

Title	urban form – reflecting [on] society
Keywords	social interactions, civic concerns, contact and conflict, democratic listening, political disengagement, local government,
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Paper no.	PUG 020

URBAN FORM – REFLECTING [ON] SOCIETY

Abstract:

Within this paper I will argue that cities are the reflection of transformations in society and that these transformations manifest themselves in spatial structures, which vice versa influence society. The enclosure of residential neighbourhoods can thus be understood as a spatial expression of social processes, which again influence society. One way of exploring these impacts on society is to look at the social interactions and civic concerns of people and analyse if these differ according to the urban form within which they live and if people disengage politically.

The paper will be organised into three parts: the first part considers the consequences of different types of social interaction for the formation of opinions. Based on arguments that encounters within the everyday life, which take place in the public sphere are important because they can reach people who are not necessarily interested in politics and because they take people by surprise and may disrupt daily routines and thus be thought provoking, I will argue that conflict and thus contact is necessary for a strong understanding of civil society and that the wish to avoid conflict and exposure to differing views and strangers is enabled through the privatisation of public space. The importance of listening will be explored and I will claim that the right to be listened to is essential for mutual understanding and recognition.

The second part looks at the link between a reduction of contact and conflict on the one side and understanding, recognition and civic concerns on the other. I will show how social interaction is linked to people's civic concerns and their value formation. I will claim that whom we perceive as fellow citizens is influenced by whom we regularly see and interact with within our everyday life. Based on the argument that spatial separation aids the solidification of social differences and vice versa contact between different groups challenges the legitimacy of these differences, I will illustrate how it can be argued that opinions and civic concerns develop according to lived experiences with others and thus the urban form people live in.

The third part regards the consequences of private neighbourhood associations on residents' interests in and expectations from local government and local politics. I will explain why it is necessary to look at the relationship of residents with their local government through the angle of political theory. The identification with a specific neighbourhood might lead to a reduction of interest in the city as a whole and thus reduce the support for policies, which are beneficial for residents of all neighbourhoods. I will claim that lack of social interaction with members of different social groups within the neighbourhood and thus lack of civic concerns for the whole municipality will decrease people's interests in their local government and in local politics.

This paper stresses the importance of integrating debates about the phenomenon of increasing privatisation of collective spaces and private security provision, spatial fragmentation, social exclusion and political disengagement.

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“The organization of space both provides the basis for social relations, and offers a reflection of them.” (Tonkiss, 2005: 2)

1 Introduction

Does the urban form we live in influence our patterns of social interaction? Do social interaction patterns influence our attitudes and civic concerns? Do they have an impact on our political interests? Are our opinions about local government and our views about local politics influenced by the urban form we live in? Analysing the links between these topics and the question if there are any causal relationships between them is the aim of this research.

This paper is a theoretical reflection, based on the findings from the empirical research, which I conducted in Buenos Aires. As part of the research for my thesis I have explored people's social interaction patterns, their political and social engagement and their civic concerns. The case study was San Isidro, a suburb of Buenos Aires, where I conducted interviews in different types of neighbourhoods: gated neighbourhoods, non-gated neighbourhoods of the same socio-economic level with private security provision, neighbourhoods without private security of various socio-economic levels and informal neighbourhoods. The specific purpose of that research was to explore the links between the urban form people live in and their values given to democratic processes and urban citizenship.

The assumption that was tested was that residents of gated neighbourhoods might have fewer needs and less reason to be concerned about urban issues regarding social and political life within the whole municipality than residents of other suburban neighbourhoods. I analysed if they engage less in debates about collective interests, if they are therefore less willing to engage in debates and issues concerning the whole municipality and thus will be less inclined to pressure local governments to provide public services that satisfy the whole municipality.

The empirical data, which has been collected, is based on people's own accounts of their daily life and their social and political opinions and engagement. The information gathered has been analysed on the background of three different areas of literature. Firstly, the interdisciplinary discussion about the spread of gated neighbourhoods and its consequences for patterns of social interaction between different socio-economic groups. Secondly, the debate within political theory, which associates the privatisation of public space with a lack of democratic listening, and with a reduction in civic concerns and political engagement. Thirdly, the debate in social psychology, which analyses the consequences of the reduction of contact and thus conflict between different groups of society. These theoretical interpretations and explanations of my empirical data will be linked to findings about differences in residents' relationship with local government and the consequences of these for urban society on a wider scale.

I will argue, that many of the regularly mentioned consequences of gated neighbourhoods on residents' social interaction patterns are not necessarily linked to gated neighbourhoods but more generally to a suburban lifestyle. But, at the same time, the findings of my research in Buenos Aires show that there are specific differences in relation to some forms of social interaction, civic concerns and political engagement if residents of gated neighbourhoods are compared with others. This paper will try to give theoretical explanations to these findings and it aims at exploring the extent to which the urban form people live in is a reflection of modern society and to what degree itself influences civic understanding and behaviour of residents.

The first part of the paper will look at the findings of differences among the patterns of social interaction and interpret these according to arguments from within political theory, focusing on the significance of involuntary contact. Secondly, I will look at debates about contact and conflict within social psychology in order to estimate the possible impacts on residents' civic concerns and value formation. I will then look at involuntary contact and its consequences for democratic processes, the politics of space and the importance of listening and sympathy. Fourthly, I will show how the findings from my empirical data concerning differences in residents' opinions about local government and their engagement in local politics can be interpreted. In the concluding part of the paper I will outline the consequences of these theoretical arguments for the interpretation of empirical findings and for the debate about gated neighbourhoods more generally.

2 Informal Encounter

Following the findings of my research I want to suggest that it is important to consider arguments from within political theory to understand the consequences that the spread of gated neighbourhoods might have on value formation of its residents and as a consequence on democratic processes.

Looking at the question if residents of gated neighbourhoods have differing patterns of social interaction and if these coincide with differences in their civic concerns, I found in my case study that compared with residents of the same socio-economic level living in the same municipality but in non-gated neighbourhoods, patterns of social interaction were almost identical. These differences should thus rather be linked to class than to the privatisation of public space. The only type of social interaction, which was found to be different, was spontaneous contact with strangers. This type of social interaction with strangers within the own neighbourhood, which I will in the following call informal encounter, is non-existent in gated neighbourhoods.

Trying to interpret the significance of this lack of informal encounter I will now review arguments from within political theory. Kohn (2004) argues that encounters within the everyday life, which take place in the public sphere are important mainly for two reasons: firstly because they can reach people who are not necessarily interested in politics and secondly because they take people by surprise and may disrupt daily routines and thus be thought provoking. Compared to the information that is sought by people out of their own initiative and within controlled circumstances, i.e. in the media, Kohn claims that exposure to strangers within public space which is unexpected has much more potential for being transformative.

Following this line of thought I want to argue that the lack of contact with strangers within the own neighbourhood can thus have an impact on residents' civic concerns. This type of social interaction is generally based on involuntary contact with people of a different socio-economic level. Examples of this type of interaction within non-gated neighbourhoods found in my empirical research mainly consisted in contacts with beggars, panhandlers, cardboard-collectors and street children. The way residents talked about these contacts and interactions showed that they were often disturbing but at the same time thought provoking.

The significance of informal encounter has to be considered in the context of the debate about the relationship between public space and public sphere. Since this is not the place to review this debate, I want to clarify which position within that debate will be followed within this paper (see e.g. Calhoun, 1992). Disagreeing with Habermas' theory of the public sphere, where public space represents the place within which rational debate can take place, I follow Kohn's (2004) position, which puts the importance of the public sphere today in allowing dissenting views to be expressed and therefore to draw the attention of citizens to the irrationalities which might be the consequences of their own behaviour and their way of life. Thus, contrary to Habermas' belief in the production of universal truth through rational debate, she argues for a public sphere, which

shows “*that our truths are not universal*” (Kohn, 2004: 59). Kohn maintains that the wish to avoid conflict and exposure to differing views and strangers, which according to her arises from a discomfort with face-to-face politics, is enabled through the privatisation of public space. She argues that this is of great importance since provocative speech especially by marginalised groups cannot happen in any other places. Additionally it can be argued that by retrieving into privatized spaces it is possible to uphold theoretical dedication to democratic ideals and free speech while at the same time avoiding conflict on a personal level. The concrete encounter with others is thus seen to be important in order to consider these others’ interests and perspectives. Interest in common goods and in public space itself can thus only result from a public interaction, which allows for differences to be expressed and perceived (Bickford, 1996). Gated neighbourhoods, which by their very nature inhibit the possibilities for informal encounter, can thus be seen as restraining political activity and open dissent within public space.

It can be argued that the residential neighbourhood is not the only environment within which people socially interact and therefore the lack of this kind of informal encounter within residents’ own neighbourhood can be considered to be negligible (see Charmes, 2006). But as the findings of my empirical research in a suburb of Buenos Aires show, many of my interviewees living in gated neighbourhoods were housewives who did not commute to work, did their shopping in shopping malls or via the Internet and spent their weekends in private leisure clubs. This means that almost all their social interaction takes place in private or semi-private spaces where involuntary contact with strangers can be avoided. Additionally, children and teenagers living in gated neighbourhoods, who in the context of my case study generally go to private schools since they belong to middle or upper-middle classes, spend their whole life in private or semi-private spaces and are thus not confronted with this kind of contact either. Therefore I believe that if the only contact with strangers mentioned by residents of non-gated neighbourhoods is found to be this spontaneous and often involuntary contact within the neighbourhood, the lack of it must be considered to be significant. My interviewees generally discussed social problems within the municipality and their opinions about others in the context of mentioning these contacts. And they discussed these issues in much more abstract ways where this contact was missing, i.e. in gated neighbourhoods. I will thus argue that as a consequence of lacking informal encounter, residents’ civic concerns, i.e. their concerns about the problems and interests of others within the municipality will be reduced.

Within the context of the debate about gated neighbourhoods and their consequences for society, Bickford (1996) similarly argues that whom we perceive as fellow citizens is influenced by whom we regularly see and interact with within our everyday life. Thus she claims that the creation of gated neighbourhoods can be interpreted as a threat to democratic processes. The greatest danger of gated neighbourhoods for her is the process of adaptation to the walls whereby they become unnoticed. As a result, residents’ image of their world consists of those living within their neighbourhood and a sense of the real world becomes more difficult to obtain. In essence it can thus be sustained that whom we regard as fellow citizens, is influenced by the built environment within which we live and by whom we thus interact with.

Kohn (2004) argues that although most liberal societies can count with general support for free speech among their citizens, there is at the same time a wide spread unease with face-to face interaction between strangers. This was also found in my empirical research, where most interviewees’ comments on informal encounter showed either negative feelings for the other or distress about the situation of contact. Whereas residents of gated neighbourhoods did not experience such encounters and thus had no conflicts arising from them. I therefore agree with Kohn (2004) when she argues that it is easier for those avoiding involuntary contact, i.e. residents of gated neighbourhoods, to theoretically commit to the right to free speech and tolerance in a general sense, because they evade conflict and provocation and thus do not need to test their convictions in real life.

I thus want to argue that, even if informal encounter in public spaces cannot be equated with political discussion, the exposure to others in itself has a political significance, since it provides

opportunities for gaining information about others and for learning to accept difference. It also often leads to conflict and aggression, which I argue is, even though a negative outcome of social interaction, still a more democratic one than avoidance and ignorance. Being confronted with strangers might thus promote opportunities to reconsider one's own world and values with the chance of a critical view on the existing social structure and power relations within which we live.

3 Social Contact within Social Psychology

Following the findings about the consequences of involuntary contact with strangers, it was shown above that contact and conflict play a vital role in the formation of civic concerns. In order to understand the significance of the impact of social contact on citizens civic concerns, it is necessary to consider the debate within social psychology about contact and conflict. I will thus review arguments from within this debate and show how, according to these, face-to-face contact between members of different social groups is, under specific circumstances, related to a better understanding of others.

It is claimed that the arising of conflicts and fears as a consequence of informal encounter can be explained by looking at the connections between spatiality and psyche. According to Wilton (1998: 174), informal encounter questions the established spatial order, which is otherwise taken for granted and additionally contests the *"integrity of individual or collective identities"*. As discussed before, spatial divisions can be considered to be the result of social difference and at the same time these spatial divisions do reinforce these differences. Similarly to arguments within political theory, which were stated above, Wilton maintains that the reason for this is the fact that spatial divisions make it easier for citizens to keep social boundaries alive, since perceived differences between groups are strengthened by such divisions. According to him, physical proximity on the other hand questions the validity of social boundaries. Therefore I will argue that urban form naturalizes social relations and that spatial configurations consolidate social divisions, since these divisions appear to be irreversible once they materialize in the built environment. And conversely, social contact will challenge existing boundaries.

Looking at intergroup relations, Brewer and Miller (1996) maintain that individuals are more likely to have positive (prosocial) behaviour to members of ingroups than towards members of outgroups. Therefore the creating of a defined group, which happens with the creation of enclosed neighbourhoods, per se might lead to the deterioration of social relations with outsiders. It is also found that there is a tendency to overstate the degree of difference between two different groups following the creation of visible determined groups. This tendency can be explained by the fact that people tend to consider things to be more similar to each other if they belong to the same category and more different if they belong to another. Regarding the impact of contact, or lack of contact Brewer and Miller conclude that through contact knowledge about others is gained. They argue that therefore the lack of contact between members of different social groups nourishes suspicion towards these others. Antagonistic social groups they claim, generally try to keep social distance and evade social interaction with members of the other group. This avoidance of intergroup social interaction promotes further resentment and evasion and thus a cycle of perpetuating hostility and avoidance develops.

This cycle is the basis of Allport's so-called 'contact hypothesis' of intergroup relations. Allport argued that if ignorance and lack of knowledge fostered suspicion and negative behaviour, face-to-face contact between members of different groups should reduce distrust by increasing knowledge and familiarity. In later empirical research a set of conditions have been established which are seen to be essential for a positive outcome of social contact. Social psychologists generally agree that regarding the effects of social contact on intergroup attitudes, the nature and the quality of social interaction is more significant than the frequency of interaction. The environment within which this interaction occurs is also seen to be of importance. With the greatest effect of social contact being the one, which takes place in a cooperative environment.

Summarising their findings, Brewer and Miller state that even if the extent to which social contact between groups has an effect on peoples' attitude depends on a combination of these factors, it can be generalised that *"cooperative contact does seem to be the key to improving intergroup relations and changing the social psychological processes that underlie prejudice and discrimination"* (Brewer & Miller, 1996: 132). They also argue that if social contact with members of a different social group, which might be perceived as uncanny, exists over a long period of time, this interaction might overcome the perception of them being the 'other'. This process according to Wilton (1998: 182) will at first provoke fear and aggression but subsequently will lead to a *"reconceptualization of the abject/uncanny"* since the perception of the other as uncanny can only persist in the context of distance.

Regarding democratic processes within urban space this is of great significance because it means that informal encounter will in the long term disturb the established social structure. Wilton (1998) claims that the uncanny, by becoming familiar, is able to confuse presupposed images of reality. This process of disturbance has to be understood as a spatial phenomenon since it occurs as a result of someone being 'out-of-place'. This being 'out-of-place' will challenge established socio-psychological structures and lead to a *"more nuanced understanding of 'difference'"* (Wilton, 1998: 183). This is why I argue that, in the context of my case study, the lack of informal encounter has a significant impact on residents' civic concerns. The men and women, who go from door to door asking for some kind of help, represent this being out of place, since they move in streets of wealthy neighbourhoods, where others mainly use cars or go jogging and where private security companies give the impression of entering a private space. Nonetheless they ring at doorbells and residents in the long term become familiar with some them and gain information about their specific problems and concerns. This does, as claimed above, lead to a more nuanced understanding of an otherwise uncanny group, which was mainly perceived as being different.

4 Democratic Processes within Urban Space

Following the insights from arguments about the impact of informal encounter within social psychology I will now explore the impact of the lack of informal encounter on democratic processes, since informal encounter within public space is seen to be part of a democratic process, even if it is only one among many. Other political processes, like voting or backroom discussions among political elites might be more significant for policy-making, but the impact of informal encounter on citizens' perceptions should not be disregarded. Informal encounter and the successive internal processes have an impact on people's awareness of others and influence their image of the world with in which they life. The resulting values and opinions will inform people's choice when it comes to elections and more generally political decision taking.

In providing public space, cities offer spaces where democratic processes, which range from political action to leafleting, can take place. These spaces can be interpreted as *"an informal spatial infrastructure for political action and association"* (Tonkiss, 2005: 65). As stated above there is an ongoing discussion about the way in which public space and public sphere relate to each other. I will in the context of this paper follow Tonkiss (2005) proposition to differentiate between three ideal-types of public space which each represent a specific part of public life. Firstly, the square, which represents collective belonging; secondly, the café, representing social exchange; and thirdly, the street, representing informal encounter.

Looking at democratic processes within urban space in the context of my research it is the third type, the street, which is affected by the privatisation of space in the context of gated neighbourhoods. The street, it is elsewhere argued, does not represent a true public space anymore, especially in the context of suburbia where it is claimed to merely act as a thoroughway for traffic (e.g. Charmes, 2005). I will in contrast argue that it should be regarded as a place of

communal use, and thus as a space that has to be shared as a matter of facts and that it should not be confused with the spaces of belonging or exchange. The street can from this perspective be conceived as a shared public space in which citizens are obliged to interact with each other, even if only to a minimal extent. In the street citizens have no choice but to deal with others who at least theoretically have the same right to be there as themselves. It is therefore in streets, on sidewalks, at bus stops, where social differences play no role since everybody has the same right to the street. Seen as a public space of informal encounters, the street is thus a space where social codes are played out and potential conflict is often expected. Questions of trust and suspicion thus arise and knowledge about others can be gained. This exposure to strangers, as discussed above, might provoke fear or aggression, but it might at the same time promote mutual concern and recognition. A prerequisite for the recognition of others is knowledge about these others, which shows their differences and simultaneously shows the similarities between groups. This kind of knowledge about strangers can primarily be gained through exposure to others within public space, because, as Kohn argues, *"in private we choose our companions according to our preferences and on public we learn to share the world with those who are different"* (Kohn, 2004: 204).

Sociologists have often pointed to the links between psychological processes, forms of social interaction and the urban form people live in. According to Tonkiss (2005), citizens will see no necessity or desire to share public space with strangers if these strangers do not concern them in the first place. Therefore the value of public space per se is lost if social contact diminishes. The gradual disappearance of public space can thus be interpreted as an indicator of the decline of public life and at the same time as a causal factor for its corrosion. Tonkiss goes on arguing that *"where public spaces are rendered inaccessible or unaccommodating or expensive, or simply are killed off by privatization, this compounds the dwindling of a public sense that make such developments expedient in the first place"* (Tonkiss, 2005: 73). Public space thus has a role in promoting civic concerns or as Bauman puts it: *"It is the urban environment which must be 'civil', if its inhabitants are to learn the difficult skills of civility"* (2000: 95).

The main argument so far was that the enclosure of residential neighbourhoods, which leads to a lack of informal encounter, has an impact on residents' civic concerns. I will now look at the consequences that increasing privatisation of public space as a result of the enclosure of neighbourhoods has on other urban democratic processes. One of these democratic processes according to Bickford (1996) is listening. She claims that similar to the right to free speech, the right to be listened to is essential for mutual understanding and recognition. She also argues that the fact that what people perceive might change their opinions leads to many not wanting to listen, since it is natural to be afraid of these changes. According to her listening within the public sphere involves taking the risk of being convinced by the other. It is very important though to understand that listening in its own is in no way considered to solve conflicts between differing groups, it might merely clarify existing differences. But according to Bickford, once these differences are perceived it is possible to take informed action, whereas while differing opinions and conflicts are ignored, they cannot be solved.

In the context of listening, Kohn (2004) argues that although social problems will not be solved by listening citizens awareness in itself is relevant. If listening is reduced, this awareness will only be achieved through media reports and not through face-to-face contact with strangers on the street. The problem with information gained through newspaper reports or televised news is that it is mediated whereas the information gained through direct personal exposure to strangers and to dissenting views, is direct and does not carry hidden agendas or opinions.

Another outcome of face-to-face contact between strangers, which is relevant in the discussion of urban democratic processes, is sympathy. Kohn (2004) argues that apart from the understanding for others that we can gain through knowledge about them, it is because of sympathy that we are not indifferent to the opinion others have about ourselves. That is to say people generally want to be accepted by others and thus assess their own behaviour according to the expected opinion and reaction of an imagined spectator. This process leads to an internalization of social norms.

Therefore it can be claimed that the capacity for sympathy is necessary for political life because it encourages citizens to try to understand others and at the same time to take into account others' viewpoint about ourselves.

5 Interest in Local Politics and Local Government

As stated above, the differences found in patterns of social interaction of residents of gated neighbourhoods compared to others, where limited to differences in informal encounter, but even if minor, these differences interpreted within the context of political theory and social psychology are considered to have a significant impact on residents' civic concerns and thus on urban democratic processes.

Within this comparison between residents of different neighbourhoods, a much greater difference though was found in residents' relationship with and knowledge about local government and thus their concerns relating to local politics and local government.

Within the debate about the impacts of gated neighbourhoods it is often argued that those living within the gates choose to provide themselves with all the facilities they want and need and therefore they have no interest in paying for public facilities for the whole municipality (e.g. Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Caldeira, 2000). Others claim that participation in local government and generally political engagement are both fostered by private forms of urban government (e.g. Foldvary, 1994; Webster, 2001). Martinotti (1999) maintains that local government institutions generally rely on the assumption that residents are naturally interested in local decision-making and in issues concerning common welfare. But that this cannot be taken for granted in a time where many cities experience increasing privatisation, commercialisation and surveillance of the public realm and where an increasing part of the population chooses to live within gated communities, which are privately governed.

According to Kohn, the private provision of services within gated neighbourhoods allows residents to "*opt out of their obligations to the broader community*" (2004: 118), particularly in reference to recreational facilities. She also claims that there is, thus not much incentive for residents of these neighbourhoods to approve public spending on the provision of these services for poorer neighbourhoods. On the other hand, private urban governance can be seen as part of a long tradition of self-government, especially in the United States. The writings of Jefferson and Tocqueville are often cited to support the claim that private urban governance, apart from having a long tradition, facilitates local political participation and thus strengthens democracy. But as Kohn (2004) clarifies, Jefferson's vision for local government consisted of wards, which functioned as forums for direct citizen participation and not like most gated communities of professionally managed associations. Jefferson imagined these communities as outward looking and wanted them to select jurors and vote and discuss national issues rather than only being concerned with local issues. His ward system was meant to provide residents with more opportunities to take part in the public sphere and express their political opinions. Jefferson's vision was thus to promote citizenship and not to protect private interests and property values. According to Kohn (2004) residential community associations on the other hand, are inward oriented and give priority to the interests of the neighbourhood compared to general political concerns. Tocqueville in contrast proposed to encourage free circulation and to support the freedom of expressing dissenting views, since for him the greatest danger for freedom and democracy was people's renunciation from public concerns.

Analysing the interviews from my case study in regards to residents interests in local politics and their knowledge about local government it can be summarised that residents of gated neighbourhoods were found to be less aware of problems concerning local government and also to a lesser extent interested in local politics. It was also found that there was no contact between residents of gated neighbourhoods and local government, whereas residents of non-gated

neighbourhoods with the same socio-economic level had almost all experienced some form of contact with local government and thus had more knowledge about local government. They were also found to have much stronger opinions about local government with often very concrete criticism of the way some things were dealt with by the municipality. Asked about the efficiency and quality of local government, residents of gated communities in contrast did all have no criticism and no specific opinion. They defended their interest vis-à-vis local government as a group and in cases where local government had to be contacted because of some problem within the neighbourhood that concerned the municipality, this was always done by the administrator. There was an effective disengagement from local political issues, which can be explained by a lack of personal contact with the local municipal administration and a resulting lack of knowledge about local government.

The interviews with residents of the informal neighbourhood showed that they also generally had no direct contact with local government, either because of lack of knowledge about their rights or because they also tended to organise as a group with a local leader representing the whole neighbourhood in cases of claims or problems, which concerned the municipality. But interestingly there were in contrast to the residents of gated communities, no signs of political disengagement or disinterest in local government. I thus believe, that the fact that residents of gated neighbourhoods, compared to those of informal settlements have the possibility to solve their local needs privately, seems to be significant as they can opt out of public services. The possibility to use private provision of public goods signifies that residents of gated neighbourhoods do not depend on public provision from local government. This freedom of choice, I want to argue inevitably leads to a disengagement from local politics and as a consequence also might reduce residents disposition to support public policies which are in the interest of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In sum it can be claimed that privately governed neighbourhoods might promote identification with the neighbourhood, but this will occur at the detriment of identification with the whole municipality. This then will reduce the disposition of residents to back municipal policies and initiatives, which benefit the whole municipality. And as Kohn argues, "*NIMBYism (not-in-my-backyard) was the specter of the 1980s, the 'only-in-my-backyard' attitude is also a threat*" (Kohn, 2004: 157).

Regarding the increasing proliferation of private residential neighbourhoods, it is elsewhere argued that private urban government is more cost effective and allows for free choice of residents and should thus be accepted as the better form of urban government. But the argument here is that such a consumer based approach to local government encourages a vision of the city, where services, recreational facilities, security provision and schools are perceived as private privileges rather than public goods.

6 Conclusions

Considering the international debate about gated communities, it is important to keep in mind the specific context of each research. Often differences in understandings of impacts and consequences of this urban reality are grounded in differences between the urban contexts, which are presupposed. Therefore I want to emphasize that the discussion about the impacts of gated neighbourhoods in this paper is to be considered within the context of a suburban municipality in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Regarding my initial questions, I come to the conclusion that, in the context of my case study, the links between a lack of informal encounter within the neighbourhood and residents civic concerns does exist. But more importantly, residents of private urban neighbourhoods show signs of disengagement from local politics and local government. This disengagement was found to be a consequence of the existence of private local administrations, which take a mediating role between residents and local government. As a result, residents are not confronted directly with their local government and do not consider it to play an important role in their life.

Similar to my earlier argument about the consequences of a lack of informal encounter with strangers in the street, I want to argue that the lack of direct contact with local government has an impact on citizens' attitude towards it, their opinions about it and most significantly on their perception of its importance. Both these socio-psychological phenomena together, i.e. reduced civic concerns and disengagement from local government will in the long run result in a more general disengagement from urban democratic processes. I thus believe that the proliferation of gated neighbourhoods will erode understandings of urban citizenship which are based on mutual recognition and solidarity. This process is intensified by the general trend to privatisation of public spaces elsewhere in the city.

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