

Fear and segregation: anxiety beyond the gated communities. The Costa Rican case.

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Abstract: Fear of crime is a constant concern in Latin America. In Costa Rica, those feeling seems to be changing the urbanisation patterns; giving way to gated communities. However, those developments might be increasing feelings of exclusion and anxiety instead of reducing crime. In the last 25 years, the gated communities have been rising; as a result, the traditional neighbourhoods have to coexist with these new developments. This paper aims to explore the effects of gated communities in the distribution of fear in their peripheries, mainly those regarding tensions between outside – inside. The research is taking place within the Greater Metropolitan Area of Costa Rica. Eight open neighbourhoods were selected, using the poverty indicator basic unfulfilled needs (NBI). In each case was carried out a walking interview with some members of the community; those walks were tracked with a GPS and recorded. Additionally, there were focus groups, observations and interviews. Some preliminary results suggest significant residential segregation between the neighbourhoods and the gated communities. It seems the fortification is more than a physical barrier; there is no room for sharing, which causes misconceptions and fears towards other people.

Keywords: Fear of crime, gated communities, Costa Rica, residential segregation.

Introduction

Safety is an important concern in most of the Latin American people. This region holds the highest rates of homicides worldwide (Chioda, 2016). Also, the fear discourse has been part of the political rhetoric from the 1990s, fuelling people anxiety even more (Huhn, 2017). As a result, more than 61% of Latin Americans agree to the increase the repressive measures such as zero-tolerance policies (Latinobarometro, 2016). Those punitive practices have been imported mainly from the United States. However, many countries also have reproduced from that country the model of gated communities, considered for many people a sort of ‘shelters’ against criminality.

Although high inequality has characterised Latin America, most of the countries started a reduction in their figures at the beginning of the century. However, Costa Rica has shown the opposite trend; this country moved from being one of the most equitable towards ranges similar to the average. In 2016 the Gini coefficient was 0.521, without any significant change since 2011 (Programa Estado de la Nacion, 2017).

Central America is also one of the most violent areas in the world; however, it is not homogeneous in their figures, then countries such as Costa Rica, Panamá and Nicaragua have lower rates of homicides than the rest. The overall victimisation rate in Costa Rica has diminished from 2008 (INEC, 2015); however, gated communities have been proliferating because they are seen for many people as security providers. This trend has started to fragment the city, physically and socially, creating isolated places

into the urban fabric. As a result, paradoxically, those developments might be increasing the fears towards their peripheries in turn.

This paper is part of an ongoing PhD research, which explores the distribution of fear outside of gated communities within the Great Metropolitan Area of Costa Rica. This work is focused on the possible tensions produced by gated communities over the surrounding neighbourhoods. The data were collected mainly through walking interviews and focus groups, in eight neighbourhoods beside gated communities. The initial findings suggest a deep residential segregation and exclusion feelings in most of the cases. The results also suggest that pre-existing fears are fuelled by the isolated landscape and the uncertainty about who lives behind those walls.

Fear of crime beyond the walls

Fear of crime has profound impacts on quality of life. Those emotions might affect social cohesion and experience in the city. This feeling is defined by Ferraro and LaGrange (1987, p.72) as ‘a negative emotional reaction to crime or the symbols associated with crime’. However, fear of crime is a complex phenomenon, which involves different dimensions and factors such as incomes level, gender, education, race, age and attach to the neighbourhood (Gray et al. 2011). In this regard, the built environment might have a significant role in the perception of fear.

Some authors have suggested the manipulation of physical space to prevent crime. Newman (1973) through his concept Defensive Spaces, points out that buildings’ configuration and urban design can help to surveillance, as well as community control is the only efficient tool for assuring safety in neighbourhoods. According to his view, the community becomes a guardian encouraging territoriality feelings. Besides, the Situation Prevention Thesis (Clarke, 1983; Crawford, 1998) supports the idea of reducing the opportunities for crime through informal community vigilance, the introduction of barriers, use of Closed-circuit television (CCTV), as well as any physical alteration. In both cases, the presence of strangers is avoided; the neighbourhood is under community control.

On the other hand, those territorial controls seem to affect the permeability of the city. Minton (2009) holds the idea that the ‘Defensive Spaces’ are the reason why gated communities and cul de sac have been spread along the United States and Britain since 1970. She argues that those measures make strangers be seen as a source of danger. In like manner, Sennett (2018) claims that edges are tense rather than friendly places of exchange, he mentions that turning walls in membranes allows the interchange inside-outside, stimulating ‘neighbours who mix casually’ (p. 223); for instance, buying food. This measure makes contact less confrontational; it could be the first step to debunk misconceptions about ‘the others’.

The tension between the absence or presence of unfamiliar people affects the dynamism of the city. Jacobs (1961) highlights the importance of bringing different type of people altogether. Actually, she points out that a successful city is that in which a person feels safe among strangers. Furthermore, Sennett (2018) points out that preconceptions towards strangers just because ‘they are incomprehensibly strange’ degrades the ethical character of the city’ (p.126). He holds that the experience of living in a diverse group has the power of reducing the feeling of insecurity and frustration because there is no clear image of who is the enemy.

Barriers of differentiation

Latin America cities have imported the concept of gated communities from anglo-saxon countries. Those residential developments arise in the United States in the early 1980s (Blakely and Snyder, 1997), later in Latin American cities during the 1990s (Castells, 1999). Although the United States has had an important role spreading those developments, gated communities have expanded rapidly in urbanising countries, 'they were simply part of the surreal economic and spatial transformation that engulfed so many countries in the last two decades of the 20th century' (Webster et al. 2002). This growth could be explained as an answer to social conflict and violence in cities; however, these developments also reflect new lifestyles emerging under the globalisation process (Coy and Pöhler, 2002). Under this perspective, the developers of gated communities' see themselves as providing both security and social familiarity' (Blakely and Snyder, 1997). However, Blakely and Snyder (1997) argue that those fences represent more than physical barriers, they are a reflection of tensions between particular aspirations based on fear and defence of privileges, with the principles of community responsibility.

Criminality causes concern among most of the Latin American people, around 88% express any fear about being a victim of delinquency, in Costa Rica, this figure is 86% (Corporación Latinobarometro, 2016). Consequently, demands for 'iron fist' to address this issue seems to be deeply attached to Latin America culture. In this regard, Costa Rica occupies the second place in Latin America with the highest percentage of people claiming for this measure, while the average is 61%, in Costa Rica reaches the 78% (Corporación Latinobarometro, 2016). Against this background, populism punitive seems to be used in the political discourse, exacerbating the fear of crime (Huhn, 2017). According to Huhn (2017) in Central America, those elements intensify each other, fuelling pre-existing fears and hence, justifying more repressive measures. The fear discourse in Costa Rica might be included in political rhetoric since the 1990s and reproduced by some media (Fonseca and Sandoval, 2006; Huhn, 2012). The spread of fear has also changed the urbanisation patterns, raising the number of gated communities within the country.

Gated Communities in Costa Rica

Costa Rica has had a significant increase in the number of gated communities. In that country, most of those developments have been created under the condominium scheme, an ownership system which has individual dwellings or units within a shared land with common areas. From 1990 to 2017, the rise of the built area under this category increases from 5,2% to 25,2% (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2018). Although this figure does not mean that all those developments are walled, it is an important sign of the current trend. A report from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Costa Rica highlights that the widespread of unsafety feelings have altered people behaviour 'They live in a condominium rather than open spaces, put razor wire around what was once an open garden.' (PNUD-Costa Rica, 2005, p. 4). Carrion (2008) mentions that in Latin America safety policies in residential areas have increased the barriers of differentiation; paradoxically, rising the segregation and creating exclusion spaces. This situation is also present in the Latin America suburbs, where poor and rich are next to each other but separated by a wall (Roitman and Phelps, 2011). In Costa Rica, due to a green belt around the Greater Metropolitan Area (GMA), the gated communities seem to be mostly concentrated in the urban region; nevertheless, there are also cases of gated communities in rural areas. Pujol et al. (2011) suggest that within GMA, those places where gated communities are located, the social segregation has climbed steadily. In Costa Rica, the planning system has different rules for open residential developments and gated communities. Historically the open neighbourhoods have

transferred to the local government land for public parks and streets; on the contrary, most local governments allow to gated communities to keep the entire property for themselves. This situation seems to provoke a reduction in the number of public spaces per inhabitant; therefore, the decline of areas for sharing within the city. With this in mind, the traditional open neighbourhoods have to coexist with the new gated communities daily. Those neighbourhoods are very diverse; they may be either low or high incomes. Many authors have suggested an association between fear of crime and income inequalities (Franklin et al. 2008; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Vieno et al. 2013), where those areas more unequal reveal a higher level of anxiety.

Methods

The research is based on eight study cases; they are neighbourhoods beside gated communities. Those cases are located within the GMA of Costa Rica. This area concentrates more than half of the country's population, despite it is just 3,83% of the Costa Rican territory (OUGAM, 2018).

The neighbourhoods were also selected according to their unfulfilled needs, called by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC) as *Necesidades Básica Insatisfechas* (NBI). The NBI is a tool to measure poverty, which was gotten from the Costa Rica census data from 2011. It is based on four needs: housing, educational level, health and access to goods and services. When a dwelling holds the four NBI, it means that it has the highest level of poverty. The eight cases have different levels of unfulfilled needs, from communities without any NBI (0 NBI) to neighbourhoods with the highest level of poverty (4 NBI). Those places were chosen using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) with the census cartography; the first random selection was polished with aerial images and then reassessed in the field.

The data collection was made from June to December 2018; the following techniques were used:

- Walking interviews
- Focus Group with adults and teenagers
- In depth-Interviews
- Observations

In each neighbourhood was carried out a walking interview with some members of the community, according to with the method suggested by Evans and Jones (2011), those walks were tracked with a Global Positioning System (GPS) and synchronised with an audio recorder. It was carried out also one focus group per each study case. Additionally, there were observations in each neighbourhood and some complementary in depth-interviews. These initial findings are based mainly on the walking interviews and focus groups.

Initial Findings

Residential segregation

Most of the participants mentioned that they did not know people from the gated community. However, those from the communities with high incomes indicated to have met them at some point. In seven of the eight cases, there was no connection between the gated community's residents and the community organisation, the only exception was the wealthiest neighbourhood, where people from the gated community were part of the community board. This overall residential segregation was also expressed by the teenagers, who despite having an extensive network of friendships beyond their neighbourhood, they did not have friends within the gated communities nearby.

Walls and preconceptions

As a result of residential segregation, people created their own concept about people from the gated community. Those ideas also fuel anxiety and tensions; there is a general feeling that those people do not care about the community because maybe they belong to another town. The level of incomes of those people also causes concern among neighbours; for instance, many participants think they are wealthy people, which is an issue for their neighbourhoods because those developments might function as a magnet for criminality, therefore, it could affect the safety of the surrounding communities. Other people believe that maybe they are involved in illegal business; hence their neighbourhoods are under threat, mainly their young people who are vulnerable and easy to recruit. On the other hand, those communities where the neighbours at least have met somebody from the gated community they assume they are just working people from middle to upper middle class. In this regard, beyond the physical barriers between neighbourhoods and gated communities, those prejudgments might be increasing some pre-existing fears.

Overwhelming growth, involuntary enclosure.

As has been noted, gated communities in Costa Rica are expanding quickly. Within GMA they are embedded into the urban fabric, next to established neighbourhoods. In those cases where the growth is notorious, the neighbours expressed their overwhelming towards this situation. To illustrate this point, those neighbourhoods surrounded by at least four gated communities larger than one hectare, manifested to feel 'wrapped' by those developments. This sort of involuntary enclosure seems to rise the exclusion feelings and fuel resentments. That frustration obeys mainly to the sensation that their community has been taken by strangers who live in their own fortifications. In the absence of spaces for sharing and mixing, as Sennett (2018) refers, the anxiety towards strangers is even more significant.

The edges

The edges between gated communities and neighbourhoods were mostly walls. The only exception was the wealthiest neighbourhood, in that case, the perimeter was permeable but keeping the restrictions of access. In most cases, those walls were associated to feelings of fear; they were described as isolated places, therefore, a convenient area for crimes such as muggings, drugs traffic, abductions, sexual abuses, among others. Due to the gated communities nearby were larger than nine hectares -in six of the cases, many neighbours were forced to walk along their edges to take the bus; actually, many bus stops were located just next to the wall. This situation provoked them a considerable anxiety, especially during the night.

Planning issues

A common complaint was the lack of contribution from gated communities to the neighbouring areas. Especially regarding the supply of public spaces such as parks and streets. In addition, they pointed out how the significant surface covered by those developments makes difficult the communication among neighbourhoods. Pujol et al. (2011) have mentioned how those gated communities have risen the drawbacks in the Costa Rican road system, which also has affected the traffic congestion. In general, those neighbourhoods where the amount of gated communities is growing faster, there is a discontent towards the local government's controls and regulations.

Final thoughts

The tensions from the outside to inside seems to be fuelled by feelings of exclusion. The residential segregation has provoked fears towards the unknown; people from gated communities are seen as

strangers who belongs to somewhere else. However, those differences seem not being present in the wealthiest community, where the gated community's edges were soft, and people from there were involved in communal issues. In this case, apparently, the levels of trust in both directions worked differently than the rest.

The local governments in Costa Rica have not reacted quickly to control the size, edges and configuration of gated communities, as well as an eventual supply of public spaces. As a result, there are 'islands' of dwellings embedded into the city, without any permeability towards the rest of the urban fabric.

The spread of gated communities in Latin America has been varied; this work aims to contribute to give more views to that discussion, mainly from Central America, which is also diverse. This work also seeks to offer another angle of observing the fear, from the other side of the wall.

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