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Fear and segregation: anxiety beyond the gated communities. The Costa Rican case.

Karla Barrantes Chaves¹

¹*Bartlett School of Planning-University College London, karla.chaves.16@ucl.ac.uk*

Abstract: Fear of crime is a constant concern in Latin America. In Costa Rica, those feeling seems to be changing the urbanisation patterns; giving way to gated communities. However, those developments might be increasing feelings of exclusion and anxiety instead of being a measure for reducing crime. In the last 25 years, the gated communities have been rising; as a result, the traditional neighbourhoods have to coexist with these new developments. This paper aims to explore the effects of gated communities over their peripheries, mainly tensions between outside – inside, and how those tensions fuel fears. The research is taking place within the Greater Metropolitan Area of Costa Rica. Eight open neighbourhoods were selected, using the poverty indicator basic unfulfilled needs (NBI). In each case was carried out a walking interview with some community members; those walks were tracked with a GPS and recorded. Additionally, there were focus groups, observations and interviews. Some preliminary results suggest significant residential segregation between the neighbourhoods and the gated communities. It seems the fortification is more than a physical barrier; there is no room for sharing, which causes misconceptions and fears towards other people.

Keywords: Fear of crime, gated communities, Costa Rica, residential segregation.

Introduction

Safety is an important concern in most of the Latin American people. This region holds the highest rates of homicides worldwide (Chioda, 2016). Also, the fear discourse has been part of the political rhetoric from the 1990s, fuelling people anxiety even more (Huhn, 2017). As a result, repressive measures such as zero-tolerance policies are accepted by most Latin Americans (Corporación Latinobarometro, 2016). Punitive practices have come to Latin America from the United States mainly, as well as the model of gated communities as ‘shelters’ against criminality. In this regard, those walled enclaves and the increase of private security are legitimised by fear discourses that perpetuate stereotypes of undesirable people (Caldeira, 2000). However, beyond the reasons for people to enclose themselves, gated communities might be generating externalities over their peripheries in terms of fear of crime. Those tensions based on distrust towards the immediate environment could incite the same feeling in turn, this time coming from the neighbourhoods beside them, on the other side of the wall.

During many years a high inequality has characterised Latin America; however, most of the countries started a reduction in their figures at the beginning of the century (Programa Estado de la Nacion, 2017). Conversely, Costa Rica has shown the opposite trend; this country moved from being one of the most equitable towards ranges similar to the average. In 2016 the Gini coefficient was 0.521, without any significant change since 2011 (Programa Estado de la Nacion, 2017).

Central America is also one of the most violent areas in the world; however, it is not homogeneous in their figures. Countries such as Costa Rica, Panamá and Nicaragua have lower rates of homicides than the rest. Although the overall victimisation rate in Costa Rica has diminished from 2008 (INEC, 2015),

gated communities have been proliferating. This trend has started to fragment the city, physically and socially, creating isolated places into the urban fabric.

This paper is part of an ongoing PhD research, which explores the distribution of fear of crime outside of gated communities within the Great Metropolitan Area of Costa Rica. This work is focused on the tensions produced by gated communities over the surrounding neighbourhoods as well as variations according to incomes inequalities. The data were collected through eight study cases. The initial findings suggest a deep residential segregation and exclusion feelings in most of the neighbourhoods. The results also show how pre-existing fears are fuelled by the isolated landscape and the uncertainty about who lives behind those walls.

Fear of crime and built environment

Fear of crime has profound impacts on quality of life. Those emotions might affect social cohesion and the experience of the city. This feeling is defined by Ferraro and LaGrange (1987, p.72) as ‘a negative emotional reaction to crime or the symbols associated with crime’. However, fear of crime is a complex phenomenon, which involves different dimensions and factors such as incomes level, gender, education, race, age and attachment to the neighbourhood (Gray et al. 2011). Some of those factors are also affected by the built environment and urban design decisions.

Some authors have suggested the manipulation of physical space to prevent crime. Newman (1973) through his concept Defensive Spaces, points out that buildings’ configuration and urban design can help surveillance, as well as community control. They are the only efficient tools for assuring safety in neighbourhoods. According to his view, the community becomes a guardian encouraging territoriality feelings. Besides, the Situation Prevention Thesis (Clarke, 1983; Crawford, 1998) supports the idea of reducing the opportunities for crime through informal community vigilance, the introduction of barriers, use of Closed-circuit television (CCTV), as well as any physical alteration. In both cases, the presence of strangers is avoided; the neighbourhood is under community control.

On the other hand, those territorial controls seem to affect the permeability of the city. Minton (2009) holds the idea that the ‘Defensive Spaces’ are the reason why gated communities and cul de sac have been spread along the United States and Britain since 1970. She argues that those measures make strangers be seen as a source of danger. In like manner, Sennett (2018) claims that edges are tense rather than friendly places of exchange, he suggests that turning walls in membranes allows the interchange inside-outside, stimulating ‘neighbours who mix casually’ (p. 223). This measure makes contact less confrontational; it could be the first step to debunk misconceptions about ‘the others’.

The tension between the absence or presence of unfamiliar people affects the dynamism of the city. Jacobs (1961) highlights the importance of bringing different types of people altogether. She points out that a successful city is that in which a person feels safe among strangers. Furthermore, Sennett (2018) points out that preconceptions towards strangers just because ‘they are incomprehensibly strange’ degrades the ethical character of the city’ (p.126). He holds that the experience of living in a diverse group has the power of reducing the feeling of insecurity and frustration because there is no clear image of who is the enemy.

However, the public spaces surrounding gated communities are affected precisely by the constant distrust, producing isolated places reinforced with surveillance mechanism. Caldeira (2000) stands ‘that new patterns of urban segregation based on the creation of fortified enclaves represents the

complementary side of the privatisation of security and transformation of notions of the public in contemporary cities' (p.3). In this regard, gated communities promote the fracture of some groups from the rest of the city, changing the features of public spaces towards places characterised by 'suspicion and restriction' (Caldeira, 2000, p. 258).

Walls and segregation

Latin America cities have imported the concept of gated communities mainly from the United States. Those residential developments arise in the United States in the early 1980s (Blakely and Snyder, 1997), later in Latin American cities during the 1990s (Castells, 1999). Although the United States has had an important role spreading those developments, gated communities have expanded rapidly in urbanising countries, 'they were simply part of the surreal economic and spatial transformation that engulfed so many countries in the last two decades of the 20th century' (Webster et al. 2002). This growth could be explained as an answer to social conflict and violence in cities; however, these developments also reflect new lifestyles emerging under the globalisation process (Coy and Pöhler, 2002). Under this perspective, the developers of gated communities see themselves as providing both security and social familiarity' (Blakely and Snyder, 1997). However, Blakely and Snyder (1997) argue that those fences represent more than physical barriers, they are a reflection of tensions between particular aspirations based on fear and defence of privileges, with the principles of community responsibility.

Criminality causes concern among most of the Latin American people, around 88% express any fear of being a victim of delinquency (Corporación Latinobarometro, 2016). Consequently, demands for 'iron fist' to address this issue seems to be deeply attached to Latin America culture. In this regard, Costa Rica occupies the second place in Latin America with the highest percentage of people claiming for this measure. While the average for Latin America is 61%, in Costa Rica reaches 78% (Corporación Latinobarometro, 2016). Against this background, punitive populism is part of the political discourse (Huhn, 2017), which has been reproduced by the media (Fonseca and Sandoval, 2006), exacerbating pre-existing fears and hence justifying more repressive measures (Huhn, 2017). This continuous spread of fear seems to change also urbanisation patterns, raising the number of gated communities across the country.

In Latin America safety policies in residential areas have increased the barriers of differentiation; paradoxically, rising the segregation and creating exclusion spaces (Carrion, 2008). This situation is also present in the suburbs, where poor and rich are next to each other but separated by a wall (Roitman and Phelps, 2011). Costa Rica has had a significant increase in the number of gated communities. Most of them have been created under the condominium scheme, an ownership system that has individual dwellings within a shared land with common areas. From 1990 to 2017, the rise of the built area under this category increased from 5,2% to 25,2% (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2018). Although this figure does not mean that all those developments are walled, it is a representative sign of the current trend. A report from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlights that the widespread of unsafety feelings have altered people behaviour in Costa Rica 'They live in a condominium rather than open spaces, put razor wire around what was once an open garden.' (PNUD-Costa Rica, 2005, p. 4).

In Costa Rica, due to a green belt around the Greater Metropolitan Area (GMA), gated communities are mostly concentrated in the urban region; nevertheless, there are also gated communities in rural areas. Pujol et al. (2011) suggest that within GMA, social segregation has climbed steadily in the places where gated communities are located. The planning system has different rules for open residential

developments and gated communities. Historically open neighbourhoods have transferred to the local government land for public parks and streets. On the contrary, gated communities are allowed to keep the entire property for themselves without supplying any public space, if the local government does not have any specific rule for that. This situation might provoke a reduction in the number of open spaces per inhabitant; therefore, the decline of areas for sharing within the city.

Many traditional open neighbourhoods have started to be surrounded by gated communities. Those neighbourhoods are very diverse; they may be either low or high incomes. Many authors have suggested an association between fear of crime and income inequalities, where those areas more unequal reveal a higher level of anxiety. (Franklin et al. 2008; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Vieno et al. 2013). In this regard, the cases selected for this research were based on this approach, combining different types of income inequalities.

Methods

The research is based on eight study cases; they are neighbourhoods beside gated communities. Those cases are located within the Greater Metropolitan Area of Costa Rica, which concentrates more than half of the country's population.

The neighbourhoods were also selected according to their unfulfilled needs, called by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC) as *Necesidades Básica Insatisfechas* (NBI). The NBI is a tool to measure poverty, which was taken from the Costa Rica census data from 2011. It is based on four needs: housing, educational level, health and access to goods and services. When a dwelling holds the four NBI, it means that it has the highest level of poverty. The census' units contains dwellings with their respective NBI values. The eight cases have different levels of unfulfilled needs, from communities without any NBI (0 NBI) to neighbourhoods which have dwellings with the highest level of poverty (4 NBI). Those places were chosen using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) with the census cartography; the first random selection was polished with aerial images and then reassessed in the field. More than 70% of dwellings into the Greater Metropolitan Area are into the group of 1NBI and 2NBI; in order to analyse variations according to the income inequality levels, the following cases were selected:

0 NBI= 1 case

1 NBI= 2 cases

2 NBI = 3 cases

3 NBI – 4NBI = 2 cases

The data collection was made from June to December 2018; the following techniques were used:

- Walking interviews
- Focus Group with adults and teenagers
- In depth-Interviews
- Observations

A walking interview (Evans and Jones, 2011) was carried out with some members of the community in each neighbourhood. Those walks were tracked with a Global Positioning System (GPS) and synchronised with an audio recorder. One focus group per each study case was also carried out.

Additionally, there were visual observations in each neighbourhood and some complementary in depth-interviews. The initial findings reported in this paper are based mainly on the walking interviews and focus groups.

Initial Findings

Residential segregation

Most of the participants in both walking interviews and focus groups mentioned that they did not know people from the gated community next to their neighbourhoods. However, those from the communities with high incomes indicated to have met them at some point. In seven of the eight cases, there was no connection between the gated community's residents and the community organisation¹, the only exception was the wealthiest neighbourhood (0 NBI), where people from the gated community were part of the community organisation with a monthly fee. In those neighbourhoods with 2 NBI, 3 NBI and 4 NBI, there was a stronger assumption that people from gated communities do not care about them or the welfare of their community.

This overall residential segregation was also expressed by the teenagers, who despite having an extensive network of friendships beyond their neighbourhood, they did not have friends within the gated communities nearby.

Walls and preconceptions

As a result of residential segregation, neighbourhood's inhabitants have created their own notion about people from the gated community. Those ideas also fuel anxiety and tensions; there is a general feeling that those people do not identify with the community needs because maybe they come from another town. The level of incomes of those people also causes concern among neighbours; for instance, many participants think they are wealthy people, which is an issue for their neighbourhoods because those developments might function as a magnet for criminality, therefore, it could affect safety in the surrounding communities. Other people, specially from the 2NBI, 3NBI and 4NBI groups, believe that maybe the residents of those condominiums are involved in illegal business and therefore their neighbourhoods might be under threat. In the case of the community with the highest level of poverty, this issue was significant because they feel their young people are vulnerable and easy to recruit by organised crime which they believe lived inside the gated community walls. On the other hand, those communities with 1 NBI where the neighbours at least have met somebody from the gated community, they assume they are just working people from middle to upper middle class. In this regard, beyond the physical barriers between neighbourhoods and gated communities, those prejudgments might be increasing some pre-existing fears.

Overwhelming growth, involuntary enclosure.

As has been noted, gated communities in Costa Rica are expanding quickly. Within Greater Metropolitan Area they are embedded into the urban fabric, next to established neighbourhoods. In those cases, where the growth is significant, the neighbours expressed their discontent towards this situation. To illustrate this point, those neighbourhoods surrounded by at least four gated communities larger than one hectare said they feel 'wrapped' by those developments. This sort of involuntary enclosure seems to rise the

¹ Neighbourhoods in Costa Rica can be organised under community boards, allowing them to access to public funds.

exclusion feelings and fuel resentments. That frustration obeys mainly to the sensation that their community has been taken by strangers who live in their own fortifications. In the absence of spaces for sharing and mixing, the anxiety towards strangers is even more significant.

The edges

The edges between gated communities and neighbourhoods were mostly walls. The only exception was the wealthiest neighbourhood, in that case, the perimeter was permeable but keeping the restrictions of access. In most cases, those walls were associated to feelings of fear; they were described as isolated places, therefore, a convenient area for crimes such as muggings, drugs traffic, abductions, sexual assault, among others. Due to the gated communities nearby being larger than nine hectares – as in six of the cases - many neighbours were forced to walk along their edges to take the bus. Actually, many bus stops were located just next to the wall. This situation provoked them a considerable anxiety due to the isolation, especially during the night.

Planning issues

A common complaint was the lack of contribution from gated communities to the neighbouring areas, especially regarding the supply of public spaces such as parks and streets. Besides, they pointed out how the significant surface covered by those developments makes communication among neighbourhoods difficult. Pujol et al. (2011) have mentioned how those gated communities have risen the drawbacks in the Costa Rican road system, which also has affected traffic congestion. In this regard, the high traffic volume was cited as an important issue in most of the cases. Considering that bus stops were mainly located next to gated communities' walls, the heavy traffic works as a 'second wall' increasing fears during waiting times. In general, in those neighbourhoods where the amount of gated communities is growing faster, there is a discontent towards local government controls and regulations, which are considered not strong enough in terms of size, urban fabric connections and contribution towards the community. The participants mentioned that gated communities cover extensive areas without supplying any street, therefore, making difficult the communication with other neighbourhoods.

A general complaint, especially in the 2NBI and 3NBI groups, was the complications during the construction of the gated community. They emphasised how construction works damaged neighbourhood infrastructure, which in many cases, was built with community funds. Those tensions raised when they realised the lack of interest from the gated community administration to make reparations, which were finally made after efforts from the community boards. On the contrary, the community with 4 NBI considers that some infrastructure has improved thanks to the gated community, mainly the surveillance systems such as CCTV. They also notice that the police have had more presence in the area since the gated community was settled.

Final thoughts

The tensions from open neighbourhoods towards gated communities seem to be fuelled by feelings of exclusion and distrust. The residential segregation has provoked fears towards the unknown; people from gated communities are seen as strangers who belong somewhere else. However, those differences seem not being present in the wealthiest community, where the gated community's edges are soft, and people from there are involved in communal issues. In this case, apparently, the levels of trust in both directions worked differently than the rest.

The local governments in Costa Rica have not reacted quickly to control the size, edges and configuration of gated communities, as well as an eventual supply of public spaces. As a result, there are 'islands' of dwellings embedded into the city, without any permeability towards the rest of the urban fabric. This slow response is noticed by members of the open neighbourhoods nearby, who see themselves as victims of the local government inefficiency with a small room for acting to prevent the issue.

The spread of gated communities in Latin America has been varied; this work aims to contribute to give more views to that discussion, mainly from Central America, which is also diverse. This work seeks to offer another angle for observing gated communities and fear of crime, from the other side of the wall.

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