



Welfare, crime and society

Gated communities: insiders and outsiders

VOICE OVER COMMENTARY

The relationship between closed access residential spaces and the concept of communities is the subject of academic and policy debate.

SARAH NEAL

The term community is an important part of the bigger term gated communities. And that's because community carries with it such a range of associations, and perhaps the most dominant association with the word community lifestyles is a warm glow, is a good association, a positive association. It speaks to us of social bonds, of social togetherness, of trust, of familiarity, of social care, really, and social wellbeing.

What it involves is people who belong to that community, knowing about each other, about looking out for each other, about keeping an eye on each other, a kindly eye. So I think we can understand that, that process of looking out for each other as a form of surveillance, and that form of surveillance takes the form itself of everyday practices of care and kindness, of neighbourliness, of knowing about each other and looking after each other. And that is one of the key interpretations of community and forms the basis of why community has an appeal for us as human beings.

VOICE OVER COMMENTARY

Debates about community have also been concerned with how community makes distinctions between people.

SARAH NEAL

Another way we have to understand community not simply as having good associations, but also being able to act as a marker of boundary, as a marker of difference, between those people that it includes within it and embraces, and those that it excludes and denies.

In working as a boundary, community requires surveillance again. It requires practices of watching out for the dangers of those that don't belong, those that are a threat to those that do belong. So those outsiders have to have an eye kept on them, they have to be kept out or are viewed with suspicion or hostility. This can lead to tensions within social relations.

VOICE OVER COMMENTARY

We can understand that insider and outsider boundaries and the practices of 'watching out for' are an integral part of gated communities. To work effectively, gated communities require the walls, fences and gates as well as other access monitoring techniques.

SARAH BLANDY

Surveillance plays a considerable part, I would say. The old idea of kind of eyes on the street, people looking out for each other has in fact, I think, been replaced by either paid employees or, more generally, by electronic surveillance in the form of CCTV. And interestingly, I think that meets concerns both about outsiders, who shouldn't be getting in anyway, but also about people within the community. We interviewed one woman who said that she was very pleased that there was CCTV within the gated community because it meant that she could send her children out to play unsupervised, that they would be watched, even if that was watched, you know, several hundred miles away by whatever company was monitoring the images. But it made her feel safe.

There are certainly some gated communities that we looked at in the national survey that seemed to be, you know, delightful places to live. There would be children playing out, clearly people who lived within the gated community knew each other very well and they talked about community activities in a very positive way. However, in others the, the fact that the community was physically enclosed had not led at all to greater social community cohesion.

SARAH NEAL

Gated communities appear to offer, or speak to, a desire for community, a sense of belonging, a sense of togetherness. And I think that's been accentuated in the contemporary political time because of a decline in trust, a rise in insecurity, a sense of precariousness, a growth in social fear and anxiety, and I think that is a transnational kind of mood, that precariousness. And in that context, community, with all its good associations, becomes much more intense and, on the other hand, we can see gated communities as a response to that precariousness, a response to people's senses of insecurity, their worries about social disorder. So certainly we could understand gating as social retreat, as well as a search for more socialness.