



Crime, order and social control

Gated communities

Sarah Blandy:

I'm Sarah Blandy, I'm a senior lecturer in the School of Environment and Development at Sheffield Hallam University, and my main area is housing law. The planners would probably say that, a gated community is one where, you can't get up to somebody's front door, so your access to what would normally be public space, is restricted by a barrier of some kind. I think I would go for a definition that, is about restriction of public access, to what would normally be expected to be public space.

Mark Tran:

My name is Mark Tran. The development used to be a hospital, on Holloway road, the Great Northern Hospital I believe, and it consists of about a hundred and seventy flats. My brother describes it as a yuppie enclave, and you can see what he means when you look at the cars, parked inside the development. Porsches, Peugeot's, so fairly affluent set of people.

Sarah Blandy:

We've had quite a few survey questionnaires returned, and we asked people what were their reasons for purchasing a property in the gated community, and what is coming up very strongly is that the top priority is security, closely followed by maintenance of property values.

Mark Tran:

It's a good selling point to sell the flats, as part of a gated community, given the fact that there are these security concerns, which seem to be on the rise, with increasing media attention to street crime, theft of mobile phones.

Sarah Blandy:

There's often use of technology, so either electronic gates, or there's an electronic keypad that you have to key in the right numbers to get in, or commonly CCTV cameras, you can open the gate and walk in as a pedestrian. As soon as you do, the CCTV is trained on you, and it follows you around the site, and that will obviously be beamed back to the person in the gatehouse.

Mark Tran:

Living in a gated community gives you a sense of security, although it has to be said that, in our particular case, it can be misleading because, the fences are not high enough.

Sarah Blandy:

One person I interviewed was, on her own during the week with her children, and she was saying it was a comfort to her to know that if the two older children got back from school before she got back from work, they would be safe, they would be within the walls, behind the gates, they'd be safer there.

Mark Tran:

Because foolproof security, can be a bit of a misnomer, it's misleading, and in some ways, it can attract people, it can present a target for the, if you'd like to call them, unsavoury elements in the neighbourhood. Because, in London, you're never far away from some of the more unsalubrious aspects of city life.

Sarah Blandy:

Most of the people we've interviewed have been, very aware, as they see it of rising crime figures. It probably reduces what criminologists seem to be calling situational crimes, so the sort of opportunistic crime. But actually in terms of burglary, and possibly more serious crime,

the evidence from the states is that they don't, there much the same as the streets immediately surrounding the gated community.

Mark Tran:

I mean when you read stories about kids having their mobile phones nicked and, people getting mugged as they're getting out of their cars, then this obviously plays into the hands of developers, and they're going to cash in on anything that's going to push their properties and sales. They can't say that security was a factor for me, but I know for some of my neighbours, particularly some of the women neighbours, I think security was a concern for them. With concerns about crime, they've obviously become a desirable place to live.

Sarah Blandy:

The images in the marketing brochure, are very much about, people in fairly anonymous surroundings, nice design, sort of hi-tech fridge's etc, lovely stripped wooden floors, and, they're marketing the lifestyle I think. But they certainly do feature the security, quite heavily, and I think a bit of the text actually says, crime rates are rising, but here you will feel secure, and there's little images down the side of the camera, the gates, the, you know the person looking at the bank of screens which are monitoring what's going on inside the community.

Roger Bolton:

Still with me in the studio is Richard Solley, a Community Safety Officer with the local council, and Gordon Hughes, senior lecturer in Criminology and Social Policy at the Open University. Gordon, where did these communities originate? Where have they started to emerge? Is it in cities where you have quite affluent areas right next to quite deprived areas, and as if you like, it's middle class fear, is that what you're saying?

Gordon Hughes:

Yeah, I think it is in part middle class fear, it's also I guess, reflecting, almost a denial of the public sphere, that citizens in a town or a country share. It's actually, I think it reflects a growing sense of 'I am an individual first and foremost', rather than 'I am a member of a common community'.

Roger Bolton:

What fragmentation of society?

Gordon Hughes:

Certainly fragmentation of society yes.

Roger Bolton:

Richard Solley in Milton Keynes, what's the demand for gated communities?

Richard Solley:

Well I'm not aware of any, although there may be. It's probably because Milton Keynes has actually thrived on being quite an open society. What we have done, is to experiment quite a lot with defensible space, which is a slightly different concept. Grading space between private space, semi-private, semi-public and public. That means that, that space can be invaded, but we tend to look at it in different ways, and we don't put fences around.

Roger Bolton:

But Gordon Hughes, you could say that these places work, if it makes those who are within them feel happier and safer, particularly women on their own, older people who are, aware of their physical infirmities, and they're obviously scared of young, strong men invading their houses, if they're happier, then they've worked, isn't that a justification?

Gordon Hughes:

I think there's also, there's some emerging evidence actually, that the opposite effect can also occur that, by constantly emphasising the importance of having your exclusive means of security, it makes you more aware, of the possibilities of unsafety, of insecurity, of fear of the other.

Roger Bolton:

Gordon Hughes, are you sceptical about gated communities because for you they represent these sort of individual feeling, I can just pull up the drawbridge, and I don't have to worry about the rest of society, that it might be divisive. You know people think, oh I'm alright Jack, why should I worry about someone else?

Gordon Hughes:

I think that is a major concern for me, both as a researcher, but also as a citizen, of the UK, and again, if we think of the history, that many of the gated community experiments have come from America, a highly individualistic society, where wealth counts, and I'm not saying that that's never been the case in Britain, remember we've always had our landed estates that were gated communities.

However, I think there is an, another tradition that we may want to hold on to. It's often called the social democratic tradition, and it's the notion that security in this case, and the lack of fear about crime and disorder, should be something that's collectively owned.

Roger Bolton:

Collective security, sometimes used in a different context, but you think it should apply here?

Gordon Hughes:

Yes.

Roger Bolton:

Gordon Hughes, is community safety and crime prevention virtually the same thing?

Gordon Hughes:

I think they're often used interchangeably by politicians, and indeed by policy makers, but, certainly from my own research and that of others in the field over the last decade since community safety has emerged, as a word that we now all use. I'd argue that there is a clear distinction between the two. Crime prevention, is primarily targeted on certain types of crime historically.

They have been the street crimes, the crimes against property, the visible crimes. Community safety has a much wider agenda, it's actually about addressing harms that are not always criminalised. For instance one harm that community safety policies in localities seek to address, would be issues around, pollution caused by traffic fumes. It would be around issues like hidden harms that take place in the home and elsewhere, such as bullying.

Roger Bolton:

Richard Solley, would you accept that wider definition. I mean would you ten fifteen years ago, been, have been called a crime prevention officer, whereas you're now a community safety officer?

Richard Solley:

Possibly, I think that there is a distinction, I think that, crime prevention, crime reduction if you like is concerned with the facts of crime. Community safety has got more to do with perception, and the fear of crime, is generally higher than the actual crime levels in society, and what we're tackling, just as much as the reality of crime, and disorder, is fear of crime. In Milton Keynes, we've got a system of redways, pathways that people use also cycle ways, and the fear of crime on those redways is actually very high. Although in actual fact, there isn't much crime. But we've got to take the fear of crime as being as real, as the crime itself.

Roger Bolton:

So you're not just concerned with community safety, you're concerned with the community's perception of its safety?

Richard Solley:

Absolutely.

Roger Bolton:

And what do you do to persuade them, that the redways are safer than they think?

Richard Solley:

Well one thing is, not to engage in a war of rhetoric, and just to use the press to say hey, come on they are safer, we've got to take the community's perception at its face value. If there's a fear of crime, then we've got to find out why that exists, could be because the bushes are getting too high. Could be because of dark underpasses. It could be because of young people hanging around, not doing anything particularly, but just apparently threatening people. And then we've got to find ways of addressing those issues.

Roger Bolton:

So community safety is making people feel safer, as much as it's, actual prevention of crime?

Richard Solley:

Yes, very much so.

Roger Bolton:

Think in the end Richard Solley, that this is adoption of despair. Gated communities, they might have a short term effect, but in the end it's no real answer.

Richard Solley:

I think it could be an answer for those that live in the gated communities, if it makes them feel safer, I don't think that it's going to have a major effect on, the majority of people that are facing crime.

Roger Bolton:

Well could we now summarise where we've got to in this discussion, because there's a danger that some people who are listening to this, may think well we've pooh poohed and poured, not scorn, certainly had a sceptical tone about any initiative. Are you suggesting that whereas you're critical of perhaps the overblown claims for individual things that we've been discussing, that together they actually, almost all of them can play a role?

Richard Solley:

Absolutely, I think that every initiative we've looked at, can play a very positive role in crime reduction. I would emphasise that they're all part of a menu of resources.

Roger Bolton:

And Gordon Hughes, the suggestion seems to be, that you know, right at the heart of this, is a conceiving ourselves as a society that we all belong to, and we all have a responsibility to, from the individual offender, realising he's offending against somebody like him, or her, to the rest of us realising that we can't opt out, we can't build our castles.

Gordon Hughes:

Indeed yes, I mean I, again, in the work that I've been involved in, one of the crucial things to hold onto I think, is a notion of community safety, rather than just, crime prevention.

Roger Bolton:

Or individual safety.

Gordon Hughes:

Indeed.