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Evaluating the Impact of Gated Communities on the Physical and Social Fabric of Doha City

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Abstract

Gated communities developments are widespread in the Arabian Gulf region. They are mainly characterized by a focus on physical security measures such as gates, walls, guards, and close circuit surveillance cameras. Even though Qatar is considered one of the safest countries in the world, still one finds that this housing pattern is dominant in Doha city, the state's capital. With a high percentage of expatriates in the country, people increasingly choose to live inside the walls of these gated communities, called also compounds. Such compounds are provided by the private developers for the public and by companies and the government alike for their employees. Currently, small, medium, and large size gated communities divide the urban fabric of the city into scattered parcels of land. These parcels are filled with housing blocks that have single and inefficient land use in contrast to the traditional compact neighborhoods of the Doha city itself. This paper seeks to analyze the case of Dar Al-Salam gated community in Doha as means to understand the impact of gated communities on the physical and social aspects of the Doha city. The case of gated communities in Doha will be explored in the context of urban design theories such as: Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch prescriptive of successful neighborhood urban design and will take into account local incentives and context. The impact of gated communities on the cohesion of the urban fabric of the city will be evaluated with reference to set of indicators derived from theories of urban form advocating mixed-use, dense, diverse, integrated and connected urban development. The analysis of the case study is mainly based on observations of the physical features and the social behavior of residents of this community. In conclusion, the paper identifies the negative impacts of gated communities on the physical fabric and social cohesion in Doha. It calls on the planning authorities to actively address these negative effects and consider alternative models of urban developments that better serves Doha's particular urban needs for achieving social integration and livable city environment.

Keywords:

Gated communities, urban fragmentation, privatization, residential, community.

1. Introduction:

More than 120 gated communities were estimated to be located in Doha as per 2012 census (Qatar map, 2012), and their numbers are growing. The dramatic demographics, economic, and social changes that happened in Qatar during the last 20 years brought with it an increasing popularity of gated communities. The high percentage of expats in the country has resulted in ethnically and economically diverse and fragmented demographics in the city. Also, housing provision is typically an employer-based catering amenity exclusively to employee groups. These main factors act as a catalyst to increasing proliferation of gated communities. This condition raises many questions about the viability of this housing pattern:

What are the grounds for gated communities in Doha? Are they compatible with Doha's neighborhoods needs for physically and socially integrated and livable environment? And how do gated communities affect the physical and social fabric of Doha?

For long, scholars and observers have been arguing for and against the validity of gated community development pattern. On the one hand, advocates of this pattern describe it as pleasant, private, and safe. They claim that it creates a sense of togetherness and tight-knit community among their residence. Also, they have controlled traffic so children can safely play on the roads like their parents did in traditional neighborhoods where narrow alleys created a safe environment against car speeding threats. Moreover, they provide a lifestyle and higher quality standards of living with a homogenous social groups and thus exclusive amenities like swimming pools, children playgrounds, and other recreational facilities. On the other hand, this gating phenomenon is not without costs. They isolate individual neighborhoods from each other and from the city public spaces, divide the city urban fabric into islands of a single land use areas which lack the vibrancy of mixed-use and socially and economically diverse neighborhoods. They create lifeless, blank, windowless, walled streets between each other that lead to the loss of public life, limit people experience of the city, and consequently result in a highly unequal society.

Given this controversy, this paper will evaluate the urban performance of gated communities with reference to theories of successful urban and social fabric summarized in terms of mixed-use, dense, divers, integrated and connected fabric. Also, it will take a case study of a typical gated community in Doha to test the hypothesis that:

Gated communities are not compatible with Doha urban and social needs for integrated and livable environment. They negatively impact the city being one of the main reasons for physical and social fragmentation. They form large-scale private properties that divide the city into isolated islands, produce a highly unequal society, and lead to the loss of public life. These aspects of gated communities are relevant to erroneous modern urban design methods that negatively affect the urban living experience within cities. The spread of this development unit leaves no hope to overcome the urban planning crisis of our contemporary cities.

2. Contextualization:

For a better understanding of the theoretical perspective which frames the gated communities in Qatar a critical review of relevant scholarship about this global phenomenon is necessary. Surveying literature on the topic, there is plenty of academic research on gated communities done in the United States, Europe, South Africa and Egypt. Surprisingly, the Gulf experience has not been well documented and studied yet with the exception of few studies in Saudi Arabia. Main recurrent themes are identified and briefly summarized below to include in the **first section** the definition of gated communities, in the **second** gated communities around the world, and in the **third** problems of contemporary cities associated with the presence of gated communities.

2.1. Defining gated communities:

There is no comprehensive definition of gated communities since it is a wide and diverse phenomenon. However, common aspects center on having closed, isolated, privatized areas of the city that serve as residential plots with above-average amenities. In gated community literature, Researchers present different definitions of this phenomenon. However, most of which share common features. The following definitions introduced in this study is based on its relevance to the type of gated communities, compounds in local terms, spread over the city

of Doha. According to (Blakely & Snyder, 1997) “Gated communities are residential areas with restricted access such that normally public spaces have been privatized”. Similarly, (Touman, 2002) asserts that a gated community is an urban settlement surrounded by walls with several entrances. These entrances are controlled by gates with security agents guard them. Sometimes these gates are under video surveillance. The access to these settlements is strictly reserved to the residents and their visitors (Touman, 2002). These residential developments are usually equipped with recreational facilities, playgrounds, swimming pools and other basic amenities, which are exclusively accessible to residents, to ensure a certain level of lifestyle.

Teipelke explains the concept of gated communities taking an inclusive perspective. For him “It is the gate that is the focal point of the analysis – from an architectural, political, economic, or cultural point of view. The gate – by its function – separates the residents from the others. The gate – by its physical feature – is the starting and end point of the fence/wall often surrounding a gated community. The gate – by its symbolic meaning – is the entrance to an exclusive world in/next to the everyday life” (Teipelke, 2011).

2.2. Gated communities around the world:

The notion of gated communities is not new, the traditional city used to be surrounded by walls with a number of secured gates for defensive and security reasons. Many of the traditional cities were based on an enclosed form of social and economic solidarity and were closely-knit and homogeneous communities. In the late 20th century, this ancient urban type began to re-emerge in modern settlements, and rapidly grew in many countries around the world. According to (Landman, 2000), in the USA, as well as in some other countries in Asia and South America, a considerable part of the population lives in these settlements. An increasing number can also be found in Europe, the Middle East and in South Africa. However, they differ from country to country with respect to their characteristics, and in particular with regard to the different reasons behind their development, such as: security, ethnicity and prestige (Levent & Gülümser, 2007). For example in South Africa and some parts of the US the main reason for their emergence, as stated by (Touman, 2002), is the increasing crime rate in their surroundings. Some residents decide to run away from this “risky” environment and live in a safely closed gated community. In other parts of the US, they are designed mainly for the urban elite (Blakely & Snyder, 1997). While in Europe, the primary reason for gated communities is the seasonal use of houses in coastal zones. On the other hand, in major cities like London and Amsterdam they have become a fashionable trend (AJIBOLA, OLOKE, & OGUNGBEMI, 2011).

In Saudi Arabia, another type of Gated Communities can be found. The purpose of gated communities there are to provide their expat inhabitants with the same lifestyle exist in their homelands. So they can freely practice their daily activities, which are prohibited outside the gates because they contradict local traditions or simply against the laws of the land (Touman, 2002). Therefore, it is mainly occupied by expatriates whose residence is part of their work contract.

2.3. Problems of contemporary cities associated with the presence of gated communities:

Drawing on (Ghonimi, El Zamly, Khairy, & Soilman, 2011), the physical and social features of gated communities do not only impact their inner structure, but they also impact their adjacent areas, and collectively they effect the overall urban fabric of the city. Therefore, taking a look into some crucial issues that relate to the impacts of gated communities on our contemporary cities is relatively important.

Alessandro Aurigi in his book *Making the Digital City* claimed in the context of exploring the crisis of contemporary cities that “cities have gone to pieces, the city is not a whole anymore;

new edges are developing within the city itself 'Fragmentation' is probably the keyword when it comes to speaking about contemporary urban space, and this phenomenon can be observed in social life as well as the production of built environment" (Aurigi, 2005). An obvious example of this is the recent developments of gated communities that cause the physical and social spaces to break up into bits that seem independent and detached from each other. This is supported by (Ajibola, Oloke, & Ogungbemi, 2011), who outlined that "the rise of gated communities can lead to spatial fragmentation and separation in cities as a result of its security and financial implications. Gated communities give a sense of community, safety, security and social exclusion which lead to urban fragmentation and separation." Consequently, fragmentation can cause the city to be not a whole anymore; or a city anymore.

3. Method of investigation:

The research questions addressed in this paper will be on the grounds of urban theories concerning successful neighborhoods' urban design elements and local context of Doha city. The impacts of gated communities on the physical and social aspects of the city urban fabric will be evaluated and examined with reference to set of indicators derived from the literature of practical lessons learnt from mistakes by idealist planners and theories of the essential qualities of city grain that must be present to achieve a good urban environment such as mixed-use, dense, divers, integrated and connected urban fabric. It will also take the case study 'Dar Al Salam' gated community, as means to identify patterns and draw conclusion of a practical nature about Doha's urban and social fabric. Specifically, this case study has been selected to reveal the course of physical and social impacts of real practice of building gated communities in Qatar. The paper will analyze qualitative primary and secondary data. The secondary data was sourced from academic reports and books mainly through the internet in the form of word or pdf documents. While primary data was obtained through site analysis using the following data collection tools: walk through, observations, interviews and site reconnaissance. All were conducted by the author in the case study area in different days of the week to guarantee the accuracy of the results. The site analysis was done to cross check the good urban fabric indicators extracted from the literature to evaluate the impact of the gated pattern on the physical and social aspects of the study area and its surrounding. The collection of data was in the form of photos, drawings, and notes. Photos were taken from inside and outside the compound. Arial photos extracted from google earth were used too for mapping the study area and its surrounding. Moreover, number of interviews was undertaken with the residents of the compound to investigate the reason behind their choice to live there and their living experience within the walls.

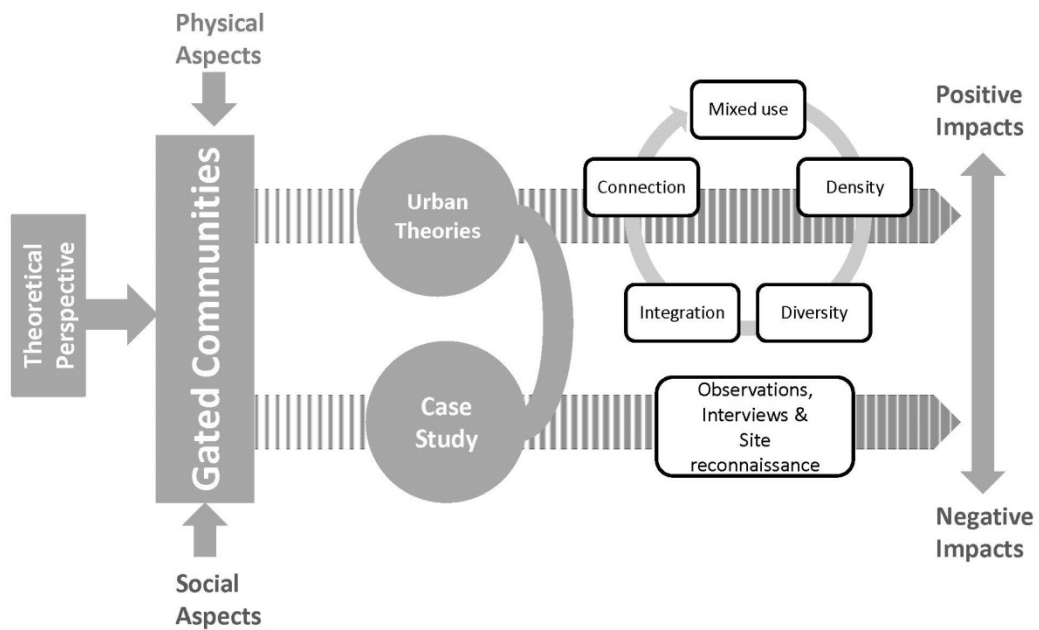


Figure 1. Framework of the research. Source: author

The paper is organized as follows: Section one includes the research theme, background and main argument. **Section two** presents the theoretical perspectives which frame the research investigation. **Section three** outlines the research methodology. **Section four** contains analysis and evaluation and the case study. Finally, **section five** concludes with the main findings and makes number of recommendations for future planning approaches to residential areas in Doha.

4. Gated communities’ evaluation and analysis:

In order to evaluate the physical and social impacts of gated communities the following indicators have been developed with reference to practical lessons learnt from mistakes by idealist planners and theories. The indicators of mixed-use, dense, diverse, integrated and connected urban fabric. The **first section** will outline some theories for the successful physical aspect of the urban fabric, and then the **second section** will present the social aspect. The **third section** contains the local context with the case study.

4.1. The physical fabric:

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* 1961, Jane Jacobs describes the four necessary physical conditions for dynamic urban life: multifunctional neighborhoods, short blocks and connected street systems, varied age residential areas and a high concentration of people (Jacobs J., 2007). Also in the same book, Jacobs introduced the idea of eyes on the streets. “Dense, street-oriented residential buildings mixed with small-scale local commercial shops provide eyes on the street that keep the city safe” (Jacobs J., 2007).

Moving to Jacobs and Appleyard, they theorize, in their urban design manifesto, the essential qualities of city grain that must be present to achieve a good urban environment: “Livable streets and neighborhoods, a minimum residential density and intensity of use, integration of activities, buildings that define public space, and many different buildings and spaces with complex arrangements and relationships” (Jacobs & Appleyard, 2007).

The charter of the new urbanism, from Congress for New Urbanism (1996), with reference to the best qualities of the traditional neighborhood design, outlined number of guiding principles

that focus on the physical spatial structure. One of the design principles in the scale of the neighborhood states that: “Neighborhoods should be compact, pedestrian-friendly and mixed-use” (Urbanisim, 2007).

From the few above mentioned theories, different criteria can be deduced in order to achieve the physical fabric that can provide integrated and livable environment in the city. These criteria include the following factors: having mixed use, compact, integrated, and high-density neighborhoods in place of single use, segregated, low-density settlements. Controversially, gated communities clearly represent large-scale privatization of vast areas of the city urban fabric. Large long walled blocks limit the continuity, accessibility, and affect the connectivity of the street systems. They are also characterized with low-density, single-use of inward residential developments. Creating lifeless, blank, windowless, walled streets around them that consequently lead to the loss of public life, limit people experience with the city, and reduce safety in the city as the notion of “eyes on the street” will not be applicable at all.

4.2. The social fabric:

In *Uses of sidewalks contact from The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs describes how casual interaction with others on everyday urban streets leads to social cohesion and sense of belonging (Jacobs J., 2007).

Moving again to the urban design principles set in *The Charter of the New Urbanism*. One principle emphasized is that: “within neighborhoods a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community” (Urbanisim, 2007).

Kevin Lynch in *Dimensions of Performance from Good City Form* (1981) describes the characteristics of good city form by linking the human values with the nature of the “good city”. In this regard he suggested that: “Settlement is good when enhances the continuity of culture and the survival of its people, increases a sense of connection in time and space, and permits or spurs individual growth: development, within continuity, via openness and connection”. (Lynch, 2007)

From the above mentioned views it is easy to note that the cohesive social fabric linked to diversity in housing types and the social groups, the interaction and connection between all kinds of people, and the integration and inclusion of the community. Thus, it rejects social segregation, separation, exclusion, and inequality. Taking that into account, gated communities which are characterized with having single housing typology with homogeneous socio-economic class of people, and act like borders that prevent the connection and interaction between individuals of the same society, will eventually weakened the civic bonds and sense of belonging, enhance social segregation and fragmentation, and consequently produce a highly unequal society and unhealthy neighborhoods.

Grounding on the above evaluation of gated communities, one can argue that they neither achieve the physical criteria of the successful physical fabric nor the social one. But, on the contrary, they represent the exact opposite of any good physical or social urban theory. Accordingly, gated communities negatively impact the physical and social aspects of the city urban fabric.

4.3. Setting the scene: Gated Communities in Doha:

Going back to the history of gated communities in Doha, it has been found according to (Mahgoub & Khalfani, 2012) and (Lockerbie, 2005) that the first compounds or gated

residential developments found in Qatar were developed by merchants' families like Darwish and Al Manna in early or mid of 1940s. Then the idea started to flourish in the inner city, and a number of walled residential developments appeared inside the different freej. Later in the late of 1950s Qatar witnessed the arrival of foreign oil companies and the migration of the labor force. The accommodation of the labor force was provided mainly with gated communities housing type. As well, the oil companies were settled within newly developed gated settlements supplied with all the utilities as the city was not established enough back then to handle the increasing numbers of the population. The merchant took the opportunity and expand their work to make more profit through supplying the accommodation, which regarding the diversity of the newly comers, took the shape of gated communities. With the economic development of the state and increase of businesses that involved the migration of labor forces to Qatar, gated communities spread all over the districts of Doha. Moreover, construction companies and real estate markets contribute in the building and enlarging the numbers of these residential developments in order to make profit (Mahgoub & Khalfani, 2012)(Lockerbie, 2005).



Figure 2. Photo for the merchants gated communities on the sea front of Doha back in 1950 (Lockerbie, 2005).

Doha now is competing to become a global city, is this gated pattern of housing serving the city urban and social fabric positively? Are gated communities an appropriate development typology for Doha urban and social needs in terms of providing integrated and livable environment? What are their physical and social impacts on the city urban fabric?

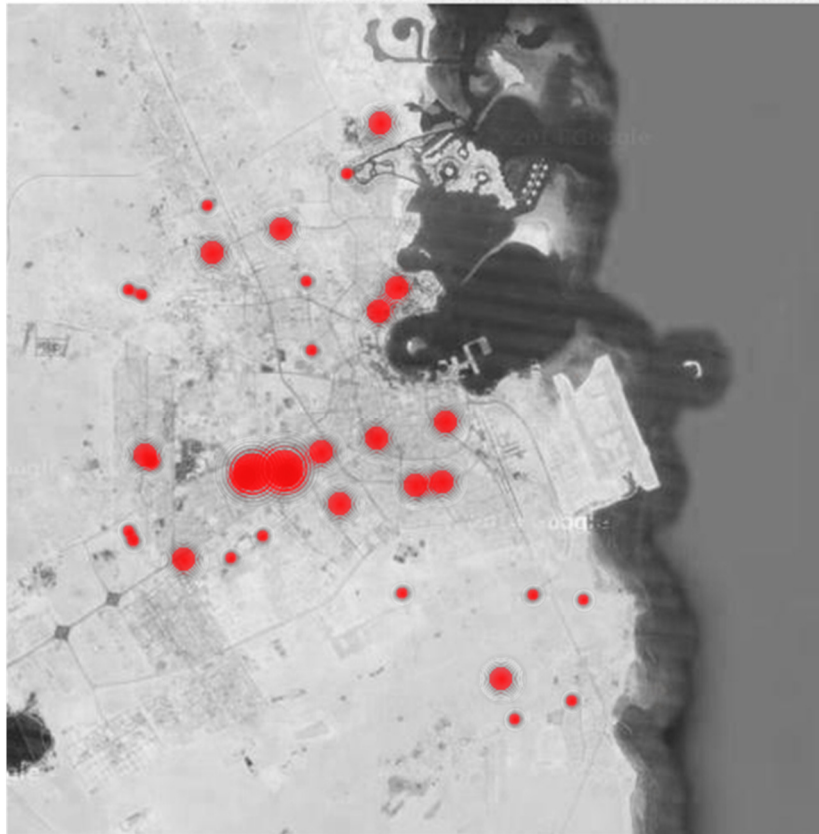


Figure 3. Map of Doha showing the distribution of gated communities over the city (Qatar map, 2012)

First of all it is important to understand the basis of gated communities in Qatar. Beside of the reviewed historical facts for the initial reason behind its existence, it is vital to underline the contemporary reasons led to the spreading of this gated phenomenon in the state. As Qatar has a different experience from other countries around the world like for instance North America, Europe, or China, gated communities in the country have different roles, and different justifications altogether. The state of Qatar is considered one of the safest countries in the world with a low crime rate assessed by the U.S. Department of State in 2010. Therefore, the safety issue is most likely not the reason behind the popularity of gated communities within the city and its citizens. So why gated communities in Doha? What is the basis for them? If it is not the crime, it has to be another reason.

Looking into the grounds for gated communities in Doha, it has been found that, the increasing numbers of expats in the country result in shaping highly diverse demography of different cultures, which made people tend to isolate their culture in order to give the possibility for them to preserve various levels of freedom within these gated developments. Another aspect is the employer-based provision of the housing system in Gulf countries. Each company offers certain privileges to its employees, and in order to make things manageable and to have these services as part of the package and the advantages which is offered through the contract, they have to make it exclusive. In this case, gated communities are not sought for security, but it is just as a part of the parcel of certain privileges offered to a group of people. In the wider perspective, these practical considerations gave justification for the presence of gated communities in Doha city but beside these practical considerations they have devastating effects on the city in large. Therefore, to place the research in a more informed position, a closer more defined approach was necessary to identify patterns and draw conclusion of a practical nature. Hence, a detailed

case study of ‘Dar Al Salam’ gated community in Doha has been undertaken to reveal the course of physical and social impacts of real practice.

4.4. Case Study:

Dar Al Salam compound in Abu Hamor district is a typical example of gated communities in Doha in terms of its physical characteristics. It is surrounded by perimeter wall with two main entrances controlled by guards and surveillance cameras; the access is limited to residents and their visitors only. The population density in this development is much higher than other gated communities since it includes 320 apartments within two stories to three stories height buildings, along with 151 villas with a total population of nearly 1700. It also includes a number of amenities probably referring to its relatively big size and medium density; the amenities are more varied than what is usually available in other compounds. The provided amenities are namely: Swimming pool, two gyms, recreational club, club house, playground, female and male hairdresser salons, supermarket and one café.

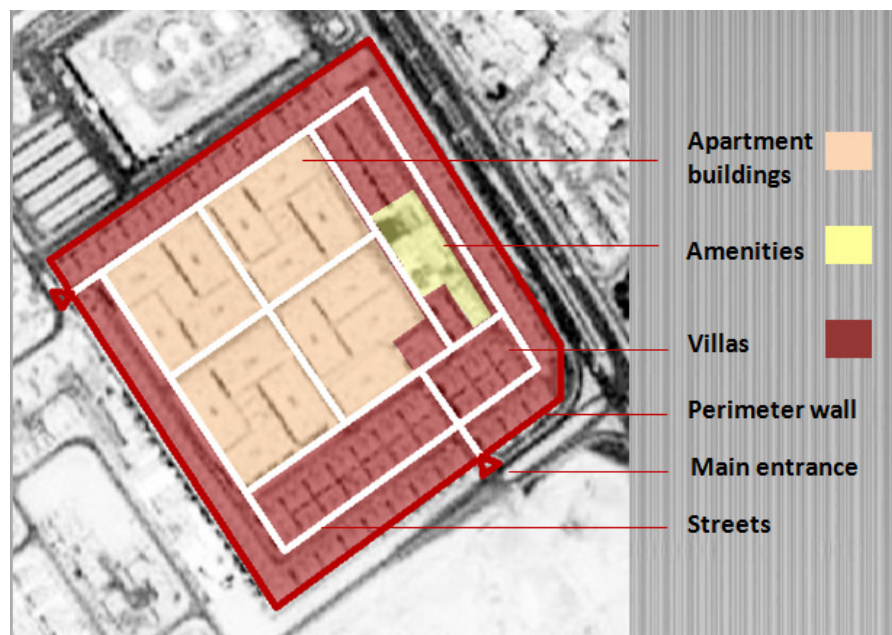


Figure 4. Dar Al Salam gated community Site Plan. Source: author

This development commissioned in 2011 was initially constructed to house employees of Qatar Airways. However, only part of it was leased to Qatar Airways, and the remaining were leased out to the public and some other organizations in particular cases. Forty percent of the residents only are living in the development as part of their employment contract. The Residents descend from different cultures and backgrounds, including some Qatari families.



Figure 5. Gated community entrances and perimeter wall. Source: author

The whole territory around the compound tends to be organized into zones more and more disconnected from each other. The residential developments tend to be designed as ‘closed systems’ of either gated communities or single family residence. The district is served with a small scale center that includes one shopping mall, a mosque, and a parking lot. Therefore, to some extent the area serves as a neighborhood but a dismembered one with a single-use, low-density, divided residential areas. And here lies the problem of gated communities in Doha. While around the world they usually exist on the outskirts of the city, in Doha they are in the middle of the city occupying the place what should have been a mixed-use, compact neighborhood structure.

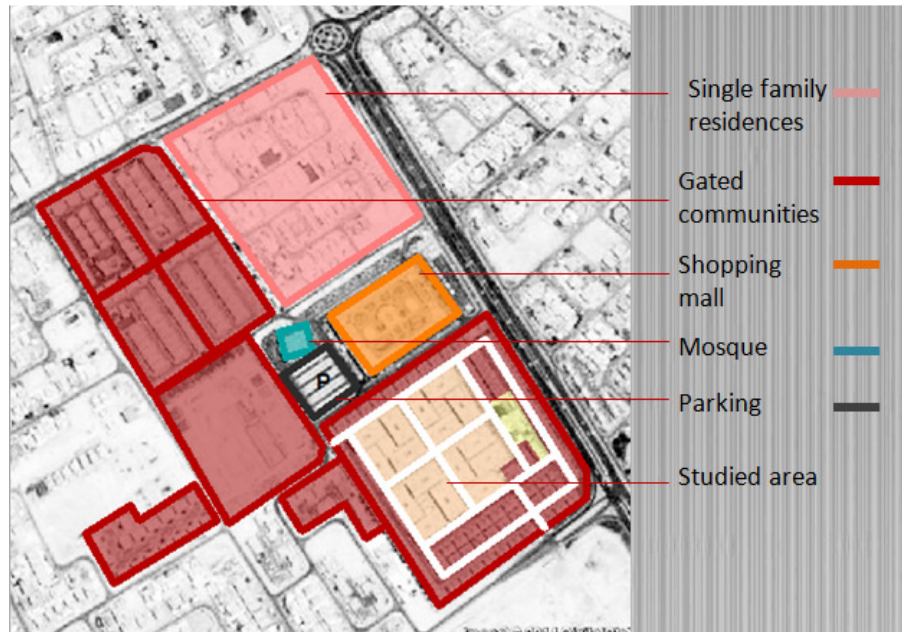


Figure 6. Dar Al Salam residential gated community and its surrounding. Source: author.

According to the social aspect, that is limited in this paper to measure the urban accessibility and the interpersonal relations and activities. The observations showed that the urban accessibility is very poor due to the presence of the perimeter wall and the controlled gates that disconnect the spaces and weaken people’s interaction. This disconnection made the residents as well as the public take longer journeys to reach the surrounding areas mostly taking their cars even for what was supposed to be considered a walking distance. The observation results showed also the interpersonal relations and the activities inside the compound are insufficient, since the compound population more or less shares only the same working class with totally different backgrounds, lifestyle and personal preferences. A common ‘outdoor room’ for casual meetings between the residents is missed inside the compound and the activities are limited to some children playing in the playground and a group of people using the provided aforementioned amenities.

Beside of the evaluation of the physical and social impacts, some interviews were conducted with a number of residents in order to explore people choice to live in the compound and their living experience within its walls. The interviews gave an idea that most have chosen to live in the compound because they were looking for a sense of a community and security in the diverse, multi cultures city of Doha, as one resident reported: “I feel more secure here knowing that not everyone can pass by my front door specially with the mixed demographics of Doha neighborhoods”. The extensive influx of diverse groups and the short-term stays are some of the reasons behind people’s security concerns as they did not perceive the city as home. Another main reason was their search for a safe environment for their kids to play in the street, have

friends and got a chance to experience the ‘city’. One resident elaborated: “I moved here because I was really tired of going back and forth across the city everyday looking for a place to entertain my kids, now I am more relaxed having my kids playing in the playground area with their new friends”. This explains the lack of proper neighborhood planning where the daily activities such as the neighborhood park or the kid’s playground are not in a close proximity of walking distance to every residential area if at all existed. Outside the gated community there is no hierarchy for streets, no safe streets, and no sidewalks. It is a car-dependent society, hence, cars are everywhere; as a result, people feel much safer knowing that they can walk and have their children play in a controlled space. The availability of parking spaces within the compound area was another aspect, as well. As one explained: “We chose to live here because it is easier to find parking areas for our cars and for our visitors’, outside it was a real problem for us”. Yet, another group of residents expressed that the main point that attracted them to live in Dar Al Salam compound in specific is the availability of apartments inside the gated community itself and not only villas which provided an option to have this standard of living for more families with lower income and subsequently provided for people of different income levels intermingle within their community.



Figure 6. Gated community child friendly environment. Source: author.

However, the sense of community provided in the gated development does not serve as a public life in any city sense. It is more various degrees of expanded private life. The lack of social connectivity in Doha city affects public urban space to be diminished. Conversely, the lack of a natural and casual public life in the city causes residents to isolate themselves from each other. Therefore, gated communities are a cause and consequence of the fragmented urbanization, the lack of proper neighborhood planning structure, the absence of community sense and the inefficiency of public housing.

5. Conclusion:

This research has critically evaluated the impact of gated communities on some of the physical and social characteristics of Doha urban fabric, by identifying and examining their effects on the ground of urban design theory as well as on the context of Doha through a local case study. As indicated by the study, gated communities are a powerful urban planning tool which went farther than zoning in several respects. They create physical barriers to public access and privatize what should have been city public areas. Consequently, they lead to the loss of public life and create fragmentation of space and society. With the increasing numbers of expats in Doha city, along with the absence of the notion of neighborhood structure in Doha urban planning, people sought out gated communities as a refuge from the problems of the city urbanization and as a search for stability in the time of these increasing demographic changes.

However, consequently with the domination of this development typology, Doha is becoming a city of walls! It is relevant to drive for 10 minutes in the streets of Doha seeing nothing but walls on both sides of the street. Therefore, it is important for planning authorities to understand the dramatic negative impacts of gated communities on the physical and social aspects of Doha urban fabric in order to actively address the problems. As a start, this research can be developed in the future to propose design guidelines and solutions that address the negative impacts of the current situation in the study area. These guidelines can be applied on similar cases of gated pattern within the city to contribute to the overall limitation of its negative impacts. Taking into account some lessons from the success factors of gated communities (sense of neighborhood, safe streets and child-friendly environment), and reflect them in the urban planning strategies to improve them and then start to construct the alternative model of future urban developments that will serve Doha urban needs to achieve integrated and livable environment. Moreover, it is important for planning agencies to work on the scale of the entire city rather than focusing on a particular community or piece by piece planning approach. The mixed-use, mixed-income, dense, integrated, livable neighborhood structure is an essential basis for any successful, healthy city urban planning, and it is missing in Doha city. Its provision will be strictly linked to the integration of all planning agencies to set planning legislation and design guidelines for planning at the city level.

The paper does not suggest that replace gated communities with another more efficient development units will automatically overcome the fragmentation of the city. Also concerted effort by many parties is required to solve the contemporary city problems and injustices. But it does mean that to build healthy, livable and integrated cities whose neighborhoods are segregated and whose people are divided among their selves, will make it much harder for our cities to overcome its crisis no matter how much effort is spent.

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