

Department of Urban Studies, University of Glasgow

"Gated Communities:
Building Social Division or Safer Communities?"

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"Gated communities" in Mexico City

Dr Angela Giglia,
Department of Anthropology,
Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana,
Mexico City
ag@xanum.uam.mx

Based on a long term field investigation, the paper addresses the issue of gated communities in Mexico City as a specific form of the crisis of public space and urban order in a stratified society. By comparing five forms of "walled neighbourhoods", the paper shows their common characteristics in spite of their morphologic differences. Living in segregated residential spaces in Mexico City is a complex social process which is not only the result of the fear of crime but also a way to escape from urban disorder, to establish islands of social homogeneity and to experiment new forms of local government.

Forms of enclosure and representations of unsafety

It is well known that in big cities, the current concern about security and maintenance of social order express themselves through social and spatial segregation processes. Examples of this phenomenon are the so-called closed spaces –which can be residential, commercial or dedicated to the supply of services. These enclosures are under surveillance, and they aspire to be impenetrable for strangers and “undesirable” people. From their different access devices to their regulations, which define what can or cannot be done inside them, these spaces respond to a specific logic of control that does not always fit with observance to individual rights, such as the right to free transit or movement, or the right to privacy.

I wish to expound here some considerations about the urban experience of people who live in residential areas with different types of enclosure in Mexico City, and their representations concerning urban security and insecurity as well as “urban order”. These ideas stem from an ethnographic comparison between five different types of “walled neighbourhoods”, which I have been able to undertake during the last three years employing such techniques as participant observation and open interviews, both personally and as the adviser of some students¹.

The neighbourhoods studied are a middle-low class residential development called Villa Panamericana; a middle class residential development called Villa Olímpica; a middle-high class horizontal condominium in Camino a Santa Teresa Street, a high-class walled

¹ Cf. Miriam Sosa, *Habitar en calles cerradas en el caso de Coapa*, Tesis de Maestría, FLACSO, Costa Rica, 2002, as well as Rocío Echevarría, *La Villa Panamericana*, Trabajo terminal de licenciatura en antropología social, julio 2003.

neighbourhood in the Ajusco's forest named Tlalpuente, and two confined middle-class blocks in Coapa's zone².

Villa Panamericana (Sections 1, 2 and 3).

Villa Panamericana has a surface area of about 2 square kilometers. It was named "Panamericana" because the 1975 Panamerican Games took place there. This residential development is located between the Anillo Periférico Sur, the Imán Avenue, Céfiro Street, Aponecas Street, and Adolfo Ruiz Cortínez Boulevard. It is a welfare housing complex built by INFONAVIT from 1972 to 1985, and is presently one of the biggest residential developments in the city, with a population of 15,000 inhabitants. Many of the buildings are enclosed with either iron bars or stone walls, vegetation or brick fences. In some cases, the iron bars have an entrance door which seldom works or which is usually kept open. There are some frequently tidy shared areas inside the neighbourhood that contain some infrastructural elements and repairs made by the inhabitants themselves; however, there are also some neglected spaces, full of rubbish and covered with graffiti.

This neighbourhood is considered by its residents themselves as an unsafe place, because of the impossibility of keeping drug addicts and thieves under control. There is an obvious and recurring presence of young homeless beggars who use to sleep in the gardens.

² This paper draws on some empirical work already published. See Giglia 2000, 2002, 2003.

Villa Olímpica

Villa Olímpica was built as a residential unit for the athletes who came for the 1968 Olympic Games. It is located on Insurgentes Avenue, close to its crossroads with Anillo Periférico, in a very strategic area in the southern part of the city. It comprises nine hundred and four apartments, most of them the same size (with three bedrooms, a living-room and a service area), distributed among twenty nine ten-story buildings. The first residents of this development were markedly homogeneous in socioeconomic terms, with high schooling family chiefs (either professional or semi-professional), whose wives used to work outside the house instead of being just housewives (González Reyes 1991: 61 ss.). There have been some changes in this original social composition; however, there is still a strong presence of middle-class intellectuals, some of them from abroad, since Villa Olímpica has been a shelter for exiled people from South America and, more recently, for families coming from Asia and Eastern Europe.

The inner characteristics of the apartments, their display and size, the plentiful parking places and the green areas still make of Villa Olímpica a high-quality place, both in functional as in urban terms. The neighbourhood is completely walled and has a single entrance which is controlled by guards 24 hours a day.

Camino a Santa Teresa Horizontal Condominium

This walled neighbourhood was built by a private construction company during the 1970's. It comprises twenty two equal houses, each of which has a surface area of about 200 square meters and five bedrooms. At the beginning, this development was inhabited by middle-class well-off young families with small children. It was surrounded by a forest and

there was nothing else in the surrounding area. Nowadays, a first generation of children has started leaving the neighborhood and the first residents are already elderly people.

The condominium, located beside the Tlalpan forest in a quiet, elegant zone, is not far away from Villa Olímpica. It is not guarded by sentries, except for a man who works both as a doorkeeper and as a caretaker for the shared areas. The residential space is described by the inhabitants as very quiet and safe. However, both the lack of security of the city –which is described almost as a monster, and the fear of going out of home, are subjects which appear here more often than in the rest of the analysed neighbourhoods. This phenomenon could be the result of the ageing of the interviewed people and of their relatively high socioeconomic level.

Tlalpuente

This settlement is situated alongside the Ajusco's forest, close to the old main road from Mexico City to Cuernavaca. It comprises a hundred and sixty hectares. The residents of San Andrés, a village on the lower slopes of Ajusco, used to administer the area according to the "usages and customs" regime, specifically by means of agreements between some families, which divided the area among themselves and used the land to produce, above all, oak charcoal. Later, a group of middle-high class people who had experience in urban developments became interested in the zone, and decided to build an ecological settlement. San Andrés' inhabitants started selling their plots to this people, who divided the land into plots of five to ten thousand square meters, and summoned their friends with the hope of creating a unique settlement in the forest, in close contact with nature -almost a flight away from the

city but not far away from it. The first houses were small weekend cabins. During the 1980's, under the threat of an evacuation of the zone due to an important invasion of lands, Tlalpuente's residents organized themselves into a civil association and adopted a series of rules to constitute the first special zone of controlled development (ZEDEC) in the countryside. According to ZEDEC's regulations, the plots where houses could be built should be very spacious; the building should not exceed 5% of the whole surface area of the plot (450 square meters for a plot of 6,000 square meters). The principles which apply to this place are the care of the forest and the maintenance of a piece of nature inside the city. The population density amounts to eight inhabitants per hectare, one of the lowest in the metropolitan area: it is necessary to have a great love for the forest, silence and nature if one wants to live in Tlalpuente. Few people can put up with the isolation in the countryside. The area is almost completely fenced off, but there is still a part of the perimeter for which there have not been as yet enough resources to put the mesh. There are guards and automatic barriers that can be lift up by means of a magnetic card owned by all the residents.

Closed streets in Coapa

These are two closed neighbourhoods in the Coapa zone, in Tlalpan, where, unlike the confinements described so far, the closure is not a preexistent morphological element, but the result of a mobilization process of the neighbours aimed at closing streets which were originally open.

The empirical research dealt with two big blocks (numbers Four and Five), respectively situated on Acoxta Road (between Garita and Hacienda Avenues) and on Acoxta and La Garita Avenue and Tenorios

Road³. Originally, those areas were meant to be a part of "Villa Coapa", a settlement built for the 1968 Olympic Games to provide accommodation for journalists and other people involved in the Olympic Games. The two big blocks are nowadays inhabited by more than five thousand people who belong to middle or middle-low class families and work as public sector employees, shopkeepers, professionals and small businessmen (Soza 2001: 23). During the 1970's, living there meant for the residents that they had been able to get a better place to live, because of the size of the houses (the plots are relatively big) and the advantages of the location (quite close to the Periférico, the most important ring road in Mexico City). From the residents' point of view, living there is a finishing line, the achievement of a better status, that of a single private home located in a residential area which occupies a strategic position in the South of the city (Gottfried 2002). The first attempts to close the streets go back to some fifteen years ago, when people started placing flowerpots and window boxes to protect

³ The closing of streets in Coapa is a broad phenomenon in the zone, as can be seen all along Acoxta Avenue, Canal de Miramontes, the Hueso Road and Las Bombas Road: from these wide streets one can see all the perpendicular alleys closed by automatic barriers, fences or sentry boxes guarded by policemen. It should be noted that in the *Guía Roji*, the official map of Mexico City, those dead-end streets are still marked as open streets. This lack of correspondence can cause some problems to the drivers who try to circulate along them without permission. There are different types of closure, among which we can find the closure with a sentry box, an automatic barrier and a guard; the closure with a sentry box, a gateway and a guard; the closure with a sentry box, an automatic barrier, a gateway and a guard; the closure with a sentry box and a guard; the closure with gateways made of iron bars, to all of which can be added window boxes and posts. According to the function of the closure in connection with the traffic control, we can distinguish at least four types of closure: an entrance to come in and out, only as a way out, only as a way in, and neither as a way neither in nor out. This last type is found in the blocked streets.

themselves from the setting-up of shops in the surrounding area, something which would necessarily mean the arrival of public transport. The aim was to reduce the uncontrollable traffic of cars and buses in the inner streets in order to guarantee the tranquility of the area and its residential nature, preventing the entrance of strange people, and specially of public transport. Later on, closing the streets became a need to confront theft and armed robbery in homes, as well as the stealing of cars and of parts of cars. In short, the closing of streets becomes an increasingly effective remedy as disorder and the uncontrolled occupation of the public space rise around the two blocks, and as the appraisal of the insecurity of the zone becomes increasingly sharp. The setting up of devices to drastically and definitely close the streets –the sentry boxes, the automatic barriers, the guards or the fixed fences– goes back to the last years. From the perspective of the internal dynamics among the residents, the closure of the streets is the result of a participation process which has not been simple, a process marked by recurrent failures and sporadic moments of collective mobilization. The decision to close the streets was made up and carried out by a small number of neighbours, if we compare it with the total amount of inhabitants. However, those who did not accept the procedure did formally agree with it.⁴

The closure of the space leads to an emulation process among the neighbours, by means of which they strive to improve the symbols of

⁴ There are neighbours who benefit from the results of the closure -i.e., the decrease of the traffic and of the insecurity - but who do not pay for the security services because they do not formally agree with the closure of the neighbourhood, so it is impossible to force them to pay their fee. It is easy to understand that this creates a serious problem for the relationships among neighbours and for the dynamics of their participation.

their social position, make their houses more beautiful or buy a new car. This process cannot be explained only by the closure as a warranty of increased security, because the residents know that the closure does not automatically make them free from robbery and theft. They even know that if there is a robbery inside the neighborhood, the company in charge of the surveillance will not be held responsible, since “the thieves go beyond any kind of security”. In short, the search for security is not the only value associated with living in a walled neighbourhood. But the fact that it is closed gives the space a higher symbolic value, which leads to a process of “imaginary social ascent”.

Different representations of insecurity, yet similar representations of the difference inside/outside as well as of the relationships with the rest of the city

If we ask ourselves what does “closed” spaces mean, and see how the closure has an effect in the identification of the inhabitants with the place, we realize that *there is a tendency to consider the enclosure as a fact*, as something that is not worth discussing. *Taking the closure for granted is what allows the inhabitants to establish the difference with the “outside” and to structure a discourse about the identity of the “inside”.* The physical barrier helps to conceive of the social boundaries. The “inside” is thought of as something different, a separate world, with its own style and different rules. In Villa Olímpica’s case, the neighbourhood is defined as a “private” space in which a specific sociability makes it possible for different individuals (youngsters, elderly people, children, foreigners, etc.) to co-exist respectfully. In Tlalpuente’s case, the residents emphasize their shared love for the forest and nature, and their often problematic relationships with the social

environment and with the authorities, both of which pose a threat to the forest.

The accounts of the inhabitants emphasize above all how special their neighbourhood is, its difference from the rest of the city. *The closed neighbourhoods have been chosen as a place to live because of their non - urban nature, because they can be imagined as "villages" or "small towns",* places where country ways and small-town social relationships still show themselves, where everybody knows and respects each other, but, at the same time, places that have some *cosmopolitan traits* which allow the foreigner to feel "at home". In any case, *these are valuable places because they are different from the rest of the city, where streets are full of heterogeneity, huge inequalities, unexpected events, distrust, violence and risks of all kinds.* Even in the Villa Panamericana, where some drug addicts and drunkards use to stay in the common areas, some residents point out that they are people who belong to that place and that, therefore, they are not strangers and do not pose any threat nor any real disadvantage, besides their deplorable look. In short, they are the known drunkards and drug addicts "of the neighbourhood".

It should not be surprising that in Villa Panamericana, where the closure is less effective because there are no guards, nor automatic barriers at the entrance, the difference inside/outside is less categorical, more free-flowing, and the inhabitants do not avoid saying that they consider that the place is unsafe, that it can be penetrated by the undesirable which dwells in the outside. However, the element they emphasize in order to build a symbolic difference with the outside is the notion of "peacefulness", of living in a "more quiet" place than the surroundings. *Once it is taken for granted that "the inside is safer than the outside", it is possible to display different behaviours, such as letting the children play among the buildings without checking that they are really inside the*

neighbourhood, or leaving the windows and the front door half-open. These behaviours set up in the "inside" an atmosphere of greater confidence and relaxation. None of these spaces, of course, is exempted from robbery, even violent robbery, but the idea that the "inside is safer", tends to be a persistent one, confirmed by the existence of a physical barrier.

Nevertheless, if we take a closer look at the way the closure really works, we will notice that it is never a hundred per cent effective. What the security devices do achieve is to reduce the probability that "undesirable" individuals come into the neighbourhood. It is worth noting that the surveillance devices which encompass automatic barriers and policemen at the entrance are a hundred percent effective only in controlling the entrance of vehicles to the neighbourhoods, but they do not carry out at all a systematic control of the pedestrians who come into the neighbourhood. This takes us back to the idea of the "visitor" who comes from the city (therefore, of the inhabitant of the city) as someone equipped with a car, whereas the simple passer-by is a sort of entity that does not deserve any attention, whose identity is not worth recording.

If we ask if these forms of "safe inhabitation" achieve their main explicit objective –safety–, we have to come to the conclusion that, seen from outside, this kind of neighbourhoods might seem impenetrable, but if we take a closer look at them, they turn out to be very "porous" places. Besides, the specific operation of the surveillance devices outlines a critical subject: how the image of the "undesirable individual", of the person that "should not come in", is built and reproduced, and how this representation acts on the behaviour of the persons who are in charge of the security. Evidently, the assessment of the people "who are not allowed to come in" depends on cultural viewpoints and stereotypes. A

forty year-old white man will be allowed in, but a young dark man carrying a student rucksack will surely be stopped and questioned.

The distrust towards that which comes from the outside and the attempt to build a "separate world" with its own rules, are some of the most relevant traits of the walled neighbourhoods. The city is a menacing chaos in face of which the separatist temptations are rather strong: "nobody can come in, this is private property"⁵.

Another element which should be emphasized is that, *in Mexico City's case, the closure is not only the result of the lack of security, but it is also associated with wider phenomena that affect the public space, particularly the difficulty to control and regulate the inappropriate, illegal and untimely forms of use of the streets* (Duhau and Giglia 2001). The proliferation of these forms of unruly use of the streets which are connected to the authorities by means of corruption practices – e.g., restaurants which stretch out to the pavement, discos that do not observe safety measures, repair shops, buses, travelling shopkeepers, etc.- *pushes the middle classes into retreat from the public space by means of barriers and the privatization of pieces of land which would otherwise be threatened by disorder and lack of regulation. Feeling safe is represented as living in a place from where undesirable people are excluded, and where it is possible to understand one another and share with them (where the rest of the people are not strangers), while, at the same time, one takes distance from what is "outside". In this sense, seeking separation from the "outside", aims at establishing in the*

⁵ These tendencies are reinforced by the attitude of local authorities, who do not want to be held responsible for the upkeep and the management of the "inner" space defined by the confinement, nor for the so-called "condominal" space, as defined by the condominium law (Giglia 1998). We are not far from an image of the urban space as a "re-feudalized" space, made up of fortified and "self-governed" citadels.

"inside" a level of security which is not only understood as the elimination of crime inside the neighbourhood, but also as the elimination of any kind of undesirable usage of the common space around the dwelling. This explains the almost massive spread of closed streets, which do not manage to be much more safer against offence and crime, but which are indeed much more quiet and peaceful, thanks to the elimination of traffic and of the indiscriminate use of the pavement by travelling shopkeepers and other kinds of workers who operate in the street.

The enclosure is meant to mark the social differences, since the exclusive use of certain spaces is what allows one to differ from the "other" through a whole process of construction and fixing of one's own identity and, at the same time, of defense of specific life-styles. When I visit the shopping mall or the club or the gym or any other place of the sort, I insert myself into spaces which have their own rules, I observe those rules and I distinguish myself from those who remain outside. The result is that each of these closed places tends to be extremely predictable; I do not find there people who are completely unknown, but people whose conduct can be very predictable –just like mine. *Moreover, the very predictability of these places, the fact that I know what I can and cannot find there, becomes one of its main appealing qualities.*

In the examined cases, *the search for security is part of a more complex socio-spatial process, which includes three strategies: the search for security itself, the will of differing from the "outside", and the aim (or the illusion) to achieve internal homogeneity. All these strategies work together, and their effect is to reinforce one another.* Knowing that one is among people of the same socio-economic level or of the same life-style ("people like oneself") and feeling oneself separated from those who belong to the "outside", reinforces the feeling of safety.

The practice of “urban” behaviour, or civility, understood as a mixture of acknowledgement and indifference, minimal civilized interaction among individuals who do not know each other and will not meet again, based on the assumption of the greatest possible heterogeneity in urban encounters, becomes unnecessary in most of the closed spaces. Paradoxically, *the socio-spatial fragmentation, which characterizes many big cities, is not accompanied by an increase in urban anonymity*. On the contrary, the “places” (Augé 1992) where one can meet one’s own peers –“people like me”, and where one can confirm one’s own social membership through the mirror of the others. The fact that these spaces are often far away from each other or segregated and surrounded by spaces which could be described as “nobody’s land”, does not deprive them from their nature of “places”, in the sense that they are endowed with a collective meaning. However, it does put them in a new urban geography, amidst a different experience of the city⁶.

In spite of the strong temptations of residents towards self-governance, which seem so prone to secession – through such practices as closing the streets, not letting the police in, or hiring the electricity and water services thinking of themselves as “clients”, not as users of a public service - it is worth noting that *these places are not at all “harmonic communities”* where individuals dissolve into the group and shared values are built in a ritual fashion. This is why I believe that the term “gated communities” can lead to mistakes and misunderstandings. I would rather call them “collectivities”, groups in which not everybody shares the same perspectives, nor the same life-style, where internal

⁶ In the global city, “the places are multiplied as the result of the multiplication of the identity-formation (formación) processes and of the actions aimed at creating the spatial (espaciales) potentials –which Gropius would call spatial (espaciales) virtualities (?) for the creation of identity” (Amendola 2000, 59).

conflicts do exist and are sometimes strong⁷, but that want (and can) manage their own affairs, at least those which are related to the management of the common areas, the selection of the new residents, and the internal forms of life.

If, on the one side, closed neighbourhoods involve fragmentation and socio-spatial division, on the other, they reproduce some kind of micro public spheres inside them, where it is possible to make some shared decisions and to come to some agreements. In some cases, it is the very need to protect oneself against insecurity what drives the residents of closed streets to cooperate with authorities in the carrying out of programs aimed at preventing local offence.

Even when restricted to those internal affairs, self-governance is one of the most important topics to study in these places: they are good observatories to study the incipient growth of new forms of participation under the rule of new principles.

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⁷ Obviously, the inhabitants tend to disqualify the nature of these conflicts, or to overlook them when they talk to the researcher, whom they regard as part of the "outside".

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