

COMMUNITY IN PRIVATE RESIDENTIAL ESTATES

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Urban and Regional Planning and Policy

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Abstract

The notion of community has had enduring appeal while undoubtedly being one of the more perplexed notions in the social sciences. Community has often been considered a ‘myth’ in many urban areas, with urban areas being hostile environments for community formation. Particularly in relation to the development of private residential estates (often termed ‘gated communities’) in metropolitan regions across Australia, community is seen to be a commodity (purely a marketing device) and anything but real. In this paper, I (re)connect with community in the form of neighbourhood based interactions and associations through an engagement with the residents of a private residential estate (Macquarie Links) in Sydney, Australia, during detailed qualitative fieldwork in 2007. I provide a conceptualisation of the concept of community that takes into account commonalities and differences, consent and disagreement, private and community. Privatism and community are often considered the anti-thesis of each other or an impossible combination, yet both are marketed and sold to the residents of private residential estates. This research uncovered the meanings and lived experiences of privatism and community in the context of Macquarie Links. The research found that community and privatism were interrelated and relied on each other to be successful. Common bonds and disagreements have continually sustained the community of Macquarie Links, such as that between owners and renters, adults and young people, the community and the individual. These disagreements, differences and ‘dramas’ within the estate can be managed by the community association (through the private structure), thus sustaining community. Privatism and community do not run parallel within Macquarie Links, rather they are complexly intertwined. A new version of urban community pervades private residential estates.

Keywords: Community; Privatism; Protection; Private Residential Estates

Introduction

Private residential estates (PREs) are an important part of contemporary residential development in metropolitan Australia. PREs are master planned to coordinate the supply and development of physical and social infrastructure in new residential estates. PREs are developed by private development companies and incorporate a form of micro-urban governance, which determines the nature of the residential development as well as the ongoing management of the residential estate. PREs are the most recent extension of the more generic master planned residential estate that has attracted significant attention in recent times in Australia (see Gleeson, 2006; Gwyther, 2005; Kenna, 2007; Kenna and Dunn, 2009; McGuirk and Dowling, 2007). The key difference with the most recent extension of master planning for residential development is that PREs depend upon specific legislation that enables the private ownership of land. Further, PREs are developed within already established local municipal council areas.

Given the critical attention that has surrounded the development of private gated residential estates, there was a need for a thorough understanding of the complexities and lived realities within private residential estates. In developing an analytical framework for Australian urban research into the development of master planned residential estates that takes account of the growing diversity of the PRE phenomenon both physically and internally, McGuirk and Dowling (2007:34) argue that an important dimension of this framework is to develop a better understanding of lived realities of both community and neighbourhood. This dimension of the framework is particularly important given that, as McGuirk and Dowling (2007:34) state, 'Australian research is underdeveloped in this regard'. Thus, to advance the state of knowledge on community and social life within private residential estates, I conducted in-depth qualitative ethnographic research in a PRE in metropolitan Sydney – Macquarie Links.

Method

Located in the Sydney metropolitan region 30km southwest of the Sydney CBD, Macquarie Links, Sydney's largest gated residential estate, is the PRE under examination in this paper. Macquarie Links, like the gated estates of Sanctuary Cove and Hope Island in south east Queensland, Australia, is one of the more extreme examples of gating residential space. Macquarie Links is one of nearly 350 PREs in the Sydney metropolitan region (UDIA, 2008). Australian PREs range in size and style with some incorporating large-scale suburban developments and others being in-fill developments in the inner city (see McGuirk and Dowling, 2007). Macquarie Links is an outer suburban residential estate with approximately 400 households. The residential estate has a mix of housing styles including apartments and free-standing homes, as well as an array of amenities such as swimming pools, tennis courts and a golf course. The estate is privately governed by a community association. Detailed qualitative fieldwork (surveys and interviews) was undertaken with residents within Macquarie Links in 2007. This resulted in a data set comprising 52 completed surveys and 30 interviews with residents.

Understanding Urban Community

Community has been a fairly uncertain notion in the social sciences over the past few decades. Current phases of globalisation and increased mobility has seen a reduced importance of place-based communities, whereby communities are said to have become more ideological, or imagined (following Anderson, 1983), and make use of new information technologies to connect with those with similar interests (see Castells, 2001; Delanty, 2003). The research in Macquarie Links reconnected with community in the form of neighbourhood based interactions and associations. Traditionally urban scholars have viewed urban environments or cities as hostile to community formation. The urban was in opposition to the rural where community was thought to exist (Tonnies, 1957). The assumed anomie and

individualism of modern society – the city – was seen as detrimental to the development of social relations, and only superficial relations were thought to form amongst urban inhabitants (Durkheim, 1964; Simmel, 1971; Wirth, 1938). Notions of community lost in urban areas have had enduring appeal within urban studies. This is in part related to the continued ideal of community as small, homogenous, consenting and rural as presented by Tonnies (1957). More recently, some scholars have considered the growth of privatism and private affluence to have been detrimental to the formation of community, in that society is increasingly individual and rarely reliant on the communal or the collective. Here, privatism and community are positioned as the anti-thesis of one another (see Pawley, 1973).

Running parallel to these notions of a loss of community in urban areas was the urban sociology and ethnography of communities and neighbourhoods that engaged with city residents to uncover their experiences of community and neighbouring, and to understand exactly what community meant to urban residents and how community had formed. Based around these studies, urban communities have been thought to emerge, and subsequently be sustained, through the commonalities of community members (see Gans, 1962, 1967; Young and Willmott, 1957). These commonalities have often included common kinship or family, common ideological beliefs, and various forms of social organisation. These understandings of community still largely insisted on consent and solidarity as key to community. Some recent articulations and conceptualisations of community have suggested that urban researchers should consider difference, diversity, complexity and contradictions within communities as a way of progressing understandings of community in urban studies and being able to uncover a diverse range of communities within cities and broader metropolitan regions. Indeed, understandings of both commonalities, and differences and complexities, within communities will strengthen understandings of urban communities.

The persistence of the notion in the various social science literatures suggests the need for a continued engagement with the notion and continued research into community development, formation and function. In urban theory, cities have long been considered chaotic and diverse, so perhaps then academic understandings of community should account for diversity, chaos and complexity. As previously noted, the ideal of community as homogenous and consenting has potentially hindered the progress of theories of urban community. Secomb (2000:134) argues that community can be reconceptualised without doing away with the notion of community altogether:

Disagreement ... holds a space open for diversity and for freedom. It is not disagreement, resistance, and agitation that destroy community. It is rather the repression or suppression of difference and disagreement in the name of unity and consensus which destroys the engagement and interrelation of community.

Secomb (2000:137) further argues that 'instead of insisting on consensus, community needs to be open to disagreement, resistance, and fracture'. The point of understanding disagreements and diversities within community will be important for scholars as 'searching for disagreement or dissonance within community will be as informative as identifying consensus' (Panelli and Welch, 2005:1593). The argument presented in this work is that understandings of community as singular, homogenous and consenting, do not allow for understandings of internal dynamics within communities. Differences and diversities, tensions and contradictions within communities are perhaps the markings of contemporary urban communities. In this paper I argue that understanding the formation of community in Macquarie Links relies on the identification of commonalities *and* complexities, consent *and* disagreement, private *and* community, which in turn allows for a consideration of the ways in which community forms within a private residential estate. Troubling the assumptions that

privatism and affluence do not create community, this paper sets out how community forms within private residential estates and what community means for the residents of my study.

Community in Macquarie Links

In the resident questionnaire respondents were asked to identify whether they felt part of a community in Macquarie Links. Eighty six percent (86%) of respondents stated that they did. Following this it was important to consider what community means for the residents of Macquarie Links, how community is understood, managed and negotiated within the neighbourhood. In a brief open response section following this question, respondents were asked to identify why they felt part of a community. What was surprising was that many of the interactions that the residents identified were not based around everyday interactions and connections usually associated with 'community' (see Gans, 1962, 1967; Young and Willmott, 1957), but around more formal processes and interactions associated with the community association. They are more formalised interactions. Many of the responses were linked to the structure and nature of the community, particularly the meetings and common goals and agendas amongst the residents. A selection of such responses follows:

Neighbourhood watch; neighbourhood meetings; facilities and concierge. (MLE 37, 2007)

Most everyone in the estate are very friendly, attending community meetings, acknowledgement of you by gatehouse staff. (MLE 6, 2007)

In these responses from the residents, the key themes here in relation to the residents' sense of community or neighbourliness, are that the residents have something in common, but that common thread appears to be the formal private structure of the neighbourhood. In

Macquarie Links, the sense of community seems to have developed out of the formal structure of the residential development where residents have the chance to connect with, get to know, and form relationships with other residents in the neighbourhood.

Interviewees for my study were asked if they interact with their neighbours. Many of the residents appear to have very positive, everyday interactions within the estate. The collegiality through dinner parties and informal neighbourhood events seems to be high.

Yes [laughing]! We've been known to have a glass of wine out the front. Christmas on the front lawn with a bottle of wine! (Tracey: Female; 40-50; 4 years)

Yes, yes, yes, we have dinner. Last Saturday we had dinner next door, Bob's place, BBQ, a few neighbours. We had dinner here on 16th November and we had about 30 people in this big room, so we associate and communicate with neighbours a lot more than what we did before. (Richard: Male; 50-60; 2.5 years)

These interactions suggest a certain level of neighbourliness and communication and interaction amongst the residents. Community, in the sense of neighbourhood based interactions and associations, is very real for these residents. This extends our understandings of private residential estates as serving economic and governance functions only. Importantly, these findings also demonstrate that privatism and community are not mutually exclusive but co-exist in the neighbourhood of Macquarie Links.

In *Behind the Gates* Setha Low (2003) provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of life within gated communities in North America to date. After conducting many in depth interviews with residents within the case study gated communities, Low concludes that 'the jury is still out as to whether gated communities provide a greater sense of community than non-gated neighbourhoods' (Low, 2003:70). Low's findings suggest that many of the

residents did not find the gated residential neighbourhoods very friendly nor did they feel a greater sense of community. The findings from the Macquarie Links residents however suggest that there is a tangible sense of community in Macquarie Links and that residents are actually experiencing and creating community engagement and social interaction.

Understanding community as dynamic, complex and contradictory has assisted in understanding the complexities of the interactions and interfaces between the private structure of the neighbourhood of Macquarie Links, and of community. Further, grounded understandings of these concepts assisted in determining the lived realities of these key concepts in contemporary urban areas and specifically in Macquarie Links. Belief in the common structure and ideology of the neighbourhood, as well as internal disagreements and tensions with this structure and its management, have allowed for the formation of a new version of urban community. Privatism and community do not run parallel in this private residential estate – they are complexly intertwined. In the next section, I want to demonstrate the intimacy of these two concepts with the management of a PRE.

Protection through *privatism and community*

In this section, I draw on the governance structure for the neighbourhood in my study and the functioning of this community to highlight how the restrictive covenants and management statement for this residential development (communal tactics) offer an ordered and *protected* residential environment, and how this is achieved through the combination of *privatism and community*. Protection is offered to the residents through their collective, careful negotiation of the private structure of the neighbourhood.

To understand this, I analyse the importance placed by the residents on the ability to protect their lifestyles and to protect themselves from any 'unwanted' activities or groups. Ultimately, the discussion in this paper demonstrates that for the residents in my study, residing in a secure residential neighbourhood is less about the role and place of physical security and security services, and more to do with protection and community control that is available through the construction of the neighbourhood around neighbourhood committees and restrictive covenants – an outcome of the Community Schemes Legislation.

Many of the residents of Macquarie Links were attracted to the location due to petty crimes and malicious damage to property that was occurring within their previous suburb.

At our old place we had our creepy crawly stolen out of the pool, we had our front hose reel stolen from the front of the house, we were down on holidays somewhere and our neighbour rang and said there was a prowler in our house and the police came and saw him. We had constant beer bottles on our property, we had a car chase and the car went across our corner and dug up big holes, and another time a motor cycle was being chased by police and he went across our lawn and he was going 100 miles an hour. ... and then we've had all this stuff stolen from outside, pot plants, etc. ... People would come up to our corner, we had a lot of young people down the bottom, and they'd all do wheelies as they came out of our corner and they'd be spinning the car, occasionally cars would spin and you'd go oh. But we just put up with that for years. (Herbert: Male; 50-60; 6 months)

The reality of the gates and security were very tenuous. There were many instances of crime occurring within the estate. For example, a drug lab was set up in the estate, guns had been confiscated, and there were a spate of robberies. Many of the residents who were interviewed were not particularly fazed by these events – it was exciting and a good source of gossip. Within Macquarie Links, security performed other functions.

Private urban residential developments are increasingly employing subtler techniques to ensure order, control and protection, such as governance mechanisms or restrictive covenants, or even design features and physical landscaping (see Rofe, 2006). Macquarie Links is designed in accordance with Community Schemes Legislations (see CLDA, 1989; CLMA, 1989) and around a community management statement. The management plan sets out the constitution for the neighbourhood and incorporates the design and maintenance guidelines, often termed restrictive covenants. Restrictive covenants are in place to ensure the standard and quality of residential developments and have become increasingly popular with planners and developers. Restrictive covenants are quite common in regard to landscaping and design features of PREs (Gwyther, 2005; McGuirk and Dowling, 2007). In Macquarie Links, covenants are in place to ensure standards and amenity are maintained throughout and apply to housing (colour of roof tiles, letter boxes, size of driveway, colour of paint), as well as landscaping (types of plants, grass, fencing). Ensuring common designs and landscaping within Macquarie Links is a point at which private becomes communal and where the private structure is influenced by the community – the community makes the private work by enforcing restrictive covenants, and the private gives the community meaning and identity by creating order and stability.

Blakely and Snyder (1997:3) note that ‘gates and fences around our neighbourhoods represent more than simple physical barriers’ – gated PREs are manifestations of the ‘protection of privilege’ and of ‘the need for personal and community control of the environment’. The community has engaged in a means of ensuring that the standard and appearance of the neighbourhood is maintained. Essentially, the private residential structure does not work without community. In relation to privately governed neighbourhoods, McKenzie (1994:43) has termed this ‘participatory community’. Here, the private structure

allows for the community to be actively involved, and participate in, the development and progress of the residential neighbourhood. The residents are actively involved in taking measures to ensure the protection of their residential environment. An example of this is a restriction of pamphlet and newspaper deliveries within the neighbourhood of Macquarie Links. The delivery of pamphlets, newspapers and junk mail is considered too messy and reduces the quality and amenity of the neighbourhood. Such materials are delivered to the gatehouse of the residential development and hence controlled. As these residents explained:

Local papers at the gate and get one if you want so they're not lying on the road, and they don't let junk mail people in. You don't have them flying all over the place. (Joanne: Female; 50-60; 6 months)

But we're not allowed to have pamphlet deliveries. I was going to say here you don't see the papers all over the lawn in the suburbs and stuff, and it rains on them, and they stay there till they rot. You don't tend to get that here, but then we're not allowed to have any deliveries are we. (Karen: Female; 40-50; 2.5 years)

Restrictions on the activities of the neighbourhood such as these are decided upon by the community association. It is this level of participation that is linked quite strongly to the residents' sense of community and their involvement in an active localised democracy and decision making process. Again, the private structure relies on the community to be successful. Private residential estates through their private governance structure allow for this level of communal involvement whilst at the same time the private structure relies on that communal involvement to be successful.

Admittedly, much of the focus of the protection afforded by private governance, and restrictive covenants, is on the protection of property values and the protection of investments. The place of some of the more intangible aspects of protection in relation to community governance and restrictive covenants are under acknowledged in the literature.

The protection of elements of private residential developments such as aesthetics, lifestyles and the like, has not been fully considered. Further to the benefits perceived with respect to investment, many residents of Macquarie Links spoke also of seeking to protect their lifestyle and the associated benefits available to them in Macquarie Links. To these residents, the governance structure and restrictive covenants would ensure the maintenance of their lifestyles and communal desires, as this informant noted:

There were people who did the wrong thing, who put great big antenna things in their back garden looking over somebody's fence. I mean here was a rule that said you shouldn't do that, and you shouldn't do that. Why should you spoil someone else's outlook. Why put an 8-foot diameter antenna in your back garden, so those sorts of things are good. People having houses that are sort of strange colours and stuff like that, I mean there are enough odd colours here as it is, but you know having some control over those sorts of things I think is a good thing. It helps the aesthetics of the place. (Stephen: Male; 60-70; 5.5 years)

The fact that covenants ensure that a certain landscape, lifestyle and amenity are maintained for the residents is seen as a form of protection of the environment and a further protection of their investment. Informants were pleased that the aesthetic appeal of the neighbourhood would be maintained. The maintenance and protection of the estate's aesthetics is also linked to the maintenance of property values as presentation of the property and the estate in general is an importance factor in determining the value of a neighbourhood, but also has a deeper benefit regarding quality of life and quality of the neighbourhood, and general feelings of control over the residential environment.

Evidently for the residents of Macquarie Links security is the protection of privatism through community. Privatism however, does not easily conflate with neoliberalism or individualism. The communal tactics in place within the private structure of Macquarie Links, particularly the restrictive covenants and communal design features, are considerably contra

neoliberalism and individualism. Privatism in this instance relies on community and communalism to be successful.

In searching for more ordered and protected residential environments the residents of Macquarie Links are quick to address any 'problems' or 'unwanted' behaviour. Of course, community has always had a fairly exclusive element in that community has always defined in and out groups (see Thorns, 1976). The nature of the residential development and the structure of the neighbourhood committees means that residents are able to raise concerns with aspects of the development or ask for problems to be resolved ensuring the order and amenity of the neighbourhood is preserved, and essentially have considerable control over the residential environment.

The pool is the problem ... kids were getting up there and garbage was thrown in the pool and the BBQs, there's 2 BBQs up there and they were costing money to keep repaired. I think it's settled down a bit now, they've got CCTV back to the gatehouse on the pool area. ... I know they were having similar difficulties in the golf, in the community centre with parties on a weekend and a couple of the guys at our meetings had to go over and try and quieten them down. So what they did was put a \$1000 bond on the room rental and that generally sorted that problem out. (John: Male; 60-70; 7 years)

Being able to 'fix' problems such as these within the neighbourhood presents itself as a way of controlling their residential environment and a way of ensuring it is protected from the unwanted. According to Blakely and Snyder (1997:99), controls such as these (e.g. CCTV) that are enforced through governance mechanisms, are a way of defending the residents 'existing way of life'. The implementation of CCTV into an already secured and controlled community entertains the idea that residents within Macquarie Links seek to control and protect the residential environment from unwanted or undesirable behaviour within. Identifying accepted forms of sociability within a community suggests that there is certain

dynamism within the community of Macquarie Links and that community is not, nor does it have to be, consenting and homogenous. Fractures or cracks within community can aid community formation and identity (Secomb, 2000; Panelli and Welch, 2005). Community is thus dynamic, messy and at times contradictory. These differences and disagreements create and sustain community.

While some of the behaviours of young people within Macquarie Links are deemed to be out of place there too are those who reside in rental properties within Macquarie Links. The renters are perceived as having different standards and values and not quite 'fitting in' with the wider community. This is not an uncommon view on the place of renters in suburban neighbourhoods. Research on suburban neighbourhoods in Australia has shown that acceptance within a neighbourhood has often been granted through home ownership. Home ownership has been viewed as a 'prerequisite for inclusion' in a given neighbourhood or community (Stevenson, 1999:215; see also Richards, 1990). Not surprisingly then, renters within Macquarie Links were somewhat on the outer of this community based on some of these residents' sentiments:

Our problem will be, and it's starting to appear now, we're getting more and more renters in here. [TK: is that a negative trend, do you think?] Yeah, because they don't own it, and I actually really wouldn't have expected that, not with the sort of rentals that they're paying up here, I thought you'd get people who would take pride in where they live, but that's not happening. [...] Just yesterday I finished a resident's information sheet that is going to be given to anyone that comes in to rent. ...the information sheet will also have, don't throw your cigarette butts over the balcony, and pick up after your dog. While we just had owners here we didn't have that sort of issue, but now we're starting to and I think that's ridiculous. I talk about cigarette butts and dogs, but I could keep going – garbage bins that go out and don't come back in, you know things like that, that just change the character of where you're living. (Lesley: Female; 50-60; 2 years)

These views of the home-owning residents within Macquarie Links towards the renters are demonstrative of the somewhat negative attitudes towards those in the rental properties held more broadly within Macquarie Links. Essentially, neighbourhood life, safety and order depend on certain conditions prevailing. In the case of Macquarie Links a certain tenure is required for the maintenance of order and stability (i.e. home ownership) – the home owners are important for protection and control while others, the renters, pose a threat to order and stability within the neighbourhood. The renters do not have a formal place in the governance structure of the neighbourhood as only home owners are able to be elected onto the neighbourhood committees. Disagreement between these groups within the neighbourhood gives meaning to the private structure and the community.

One of the interviewees for this research, Kathryn, was residing in a rental property. Kathryn had experienced some of the hostility first hand:

I get into trouble for my bins and that's about it. I get dirty letters. I don't know who's in charge of the body corporate but they don't like my bins, I'm tardy. ...No, it's stupid, but the side of the house – they expect me to carry the bins all the way down the stairs and have them in this courtyard so that when they're up on their balconies looking at their pristine golf course, and Macquarie Fields [Laughing], because if they could they'd probably blow it up, they don't like seeing my bin along the side. But the problem is that it's all gravel so I can't drag a wheeled bin through gravel, it's just stupid, and I'm not leaving it in the garage it can just happily stay there. So they gave up that fight after a while. (Kathryn: Female; 30-40; 1 year)

Again, the residents find a way of dealing with or 'fixing' the unwanted. Further, this demonstrates that while community is often considered exclusive, community can also be messy, complex and often contradictory. The private structure of the residential neighbourhood however, assists the community in making sense of complexities and disagreements within the residential development – a coalescing of community and privatism.

The residents can rally together to have their issues addressed usually through the neighbourhood committees of Macquarie Links (see McKenzie, 1994) – a stringent form of social organisation.

Protection then, for a neighbourhood like Macquarie Links, implies something deeper than physical protection and security. The privately governed nature of the development with its restrictive covenants allows for a more encompassing protection of the residential environments. Ultimately, security in the case of Macquarie Links is about protection through privatisation and community. The communal tactics enabled by the private structure bring community into privatisation and privatisation into community. There is an apparent mutual dependence between community and privatisation in Macquarie Links. Further, the residents are able to manage their own private residential environment and neighbourhood by controlling the threats to order and stability (the unwanted or the undesirable – i.e. CCTV at the pool), as well as being able to ensure the standards and aesthetics of the neighbourhood are maintained over time to avoid any deterioration in quality or appearance. Residents are able to fix any problems that arise, suggesting that community excludes, but the pre-text to these suggested changes to the nature of the neighbourhood (i.e. CCTV) is the complex and contradictory nature of community. Community is not always consenting and homogenous, and community can occur through privatisation and private structures. Conceptualising control as something more than exclusion through gating (as Blakely and Snyder, 1997 suggest) allows for a fuller understanding of the nature of social life, protection, privatisation and community, as well as their workings, meanings and negotiations.

Conclusion

Considering commonalities within communities is important. Equally important however, is a wider conceptualisation of community as complex, different and not always consenting

(Moore, 2008; Panelli and Welch, 2005; Secomb, 2000). Drawing attention to the homogenous elements of community as well as the differences within, allows community to be a space where both harmony and disharmony occur. Common bonds and disagreements have continually sustained the community of Macquarie Links, such as those between owners and renters, adults and young people, the community and the individual. These disagreements, differences and 'dramas' within the estate are in turn managed by the community association (through the private structure), thus sustaining (reinforcing) community. Privatism and community do not run parallel within Macquarie Links; rather they are complex and intertwined in a relationship of dependency. To understand this within Macquarie Links required an understanding of community as complex and contradictory. Theories of urban community that take into account commonalities and differences, consent and disagreement will certainly provide urban scholars with a space for continuing to engage with the notion of community in urban areas and progress urban theory. Essentially, a new version of urban community pervades these private residential developments.

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