

Gated Communities and their impeccable Role Curbing the Spread of COVID-19 in China

Although it is not the first time that pandemics threated our cities and urban spaces, the 2020 health crisis reminded us once gain of the critical role cities play in the global health governance, and at the same time their vulnerability when hit by unknown viruses, such as the case of COVID-19. In an attempt to limit the circulation of the highly contagious virus, local governments around the world rushed to adopt what proved to be the most efficient remedy: the quarantine and the lockdown of entire cities and neighborhoods.

In this article, looking from the prospective of an architect and urban researcher, the focus addresses the basic territorial and administrative urban unit in China, the ‘gated community’, and its role in the implementation of the quarantine measures adopted by most Chinese cities. China is known for its large and crowded cities, but it is also one of the countries, which employs the enclosed neighborhood typology, generally large-scale blocks with thousands of residents, since long time as a tactic,

not only to preserve security and social order but also, to manage its large population in case of environmental or health crisis events. In 2003, during the SARS epidemic, the gated communities enforcing their segregation measures played a decisive role in preventing the spread of the virus. Seventeen years later, although China went through significant economic, social and urban reforms, the rational for enclosure persisted and have even been strengthened.

The enclosed territorial and administrative units, adopted by almost all social classes and forming the basic component of the city structure, are prioritized for their urban governance efficiency. In fact, the spatial division of the city into distinct micro-enclaves, marking clearly the urban territory with their boundaries, facilitates not only the classification and control of the population and the urban spaces, but it also helps maintaining a continuous surveillance of the state, ready to intervene punctually at the neighborhood level with specific control measures in case of emergency.

Following the Chinese central government official announcement of the epidemic on January 20, and in an effort to fight at any cost the virus, defined by Xi Jinping as the ‘demon’, local governments rushed to issue emergency plans ordering entire residential neighborhoods to close off their gates, and strictly constrain people’s circulation. Now, it is simple to imagine, that those measures where applied overnight by simply locking the few gates piercing the residential compounds. Generally, only one member from each family was allowed to go out of the gated community to get their daily needs by displaying a temporary pass issued by the neighborhood committee when entering and exiting the guarded compounds. Even university campuses, closed most of their gates reinforcing the presence of security guards patrolling the few entrances left open. Students were asked to apply beforehand for an authorization valid for 24 hours, and transgressors of the time limit were banned from re-entering the campus.

The lock-down measures adopted in China have been undoubtedly propped by the

gated community, a ready at hand administrative and spatial tool, which already proved its functionality during the SARS epidemic. In this direction, closed neighborhoods helped Chinese authorities apply efficiently their draconian measures and contributed to limit the spread of the virus.
The intersection of city design and public health is an increasingly critical territory. Although there is no established principles or policies for cities to adopt, especially, when faced with new viruses, the facilitating role played by the gated communities during the two most dangerous health crisis in China in the last seventeen years, will rather contribute to their reinforcement in the Chinese city.

Cover picture: Two guards patrolling the entrance of a gated community in Haidian District, Beijing (Photo credit: Badiaa Hamama, 2019)

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