Guarding the Neighbourhood: The New Landscape of Control in Malaysia

Peter Aning Tedong\textsuperscript{a}, Jill Linda Grant\textsuperscript{b}, Wan Nor Azriyati Wan Abd Aziz\textsuperscript{a}, Faizah Ahmad\textsuperscript{c} & Noor Rosly Hanif\textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{a} Department of Estate Management, Faculty of Built Environment, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 50603, Malaysia
\textsuperscript{b} School of Planning, Dalhousie University, Box 1000, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3J2X4, Canada
\textsuperscript{c} Department of Urban & Regional Planning, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 50603, Malaysia

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Guarding the Neighbourhood: The New Landscape of Control in Malaysia

PETER ANING TEDONG*, JILL LINDA GRANT**, WAN NOR AZRIYATI WAN ABD AZIZ*, FAIZAH AHMAD† & NOOR ROSLY HANIF*

*Department of Estate Management, Faculty of Built Environment, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 50603, Malaysia, **School of Planning, Dalhousie University, Box 1000, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3J2X4, Canada, †Department of Urban & Regional Planning, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 50603, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT While securitised enclaves have become a global phenomenon, case studies of particular nations reveal the unique interplay between local conditions and international influences. This article presents the first major empirical study of gated developments in Malaysia. We found two types of enclosures being produced in urban Malaysia. Market-produced gated communities, attracting affluent households to live within elegant walls, dominate new growth areas in major cities. Guarded neighbourhoods are a post-market product: that is they result from resident-initiated actions to impose makeshift boundaries and controls in older neighbourhoods. Although concerns about safety and security permeate the national discourse around gates and guards, new structures of enclosure reinforce and reproduce shifting structures of inequality, class and ethnicity in urban Malaysia.

KEY WORDS: Gated communities, guarded neighbourhoods, crime, immigrants, class, Malaysia

Introduction

Over the last several decades, Malaysian cities have changed dramatically, as the economy modernised and Malaysian society transformed. In recent decades, patterns of enclosed residential developments have appeared both in new suburban and older urban areas. Like countries in many parts of the world, Malaysia has extensive districts of gated communities: that is residential developments with private streets closed to visitors. A superficial analysis might gloss such changes as clear evidence of globalisation. We argue, however, that a detailed examination of practices in some of the most urbanised districts demonstrates that while enclosure has become a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary Malaysia, its character, the motivations generating it and the processes enabling it differ from those documented elsewhere.
In this article we present recent research on enclosed communities in the region around Malaysia’s largest city, Kuala Lumpur. Since early 2012, we have been studying gated developments in Selangor state, a largely urbanised region neighbouring Kuala Lumpur. The districts around Malaysia’s capital are prosperous and ethnically diverse. Contemporary cities have a diverse mix of Malays, ethnic Chinese, ethnic Indians and foreign migrants. Although diversity generates vibrancy and prosperity in urban Malaysia, it is accompanied by lingering racism and fear (Gomez, 2004; King, 2008). Relatively low crime rates do little to allay suspicions reflecting historic inequities, religious differences and power imbalances. With findings drawing on surveys, interviews and field visits, we articulate the motivations that residents and government officials cite to explain their choices to live in enclosed communities. Malaysia has two types of enclosed neighbourhoods. Developers commonly build gated communities in suburban areas: these are similar to enclaves found in many parts of the world. In Malaysia, though, we also encounter guarded neighbourhoods: these have resident-erected barricades to close public streets, a practice not common in many countries. Citizen action thus plays a significant role in producing enclosure in older urban districts. We suggest that rather than furthering social integration in Malaysia’s cities, political interventions have enabled and encouraged the fragmentation and hardening of urban spaces. Enclosure serves as a strategy to facilitate surveillance and control space. Consequently, the structure of the Malaysian city (re)produces structures of social inequality while physically expressing fears of difference.

We begin by briefly discussing the literature on gated communities to situate the case study of Malaysian developments. Then we present findings on enclosed residential areas in Malaysia, describing the kinds of motivations that dominate among those producing and regulating enclosure. In the final section we consider the implications of the Malaysian example.

The Geography of Enclosure

Since gated communities emerged as a topic of scholarly interest in the 1990s (Blakely & Snyder, 1997), international studies have proliferated. Definitions of gated communities vary, but most sources describe them as residential areas enclosed by walls or fences, or with access limited by security controls (Grant & Mittelsteadt, 2004). Such enclaves generally constitute private neighbourhoods (Kohn, 2004; McKenzie, 1994): in some cases that means they own and manage their own services, infrastructure and amenities; in other cases it may simply imply that they regulate access to public streets or services by non-residents. In some nations, private neighbourhoods have come to dominate the new housing market, especially for affluent households. For instance, in the USA most new development creates private neighbourhoods (McKenzie, 2011; Nelson, 2005).

Although fortified settlements appeared commonly in urban history in many parts of the world, contemporary gated communities began to proliferate as rates of urbanisation increased, new forms of social polarisation emerged and neoliberal policies increasingly influenced government decisions after 1980. Pow (2009) noted that gated communities reflect a wider trend towards urban restructuring. Brenner & Theodore (2002, p. 375) pointed out ‘cities have become strategically crucial arenas for neoliberal forms of policy experimentation and institutional restructuring’, with enclosures one among several urban forms arising from globalisation processes (Glasze, 2005; Van Kampen & Van Naerssen,
Global processes interact with transnational ideologies, discourses and networks at the local level in producing gated communities (Genis, 2007; Grant & Rosen, 2009). Rising insecurities in recent decades inspired public demands for state actions that led to financial reforms, deregulated markets and privatisation of services (Kurtz & Brooks, 2008). Neoliberal economic restructuring expanded the role of real estate actors in market systems, privatised public services and created a new—often enclosed—urban landscape in residential areas (Genis, 2007).

Enclosures take different forms in different nations as housing producers respond to local values, beliefs and practices. Studies of enclosures in particular contexts illuminate the interaction between global processes and local conditions. For instance, large gated projects are common in urban areas of Latin America where crime rates are high and social polarisation significant (Caldeira, 2000; Janoschka & Borsdorf, 2006). They appear widely in parts of urban China where community security mechanisms help ensure public order and social control (Huang, 2006; Pow, 2007; Yao & Wei, 2012). In countries where security conditions are generally peaceful, gated developments typically represent small niche markets providing privacy and exclusivity: this is true in countries such as Canada (Grant et al., 2004), Russia (Lentz, 2006) and England and New Zealand (Blandy, 2006).

Gated communities began appearing in South-East Asia—in the Philippines—as early as the late 1960s (Dick & Rimmer, 1998). In Vientiane, the capital of Laos, an enclave which had housed American military advisors before 1976 became an enclosure for senior administrators of the subsequent regime (Rafiqui & Gentile, 2009). Shatkin (2008) indicated that the privatisation of public space resulted from social inequity along with perpetual economic and fiscal crisis in Manila. Leisch (2002) argued that in Indonesia, enclosures reflected growing socio-economic disparity and represented a strategy to manage the risk of ethnic conflicts while emulating modern trends. Hishiyama (2010) suggested that the failure of the state to keep people feeling secure led residents to hire private guards to ensure security in Indonesia and Thailand. Some minority populations feel especially insecure in contemporary conditions, as Leisch (2002, p. 349) explained,

since the wealth has not been spread equally, a further socio-economic polarisation is taking place, resulting in a growing income gap with growing jealousy and a growing need for security. In Indonesia, the jealousy [...] is mainly directed against the Chinese, who thus request the best possible security.

Fear is a significant motivating factor for enclosure in many parts of the world (Csefalvay & Webster, 2012; Wilson-Doenges, 2000). ‘In post-independence south-east Asia, the street is typically perceived as a source of danger. [...] Open suburban living thus becomes very insecure’ (Dick & Rimmer, 1998, p. 2313). Hogan et al. (2012) suggested that since open public streets did not feature prominently in the history of the region, privatisation of residential areas came easily. A growing literature has documented the proliferation of private neighbourhoods in South-East Asia, often linking the trend with an expanding middle class and their fears. As Dick & Rimmer (1998, p. 2317) explained,

[...] rising real household incomes and the emergence of an identifiable middle class have been accompanied by a growing differentiation from, and fear of, the rest of the inchoate urban mass. In countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the
Philippines, where the middle class is disproportionately ethnic Chinese, that fear has a palpable racial edge. Gated residential communities, condominiums, air-conditioned cars, patrolled shopping malls and entertainment complexes, and multi-storeyed offices are the present and future world of the insecure middle class in south-east Asia.

With the development of new affluent groups has come a desire for distance or separation from others. In Thailand, for instance, Johnson (2013, p. 235) noted that ‘gated communities as well as high-rise residences [...] often advertise themselves as being homogenous, in opposition to the messy heterogeneous city’. Similarly, in Vietnam large tracts of private new towns and gated communities facilitate economic and socio-cultural differentiation (Huong & Sajor, 2010; Spencer, 2010). Enclosure has become increasingly common in South-East Asia.

What lies behind the palpable fear of crime in contemporary cities? In some cases, crime may be increasing through the combined effects of urbanisation lack of economic opportunities and social polarisation (Lewis & Salem, 1986). In regions as in Latin America and South Africa, property crimes and acts of violence constitute real threats (Breetzke et al., 2013; Caldeira, 2000; Csefalvay & Webster, 2012). Yet even in the absence of significant risk, people may fear the potential for crime. For instance, while some cities in the USA have problems with crime, many studies argue that fear of crime is a more significant driver of enclosure than is risk (Blakely & Snyder, 1997; Low, 2001, 2003). As Johnston (2001, p. 963) noted, ‘the relationship between crime, fear and citizen behaviour is mediated by a vast complex of factors external to the actor.’ These factors may include cultural beliefs (Grant & Rosen, 2009), policies and organisations of the state (Pow, 2009), mass media (Ellin, 1997) and popular technologies of security (Vilalta, 2011).

The desire for privacy, exclusivity, property investment potential, liveability and comfortable lifestyles influences residents’ decisions to live in gated communities in countries as diverse as Australia (Kenna, 2010), Barbados (Clement & Grant, 2012) and Bulgaria (Stoyanov & Frantz, 2006). Condominium living—that is, housing where residents’ own shared elements such as open spaces or recreational amenities in common—is increasingly popular in many parts of South-East Asia where land pressures force intensification, and is a key process producing enclosed private residential areas. Property companies typically manage private and gated communities in Taiwan (Chen & Webster, 2005) and Singapore (Pow, 2009), leaving residents relatively passive and powerless to influence conditions. In Singapore, the state has played an active role in producing gated communities because of its housing policies: while it provided good quality, mixed-income public housing for the majority of the population, it also sold land parcels to development companies to build exclusive enclaves for affluent households (Pow, 2009).

The scholarly literature clearly documents that gated developments have become a significant marketing strategy for appealing to consumers buying new homes in urban fringe or infill projects in nations where disparity is increasing and security fears are common. Enclosure provides mechanism for surveillance and control. Walls and access barriers provide what Foucault (1977) might describe as disciplinary mechanisms for policing space. In enclosure developments, several parties—state, market and citizens—collaborate in policing and controlling space to regulate the activities of unwanted visitors.
Although market mechanisms to generate gated developments are well documented, we see less written about situations in which residents of established neighbourhoods take action to enclose or barricade their areas. Residents of high-end neighbourhoods in Los Angeles convinced local officials to allow them to close streets to create what Blakely & Snyder (1997) defined as security zones. Such enclosures became common in parts of urban South Africa as the security situation deteriorated following the end of apartheid (Jurgens & Gnad, 2002; Landman, 2000, 2004, 2006; Lemanski, 2004). Hishiyama (2010) reported that residents in parts of Thailand and in Bali in Indonesia hired guards and imposed barriers in their neighbourhoods to increase security as terrorism threats loomed in the 2000s. Similar processes of resident-initiated enclosure are underway through urban Malaysia at the same time as development corporations are building gated communities in new suburban regions: we turn now to the Malaysian experience.

### Malaysia: Changing Urban Patterns

The practice of enclosing residential areas has received scant research attention in Malaysia, despite its increasing scale and significance in the real estate market. While Malaysia has some history of bounded settlements, contemporary practices are divorced from traditional settlement patterns.

In the 1950s, British colonial powers forced 100s of 1000s Malayan peasants—largely of Chinese descent—to relocate to ‘new villages’: enclosed security communities intended to limit the spread of communism by preventing fraternisation and material support for rebels (Hack, 2009; Shuib et al., 2009; Tajuddin, 2012). Kheng (2009, p. 144) noted that with barbed wire fences and police guards at the entrances, the settlements were like ‘concentration camps’ containing perceived security risks and enforcing ethnic segregation. In colonial Malaya, ethnic segregation became a key management strategy: Europeans lived apart from Chinese who were separated from Indians and indigenous Malaysians (Guan, 2000; Selvaratnam, 1988). These racial divisions reinforced by colonial practices continue to influence Malaysian politics, culture and urbanisation trends (Jomo, 1995; King, 2008).

After independence in 1957, Malaysia (Figure 1) began an economic transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy: it became extremely successful in socio-economic development (Yeoh & Hirschman, 1980). The urban population increased rapidly (Osman et al., 2008), from 51 per cent of the national total in 1991 to 75 per cent by 2015 (Abdulahi & Abdul-Aziz, 2011); at least three states now have more than 80 per cent of the population living in cities. Particularly in the Klang Valley area (combining the states of Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and the Federal Territory of Putrajaya), urbanisation generated considerable social change and economic development (Masron et al., 2012).

During the post-colonial period, housing policy was a priority for the government. After independence, the First Malaysia Plan, 1956–1960, sought to provide well-planned homes for the poor (Salfarina et al., 2010) and to replace squatter and slum settlements in urban areas (Sufian & Mohammad, 2009). The public sector invested heavily in constructing low-cost residential buildings first for rental, but later for sale. The government introduced the New Economic Policy in 1970 and the Second Malaysia Plan, 1971–1975 (Economic Planning Unit, 1965) to alleviate poverty, reduce political discontent and restructure the country into a multi-ethnic society: reducing social and economic polarisation among Malay, Chinese and Indians became a focus (Salfarina et al., 2010). In 1957–1970, almost
90 per cent of Malays lived in rural areas, compared to about 55 per cent of the Chinese and 70 per cent of the Indians (Roslan, 2001). The average income of the Malays and other indigenous people was substantially below that of the Chinese and the Indians. Enabling low-income Malay and indigenous households to get urban jobs and buy homes was central to the strategy (Salfarina et al., 2010). Under the New Economic Policy, Malays' average income grew rapidly, reducing the gap from the national average (Economic Planning Unit, 1981). In the same period, Malays and indigenous ethnic populations increasingly became urban residents living in mixed neighbourhoods.

The private sector became more involved in providing housing during the Third Malaysia Plan (Economic Planning Unit, 1976). Private investment in urban development grew rapidly with expanding demand for housing, and was further stimulated by fiscal and monetary incentive packages in the Fourth Malaysia Plan (Economic Planning Unit, 1981; Shuid, 2010). By the 1980s, Malaysian institutional structure reflected the influence of globalisation and the spread of neo-liberal ideology. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammad, neoliberalism began to shift policy and practice in Malaysia. Mahathir sought to limit government intervention and spending (Siddiquee, 2002), encourage privatisation and deregulate markets (Lee, 2004). Funding for programmes such as housing diminished as government focused on repaying foreign debts (Khoo, 2010). As high growth resumed in the late 1980s, the state liberalised, deregulated and privatised social services (Roslan & Mustafa, 2006; Tan, 2008).

With significant labour shortages in manufacturing production in the 1970s, the Malaysian government had turned to recruiting foreign labour (Kaur, 2008), especially for low-to-medium skilled work (Kanapathy, 2006). Foreign workers began arriving in large numbers in the 1970s, despite the lack of legal routes for migration; only in the 1980s was immigration normalised (Abdul-Rahman et al., 2012). For Malaysians, foreign workers triggered concerns about safety and security. In 1972, the government created the People’s Volunteer Corps known as RELA: these local action groups focused attention on security matters (SUARAM, 2008). Under the Fourth Malaysia Plan (Economic Planning Unit, 1981), RELA groups were empowered to assist authorities to control undesirable elements threatening the security and stability of residential neighbourhoods. RELA groups often sought to manage crime and scrutinise the activities of immigrants in cities (Kaur, 2008).
Malaysians responded to contexts that involved more frequent encounters with those of other ethnic groups and with feared immigrants with more robust security mechanisms and other efforts to impose controls over urban spaces.

By the late 1990s, urban growth paralleled the structural shift in the Malaysian economy towards manufacturing and modern services centralised in the Klang Valley area (Masron et al., 2012). The dominance of the private sector in building housing coincided with the National Development Plan (1991–2000), the Sixth Malaysia Plan (Economic Planning Unit, 1991) and the Seventh Malaysia Plan (Economic Planning Unit, 1996) that emphasised sustainable development and decent housing (Sufian & Mohammad, 2009). During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Malaysia rejected International Monetary Fund advice, turning instead to capital controls (Kotz, 2002) that ultimately stabilised the economy (Robison & Hewison, 2005) with pro-market reforms (Khoo, 2010). The National Economy Recovery Plan of 1998 sought to stabilise the local currency, restore market confidence, maintain financial stability, recapitalise and restructure the banking sector, and revitalise the economy (Mah-Hui & Gou, 2012; Wee, 1999). Through effective policy decisions, Malaysia began its economic recovery earlier and more robustly than many nations in the region.

The rise of neoliberal ideology alongside growing security concerns set the stage for new neighbourhood planning practices that transformed neighbourhoods. With government stepping back from regulating the residential real estate market, real estate development became a critical mechanism for wealth generation, and a strategy forcing tenant farmers off under-productive plantation land and into cities (Jomo, 1995; King, 2008). Private neighbourhoods began mushrooming. Financial liberalisation and privatisation, faster development approvals, and relaxed planning and infrastructure standards (Abdullahi & Abdul-Aziz, 2011) enabled private developers in Malaysia to innovate in producing new development areas. At the same time, perceptions that the state was not effectively dealing with rising crime rates and illegal immigrants in cities bolstered a growing fear of crime (Kassim, 1997; Zumkehr & Andriesse, 2008). *Gated communities*—that is, enclosed residential enclaves with private recreational amenities produced by the market—became a preferred option aimed at wealthier purchasers in suburban developments (Misnan et al., 2010). As Tajuddin (2012, p. 69) suggested, the free market began to reproduce social segregation and enclosure once forced by colonial powers.

In the early 2000s, Malaysian society also saw a new phenomenon emerge in its cities. Older open traditional residential areas began to adopt an informal enclosure model that Malaysians call the *guarded neighbourhood*. Guarded neighbourhoods reflect the post-market production of enclosure in older residential areas: that is, associations of residents organise to limit access to their residential streets with barricades and guards. The rise of guarded neighbourhoods coincided with the Eighth Malaysia Plan (Economic Planning Unit, 2001), which emphasised safety, health, convenience and livability. Government policies encouraged ‘neighbourhood watch’ committees to reduce crime and provided grants to over 4000 resident associations to support their work (Najib, 2012). Through its funding actions, the state facilitated local social control of space and reinforced fears of other ethnic groups and immigrants (Tedong et al., forthcoming).

While several articles (Narayanasamy & Mohammad, 2011; Osman et al., 2011; Tahir & Hussin, 2011) discuss gated communities in Malaysia, few systematic scholarly analyses (Hanif et al., 2012; Mohit & Abdulla, 2011) have explored the factors producing
enclosure or differentiating types of enclosure. Given the prevalence of gated communities in Malaysian cities and the increasing incidence of post-market production of enclosure in older neighbourhoods, we embarked on a detailed investigation to document and understand contemporary practices.

A Case Study

Drawing on empirical data collected between January and November 2012, we profile the characteristics of enclaves in Malaysia, the context responsible for their unique features and their overall impact in the urban environment. We employed mixed methods—including surveys, interviews, field studies, direct and participant observation, review of newspaper coverage and analysis of crime statistics—to assess private neighbourhoods in Klang Valley, Johor Bahru and Penang Island. The study proceeded in three stages. First we surveyed over 440 heads of households (220 from gated communities and 220 residents from guarded neighbourhoods through face-to-face surveys at the entries to their communities. In another survey in Selangor state, we interviewed 360 residents of guarded neighbourhoods and 240 residents of open communities (recruited through convenience and snowballing sampling techniques) to compare their perceptions of urban conditions. We asked about respondent characteristics, motivations for living in enclosed communities, views about the socio-spatial implications of enclosure and the roles of resident associations and/or management corporations. Here we focus principally on the motivations respondents offered to explain why they live in private neighbourhoods.

In the second stage, we made direct observations of more than a dozen private neighbourhoods. Observations evaluated social and physical considerations such as physical barriers (fence, gate, speed bumps and guardhouse), surveillance strategies (e.g. private security guards and neighbourhood watch) and signage. Several co-authors also drew on participant observations from years of experience of living in enclosed neighbourhoods. Finally, we conducted 29 in-depth interviews with key actors involved in producing and governing private neighbourhoods in Malaysia: staff from federal, state and local governments; leaders of resident associations; and residents of open and private neighbourhoods. Although we used systematic search strategies for finding enclosed neighbourhoods, we recognise the limitations of trying to evaluate communities that are generally inaccessible to outsiders due to physical boundaries and surveillance technologies.

Types and Characteristics of Enclosures in Malaysia

Malaysia has two distinct categories of private neighbourhoods: market-produced gated communities and post-market-generated guarded neighbourhoods. Development companies produce gated communities featuring attractive amenities often aimed at affluent households in urban contexts. Guarded neighbourhoods are older middle-class suburban districts enclosed after-market through resident actions to barricade public streets, restrict access, hire guards and establish surveillance mechanisms. While both types of communities appear in other countries, the configuration and practices in Malaysia prove distinct. The South African experience with private neighbourhood practice is comparable in some ways. In South Africa, Landman (2000) described two types of gated
communities: what she called the enclosed neighbourhood roughly parallels the Malaysian guarded neighbourhood, although the enclosure and security infrastructure in South Africa is more robust (Lippman & Harris, 1999). While the South African security village has some similarities to the Malaysian gated community, its scale is larger and it contains a greater range of uses than seen in Malaysia. In Malaysia, the gated community focuses on residential uses and private recreational facilities: it offers an orderly, disciplined and controlled private realm.

**Gated Communities**

Gated communities in Malaysia look similar to those seen elsewhere. They involve exclusive developments surrounded by fences or masonry walls employing limited-entry access with 24-hour security control. Early developments appeared in Kuala Lumpur and later in other cities. The first gated community, Country Heights Kajang, transformed a rubber estate into what its developer called the ‘Beverly Hills of Malaysia’ in 1987. Developers rely on gated communities as a primary marketing strategy for attracting affluent urban consumers who want privacy and exclusivity (Misnan et al., 2010). Gated community enclosures reveal a high standard of facilities, amenities and design used by real estate actors as marketing devices. The interior style and arrangement of common areas reflect luxurious, exclusive and private living. Such communities form a club realm, with shared collective goods (Webster, 2002). Some have high-rise condominium or strata ownership (Figure 2), while others have ground-oriented landed property (Figure 3). Residents pay monthly fees to cover the costs of maintenance and security.

Rather than a niche strategy as seen in some parts of the world, gated developments have become the most common form of new residential neighbourhood in urban Malaysia.

**Figure 2.** Gated community (strata) with 24-hour guarded access control.
Gated communities generally accommodate a mix of Malays, Chinese, Indians and foreigners with a range of religions but sharing similar income levels. Developers create private neighbourhoods governed by management corporations, regulated by the Common and Property and Building Act (Maintenance and Management) of 2007. State policies facilitate enclosure: Malaysian planning acknowledges, defines and seeks to regulate gated communities (Department of Town and Country Planning of Malaysia, 2010). Official guidelines adopted in 2010 (Bernama, 2010) permit residential and related uses only and stipulate that gated communities will be between 1 and 10 hectares. Gated communities are generally well planned and professionally managed, and staffed by security firms employing migrant labour.

Guarded Neighbourhoods

Throughout urban Malaysia, many residents’ associations are organising themselves to enclose their neighbourhoods. A guarded neighbourhood is a formerly open neighbourhood where middle-class suburban residents establish barriers and employ unarmed private guards to provide security services to an area that includes public spaces and public streets (Fernandez, 2007). Residents’ associations sometimes seek permission from local authorities to erect temporary physical barriers such as manual boom gates, cones and security signs, but guarded neighbourhoods often lack formal approval from local authorities. Malaysian law does not permit the enclosure of public streets, yet authorities generally tolerate barricades. In 2010, the federal government introduced a ‘guarded neighbourhoods’ guideline to control and monitor enclosure (Department of Town and Country Planning of Malaysia, 2010). The guideline restricted enclosure to limited locations in urban areas where associations could demonstrate they had the consent of 51 per cent of the residents. A female urban planner of Malay ethnicity working for a local authority explained the process.
Residents need to apply for temporary planning approval from us showing majority support from residents [. . .] We will consider allowing them to close some public roads using manual boom gates or temporary structures, but there are also some [illegal] guarded neighbourhoods that have closed public roads permanently.

Guarded neighbourhoods generally include populations that share similarities in income and tenure, and that occupy a single type of home (normally terrace houses). Many enclosed neighbourhoods have a mix of ethnic and religious groups. The residents’ association typically engages a security company to provide guards, construct guardhouses, set a boom-gate to control access and locate cameras around the neighbourhood (see Figures 4 and 5). Relatively poorly paid guards provide a critical surveillance and disciplinary function, stopping anyone trying to come into the neighbourhood.

In order to pay for enclosure, resident associations impose modest monthly maintenance fees. Residents’ actions modify the formerly open neighbourhood into a type of a private neighbourhood, albeit without the legal status the state affords gated communities. In the process, residential spaces are—to use Sibley’s (1988) term—‘purified’ of feared visitors.

The residents of guarded neighbourhoods have privatised public streets and parks: local authorities manage and maintain the infrastructure and provide public services despite the restricted access. Field observations revealed that physical barriers and guards significantly limited access for outsiders who wished to use public spaces within neighbourhoods. Visitors must register with the guards and temporarily surrender identity documents to enter guarded neighbourhood space. Some of those we interviewed complained about the effects of enclosure, the activities of residents’ associations and illegal behaviour by guards (such as blackmailing residents). For the most part, however, widespread post-market production of enclosure signifies shifts underway in Malaysian society around expectations of security, comfort and privacy in the contemporary city.

Figure 4. Guarded neighbourhood entry with boom gate and guard station.
Motivations for Enclosure

As Table 1 illustrates, we asked residents about their motivations for living in enclosed communities. Based on factors that the literature suggested may influence residents, we invited residents to evaluate each of the five factors—seeking safety and security, looking for good property investment, wanting exclusivity, needing privacy and following current development trends—from 1 (highest) to 5 (lowest). In both types of communities safety and security dominated the rankings; however, we found differences in priorities of other elements between residents of the two types of enclosed settlements (Table 1). While those in guarded neighbourhoods scored privacy next highly after safety and security, the residents of gated communities put investment potential as their second highest objective. The chairman of a resident association, a male of Chinese ethnicity, explained the motivation:

We collect maintenance fees from the residents so that we could maintain the neighbourhood area [...] the money will be used to run the guarded neighbourhood scheme from security guards to physical barriers [...] We hope by doing this our community will be more vibrant and indirectly will increase the property value of the community.

Safety and Security

In-depth interviews with residents of private neighbourhoods revealed that safety and security motivated them to live in gated communities and guarded neighbourhoods. One landlord, a Malay resident from a guarded neighbourhood, said, ‘Physical barriers and
security guards definitely increase our safety and security here. Strangers are not allowed to enter our community without permission from security guards’. One male Chinese member of a resident association explained that ‘Safety and security was a primary reason for us to apply the guarded neighbourhoods because its helps to reduce crime in residential area’.

Because the residents of both kinds of communities overwhelmingly identified safety and security as the top priority among reasons for preferring private neighbourhoods, we might ask whether urban safety is a problem in Malaysia. The Global Peace Index (2012) ranked Malaysia as the most peaceful country in the Association of South-East Asian Nations and among the top 20 most peaceful countries in the world. By global standards, Malaysia has low crime rates. In 1999, while South Africa recorded 2599 crimes per 100 000 population (Landman, 2004), Malaysia recorded an estimated 750 per 100 000 (Royal Malaysian Police, personal communication, 2012) and only 740/100 000 in 2009 (Tan, 2011). In 2009, the USA had 439.7 violent crimes per 100 000 people and 3071.5 property crimes per 100 000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), while Malaysia had only 148 violent crimes recorded per 100 000 and 592 property crimes per 100 000 (Royal Malaysian Police, personal communication, 2012). The current murder rate in South Africa is 37.3 murders per 100 000 people, nearly five times the global murder rate of 7.6 murders per 100 000 (Breetzke et al., 2013); in contrast, Malaysia’s recorded murder rate was 1.9 per 100 000 in 2011 (Royal Malaysian Police, personal communication, 2012). Although residents in South African or American neighbourhoods might reasonably claim they have grounds for guarding their boundaries, in Malaysia fear far exceeds risk.

Given low crime rates, what explains widespread perception of insecurity and local responses to it? Statistics indicate that property crimes generally occur in urban areas (Sidhu, 2005, p. 9). Media reporting of crime sensationalises risk and may induce what Low (2001) called a discourse of urban fear. Press coverage suggests that perceptions of growing crime problems appear linked to the rising presence of foreign workers. In 2011, Malaysia had about 2.3 million registered foreigners (Bernama, 2011). Chin (2008) estimated that a further two to four million undocumented foreigners lived in the country.

### Table 1. Summary of survey responses: ‘Please rank the factors which may have affected your decision to live in an enclosed community from highest to lowest in importance’ *n* = 440

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighbourhood type of respondent</th>
<th>Elements tested</th>
<th>Percentage choosing rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gated community <em>n</em> = 220</td>
<td>Safety and security</td>
<td>70 18.2 4.5 3.2 4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As a future property investment</td>
<td>10.5 46.3 21.8 8.2 13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow the latest development concept</td>
<td>5 3.7 13.5 23.6 54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure privacy</td>
<td>4.5 18.2 10 56.8 10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusive and prestige neighbourhood</td>
<td>10 13.6 50.2 8.2 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Safety and security</td>
<td>75.8 12.1 3.2 6.4 2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guarded neighbourhood <em>n</em> = 220</td>
<td>Safety and security</td>
<td>75.8 12.1 3.2 6.4 2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As a future property investment</td>
<td>10.5 6 65.8 13.2 4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusive and prestige neighbourhood</td>
<td>8.2 6.8 9.9 32.3 42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure privacy</td>
<td>0.5 60 10 11.9 17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow the latest development concept</td>
<td>5 15.1 11.1 36.2 32.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Immigrants constitute approximately 8 per cent of Malaysia’s resident population. Although Malaysia successfully integrated previously marginalised Malays and native groups economically through policy interventions over the last few decades, the processes of decolonisation and the growth in Malay privilege left ethnic Chinese and Indian Malaysians feeling politically and socially marginalised (Jomo, 1995; King, 2008). Despite the demand for labour, people have not readily accepted foreign immigrants. Malaysians perceive foreigners as presenting threats ranging from social problems (Liow, 2004) and criminal activities (Kanapathy, 2006; Kassim, 1997) to dilution of the gene pool (Chin, 2008). While empirical evidence suggesting that foreigners drive crime in Malaysia remains weak, the fear of crime associated with foreigners—especially illegal immigrants—was palpable among those interviewed. One legal professional, a Malay resident of a private neighbourhood, said, ‘I have to be vigilant in certain areas in Klang Valley. Some areas are occupied by illegal foreigners—especially those from Asia and Africa. [...] I feel insecure walking alone in the area especially during public holidays’.

Ironically, observations of enclosed developments indicated that most of the guards working the gates were immigrants. In 2009, estimates showed 300,000 foreign security guards in the country, more than the number of police (Surin, 2009). One female Malay local authority staff person working with the urban planning department noted that the government does not monitor the security guards in private neighbourhoods. ‘We assume that the security guards appointed by the resident association are from a legal agency that has gained operating approval from the Ministry of Home Affairs’. Perhaps the desire to control and securitise urban space is so great that the presence of security uniforms can allay fears that otherwise attach to the bodies within.

Security is the common sense rationale for enclosure in urban Malaysia. As King (2008, p. 57) noted, Kuala Lumpur ‘is a city of surveillance, unease and anxiety’. Tan (2012) claimed that security was the main factor contributing to the proliferation of gated communities and guarded neighbourhoods in the Klang Valley. Residents we surveyed saw enclosing their neighbourhoods as a way to improve safety for their families. One resident of private neighbourhood, a Malay recently retired from the private sector, argued, ‘We feel safer living in guarded residential neighbourhood compared to living in development areas without any security features such as security guards, CCTV and barrier gates at exit and entry points.’ Government authorities accepted the rationale. As one female Malay local authority staff person, with 15 years working experience, said,

[...] high crime rates in urban areas and lack of confidence in enforcement agencies resulted in a rise in applications for private neighbourhoods, as the existence of physical barriers and presence of security guards provides residents the confidence of security and safety.

Our survey comparing perceptions of the residents of guarded neighbourhoods ($n = 360$) with those living in open neighbourhoods ($n = 240$) in Selangor state suggested that views about safety differ little between the areas. Although 85.8 per cent of the residents of guarded areas cited safety and security as the primary reason for choosing their current residence, an even greater number (87.5 per cent) of the residents of open communities said
the same thing. As Table 2 illustrates, the residents of open neighbourhoods proved more confident than those in enclosures that their areas were safer than others. Perhaps the fear of crime is greater within guarded areas; alternatively, residents may decide to enclose their neighbourhoods in response to specific local experiences.

Fear of crime is widespread in urban Malaysia. Fear is a problem as serious as real crime in terms of its social and spatial effects (Marzbali et al., 2011). Nair et al. (2013) found that 91 per cent of urban residents in Malaysia exhibited a high level of fear of becoming a victim of crime in a residential area. A discourse of fear may induce a kind of moral panic based not in evidence but in socially reproduced understandings of current urban conditions. Sakip et al. (2013) noted a higher fear of crime among private neighbourhood residents than among others. In one comparative survey of 50 residents from gated communities and 50 residents of non-gated areas, Mohit & Abdulla (2011) found that inhabitants of enclosed areas reported more incidents of crime and felt no safer than did residents of open neighbourhoods. A federal government staff person we interviewed confirmed that. One federal government worker, a Malay with a Ph.D., said:

Although the official data revealed by the police department shows decreasing crime rates, the element of mistrust in the physical surrounding and fear of outsiders still exists. This element of fear has contributed to the increase in the application of guarded neighbourhoods, all in the name of personal safety and security.

Hanif et al. (2012, obscured for review) argued that the rise of private neighbourhoods in Malaysia reflected the inability of the state to ensure public safety, particularly in residential areas. Nair et al. (2013) discovered that residents believed that the police were ineffective in controlling crime. Residents we surveyed told us that they distrusted official reports claiming that their cities were safe. One male Malay resident working with an oil and gas company lamented, ‘The authorities stated that the crime rates have decreased, but in reality there are still criminal incidents happening in residential areas in Malaysia, including in private neighbourhood developments’. Pervasive fear of ethnic others and reluctance to trust government induce enclosure as a strategy for local social control.

Government guidelines to facilitate enclosure and financial support for neighbourhood watch activities fuel perceptions of insecurity and strategies for urban intervention. For instance, local government awards for ‘Best neighbourhoods’ have rewarded guarded neighbourhoods. Governmental strategies and incentives to enhance community safety reproduce fear of others, fear of crime and local efforts to control space. The cultural discourse of fear encourages both the market and post-market production of enclaves.

**Table 2.** Response of residents in Selangor state to the item ‘My neighbourhood is safer than other neighbourhoods’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighbourhood type of respondent</th>
<th>My neighbourhood is safer</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly disagree (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly agree (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guarded neighbourhood</td>
<td>10.6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23.9</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>45.8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100 (N = 360)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open neighbourhood</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.8</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>71.7</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.9</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100 (N = 240)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>18.0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>56.2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9.3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>100 (N = 600)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The New Landscape of Control in Malaysia 1019
Other Factors

Although security dominated the discourse around the justification for enclosing residential areas, residents acknowledged other motivations for gating. Many residents saw enclosure as enhancing property values. Khalid (2012) noted that in Malaysia, properties with strong security systems fetched higher prices and had higher appreciation values. Xavier (2008) found that private neighbourhoods increased property values. One property owner told us, ‘Even if my property prices do not increase, I believe my house rentals will be high compared with open neighbourhood properties.’ As in other countries, enclosure may confer added property value (Ajibola et al., 2011; Le Goix & Vesselinov, 2012).

The desire for private and exclusive living also drives the creation of enclosed neighbourhoods in Malaysia. As the middle class has grown, the desire for private and exclusive living expanded. For example, in both Selangor and Kuala Lumpur states, the government categorises almost 30 per cent of urban households as high income (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2009). Affluent households are choosing private neighbourhood developments in order to live near others like themselves. In colonial times, Malaysia was highly segregated by ethnicity: some parts of the country still are. Today urban residential areas may integrate indigenous populations but most segregate income levels and housing types. A male Malay senior officer of a local authority described residents’ motivations: ‘We have received applications where residents living in two-storey houses try to separate their neighbourhood from one with single-storey homes’.

Perimeter fencing imposes a sturdy image of privacy and exclusivity, and marks class boundaries. Private neighbourhoods cocoon residents and their family members. At main entrances, ‘STOP’ or ‘Visitors please register’ signs remind outsiders that the security guards exert power and control access (Figure 6). Residents may separate themselves from members of the wider society who they define as different and therefore dangerous. Some residents of private neighbourhoods interviewed explained that they appreciated privacy and exclusivity. For instance, one female resident working for a private developer said, ‘No one can disturb me [. . . if] no strangers [are] in my neighbourhood.’ Whether built by the real estate market or produced by residents of established communities, the private neighbourhood carves the city into territories designed to exclude non-members.

Figure 6. Signage reinforces the social control of space.
Producing Separation

Although our study is among the most comprehensive investigations of enclosed communities in Malaysia, we acknowledge its limitations. We focused on particular regions, and so cannot claim to describe all urban centres in the country. In documenting the motivations and some of the practices of residents in enclosing neighbourhoods in the research reported here, we recognise that people may have left unstated some of the factors underlying their motivations (perhaps because of the ethnicity of the interviewer or other reasons). We did not examine in detail the mechanisms by which communities organise residents’ associations or the instructions given to guards to regulate access, so there are some motivations to consider in future research. Nonetheless, the study presents useful insights into the ways in which people control landscapes and seek to discipline those they fear.

Gated enclaves are appearing in many parts of the world, but studies of individual countries show that they vary in their characteristics and in their pervasiveness. Detailed case study investigations offer useful insights into the complex cultural processes producing enclosed residential areas (Caldeira, 2000; Grant & Rosen, 2009; Low, 2003). The proliferation of gated communities in South-East Asia is undoubtedly linked to globalisation (Dick & Rimmer, 1998), but the Malaysian experience provides evidence of the way that local conditions, cultural practices and political choices modify the effects of global economic transformations. Global forces affect urban outcomes in Malaysia as they do in other nations. Over the last several decades, Malaysia transformed into a manufacturing powerhouse rapidly moving towards developed nation status. Such change promoted urbanisation and helped create a growing middle class seeking attractive housing options. Like governments in many countries, Malaysia’s leaders moved to deregulate and liberalise markets, reducing the role of the state in producing housing. Although neoliberalism certainly affected the nation, Malaysia plotted a unique political and social trajectory. For instance, the state actively promoted social and economic integration of indigenous Malay groups, creating conditions that ultimately prompted migration and economic change that transformed urban centres. Rapid economic modernisation and urbanisation alongside divisive ethnic politics generated an uneasy multi-cultural mix characterised by inter-group suspicion and fear (Gomez, 2004; King, 2008). Although the state may characterise its policies as accommodating an inclusive multi-ethnic mix, the segregated urban neighbourhoods reveal significant fears reinforced by state practices.

The Malaysian case illustrates market and citizen efforts—supported by state policies and funding—to impose territorial control and surveillance in residential environments where cultural diversity has become an unwelcomed urban reality. A political economy that privileges some ethnic and religious groups while vilifying others creates cultural tensions that inevitably become manifest in efforts to control the spaces of the city. The colonial legacy of forcible confinement of some ethnic groups in ‘new villages’ casts a lingering shadow over contemporary strategies for policing space. In Malaysia, ethnic and class diversity underscores fears that developers and residents seek to address through physical barriers and security guards of the kind that historically kept ethnic communities apart. The landscape of control in Malaysia increasingly involves walls, gates and guards.

The government has provided funding to support citizen groups working to promote community safety, and developed guidelines and regulations to govern enclosure of residential areas. Although the Malaysian government is not an active agent of privatisation and fortification—as may be the case in the district of Las Vegas (McKenzie,
or in the state of Israel (Rosen & Grant, 2011)—the state produces conditions and funding that support and reinforce those wishing to secure spaces. Government policies encourage groups to control neighbourhood spaces, while insufficient funding for enforcement leads local authorities to tolerate street closures that are officially prohibited by law. Rather than restricting enclosure, government guidelines facilitate and regularise the gating and guarding of urban space.

Neighbourhood associations appear highly empowered and engaged in Malaysian cities. The residents of older neighbourhoods responded to changing perceptions of urban safety, initiated by developers creating gated communities by organising to close access to their streets. In so doing, they excluded outsiders from public spaces and acted to enhance the perceived amenities, value and security of their neighbourhoods. The state has allowed property rights to dominate mobility rights in residential areas. Encouraging residents to mobilise to control their neighbourhoods further undermines the ability of the urban poor—often from disadvantaged ethnic groups such as Indians or illegal immigrants—from having access to the city (Bunnell et al., 2010).

Encouraging the migration of low-wage foreign workers to Malaysia solved the labour crisis generated by industrialisation, but altered the social dynamics of the city. Approximately 8 per cent of the nation’s population is now foreign-born (Kaur, 2008). Rather than being described in public discourse as contributing to diversity and economic potential (Eraydin et al., 2010), as may be the case in Canada with its large immigrant population (Friesen, 2012), foreigners in Malaysia are construed as potentially dangerous and often linked with perceptions of problems with crime. Further research might usefully interrogate the nexus between fear of crime and fear of foreigners to understand the role of moral panic in producing enclosure in Malaysia.

What are the physical and social results of enclosure in Malaysia? In new development areas, gating is producing beautiful, well-endowed, planned residential communities for urban elites. In older suburban areas, makeshift barricades and ramshackle guardhouses produce unsightly disruptions in public street networks and transform public spaces into private domains. Security at the neighbourhood level is rapidly becoming not merely an amenity but a perceived necessity, linked to maintaining property values and protecting family members.

Gated communities and guarded neighbourhoods contribute to an increasingly fragmented landscape segregated by class, housing type and tenure. Contemporary class segregation intersects with and overlays the ethnic suspicion and segregation created in colonial times. Wide swathes of the city have become spaces of exclusion, with boundaries managed by low-status workers and immigrants functioning to control access by outsiders. Investigating the characteristics of enclosed communities in Malaysia illustrates some of the ways in which the structure of the city (re)produces structures of social inequality in the wider society.

References


