

Planning responses to gated communities in Canada

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research project that is exploring the municipal planning response to the phenomenon of gated communities in Canada. We are investigating the ways in which local planning authorities implement policies and regulations to deal with developers' requests to gate new development projects. Although gating is not as common in Canada as it is in the US, the number of gated subdivisions is increasing. The issue has not yet generated significant social debate regarding the social, economic, or political implications of this residential form. While planners in some communities have developed policy to regulate gating, for the most part local planners do not have the tools to respond effectively to the challenges that gating may create.

The new gated community

Gated or walled communities have proliferated in America in the last decade, and appear increasingly in regions such as the Middle East, Australia, South Africa, and Central and South America. Blakely and Snyder (1997) found some 20,000 gated communities in the US accommodating over three million units (with seven to eight million residents), but more recent estimates (eg, McGoey 2003) put the number at more than twice that. The US census of 2001 revealed 7 million households in walled communities, and 4 million households in controlled access communities (Sanchez and Lang 2002). Developers estimate that eight out of ten new residential projects in the US involve gates, walls, or guards (Blakely and Snyder 1997). Some 12% of the population of Metro Phoenix lived in gated communities by 1999 (Webster *et al.* 2002). Media reports suggest that gated communities are also on the increase in Canada (Anthony 1997; Haysom 1996; Liebner 2003; Yelaja 2003).

People who choose to close themselves off from the larger city do so in search of community and privacy, and in flight from fear (Dillon 1994; Hubert and Delsohn 1996; Low 2001; Marcuse 1997; McKenzie 1994; Wilson-Doenges 2000). Gates and barriers reflect a reaction to urban problems that have shown no sign of easing; they also indicate the depth of the problems contemporary cities must address. Gated communities respond to the same underlying root issues that generate NIMBYism: concerns about property values, personal safety, and neighbourhood amenities (Dear 1992; Helsley and Strange 1999; Hornblower 1988; Rural and Small Town Research 1992; Shouse and Silverman 1999). These factors similarly motivate those who consider homes in gated communities. When people feel they cannot rely on public regulations and political processes to protect their neighbourhoods from unwanted uses (or people), then some find the option of voluntarily entering an exclusive community quite desirable (Byers n.d.).

Gated enclaves represent the hope of security; they appeal to consumers searching for a sense of community and identity; they offer an important niche marketing strategy for developers in a competitive environment; they keep out the unwelcome; they often come associated with attractive amenities; they increase property values (Baron 1998; Bible and Hsieh 2001; Blakely 1999; McGoey 2003; Townshend 2002). The implications of the growth of this phenomenon are, however, deeply troubling. Gated communities increase housing costs; they enhance class and ethnic segregation; they privatize elements of the public realm (like streets, parks, and even schools); they may promote rather than reduce the fear of crime. Are gated communities appropriate in cities seeking to enhance integration and livability? Gating is

clearly profitable, but can it be “smart” or “sustainable”?

Blakely and Snyder (1997) indicate that the public debate about the social implications of gated communities has barely begun in the US. The discussion is even more limited in Canada, except perhaps in southern BC and southern Ontario where we find most gated projects. However, if Canadian trends parallel those in the US, pressures to gate communities may well increase. Are policy-makers and planners ready to respond?

Blakely (2001) says that professional planners have to take an ethical stand on this issue: silence, he argues, implies acceptance of a built realm in which a growing portion of the most affluent among us wall themselves off. Gated communities raise significant questions related to affordability, segregation, and connectivity. They present physical barriers within the community, limiting access to formerly open landscapes and to public space in coastal areas. As we try to plan sustainable communities with a place for everyone, we might ask whether gated areas represent an innocuous form of protected suburban development or a worrisome precedent for a divided urban realm.

This paper reports on a study of gated communities in Canada begun in 2002. Relatively little is published on gating in Canada, apart from articles in the popular press. We hoped to develop a greater understanding of the extent of the phenomenon in Canada, the spatial distribution of gated projects, and the character of the planning responses to them. Although we did not think that gated communities were as common as they are in the US, we knew from on-going studies of several Canadian cities that they were appearing. We expected that conducting an inventory of gated projects would give us the ability to describe the “typical” gated enclave in Canada, as well as atypical forms. Thus we hope to help elucidate the international understanding of this urban form and the way in which local governments are responding.

Gated communities in Canada

Our review of the Canadian planning literature has not revealed extensive discussions of gated communities. One undergraduate thesis describes a gated project in Winnipeg in limited detail (Golby 1999), while another recently reported on cases in Nova Scotia (Mittelsteadt 2003a). Although the Canadian media has highlighted gated projects (eg, Anthony 1997; Carey 1997; Liebner 2003; Yelaja 2003), we find little evidence that planners have raised flags about the issue in conferences or professional workshops, prior to our own presentations at a recent conference (Grant 2003a, Maxwell 2003, Mittelsteadt 2003b).

Some Canadian scholars have taken an interest in gated projects. Townshend (2002) describes “self actualization” in Canadian retirement communities, some of which are gated. Helsley and Strange (1999) consider the effect of gating on crime, but not particularly in a Canadian context. Byers (n.d.) explores the way in which gating reveals the fear of the “other” in society. None of these scholars have, however, considered planning issues: namely, how do local governments seek to control this form of land use?

Although fully gated communities remain relatively uncommon in Canada, the phenomenon is beginning to affect the development industry, especially in the fringe districts of rapidly growing urban areas and in regions popular for retirement. We have identified over 240¹ fully gated projects in our on-going inventory of Canadian gated communities. More than half of them are in British Columbia. We have also located gated areas in Alberta, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba.

In the fall of 2002, we began to document gated communities and the planning responses to them. We sent an email survey to planners across Canada, starting with the larger

¹ This number reflects only contemporary (last three decades) residential projects where public access to the roads within the project is limited. It **excludes** hundreds of small cottage developments in rural areas of provinces like Nova Scotia.

cities and regional capitals, then expanding the search to smaller cities in growing areas. From 123 contacts, we had replies from 78 planners (63% response rate). We scanned the internet for real estate and development listings of Canadian projects that might have gates. In key areas, we emailed or telephoned realtors to check on particular communities or to locate additional gated projects.

One of our research team conducted a field study of Nova Scotia projects in fall 2002 (Mittelsteadt 2003a). In summer 2003, we extended our site visits to south central Ontario and to parts of British Columbia. Field work included visual assessment of some of the gated communities, and interviews with planners, municipal councillors, and developers in those key areas.²

As soon as we began the work we ran into difficulty with the term “gated”. We discovered quickly that planners do not share consensus on the meaning of “gated”. The definition we used did not fully resolve the problem. In our notes to planners requesting information, we first suggested that

“Gated communities are multi-unit housing developments surrounded by fences, walls or other barriers, and with streets that are not open to general traffic.”

Following requests for clarification, and submissions of lists of projects that we did not consider fully gated, we revised the definition:

“Gated communities are multi-unit housing developments with private roads that are not open to general traffic because they have a gate across the primary access. These developments may be surrounded by fences, walls or other natural barriers that further limit public access.”

We still found, though, that planners differed in their understanding of the term. Following a comment from a planner that “multi-unit” might be interpreted to mean “multi-family”, we developed a third iteration of the definition:

“Gated communities are housing developments on private roads that are closed to general traffic by a gate across the primary access. These developments may be surrounded by fences, walls or other natural barriers that further limit public access.”

We continue to work with this definition.

Despite our efforts to make clear that our interest is in projects with controlled access roads, however, we found in our interviews that planners often used the term gated community to include walled projects with open street access. Because of the common appearance of walled subdivisions, especially in Western Canada, however, we felt it important to be as precise as possible in our terminology. We focussed on communities with gates across streets carrying homes³.

In trying to conduct the inventory, we came to realize that planners often do not know about gated projects in their midst. Municipal authorities have no system for tracking this development form. No permits are required to erect a gate. Private roads can easily be gated at any time after construction, provided that arrangements are made to give access to emergency vehicles. Planners often do not know the marketing names of projects, so they had difficulties when we tried to confirm whether particular projects in their communities were gated. Planners resident in smaller cities, or those active in local politics, were better able to identify and name gated projects.

When we visited cities for field assessments of gated communities, we realized that private roads do not show up on street maps. Street maps do not show marketing names for developments. Accordingly, finding projects in the field proved quite difficult when we did not have a street address. By patrolling likely districts of cities known to have gated projects, and

² The results herein derive from the email survey and field visits, as the interview data is not yet analysed.

³ When the gate is left in open position most of the time, we still consider the community gated.

talking to local planners and councillors, we doubled the count of gated developments identified through our email survey and web search.

Web advertising often proved incomplete, and not always accurate. Developers may advertise a gate long before it actually goes in, or they may not advertise a gate even though it is there on the ground. Many development web sites are only available during project marketing, and then disappear. This meant that often we could only find older projects when units came up for sale. With differing levels and accuracy of information online, we found it difficult to determine the scale or characteristics of projects from web information.

Thus we completed the first stage of our inventory with the realization that our information is partial and incomplete at best. Despite the drawbacks that we recognize, however, we feel the study has given us a good approximation of the scope of gated development in Canada.

As of August 2003, we documented 241 gated developments. Based on the rate at which numbers expanded during our field studies, we estimate that the true figure is probably closer to twice that number. Table 1 shows the distribution of known gated projects by province and characteristics.

Table 1: Documented gated projects in Canada (August 2003)

Province	Total gated projects	Projects with 500 units or more	Projects with guards	Projects with video surveillance
British Columbia	172	1	2	1
Alberta	17	2	1	2
Saskatchewan	1	1		
Manitoba	1			1
Ontario	37	9	7	5
Nova Scotia	6			2
Canada total	241	13	10	11

British Columbia has the greatest number of gated projects, with 172 identified to date. Communities on Vancouver Island, within commuting distance of Vancouver, or in the Okanagan Valley, have many gated communities. Ontario is a distant second with 37 projects. The Ontario projects are larger than BC ones, with nine having more than 500 units. They also have greater security, with seven employing guards and five using video surveillance. The largest gated community in Canada, Sandycove Acres in Innisfil ON, has 1185 units. Although we do not have good data on all projects, we estimate the average size to be about 80 units. This makes Canadian gated communities much smaller and less security-conscious than their American counterparts.

BC gated projects, especially in high cost areas near Vancouver, often involve adult-oriented townhouse developments. Our data show considerable variation by community, as gating may address different market segments and result in divergent forms. Generally the inventory indicates that gated projects are most popular for seniors housing in retirement destinations. For instance, they are popular in parts of Ontario outside Toronto, often in resort country: some of these are quite exclusive and expensive. Because of its moderate climate and

beautiful scenery, BC attracts many retirees to populate gated projects. Where land values are high, as in Langley BC, townhouse units dominate. Where costs are lower, as in Penticton BC, “rancher style” one-storey singles are common. In some areas, mobile home parks offer a low-cost gated option.

Gated projects invariably involve private roads and condominium development (common interest development). The net densities are higher than in conventional development on public roads: townhouses are at 10 to 12 units per acre, and singles at 8 to 10 units per acre (except for high end product). Most of the earlier projects have common amenities like lavish landscaping, club houses, fountains, RV parking, or swimming pools; some of the recent projects, aimed at delivering a lower cost product, have few amenities (other than the gate and wall).

The planning response

Most planners who responded said their communities had no gated projects, and no policy to deal with them. The email survey of planners did indicate, however, that nine municipalities, five in British Columbia (Burnaby, Coquitlam, Nanaimo, Kelowna, and Qualicum Beach) and four in Ontario (Ottawa, Orangeville, Brockville, and Ajax), reported local policies to regulate or limit gated communities.

As Table 2 illustrates, municipalities use a range of tools to manage gated communities. British Columbia municipalities with several gated projects have the strongest policies in their plans. Even in the absence of targeted policy, however, council members and planners are finding ways to control built form. Policies that limit fence heights, restrict walls or screens along public roads, or require permeable street networks can seek to prevent enclosure. Increased use of negotiated development agreements or permits provides planners with mechanisms to discourage developers from gating. In some cases, councils have passed resolutions to limit fortification of properties or to prohibit the locking of gates.

Many planners reported that they rely on the powers of persuasion to convince developers that proposals for gating are not in the public interest and may therefore slow down their applications. As one planner noted,

“There are general policies regarding the preservation of the heritage / culture of the town, which can be raised as a point of discussion with an applicant and identified as a characteristic valued enough by Council to be included in the [plan]. Add to that the persuasion of a good argument, and an applicant can be convinced that the easiest route to achieving smooth planning approval is to concede on certain issues.”

Several planners said that their communities experienced little pressure for growth and therefore local developers showed no interest in gated projects. Similarly, planners for older inner-city municipalities said there was little demand for gating in infill projects. Our preliminary inventory findings do show many of the larger gated communities in the rural and suburban fringe of rapidly-growing urban regions. However, some BC communities, like Vernon, are trying to ensure that gated projects are well-distributed throughout the city in order to prevent a concentration of enclosing walls without through access. A shortage of developable land in many BC communities limits the scale of potential new gated projects.

The planners we contacted noted several issues that may arise from gated projects. Emergency access is clearly a concern. Areas that have gated projects insist that provisions are made for emergency vehicles to gain access. Planners also want to see transportation and pedestrian links maintained wherever possible. They prefer smaller gated projects (under 20 acres) over large ones. They want to ensure that fences around projects are attractive and allow lines of sight in and out of the project. In rural parts of Nova Scotia, planners note that gating is limiting public access to the coastal zone and to areas traditionally used for recreational activities.

Table 2: Municipal tools for controlling gated communities (from email survey)

1. plan policies and land use / zoning bylaws		
	adopt plan policies to limit or discourage gating	Burnaby, Coquitlam, Nanaimo, Kelowna, Qualicum Beach BC Ottawa Region (1999) ⁴
	restrict use of “reverse frontage” lots, or require front-loaded lots on all road types	Ajax ON
	limit fence heights	Nanaimo BC
	employ design guidelines (character, heritage, integration of housing)	North Vancouver District
	require or encourage transportation network integration and permeability (may specify grid streets)	Burnaby, Ajax, Orangeville
	require public access	Surrey BC
	set landscaping or setback regulations	Regina SK
2. engineering and emergency access policies		
	restrict closing of roads, temporary moratorium on private roads	Halifax Regional Municipality NS
	require emergency access	Canmore, Edmonton AB
3. development agreements and negotiated permitting process adjustments:		
	use development permit process to refuse requests	North Vancouver District, Saanich, Nanaimo Regional District BC
	use urban design and landscape guidelines to limit undesirable features	Toronto, North Vancouver District, Kelowna
	impose deed restrictions or covenants on bare land strata condominiums	Coquitlam
	exact public use easements over private roads or trails	Oakville ON

⁴ Council amended the Ottawa Regional Official Plan in March 1999 to prevent developers from gating subdivisions: it required that “public access through the road and pedestrian access unimpeded by security gates or similar barriers” (Ottawa Region 1999, policy 3.2.13). Respondents advised us that the draft plan for Ottawa-Carleton (which will replace the earlier plan) does not include the policy.

4. Council by-laws and resolutions		
	prohibit fortification of buildings and land	Brockville ON
	prohibit locking of gates across roads	Burnaby 1986 ⁵

5. Staff persuasion		
	persuade developers to consider other options	Airdrie AB, Bridgewater NS
	tell developers gates are not permitted	York Region, North Vancouver City
	tell developers staff does not support gating	Cochrane AB, Oakville

Some planners worry that gating can lead to social isolation, segregation, and fear. As one said, "*Gated communities are the result of social decay. ...In summary, they defeat the purpose of community planning.*" Others, though, can see the benefits of gated projects. One planner told us that her mother lives in a gated seniors community with a good network of friends who look out for her welfare. "*Jane Jacobs would be proud,*" she wrote to us.

Provincial governments have taken little evident interest in gating. Most provinces have no policies on gating of private roads in condominium projects. Only New Brunswick, with its 1969 *Condominium Property Act*, prevents gating: because the Act does not enable bare land condominiums, it does not allow development forms that developers may wish to enclose.

For the most part, planners who responded to our survey do not see a great need to regulate gated communities. Given the press of current issues, planners have not taken a proactive approach to preventing a phenomenon many have yet to witness in their municipalities. Gated communities have not made it to the "front burner". For now, the tools available suit the purpose; others can be added should the need arise.

Perhaps because the culture of fear which drives gating in the US has not proven as strong in Canada, developers may not perceive a ready market for enclosing new developments here, except in a few competitive environments. Nonetheless, the preliminary findings from our inventory do indicate that Canada has its share of gated projects; moreover developers see such developments as an effective marketing tool, especially for seniors housing.

The future of gating

We found considerable difference between provinces in the patterns of gating. Provinces that do not allow ground-oriented condominium development do not have gated projects. Several, however, are now reviewing their legislation. The success of "bare land" or "vacant land" strata condominiums in BC, Ontario, and Alberta may well appeal to other provinces. Thus we could see further development of gating if the laws are relaxed.

Seniors have considerable buying power and clearly form a market interested in gated projects. Many of those who head south in winter have experienced gated enclaves in the US. They appreciate the appeal of such projects. Developers recognize the opportunity for niche marketing: they effectively combine the aesthetic appeal of a private controlled development (with its attractive amenities and common maintenance) with the lure of a homogeneous community of residents. The proliferation of "adult" communities (minimum age from 19 to 55)

⁵ Burnaby Council passed a resolution in 1986 limiting the locking of gates after a developer constructed a gate. Plan policy later obviated the need for the resolution.

through many parts of southern British Columbia attests to the success of the concept.

Is living in gated communities in Canada about security? Yes and no. The gate is advertised as a security feature, but our observations indicate that gates mostly function to keep casual visitors and sight-seers out. In some cases, fences are low (three feet or less). Guards and video surveillance are rare, except in the most exclusive projects. Some gates stand open much of the day. Residents recognize that they are not truly secure, yet those we met in our field visits say that they watch out for each other and thus reduce random crime⁶. Most importantly, they feel safe to travel with some level of confidence as they leave their property tended by neighbours.

In Canadian gated projects, privacy, enclosure, identity, lifestyle, and community seem most important both to those selling and those buying homes in gated projects. Our research does not directly involve interviews with residents: understanding their motivations and meanings requires further work. This fall one of our research group members will begin a more detailed investigation of the appeals that developers use in selling the projects.

Gating, and private roads more generally, offer significant strategies for traffic calming in a context where other options have not worked effectively. Signs post lower than normal speeds, and alert motorists that they are entering private property. Parking is carefully controlled. Streets in gated enclaves are narrow, quiet, well-maintained, and safe. Gating off emergency exit access routes has turned many private roads into veritable cul-de-sacs with no through traffic.

Our investigations to date show that it is quite rare for municipalities to prohibit gates, although some municipalities have passed council resolutions to prohibit locking of gates. More commonly, communities seek to regulate the fencing around developments and the size of projects. By controlling fence height, type of materials, articulation, and vegetation, local authorities can ensure attractive street scapes. By keeping projects small, they can protect connectivity of street and pedestrian routes. Meeting these aims may make gated projects acceptable for many communities.

Municipalities frequently impose municipal standards on private roads, for everything but pavement width and sidewalks. They expect quality of infrastructure. Once the roads are approved, however, planning rules cannot easily control gating. Where projects are permitted by negotiated agreements, then local government may insist on clauses prohibiting gating. This seems relatively rare in practice. Where gates have not become popular yet, it may be possible to restrict them through development agreements. In some areas, they have become so popular that it is not politically possible to limit them. They have a foothold in the market place.

Governments make gating possible by permitting development on private roads. Provincial downloading of responsibilities without providing adequate fiscal resources for local governments has made local government vulnerable to cost saving strategies. Permitting private roads saves expenditures on road maintenance, snow plowing, garbage collection, street lighting, recreational resources, and police patrols. Privatizing public services for some may then be justified in terms of devoting available resources to others with lesser means. In the process, however, the practice contributes to creating a two-tiered system and residential segregation in a nation that advocates equality.

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⁶ After I wrote an opinion piece in the local newspaper (Grant 2003b), a realtor in southern Nova Scotia sent me, and the newspaper, an email. He advised that they needed gates to keep out local thugs who otherwise would engage in drinking and drugs in the area.

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