

> Simone Pekelsma

Looking beyond the gates

Urban life as the expression of multiple realities

> About the author

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It was a dark and stormy night. Trees were ferociously being swept from left to right, while raindrops beat relentlessly on our windscreen. The city was deserted. Not a soul seemed to be awake.

We arrived at the hospital, knowing that our lives would never be the same again...

My daughter was born two days after the attack on Charlie Hebdo. A few hours after her birth, while my mind was still in the parallel universe of giving new life, I switched on the TV in our warm hospital room. From my comfortable bed, I watched how fear, anger and insecurity invaded the streets of Paris and quickly ate away at the hearts of the city's inhabitants. My little baby girl looked calm and serene. She was fast asleep in her cot, unaware of everything that had happened only 600 kilometres away from us. I looked outside, beyond the imagined safety of the windows, into the still ongoing storm that seemed to reflect the turmoil I had witnessed on the news. I did not know how to feel. What new reality was waiting for us outside? How would I prepare my daughter for the world? And how would I enable my daughter to live in freedom, happiness and peace? I wanted to disappear, to hide in the safety of the walls surrounding me, keeping the harsh realities of the outside world at a distance.

The earth is fast and furious. We orbit the sun at a speed of 30 kilometres per second. But it's what's happening on the ground that increasingly

seems to be giving people the feeling they will be parachuted from the surface of our planet, into the unknown. Insecurity, confusion and doubt mark our daily thoughts and practices. Also, and maybe especially, in cities.

Ankara, Beirut, Istanbul, Paris... many of our cities have experienced tragedy recently. The way we should respond to all this turbulence is unclear though. We cry for security measures: more police, cameras, barbed wire and stricter rules. We urge for more respect by organising protests against each other. We call for participation by attacking others. We scream, we rage, we insult. And we hide, just like I did.

> Hiding in the city

As urban residents, we have successfully established many different ways of hiding. Looking away when a stranger glances in our direction, listening to music on crowded trains, sinking into our own thoughts in a busy supermarket, living in neighbourhoods that remind us of ourselves. Or literally gating ourselves away.

Gated living is a major trend in cities all around the globe. Starting its spread from the United States in the 1960s, the gated community has recently seen an upsurge in rapidly urbanising settings in Asia, Africa and Latin America, but also in Europe. Gated communities are not

the only form of gated living, though. We are witnessing a diversification of gating practices in our cities, with private communities, high-rise flats with concierge services and self-managed communes now forming popular options for a (more) gated existence. However, living behind gates is controversial too and gated communities form a highly politicised urban phenomenon, dominated largely by dystopian views (Pow 2015). In politics, media and academia alike, it is viewed largely in negative terms, with globalisation and neoliberalism as its main instigators and driving forces.

Contemporary gating practices in cities give many politicians and policy makers a pounding headache, even if they do clearly see the benefits of gating. On the one hand, housing projects that include some form of gating fulfil the growing demand of governments for increased resident participation and community development, while at the same time satisfying the increasing desire of residents to break away from governmental control, which is viewed with a sense of distrust in many countries. (WRR 2012; Edelman 2014). On the other hand, they promote exclusion, prohibiting non-residents from making use of their private services and facilities, and they put what is considered a public urban right into private hands. These contradictory considerations make gated living an intensely complex phenomenon to study or to decide and comment on. However, rather than acknowledging this complexity and multiplicity, the debate on gating is conducted in a singular, one-dimensional fashion.

> *The generalisation of gating*

“The ideal city is not one with gated communities, security cameras, a futuristic scene from Blade Runner, dark and dramatic, with profound unhappiness...we need to at least build a city where happiness is possible and where public space is really for everybody,” Joan Clos - UN-Habitat chief stated in one of his speeches. (The Guardian, 2 May 2014)

He is not the only one expressing deep concern over the spread of gated communities, or gating in general. The question is if it is valid, necessary or even desirable to reduce gated communities to a one-dimensional urban evil, the same way shopping malls are for example viewed as “the battleships of capitalism”, and as part of a “remorseless process of commodification that must end in a cultural meltdown.” (Amin & Thrift, p. 40) What do we win by reducing gated housing projects - or more generally gating practices - to such negative and dark stereotypes, besides instigating fear for this development? Can we think or talk about gated living without generalising it

to a Blade Runner type of urban development?

I believe that we can and that we should. First of all, because the dominant view on gated communities that characterises contemporary urban debates does not fit the multiple, diverse and flexible instances of gated communities visible in today's cities. We talk about ‘gated communities’ as if they are one and the same thing, but they exist in many different shapes, sizes and gradations, housing many different types of residents with an equally diverse range of lifestyles and preferences. Gated housing projects are not developed by one single authority, force or influence, but by flowing networks of people (including ourselves, potentially), objects and practices that are in continuous movement, and thus have the potential to create fresh outcomes. If we want to understand gated housing developments or the practice of urban gating at large, we must get a taste of this diversity, rather than base our views, policies and decisions on a gloomy idea of what we think gated living is like.

> *The realities of gated living*

For my PhD research on gated communities I spent the summer of 2015 living in a new gated residential project in Istanbul. My family and I rented a small apartment, through Airbnb, at Varyap Meridian, a popular mixed-used project consisting of apartments, leisure facilities, shops and offices. It was located in West Ataşehir, a celebrated new neighbourhood on the Asian side of the city that is to become Turkey's central financial district. The project has been awarded several architectural prizes, including the 2010 European Residential Property Award for ‘Best High-Rise Development’ and ‘Best Development’ in Turkey. Varyap Meridian consists of 1500 residential units (ranging from studios to luxurious penthouses), offices, a five-star hotel, conference facilities and underground parking for 2500 vehicles. Around 5000 people currently live on the premises of Varyap Meridian.

Having watched the grandiose commercials and viewed the glossy advertisements for the project, I expected to find a very closed-off and serene housing project inhabited by a peaceful collective of like-minded people trying to distance themselves from the city. At the end of my stay, I had to conclude that none of these expectations were met. Varyap Meridian was more like a modern hotel, built up of short-term stays and hectic relations between a colourful set of residents. People described their neighbours as highly educated and well-paid professionals; starters wanting to climb the socioeconomic ladder; Anatolian students with rich parents; professional athletes; serious criminals; middle-

class families; adulterous men and escort girls. Not exactly the standard image I had of gated community residents.

These residents were entangled in various internal and external networks including with all kinds of individuals, institutions and locations such as the project's real estate developer, local businesses, residents from neighbouring areas, shopping malls, restaurants, homes of friends, gyms and social media.

> *Moving beyond the gates*

Varyap Meridian clearly did not start or stop at the gate. The city found its way into the community, while the community left its markings on the city itself as well. Looking closely at the daily practices going on in and beyond the project, it became obvious how the city infiltrated the project: noise, dirt, politics, the fear of terrorist attacks, Roma children trying to climb the walls, removal trucks delivering the belongings of new residents or wanted and unwanted visitors using the swimming pool; the residents of Varyap Meridian seemed to be fully aware of the fact that their gates could not filter out all unwanted acts, individuals and behaviours. The people I met regularly even referred to criminal affairs, such as gambling, drug dealing and prostitution going on inside the project; activities that have reportedly also been flourishing in large-scale gated communities in India. (The Times of India, 19 January 2016).

At the same time, Varyap Meridian's residents - in all their diversity - are leaving a mark on the city of Istanbul too, for example, as consumers, players in local politics, as users of social media or as creators of images and ideas relating to the development of the city. In other words, Varyap Meridian is not an isolated, fixed living space, but a flexible and moving part of the city, that may not always remain the way it is today.

I do not mean that it is an ideal project that has a great influence on the city. It may indeed encourage exclusionary practices. It may have caused displacement and, indeed, criminal activities inside private walls are not very desirable either. However, these characteristics do not form an essential part of the project. Things might be different tomorrow. We should thus not essentialise the current reality of Varyap Meridian and freeze it for eternity. Varyap Meridian will change, depending on the direction in which Ataşehir, Istanbul, Turkey and the world will develop. And more importantly, this change will be subject to the shifts we will see in the networks of people, objects and practices that are currently shaping the project.

> *The desire for a good and fulfilling life*

Besides the fact that the tendency towards the generalisation and essentialisation of gated forms of living does not allow any space for the diverse realities and potential of cities, it also disqualifies large parts of the urban population as contributors to the improvement of cities. By referring to gated communities as potentially dark, dramatic and unhappy, Clos indirectly reduces the residents of such projects to selfish individuals who do not seem to be interested in creating better cities at all. Once again, gated communities may indeed have negative effects on cities, but these effects cannot be reduced to the people living in these kinds of projects, who are simply searching for happier and better lives. The search for happiness is a fundamental human condition, on which most - if not all - our decisions are based. People don't choose to live in gated communities because they hate everyone else. People don't move in to private communities because they want to turn their back on the city. They move in because they believe it will improve their lives. And because they are viewed as a solution to real urban issues.

"It is more comfortable and easier to undertake social activities here," a resident of Varyap Meridian explained to me. "In Istanbul, neighbourhood life does not really exist anymore, because everyone has stressful jobs. People are just too busy. Outside Varyap Meridian, life is also more complicated and distributed. You have to travel to do things and meet people, and travelling in Istanbul is difficult, because it's such a crowded city. Here I have a great variety of social facilities on-site, so I can meet a lot of people here."

> *Beyond the essentialised city*

For this particular resident - a middle-aged father and computer engineer - the gated community formed the perfect place to connect with people and be in touch with others. He did not describe his living environment as a place of isolation, but rather as a site of possible connections.

If he views it that way, why should we - politicians, academics, journalists and citizens alike, discard these kinds of more positive perspectives? Why should we turn gated living into a one-eyed-monster that is only creating disinterest and distance? After all, gated communities are not the real problem. Nor is gating. Yes, it can definitely have problematic effects, but the problem is not an essential part of the gate. If we view gating as a real and lived expression of present-day urban life - recognising its full range of experiences, touches and flavours - we may be able to analyse it more sensibly.

Gated living is only an example of how we are turning the multiple realities of urban form into a one-dimensional evil though. This applies to the city at large and all urban phenomena. Alternatively, treating the city as the result of the life that is happening inside (and outside) it, we may be able to see its multiple, and yes, potentially conflicting sides. We may see that the city is not black or white, but that there is a whole range of grey scales in between. We may become more sensitive to the views, acts and behaviours of people, even if we don't understand them or do not even agree with them.

Such a perspective should also allow us to address urban issues much more effectively and realistically. We would be able to move beyond our traditional viewpoints and approach the future of the city as a challenge that merits our unbiased, undivided and real attention.

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