

Case Study

Does the Gated Form of Residential Development Matter for Community Cohesion?

Reflections on the Response to COVID-19 Outbreak in Wuhan, China

Wenjing LUO, Wuhan Spatial Planning Vetting Centre, China

Han ZOU¹, Hubei University of Technology, China

Weiwei GU, Yangtze River Survey Plan Design Research Institute, China

Abstract

During the lockdown in Wuhan, urban life has effectively been confined to each gated residential community. It was an unprecedented operation that relied on mutual help from neighbors and the true community spirit. The community cohesion achieved in this impromptu self-organization demonstrates that it is potentially not the gated form itself but the absence of momentum, time, commitment, and space for engagement and participation in community affairs that ultimately leads to social alienations. The investigation has demonstrated that more than 80 percent of the respondents felt that the lockdown did not weaken their community cohesion, and the percentage of respondents with positive viewpoints on enhanced community cohesion are more than 2-3 times the ones with negative opinions. In accordance with the assumption from the interviews, the result of the investigation demonstrates that a higher level of community cohesion has been perceived in contrast to before the lockdown. Based on the reflections on whether gated or ungated matter for Community Cohesion, basic conclusions have been made that community cohesion does not relate strongly with the physical forms of housing, the level of engagement of their residents in community affairs, which depends on momentum, time, commitment, and space for participation, is of greater significance. Post COVID-19, further efforts have been suggested to make on an integrated approach through the means of governance reform and spatial interventions, promoting community cohesion.

Keywords

Gated Communities, Community Cohesion, COVID-19, Neighbourhood Development, integrated community

1. Introduction

In this ongoing battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing measures, like “shelter-in-place”, have been proven to matter the most in “flattening the curve” (Zhang et al. 2020). In Wuhan, the epicenter of this outbreak in China, the implementation of the lockdown measures owed a great deal to the gated forms of residential communities. Globally, the practice of gating communities has generated significant debates over its social, economic, and political implications (Wu 2005; Tony & Bil 2006; Song 2010; Goix 2005; Thuillier 2005; McKenzie 2005; Grant 2004; Grant 2005). Often being accused of social segregation, this gated form of urban housing has been considered as an obstacle in improving urban

governance as it diminishes social capitals (Wu 2005; Atkinson & Blandy 2005). Before the COVID-19 outbreak, gated communities have been discouraged in China through national policy guidelines, feasibility studies and pilot programs have been carried out in attempts to transform them into open neighborhoods, which emphasis on physical forms. However, this lockdown experience in Wuhan has somehow changed our perspectives on this particular issue, especially the relationship between gated compounds and community cohesion, which is a key element in social determinants of health (SDH) (Batemen et al. 2017). It begs the question, does the gated or ungated form impact the development of community cohesion? Post COVID-19, how could urban planning help to nurture more cohesive communities? These questions will be discussed with reflections from the experience during the lockdown in Wuhan.

2. The Emergency Response in Communities during the Lockdown

The majority (more than 85% of the land designated for residential use) of residential developments in Wuhan are enclosed with gates, fences, walls, and other barriers to limit public access (WLSP 2016). These gated compounds are mostly commercial residential estates managed by professional property management companies, and are jointly governed by “residents’ committees” representing the government, and elected “homeowners’ associations”.

To contain the spread of COVID-19, the municipal government ordered to cordon off all 7148 communities individually which started in early February 2020, though some of the restrictions have been partially lifted. The perimeters of these cordon zones are either the existing boundary of gated compounds or temporary barriers enclosing an originally ungated neighbourhood. Emergency response teams, which comprised of volunteers, members of “homeowners’ associations”, staff from “residents’ committees” and property management, have been established to safeguard their respective communities. As no one leaves their cordon zones, the teams are responsible for organizing daily necessities, monitoring residents’ health conditions, purchasing medicines, and dealing with any other requests. They take special care of the elderly and people with disabilities by delivering free food door to door. Residents have also volunteered to help and some donated food and money to the team to be distributed to those in need. Other than these structured interactions between the response teams and residents, spontaneous resident-to-resident help also took place during this period which contributed towards interpersonal bonding and an elevated sense of solidarity. The diagram below demonstrates the typical organization of lockdown response in communities in Wuhan (Fig. 1).

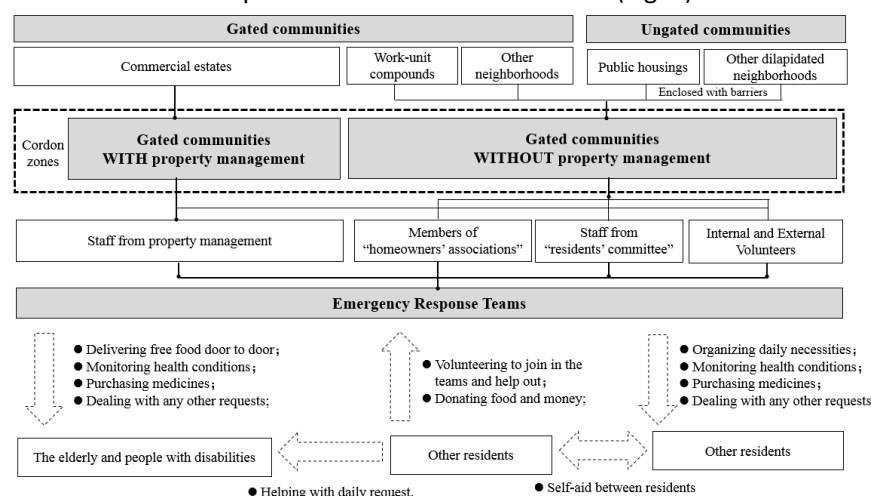


Figure 1 The Response Organization of Communities in Wuhan During the lockdown. Source: Authors .

3. Enhanced Community Cohesion Compared to Pre-COVID-19

Studies in China have found that most of the residents living in gated commercial estates, only make nodding-acquaintances, and social interactions are limited to small groups that are bounded by common interests or working relations, which limits the possibility of achieving a higher level of community cohesion (Wu 2005). Nonetheless, during this unprecedented lockdown, we observed signs of improvement in community cohesion as the unexpected result of organizing this emergency response.

To verify our hypothesis, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with our neighbors. Based on the definition of community cohesion (Forrest & Kearns 2001), two questions were put forward asking the interviewees to compare their experience before and after the lockdown:

- 1) Do you think you are living in a more close-knit community?
- 2) Do you feel more strongly attached to your community?

The outcome of this small scale study revealed that residents had engaged in more social interactions with their neighbors, and were more attached to the communities. As these interviews mostly happened in casual settings during unplanned encounters with interviewees, they should not be regarded as conclusive evidence.

To seek more convincing evidences, a questionnaire has also been conducted by the students of Hubei University of Technology, towards the inhabitants in the neighborhood of Minyi Street in Wuhan. There were 269 respondents, who consisted of 76.21% stakeholders and 15.24% tenants. Although about half of the respondents felt no differences concerning the cohesion of the neighborhood before and after the lockdown, more than one third of the respondents felt more attached to the communities and have engaged in more social interactions with their neighbors. In another words, more than 80 percent of the respondents felt that the lockdown did not weaken their community cohesion. And the percentage of respondents with positive viewpoints on enhanced community cohesion are more than 2-3 times the ones with negative opinions. In accordance with the assumption from the interviews, the result of the investigation demonstrates that a higher level of community cohesion has been perceived in contrast to before the lockdown.

Table 1 The Results of the Questionnaire. Source: Authors .

Question	Answers	Percentage
1. Do you think you are living in a more close-knit community?	much more close-knit	11.11%
	less more close-knit	26.67%
	pretty much the same	52.59%
	less close-knit	14.07%
2. Do you feel more strongly attached to your community?	Much stronger attachment	12.59%
	Stronger attachment	19.61%
	pretty much the same	58.52%
	less stronger attachment	9.63%

We can potentially credit this improvement to residents' engagement with community affairs in cooperation with emergency response teams. Social interactions have hence been reactivated between larger groups of residents, who were bounded with a mutual goal against the virus, as well as more time for participation and fewer distractions from other affairs during the lockdown.

Some interviewees responded that they are reminded of their time spent living in work-unit compounds², which was also gated but with "neighborhood watch" self-organized by residents. They particularly pointed out the recreation of a similar sense of solidarity in their current place of residence over the past weeks. Although the forms of social interactions are different and incomparable, the triggering of such memories demonstrates, to some extent, that community cohesion has been enhanced in gated communities during this lockdown.

4. Reflections: Does Gated or Ungated matter for Community Cohesion?

Our investigations and observations have shown that there is potential for community cohesion within gated residential compounds in the Chinese contexts, but to understand the mechanism, the social-spatial structure of cities has to be explored beyond the gated community itself. Unlike other countries, the prevalence of gated estates in China is mostly due to the commodification of real estates from total state provision. With a mix of different functions, the pre-commodification "work-unit compounds" of the communist era accommodated employees of the same company or public institution. The relationships formed from co-working were strengthened through co-living in quasi-self-sufficient units which spontaneously nurtured a sense of attachment to the community. On the other hand, residents living in post-commodification compounds have weak interpersonal ties other than co-location. They may have similar socio-economic status, but come from different parts of the country and work in a wide array of sectors. It is often the case that residents are reluctant to extract themselves from their sphere of work and social networks to interact with neighbors.

Yet, as an unexpected result of lockdown, social interactions within these compounds have all been activated out of the necessity to organize daily life in isolation, and the fear of the virus. Such a dire situation provoked residents to engage with community affairs and to help each other out where they can. These revelations show that given the right circumstances, community cohesion can be strengthened in commercial residential estates without changing gated forms. Therefore, it is possible that community cohesion does not relate strongly with the physical forms of housing, the level of engagement of their residents in community affairs, which depends on momentum, time, commitment, and space for participation, is of greater significance. With the progress of urbanization and globalization, momentum and time available for community participation have been swamped by other activities in this transient world of high-speed transport and information technology. Although the organization of communities during unprecedented urban emergency demonstrated that enhanced community cohesion in gated estates is possible, it doesn't justify its suitability for sustaining the level of cohesion post-COVID-19. At the same time, if the aforementioned conditions of community engagement are the key to cohesion, the proposed transition towards open neighborhood in China which focuses solely on physical forms is also invalidated. It is perhaps time to explore new approaches to community planning towards the goal of social cohesion.

5. Future Efforts to be Made

Recently, numerous post-COVID-19 scenarios have been imagined and are subject to intense discussions worldwide. One thing for sure, humanity will have to be prepared for unprecedented risks and challenges.

Such global uncertainty will result in an aggravated level of fear and anxiety amongst the public. There is a psychological phenomenon that the sense of fear could redefine the boundary of one's activities, so according to this argument, the boundaries of all physical realms may be reinforced post-COVID-19, including residential neighborhoods. As the product of fear, gated communities, which proved unable to ensure security but can enhance the secured feeling, will probably be more enclosed than ever before due to habitual thinking and cannot be easily ungated cause they are market-driven.

On the other hand, high urbanism, which could make the traditional ties of communities facing a new crisis of social cohesion, would require the making of "community" more desperately to improve urban governance, as bigger cities become the more risks they will get. The key to deal with risks, especially for metropolises, would be to establish an adaptive governance system, based on each community as the basic unit which can also collaborate as an integral (Folke et al. 2005, Wu 2013). The system could improve the efficiency and save the cost of governance during emergency and non-emergency periods, but would require community cohesion as the cornerstone.

Under such circumstances, a renewed approach in planning cohesive communities could be established by the means of urban governance reform and spatial interventions, which focuses on inspiring residents to participate in the making of "community" rather than regulating physical forms of urban space (David & Keith 2010; French et al 2014). More efforts should be made in developing both tangible and intangible strategies at national and local levels to enhance the momentum, time, commitment, and space for public participation. For example, it is suggested to offer social infrastructures and urban amenities within walking distances and a complete network of streets and open spaces, which will not only save the time for daily commutes but more importantly provide spaces for encounters and social interactions. Co-governance between residents and authorities should also be encouraged, between whom urban planners should play the bridging roles and invite residents to engage in community affairs together.

Integrated communities, as coined by Wu Liangyong (2000), which aim to function as integral micro-cities, could be considered as a trend and become the future model of urban housing, particularly in metropolises. As a self-contained quasi-city unit, integrated communities could cultivate community cohesion by enhancing the momentum, time, commitment and space for public participation. Like the concept of Perry's neighborhood unit, it is suggested to offer various urban services within walking distances and a complete network of streets and open spaces, which could not only save the time for daily commutes but also make the space for random encounters and social interactions. To help with the shift of from hierarchy to cross-level management, it is also a commitment towards co-governance by local residents and the authorities, between whom urban planners should play the roles of bridges. Only when urban planners invite local residents to engage with community affairs together as self-organizations, can the top-down physical plan of integrated communities be implemented and the momentum of public participation be activated bottom-up.

The transition of gated communities in the Chinese context, from open neighborhoods to integrated communities, indicates that the focus of urban planning discipline, is turning to governance beyond physical forms. The logic of this shift could be applied to other countries with different models of communities adjusting to local contexts.

6. Conclusion

Based on the reflections on whether gated or ungated matter for Community Cohesion, basic conclusions have been made that community cohesion does not relate strongly with the physical forms of housing, the level of engagement of their residents in community affairs, which depends on momentum, time, commitment, and space for participation, is of greater significance. Post COVID-19, further efforts have been suggested to make on an integrated approach through the means of governance reform and spatial interventions, promoting community cohesion. To benefit from integrated and sustainable urban and regional planning, Integrated communities, as coined by Wu Liangyong(2000) in China, which aim to function as integral micro-cities, has been proposed as a trend and become the future model of urban housing, particularly in metropolises. As a self-contained quasi-city unit, integrated communities could cultivate community cohesion by enhancing the momentum, time, commitment and space for public participation. Like the concept of Perry's neighborhood unit, it is suggested to offer various urban services within walking distances and a complete network of streets and open spaces, which could not only save the time for daily commutes but also make the space for random encounters and social interactions. To help with the shift of from hierarchy to cross-level management, it is also a commitment towards co-governance by local residents and the authorities, between whom urban planners should play the roles of bridges. Only when urban planners invite local residents to engage with community affairs together as self-organizations, can the top-down physical plan of integrated communities be implemented and the momentum of public participation be activated bottom-up.

More research and practice should be devoted to understanding the mechanisms behind the formation of community cohesion in residential neighborhoods globally, taking into consideration the social and cultural context of different localities, as well as the potential of planning as a tool to assist in improving cohesion and mitigate the impact of uncertainties.

7. References

- Atkinson, R. Blandy, S. (2005) 'International Perspectives on the New Enclavism and the Rise of Gated Communities' (Special issue), *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 177-186.
- Bateman, L. Fouad, M. Hawk, B. Osborne, T. Bae, S. Eady, S. Thompson, J. Branteley, W. Crawford, L. Heider, L. Schoenberger, Y. (2017) 'Examining Neighborhood Social Cohesion in the Context of Community-based Participatory Research: Descriptive Findings from an Academic-Community Partnership', *Ethnicity & Disease*, 27(1), 329-336.
- Chiang, C.M. (2005) 'Policy Review: Government Intervention in Housing: The Case of Macao', *Housing Studies*, 20(1), 149-155.
- David, C. Keith, K. (2010) 'Community-based Housing Organizations and the Local Governance Debate', *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 533-559.
- Folke, C. Hahn, T. Olsson, P. Norberg, J. (2005) 'Adaptive Governance of Social-Ecological Systems', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 30(1), 441-473.
- Forrest, R. Kearns, A. (2001) 'Social Cohesion, 'Social Capital and the Neighborhood'', *Urban Studies*, 38(12), 2125-2143.

- French, S. Wood, L. Foster, S.A., Giles-Corti, B. etc. (2014) 'Sense of Community and Its Association With the Neighborhood Built Environment'. *Environment and Behavior*, 46(6), 677–697.
- Glasze, G. (2005) 'Some Reflections on the Economic and Political Organisation of Private Neighbourhoods', *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 221–233.
- Goix, R.L. (2005) 'Gated Communities: Sprawl and Social Segregation in Southern California', *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 323–343.
- Grant, J. (2004) 'Types of gated communities', *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 31, 913–930.
- Grant, J. (2005) 'Planning Responses to Gated Communities in Canada', *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 273–285.
- Kleit, R.G. Rohe, W.M. (2005) 'Using Public Housing to Achieve Self-Sufficiency: Can We Predict Success?', *Housing Studies*, 20(1), 81–105.
- McKenzie, E. (2005) 'Constructing The Pomerium in Las Vegas: A Case Study of Emerging Trends in American Gated Communities', *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 187–203.
- Song, W.X. (2010) 'A Review on Researchers of the Gated Community'. *Urban Planning Forum*, 189(2), 42–51.
- Thuillier, G. (2005) 'Gated Communities in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, Argentina: A challenge for Town Planning', *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 255–271.
- Tony, M. Bill, S. (2006) 'Gated Communities as Club Goods: Segregation or Social Cohesion?', *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 345–359.
- WLSP (Wuhan Land use and Urban Spatial Planning Research Centre). Research on the Residential Areas in Wuhan (Unpublished Research), Wuhan Natural Resource & Planning Bureau, Wuhan. 2016.
- Wu, L.Y. (2013). *Human Settlements towards the Future*. Beijing: Press of Tsinghua University.
- Wu, F.L. (2005) 'Rediscovering the 'Gate' Under Market Transition: From Work-unit Compounds to Commodity Housing Enclaves', *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 235–254.
- Xu, L.Y. Zhang, H.M. Deng, Y.Q. etc. (2020) 'Cost-effectiveness Analysis of Antiepidemic Policies and Global Situation Assessment of COVID-19', [online]. Available at: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2004.07765> (Accessed: 15 November 2021).

Endnotes

1. Han Zou is the corresponding author. Email: 50682556@qq.com.
2. Imported from the former Soviet Union in the socialist era, work-unit compounds were planned residential districts or so-called "micro-region" with clear boundaries, which were often largely associated with industrial development (Wu, 2005).

Synopsis

Through investigations after the lock-down of Wuhan, this paper suggests that it is potentially not the gated form itself but the absence of momentum, time, commitment, and space for engagement and participation in community affairs that ultimately leads to social alienations. Post COVID-19, further efforts have been suggested to make on an integrated approach through the means of governance reform and spatial interventions, promoting community cohesion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors sincerely wish to thank Frank D'hondt for his advice on the abstract. This paper is also inspired by the group discussion among the members of ISOCARP Community of Practice Urban Health. Information about the group can be found via <https://isocarp.org/>.

Funding: This work was supported by the Chinese MOE Foundation of Humanities and Social Sciences (A Study on the Traditional Ideas and Values of Jingchu Human Settlement Environment)