1995 and 2001. A dozen of these reach a size of more than 5,000 inhabitants (Janoschka 2002a). To this figure an unknown number of urban gated communities known as

garden-towers *(torre jardín*, cf. Welch 2002*)* must be added in Argentina. In 2002 more than 130 of these garden-towers were listed in the local newspapers as offering new apartments. The quantity of pre-existing stock is unknown. Estimation of the total population ranges between 300,000 and 600,000 persons. In another example, Pöhler (1999) estimates that more than 100,000 people live in *condomínios fechados* in Rio de Janeiro's upper-class and beach-oriented city expansion area called Barra da Tijuca. Brazil's financial centre and mega-city São Paulo also has a mega-project, Alphaville, with around 35,000 inhabitants and more than 100,000 people working inside the gates. Gated communities have also diffused to secondary cities such as Córdoba, Argentina (1.3 million inhabitants). Within the metropolitan area there are more then 50 gated residential developments; one of them, Valle Escondido (Hidden Valley), promoted with the slogan 'the new city', offers a cluster of different gated communities for a total population of approximately 25,000 inhabitants (Roca 2001; ECIPSA 2003). Data for Curitiba in Brazil estimate the number of gated communities at about 300. This pattern is repeated in most big Latin American cities. In medium-size cities (less than 500,000 inhabitants) and in some cases even in small towns (for example Gualeguaychú, Entre Rios, Argentina), gated communities are also becoming more and more common.

The market share of gated housing complexes is extremely difficult to estimate. There are poor statistical data for the construction sector and in most cases differentiation between the products is not clearly specified. For the case of Buenos Aires, our own calculation is that there are about 100,000 units in the city's suburban gated communities. In relation to the whole housing stock, which is about 3 million, the market share represents not more than three per cent. But considering only the proportion of suburban housing, the market share has already risen to 10 per cent. If the calculation is based on the demand group (the upper 15–20 per cent of the population in terms of income, equivalent to 450,000 households), these 100,000 units represent between 20 and 25 per cent of the market share. The market for single detached houses or lots for construction of detached houses in suburban locations is more or less synonymous with gated communities. During the period of macro-economic stability from 1991 to 2001, between 80 and 90 per cent of urban expansion was related to the expansion of gated communities.

To these figures should be added the 'quasi' gated communities; streets and neighbourhoods with strong vigilance and closure of access during the night or retrospectively enclosed neighbourhoods, which do not appear as gated developments in the open real-estate market. Also, social housing projects from the 1970s, which are nowadays walled and gate-guarded, add to the contemporary stock of enclosed neighbourhoods. The same happens with a whole range of areas which are inaccessible due to internal governance and the predominance of criminal structures.

Urban insecurity

Our earlier discussion showed that the proliferation of gated communities started in Latin America long before political decisions led to internationalisation of the region's economy. Neither globalisation nor Americanisation of society can adequately on their own explain the peculiar rise in gated housing areas in Latin American cities.

Explanations focussing on security seem at first sight rather convincing. Superficially there seems to be a temporal correlation between the socio-economic transformation of most Latin American societies, which led to a substantial rise of urban insecurity, and the proliferation of enclosed neighbourhoods (Caldeira 2000; Dammert 2001). The development of gated housing complexes seems to be a rational solution not only for the richest parts of the population, but also for everyone else. It is an obvious consequence of rising criminality. Empirical data from several studies in Latin America show, however, that concern about criminality cannot fully explain why people move to a gated neighbourhood. The exception is Colombia, where about 40,000 murders per year are committed due to haphazard and organised violence and internal political conflict. However, in all other cases there are more important reasons than violence in itself. Between different countries and cities, the significance of the fear of violence varies. Caldeira (2000) showed that for the Brazilian city of São Paulo, urban violence reached such high levels that most inhabitants of gated communities had direct experience of some kind of criminality before making the decision to move inside the gates. This experience is also found in several big Brazilian cities and also in Mexico City. But this may not be a representative picture for the rest of the cities in the hemisphere. Biographical interviews with inhabitants of Nordelta in Buenos Aires, for example, show that despite media discourse and marketing emphasis, which stress fear of crime, inhabitants of the private city do not mention these factors as key influences on their decision to move there (Janoschka 2002a). There are several aspects which are more important for the new inhabitants of Nordelta. These include:

- Political and economic insecurity in the wider city, accompanied by the incapacity of the state to organise urban services and social infrastructure.
- The enhanced urban and suburban environment in the gated city, created by high levels of private investment. On the one hand, suburban spaces were viewed as more attractive because of the better standard of infrastructure (motorways, private schools, shopping and entertainment facilities). On the other hand, the urban environment outside was viewed as being degraded due to increasing density, rising motorisation and state retreat from maintenance of public spaces.
- The desire for a change of personal lifestyle and the search for a more socially homogeneous environment. Nordelta inhabitants are mainly between 35 and 40 years old and have one or more children. The location

gives them space and time with the family and outdoor activities for the children. The decision to move into the private city is an option to change lifestyle and guarantee a secure and predictable quality of life for the family. The package purchased is not only the immediate benefits within the gates but also the chance of a high standard of education and future networks for the children, to help secure the long-term social standard of the family.

- Last, but not least, the wish to achieve a new lifestyle is motivated by face-to-face propaganda, personal knowledge and group behaviour. Most people moving to Nordelta know from relatives and friends how life is organised in the gated neighbourhood. Some people even commented on friend group pressure as a determinant for their decision. In certain social groups you are 'out' if you do not move to the suburban gated neighbourhood.

Empirical data collected by the authors from other Latin American cities, such as Santiago de Chile, Mexico City or Quito, show similar patterns (Janoschka 2002e). Despite the huge differences in urban settings, social behaviour and socio-economic development between different countries in Latin America, the importance of criminality is much lower than expected and in many cases irrelevant.

Conclusion

The physical fragmentation processes analysed in this paper are having an impact on the nature of urban life. Inhabitants of Latin American gated communities rapidly change their lifestyle and fully adapt their daily habits to life within an access-restricted area. Local public spaces lose their basic role as points of interaction between different classes as each class organises its own homogeneous space 'inside'. This tendency rises with the growing complexity of urban functions within the new private cities, as shown in the example of Nordelta. Inhabitants are increasingly living live in bubbles which are detached from the surrounding local political and social environments. The central difference compared to former times is the fact that today all social classes show signs of wanting to escape from the wider public sphere.

Latin American elites never strongly oriented themselves towards their own society but followed lifestyles imported from Europe and later from the US. A life behind walls may lead gated neighbourhood inhabitants even further away from the social reality of their 'home' society, which for the great majority of the population consists of a struggle for daily survival. From this point of view, the proliferation of gated neighbourhoods must surely inevitably lead to a decrease in solidarity between different social groups. The historical behaviour of the elites in Latin America today dominates also the middle- and lower middle-class populations. During the gating boom of the last two decades, neither Latin American media nor urbanists, architects or politicians have recognised it as a long-term problem for society. This is not surprising since all these groups, which are helping lead economic progress, directly or indirectly benefit from the

gated communities. With the exception of Brazil and Colombia, gated neighbourhoods are partly a product of an imagined insecurity promoted by the media and real-estate companies, both gaining from exaggerating fears. On the other hand, as we have argued, residents may respond not so much to the security on offer as to the provision of neighbourhood services and facilities. Real-estate agents, developers, the media and an army of willing consumers have wielded sufficient economic power to prevent local and regional governments from attempting to regulate gated communities. Politics in Latin America are not driven so much by the implementation of citizens' desires as by the pressure of particular interests, and gated communities represent the perfection of Latin American traditions applied by the regional elite. Only recently and in the light of economic crisis is a rethink process starting, in which the negative consequences of urban disintegration through gated neighbourhoods have been raised. The announcement from the urban government in La Paz, Bolivia to open by force a dozen gated neighbourhoods to the public in March of 2003 shows that changes in urban policies may be possible in the future. Credible politicians and active civic participation are required to increase public awareness of urban social problems. And the problems being stored up by a fragmented urban form have not yet had the political debate in Latin America that they deserve.

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