

# Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States.

by Mark Purcell

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Edward Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press and Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1997), 209 pp., \$24.95 (cloth).

Fortress America, by Edward Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, is an attempt to analyze the growing phenomenon of gated communities in the United States. It joins the literature surrounding neighborhood defense, suburban exclusion, and residential social organization.

Unfortunately, readers familiar with the work of authors such as Robert Fishman, Kenneth Jackson, Marc Weiss, Mike Davis, and Evan McKenzie will find little that is new or surprising in this book.

The authors begin by setting gated communities in their historical and geographical context. They then present their tripartite typology of gated communities: lifestyle communities, prestige communities, and security zone communities. Lifestyle communities are geared toward a set of leisure activities; the gates cordon off the leisure resources for the exclusive use of community residents. Prestige communities use gates to symbolize the lofty status of their residents. In security zone communities, gates are defensive measures that residents hope will protect them from crime, traffic, and outsiders. The authors spend the next three chapters describing each of these in detail. They then present the results of a survey the authors conducted among residents and homeowner association board members in gated communities. They mix these results throughout the chapter with a survey conducted by the Community Associations Institute. Both surveys contain data about the importance of security, the sense of community, and the level of activism in gated communities. The authors conclude the book with a clear but reserved criticism of gated communities, citing their contribution to residential segregation, their destructive exclusivism, and their abandonment of public responsibility. The authors argue that gated communities do not effectively address the practical concerns of crime and traffic that they are supposed to. The last chapter offers alternatives to gated communities that the authors hope will assuage the anxiety of suburbanites while avoiding the pitfalls of physical barricades.

At the heart of the issue of gated communities are two phenomena. One is the actual physical gating itself--the erecting of material battlements around a neighborhood. The other is the changing social organization of single-family neighborhoods--the rise of homeowner associations and so-called common interest developments (CIDs). CID neighborhoods are privately owned in

common by their residents; they are governed by a homeowner association (in which membership is mandatory for all residents), and their infrastructure is largely maintained by hefty dues paid by the residents. Not all CIDs are gated (although many are), and not all gated areas are CIDs (although most are). There is a close relationship between the two phenomena, but they are not the same thing.

One of the central weaknesses in Fortress America is a failure to carefully draw distinctions between these two phenomena. Evan McKenzie's *Privatopia* covered CIDs and homeowner associations extensively but left the issue of physical barriers largely latent. Where this book could have contributed nicely to the work already done by others would have been to show the particular motivations for and effects of physical gating as separate from the motivations for and effects of CIDs and home owner associations. The authors do make attempts at such a distinction. In chapter 6, they briefly attempt to isolate the effects of gates by comparing their survey results from gated communities against a survey of CIDs containing both gated and nongated communities (pp. 130-31). They point out in an endnote, however, that they could not separate the gated from the nongated CIDs in the second survey, and so they essentially drop the attempt (p. 188). They also try to separate the gated non-CID neighborhoods by means of their "security zone" type of gates communities. In these communities, the impetus for the gates comes from the residents rather than the developer. Defining the type in this way means that most security zone communities will be non-CIDs since CIDs are almost always created a priori by the developer. However, the authors never make this non-CID status explicit, and they miss the opportunity to compare non-CID gated areas to CID gated ones. In general, the effects of CIDs are lumped in with the effects of gates throughout the book. In fact, one could argue that gates are not really the issue at all and that most of the motivations and effects of gated communities that the authors present are really the motivations and effects of CIDs and are mostly incidental to the existence of gates.

The book is strongest in the middle chapters when it is reporting the data collected in a series of interviews conducted in several gated communities in California, Texas, and Florida. These probed the reasons why people have chosen to live in gated communities. Although the authors eventually reveal themselves to be sharply critical of gated communities, they do well to take the interview subjects seriously, treating their responses respectfully and reporting them plainly. The result is some very good information on the mind-set of the consumers of gated communities, a mind-set that is crucial in understanding

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the larger phenomenon.

The authors state in the preface that the "book is intended for public officials, policymakers, educators, and the general public" (p. viii). Academics whose work centers on closely related topics will find the book lacks analytical sharpness and is of limited use beyond the empirical interview data. For instructors, the book might serve as an effective illustration in a broader survey of, say, residential segregation, white flight, or urban political fragmentation. In the end, the book may be seen as a first exploration of an important topic. Despite its shortcomings, if Fortress America can inspire further research into gated communities, CIDs, and neighborhood privatization and fortification, then it will have provided a service to the research community.