

Security Boom in Orange County Gated Communities: False Sense of Safety?; [Orange County Edition]

JIM CARLTON. *Los Angeles Times*, 27 September 1989, pg. 1

The Rolling Hills subdivision in Laguna Niguel, a comfortable enclave of \$500,000 tract homes, is a place where young professionals can raise families in quiet seclusion, away from the frenetic pace of South Orange County.

But the residents, not satisfied with the privacy that comes from their many limited-access cul-de-sac streets, are taking steps to transform the neighborhood into a virtual sanctuary by surrounding the 315-home subdivision with fences and electronic gates.

All over Southern California, more and more communities, condominium complexes and apartment buildings are building walls and gates to try to seal off the pressures and dangers of the outside world.

Although many believe that snob appeal is fueling the gating frenzy, industry officials say the major force behind the boom is the public's desire for more security. Having a fence around their neighborhood makes people think they have locked crime out.

But if it is criminals they seek to exclude, their solution seems less than perfect. Only last weekend, a 12-year-old girl was kidnaped from her Huntington Beach home inside Sea Cliff on the Greens, a gate-guarded condominium complex ringed by walls and patrolled by a private security force. And it was hardly the first time that crime inside a walled community made headlines.

In Los Angeles, California Secretary of State March Fong Eu was robbed and savagely attacked in a November, 1986, break-in at her home in a gated and guarded community in Hancock Park. Police speculated that the intruder, who was later caught and convicted for the crime, vaulted a wall surrounding the community.

In Laguna Niguel, newlyweds Keith and Patty Harrington, were beaten to death on Aug. 19, 1980, in the bedroom of their home in the Niguel Shores gated community. Orange County Sheriff's investigators say they still haven't a clue as to why the couple were attacked or who killed them.

And in Laguna Hills, the presence of gates, guards and high walls surrounding the Leisure World retirement community did not deter a 1980 burglary spree of 17 residences. A subsequent lawsuit brought by one of the residents disclosed security measures that were so lax that one visitor was admitted after flashing a Disneyland Magic Kingdom card.

While many security analysts agree that gates do deter many criminals, police studies show they by no means are impenetrable.

Police in Irvine and Newport Beach conducted separate studies several years ago that showed the property crime rate in gated communities was comparable to the burglary rate in similar non-gated communities.

Security consultant Bruce Ramm, a former Orange police officer, said that gates are easily circumvented, either by leaping over a retaining wall or by simply following an authorized vehicle.

Once inside, Ramm said, criminals often find a populace lulled into a false sense of security. Oftentimes, he said, front doors are left unlocked and Neighborhood Watch programs go unformed because the residents believe that criminals will not come in.

"Just because you have gates doesn't mean nothing is going to happen," Ramm said. "Your front door should be your gate."

A final security problem in gated communities is something of a Catch-22. Police officers responding to an emergency call sometimes find their access impeded by a gate.

Gated communities are required to provide emergency access codes to police and fire officials and must maintain a "crash gate" that officials could drive through, if necessary. But police say they sometimes can't get in because they are not kept up to date on the access codes. They also say there are delays even if everything is working according to plan.

"You still have to stop and get the gate open," said Sgt. Phil Povey of the Irvine Police Department.

Officials in the gate security business agree that gates don't eliminate all crime, but they maintain that gates-especially guarded gates-do provide a deterrent.

"First of all, burglars for the most part don't go in on a skateboard. They go in driving something," said Jack Smith, former operations manager for Saddleback Security Systems in Mission Viejo, which deploys guards at several Southland gated communities. "In order to get vehicles in, they have to go through a gate. And if challenged by a guard, that's a real deterrent. It's not Checkpoint Charlie, but the last thing a crook wants is to be identified."

Gates may not solve the entire problem, "but you'll solve 80 to 90%," said Ed Pyle, sales manager for Trans Meridien Systems in Northridge, a gate manufacturer. "If they (gates) can eliminate the biggest percentage of your problem, then that's good."

In Orange County, which is considered one of the nation's premier gate markets because of its relative affluence, a full one-third of the 140 new developments under way during 1988 featured security gates, according to the Residential Trends, a Costa Mesa publication that charts real-estate trends in Southern California.

In 1983, by contrast, the publication's survey found that only 15% of the county's new developments were being gated.

Access Controls of Burbank, Southern California's largest maker and installer of security gates, has been selling 35 to 40 security gates per month in the Southland. Company officials said they have a backlog that can stretch as long as five weeks, with the biggest demand coming from South Orange County.

But whatever the reason, security gates are translating into speedier house sales-and more money-for real estate developers.

"It's an amenity that all homeowners seem to enjoy," said Brian Theriot, director of investor relations for J.M. Peters Co., one of the Southland's largest builders of expensive homes. "Rather than being an extra trimming on the Christmas tree, as it used to be, it is now part of the tree."

The gating idea is not new-it dates back to antiquity. The Chinese built the 4,000-mile Great Wall to keep out northern invaders. In the Middle Ages, fearful communities fortified their castles with walls and moats to ward off attacks from roving marauders.

In the latter half of this century, gates became a mainstay of the very rich who constructed them to seal off their houses in such well-heeled cities as Malibu, Beverly Hills and Palm Springs.

Today, gates are not restricted to upscale neighborhoods. From the middle-class neighborhoods of the San Fernando Valley to the apartment buildings in South-Central Los Angeles, the gates are springing up in unprecedented numbers, experts say.

Gates are in such demand that many realtors are finding that buyers and renters strongly prefer properties that have them.

Brian Weinstock, president of Weinstock Construction in Studio City, said that the homes he builds within gated communities often sell out before development is completed, versus non-gated homes, which take as long as 60 days to sell. "The first question out of their (buyers') mouth is whether there is a gated community," he said.

Mark Baldassare, an associate professor in social ecology at UC Irvine, said the "snob appeal" aspect of gates attracts buyers in pricey areas like Orange County, where a recent survey found 40% of the residents considered themselves upper-middle class.

"People are constantly striving for ways to differentiate themselves from the middle class," Baldassare said. "To say you live in a gated community is a way of saying you earn enough money to separate yourself from the masses."

Mayor Larry Agran of Irvine, a planned city of about 100,000 residents, believes that gated communities convey the wrong impression and seem elitist. "We have lovely neighborhoods where we invite people to interact with one another," Agran said.

Developers of gated communities say a desire for privacy is more compelling than snob appeal. Having a gate, they say, enables residents to screen unwelcome visitors.

Gated communities also offer a "sense of community" that is not typical in newer urban areas like Southern California, added Joel Singer, executive vice president of the California Assn. of Realtors. A feeling of closeness exists, Singer said, because residents are responsible for upkeep of their streets and lighting, by virtue of their community's private status. They pay for the maintenance through homeowners' association dues or higher rents.

Gates save taxpayers' money, too, because local government agencies don't have to take care of the streets any longer when a gate goes up. Local government planners consequently, eagerly allow developers to put up gates-so long as they don't impede the traffic flow through the area, and not too many adjoining residents object.

Gated community builders say they frequently encounter opposition from nearby residents who object if walls potentially spoil a view or force them off streets they are accustomed to driving.

Regardless, gates are a valuable marketing tool. Weinstock said that although it costs him about \$80,000 to gate a community, he can make his money back not by charging more for the houses but by selling them faster.

The downside for homeowners in gated communities is that they have to pay to maintain the streets and the gates.

In the exclusive Turtle Rock community of Irvine-where residents want to put in gates but have been unable to obtain necessary city approval-a financial analysis done for the Turtle Rock Crest Homeowners' Assn. estimated that the community would have to spend \$300,000 over the next 30 years to finance the construction

costs of two gates and necessary road changes. The cost includes a 24-hour manned guard station.

For the community's 248 residents, that translates to an initial increase in homeowners' association fees of \$9.40 per month, the analysis concluded. The residents already pay about \$200 a month. Gate-related maintenance fees can run as high as \$25 a month in other gated communities.

These costs don't include the money it would take to upgrade the roads to county or city standards in the event residents later decide to take down their gate and reopen the community to the public. There is also the matter of liability. The community can be sued for problems involving its roads.

Residents, once they've begun to understand all the hidden costs, sometimes become angry when they find that-for all their money-the gates don't work. Gate malfunctions are so widespread that Trea Sparrow, vice president of Irvine-based Mercury Management-which manages 250 Southland homeowners' associations-said she could not think of one that has not had problems.

"They are just a big headache," said Sparrow.

Given the drawbacks, there is rarely unanimity among residents inside a community on whether or not to have gates.

In Laguna Niguel's Rolling Hills, about 85% of the residents voted in favor of gates, said Bob Botts, former president of the homeowners' association there. And in Irvine's Turtle Rock community, residents responding to a 1988 homeowners' association survey were divided 140 for and 31 against the prospect of gating.

While the Turtle Rock proponents argue for more privacy, opponents there insist that a gate would be a nuisance appealing only to status.

"We already live in the nicest area of Irvine," said resident Joanne Sedleniek, "and we're just building a fortress to try and shut everybody else out in the community."