

FROM MACRO-LEVEL POLICIES TO MICRO-LEVEL PRACTICES: CHANGING GLOBAL ECONOMIC LANDSCAPES AND THE PROLIFERATION OF MIDDLE-CLASS GATED COMMUNITIES IN MEXICO

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Abstract

In recent decades, gated communities for affluent groups have gained academic attention worldwide. However, in nations with large inequalities such as Mexico, which are also affected by issues of insecurity, corruption, and violence, these enclaves have become more common for middle-income groups. Their existence is usually associated with the search for prestige and exclusivity, along with fear of crime and violence. However, this article focuses on other structural conditions that contribute to the proliferation of these fortified spaces, such as the connections between global economic forces and the changes in national planning, financial, and housing policies since the 1990s. Since then, Mexican peripheries have become more fragmented and disconnected and gated communities have proliferated. This discussion takes place in a context of global polarisation, both in the Global North and South, in which planners have been urged to respond to issues of growing fear, inequality, and violence. This article addresses the contradictions of polarisation, because some Mexicans are defending the right to build walls to protect from insecurity, while there is also social condemnation of the proposed wall by President Trump. The discussion about macro-economic policies in the development of middle-class gated communities in Mexico is helpful in identifying the future risks and challenges that may come from the normalisation of exclusionary places.

Keywords

Gated communities, Mexico, inequality, urban fragmentation, contradictions

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1. Introduction

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, after years of economic crises, uncertainty, and political turmoil, Mexico embraced an economic and political model which was largely defined by the neoliberal policies promoted by global economic institutions commonly identified as the Washington Consensus (Williamson, 1990; Zanetta, 2004; Walker, 2013). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were important changes to planning, housing, land tenure, and financial policies in Mexico (Puebla, 2002; Vidal, Marshall and Correa, 2011; Monkkonen, 2012). The new policies were aligned with the World Bank's vision in which governments were "advised to abandon their role as producers of housing to adopt an enabling role of managing the housing sector as a whole" (The World Bank, 1993, p.1). The 'market enabling strategy' considered not only the participation of the private sector in the provision of housing (Keivani and Werna, 2001; Puebla, 2002) but also the financialisation of the housing market, and made this sector one of the main drivers of Mexican macro-economic growth in the 1990s and 2000s. As a result of these policies, private interests from foreign and national actors eroded the existent planning system and the capacity of the state to deal with everyday issues. In only a couple of decades, Mexican metropolitan areas have grown significantly in the territory of small municipalities with limited planning knowledge or regulation, leaving large housing developments without adequate infrastructure, public services and transport.

The national housing strategy during the 2000s was based on the number of houses built and the number of mortgages originated. The result of this quantitative rather than qualitative approach contributed to the configuration of fragmented urban structures in an already divided and polarised society dealing with inequality (González-Arellano and Larralde-Corona, 2019). The private-led and financially-focused housing production shaped not only fragmented cities but also contributed to a stronger fracture between different social groups, and between those groups and the state. As Mexico's macro-economic position improved, the wealthiest population became more powerful and more segregated while the conditions of the most vulnerable did not improve. These growing inequalities have been fundamental in the increase in crime, corruption, delinquency, and distrust.

In this paper, I discuss the role of global economic policies in the shaping of modern Mexican peripheries and the contradictions, risks, and challenges that have arisen as a consequence of growing polarisation. This is achieved through an analysis of middle-class gated communities (GCs) which provide tangible examples of the role of fear and distrust in the shaping of modern socio-spatial relations. Reflection upon the proliferation and normalisation of middle-class GCs in Mexico can provide researchers and policymakers in other countries with hints on the possible challenges to face under the current global atmosphere of fear and distrust. The widely spread far-right movements and anti-immigrant groups, which are present in Europe and North America, are threatening principles of freedom, diversity, inclusion, multiculturalism, and sustainability. The article is organised into four sections. The first provides background to the research. Thereafter, a brief literature about gated communities and their development in Mexico is given. This is followed by a broad analysis of the role of macro-level policies and their impact on everyday lives using a middle-class gated community in Mexico as case study. In addition, a discussion about the contradictions, risks and challenges of the normalisation of these exclusionary places and practices is presented. Finally, the conclusion addresses possible opportunities to build bridges in a time of walls, considering the findings in the case study *Lomas de Angelópolis*.

2. Research Background

This article is partially based on the findings of a four-year doctoral project conducted between 2013 and 2016 that focused on the proliferation of middle-class gated communities (GCs) in Mexico from a practice perspective (Morales, 2016). However, the discussion in this paper goes beyond the aims of the thesis, in that it focuses on the risks and challenges of these exclusionary places and practices in a global context of polarisation, particularly since 2016. The case study of *Lomas de Angelópolis*, which was used for the cited thesis, is a large-scale suburban GC in the Metropolitan Area of Puebla, the fourth largest in Mexico. The case is not only a tangible example of an extreme case of a spatially and socially fragmented urban structure, but also illustrates the role of financial interests and global forces' impact on national policies, as well as how these shape social practices.

The research conducted between 2013 and 2016 took an interpretive approach and used qualitative methods because I had particular interest in a practice analysis approach of gated communities using an in-depth single case study. The case *Lomas de Angelópolis* in Puebla, Mexico, with over 21,000 housing units, allowed the identification and analysis of the policies, practices, and meanings in the process of 'gating up'. The fieldwork was done mostly through observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews of all those involved, such as developers, public officials, policymakers, architects, home cleaners, amongst many others (Morales, 2016, pp.89-96).

The observation exercises were conducted in four stages throughout the three-year period (2013-2016) and the 39 interviews that were undertaken were organised into five categories: residents and potential residents; government officials and policymakers; developers, constructors and financial enablers; NGOs, experts and academics; and outsiders and neighbours. The observational exercises and interviews not only provided a wide range of ideas about security, housing needs, and the justification for fences and gates, but also showed two underlying drivers: aspirations and anxieties were fundamental in the growing success of GCs for middle-income groups. The interviews also provided many examples of the connections between these enclaves and macro-economic and political policies, and how these have impacted everyday lives, attitudes, and meanings. Some of the findings from the thesis indicated that whilst residents did not aim to segregate themselves, GCs offered certain advantages such as the accountability and protection of patrimony that open-street neighbourhoods run by public authorities lacked.

During the research, most interviewees that I spoke with considered that they had encountered 'legitimate' experiences with crime and violence that justified their decisions to move into or develop fortified enclaves. After the 2016 United States presidential election and the anti-Mexican rhetoric of President Trump and his pledge to build the southern wall, I went back to the gated community *Lomas de Angelópolis* because I wanted to talk to the interviewees and see if the views of residents to fences and walls had changed. Between January and March 2017, I was able to conduct short semi-structured interviews with seven of the 16 residents whom I had previously interviewed. In addition, I asked the same questions to other nine residents who had not taken part in the original research. I found that, although the arguments for gating up were different, ranging from family convenience, investment opportunities, and security concerns, all the interviewees justified their need for walls and fences, while emphatically condemning Trump's plans to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico and the imposition of policies that would damage Mexicans on both sides of the border. I found the responses revealing because they showed that residents did not perceive the contradictions between their discourses and actions living inside a GC. In 2018, I conducted some further research about 'life on the other side of the wall' with a particular focus on the precarious conditions of cleaning and construction staff trying to get to work inside the GC every day from surrounding informal settlements and old towns. I found that residents did not know much about the living conditions of their workers and their everyday struggles.

3. Gated Communities... A tangible Expression of a Fragmented Society

Gated communities (GCs) have been discussed in academic literature from different perspectives since the late 1990s particularly in the United States of America and a few Latin American cases (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Marcuse, 1997; Davis, 1998; Caldeira, 2000; Low, 2001). The earliest literature focused on prestige, lifestyles, and socio-spatial segregation in exclusive fortified enclaves or 'citadels' for affluent groups (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Marcuse, 1997). However, since the early 2000s, the discussion has extended to different socioeconomic groups all over the world. According to Fainstein (2010, p.81), housing provision policies should consider the "values of diversity, democracy, and equity"; however, residents in gated communities defined by privilege and exclusion might not desire such values. Marcuse and Van Kempen (2002) consider that homogeneity at the micro-level in certain enclaves contributes to diversity at a metropolitan level, but the case analysed in Puebla Mexico shows that gated communities aimed at different socioeconomic groups did not contribute to making cities more diverse, but that they resulted in more fragmented cities.

The debate about fortification and exclusion has transcended the residential realm of physical barriers, and in so doing has incorporated discussion of more complex territorial challenges including governance, management, equity, and social cohesion amongst others (Blandy and Lister, 2005; Atkinson, 2006; Fainstein,

2010; McKenzie, 2011). The building of walls, according to Marcuse and Van Kempen (2002, p.15) “to create or enforce divisions may be as much of a reflection of the instability of underlying relationships of the hardness of the divisions within them”. Gated communities, therefore, are not only spatially segregated urban spaces, but also a tangible expression of privilege, power divisions, and political and economic interests. The state can play a regulatory role or it can respond to the desires of the most powerful groups; unfortunately in Mexico, since the 2000s, real estate interests have been more powerful than official planning objectives.

In Mexico, GCs and privately-developed planned communities are not new; there are examples of their existence for high-income groups since the beginning of the twentieth century (García-Peralta and Hofer, 2006; Giglia, 2008; Scheinbaum, 2010). However, in recent decades, these residential fortified enclaves have become more common in Mexican metropolitan areas (Cabrales-Barajas and Canosa-Zamora, 2001). In my research, I focused on middle-class gated communities for two reasons. First, because most Latin American literature about socio-spatial segregation focuses on the poorest and most vulnerable social groups. Secondly, it was because of the role that this socio-economic group played during the recent debt-fuelled housing production boom and the privatisation of urban development (Vidal, Marshall and Correa, 2011) as well as the vulnerability that comes with extreme debt and the weakening of the state’s role in housing production in a context of political and economic uncertainty (López-Calva and Ortiz-Juárez, 2013).

A large majority of the literature about GCs in the late 1990s focused on physical borders and socio-spatial segregation in the global north. In recent years, there has been an increase in literature about these enclaves in Latin America, introducing new elements of analysis from a global south perspective. Since Caldeira’s (2000) ‘City of Walls’ that introduced intangible components to the development of these exclusionary enclaves such as ‘talk of crime’, numerous authors have provided different approaches to the analysis of GCs. For instance, Borsdorf and Hidalgo (2010) proposed typologies of Latin American GCs depending on size and structure that went from ‘urban gated communities’, to ‘suburban gated communities’, and ‘megaprojects’. Roitman, Webster and Landman (2010) proposed a methodological framework that considered three specific themes: ‘social fragmentation, spatial fragmentation, and institutional fragmentation’. For this research, literature was organised into five categories:

- *Peace of Mind and Security.* One of the main ideas around gated communities is a search for security or at least the perception of security. In recent years, some authors have questioned whether these spaces are actually more secure than traditional open street neighbourhoods (Atkinson and Smith, 2012; Cséfalvay and Webster, 2012); others consider that these spaces respond more to fear of crime than to actual crime (Caldeira, 2000; Coy and Pöhler, 2002; Addington and Renisson; 2013). In Mexico, some authors have even argued that GCs are not significantly safer than traditional neighbourhoods (Vilalta, 2011).
- *Status and Prestige.* Some authors consider the main drivers of GCs to be status and prestige; people trying to improve their position upon the social mobility ladder may consider that living in a gated community provides a sense of distinction or exclusivity (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Giglia, 2008). Cséfalvay (2011) argues that security measures implemented “express prestige rather than prevent crime” (2011, p.751). These exclusive ‘communities’ are meant to group people with similar ‘tastes’ and interests (Manzi and Smith-Bowers, 2005).
- *Lifestyle and Quality of Life.* Unlike the previous category where the search for a community is based on exclusivity, in this case it is based on common interests. It follows that they may be linked to the presence of certain special facilities for sports, leisure, or social life (Horta-Duarte, 2012). Quality of life, in that sense, comes with the possibility that GCs provide a way by which to avoid the inconveniences of outside life (Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007).
- *Withdrawal from the State.* Some authors focus on the presence of homeowners’ associations which function as a sort of ‘private government’ in master-planned communities and assume some of the roles of the state. The concerns are not only in the privatisation of public functions (Janoshka, 2002) but on the continuing financial and organisational viability of these enclaves (McKenzie, 2011). These private administrations can result in serious governance problems in the long term because they depend on the market rather than a vision of the city (Marcuse and Van Kempen, 2000).
- *Privatisation of Public Space.* In Latin American academic literature, there is growing concern about the proliferation of GCs because they are seen as an example of the privatisation of public space; some authors argue that streets are fundamental spaces for public life (Borja and Muxi, 2003). GCs, in that sense, fracture urban structures leaving the most vulnerable outside (Giglia, 2008). The growing tendency to exchange traditional public spaces for modern exclusionary places limits the possibility of ‘social space’ and contributes to the differentiation of social classes (Segovia, 2007).

Discussion about gated communities has evolved since the 1990s, and every year there is more empirical evidence from different contexts. The use of case studies is helpful to identify the similarities and differences between fortified places in a global context with regard to both local implications and repercussions.

4. From Macro-Level Economic Policies to Micro-Level Housing Practices: Middle Class Gated Communities in Mexico

Gated communities are a global phenomenon. Though their emergence and proliferation respond to different local conditions, they are also part of a growing transnational movement of capital, free-market ideas, and practices. Some global ideas that are usually seen as 'neoliberal', have become particularly influential in urban development, such as "general disinvestment in cities by federal governments", which has forced "city governments and public authorities to borrow more in order to provide the same basic services" (Mitchell and Beckett, 2008, p.78). These limitations have driven local authorities to rely on loans and increase their debt or transfer the burden of investment in infrastructure and service provision to others. Mitchell and Beckett (2008, p.76) argue that neoliberalism is not only about market liberalisation but that states also play a very important role: states are active "in the processes, both through withdrawing the social provisions of an earlier, Keynesian or 'welfarist' moment, as well as through the vigorous creation of new conditions of privatisation and deregulation through which markets expand".

Considering such complex connections between global economic forces and local everyday practices, I used Shove, Patzar and Watson's (2012) three basic elements of practice, 'competences, meanings, and materials', for this research to analyse the 'relations and connections' between policies and practices that have contributed to the proliferation of GCs (such as the deregulation of planning, and the financialisation of housing). This practice-based approach allowed analysis of structural conditions that facilitate certain policies and practices without considering the 'meanings' and cognitive-affective dispositions that make residents, public officials, and developers justify these fortified enclaves. The work of Shove, Patzar and Watson (2012) was useful to connect tangible and intangible elements to the analysis of GCs.

Walls and barriers are not only 'materials' but also a representation of the aspirations and anxieties of populations living under social, economic, and political uncertainties. Through this practice-based analysis considering competences, meanings and materials, I argue that the proliferation of middle-class gated communities is not a mere matter of choice of individual families self-segregating, but the result of complex combination of policies and practices, where municipalities, developers, and residents find more incentives to build, manage, and live in this sort of development than in traditional open street neighbourhoods. In that sense, the decision to move to a GC is not a simple aspirational trend through which to find status, prestige and security, or a real estate marketing tool. The creation and proliferation of GCs is also linked to existing facilitating forces and institutional conditions, characterised by social inequality, the withdrawal from the state, a growing power of financial institutions, and a genuine response to self-protect from growing crime and violence.

After the institutionalisation of urban planning and housing in the 1970s, Mexico's political and economic policies drifted in the late 1980s and early 1990s towards the privatisation of housing and urban development (Zanetta, 2004; Monkonnen, 2012). This coincided with more tangible spatial segregation in cities and clearer socio-economic distinctions characterised by new consumption patterns and access to new commodities (Walker, 2013). The most important cities in Mexico, such as Mexico City, Guadalajara and Puebla, have distinctive examples of what Blakely and Snyder (1997) call 'lifestyle communities' or GCs for the affluent population which have been studied by several authors (Cabrales-Barajas and Canosa-Zamora, 2001; Rodríguez-Chumillas and Mollá Ruiz-Gómez, 2003; Scheinbaum, 2010). This article, on the other hand, focuses on the less-studied middle-class GCs, which can be better understood through the analysis of macro-level policies, such as 'financialisation' and 'transnational urbanism'. These two elements of analysis show how Mexican real estate market has boomed in the recent decades because it is seen as a rapid way for accumulation of capital, with the participation of financial institutions, national and foreign private capital, and standardised ideas of housing and urbanism supported by transnational actors (Parnreiter, 2016).

In the early 1990s, as part of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), there were important changes in Mexican economic, political, housing, and planning policies (Zanetta, 2004; Moreno-Brid, Pérez-Caldente and Ruíz-Nápoles, 2005; Vidal, Marshall and Correa, 2011). Since the early 2000s, financial institutions and government agencies have promoted strategies for Mexicans to reach middle-class status through home and car ownership. The middle classes, which had suffered considerably in the 1980's economic crises, acquired larger debts in recent years to maintain their middle-class status (De la Calle and Rubio, 2012; Walker, 2013). The market-driven economy has incentivised privately run services to cover all the basic needs. According to the National Survey of Household Income and Expenditure 2016, the average Mexican family spends around 44 percent of their income on health, transport, housing, and education (INEGI, 2016). Developers of GCs have targeted middle-class families, because of their supposedly stable incomes, and their ability to acquire mortgages. They have also been targeted because of the growing aspirations and anxieties that have arisen under the current social, economic, and political context.

As a consequence of the recent policy changes, middle-class GCs proliferated in Mexican metropolitan areas because private developers were able to acquire cheaper land, local governments allowed new urbanisation projects with few planning restrictions, and the national housing policy privileged private investment and the participation of financial institutions. These facilitating strategies were aimed not only at developers but also individual families, because financial institutions developed a series of new and diversified mortgage options that strengthened an already debt-driven economy. Due to these structural conditions, in my doctoral thesis (Morales, 2016), I proposed that discussion about gated communities should not only focus on the gates and fences but go beyond the physical fortified space and focus on gatedness - a concept that helps with understanding the connections that exist between these material spaces, and policies, practices, and meanings.

Socio-spatial segregation is not new in Mexico; it can be traced back to pre-Hispanic times and the Spanish viceroyalty (Scheinbaum, 2010). During the period of Spanish rule, the territory had a clear socially segregated structure. Nonetheless, for centuries, there were some shared spaces; places where different social groups could meet such as churches, parks, promenades, green areas, and streets. The privatisation of public space is one of the most important current discussions in Latin America because socio-spatial segregation is becoming more tangible and making social inequalities more visible. GCs have provided an opportunity for real estate investment, securitised environments, isolation from the outside inconveniences, and in some cases, municipal disengagement from the provision of some public services.

As previously stated, financialisation plays an important role in urban development in modern global cities. In Mexico, state-run institutions such as the Institute of the National Fund for Workers' Housing (INFONAVIT) have become 'enablers', instead of producing social housing, they are now financial institutions that support housing production by private developers. This urban development and housing production model has brought serious problems because it does not consider transport, infrastructure, security, and the provision of public services and public facilities (Eibenschutz-Hartman and Goya-Escobedo, 2006). The combination of financial incentives to developers and buyers, and chaotic suburban sprawl created by the national social housing policy offered fertile ground for the creation of middle- and high-income GCs. Isolation from the city and the inconveniences of surrounding new social housing developments enabled new residential enclaves that privileged the use of the private automobile and the securitisation of space (González-Arellano and Larralde-Corona, 2019). Municipalities also incentivised this sort of development through ad-hoc planning regulation or de-regulation, so that private developers covered infrastructure and urbanisation costs.

The increase in house production after 2010 indicates how profitable it became, with the main housing development companies becoming listed within the Mexican stock market. The economically-focused housing provision strategy was far from the original constitutional aim of providing 'adequate and dignified housing for all' (Constitution, 1917, Art.4). The economic forces and stakes are so high that they can be seen as a form of 'transnational spatial governance' in a borderless world (Healey, 2013), where geographic boundaries are less important than economic flows. The physical fortification of houses, neighbourhoods, cities and even countries are as much as a result of increased fear and security concerns, as they are global financial market outcomes.

Transnational planning ideas can also have positive impacts; there have been important efforts in recent years to improve public transport, the quality of public spaces, and provide better housing solutions. However, these initiatives have only continued where they have been seen as economically viable, regardless of whether they were socially pertinent. Mexico has a relatively young planning system; it was in the mid-1970s that planning became institutionalised. However, in a very short time, planning institutions lost their capacity to respond to common good interests, and although on paper it continues to privilege the improvement of the quality of life and adequate land management, the physical outcomes do not match the aims of planning regulations but rather the written and unwritten rules of supranational markets. The new urban model raises governance concerns, not only because of the disassociation of local governments with the population of certain sections of municipal territories such as GCs (Eibeschutz-Hartman and Goya-Escobedo, 2006) but also because of the disappearance of shared spaces.

The transnational planning influence we are observing in Mexico is not about spatial configurations, but the construction of policies built on global economic interests and meanings. Healey (2013, p.1511) provides conceptual and methodological tools “for the critical analysis of transnational flows of planning ideas and practices”; the author points out that the analysis should focus on the flows, rather than the origin of the ideas. In that sense, Mexican housing policies since the 1990s have been closely linked to the recommendations of the World Bank with regard to how to enable housing markets to work. However, as Zanetta (2004) points out, the Mexican government chose to ignore those parts of the policy recommendations that were inconvenient for economic growth purposes, such as looking after the most vulnerable segments of the population. As a result, the impacts of global economic interests in urban development were even higher, because corruption and political aims, disregarded public interest. Since the implementation of policies of deregulation, privatisation, and commercial liberalisation amongst others which are widely accepted by Washington based global financial institutions (Williamson, 1990), Mexico has become a debt-driven economy with sprawling cities and possesses a middle-class which is burdened by private automobile dependence, mortgages and consumer debt, and high-cost private services. Macro-policies are affecting everyday lives in individual households and making families more vulnerable in the process.

The issue with the proliferation of gated communities is that once the city only works in fractions it is very hard to make it work as one piece; urban design is used for marketing purposes instead of making more liveable inclusive cities.

For instance, developers of GCs are using New Urbanism principles and Creative Class ideas to boost small businesses to make their planned communities more attractive and therefore more profitable. That is why it was important in this research to look not only at the policies and the practices, but also the ideas, the meanings and the perceptions in the process of gating up (Wagenaar, 2011; Shove, Patzar and Watson, 2012) and how mentalities become institutionalised into practices (Healey, 2013). Transnational ideas have not only influenced policies to boost economic growth and benefit financial interests, GCs are also spaces of metaphors, perceptions, and avoidance. In the following paragraphs, I will use the case study of *Lomas de Angelópolis* in Puebla to illustrate some of the connections mentioned.

5. Lomas de Angelópolis in Puebla, Mexico: A Global Middle-Class Gated Community with Local Implications

Lomas de Angelópolis is a large-scale gated community in the metropolitan area of Puebla, the fourth most important city in Mexico. It is one of the largest gated communities in the country, with over 21,000 housing units organised in small clusters (inner GCs). The original design of the gated community targeted high middle-income families, but the development was so successful that, in only a decade, it increased its size from around 100 ha to 700 ha. As the project became more profitable, it evolved from a simple residential area to a fortified city with its own city centre, schools, universities, hotels, and offices.

My first observation exercises in this GC were conducted in 2009, before starting my doctoral studies, when most of the clusters were not fully inhabited and there were only single-family housing units. Back then,

residents complained about the lack of shops and restaurants, as well as the distance to the city. By the time I finished my doctoral research in 2016, the GC had become a new centrality and most of the leisure, recreation and commercial activities in the metropolitan area are now in Sonata, the commercial district inside the compound.

5.1. Background Information About GCs and the Metropolitan Area of Puebla

The financial crises of the 1980s affected the ability of the middle-classes to obtain housing financing. However, after the changes in land tenure that liberated massive extensions of communal agriculture land (*ejidos*) to urbanisation, and the market-enabling strategies of the early 1990s, Puebla's metropolitan area experienced a boom in real estate that became even stronger after the 2000s due to financialisation.

The first GCs in Puebla were aimed at elite groups with privileged use of urban space. The GCs built between the late 1980s and the early 1990s ranged from 50 to 400 plots to develop (Rodríguez-Chumilla and Mollá Ruiz-Gómez, 2003, p.4). However, the scale and market have diversified since the 2000s, particularly in the municipalities of San Pedro Cholula and San Andrés Cholula. The case study *Lomas de Angelópolis* is located in the vicinity of a land reserve considered in the Regional Development Programme Angelópolis in 1993, developed by the global consultancy firm McKinsey just before NAFTA came into effect, with clear aims of global competitiveness and attracting national and foreign investment (Jones and Moreno-Carranco, 2007; Cabrera-Becerra and Guerrero-Bazán, 2008). The 1993 programme included guidelines for the land reserve Atlixcáyotl, but the rest of the land had very few planning restrictions, which enabled the developers to define their own planning regulations.

According to Milián-Ávila and Guenet (2015, p.184), the chaotic expansion and "socially segregative urbanisation" that led to the proliferation of GCs in Puebla was enabled by the "absence of legislation and clear institutional regulations". In a census conducted between 2000 and 2001 they found 912 gated communities in Puebla and its fringes (Milián-Ávila and Guenet, 2006). These authors consider that some of their main concerns about these enclaves and the private nature of their investment is that neighbouring settlements are having difficulties to access basic services and there is constant congestion due to the reliance on primary roadways (Milián-Ávila and Guenet, 2015). The original regional urban programme in 1993 considered a large section of social housing, but as land value increased, the programme was modified to fit the market's need for luxury commercial areas and elite housing developments (Cabrera-Becerra and Guerrero-Bazán, 2008). The metropolitan area of Puebla includes several municipalities, which make it difficult to take shared planning decisions. Depending on the location, GCs are aimed at diverse socio-economic groups. *Lomas de Angelópolis* is the largest of all, and it incorporates all segments of the middle-classes.

5.2. Normalisation of Middle-Class Gated Communities in a Polarised Environment

One of the main findings of the interviews undertaken for the research conducted between 2013 and 2016 (Morales, 2016) was that residents, developers and even public officials justified the proliferation and normalisation of middle-class GCs in Mexico due to issues of crime and violence. However, in the same interviews, when interviewees were asked about the process of 'gating up' it became clear that there was a strong connection between this supposedly spontaneous flourishing or fortified spaces and transnational planning ideas and economic interests.

Lomas de Angelópolis is such a large residential development that it extends through different localities and municipalities. Residents who were interviewed have become so used to life inside the gated community and the presence of private administrators that take care of their everyday problems, that some of them were not even aware of the name of the municipality in which their house is located before they moved in. This is an example of the disengagement of residents and local governments, and how private actors are assuming functions that were previously covered by the state.

The case study was useful in identifying connections between policies and practices and how these intertwine with people's aspirations and anxieties. Since the first interviews with residents, I realised that the decision to

move into a GC was not only an aspirational choice, but a decision based on real security concerns, a response to financial incentives, or a direct response to limited capacity from municipal governments. Two interviewees decided to move into the GC after their houses or cars were burgled in their previous neighbourhood. One of the interviewees decided to move into the GC after finding that it was much easier and faster to obtain a mortgage for a new house there than it was to obtain a credit to self-construct a dream family house somewhere else. Three interviewees implied that they were somehow 'forced' out of their previous neighbourhoods due to municipal abandonment; these residents considered their neighbourhoods to have been more dangerous because so many people were moving out, and that fixing a pothole or a broken lightbulb in a streetlamp could take years. These interviewees were more satisfied with private administrators looking after their basic needs even if it meant permanent maintenance costs.

The interviews also showed how aspirations and anxieties play an important role in the decision-making process of moving into a gated community, and how these feelings continued even after they moved into the GC. Around the time that the GC was built, conflicts between drug cartels and organised crime became more visible, and stories about kidnappings, burglaries and extortions became more common. The 'talk of crime', as Caldeira (2000) calls it, has become common in coffee shop small talk, but its impact has become exponential because of social media, particularly Whatsapp groups where dramatic warnings are shared. Fearmongering is affecting daily patterns of everyday lives and choices. Residents interviewed shared significant concerns about life in the city and the potential threats that made them feel safer inside the GC.

The normalisation of these enclaves in places such as Puebla, Mexico can be understood through the examples mentioned previously. They emerged as part of a macro-economic strategy that allowed the privatisation of housing production and urban development. Financial institutions made it easier for families to obtain mortgages for newly built houses in this debt-driven economy. Federal governments left municipal governments with limited resources to provide basic public services, which led to the abandonment of consolidated neighbourhoods and incentives for privately-led planned neighbourhoods willing to assume some of the costs and responsibilities. Because of the growing inequalities derived from the economic model and the war on drugs, there has been an increase in crime and violence. The national financial housing strategy promoted disconnected sprawling territories leaving undefended empty available land for development, a perfect excuse for gating up. And finally, GCs and their private administrators represent accountability and reliability for a group of people who have lost their trust in local authorities (Janoshka, 2002; Zanetta, 2004; Moreno-Brid et al., 2005; Eibenschutz-Hartman and Goya-Escobedo, 2006; De la Calle et al., 2012; Monkkonen, 2012).

One interesting issue found during my doctoral research, that I decided to analyse from a different perspective in this article, is what happens with those who work inside the gated communities and live on 'the other side of the wall'. I found that most of these workers had to use informal access and cross pedestrian bridges over polluted waters. I also walked for kilometres and identified different options of illegal collective transport. However, when I asked my interviewees if they knew how their house cleaners, gardeners, and construction workers arrived, most of them had no idea of what they go through. The policies and the practices helped create a physical fortress that isolates residents from the outside world but also the possibility to empathise more with that external reality.

6. Contradictions, Risks, and Challenges of the Normalisation of Exclusionary Practices

Walls and fences are tools to isolate from surrounding hostile conditions. However, under the current global context of polarisation, it is essential to talk about the contradictions, risks, and challenges of these exclusionary practices. There are conflicting and contradictory positions around physical barriers, and President Trump's proposed wall upon the Mexican northern border at a time when gated communities have become normalised in certain sectors in Mexican society raises several questions. For this article, I did seven follow-up interviews with residents whom I had met during my doctoral research, and I interviewed nine new interviewees because I wanted to learn about their perceptions about walls and exclusionary practices. The responses were similar in all 16 interviews: although some of the interviewees would like to live in a more open type of city, they

considered it acceptable and justifiable to protect their property and families using fences, gates, CCTV systems and private security. However, the same people condemned Trump's proposed border wall when asked about it. Four of the interviewees provided a comprehensive response as to why the wall would stop illegal immigration and would have very high costs and environmental impacts in the long-term. The rest of the interviewees focused on the discriminatory nature of the wall against Mexicans, but never mentioned about discriminatory practices in Mexico.

The contradictions within these residents' responses to walls and barriers, can be linked to the normalisation of their own exclusionary practices since they moved inside the GC. One of the risks of normalisation of GCs is that people may become numb and get used to socially and spatially segregating others who are different. The marketing discourse of the case study analysis is that this gated community allows you to live 'life like it should be', in a planned community with all the amenities, services, and activities you need. However, even if it is a community, the discourses and practices are based on individual benefit rather than the common good.

The normalisation of armed privatised security personnel is an example of the same contradictions. Mexican gated communities are filled with armed private security guards; inside these premises it is seen as acceptable. However, every other person with guns outside the gates is seen as a threat. In Mexico, gated communities have become so normalised for middle-income groups, particularly in suburban areas, that it would seem that this is the only valid way to accomplish the goals of habitability, security, quality urban spaces, and community life. For the residents and potential buyers in the case study analysed, security or at least the 'feeling of security' seemed to be one of the main drivers. A fear-driven urban development is hard to modify because it would require changing people's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. One of the interviewees mentioned the advantages of open, diverse and inclusive communities, but his wife had lived through a traumatic experience when their house was burgled, and that had changed their position on GCs completely.

During my fieldwork in 2013, I discovered that most of my interviewees had shared a traumatic experience that justified their voluntary displacement into a GC. Most of the stories happened to the residents I interviewed, but some others were just stories that they had heard from someone else. All of my interviewees considered that their quality of life was better than before, so they did not even consider the possibility of going back to a traditional open-street neighbourhood. This is problematic because the normalisation of gated communities is accompanied by a belief that municipal authorities would never be able to provide the same certainties and services in traditional neighbourhoods. Distrust in local authorities is connected to corruption. According to the Latinobarómetro Report in 2017, 61 percent of Mexicans consider that government officials are corrupt and only 16 percent of Mexicans trust the government in general (Latinobarómetro and CAF, 2017). Distrust in local authorities is also a response to their limited capacity to provide basic public services, security and infrastructure.

The same Latinobarómetro Report shows that interpersonal trust has gone down in recent years in all of Latin America; only 18 percent of Mexicans trust other people (Latinobarómetro and CAF, 2017). Fear-driven urban developments produce highly segregated spaces, but anxieties do not disappear. In a recent Smart City exhibition in Puebla, a large majority of the companies exhibiting their products were surveillance and security systems. According to one of the interviewees, in Lomas de Angelópolis some private administrators in a few clusters have located CCTV systems in every street and implemented rules that force every visitor to open their car's boot and every house cleaner or gardener to show their bags on their way out. The fences and the gates are not enough to keep people safe or make them feel completely safe.

The risks and challenges of modern Mexican gated communities are not just in the shape of walls and fences but the inequality and physicality of segregation. It is not only the increasing gap between the rich and the rest of the population, but also the super-stratification of middle to lower-income groups. GCs, in that sense, should be seen as a dangerous urbanisation model in terms of governance. In the case of Mexico, we can see how crises and political uncertainty are shaping and reshaping the urban structure. The case study I analysed in Puebla can be seen as an extreme case because of its large scale and multi-clustered structure (more than 21,000 houses located in stratified mini-gated communities). The research showed that residents felt judged by outsiders and considered that they had valid reasons to live in a GC and these had nothing to do with the exclusiveness, status, and prestige drivers usually mentioned in literature. There were three main issues why these residents considered that gated communities are not only desirable but necessary:

- Municipal authorities are unable to respond to their needs and they feel that private administrations are more reliable and provide better services.
- Their family's safety is more important than anything else, and if it takes a wall, a fence, a security guard, a camera and an alarm, these residents will not hesitate to pay for all them because it provides them peace of mind.
- The ideal of a shared space for all sounds good, but they would rather live amongst 'people like them'. The residents I interviewed do not consider themselves racist or discriminatory but defend their right to associate and spend time with people with the same interests and tastes.

From a policy perspective, it becomes very hard to promote inclusive urban environments, because the meanings attached to this model of safe urbanism is so strong. The 'new normal' makes the traditional city undesirable because it does not offer the same elements of beauty, security, reliability, and infrastructure. The risks and challenges of these urban segregated structures are that once they become normal, people become numb and stop realising the conditions of disconnection and isolation. Gatedness, or the need to live protected by gates, is becoming so desirable that it is leaving the residential areas and reaching public spaces, universities, and public facilities. In Puebla, even bike lanes and public parks are being gated, because people feel safer. Public and private universities are incorporating more access control strategies and increasing their security budgets to fulfil their students' expectations. The problem with this normalisation is that it makes it more difficult to promote more inclusive policies and practices.

In recent years, scholars and planners in Puebla have proposed the prohibition of GCs and other exclusionary urban practices. However, these ideas face strong opposition because most people in Puebla value the presence of 24-hour security personnel or safe and closed environments. During 2017, I compared advertisements for new houses with similar sizes and designs; the prices varied not as a consequence of their location or the presence of schools and public spaces nearby, but according to the type of neighbourhood (gated or non-gated) that they were located within. With this in mind, I consider that in order to change policies and practices we should understand meanings before designing new regulations and planning instruments. The research in Puebla shows that as long as people attach positive meanings to these exclusionary urban spaces, they will not support any project that opposes them; even when projects do not comply to federal planning or environmental laws. The clearest example of this was the construction of the International Baroque Museum designed by the famous architect Toyo Ito. It was more important to have an outstanding architectural project from a famous architect than to protect one of the few open large-scale green areas left in the metropolitan area.

With this research, I found that the proliferation of gated communities has become so normalised in Puebla that there is not even official data about them. The existing numbers have been provided by academic research, but official sources such as Cadastre, the Urban Development and Sustainability Secretary, or the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) have no official registry of sizes, locations, the presence of private administrations, the presence of private security personnel, or homeowners' associations. In Puebla, there are no laws or regulations that consider the interrelation of gated communities and their surroundings.

7. Conclusion: Building Bridges in a Time of Walls

The current global context of polarisation, and the contradictions, tensions, risks, and challenges of exclusionary places, make it difficult to think about alternatives to isolation and securitisation. The analysis of an extreme case of gatedness such as *Lomas de Angelópolis* in Puebla, Mexico provide some clues to planners and policymakers to deal with this complex urban phenomenon that has been shaped by global economic forces and micro-level practices. The extreme case of social inequality and distrust in institutions in Mexico should act as a warning for other regions of the world such as the European Union where principles of diversity, inclusiveness, and multiculturalism are under threat because of the fears and security concerns of the few.

Considering the particular case study of *Lomas de Angelópolis in Puebla*, some of the main risks and challenges of exclusionary places, as well as possible opportunities to address these issues can be summarised thus:

- In Mexico, there is a concurrency principle in urban development control laws. There is a federal framework and every state and municipality has its own specific legislation. After the 2018 presidential transition, Mexican institutions and policies are facing the possibility of dramatic changes. It is too early to know what the outcome of this transition will be, but in terms of policymaking, the new national housing policy is based on human rights, and there is a clear intention to not only contain sprawling metropolitan areas but also to regulate large-scale housing developments to mitigate, amongst other things, the negative impacts of gated communities.
- The isolation on residents inside gated communities such as *Lomas de Angelópolis*, according to the interviews conducted, creates a sort of numbing effect that makes residents unable to pay attention or empathise with others outside. The risks and challenges of this numbing effect are that residents inside the GC depend on economic, political, and social stability to maintain themselves in a manner that is disconnected and disengaged with the outside world. However, in the last couple of years, main roads have become saturated during the rush hour, there have been growing concerns about water supply, and burglars have found ways to enter the premises without being caught. These issues have made residents remember that there are municipal authorities, at least to complain about the lack of security. The opportunity in these cases is the recognition that to be able to fix those problems, there must be a will to compromise with surrounding neighbourhoods and find shared solutions.
- The case study shows how macro-economic interests have shaped thousands of lives. It is not only the important changes in land, planning, housing and financial policies that enabled the proliferation of GCs, but also the debilitation of the state that made these neighbourhoods more reliable than the traditional city. There can be no alternative to GCs until local authorities recover the confidence and trust of citizens. The opportunity to build bridges lies in fighting corruption and promoting permanent neighbourhood improvement programs.
- The case study also shows how the enabling strategies of the state have weakened planning laws and regulations, and citizens have lost their confidence in the planning system. To regain trust in the planning system, the benefits should be tangible, measurable, and easy to spot. Therefore, municipal governments should be able to improve public service provision, security, and infrastructure. There are creative planning instruments that are used in other Latin-American countries that might help municipalities to finance these basic needs.
- Fear-driven urbanisation strategies create unfinished safe spaces. Observation exercises in Puebla showed that even in the safest GC in the metropolitan area, residents, owners, authorities and developers will continue to invest in new security features. No matter how safe it actually is, fear and anxieties do not disappear. Local governments must provide not only adequate infrastructure and security personnel, but also identify the main issues that people fear the most. The current conditions of crime and violence make this issue one of the hardest to solve, but a better understanding of the underlying problem, might contribute to fighting them.

The case against these exclusionary places is embodied in what I call the 'traps of gatedness'. The first trap is the 'credit and debt trap' that is the result of a state-led policy promoting homeownership binding thousands of middle-income families to long-term debt. The second trap is 'the private government trap' because of the governance problems that come with a system that functions above the public interest. Finally, I consider the 'security and control trap' that is making people more vulnerable because of the extreme scrutiny and surveillance they are subject to.

The risks of the normalisation of these spaces, particularly under uncertain political and economic conditions is that it makes it seem as though there is no alternative. Prohibition, from a planning perspective would be counterproductive because residents would demand their right to live in a safe environment. The case study illustrates the need to promote planning strategies from the local level that understand people's aspirations and anxieties, without affecting other people's access to opportunities. The case shows that people are willing to follow rules and pay fees as long as they see that they are being looked after. Gated communities are often seen as the result of a failing planning system. But it is not necessarily failed planning. It is the combination of economic, social, and political interests that are connected to planning. Therefore, alternatives to building bridges in a time of walls and extreme polarisation cannot come only from regulation. Housing policies should consider not only their relationships with global markets and financial institutions, but also municipal capacity, governance strategies, and sustainability. The case study illustrates that the structural conditions of market-led housing policies made it easier to build and move into a gated community, but it also illustrates that practices are defined by meanings and perceptions. In that sense, local governments must pay more attention

to aspirations and anxieties of their population to anticipate and provide better and more inclusive urban solutions.

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