



3.12 Gated communities in China

Segregated space

Trends in the privatisation of public space are not confined solely to corporate space, but extend also to the home environment. Contemporary and worldwide trends of physically gating communities, for example, have been well documented (see, for example, Blakely and Snyder 1997; Low in Smith and Low 2006; Webster 2001), and reflect the long-established desire of affluent groups in many societies (see Chapter 2) to separate themselves from the rest of society, often reflecting a fear of crime, or simply a desire to be, and to be seen to be, exclusive. In essence, the gates turn the space inside into a private space, accessed on the basis of relative wealth, whilst the residents turn their backs (the walls and gates) on the space around. Increasingly this is a global phenomena (Figure 3.12).

These trends may be an extension on what Sennett (1977: 5–15) has described as a decline in public life brought on by an increasing emphasis on the private relations of individuals, their families and intimate friends, driven by the rise of secularism and capitalism. By contrast, he argues, public life has increasingly been seen as a matter of dry, formal relations, whilst the introspective obsession on private life has become a trap, absorbing the attention of individuals rather than liberating them. The consequence is that the venues of public life, the streets and squares, have increasingly been replaced by the suburban living room, whilst the spaces that remain become movement rather than sociable spaces.

THE IMPACT OF CRIME

Crime, or often, more correctly, the fear of crime, remains a major cause of this retreat from the public realm for those with choice (Miethe 1995), whether behind gates, or simply away from urban locations into suburban ones. Boddy (1992), for example, contends that people feel exposed and vulnerable when outdoors, and conversely safe and protected when inside, a fear that results in the increasing spatial segregation of activities by class, age, ethnicity and occupation – communities for the elderly, ethnic areas, gated communities, skid row, etc.



3.13 Active participants in the drama of civilisation

As well as explicit segregation strategies, policing (public or private) and surveillance strategies can also be used to a similar effect. Indeed, the fear of victimisation is real and a major factor in how the contemporary urban environment is both designed, and managed (Oc and Tiesdell 1997). Crime and incivil behaviour can quickly undermine the quality and experience of public space, encouraging users to manage the perceived risk by avoiding using places and in turn contributing to their further decline. Although men are statistically at greater risk of crime than women, and young men at greatest risk of all, the fear of victimisation is felt more acutely by women, no doubt helping to explain Whyte's (1980) observation that a low proportion of women in public space generally indicates that something is wrong.

A huge literature exists around approaches to crime reduction, with arguments around the extent to which environments can be made more safe through various combinations of defensive design, surveillance, street animation, active control, and social and educational approaches to crime reduction. Although prescriptions vary, most commentators would agree with Jane Jacob's basic prescription that public peace is kept primarily by the network of voluntary controls that most individuals in society subscribe to and which is (typically) codified in law. In this sense, as Jacobs (1961: 45) argued, users of the public space and occupiers of the surrounding buildings are 'active participants in the drama of civilisation versus barbarism' (Figure 3.13). By its very nature this requires users to be actively engaged in the process of civility, and a perverse consequence of the privatisation of residential environments may simply be the withdrawal (behind their gates) of many law-abiding participants from this role (Bentley 1999: 163).

Domestic space

Another aspect of this balance between private and public realms concerns the idea that the very notion of a public life is under threat from the spread of new technologies and new private venues for social exchange. Ellin (1996: 149), amongst others, notes, how many social and