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PRIVATE NEIGHBOURHOODS AND THE SEARCH FOR SUSTAINABILITY: ARGUMENTS FOR A DEBATE

Abstract:

In most modern states, the history of cities has always involved private and public actors. However if this principle of interconnexion is largely diffused it may also take a variety of modes according to the political culture of each nation-state and according to the modes of production of a given historical period. In the 1970s, some large cities have seen the emergence of new forms of urban development which were later on qualified by geographers & sociologists "private neighbourhoods" (PN) and if they were enclosed "gated communities" (GC). They were named PN not because they were produced by a private developer but because the private development firm didn't limit itself to the production of housing units in a nice environment (natural and artificial) but also of creating a sense of belonging to its new inhabitants while providing "new" services and amenities (such as leisure & sports activities).

The social scientists who analyzed this new form of urban development (usually located in exurban areas (périurbain)) tended to be rather critical as they stressed its negative impacts (Glasze, Le Goix, Webster). PN were reinforcing and strengthening social, racial & spatial discrimination while at the same time they were securing the investment made by the homeowners. Although we share this point of view and tend to think that traditional European cities offer a better form of living given the quality and accessibility of their public spaces open to everyone (Glasze), our presentation discusses a few arguments and conditions for the social sustainability of these new forms of urban development in an urban context characterized by metropolitanization processes (change of scale of jobs and housing markets) , "urban sprawl" and urban mobility.

The arguments are largely based on a survey done in Raintree (a PN in Culver City, a municipality within the metropolitan area of Los Angeles):

1- PNs (located in cities) may be perceived as a means for recycling the urban fabric (brownfield). They produce a dense urban fabric in a well designed vegetal landscape and, as such, offer an alternative to an urban sprawl based on the single-family house model.

2- PNs don't offer an image of social mix (mixité sociale) but they are good examples of cultural mix or cultural diversity. In metropolitan areas largely shaped by domestic and international migrations, PNs provide a sense of belonging to its residents (even people who arrived recently) where nobody has the feeling of being an "outsider", contrary to traditional neighbourhoods.

The conclusion discusses the conditions under which PN may become a sustainable urban form if the homeowners are willing to include a percentage of rental housing units below the market price.

PRIVATE NEIGHBOURHOODS AND THE SEARCH FOR SUSTAINABILITY: ARGUMENTS FOR A DEBATE

1- Metropolitanization or the forgotten process behind GC

Most of social scientists working on GC didn't fully integrate the change of scale of the urban fabric and urban environment in order to explain the proliferation of GC over the last three decades. A metropolitan region or a "global city-region" is a complex entity which may be defined here as a region which (1) registers a change of scale of the urban scale given the spatial restructuring of the job market along with the coming of a global market (2) receives flows of domestic and international migrations and is also identified by its urban sprawl.

1.1 Change of scale of the urban realm

Throughout history, there has always been a clear distinction between city and countryside. The city was supposed to be a compact and dense area with residential buildings, office buildings and plants. During the industrial period of the capitalist system, the large cities were then surrounded by suburbs which were mainly residential and included open space. The suburbs became quickly the "ideal" place for families to become homeowners and very often live in a house surrounded by a garden (Ghorra-Gobin 1987, Berque, Bonnin & Ghorra-Gobin 2006). This model of a central city surrounded by residential suburbs has been identified by the Sociological School of Chicago in the 20s and 30s. The suburban built environment included row houses or single-family detached houses, depending on the national and local preferences. In the United States, since the second half of the 19th century, the single-family detached house became the main "reference" in the suburbs (Jackson, 1985).

Metropolitanization and urban sprawl is not associated with the residentialization of the suburbs but with the urbanization process of the exurban areas along with the decentralisation of jobs. Countries with an ample water supply have seen the emergence of exurbia, an area beyond the suburbs. This area is becoming the most dynamic part of many urban areas, particularly older urban regions in the eastern part of the United States and in Europe. By the late 20th century, increases in wealth, together with widespread automobile ownership and new communications technologies, have put "country" living within the reach of millions of middle-class families. Exurban areas are increasing faster in land area than in population as lot sizes continue to rise. According to some authors like Myron Orfield, exurbia accounts for more than 30% of the land in 48 American states and houses around 60 million Americans. This phenomenon was first called "counterurbanization" by the geographer Brian J. Berry before being named "exurbia". Growth is happening in remote parts of the extended urban realm. These exurban areas are neither suburban nor rural but are still connected back to central cities even when they are located dozens or hundreds of miles out from them.

Most of the GC of the late 20th century are located in these exurban areas where the gates provide the dwellers with a feeling of territorial belonging. Their inhabitants,

who tend to think of themselves as people living in “large urban fields” or in an urban wilderness where there are no limits to urban sprawl, are enjoying their GC. Through the limits of their neighbourhoods symbolized by a wall or by a gate, they feel more secure because they are preserved from the gangs’ activities but also because they feel they belong to a spatial territory defined by its boundaries. In other words they don’t see themselves as living in a “nowhere” environment. The concept of an nowhere environment is largely used after James Howard Kunstler who in 1993 analyses the decline of America’s man-made landscape and argued the human need for a specific and recognizable environment:

“There is a reason that human beings long for a sense of permanence. This longing is not limited to children, for it touches the profoundest aspects of our existence: that life is short, fraught with uncertainty, and sometimes tragic. We know not where we come from, and to keep from going crazy while we are here, we want to feel that we truly belong to a specific part of the world” (p.275).

In his book Kunstler stressed the importance of the design of the urban environment for transmitting each of us a sense of belonging to a territory and hence to a community. However this argument has been already used in the early 60s by Kevin Lynch was indeed sensitive to the idea of “sense” in our daily life through the use of definite urban design concepts:

“By sense I mean the clarity with which it can be perceived and identified, and the ease with which its elements can be linked with other events and places in a coherent mental representation of time and space and that representation can be connected with nonspatial concepts and values” (Kevin Lynch p.131)

The inhabitants of a GC share the feeling of living in a distinct territory within the vast metropolitan area and do not have the feeling of being “lost” in large urban environment. Thus they have a sense of belonging to a special place and to the community living on that territory. The idea of a “special place” is given by the design of a territory the limit of which is symbolized by a wall and by a gate, by the quality of the landscaping (often associating natural and artificial environments) and by a certain homogeneity in the design of the buildings. In Raintree, there are no single family detached houses. The plan includes a larger number of green alleys each with five town houses or row houses with a differentiated entrance and a few small buildings.

The quality of the neighbourhood environment is largely stressed by the inhabitants of the GC of Raintree. They understand that in order to make a decent living (given the nature of the economy), they have to be in a large metropolitan area (or global city-regions). However given the scale of the metropolitan region they look for a place which they can afford and which is giving them a sense of belonging and rootedness. In the interviews the inhabitants stressed the fact that they were ready to give up the single family detached house in a trade-off with a neighbourhood offering them a certain quality of life. They accepted to live in a row house where the domestic space in exchange of a certain quality of an outdoor environment where they could be simple “pedestrians”. In Raintree, pedestrians may use safely green lanes in order to visit people living in another section of the GC or for getting to the swimming-pool without taking their car. They have access to their apartment through the garage but also through the main entrance which is located on a lane. The speed of the car is extremely limited. Living in

Raintree where you don't feel the pressure of the car traffic and the noise of the car provides means living in a calm and nice environment.

1.2 The Spatial restructuring of the job market and the loss of centrality

The experts of GC or PN didn't seriously take into consideration the change in the capitalist system along with globalization processes which had a serious impact on the spatial location of firms. A large number of them seem to assume that the industrial system continues to function today the way it used in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus they didn't integrate the spatial restructuring of the labour market at the local level. Until the 60s and 70s in most western countries, jobs were mainly concentrated in central cities and in some cases in their adjacent suburbs which were considered as industrial suburbs and housed a large number of working class families. However since that period, there has been a decentralization process of the economy at the metropolitan level. Office buildings and sometimes new small industrial buildings were located in suburban areas such as La Défense in Paris or Schaumburg in Chicago. Those new developments which may have been planned as in Paris were named suburban parks or suburban centers before being designated as "Edge cities" by Joel Garreau in 1991. In the new industrial parks, often quite low in density and heavily landscaped with clean and efficient new buildings, work can still be low paying, repetitive, and sometimes dangerous, but the differences in physical setting have disappeared between blue and white collar workers. The rise of "Suburban Park" as an ideal setting for business has been paired with the rise of the suburban center. As suburban shopping centers increased, they started to incorporate activities other than retail activities within and around them.

In the 1970s and 1980s a number of malls became the nuclei for giant suburban business centers like Tyson's Corner outside of Washington DC or Costa Mesa-Irvine in the Los Angeles region. From the 70s through the mid-1980s, the Woodfield area of Schaumburg (northwest of Chicago) became one of the most vibrant urban district of Illinois. After Garreau, another American researcher, Robert Lang talked about the "edgeless cities" in order to emphasize the decentralisation process of jobs without any emergence of new urban forms. The automobile did not directly replace any sort of mass transportation but have coexisted and developed with mass transit. The automobile replaced the private carriage and the bus replaced the streetcar.

The central cities of large metropolitan areas lost a large number of industrial jobs in the 80s and 90s which can be seen in the urban landscape with the "Brownfield". Some of them were off shored to foreign countries and others were transplanted in the suburbs or exurbs. The decentralization of jobs accelerated the sprawl of the urban fabric and the emergence of gated communities in the exurban areas of the metropolitan area. This process was largely due to the restructuring of the firms along with the use of communication technologies which allows for a group of persons living in different parts of the world to work together thanks to the quality of the virtual communication. The virtual team work comes along with a serious decrease in the cost of transportation for goods. More than 40% of the international trade is due to exchanges within firms. As jobs are moving out of central cities and are located in Edge cities and Edgeless cities, people are moving further out. GC are part of this decentralization process and its sprawling effect along with the loss of urban centrality.

In Raintree, most of the inhabitants (on a total population of 1,000) are Americans but a large number of them are coming from other parts of the country and are based in the LA area because they got a job while others are leaving because they found another job (mainly in the area of Portland). Those who were interviewed mentioned several times that they chose Raintree because it was not too far from their job location and from the airport. The access to the airport is important because they know they will be visiting their families (located in other American regions) and they will be receiving relatives. Those who were coming from another part of the country also stressed the fact that living in a GC gives a sense of belonging (in spite of the scale of the urban region) because of the design of the neighbourhood but also because of the sense of community they find in a GC even though they recognize that they live in a multicultural environment. They never had the feeling of being perceived as “strangers” by the other inhabitants. They were welcomed by their neighbours and did not have a hard time in “getting adjusted”: they were perceived as members of the community even though they belonged to a different ethnic or racial group. This feeling is certainly due to the fact that they are sharing the same interests as homeowners: the third Wednesday of each month they are invited to attend a monthly homeowner associations meeting. It is also because their neighbours are ready to help them accommodate their life in the LA area and for supplying them with information about how to use the urban region.

The change of scale of urban regions which results from a metropolitanization process along with the decentralization of jobs and the spatial restructuring of the job market which translates itself into the loss of any kind of centrality (in favour of polycentrality) is largely responsible for the satisfaction of people who made the choice of living in GC. They certainly wanted to be away from gangs' activities and any kind of violence but they also wanted to live in a special “place” which they could identify in the vast urban territory. The GC because of the quality of its special design is giving them a sense of belonging to a place and thus a sense of belonging to the community living there. They also have a feeling they have an identity within the large metropolitan region and within the city of Culver. This feeling is not only shared by people who have always lived in LA but also by the people coming from different parts of the country. One woman mentioned during the interview that:

“Living in a GC when you come from another area facilitates the adaptation process and makes it much easier and quicker”. In other words it does not take many months to feel that you are a losangelinos based in Raintree”.

Metropolitanization represents the change of scale of the urban context along with the loss of centrality as a way for explaining the rise of GC in large urban areas through the world.

2. An Urban governance based on sustainable strategy

Most social scientists tend to think that the rise of GC may be explained by the fear of crime or the need to secure their property investment (Le Goix 2004). Homeowners are thus willing to exclude themselves from the public realm and prefer to adopt a social behaviour close to the spirit of a club. Webster (2002) and Glasze (2005) also refer to the club goods theory of Robert H. Nelson and Fred Foldavary. These two elements are certainly factors contributing to the explanation of the rise of GC but this broad

generalization tends to dismiss other variables. GC may be perceived as real estate projects which help to reduce urban sprawl and to recycle old neighbourhoods. Based on these arguments, social scientist could contribute to urban governance by discussing a public policy in favour of bringing some kind of social mix. Given their success with the consumers, GC may then be part of a sustainable strategy under some conditions defined through public policies.

2.1 Landscaping, amenities and services as a way to reinforce density

In the first section of the paper the importance given to urban design features (including the gate) in the landscaping of GC could be understood (after Kevin Lynch) as an element for making the place “special” and “distinctive” (within a vast metropolitan area) and thus for giving people a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood. The quality of the design as well as the amenities (swimming pool, tennis or golf courts...a natural or artificial lake) may also be understood as a way for increasing the density of the subdivision or the planned-unit development without giving its inhabitants the feeling they are living in a dense neighbourhood.

Raintree, one of the many GC of Culver City (a city adjacent to the municipality of LA) is a neighbourhood which covers 35 acres and includes a population reaching 1,000 has been finished in the middle of the 70s. It is subdivided into two sections: one of townhouses (210) and one of condominiums (354). Each section has a clubhouse. In the brochure offered by the RTHA (Raintree Townhouse Homeowners Associations) one can read:

“We have the most beautiful garden of any complex in LA. We are also woodland of wonderful trees, complete with a tranquil lake, lovely waterfall and many paths to stroll along”. Our Board of Directors and Management Staff express the wish that you will find enjoyment in your ‘garden’ surroundings and in your new home”. (Document welcoming new residents to Raintree Townhouse, 2005)

The landscaping of Raintree is extremely well done and presents itself as a haven of peace and calm in a metropolitan region where speed and stress are part of the daily life. Raintree has indeed a unique history and goes back to the 1930s. It used to be the back lot of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios where the famous Tarzan movies were filmed and Tarzan swung from the trees over the lake. The urban design of the GC of Raintree maintained the landscape and accommodated the housing part.

The quality of the design as well as the amenities provided by the GC are serious means allowing for an increase in the density of the population living on a territory of 35 acres. Being able to use the swimming-pool on a daily basis in summer and winter times from 7am to 11pm and having access to this facility by walking is seen as a real privilege. People may then have their exercises done in the swimming-pool or in the tennis court which are both extremely well located and well designed. Most of the persons interviewed underlined the special features of their daily environment. They also underlined the quality of the services they could get while living in Raintree. The administrative staff which is located in the Lakeside Clubhouse and enjoys an ambiance and a nice view on the lake may be reached any time during the day. Raintree has an on-site manager as well as a maintenance supervisor who are ready to answer any type of questions and assist the inhabitants in matters dealing with the HA.

During the interviews people stressed that even though they would have preferred to live in a single detached family house, they were ready to abandon their first wish given the quality of the urban design of Raintree, its landscaping as well as the amenities and the services they could have access to in their daily life. Several persons mentioned the fact that they were more often using e-commerce in order to do their shopping and that living in a GC was extremely efficient. Deliveries are made at their doors and parcels are left there with no risk of disappearing or being stolen (even if they stayed there a few days). The inhabitants of Raintree accepted to live in a town-house and gave up the idea of living in a house surrounded by a garden. The entrance of the town-house is well designed and is filled with plants and flowers but their inhabitants don't really have a private garden which also means that they don't have to worry about having a gardener. They have the feeling of "living in a wonderful garden" which is well maintained and where they may walk, rest and enjoy the landscape in a special area close to the lake.

Based on the arguments given by the inhabitants of Raintree, CG may be perceived as an urban neighbourhood which is preventing urban sprawl and preserving the natural environment.

2.2 GC as a tool for recycling urban fabric and bringing cultural diversity

Given the quality of its design, its landscaping and the amenities provided by the association, Raintree may also be perceived as an object for recycling the urban fabric (Brownfield).

In Raintree as already mentioned earlier, the GC is part of a recycling project undertaken by a developer (Leavitt company) once the MGM studios decided to leave Culver city and to relocate in another part of the metropolitan area. The site of the company has been divided into three lots: Lakeside, Tara and Raintree. Each lot is targeted to a specific segment of the market. The inhabitants of Raintree are always happy to add that before becoming the back lot of the MGM studios the area where they live as well as the rest of the city of Culver used to be owned by the Indians before being transformed into a rancho and later becoming an incorporated city thanks to an estate man, Mr. Culver. A large number (around 40%) of the current inhabitants of Raintree are living there since the creation of the GC and they continue to be pleased with the neighbourhood in spite of the changes.

The persons interviewed were pleased to tell me that their neighbourhood presented a certain cultural diversity: white people represented the majority of the inhabitants but since the 1980s, it also included people from different ethnic or racial background. Raintree had an Asian American population, a few Hispanic household and one famous black actor and his family. The main critique which may be addressed to GC relies largely on its lack of social diversity. Homeowners living in Raintree belong to the high middle class and hence they share similar interests like maintaining a good return for their investments. However it is correct to say that they are isolated in their own environment and distant from the other social groups of people living in Los Angeles. GCs are certainly part of the segregation process but given the qualities they are offering, it may be possible to include a certain dose of public intervention. With the quality of life that the inhabitants of GC enjoyed and given the capacity of GC to halt

urban sprawl and recycle urban fabric, municipalities or counties may be required to impose to the developer who is asking for a building permit to include a certain percentage of tenants who would be eligible on the basis of their revenues. Such a public policy may instil a certain dose of social mix within the community which may help diversify the population and as the same maintain the same quality of life for its inhabitants.

The idea of making “social mix” an obligation for the developer is an idea I borrowed from the French national regulation which mentions that every municipality within a large metropolitan area should include in its building stock around 20% of social apartments or apartments which are below the price of the market. It also came from a discussion with a woman (professor of literature at UCLA) who told me that she had a town-house with three bedrooms and since her two children are gone, she was subletting one room to a young latino boy. This guy who is working in the western part of LA (while his parents are living in the central area) and studying at night has been introduced to her by a church group and she was happy to help him. By telling me this story she was willing to recognize that a GC didn’t allow for any kind of social mix but that responsible inhabitants of the area were ready to help others young people of the region who were not living in areas where there were a large number opportunities in terms of jobs and quality of education.

Given the density that a well designed GC offers, it may be seen as an alternative to the process of urban sprawl as well as a means for recycling the urban fabric.

Conclusion

Urban Governance with public intervention: Introducing “social mix” in Gated communities

In metropolitan areas largely shaped by domestic and international migrations, GCs provide a sense of belonging to a community where nobody has the feeling of being an “outsider”, contrary to traditional neighbourhoods. This argument is founded on the quality of the design which provides to the inhabitants a sense of sharing a common territory. The inhabitants were ready to give up the ideal of a house surrounded by a garden and ready to live in a dense neighbourhood given the quality of the landscape as well as the services and amenities offered by the HA. It follows that GC may be then perceived as serious tools for recycling the urban fabric as well as for halting urban sprawl. Given the qualities attributed to a GC beyond the feeling of “security”, this presentation also raises and explores the issue of sustainability in urban governance. GC may be perceived as a way for recycling the urban fabric through a dense urban fabric in a well designed vegetal landscape. Located in suburban or exurban areas, GC offer an alternative to the process of urban sprawl. Raintree as many other GC offers a certain cultural diversity in terms of origin of people as well as race and ethnic background in a context of international and domestic migrations. However if Raintree is a good example of a cultural mix, the social mix ingredient is seriously missing.

Adopting a strategy of sustainability means (1) preventing the waist of land and halting urban sprawl (environmental costs) (2) taking into consideration the social costs associated with metropolitanization and (3) maintaining the economic attractiveness of

the area. Thinking of sustainability in the case of GC means introducing some kind of social mix in the residential neighbourhoods. The real issue brought by the rise of GC does not refer to the presence of the gate in the landscape, an element of design which gives the inhabitants a sense of a territory in a vast metropolitan area (and hence is appreciated) but how to introduce the missing element, social mix. It follows that a sustainable strategy in terms of urban governance requires adopting public policies geared towards social mix. As most social scientists and urban planners already know social mix is not provided by the housing market and hence requires a public policy. In this perspective one can think of a GC offering around 20% of its housing stock to tenants who are eligible given their limited revenues and wages. In the perspective of a strategy or sustainability, the role of social scientists is no longer limited to a posture of criticism but after analyzing the positive externalities of these new developments to discuss the issue of a public intervention along with urban governance for introducing social mix, the missing element.

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