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ENEMIES WITHIN? GATED COMMUNITIES UNHINGED

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Introduction

Gated communities are a fascinating phenomenon: what motivates people to voluntarily wall themselves in? They are a relatively new phenomenon, as historically, “material enclosure in the design of urban populations has been the exception.” (Kosloff, 1992, p.104). Mediaeval cities were of course walled but their walls enclosed the whole population. Today’s gated communities are a market response to the perceived failure of government to ensure maintenance of property values and personal security. Groups formed of individuals from largely the same sector of society buy environmental quality and security in a retreat behind walls, gates and even their own security forces. This paper outlines the different types and scale of such developments, together with the legal basis of gated communities both here and in the States, before moving on to their treatment in fiction.

It is not surprising that gated communities appeal to novelists, as a number of perennial motifs can be played out against the background they provide : for example, social inclusion and exclusion; order and disorder; nature and human artifice. As well as the rich possibilities of exploring the psychological impact on those living within the walls, gated communities can be taken as a metaphor for the state of the world at the beginning of the 21st century. It seems that increasingly states are dividing into smaller nations, as fear and hatred of ‘the other’ operates on a far larger than individual scale. This paper looks at the work of two well-known authors, the American T.C. Boyle, and the English J.G. Ballard. Both have used gated communities as more than just the setting for novels. Boyle focuses on the relationship between those inside and those outside the walls, while Ballard is more interested in the psychological state of the communities’ residents. The narratives and themes of their novels are explored, and the final section of the paper considers the question of the place of fiction in shaping our views about gated communities.

Real gated communities

Gated communities can take many forms, including private apartment blocks, social rented tower blocks, new housing developments which include land and/or leisure facilities, and (in the States at least) existing neighbourhoods which become gated after their initial development. Blakeley and Snyder (1998) identify three main categories of gated communities. “Lifestyle” communities, such as retirement communities and golf club leisure developments, provide security and access to exclusive leisure facilities. “Elite” communities are enclaves of the rich and famous who seek privacy. Thirdly, the “security zone” development is primarily motivated by the fear of crime. In the States, this third type includes public housing complexes in areas of high crime rates, as well as middle class private housing. These authors cast doubt on whether there is any reduction in actual crime, but point out that a reduction in the fear of crime is important in itself for resident satisfaction.

Figures from the USA indicate that up to 9 million residents live in 3 million units in around 20,000 gated communities, and an estimated 80% of new urban developments are gated. (Blakeley and Snyder, 1998). However, in the States, gated communities are not just new developments. Membership of residents associations is high in America; in 1999 it was estimated that there were 205,000 American residential community associations, housing 42 million people. (Treese, 1999, cited in Webster, 2001, p.151). In the States, associations can vote to *become* gated. Over ten years ago, Davis noted in his seminal book *City of Quartz*, that the trend for gated communities in the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles, had “assumed the frenzied dimensions of a residential arms race as ordinary suburbanites demand the kind of social insulation once enjoyed only by the rich.” (Davis, 1990, p.246). The local authority transfers ownership of that neighbourhood to the association on condition that they accept responsibility. In America, along with walls and gates, go private armed guards and privatised services such as refuse collection and street lighting, in formerly public streets and neighbourhoods.

The ownership deeds of 80% of American residents associations require membership of the association. These associations become the local government, as they “involve the administration of territory such that they resemble communities in the broader sense rather than simply buildings.” (Kennedy, 1995, p.762). As in conventional local government, residents do not have the option of opting out, because it is impossible to buy a residence there without belonging to the association. This trend emphasises private property rights and private services, and American commentators fear that members of the residential community associations will soon refuse to pay local taxes for services they do not use. After all, they are already paying for the privatised services provided by the association. In addition, on purchase they must sign up to a number of enforceable covenants, conditions and restrictions. Typical clauses include :

- no parking of vehicles on roads overnight
- no basketball hoops to be erected on the front of buildings
- no rowdy parties
- every house to have a garage with room for at least two cars, which cannot be used for any other purpose
- no rooms to be let to tenants
- pets to be limited to a maximum of three dogs or four cats over the age of six weeks, of maximum 30 pounds in weight, per house
- only 35% of each front yard can be cemented over
- no hanging of washing out to dry

In the UK the scale of gated communities is smaller; they are a more recent, and certainly less well documented, development. Lady Margaret ('there is no such thing as society') Thatcher famously moved to a gated community in Dulwich when she had to leave 10 Downing Street in a hurry in 1997. Gated communities are now becoming more evident in London, and in key areas of urban regeneration elsewhere. Webster (2001, p.157) cites a newspaper report that developers are experiencing “increasing demand for homes

surrounded by high walls and security gates". (Gardner, 2000). This recent development in the provision of private housing in the UK has taken place against the background of an increasing division between the poorest quarter and the rest of the population. The effect of a dominant discourse of tenure which favours owner-occupation has led to the marginalisation of rented tenures, especially social rented housing. Successive British Crime Surveys have highlighted the rise in actual crime, and the rise in the number of people who fear crime. Fear of crime is highly correlated with experience of crime itself, but many more people fear crime than are victims of it. (Hough, 1995).

The legal form of gated communities in England differs from those in the United States. So far as I am aware, there has been no ceding of responsibility for once-public streets by any local authority. It is true that the roads in some housing developments remain unadopted by the local authority, so residents must pay for their upkeep. However, there is no concomitant right to prevent non-residents from using these private streets or parking on them. The legal documents for gated communities which I have seen, are drafted as a three party lease between the developers, the leaseholders and the management company. Unlike the American norm, there is no requirement to join the residents association.

There are at least two legal techniques used to establish exclusive gated communities. In the first, control can be exercised by developers through Estate Management Schemes, which are provided for by the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993. These Schemes are approved by a leasehold valuation tribunal - so that even if the leaseholder residents later enfranchise (acquiring the freehold from the developer), they will still be bound by obligations to preserve standards and amenities. The freeholder thus retains powers of management over the whole development. In the second variant, used when the developer has no intention of retaining a long-term interest in the properties, all residents acquire a share of the management company when they purchase their lease. When the last plot is sold, the freehold will be offered to the management company. Individual enfranchisement would be discouraged, but could not be prevented.

In both versions described, the rights of the owners are restricted through the use of covenants in the lease, as in America, except that here enforcement of the covenants will be the responsibility of the individual resident or the management company on their behalf, rather than the community association. Typical covenants are very similar, though perhaps less invasive and detailed, to their American counterparts. Yet they still aim to control the occupiers' use of the property in a way which seems at odds with our expectations of the freedom enjoyed by owner-occupiers. One lease which I have seen forbids children to play in any communal areas except the designated play area, which may lead to conflicts developing between those residents with children, and those without. Another example is the restriction of the use of leisure facilities to those who permanently reside in the development, which clearly envisages a very self-contained community. An owner-occupier with a swimming pool in their garden would invite their guests, and their children's friends, to use it. However, it seems that residents of gated communities

have no such right to entertain their guests in the shared leisure facilities of the gated community. The children living in the gated community may be safe from paedophiles (unless of course one lives next door) but will have little liberty to invite non-resident friends to 'play out' and use the leisure facilities of their neighbourhood.

The development of gated communities therefore raises interesting questions about the trade-off between individual rights and community interests behind the gate itself. Saunders (1980) identifies three essential characteristics of owner-occupation : the right of exclusive use and benefit, the right of control, and the right of disposal. The right of disposal is still present for affluent owner-occupiers, but in restricted form. Many American community residential associations reserve the right to 'vet' potential purchasers. In this country the lease will usually provide that properties may only be sold if the purchaser is prepared to take on the original covenants and restrictions, and on condition that the seller pays a proportion of the sale price to the management company. The right of exclusive use and benefit is secondary, in gated communities, to an acceptance that neighbours have an interest in each others' properties, as the area must not be allowed to go downhill. The right of control over your own property is thus given up to the greater good, and it seems that the response of affluent owner-occupiers to fear of crime is to give up their rights, which theoretically are what distinguishes the tenure of ownership from that of tenancy. (See Blandy and Goodchild, 1999).

More importantly, the growth in gated communities affects the wider interests of the whole of society. Blakely and Snyders (1998) make explicit the impact on social exclusion and fragmentation of the growth in the USA of gated communities. The self-interest of wealthy owner-occupiers which creates gated communities, and persuades them to relinquish certain rights associated with ownership of property, reinforces the divided society which they sought to escape.

Fictional gated communities

This section of the paper starts with a fictional American gated community, and then moves to gated communities in England, Spain and France. T. C. Boyle is an award-winning novelist from California. His book *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995) concerns a "private community, comprising a golf course, ten tennis courts, a community center and some two hundred and fifty homes, each ... strictly conforming to the covenants, conditions and restrictions set forth in the 1973 articles of incorporation." (p.30). This well established community known as the Arroyo Blanco Estates is set in the Santa Monica Mountains outside Los Angeles. The novel describes how the residents association votes to install first security gates, and then to build a wall around the whole development. Two couples and the way their lives become entangled are at the centre of the book. Kyra and Delaney Mossbacher are a liberal, white couple who live in the development, and their counterpoints are Candido and America, illegal immigrants from Mexico who just about survive in a makeshift campsite at the bottom of the canyon below the estate.

At the beginning of the novel, the residents of the estate have been “whipped into a reactionary frenzy by the newspapers” and support the proposal to gate their community almost unanimously. Delaney Mossbacher is a journalist who writes a nature column and is initially against the gate, as later he is against the proposed wall. In his view, “The whole point of this place is to be close to nature. ... I need to be able to just walk out the door and be in the hills, in the wild.” His wife is a realtor, and in favour of both gate and wall : “What do you think this is - some kind of nature preserve? This is a community, for your information, a place to raise kids and grow old - in an exclusive private highly desirable location.” (pp.220/1). Those to be excluded are the illegal immigrants who provide cheap labour in the area, and who ironically find work building the wall.

The Tortilla Curtain describes how Delaney’s objections to the gates and the wall are undermined, firstly when coyotes come into their garden and kill their dogs. A series of encounters with human ‘intruders’ into the estate then make him feel personally threatened. A forest fire, accidentally started by the Mexicans camping in the canyon, forces the temporary evacuation of the residents of the (by then gated) estate. Candido and America escape the conflagration, and their baby is born in a hut just outside the wall. Months later, Delaney has become sufficiently obsessed to hunt them down, armed with a gun. That night, heavy rainfall leads to a canyon torrent and mudslide. The novel ends with America and Candido reaching safety on the roof of a building. Just as Candido realises that their baby has been lost in the flood, Delaney is swept past by the torrent. Candido reaches down to offer him a hand onto the roof; a poignant gesture of common humanity amidst destruction and tragedy.

The English novelist J.G. Ballard, probably most famous for *Empire of the Sun*, the controversial novel *Crash*, or his output of science fiction, has written several novels set in one or another form of gated community. It is possible that this almost obsessive interest arises from his childhood experiences in a Singapore prison of war camp, the ultimate in gated communities. As Ballard describes his own, fictionalised, experiences in *Empire of the Sun*, the camp was a lawless community in which conventional middle class families who strove to preserve their ‘outside’ values, lost out to opportunistic petty criminals and bullies who rose to become the rulers of the camp. Ballard’s novel *High Rise* was published in 1975. It concerns a luxury forty-storey apartment block in London which was in effect “a small vertical city ... (with) an impressive range of services” (p.9), including sports facilities, shops and a junior school. The two thousand tenants “formed a virtually homogeneous collection of well-to-do professional people” (p.10). At the beginning of the book, the block has only just been completed, and the new residents move in. Gradually they stop leaving the block for work or at all, and turn in on themselves during “a period of continuous bickering, of trivial disputes over the faulty elevators and air-conditioning, inexplicable electrical failures, noise ... in short, that host of minor defects which the architects were supposed specifically to have designed out of these over-priced apartments.” (pp. 17-18).

However, their grievances are directed against other groups of residents rather than against the architects or the building's management. Rivalries emerge between the dog-owners living in the more expensive upper floors, and the residents with children who mainly live in the cheaper lower floors. Fuelled by alcohol and drugs, parties start to get out of hand and tensions simmer, occasionally spilling over into low level violence between groups of residents, who divide "into the three classical social groups, its lower, middle and upper classes." (p.53). Inexorably, social relations between these groups worsen, with residents from the lower floors forming raiding parties to the upper floors, and residents there erecting barricades to repel them. Soon, food and water are in short supply, dogs are eaten and there are hints of cannibalism. The apartment block's services deteriorate still further, but strangely, no residents complain to any outside agency. Soon a situation is reached where "violence would clearly become a valuable form of social cement." (p.92). Finally "the new order had emerged, in which all life within the high-rise revolved around three obsessions - security, food and sex." (p.136). By the close of the novel, a strange type of equilibrium has been achieved within the tower block.

In 1988 Ballard published *Running Wild*, a novel about a different type of gated community. The fictional Pangbourne Village, Berkshire, was made up of ten mansions each set in two acres of grounds, a security gatehouse, and a gymnasium. The estate was "ringed by a steel-mesh fence fitted with electrical alarms ... regularly patrolled by guard-dogs and radio-equipped handlers. Entry to the estate was by appointment only, and the avenues and drives were swept by remote-controlled TV cameras." (p.13). Thirteen children, aged between eight and seventeen, lived on the estate, "scarcely a minute of (whose) lives had not been carefully planned." (p.32). *Running Wild* is written as an investigation into a terrible massacre which took place on the estate, in which all the adults were killed and the children disappeared. The novel is an indictment of "the unlimited tolerance and understanding that had erased all freedom and all trace of emotion" (pp.82/83) for the children of Pangbourne Village. It was, of course, the children who had planned and carried out the massacre. They then disappeared, to re-emerge five years later with a failed assassination attempt at "an exclusive estate in Dulwich against a former British prime minister". (p.105).

Nearly ten years later, in 1996, *Cocaine Nights* was published by Ballard. It concerns Estrella de Mar, a gated peninsula on the Costa del Sol, "a residential retreat for the professional classes of northern Europe." (p.35). Against all expectations, it is a a real, vibrant community with a lively atmosphere, the inhabitants engaged in artistic and sporting activities. But there is "another side to Estrella de Mar. The Harold Pinter seasons, the choral societies and sculpture classes are an elaborate play-group. Meanwhile everyone else is getting on with the real business ... Money, sex, drugs." (p.117). The novel describes how one key character managed to transform the resort from its very dull beginnings, giving its residents a sense of community through his use of crime as performance art. Crime has become the heartbeat of the community. Despite the security alarms and surveillance

cameras, the “main function (of the privatised police force) seemed to be the preservation of the existing criminal order, rather than the tracking down of miscreants.” (p.167). This resort, built in the 1970’s and incorporating an old harbour town, is contrasted with the “pure 1990s” Residencia Costasol, a gated community up the coast, in which “everything is designed around an obsession with crime.” (p.212). Here, the residents “are locking their doors and switching off their nervous systems” (p.219), there are no communal activities and very little use is made of the leisure facilities. However, by the end of the novel this resort too has enjoyed a one-man crime wave and has caught the “infection of optimism and creativity.” (p.289).

Ballard’s latest gated community novel, *Super-Cannes* (2000), is set in Eden-Olympia, a very upmarket gated business park which “concentrated on the office as the key psychological zone.” (p.17). Unlike Ballard’s other novels discussed here, Eden-Olympia is not primarily a residential community; the flats and houses which accommodate only a fifth of the workforce are merely “service stations, where people sleep and ablute.” (p.17). However, like the gated communities in the other novels, Eden-Olympia has its own sporting facilities, artificial lakes and forests, shopping malls, its own TV station, and above all elaborate security features and its own armed police force. The community is described as “an ideas laboratory for the new millennium” (p.16), full of high-achieving and driven experts in their respective fields, too busy for leisure activities, engaged in a “regime of fulfilment through work” (p.39).

Yet “these highly disciplined professionals had very strange dreams. Fantasies filled with suppressed yearnings for violence and ugly narratives of anger and revenge...” (p.258). One of the main characters is a psychiatrist who prescribes “small doses of insanity” to counteract “internal stress, the obsession with the invisible intruder in the fortress...” (p.257). His patients began to seek violence and excitement outside Eden-Olympia, organising “brawls ... vigilante actions ... drug-dealing and prostitution, burglaries and warehouse robberies.” These activities did away with insomnia and depression, and restored their creative edge to the inhabitants of Eden-Olympia. The novel concerns the aftermath of a shoot-out involving a paediatrician, security guards and several other residents, tracing what happens to the paediatrician’s successor and her husband.

Narrative themes

Exclusion and inclusion, both physical and social, are major themes in these novels about gated communities. T.C. Boyle’s book is concerned with boundaries : the process of deciding upon and erecting a wall around the estate, which however can never be made completely impenetrable, is designed to make us think about the boundary between the States and Mexico, and all the other, invisible boundaries between the haves and have-nots. This aspect is less apparent in Ballard’s work, although *Super-Cannes* also features intruders, who cannot be kept out but who are dealt with brutally by the private security force.

The difference in focus between the two authors' works mirrors the difference between gated communities in the States, where existing privileged neighbourhoods go through the process of becoming gated, and in England where new developments are designed as gated communities from the outset. Ballard's novels set in Europe address another facet of social in/exclusion ; the wealthy expatriate community. *Cocaine Nights* imagines what would happen to an elite society with too much leisure time, while *Super-Cannes* imagines one that works too hard.

Both authors also describe the process of the initially cynical outsider being drawn in to the claustrophobic world of their gated community. The main protagonists of *High Rise*, *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes* all become embroiled in the violence which provides the driving force in these novels. In the last two, the central characters specifically follow the tracks of a previous character who has gone too far and ended up contributing to a massacre. *The Tortilla Curtain* describes how Delaney Mossbacher becomes progressively less liberal in his attitude towards both human outsiders and wildlife, in the form of the coyote. He buys his first gun, "shopping for the tools of murder as casually as .. for rat traps or gopher pellets at the hardware store." (p.343), and finally, is prepared to use the gun in his one-man vendetta against the Mexican, who is accidentally knocked down by Delaney in his car at the start of the novel. This deliberate blurring between animals and humans emphasises the idea of the gated community as representative of order, keeping back the disorder beyond the gates. In his nature column, Delaney Mossbacher writes, "The coyote is not to blame - he is only trying to survive, to make a living, to take advantage of the opportunities available to him." But he later expresses the view that "The coyotes keep coming, breeding up to fill in the gaps, moving in where the living is easy. They are cunning, versatile, hungry and unstoppable." Similar opinions of socially excluded people are, of course, exactly what fuels the perceived need for gated communities.

Ballard also characterises the gated community as an over-efficiently ordered, artificial environment : "There are no pine cones to trip you, no bird shit on your car. At Eden-Olympia even nature knows her place." (*Super-Cannes*, p.83). However, as we have seen he is more fascinated by the disorder within gated communities. This is expressed in two ways : a deep-seated internal drive to anti-social behaviour, and the community's need for disorder around them. If people are protected from the reality of social and other conflicts, their lives become meaningless and dull. The first of Ballard's gated community novels, *High Rise*, is a study of collective social breakdown. Ballard suggests that this is made possible by "the remarkably self-contained nature of the high-rise, a self-administered enclave within the larger private domain of the development project." (p.76), where the services provided in the apartment block "took over the task of maintaining the social structure... removed the need to repress every kind of anti-social behaviour, and left (the residents) free to explore any deviant or wayward impulses." (p.36). Thus, the gated community environment encourages the expression of 'natural' selfish and primitive behaviour by the residents through providing, initially, too much external and sanitised order.

In *Running Wild*, an explanation given for the terrible events at Pangbourne Village is that “the regime of kindness and care ...has given birth to its children of revenge...” (p.106). Because their lives were so well regulated, they went “beyond the point where questions of guilt and responsibility have any meaning for them.” (p.80). Even as adults, if everything is provided for us, and there is no need to interact with other members of the ‘community’ we live in, then “There are none of the social tensions that force us to recognise other people’s strengths and weaknesses, our obligations to them or feelings of dependance. ... there’s no need for personal morality.” (*Super-Cannes*, pp.254/5). The other aspect of this theme explored in Ballard’s novels is that “Crime and transgressive behaviour ... provoke us and tap our need for strong emotion, quicken the nervous system and jump the synapses deadened by leisure and inaction.” (p.180, *Cocaine Nights*). In both this book and in *Super-Cannes*, communities and individuals have their lives enriched by indulging in, or witnessing others indulging in, anti-social behaviour. If disorder is regulated out of our immediate environment, then human need for it will ensure that it is provided by different means. Ballard’s message is that designing out disorder from our lives and communities is futile and ultimately counter-productive.

In Boyle’s novel, the most potent threat of disorder comes from the natural forces of fire and water. Each of these at some point nearly engulfs the gated community, but finally the flood brings together the privileged and the socially excluded residents of the canyon. The idea of nature as disorder and violence first found favour in the seventeenth century, at the height of the Scientific Revolution. Later, as a reaction against industrialisation, it became commonplace for western literature to represent nature as representing “both material and spiritual food, to enhance the comfort and soothe the anxieties of men distraught by the demands of the urban world and the stress of the market place.” (Merchant, 1980, pp.8-9). *The Tortilla Curtain* draws on both these views of nature to stress the risks involved in excluding the natural, disordered world, and the dangers inherent in nature itself, which require co-operation by humankind if we are to survive.

The force of fiction

Does fiction have the power to shape our views of gated communities? It would be as well at this point to define what type of fiction we have been considering. These novels do not belong in the science fiction genre; even though the gated business park depicted in *Super-Cannes* is very hi-tech, this feature does not play an integral part in the plot of the book. J.G.Ballard’s gated community books all concern violence and murder, and could be categorised as thrillers. In each of the books discussed here, there is a strong element of social realism and satire, particularly in T.C. Boyle’s novel which carries forward the same tradition of American fiction as John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Perhaps the best description is ‘predictive fiction’. The books are set in the present, written in a style of heightened naturalism, and describe unlikely, but not impossible, events. *High Rise* might have seemed

before its time in 1975 when it was first published, but developments in design and in housing aspirations have since caught up with Ballard's imagination.

All the gated communities described in the novels discussed, were originally designed as and considered to be utopias. Klaic (1994) uses the term 'dystopia' to convey the "withering away of utopia, its gradual abandonment or reversal" (p.3). He describes the view of the future portrayed by dystopias as a "polemic, cautionary, or admonitory gesture, a provoking and shocking rendering of what our futures might turn out to be." (pp.5-6). Thus 'dystopic' certainly seems to be an apt description of the gated community fiction. In reading these books, we are alerted to how the media-fed paranoia which leads to gated communities can suck us in, including those who were initially cynical about the benefits or even actively opposed to the creation of the exclusive and excluding development. The authors creatively explore the consequences of moving away from a natural environment, both in terms of the residents' own psychological well-being, and the consequences for others who are left outside the gates.

Novels can offer qualitative insights into the potential implications of our actions, and as a result perhaps have more influence than much academic research. Maybe we should accept that novelists' imaginations are more developed and finely attuned than most people's, and it is therefore worth listening carefully to what they have to say, certainly before European countries embrace gated communities as enthusiastically as America has done.

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