Urban agoraphobia: the pursuit of security within confined community ties
Urban-ethnographic analysis on gated housing developments of Guadalajara, Mexico

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- **Definition of the problematics addressed by this dissertation**

There is consensus in current urban research around the growing impact of gated communities (GCs) in the contemporary city. Mostly defined as *hubs* that channel a diversity of issues –e.g. social, economic, political, cultural, environmental– of study, GCs may appear as relatively isolated, self-sufficient subterfuges of safety spread around the city, however, while the impact of a single case may have a limited effect, the bundle represented by the networks they create in regions like Latin America embodies a significant shift according to our previous urban concepts in terms of the changes they bring along. Taking this into account, the main approach of the dissertation circumscribes to the outcomes derived from those shifts by focusing on their *social* and *individual* drivers, specifically those that correspond to the *pursuit of safety* and *reassurance* through *community bonds* as their main trigger. Under this assumption, the exploration of the general research issue was shaped by the following three elements: a) a main *hypothesis,* which acts as the core of the research project, b) a group of *research questions* derived from that leading inquiry, c) a series of *objectives* that directly correspond to those questions.

While the main approach to define a general issue of study involved the evaluation of fear of crime as leading driver within the *social* and *individual* spheres, it is assumed that *global* and *state* level factors are also at stake. In this regard, the initial hypothesized premise claims that, while in earlier stages of development, the reproduction of the GC model in the Guadalajara Metropolitan Area (GMA) in México responded mainly to *dimensional, aspirational* and *locational* trends, driven accordingly at *global, state* and *individual* levels, the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of new patterns within an unprecedented context of national security crisis fuelled by the fruitless *war on drugs* strategy started in 2006, depicting a socioeconomic and locational diversification along the escalation in the demand of *security and community enforcement* related *drivers* (manuscript's *Figure 1-12*); factors which are mostly embedded in the *social* and *individual* scopes, where urban imaginaries appear to play a major role. This dissertation seeks to attain, thus, a deeper understanding of the interaction amongst these new drivers and trends from the perspective of their inhabitants, assuming that only by acknowledging this shift and recognizing its sources can GCs be understood in their proper, current dimension and the sought conditions that are emulated/simulated behind walls be achieved in the open context of less exclusive cities, where segregation patterns are not perceived as a natural shift of contemporary urban development.

- **Main hypothesis**

For decades, the GC offer by real estate developers has manufactured simulated, harmonic spaces around Mexican metropoles; usually emplaced in closeness to nature and providers of a privileged social status, they endow their inhabitants with a sense of security and community based on selfhood, protection and commodifying practices. These features have gradually turned them into the *star-product* of socioeconomic strata able to afford a life behind gates; furthermore, the bordering of these areas seems to have derived into a redirection of insecurity flows towards their edges, establishing in this manner *archipelagos* of apparent safety surrounded by the flows of risk of their open environment. However, parallel to the recent criminality outbreak in the country, a novel process of diversification that started to adequate this model to aspiring middle-class and social-interest housing sectors began to take place as well; the spread of social segregation has begun thus to involve a growing socioeconomic spectrum in what appears to be a failed emulation of the phenomenon pointing towards the abandonment and detriment of inner community ties which, paradoxically, derives in the creation of risk receptacles rather than the projected immune areas.

This research departs from the premise that this diversification is giving way to a new paradigm within housing development according to the flows of risk that seem to emanate from the open city. To support this, the typification of a functional dichotomy of closure that ranges between *repellence*, for the case of upper class GCs, and *continence*, for recent, diversified instances, is to be considered, without disregarding that neither of these approaches is considered valid to the actual counteraction of insecurity and the consequent fears associated with it. I consider that the evaluation and thorough understanding of communitarian dynamics and security perception that emerge inside GCs in regard to their immediate open environments represent key categories of analysis in search of demystifying the phenomenon and

lessening justification to its climax. Even considering these housing modalities as legitimate within current legislations and the real estate market, their actual contribution in the midst of insecure contexts demands further questioning and thorough, qualitative research approaches.

- ▪ *Main objectives and concerns leading the development of this dissertation*

The main aim of the research is to explain a current shift in housing development that appears to set the role of insecurity-related fear as a crucial driver beneath the socio-economic diversification of GCs in the GMA, drawing from the assumption that frightened citizens perceive in them stronger community bonds, hence, safer environments. From that perspective, GCs shall be regarded, along with their urban and social impacts, as either catalysts or repellents of those fears; to approach this conceptual dichotomy, the use of a qualitative, comparative study of sense of community and security perception is proposed, aided by the use of a *methodological triangulation* that draws upon qualitative and semi-qualitative instruments. In the direction of fulfilling the research towards this aim, a set of questions were established: *a)* How have GCs in the GMA evolved since their establishment until their current stage?, *b)* What factors, aside insecurity-derived fear, have influenced the boom and diversification of GCs during their latest stage?, *c)* How do sense of community and sense of security interrelate within GCs and in regard to their immediate surroundings?, *d)* In terms of sense of community and sense of security conception, what are the differences and which variables come into play between the open and confined case studies?

- ▪ *Relevant current research in the field & differentiated approach*

The scope of research topics triggered by GCs has extended their interest amongst urban researchers worldwide, witnessing a particular momentum in the production of publications. In broad terms, and after a thorough review, I argue that the perspectives under which these phenomena have been explored could be narrowed down to the following approaches attaining this research: *a)* analysis of public's attitudes towards GCs, *b)* property value, *c)* behaviour amongst residents, *d)* level of satisfaction, *e)* governance within GCs, *f)* control over planning and policies, *g)* resident's motivations, *h)* crime rates and security perception, *i)* the role of GCs as segregators, *j)* community perception.

Studies over *insecurity, crime-driven fear* and *community development* were also widely found throughout the available literature; however, a gap was identified in the studies that inquire the interrelations between these issues and the boom of GCs through the qualitative evaluation of residents' perspectives. Based on the bibliographical resources reviewed, an extensive list of concepts suggested by authors such as Ickx (2002), Cabrales (2002) and Hernandez (2007), who analyse the GC phenomenon from a local perspective; Borsdorf (2009), Hidalgo (2004), Svampa (2001), Giglia (2002), Janoschka (2003) and Caldeira (1997), who provide insight on GCs on a regional scope; Foucault (1975), Augé (1992), Amendola (2000), Fromm (1941), Robin (2003), Bauman (2008), Korstanje (2010), Giddens (1997) and Beck (1987), who define the theoretical foundations over core concepts like fear and risk in respect to contemporary society; and finally, Davis (1990), Amendola (2000), Soja (1995), Lynch (1985), Ellin (2003) and McKenzie (1994), who have provided insights on postmodern urbanism and its links to social phenomena involving fear, were considered amongst the most significant for the creation of a conceptual framework; a synthesis of leading cues towards research fields on which different approaches have been detected and which could be deepened on by this dissertation. The following four directions were, therefore, initially established as means of building a structure for the production of a state of the art basis that is thoroughly reviewed throughout the dissertation, its exploration determined clear paths of incursion to the elaboration of an adequate theoretical framework (manuscript's *Figure 2-1*) in terms of its degree of validity and innovation:

A. Gated developments	B. Risk, fear & insecurity	C. Community	D. Qualitative research approaches
Citizenship & public space	Notions & definitions on fear as a concept	Community & social bonds	Perception studies
Social exclusion & residential segregation	Architecture of fear/ Ecology of fear	Sense of community	Urban ethnography
Periodization/ typification	Local and national insecurity indicators	Community links & sense of safety	Epistemology/ontology in social science

Space privatization & fortification	Theoretical discourses on fear, risk & social control	Membership & identity	Urban imaginaries
Housing market elitization	Commodified security	Ghettoization	Social imaginaries
Insecurity crisis	Liquid fear	Retribalization	Semiotics
Consumption	Risk society	Public space	Evil imaginaries

- ▪ *Methodological guidelines*

The methodological approach I propose relies on an epistemological position within the *qualitative-quantitative* divide, departing from a realist position while favouring a pluralist research view. This cross-sectional approach reflects on an *inter-method triangulation* that comprises a set of analytical instruments incorporating qualitative elements yielded by *urban ethnography* and semi-qualitative elements provided by *multidimensional scaling* and *sense of community indexing* tools (manuscript's *Figure 6-7*). A mixed methodology that combines *ethnographical* aspects, such as *cognitive mapping* and *interviews*, with the use of *surveys*, *data analysis* and *observation* may derive into more detailed approximations and results, while the implementation of pioneer methodologies such as the *conceptual structure analysis* of urban fears, proposed by Páramo & Roa (2015) for the evaluation of citizen's representations and materialization of fears in urban contexts, along with the use of tools like McMillan & Chavis' SCI (1986) regarding the measurement of *sense of community* through an indexed evaluation are regarded as counterparts to the qualitative side of the research.

Given that the main approach of the proposed methodological triangulation relied on qualitative aspects, *interviews* constituted its main, encompassing tool; surrounding a base script, a series of instruments took place as dialogues developed, first through semi-qualitative exploration, gradually moving into the direction of qualitative instruments and activities. The arrangement of these instruments took place according to the following sequence, while this served to provide a degree of structure to the interview, it should be noted that the dialogue and narratives derived from its application were not subordinated to it, acting mainly as enablers for the discussion of topics on determinate directions (for a detailed description of this operationalization refer to *manuscript's section 6.3.2*):

1. Sense of community evaluation based on McMillan & Chavis' *SCI-2* (2008)
2. Residential election and fear/insecurity assessment survey based on analytical categories taken from the research's own theoretical framework
3. Conceptual structure analysis based on Paramo's (2015) *Multiple Item Classification* approach on the conceptualization of urban fears
4. *Multidimensional scaling (MDS)* with the aid of a perceptual mapping tool *(PERMAP)*
5. Resident's *cognitive mapping*, aimed at evaluating internalized community and spatial conceptions

- ▪ *Main results & conclusions (detailed on manuscript's chapters 7 & 8)*
  - ○ GCs act as catalysts of polarization, condensing a series of social phenomena wherein uncertainty perceived as inherent to urban life plays a decisive role. Their success relies upon the simulation of the longed-for, comforting feeling of shelter lost in the contemporary city.
  - ○ Throughout previous stages, GCs have succeeded at supplying a sense of reassurance by means of privileged lifestyles, e.g. internal regulations favouring a controlled coexistence amongst residents, greener, cleaner environments, proximity to nature and protective measures achieved through architecture of fear elements. As novel element, intramural community bonds as *anchorage* elements appear to be playing an increasingly major role within those dynamics.
  - ○ The process of catalysis and diversification of GCs in the GMA is characterized by a periodization that can be depicted by 3 stages, wherein *locational, aspirational, dimensional* and *individual* diversification patterns were found to be a result of *social, economic, cultural* and *political* shifts. These were either adopted through a process of *globalization* or driven by *state-related policies* and they appear to also reflect in territorial terms:
    - ▪ A. *Suburbs and grandeur* (1967-1985): Leisure in the country club as the alibi for first signs of gating instances. A process of *exogenous* development in territorial terms
    - ▪ B. *Green coalescence* (1986-1999): The hunt for nature within the city; revival & establishment of GCs through status. An *endogenous* stage of development

- C. *Catalysis and diversification* (2000-2018): Flexibilization of the GC phenomenon and a focus on safety by means of community related features as real estate product. *Entropic* stage of development
  - A major finding depicted by this periodization is the acknowledgment of the shapeshifting abilities of GCs. Rather than remaining static in the face of social, economic, cultural and political changes, the real estate market has successfully managed to adapt itself to the reassuring needs of citizens according to each stage; in that regard, it appears that a weak social fabric, led by polarization and shifting identity representations, is directly proportional to the increase of their demand and popularity.
  - Fear representations built around insecurity have turned safety into a commodity, suggesting a change of paradigm in terms of safety provision encompassed around the concept of *security commodification*. GCs represent the epitome of this shift in urban contemporary contexts, rather than conceptualizing security as a collective, its commodification points to its allotting based on income level, turning it into a profitable market product rather than a citizen's right.
  - The erosion of social bonds through shifting global conditions plays a key role in security redefinition; in the case study, however, commodification points to an undermining process stemming mostly from *state-level* factors. While vulnerability is normalized by prevailing global conditions that detach individuals from support structures formerly constituted by traditional social networks, *state-level* policies in México have disregarded an equitable socioeconomic development for decades while implementing coercive measures in the face of the polarization emerged from those gaps.
  - GCs appear to no longer provide an effective counteraction towards insecurity. Validated by the ethnographical analysis on the chosen GC case study, vulnerability levels that are far from being deemed safe were reported. This reflects in high levels of mistrust amongst residents, who, in the face of burglary, retrofit already gated homes as a common practice.
  - In broad terms, the case study shows an intramural sense of community that does not comply with the guidelines established by McMillan & Chavis' (1986) *SCI*. In fact, when contrasting its results to those obtained by open neighbourhoods, lower signs of sense of community were obtained on all four community referents taken into account, with the most significant differences on those related to *shared emotional connection* and *reinforcement of needs* amongst residents.
  - As a whole, GC residents show a restricted spatial perception of their surroundings, cognitive mapping validated this through reduced, narrow representations of their environs, framed by vicinities portrayed as empty canvasses and segregated from the rest of the city. As contrast element, cognitive processes of open neighbourhoods depicted stronger links to their surroundings through wider scopes of graphic representation that may favour a contextual, collective view over the individual.
  - A major finding derived from analysing urban fear's structures hints a divergence in terms of the perceived intensity and distance of fears; while inhabitants of open neighbourhoods tend to perceive threats in close relationship, almost as *quotidian* elements, that proximity is inversely correlated to the level of risk they inspire; on the other hand, GC residents, although relatively isolated from threats, as confirmed by their distant appearance in cognitive mappings, associate them with higher risk levels.

- **Areas of potential further research**

Further research should keep tabs on GC's shifting processes and deepen on the impact of their consequences, the social challenges posed by its normalization demands the analysis of emerging concerns that could not be addressed during the dissertation, remaining however essential for the comprehension of the phenomenon: what does the expansion of the gated model towards increasingly lower socioeconomic levels entail for the development of the city and for those adopting them? How does this expansion influence the restructuring of urban fears? What does the normalization of the phenomenon imply for the novel perceptions and imaginaries of young GC residents, especially infants who have grown up behind gates? In terms of policy-making, under which guidelines should the issues raised at the fringes of GCs be addressed considering the high polarization levels they keep engendering? How could the catalysis and diversification of the gating model redefine our current concept of community as a whole?