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Enclosurotopias: A Heterotopian Simulation of Reality

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Abstract

Michel Foucault identifies heterotopias as forms of space that exists somewhere between reality and utopia. It's real but does not serve or correspond to reality. What appears to be real within heterotopias is the notion of signs, a parallel hyperreal world that encompasses the definition of reality to an extent that it has become the actual meaning of being. Gated communities have long been categorized as the places where fragments of utopia and simulation coexist, and where the illusion of safety flourishes in its most vivid forms. This paper attempts to highlight such heterotopian features within gated communities, with an analytical focus on the Fuyunxindu community in the Tiexi district of Shenyang – a highly controlled residential zone that gave rise to the insider/outsider dichotomy. Through this outlook, the reader gets to answer a simple question: What kind of spatial vision do gated communities provide within the urban realm?

Keywords: Gated Communities; Heterotopias; Chinese Urbanism; Neoliberalism; Contemporary Urbanization.

1. Introduction: The Rise of a Heterotopian Lifestyle

For the emergence of the 21st century images and qualities, we are no longer confined within a conflictual environment of fantasy and reality, rather what appears to be real. It is quite different from the notion of pretending though, because of the fact that it actually exists and happens within our daily three-dimensional world. What caused the appearance of such phenomenon is the continuous agglomeration of “contemporary forms of globalization, [which] is nothing more than yet another round in the capitalist production and reconstruction of space” (Harvey, 2001:23). Geographers are now more concerned with the political economy of space and its relation to the surrounding high-rise walls of neoliberal forms. The quality aspect of the image is in fact a distortion to the laws of existence which all natural entities rest upon (Simmel, 1978). As a result of the new century globalization, we have become dissatisfied with such natural order, and have intervened to rearrange qualities in a way to satisfy our needs and desires. Yet, this order exists where “equality is completely eliminated, in which the highest level of one point is adjacent to the lowest level of another, in this series, the fundamental quality is not uniformity, but difference” (Simmel, 1978:56).

Utopian product of capitalism exists within our deepest personal desires, and so does reality. We tend to think of reality as the norm, as the undesirable place to be escaped from. We call for simulators and virtual realities that provide us with obscure spaces. Foucault's “light-hearted and almost improvised manner” (Johnson, 2013:790) describes such spaces that exist between utopia and reality, yet acting as anti-utopian spaces, as heterotopias. According to Johnson, they are spaces which are lodged within our lives, and which also mirror and distort other spaces (2013). They can take on many forms and sizes ranging from the internet pornographic sites to the underground band rooms in Hong Kong (Palladino & Miller eds., 2015). Foucault's concern with space is actually reflected in our present days' conditions, our daily anxiety routine, and our neoliberal progress. Heterotopias represent a sense of sacredness and privilege, which are often “reserved for the individual in a crisis” (Fontana-Guisti, 2013:137). They are considered to be the strongest contribution to the juxtaposed notion of heterogeneous space within which we dwell and consume.

On a parallel level of quality, heterotopias are also images, hence dreams, but the difference is our fully state of awareness of its existence and physical boundaries. These so-called images tend to place us inside our own inner inclination to an extent where the differences between the real and the imaginary are threatened (Baudrillard, 1981). Baudrillard, metaphorically, uses theme parks, e.g. Disneyland, to express this aspect. The public enjoys Disneyland for its “play of illusions and phantasms” (1981:10). It is not only the excitement and enjoyment of the thrill rides, but more the idealized image of America that is embedded within this space. It is presented to us as the element that fills our desires by making us believe that everything around it represents acute reality, when the fact states the exact contradictory. We chose to simulate ourselves by putting on 3D and VR urbanistic and social glasses to escape from what's real, and also to have the flexibility and open-ended options to rearrange the natural world order, eventually corresponding to what we want. Rather than the dominance of the nature of things, it is a triumph of the economy of the market and political aspirations.

2. Gated Communities as Heterotopias

This paper attempts to give concrete grounds to the concept of heterotopias and apply them to gated communities. As a hypothetical discourse, gated communities are places where fragments of utopia and simulation coexist, where there is a blurry line differentiating between public and private entities, and where the illusion of safety flourishes in its most vivid forms (Low, 2008). A gated community is a residential development that is often surrounded by walls or fences, covered with bushes and in most cases have a second entrance. The houses, streets, sidewalks and other forms of services are privatized and enclosed to the desires of the local residents, and are guarded by a guard or an electronic identity card. Reasons for moving to enclosed communities vary from the feeling of safety and security to having control over the environment and its amenities. Low (2008) believes that the retreat of the state, the accumulation of capital, the fear of 'others' and contemporary forms of economic organizations have produced the emerging residential enclosures we are observing.

2.1 Enclosure-(hetero)-topias

Since space has become the central concern of our daily lives, it has become important for the public to re-evaluate their social positions within space in relation to their surrounding communities. They have been mostly concerned with the nature of the built environment they dwell within, and whether this particular environment provides them with all required basic necessities or not. Yet, desires have exceeded mere basics, but rather extended to include all what lies inside their dreams to be included into one single setting. The minority elite society are now encompassing thoughts of individual liberation and "entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005:2). The individual is no longer overwhelmed by the essence of the community, but rather by the effect of the free market on the community's organization and the presupposed fragmentation of reality. As Debord argues, "The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomised images where even the deceivers are deceived" (1967:6). Due to the immense collective modern conditions of behaviour, in several moments space can be presented to the public as a series of illusions, i.e. representations of representations.

The term 'enclosurotopias' is a combination of both enclosures and heterotopias, referring to spaces that enclose on certain members of society while restricting access to outsiders, thereby creating new forms of spaces whose patterns of social order are broken down, reconstructed and reordered in a protective manner (Low, 2008). Gated communities are considered the prominent form of enclosures that have contributed greatly to the emergence of a fortress society via privatization of public space (Hook & Vrdoljak, 2002). They are the most vivid images of the modernized 20th century where individuals are no longer citizens but globalized consumers, as well as victims of excessive media coverage and virtual influences (Varnelis & Friedberg, 2008). Gated communities preserve their enclosed facet through physical borders and controlled entrances that separate heterotopia from everyday life; a sort of safe haven that special features of a community is expressed via the insider/outsider dichotomy. Blakely & Snyder (1997) classify three categories of gated communities: lifestyle communities, elite communities and the security zone. The first two are primarily motivated by a desire to enhance living standards within a homogenous community through the existence of both residential and commercial aspects, thus creating a new, and in some cases artificial, suburban towns with a luxurious lifestyle. The third category is probably the most tangible boundary of heterotopias due to its relation to fear of crime and outsiders, a notion that leads to the erection of up-right fortresses and surveilled gates. These walls are, supposedly, constructed to provide a sense of safety and sanctuary, but in fact it is mere illusion. The argument in this paper would go in favour of Low's perception on gated communities as physical spaces that provide a "vision of heterotopia as a safe haven and sanctuary for the few, rather than the urban solution for the many" (2008:163).

3. The Chinese Context

The 1978 economic reform called for initiatives to increase foreign trade and investment to elevate its living standards (Long, 2010), in addition to China joining the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1980s. Such ideological-economic shift boosted the free system of supply where the culture of consumption "was no longer a mere facet of the economy but the driving force for economic and social advancement" (Davis, 2000: 1). The liberal market economy has replaced the centralized-macro model that has dominated society's spatial organization in the form of the work-unit compound; a collective community socio-residential grid that regulated most aspects of an individual's life, e.g. education, clinic, grocery, etc. (Chen, 2014). Gated communities in China, in other words 'sealed residential quarters' (fengbi xiaoqu), have reflected the transformation of the Chinese economy which was mainly embedded within the privatization of the housing stock (shangping fang), which led to the emergence of a new typology of residential units in China, ones that resemble a life of luxury (Staub & Yu, 2014). Enclosed communities in China are mainly characterized by the absence of proximity to work places and lack of social homogeneity, unlike pre-reform Chinese cities (Breitung, 2012). Today, due to forces of globalization and mass rural-urban migration, there are distinctive features of opposing social poles, e.g. rich vs. poor, urban vs. rural, and local vs. immigrant. The virtual "vs." is not actually virtual, as walls and fences have developed the vivid modern-day China's sealed residential quarters which are usually provided with high-tech

surveillance, alarm systems and human guards at the entrances (Miao, 2003). China's private developers believe that adopting the Western-style is a strong symbol of prestige and prosperity for the residents dwelling within. This newly placed style is basically a "cut-and-paste" product (Pow & Kong, 2007:148), in which it is cut from the Western conditions and surroundings, and then pasted into a completely different culture. The Western image led to the rise of the elite-attracting Chinese real estate advertisements, reinforcing the notion of abandonment of tradition and "replacing homogeneity with diversity and pluralism" (Zhang & Wang, 2017:51). It has delivered promises of status (Figure 1). According to Xu (2008), an ad for Shunde Country Garden attempts to deliver a feeling of success to 'future residents' through being overloaded with symbolic images of classic European architecture, expansive golf courses, prestigious education and markers of aristocracy.



Figure 1. A typical advertisement for a Chinese gated community to attract as much consumers as possible. URL: http://allpurposedark.blogspot.sg/2006_11_01_archive.html

The Palais de Fortune development in Beijing is another vivid example of such elegant episode whose glossy brochure suggests "Construct a legend of fortune, steer the world's power". The Palais de Fortune development fulfils the Chinese elite dream by mixing both the European classical façade with an Asian high-end luxurious touch, to an extent it is being called home (Figure 2).

Apart from the Westernized image that the Chinese elite population are longing for, and the idealized image that fulfils their American-like dream, safety and security are among the top priorities for the residents to keep outsiders walled-out. Therefore, governments at all levels have included gated zones as a crime control strategy. According to Miao, "the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee on the Comprehensive Management of Public Security and the Ministry of Public Security have made gating one of the critical measures in evaluating the performance of local governments" (2003:49). Moreover, according to a Nanjing study conducted by Xu in 2008, 35% of the middle-class residents' respondents had a high level of concern for security within their enclosed dwellings. Thus, it seems that the physical notion of walls somehow reflect China's modern-day culture and "people's psychological line of defense" (Hewitt, 2016) against outsiders. This social feature of "others" creation alongside the increasing gap between the poor and the wealthy classes in China, the residents' desire for an idealized living standard, as well as the advertising fuel to achieve such utopian aspects, all have contributed to the heterotopian simulation of reality, the creation of an enclosed dream that gives an illusion of living.



Figure 2. Palais de Fortune, Beijing. A French lifestyle within a Chinese context. URL: <http://www.thenational.ae/business/property/luxury-comes-home-to-beijing>

3.1 Fuyunxindu Community, Shenyang

Since the 1978 economic reform, various types of houses have been constructed to meet the needs of different people. According to Yu (2013), in 1998, the State Council of China has further developed the Urban Housing System reform to

speed up housing construction, leading to the introduction of profit-oriented community units. As the urbanization process of Shenyang accelerated during the time, translated as 7.29 sqm/year of urban growth (Liu, Xu, Hu, Li, Sun & Chen, 2014), Chinese society became more enclaved within their sealed communities. The most common apartment typologies that emerged since then are the typical two-generation family, i.e. the parents and their only child (Yu, 2013). Fuyunxindu is a gated community that was built in 2005 and is located in the Teixi Desitric in Shenyang. It is divided into two zones separated by a thoroughfare, and like most developer-driven communities, its perimeters are extruded with walls, fence and gates which have guards on. Outsiders are not allowed accessibility and residents are required to display a parking permit when driving into the community (Yu, 2013). Hence, the insider/outsider dichotomy is quite vivid in this case. Western theory of enclosures have dominated the spatial organizational scenery within the community where the grid of buildings – situated at a distance of 1.5 times of a building’s height from each other – has created a central open space with communal amenities such as playgrounds (Figure 3). On the other hand, the indoor scenery reflects Western individualism where children have their own rooms instead of living in one room with their parents. Additionally, the master bedrooms have their own bathrooms, unlike most families in the Chinese society who share just one bathroom. In his Master’s thesis at Pennsylvania University, Yu (2013) specified three spatial elements that contributed to Fuyunxindu residents’ sense of belonging: 1) Visibility into green areas, 2) Transitional and edge spaces, and 3) Threshold spaces. It was found that adults prefer good visibility within their communities which encourage more local interactions. This concurs with Gehl’s theory regarding how people respond to the presence of others within the same public sphere highlighting the value of staying in contact with similar citizens (Gehl, 1987). The yards that are in direct sight-connection with the central plaza tend to attract more residents than the ones who are enclosed by a building in the four directions (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Fuyunxindu Community. It is a commodity, gated community which separates itself by fences, walls and gates. It has inside yard—the yard is closed by the buildings. And the buildings themselves are used as important parts of the boundary. (Yu, 2013)

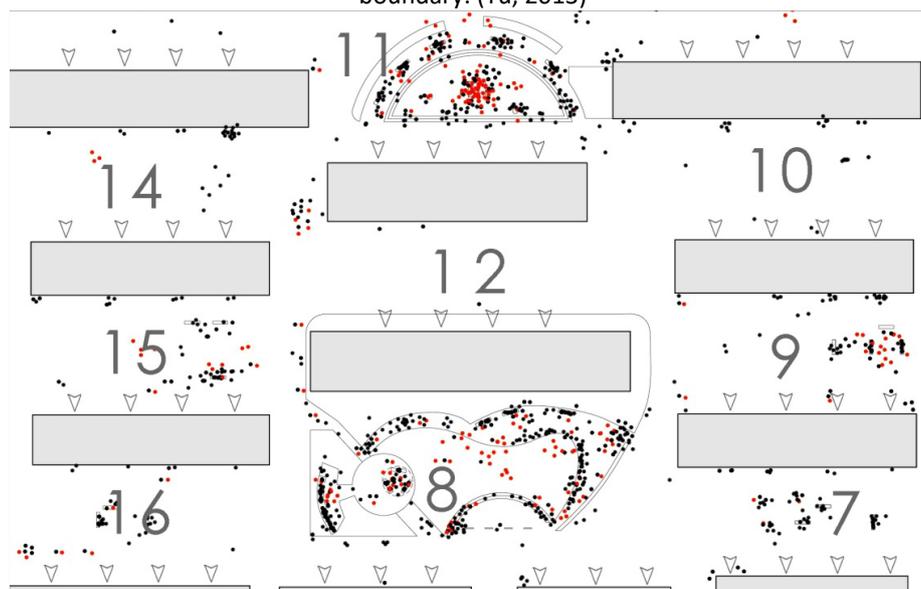


Figure 4. Fuyunxindu Community. Yard no. 12 is less attractive to residents as it is surrounded by buildings from all four directions. (Yu, 2013)

In addition to being connected to the other local residents, parents find it more convenient to better monitor their children playing in the yards than any other place beyond the walls of the enclosed community. The rigid fences have successfully advertised the image of safety to the elderly. Extending the notion of surveying the central space, most elderly prefer staying at the edge of the space rather than being part of the activity, i.e. transitional space (Whyte, 1980). The transitional areas offer a better view for the residents at the midpoint to observe what is happening on the outside, hence can return to their own territory at any given time. On a heterotopian level, the walls act as edge spatial elements that provide no choice for residents but to remain enclosed within their community – explaining the fact that people prefer staying near the community gates. Moreover, the edges maintain an individual's personal territory – a span equal to a semicircle in front of the person – making it easier for him/her to approach other locals only from the front (Gehl, 1987). The third most salient feature of sense of belonging is the community's residents' territorial attitude, which is often reflected in extensions out in the public space, e.g. establishing flowerbeds and setting up tables and seats along the wall. This is considered to be a miniature version of what is public and what is private. These territorial ones can be viewed as transitional zones which provide the residents more security and spatial attachment. The "I control my personal territory" attitude is a perk obtained with flexibility within the gated area, yet puts the local citizens in complete isolation from what lies beyond the fences. It is a threshold effect that arises from living beyond high fences with a dark dystopian perception of what exists beyond, hence outsiders are considered dangerous.

3.1.1 The Personal Territory vs. The Outside "Other"

According to a Dongfang morning post in 2004, in Shanghai Spring City, the developers allowed several publicly accessible shops to be settled within the community. Such decision was met with harsh criticism from the residents, thinking they will lose the sense of security and exclusivity. "We are very worried about outsiders entering our neighbourhood, even if they are just here to patronize the shops. Once the shops are opened, all kinds of people will enter our estate and disrupt the order and peace...and spoil the image of the neighbourhood", was one of the resident's response.

The phenomenon of inducing fear within the enclosed community reinforces Fraser's (2000) theoretical discourse on advertising, claiming that it is the "construction of dreams and alternative realities" (Fraser, 2000:138). On another level, Crilley (1994) argues that the advertisements created for such enclosed residential spaces reflect the developers' desire to create a "scenographic enclave", a world of stimulating visuals of exotic lifestyles that appeal the customers' eyes and subconscious minds (Pow & Kong, 2007). Advertisements are the crucial tools used to create signs and eliminate all sorts of essence from reality. Their main purpose is to capture the level of consumption of the Chinese middle-class society which eventually corresponds to individual entitlement and sense of prestige.

5. Conclusion

In his book *A History of Future Cities*, Daniel Brook (2013) argues that the Chinese elite sector are importing an American way of life within the original context, with fake lakes, hummers and houses. Since the Chinese economic reform in 1978, and the introduction of the new globalization era, heterotopian tones have casted its shadows over a consumerist society that have led a lifestyle of fake façades and alternative realities, rather than the true essence and logic behind them. The middle and upper sectors have shut themselves out within enclosed communities to dwell within the illusion of safety and haven, as an escape from the outside disorganized world. The world which they have created lies somewhere between utopia and reality, a social and physical, yet at the same time virtual, universe that blurs the distinctive features between what's private and what's public. The gated community separates its residents from the outside world through a row of erecting walls and fences that "contribute to a geography of social relations that produces fear and anxiety" (Low, 2008, p. 162). They are presented as holiday spaces, a Disneyland-like setting that simulates the notion of living.

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