

Realities Behind The Gates

Enclosed Communities A Potent Symbol, But May Be Losing Favor

By CARLY BERWICK

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For much of the past century, the Allyn estate and the Goodwin estate were adjoining mansions on Asylum Avenue in the West End of Hartford. Two decades ago, the Allyn was redeveloped into a gated condominium community. Now the Goodwin is following suit as a condominium development, with one exception - it does not have a gate.

These neighboring developments mirror a national pattern.

The gated community is one of most striking innovations in recent American housing. In the early 1980s, as new housing developments began spring up in open land across the United States, many also added gates, walls, and guardhouses to their perimeters. Several gated Connecticut communities date from this period. Between 1995 and 1998, the number of Americans living in gated communities increased fourfold, from 4 million to 16 million.

Some find this trend troubling. Early critics, such as author Mike Davis, saw the rising numbers of gated communities as the product of a climate of fear. Even as crime rates dropped throughout the '90s, people moved inside gates to keep the perceived chaos outside at bay. According to their critics, gates represent a fortress mentality, which divides Americans into similar groupings of race, economic class, age and politics, and degrades social cohesiveness.

Setha M.Low, author of the 2003 book "Behind the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America," argues that the primary things people say they move to gated communities for - enhanced security and community - never materialize anyway. Crime rates within gated communities tend to be similar to the areas around them, while only a small proportion of residents of feel more connected to their neighbors behind the gate. Low lays much of the blame for the "discourse of fear" on the mainstream media, which she believes unduly emphasizes crime. She says this sometimes encourages people to move into gated communities from neighborhoods with low crime rates.

The criticism may be having an effect, because the growth of gated communities appears to be leveling off. The census bureau only added the category to its semi-annual American Housing Survey in 2001. The survey shows that between 2001 and 2003, the actual number of American households in "secured communities" dipped from just over 7 million to just below it (or 6.6 percent of total households).

The decrease occurred primarily in states in the Northeast and the Midwest, however. The Home Builders Association of Connecticut identified only two gated communities built in recent years, both in Fairfield County, and one of those is electronically gated. In the Sunbelt states - from Florida across the Southwest to southern California - these housing enclaves continued to see a small increase in total numbers, according to the American Housing Survey. A friend described the new Miami gated community where her parents live. It sits between warehouses and the airport, but her father has just a five-minute commute to his job. It seems a desolate place for luxury housing.

Yet in many ways, this secured community is not so different from condos with doormen or suburbs that use distance as a barrier. As political scientist Evan McKenzie points out, savvy developers, wary of the negative associations attached to gated communities, are simply building private communities with their borders protected by other means, such as guards, cameras, creative landscaping or sheer distance.

These private enclaves even offer some advantages to the cities they're near. McKenzie tracks the legions of municipalities across the country that now require most new developments to be private; fast-growing Las Vegas is the most notable example. Private developments allow cities to harvest property taxes without having to provide services

such as street maintenance and security. In many cases, private gated communities also consolidate the development of land, as urban planners advocate, into mini-cities. With open lawns, recreational areas, paths, and the occasional commissary, they are not so different from private communities, such as Florida's Celebration, developed by New Urbanist planners to mimic America's classic small towns.

Private residential developments belong to the long tradition of utopian efforts that helped form modern America. Groups who have wanted to create a more perfect world limited to outsiders include Puritans, Amish, back-to-the-landers, nudist colonies, Branch Davidians, and private universities.

Members of gated communities - and all contract-based homeowners associations for that matter - set their own rules for governance and often privatize public services. They become, in effect, privately owned cities. They often pay for their own security forces, snow removal and garbage collection. They also have resisted what they call "double taxation." In New Jersey, private communities successfully argued to the courts that they should not have to pay full property taxes in addition to community fees for basic services. The nation's oldest retirement community, Arizona's Youngtown, proudly promotes itself as having no school taxes. The opt-out option has its own perils, however, eventually threatening the stability of programs such as public education.

Gates are a loaded symbol, marking the most visible form of private housing community. These associations may save cities money in the short term and help homebuyers feel less anxious or frightened. But unregulated private-sector control over where we live also threatens how we live. As in shopping malls, First Amendment protections don't apply within the borders of private communities. The growing numbers of private-community residents are trading the right to express themselves freely, including in religious or patriotic displays, for the privilege of living within a select setting. It's something to be really scared of.

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