The social and spatial implications of community action to enclose space: Guarded neighbourhoods in Selangor, Malaysia

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A B S T R A C T

The article examines the social and spatial implications of guarded neighbourhoods: resident-generated enclosed areas in urban Malaysia. Neoliberal government practices provide a regulatory context within which residents organise associations, levy fees, erect barricades, and hire guards to control formerly public streets and spaces. Citizen action to create guarded neighbourhoods concretise emerging class boundaries and reinforce social segregation within cities already noted for having significant ethnic disparities. Guarded neighbourhoods in Malaysia simultaneously reflect social exclusion—of non-residents, lower classes, migrants, and ethnic ‘others’—and cohesive social action of the politically and economically powerful to produce neighbourhood identity and community coherence through enclosure.

Introduction

Gating, enclosing, or privatising residential areas has become increasingly common throughout the world (Atkinson & Blandy, 2006; Glasze, Webster, & Frantz, 2006). Some authors see such processes as reflecting growing social polarisation (Marcuse & van Kempen, 2000, 2002) while others describe enclosure as a by-product of neoliberal urbanisation, in a time when states have reduced their regulatory role (Genis, 2007; Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 2005). Whatever the factors producing them, enclosed residential environments universally generate social and spatial implications for the cities that have them.

Malaysia has two types of enclosed developments (Tedong et al., in press-a): developers market gated communities in upscale suburban areas, while residents in older districts erect their own barricades to create guarded neighbourhoods. In this article we examine the social and spatial implications of the guarded neighbourhoods, which are increasing rapidly in Malaysia’s largest urban region. Guarded neighbourhoods are self-organised residential enclosures produced through residents’ actions and investments in older urban districts. Residents have banded together to create associations with the mandate of controlling space in ways that control and potentially exclude non-residents. National government decisions to roll back housing programs generated a context within which residents turned increasingly to private markets to address housing needs (Tedong et al., in press-b); at the same time government initiatives to roll out guidelines to govern enclosure of urban space framed specific types of market responses to fears of crime and urban growth (Tedong et al., in press-a). The emergence of guarded neighbourhoods in Malaysia reflects the simultaneous operation of what Swyngedouw (1997) called global, local, and regional processes. Within a global context of neoliberalism and a state seeking to use its influence in the region to improve the situation for ethnic Malays, the Malaysian government created conditions that encouraged local citizen action groups to self-organise to control urban territories. That process has inscribed class on top of ethnic, racial, and religious differentiation in the city. As a consequence, Malaysian urban space has become fragmented: that is, less socially and spatially permeable and accessible.

We begin by briefly reviewing the literature on the production of gated and private communities to consider how enclosure contributes to social and spatial fragmentation. We then turn to discuss a case study of Selangor state, near Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, where guarded neighbourhoods are proliferating. We argue that examining enclosure practices in urban Malaysia provides an opportunity to explore ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner & Theodore, 2002) at work facilitating the social processes of spatial fragmentation.

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The production of enclosed residential neighbourhoods

Although enclosed and fortified settlements have a storied history (Bagaeen & Uduku, 2010), contemporary gated communities began to emerge in large numbers as states adopted the political philosophy of neoliberalism—that is, the notion that the state should reduce its role to allow the market to operate more efficiently and effectively. Enclosure became common in the United States (Blakely & Snyder, 1997), Latin America (Caldeira, 2000; Thibert & Osorio, 2013), and parts of the Middle East (Glasse, 2006a, 2006b; Güzey, 2014) during the 1980s, and in Eastern Europe (Kovác & Hegedüs, 2014; Smigielski, 2013) and China (Miao, 2003; Pow, 2007) after the fall of the Iron Curtain. As enclosed communities have become more common in urban development, scholars have become increasingly interested in documenting the processes producing them and the social and spatial implications they generate.

The urban processes that accompanied neoliberal economic restructuring during and since the 1980s expanded the role of market forces in the housing and real estate sectors, privatised urban and social services, and increased the role of elites in shaping landscapes (Genis, 2007; Harvey, 2005). Partnerships between the state and private sector often privatised and commercialised public spaces and institutions (Hackworth, 2007), undermining access to the public realm. In some countries, such as the United States, private communities became the norm for new developments (Kohn, 2004; McKenzie, 1994). Wood, McGrath, and Young (2012) argued that neoliberalism increased inequality in cities and created new forms of exclusion. The results produced uneven geographies of urban development (Walks, 2009, p. 346).

Increasing isolation, boundaries, and separation between social groups characterised contemporary urban environment (Walks, 2006). Hodkinson (2012, p. 505) described urban enclosure as the ‘modus operandi of neoliberal urbanism’ as it privatises spaces, destroys use values, and seeks to displace and exclude the urban poor from parts of the city. Making space private allows authorities to use physical and social technologies to control access (Bottomley & Moore, 2007). Spatial ruptures generated by neoliberal urbanism may be visible (as in walls and gates) or ephemeral (as in policing and access policies). The Malaysia case will illustrate some ways in which state policies and local history influence how enclosure fragments the city.

Several agents can generate urban enclosure. In some situations governments have adopted policies that encourage or require enclosure. For instance, in China (Miao, 2003; Pow, 2007) and Singapore (Pow, 2009) the state has used enclosure as a strategy for compliant management and social control. McKenzie (2005) noted that some U.S. jurisdictions effectively require private communities by insisting on self-management of quasi-public elements such as streets and vegetation. Government deregulation often allows private development markets greater opportunities in producing housing. Gating offers a niche market for developers, and has become the dominant practice in some countries. Changes to legislation to permit condominium or strata ownership facilitated the rise of private communities in the 1980s in the U.S., Canada, and Europe (Kohn, 2004; McKenzie, 1994). Homeowners’, residents’, and condominium associations have provided mechanisms for resident initiatives to enclose and control space (Nelson, 2005). Neighbourhood actions to enclose older districts are common in places such as South Africa where crime rates are high and authorities accept such community action (Landman, 2006), but rare elsewhere. Malaysia thus offers an uncommon example where resident agency produces enclosure.

Enclosures differentiate space for those inside from those outside. By definition, barriers imply a level of social segregation and spatial fragmentation. In the neo-liberal city, those inside the walls are more commonly affluent than those outside: they use enclosure to exclude others. In many cases, gated communities privilege middle-class lifestyles and conspicuous consumption (Pow, 2009). Gated communities are often blamed for exacerbating residential and social segregation (Blakely & Snyder, 1997; Caldeira, 2000), although they may enable mix by providing security for higher income residents living near lower income neighbours (Clement & Grant, 2012; LeGoix, 2005; Manzi & Smith-Bowers, 2005). The nature of social fragmentation—who is inside, and who outside—varies from context to context.

The spatial implications of enclosure on mobility and accessibility in the city vary depending on the scale of enclosure and management policies around entry. Large gated areas and robust mechanisms of enclosure and policing limit access, fragment space, and disrupt urban mobility (Grant & Curran, 2007). Enclosures that reduce access to public goods and amenities, such as beaches or parks, are likely to prove socially as well as spatially disruptive (Clement & Grant, 2012; Grant & Rosen, 2009). Assessing the nature of restrictions provides insight into the extent to which enclosure fragments the city.

Spatial planning and urban development in many regions address the needs of those benefiting from the ‘neoliberal turn’ (Tasan-Kok, 2012). In Southeast Asia, enclosure provides privacy and exclusivity for emerging elites (Leisch, 2002; Huong & Sajor, 2010). Like other nations in the region, Malaysia reveals the influence of neoliberal urbanism and globalisation, and has seen the rise of new elites (Bunnell & Nah, 2004; Bunnell & Coe, 2005). Facilitated by the liberalising policies of the state, enclosure is creating a new landscape of control in contemporary Malaysia (Tedong et al., in press-b). Guarded neighbourhoods—with enclosure produced by residents on public streets—illustrate the political efforts of urban middle classes to wrest control of spaces in the city. Within the context of Malaysia’s already racially-inflected social divisions (Gomez, 2004; King, 2008) enclosure adds social and spatial fragmentation based on class.

Locally contingent histories and cultural processes produce unique expressions of neoliberal urbanism (Grant & Rosen, 2009; Peck & Tickell, 2002). As we try to understand the changes in urban structures and processes wrought by contemporary economic and political conditions exploring diverse circumstances and responses proves informative. In the sections that follow we consider some of the social and spatial implications of guarded neighbourhoods in Selangor state in urban Malaysia. We argue that resident actions to barricade streets increase social and spatial fragmentation. Case studies of practice, such as that documented here, enhance understanding of the processes generating increasingly divided cities.

Malaysian urbanism: a legacy of polarisation

The unequal geographical distribution of indigenous, ethnic, and migrant groups characterises Malaysian urbanism (Gomez, 2004). Malaya society was racially segregated during British colonial rule1: ethnic communities of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Europeans were physically and socially segregated (Hirschman, 1975, 1986; Khader, 2012). The rubber and tin industries, which thrived from the late 1800s to the early 1920s, responded to labour shortages by importing migrant labour from India and China (Chin, 2000; Tajuddin, 2012). By 1931, migrant groups outnumbered indigenous Malays (Hirschman, 1975), but inter-ethnic social interactions proved rare (Tajuddin, 2012). Colonialism produced a demographically and socially segregated landscape. Europeans, Chinese, and Indians lived in urban areas, while impoverished Malays occupied rural regions (Haque, 2003; Stark, 2006; Chakravarty &
Roslan, 2005). Socio-spatial fragmentation thus is not new in Malaysia, although the character of urban fragmentation has changed somewhat in the neoliberal era.

In the socioeconomic structure of Malaysia before independence, colonial practices generated ethnic and racial divisions (Hirschman, 1986; Masron, Yaakob, Ayob, & Mokhtar, 2012). Even in towns where inter-ethnic contact was possible, residential areas, market places, and recreational spaces were typically segregated along ethnic lines (Hirschman, 1986; King, 2008). Colonial education policy reinforced ethnic segregation: English schools for the children of Malay and European elites, and vernacular schools for the Malay peasantry and migrant communities (Chin, 2000). The colonial socio-spatial ethnic divide continues to have significant impacts (Bae-Gyoon & Lepawsky, 2012). While in some sense Malaysia was a multi-ethnic society, in practice patterns of inequality and ethnic difference were stark (Bunnell & Coe, 2005; Haque, 2003). At independence, the state inherited deeply entrenched inequality across ethnic groups and regions (Jomo, 1986; Jomo & Chang, 2008). Inter-ethnic tensions erupted in violence in 1969, resulting in the deaths of many ethnic Chinese in urban areas. Continued immigration to provide low-wage labour for industrial and service industries has fuelled security fears (Kassim, 1997). Inequality and ethnic tensions remain a major challenge in contemporary Malaysia (Hill, Yeang, & Zin, 2012; Pak, 2010), and provide the social context within which the neoliberal turn further fragments urban environments.

**Neoliberal Malaysia**


By the 1990s mass rural-to-urban migration resulted in a growing Malay middle class in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor states (Abdul-Rahman, 1996, 2002), accompanied by high demand for suburban housing (Thibert & Osorio, 2013). The government’s free market policy in housing privileged Malay ethnic and middle-class groups. As the private market became more dominant, affluent people could meet their demands for housing, but the government ignored the need for low cost housing for poor people. Economic inequality alongside uneasy inter-ethnic relations leaves people feeling vulnerable (Chakravarty & Roslan, 2005). As a consequence, fear of crime and class segregation has grown, and has become the dominant motivation for enclosing communities (Tedong et al., in press-b).

Malaysia has a long history of social and spatial fragmentation: first as a product of colonial political and economic choices, and recently exacerbated by the economic effects of neoliberal urbanism. In the next section, we examine the character of enclosure in Selangor state, surrounding the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. We focus on how middle-class residents in older urban neighbourhoods are actively transforming their areas to enforce social and spatial segregation. As residential groups organise to erect barricades and hire guards to protect their neighbourhoods they enhance the fragmentation of an already socially and spatially divided society.

**Guarded neighbourhoods in Selangor state**

Since the 1980s, as the national government reduced its role in housing construction, private developers increasingly built enclosed residential communities in the fringe around the national capital (Hanif, Abdul-Aziz, & Tedong, 2012). Selangor is a largely urbanised state surrounding the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Cyberjaya. Rosly (2011) found 515 enclosed communities in Malaysia, with the highest concentration (407 guarded neighbourhoods) in Selangor (see Fig. 1). As developers built gated enclaves in the urban fringe, groups in older residential neighbourhoods began organising to close off their streets and hire guards to privatise older urban areas (Tedong et al., in press-a). These self-initiated guarded neighbourhoods are proliferating rapidly and affecting the social and spatial character of urban Malaysia. Recognising the need to regulate enclosure in some ways, national authorities issued guidelines in 2010 (Tedong et al., in press-b): the guidelines limited the size of enclosures to 10 ha, specified where they could occur, and identified a process whereby residents could request to barricade their streets.

Between 2011 and 2013 we conducted field work on guarded neighbourhoods in Selangor state. We began by analysing the spatial distribution and characteristics of guarded neighbourhoods to construct an inventory. Then we conducted in-depth interviews2 with representatives of residents’ associations, residents of guarded neighbourhoods, residents of open neighbourhoods, federal and state government officials, and urban planners of four Selangor local authorities to gain insights into the process of producing enclosure, the implications of barricades, and attitudes about private communities. Observations of the guarded neighbourhoods and thematic analysis of interview results revealed some socio-spatial implications of guarded neighbourhood development. The sections which follow summarise the findings. In particular, we show the ways in which respondents talked about the social and spatial implications of enclosed communities.

**Fragmented urban landscapes**

Spatial fragmentation and social segregation are not new to Selangor state, but the character of urban patterns is changing and significant implications are arising as enclosed communities become commonplace. Although some districts predominantly accommodate one ethnic group or another, many urban neighbourhoods in Selangor have a mix of Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups. In older neighbourhoods, traditional geographies based on ethnic and religious affiliation are being overlaid with spatial patterns and social differences based on class, housing type, tenure, and location.

Observations revealed that guarded neighbourhoods typically appear alongside main roads, with barricades closing smaller public roads that lead into the communities (Fig. 2). Housing in the enclosed area is usually two or more decades old. In one of the

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2 We employed purposive sampling of 29 respondents. Interviews lasted 60–90 min: some were recorded and transcribed for analysis, while others relied on note taking.
local authorities we surveyed, documents provided by staff and our fieldwork identified 98 guarded neighbourhoods: most included one or more public spaces such as playground areas (Fig. 3).

Guarded neighbourhoods fragment urban street patterns when barricades close public streets (Fig. 4). They make the city less permeable and accessible. Residents’ associations that choose to enclose their areas usually erect entry points, often with makeshift barricades and guard houses. Our observations indicated that many guarded neighbourhoods enclose public spaces, such as parks or kindergartens, or community facilities, such as Muslim prayer houses. Thus they reflect the global trend that Webster (2002) identified of privatising public goods. Not only do barriers prevent easy access through public streets by cars, they limit access of non-residents to resources and services that the state or other community agencies pay for and maintain. A resident of an open neighbourhood we interviewed complained:

We are not allowed the use of the open fields and children’s park available within the area. Even if we are allowed to use them, the security guards will insist on taking down our particulars and ask me to surrender my [driver’s] licence or national identification card [passport].

Enclosure seeks to ensure the orderly flow of human and motorised traffic in and out of the guarded neighbourhood, regulating residents and visitors to produce local safety and harmony. Sometimes the closure of public roads has had tragic results, however. For instance, the ‘Kepong tragedy’ of 2011 saw a woman and her daughter die in a fire that gutted their home in a gated residential area where the security barrier delayed entry for fire crews (Henry & Lim, 2011). An urban planner with the local authority acknowledged the challenge:

We are dealing with an ad-hoc planning approval (two years, renewable) of older areas that intend to secure communities by enclosing public roads. If something happens in the future – such as fire – fire engines and ambulances will have a hard time getting through as public roads are closed by the residents.

State government staff discussed the difficulty of creating connected communities when residents close public roads. The closure of public roads transforms the morphological structure of public spaces and disturbs traffic networks. Barriers routinely force longer
trips and alternative routes, concentrating traffic on open roads. Nearby residents of open neighbourhoods resented the inconvenience, as one explained.

In order to send my children to the school situated just next to my neighbourhood, I had to detour using the main road, although by right I should be able to use a short cut through the guarded neighbourhood.

We found guarded neighbourhoods segregated according to housing types. Observations showed that residents' associations generally enclosed residential units that were relatively homogeneous in type, tenure, and value (although often mixed in ethnicity). For instance, units in an enclosed community may be a cluster of two-storey houses. One local authority staff person interviewed acknowledged the pattern: 'I have received guarded neighbourhood applications from residents' associations ... for separation between, for example, double-storey houses and single-storey houses or vice-versa'. Boundaries contain homogeneity in housing value and form.

The cost of erecting barricades and hiring guards means that enclosure has primarily occurred in middle-class neighbourhoods. A local authority staff person explained:

I would say that class segregation is happening in residential development in Malaysia ... These people [within the enclosure] can be considered urban elites. They are willing to pay a maintenance fee to establish enclosure on public roads by putting up physical barriers and hiring security guards.

As Abdul-Rahman (1996) noted, income inequalities and class stratification have been increasing in urban areas in Malaysia. Enclosure spatially marks higher social class. Most housing in the guarded neighbourhoods was owner-occupied by middle-income households. The more affluent the area, the more robust the surveillance technologies: private security guards, CCTV, boom gates, and wall/
fences. As Low (2003, p. 89) argued, enclosure mechanisms offer a ‘psychological buffer’ between insiders and outsiders, and reinforce understandings of difference. One resident of an open neighbourhood highlighted the role of class in decisions about enclosure.

The guarded neighbourhood broke social interaction by closing the public road and promoting segregation between outsiders and the community inside. I also believe that if economic background was taken as the measure to define social distinction, this could be mean that only middle and upper class groups can afford to live in guarded neighbourhood developments.

While the product of enclosure excludes non-residents, the process of enclosing may reflect the building of social capital within an area. Establishing enclosure developments in older districts requires collective action from residents: the Selangor state government requires agreement of 80% of local residents to permit enclosure. Organising to achieve such targets is no mean feat. Local initiatives have been supported by government programs to enhance community development and security, such as giving fiscal incentives to citizens groups for enclosure projects (Tedong et al., in press-b). The residents of guarded neighbourhoods explained their actions by citing the risk of crime and the need to protect and differentiate themselves from dangerous outsiders, especially illegal migrants.

In the mixed city, enclosure developments provide middle-class residents with a sense of security and control while they live near less affluent neighbours. Gates and guards offer more than just physical barriers to define neighbourhood boundaries; they constitute symbolic markers to reinforce the elite status of inhabitants. Ubiquitous signage—’Stop for security check’, ‘Visitors kindly register’—reminds outsiders of their secondary status. Access requires permission from uniformed guards who often demand temporary surrender of state-issued identity documents. In controlling access to the spaces around their homes the residents of guarded neighbourhoods employ the power of private security services but also rely on the state to sanction enclosure and to provide outsiders with documents that guards can hold to guarantee compliant behaviour.

Residents inside guarded neighbourhoods explained that they sought exclusive control over public spaces: what Hou (2010) described as expressing power and political control in space. Residents appreciated enhanced privacy, exclusivity, and what Low (2003) called the ‘niceness’ created by enclosure. One resident explained:

I wasn’t keen in the beginning, but it’s quite good, and the most important thing is that my life has more privacy than before… Our neighbourhood has become more prestigious… Outsiders are not allowed to enter our neighbourhood area without permission from security guards… You need to understand, I paid the service fees to the resident association to better maintain the area. Why should I allow strangers to enter our neighbourhood and enjoy the public goods inside our community?

Those inhabiting guarded neighbourhoods described generally good relationships within the enclosure. Some government staff members we interviewed lived in guarded neighbourhoods: one urban planner said she had a good network of friends among residents, but not with outsiders. Some other local authority staff, however, worried that guarded neighbourhoods could lead to social isolation, segregation, and fragmentation. One fretted about the development of ‘private army communities’ in older residential areas of Selangor.

A local authority worker noted that although guidelines govern spatial design, traffic implications, size of development, perimeter fencing, and general planning control they fail to consider the socio-spatial implications of enclosure for the wider society.

The current guidelines aren’t great because we don’t really consider the social implications. It is obvious that the guidelines allowed neighbourhood areas to be divided into smaller parcels. This will create neighbourhood fragmentation based on types, tenure, and social class by restricting outsiders from entering.

Although the Malaysian state has facilitated enclosure by providing guidelines, establishing approval processes, and continuing to provide upkeep on privatised public spaces (Tedong et al., in press-b), some staff members of local authorities in Selangor explicitly acknowledged negative social and spatial implications of guarded and gated neighbourhoods. One said,

Guarded neighbourhoods draw a line between lower, middle, and upper classes, and I am amazed nobody has condemned it yet as a serious factor of social segregation in residential areas.

Cohesion and fragmentation

After independence the Malaysian state promoted social integration and the advancement of ethnic Malays through its New Economic Program. Other ethnic groups consequently became increasingly politically marginalised and security-conscious (Gomez, 2004). As a new middle class emerged in the early 1980s, the economic transition from a state-led market to a market-led state facilitated the production of new kinds of enclosed communities in sub/urban areas. In recent development on the urban fringes private developers have taken advantage of what Thibert and Osorio (2013, p. 13) called the ‘internationalization of consumer tastes’ by creating upscale gated communities with wonderful amenities and luxurious lifestyles. Within older urban neighbourhoods in Selangor, middle and upper income residents piggybacked on government policies and urban fears to transform the open but ethnic-inflected Malaysian city into increasingly spatially fragmented and bounded class-segregated spaces: guarded neighbourhoods. We have argued that such transformation occurred within neoliberal conditions, as government facilitated privatisation and regulated resident and market actions to control space. The character of social and spatial fragmentation reflects the unique legacy of Malaysian society, history, and politics with its lingering racism and fear of others. The processes producing guarded neighbourhoods simultaneously bolster membership in-class cohesion while increasing urban fragmentation. The result is a complex, multicultural, compartmentalised city, with poor and affluent groups spatially proximate yet socially distanced.

Guarded neighbourhoods reveal the complicity of the state in privatising public spaces and governance functions. Enclosed enclaves break the urban fabric into smaller physical pieces that enable localised community control while enlarging the grain size of urban blocks in the city’s transportation structure. By closing public streets and containing public spaces such as parks or common amenities, enclosures change the relationship of non-residents to community spaces as well as to other residents. Guardsed neighbourhoods in Malaysia simultaneously reflect social exclusion—of non-residents, lower classes, foreigners and ‘others’—and cohesive social action of the politically powerful to produce neighbourhood identity and community coherence. They reveal the way that rising elites shape the city as they are influenced by cultural history and empowered by changing socioeconomic circumstances in a situation of actually existing neoliberalism.

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3 For instance, under the Malaysian Budget 2013 the federal government allocated USD 1.3 million to finance neighbourhood watch activities (Najib, 2012).
Areas (such as streets) which had been public become redefined as private as users of the (public) facilities now enclosed are redefined as potentially dangerous persons requiring surveillance and control. The reality that guards feel comfortable asking for state permission to enter enclosed communities is an increasingly divided city with more ‘no go’ zones each year.

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