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Is there a gate in your future?

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Insert the card into the slot and the gate opens. Watch through the rearview mirror as the gate closes behind your car to protect your home community from the world outside. This sounds like Scottsdale, Los Angeles, or Miami Beach, but it could just as easily be Calgary, Markham, Kelowna, or cottage country in rural Nova Scotia.

Gates, fences and walls are proliferating in Canada. Although we remain a far cry from the US, where as many as 8 million households live in gated communities, the number of enclaves in Canada is increasing. Our current study of gated communities in Canada (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) has already identified over 130 enclosed developments.

A gated community is a private housing development, with roads closed to outside traffic. Some have walls or fences around their boundaries, while others are isolated by water, ravines, or thick forest cover. They all have some kind of gate across the road entry to keep strangers at bay. Upscale projects have ornate cast iron swinging gates operated by card, code, or key entry, or by guards. A rural lane to a pocket of cottages typically features a swinging bar fixed by a padlock (which vandals may fill with epoxy over winter). Regardless of the degree of sophistication in the devices, the message is clear: if you don't belong here, stay out!

In a society increasingly paralyzed by fear, those with the means chase the promise of greater security. Canada may not have the crime or terrorism threats that our southern neighbours experience, but we can't escape their worries. The search for safety is a special concern for the elderly, who feel vulnerable to victimization, and to the affluent, who see themselves as targets for robbery. Residents tell us they want to protect themselves and their families from dangerous traffic and roving thieves. If they have worked hard to succeed in their lives, they believe they should be able to enjoy a peaceful, private realm at the end of a day.

The prestige associated with elegant gated entries, uniformed guards, and beautiful community amenities also attracts buyers. A beautiful home on a luxuriant golf course is a dream come true for some.

Even more important to many residents of gated communities, though, is the desire to live near people of similar interests and circumstances. The search for community, identity, and companionship especially draws seniors to enclaves. Residents find it easy to establish networks of friendship and mutual support in a homogeneous community. A planner we surveyed explained to us that her mother lives in a gated seniors' complex where neighbours look out for and care about her. Isn't that the hallmark of a good community?

Of course the idea that the gated community may be the remedy for the perils of modern life contradicts the experts' most commonly prescribed solutions for the ills of the contemporary city. Planners and urban designers advocate encouraging diversity, integrating a mix of uses and people through the urban fabric, and increasing densities and street connectivity. Municipal plans and vision statements from across the land promote vibrant and heterogeneous cities. Most are silent on what to do about gating.

Do we, as a society, need to be concerned if those who have the means cloister themselves in enclaves? Does this segregation by class, age, and in some cases ethnicity or race, represent a threat to civil society? Certainly gated communities reflect a new kind of separation in our urban realm, where the “haves” can set themselves apart from the rest. Those in enclaves may not feel they need to share the costs of improving the rest of the urban environment. The residents of private communities may resent paying local taxes on top of their community association rates. They may feel that they pay for the amenities they use and shouldn't have to share the burden for others.

Closing streets to through traffic and building walls around natural amenities fragments the urban realm and privatizes public space. Many of the resort developments threaten to limit public access to ocean and lake shores.

Municipalities vary considerably in their response to gated communities. Some clearly don't want them; some have learned to live with them; some have no idea that gated projects are developing; some have had no experience with them yet. Regions like southern British Columbia, where gating became popular about two decades ago, have the most established policies. Several municipalities actively limit or discourage gating. The real estate ads make clear, however, that the market has not given up on the concept.

Some cities have tried to regulate against gating by prohibiting closed or private roads, requiring street connectivity, or limiting “rear loaded” lots that have high fences along public streets. Municipalities like Burnaby BC, Ajax On, and Orangeville ON have had some success in limiting projects in this way. In the absence of policy, many planners rely on the power of persuasion to convince developers that project approvals would go more smoothly without gates.

Street barricading as a means of traffic calming has become common in Canadian cities. Fences, planters, or concrete barriers limit traffic flow. While this isn't full community gating, it reduces access to public streets and becomes fodder for those who advocate enclosure.

In areas where growth is highly desired, planners may not ask about gates and developers may not raise the issue during the approvals phase. We found many communities where local officials were not aware that gated projects have been built.

The continued increase in gated communities and barricaded streets should be sending us a message about the problems we need to address in the urban environment. It's time we had a public debate about urban form in Canada. Do we want to track the American pattern and end up in Fortress Canada? What will it take to make our cities more livable, secure, and embracing?

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