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The Grass is Always Greener in Gated Communities: The Social Segregation and Construction of Difference in the Urbanizaciones Cerradas of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area

Ben Simons
SIT Study Abroad

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The Grass is always Greener in Gated Communities:
The social segregation and construction of difference in the *Urbanizaciones*
Cerradas of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area

Ben Simons
SIT Southern Cone Spring 2006

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Abstract

In the past 15 years, the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires (RMBA) has experienced the phenomenon of the massive development of hundreds of gated communities outside the city center (Capital Federal). This has been due to a perceived decrease in the quality of life within the city center by many middle to upper class residents, and a rising sensation of insecurity and fear within the open urban environment. The search for a more safe and secure setting as well as a higher quality of life has led many of these residents to flee the city for the enclosed environments of the gated urbanizations, or *urbanizaciones cerradas*. The purpose of this paper is to explore the social segregation that results from the affluent of Buenos Aires walling themselves off from the rest of the city, to identify certain residents sensations of insecurity and fear of the open urban environment, and finally to observe how they construct perceptions of difference between themselves and those that live outside the gated communities. To accomplish this task, this paper first synthesizes information from a variety of academic sources that currently exist on the topic to create a historical and spatial contextualization of the phenomenon as well as to create a general outline of the concepts and theories that have been used to analyze it. The paper then goes on to describe and analyze the responses to 6 interviews, 3 of which were from residents of gated communities, and the other 3 of which were from individuals associated with the phenomenon, to determine if these specific actors conform to the theories and concepts presented by the academic literature. This paper concludes that although overall, blanket generalizations cannot be made about the perceptions of the residents of gated communities, some common themes do arise in their discourse regarding the sensation of insecurity in the open urban environment and their perceptions of difference.

Introduction-

Human society as a whole is currently experiencing a global phenomenon of increasing urbanization. In almost every country in the world, greater and greater proportions of the populace are living in the urban centers, and many of the world's cities are growing at rapid rates. The phenomenon is due to confluence of factors, such as the displacement of rural workers by the industrialization of agriculture and the concentration of arable land into the hands of the few, the city's increasing dominance of economic production in the country as the centers of the globalized service and technology economy, and the perception of greater opportunity and mobility that the city provides the people.

Coinciding with the rapid urbanization of the global populace has been a common trend of growing inequity and disparity of wealth, in which those with money in the world are getting wealthier, and those without are getting poorer. The increasing gap between the have and the have-nots can be attributed to the mechanisms of the modern capitalist global economic system. The disparity of wealth is observed on a global scale between the core, semi-periphery, and periphery countries and also on the scale of the economies of individual countries. In the majority of cases, the disparity is more marked in periphery and semi-periphery countries where a large middleclass has never been able to develop. As a result of the growing income gap, many of the world's cities are experiencing a greater polarization between rich and the poor and a significant increase in urban poverty. This polarization is manifesting itself in a metamorphosis of the built urban environment of the city, as the increasing economic divide is leading to greater physical separation between those with money and those without.

Here is where the global proliferation of gated communities and enclosed urbanizations comes into play. A common perception has arisen with many of the

world's middle to upper class residents that the city is becoming an increasingly dangerous and unattractive setting to live and raise a family in. Many perceive that crime is on the rise, the public spaces of the city are becoming unsafe, and the growing density of the city and the increasingly visible signs of poverty make it much less appealing. This sensation of urban fear and dropping standards of living has led to a flight of the privileged from the city center to areas at the periphery of the city and the construction of enclosed urbanizations to reside in. These suburbs and gated communities create a much more distinct physical separation between the rich and the poor of the city and a change in the spatial interactions within the urban centers. Or, as Grant and Mittlesteadt put it in their paper entitled *Types of gated communities*: "Gated developments challenge the spatial, organizational, and institutional order that has shaped modern cities," (913).

One of the earliest and most extensive examples of this movement was the suburbanization of the urban centers of the United States, which began in the 1940s and 1950s. Many other countries have experienced the movement more recently, in the last few decades, especially in the periphery and semi periphery countries where the difference between the rich and the poor is generally much more drastic. As a result of the proliferation of gated communities in and around the world's cities, there has been an increase in the spatial fragmentation of the urban centers and the social segregation within them.

One unique and extensive example has been the massive growth of enclosed urbanizations outside the metropolis of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The Argentinean manifestation of the phenomenon began to gain its momentum in the very late 80s and early 90s, and the city has experienced a rapid and energetic construction of many *urbanizaciones cerradas* (UCs), or enclosed urbanizations, since. As of recent data,

there exists over 400 UCs of different varieties in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area with more than 500,000 permanent residents, and more are being constructed every month (Arizaga 26). What is unique about the situation of Buenos Aires is that the city has traditionally been a center of shared public spaces between people of all different socio-economic statuses and one in which the rich and poor have lived in close proximity to one another. But during the last 15 years many residents have experienced a rising sensation of insecurity and distaste of life within the city, and have chosen to wall themselves off from the “dangers” of the urban environment and move into the UCs. Now, not all decisions to move to UCs are based solely upon the sensation of insecurity, as many families choose to move to them in search of a more tranquil life, a greater sense of contact with nature, and stronger sense of community, but urban fear is one of the leading causes, and most likely the greatest driving force, of the movement.

This paper looks to explore the phenomenon in Buenos Aires and the social and spatial segregation that has resulted because of it. More specifically, this paper intends to answer the question: How do the residents of the UCs construct their perceptions of urban fear and insecurity of the city outside and the sensation of security inside the UCs, as well as how they differentiate between their lives as residents of the UCs from the lives of those who live outside in the *Region Metropolitana de Buenos Aires* (RMBA)? The goal of the paper, however, is not to form overarching generalizations of perceptions of the residents of the UCs, as there is too grand a diversity of attitudes and perceptions to make such generalizations. Rather, the goal of the paper is to shed some light on to how particular residents construct their own perceptions of security/insecurity and common identity within the UCs, and to explore if any common themes arise in the discourse.

The body of this paper will begin with an explanation of the methodology used to obtain the theory and data necessary to complete the work. This will consist of description of the secondary sources used to form the base of theories and concepts used and then will go on to explain the strategy and means of obtaining primary information through site visits to different UCs and interviews with a selection of residents as well as others whose work is closely related to the UCs. After the methodology is laid out, the paper will paint a much more detailed picture of the UC phenomenon in Buenos Aires, including the history of the phenomenon and a typology of the different forms of UCs that have arisen outside the city and the different services they provide. There has been a significant quantity of literature written about the global phenomenon of enclosed urbanizations and specifically about the situation of Buenos Aires, so next will be a synthesis of the major theories and concepts from some of the leading academics in the field. Finally, there will be a description and analysis of the primary information gathered for this specific project and a relation of this material to the existing theories and concepts of said academics with the goal of enriching the existing knowledge on the topic.

II. Methodological Considerations for Research Process

Two paths were followed in order to obtain the data and concepts necessary for the execution of this research. The first was a semi-complete literature review of the existing academic knowledge and analysis of the global phenomenon of gated communities and the specific situation of the RMBA, as well as of some academic discourse on urban fear and the sensation of insecurity. An overall conceptualization of gated communities was provided by two articles, one written by Jill Grant and Lindsey Mittlesteadt which formulates a typology for characterizing gated communities, and the

other written by Sonia Roitman, which attempts to create a comprehensive definition of gated communities in general from the perspective of segregation. An analysis of the discourse of urban fear in relation to the residents of gated communities was provided by an article by Setha M. Low, which specifically analyzes gated communities in the United States, but whose ideas can be applied to gated communities the world over. Information and analysis pertaining to the phenomenon of UCs in the RMBA and the perceptions of insecurity and identity of the residents of the UCs was provided by the works of academic authors such as Cecilia Arizaga, Martin Coy and Martin Pohler, Maria Florencia Girola, Guy Thuillier, and Maristella Svampa. Finally, the promotional material of an UC called Nordelta, which was the site of much of the field observation and one interview of this project, and the section *Countries* in the national daily newspapers, *La Nacion* and *Clarín*, dedicated to the UCs were used to gain a sense of how they are being advertised and sold to the public. From these various sources, a general theoretical and conceptual base could be established to build on top of with primary data from field observations and personal interviews.

A total of 5 formal personal interviews and one informal interview were held during the course of investigation. 3 of the formal personal interviews were with residents of various UCs in the RMBA. The first was held with a woman named Nina in her office in the Capital Federal on May 5, 2006. She had been a friend of one of my academic advisors in my study abroad program in Buenos Aires, and I was able to contact her through my advisor. The other two were held in the places of residence of the interviewees inside their UCs, one with a woman named Maria on May 5, 2006, and the other with a man named Jorge on May 13, 2006. Both had been either a friend or acquaintance of my other academic director in the program, and I was able to schedule the interviews through her.

The first of the other two formal personal interviews was held on April 30, 2006 in my home stay family's apartment in the Capital Federal, with a journalist of the *Countries* section of *La Nacion* named Lara Sauvdet. I was able to contact her through my host family, as she is one of their relatives. The other interview was held with Maria Florencia Girola, a professor who has researched the lives of the residents of UCs extensively, in her apartment in the Capital Federal on May 11, 2006. Nina, the first resident interviewee, had worked with Maria Florencia before and was able to set up the interview with her for me. The one informal interview was held with a real estate agent for the UC of Highlands in her office on May 5, 2006.

The main problem that arose with accessing information and obtaining primary data resources for this paper was the limited time period given to complete this project. The theme had to be developed, researched and written in the space of 4 weeks, which did not allow the opportunity for extensive research that would be necessary for a more comprehensive study of the phenomenon of gated communities in Buenos Aires. Thus, although there were ample opportunities to contact residents of different UCs, people who work for the administration of the UCs and within them as service, maintenance, and security employees, academics and journalists who study the phenomenon, and others who are in one way or another related to the theme, the time period only allowed for a select few interviews. There is a wealth of secondary information available about the topic, however, so there was no trouble involved in obtaining the literature and existing information concerning gated communities and the UCs of Buenos Aires.

Another obvious problem in accessing and understanding the information was the language barrier of conducting most of my research with written or spoken Spanish. Although I can almost always understand the general idea of what is being said or written and pick up on some specifics, there are still pieces of information lost when I

read a text written in Spanish or listen to an interviewee speak in the language. All of my interviews were held in Spanish, and although I recorded them and listened to them repeated times afterwards, on occasions I did not completely understand everything that was said.

Not being a fluent in Spanish also effected how the interviews were conducted, as it was very difficult to formulate follow up questions when not all that was said was understood, and also in that the interviewee might have approached the interview differently if they had been talking to a native *porteño* (resident of Buenos Aires). The fact that all my formal interviews were arranged through middlemen with good relationships to both parties, and also that my academic director accompanied me on two of the interviews with the contacts she knew, might have allowed for more amiable relationships and more openness from the interviewees than if I had contacted them directly. Because of the limited matter in which the primary data could be collected, the paper will be more heavily based upon concepts and data derived from the secondary sources and supplemented with the primary data obtained during the field work.

III. Historical Contextualization of the UCs in the RMBA

The phenomenon of *Urbanizaciones Cerradas* is a relatively recent one in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. The city had been historically characterized as one in which public spaces were shared by peoples of all socio-economic statuses, with images of the street corner café and relaxing in the cities abundant parks and plazas coming to mind. Under the rule of the populist leader Juan Domingo Perón, beginning in the late 1940s, the popular sector of Argentinean society was encouraged to make use of the cities public spaces and cultural events, which were formerly relegated mostly to

those with wealth (**Skidmore and Smith...**). During this time period, however, precursors to the current phenomenon began to develop.

Beginning in the 1930s, many of the middle and upper class residents of the city started building country homes, called *quintas*, outside the city, sometimes gathered together organized developments, called a *countries*, and modeled after the English country clubs (Thuillier, 9). Up until recently, these residences outside the city center were used almost solely as weekend or vacation houses, where the owners could escape the hustle and bustle of Buenos Aires for a more tranquil and natural setting. Very few were used as permanent residences and most of the owners lived in an apartment or house within the city during the working week.

The construction boom of UCs began to gain momentum when the government of Carlos Menem arrived in office in 1989 and a neo liberal style of politics was instituted. With the new government came a reconfiguration of the Argentinean economy with policies such as the convertibility of the peso to the dollar (in which the value of the peso was artificially set to equal one US dollar), extensive privatization, an opening of the financial aperture with deregulation and flexibilization, and an increase in external debt (Capron et al 4). As with all cases of the institution of neo liberal economic policies and the decrease in state spending on social welfare and public infrastructure projects, the gap between the rich and poor of Buenos Aires widened significantly during this period and the potential for social conflict within the city intensified (Coy and Pohler 365).

Coinciding with the institution of the neo liberal policies in the 90s was a vast expansion of the highway system in the RMBA, principally of the *Panamericana* highway that services the areas north of the urban agglomeration, and a greatly increased access to the regions surrounding the capital (Thuillier 9). As the city

experienced a continuing densification of buildings and people, environmental and traffic problems began to rise, and the visibility of urban poverty became much more apparent, many of the cities wealthy began to perceive a degradation of inner urban living conditions and a decrease in their quality of life (Coy and Pohler 366). During this period, the city also experienced a marked increase in the sensation of insecurity and a fear of urban crime.

With the improved access to the areas outside the city center, and an economy favorable to the expansion of the real estate market, many middle to upper class residents began looking towards developments such as the traditional *countries* outside the city for permanent places of residence. For them, these clubs offered a much higher standard of living with accessibility to nature, availability of sporting activities, established infrastructures, and a sense of security. Real estate companies latched on to this desire and began converting the *countries* into permanent residential areas, as well as constructing new projects of varying sizes with complete infrastructure that would become the *Urbanizaciones Cerradas* that this paper focuses on (Coy and Pohler 366).

The first major boom of UC construction occurred during the period of 1993 to 1999 (Capron et al 4). Then the economic crisis of 2001 hit and the expansion of UCs halted, along with most other economic production in the country, and social unrest and crime increased as much of the countries population fell into poverty. Argentina began recovering from the crisis in 2003, and the construction of UCs gained new momentum, but with a much greater emphasis on security (Capron et al 4).

IV. Types and Functions of Urbanizaciones Cerradas

The real estate market of Buenos Aires distinguishes between 5 different types of UCs: *barrios cerrados* (gated communities), *clubs de campo* (country clubs), *chacras*

(emphasizing the rural aspect), *clubes nauticos* (emphasizing access to water sports), and *grandes* or *mega emprendimientos* (gated cities) (*La Nacion* 29 April 2006). Most *barrios cerrados* consist solely of a grouping of houses surrounded by a wall or fence that share various services such as security, maintenance, and utilities, and some have limited sports facilities such as a common pool, tennis courts, or a club house (Arizaga 59). The *clubs de campo* or *countries* are mostly characterized by the sporting activities, such as golf, tennis, polo, and fútbol (soccer), and social services, such as club houses, restaurants, and organized events, that are provided (Arizaga 58). Many of the *countries* existed before the UC phenomenon as weekend and vacation residences, and therefore have an aspect of antiquity, but there are also new developments resulting from the demand of the phenomenon (Arizaga 59). The latest, and possibly most revolutionary, developments are the *megaemprendimientos* which are large-scale projects the size of small towns in which a wide variety of services including schools, medical centers, commercial areas, sport facilities, and sometimes even job parks are included. All projects emphasize a high level of security, privacy, tranquility, a sense of nature, high standard of living and quality of infrastructure, and easy access to the city center (Coy and Pohler, 366).

The vast majority of these projects are located in a radius of 25 to 70 km from the center of Buenos Aires (Thuillier 9). These regions have historically been semi-rural zones occupied by mostly working class and marginalized sector inhabitants with high levels of poverty. Now, with the phenomenon of the UCs, there are hundreds of enclosed communities of middle to upper income residents moving in close proximity to traditionally poorer areas. A stark contrast is created between the pockets of affluence that are the UCs, and the surrounding regions of low income communities. In some cases, the UCs form a symbiotic relationship with nearby poorer neighborhoods,

as the people from the poorer neighborhoods are employed in the UCs as domestic servants, gardeners, construction workers, and security guards.

Approximately 85% of the UCs are situated in the northern and western suburban areas of the RMBA, where the highway infrastructure is more developed (*La Nacion* 29 April 2006). The massive proliferation of UCs in the suburban rings of Buenos Aires has created edge-city like conditions in the community of Pilar, located 50 km from the urban center, and where almost a third of the *barrios cerrados* of the RMBA are located (Thuillier 12). In between 1991 and 2001, Pilar grew from 144,000 residents to 233,000 residents, the greatest growth of any municipality in the RMBA during that time period (Thuillier 13). The southern areas of the metropolitan region are now experiencing their own share of UC development and the growth of these “islands of wealth” shows now sign of subsiding (Coy and Pohler 355).

It is in this context that this paper attempts to analyze the residents of the UCs’ construction of fear and insecurity of the urban environment outside their “secure” communities, and the manner in which they perceive their lives being different than those who live outside. To begin the approach to this question, this paper will explore some of the existing academic literature and concepts that have been written on the theme of the UCs. By utilizing the theories and ideas formulated by the leading academics in the field, a base of analysis will be created to help answer the question.

V. Theoretical Approach

A general consensus has been formed by most of the academic material pertaining to the phenomenon of UCs that suggests the proliferation of these communities increases the social and spatial segregation of the city. As a result of this fragmentation, a societal division is established between those that reside within the

UCs, who share common lifestyles and living spaces, and those that stay outside the UCs, who gain a sentiment of “the others”. It is suggested that because of this division, those that reside inside the UCs become socially and physically isolated from the rest of the city to one degree or another. Understanding this process is especially important with regards to the children of the UCs, as many have lived all or the majority of their lives within the UCs and have never experienced life in the open city. The social segregation and physical separation of the UCs can possibly lead to a greater sense of insecurity or fear outside the walls of the community as residents become less familiar with the open urban environment.

The modes of segregation occur on the varying levels of physical, social, and psychological. The most obvious is the physical distance that separates the UCs from the center of the city, and the walls or barriers constructed around them to restrict access inside. Thuillier suggests another physical difference, in that the UCs break away from the architecture and urban design of the city with their typical curved roads, cul de sacs, green spaces, and artificial lakes that valorize the natural life and invoke a “rural folklore” sentiment (Thuillier 9). According to Thuillier, what truly physically distinguishes the UCs from the center of the city and the rest of the suburban region is “their homogeneity, their architectural coherence, and their internal aesthetic, guaranteed by a very strong degree of community control over the production of urban space,” (Thuillier 10).

In terms of social segregation, the most apparent form is the demographically homogenous populace that resides within the UCs. The search for social homogeneity and a community in which the residents share similar forms of lifestyles is a major factor in the decision of many to move to a UC, and their success as urban developments (Roitman 8). A large portion of those moving to UCs are young, middle

class couples looking for a larger space to raise their family, in a more “natural environment” outside the city (Thuillier, 9). But this demographic of family only makes up a certain percentage of the populations of the UCs.

While social composition of the *urbanizaciones cerradas* is characteristically more homogenous than that of the open city, within the homogeneity of the UCs exists a certain degree of diversity (Roitman 8). This diversity can be found in economic terms between middle, upper middle, and upper class residents and between the “old wealthy” and the “newly rich.” It can also be observed in terms of the types of families that live inside, such as the age of parents and the children and the types of religion and cultural they practice (Roitman 8). Maristella Svampa suggests that the UCs also represent a social divide within the middle class of Argentine society between those that have adapted to the new technology and service driven economy, who are the ones moving to the UCs and who she labels the “winners,” and those that have failed to adapt and have become unqualified, who she labels the “losers,” (Svampa 79). Regardless of the degree of diversity found within the UCs, one common trait is shared by all in that only those that have reached a certain socio-economic status may enter.

The psychological segregation is possibly the most abstract and originates from a confluence of factors. One of the greatest contributors to this form of segregation is the perception of security and organization inside the UCs and the perception of a chaotic urban environment outside. All *urbanizaciones cerradas* maintain a set of rules to one degree or another over questions such as the maximum velocity one may drive, the size, dimensions and appearance of the houses, the placement of trees, and so on as well as norms of behavior to maintain harmonious relationships between the neighbors (Svampa 176). Some UCs even have rules regulating what breed of dog the residents may own (*Clarín* 29 April 2006). According to Svampa, many UCs maintain an excess

of regulation which influences the every day life in UCs and which, in some respects, demonstrates intolerance (Svampa 176). What is in play, she suggests, is a model of society, or the creation of an “organized community” defined in contraposition to the other society (outside) which is perceived clearly as abandoning the rules and that exists with an absence of order, and the loss the values linked with respecting of others and good behavior (Svampa 178). It is in this sense that a certain psychological separation can be observed between those that live inside the UCs and those that live outside.

This brings us to the formation of the identity of “us” as a common community inside the UCs, and the perception of those outside as being “the others”. In her book *El mito de comunidad en la ciudad mundializada: Estilos de vida y nuevas clases medias en urbanizaciones cerradas*, Cecilia Arizaga forms a typology of the interactions between *nosotros* (us) and *los otros* (the others). She divides the actors into *nosotros adentro*, or us inside, *nosotros afuera*, or us outside, *los otros adentro*, or the others inside, and *los otros afuera*, or the others outside (Arizaga 106). *Nosotros adentro* are the residents of the UCs who are attempting to create a connection of community which is found in the perception of a common identity (Arizaga 106). This common identity is created through what she terms the UCs’ “look of seduction” in which the physical design of the houses and public spaces creates an environment of community, and is reinforced by a system of auto-control, in which the residents constantly reinforce the sensation of this community and solidarity (Arizaga 108). Arizaga defines *nosotros afuera* as the family and friends of the residents of a UC, of whom they share strong connections, as well as the residents of other UCs, of whom they share similar life styles (Arizaga 110). The *otros adentro* are those who are from outside the UC but work inside as domestic servants, construction workers, gardeners and security, and who the residents perceive as a necessity but often regard with a

certain distance and suspicion (Arizaga 113). Finally, Arizaga defines the *otros afuera* as those who stay outside the walls, and who the residents relate with the chaos of the outside urban environment (Arizaga 113). There often exists a dual perception of the *otros afuera* with the residents, consisting of a sense of charity towards them but also a sensation of fear (Arizaga 113). Arizaga's typology can be a useful tool in analyzing how residents define their identities within the UCs and separate themselves from the outside.

A common theme that much of the academic literature explores is the effect that the social segregation, and resulting isolation within the UCs, has on the children who have spent most, if not all, of their lives inside. Thuillier notes that often observed with children born in the UCs is a real aversion to the city center, and at times a true phobia for central public spaces (Thuillier 15). There is a perception among academics and residents of the barrios alike that life inside the UCs is like a bubble, an unreality, and that the children are missing an important development process by not becoming accustomed to an open urban environment. In Arizaga's case studies with children and adolescents of certain UCs in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, she found that many of them are well aware of the social segregation and exclusivity of their lives, and they experience sensations of encapsulation and conflict with life inside the UCs (Arizaga 179). The situation with the children of the UCs is somewhat of a paradox, as many families move into the UCs to provide a better environment for their children to grow up in, only to realize that being raised exclusively within one may be detrimental to the child's development.

The entire process of spatial and social segregation reinforces and exacerbates the sensation of insecurity and urban fear that was one of the main driving forces for moving from the open city into an enclosed community in the first place. The physical

components of the enclosed environment evoke a “visual landscape of fear created by the walls, gates, and guards,” (Low 56). Capron et al note that the relative security found inside the UCs moves the resident’s fear and insecurity towards their mobility outside, to the streets that connect the UC with the highways, the *villas miserias* that are located nearby, and the vacant, unlit spaces that often can be found in the semi rural zones where many of the UCs are located (Capron et al 5). That is, the fear of the urban center becomes translated to a fear of the areas surrounding the *urbanizacion cerradas* after the residents move in. These fears are most often more a social construction and imaginary than material, and are often expressed in a diffuse and abstract manner, as if they were concerning a ghost (Capron et al 6). A general sensation of fear and insecurity cannot be applied to all residents of the UCs in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area because each have chosen to move to a UC in their own particular context and have formed their own unique perceptions of their life inside the UC.

Because blanket generalizations often ignore the diversity of opinions and perceptions that actually exist, it was extremely important in this project to conduct primary observations and talk with individual residents. In the next section of this paper, the information gathered from primary sources will be presented and related to the academic analysis to determine what role these individual actors play in the processes of social segregation and construction of fear and insecurity.

VI. Primary Observations and Interviews

As stated earlier, 5 formal interviews and one informal interview were conducted during the investigation. 3 were with residents of different UCs in the RMBA. The first of these was with Nina, who lives in a modest, small sized *barrio cerrado* called *Soles de Pilar* in the city of Pilar, north of the agglomeration. The

second was conducted with Mariela, a resident of *Highlands*, a highly exclusive *club de campo* also located in the region of Pilar. The last of the interviews with residents was conducted with Jorge, a habitant of *Nordelta*, one of the largest *megaemprendimiento* projects in the RMBA, which will eventually have over 9,000 residents living in it. The two other formal interviews were with Lara Sauvdet, a journalist for *La Nacion* who writes for the section on *countries*, and Maria Florencia Girola, a professor at the University of Buenos Aires who has researched the UC phenomenon extensively and written various academic articles about it. The one informal interview was held with a real estate agent for *Highlands* whose office was located right outside the *club de campo*. Similar questions were asked to all the residents of the UCs, while questions were more specifically catered for the other two interviewees.

General questions were asked to all residents about their personal decisions to move to a UC. The common response was always that the family was looking for a larger space to raise a family in and a secure environment with high standards of living. All the responses focused on the children and their ability to grow up in safe setting, stating that the neighborhood they lived in before the move was more dangerous. Jorge lived in a house in San Isidro (a suburb of Buenos Aires) before hand and explained that there was not enough space, as well as that the theme of security bothered him because his daughter could not walk alone in the streets at night. None of the residents mentioned specific acts of crime they had experienced before moving to a UC, implying that their sense of insecurity was more a sensation than an actual known material threat. Nina explained that she has 3 children and was able to afford a much larger house in the *barrio cerrado* than she would have inside the city, so the price was a significant decision factor. Interestingly, all the interviewees evoked images of their children being able to “bicycle in the streets” as an example of a better environment for the kids.

When asked about the greatest perceived advantages of living inside the UCs, the interviewees responses varied slightly, but again the themes of security, a high quality of life, and tranquility were paramount. Jorge's response was that "the life inside *Nordelta* is a very, very peaceful; it is a controlled environment." He used the phrase "controlled environment" or "controlled life" multiple times in a positive manner, harkening to a sensation of organization inside and chaos outside that Svampa noted in her research. Mariela focused on the tranquility and quality of life, mentioning the size of her lawn, the community that *Highlands* provides, and her children's ability to play sports inside. Jorge also stated that life inside *Nordelta* is "more like when we were kids" invoking a nostalgia of a neighborhood in which the children can play with each other outside. Maria Florencia brought up this idea, describing UCs as "neighborhoods of infancy" that evoke a memory of a tranquil neighborhood where one can play in the streets. Lara talked about a similar theme in that "in the city you lose the neighborhood" and that in the UCs, the possibility of having a traditional neighborhood with a close community arises again.

All the residents were asked about the demographic composition of their UC and if they believed there was a strong sense of community and of a group identity within. All three responded that they perceived a fair amount of diversity within their UCs. Nina explained that the stereotypes of the house mom and the male breadwinner did not hold true in her *barrio cerrado* and that there were many different types of families living there. As for the community aspect, she believes that there is not a strong sense of community within and that relations between neighbors are friendly but not close. She did mention the homogeneity of the houses, saying "the houses are very similar, there are only 3 house models; all of the houses are almost equal." Mariela described her community as a "difficult mix" between the more modest and the more elite, and

stated that *Highlands* is more diverse than the *barrios cerrados*. She mentioned her distaste for the elite attitude of some, saying “there are many people that believe because they have more money, they can pass over the others.” She does feel a sense of community and has strong relations with people like herself who have a “more middle class profile.” Jorge made a point of mentioning the diversity inside *Nordelta*, saying “there is diversity, I do not know if this is the exact word, but of socio-economic levels.” He did explain, however, that there are two very common types of households living in *Nordelta*: those with parents less than 40 years old with small children, and those with parents over 60 years old whose children are adults and no longer live in the house, but that his family does not fall into either category (He is middle aged and has a 16 year old daughter).

With all the residents there was a perception of heterogeneity within their UC. They were all well aware and self-conscious of the stereotype of homogeneity within the UCs and did not believe it held true. This sentiment was especially strong with the real estate agent of *Highlands* when she described the highlands community. She explained that *Highlands* is a very democratic community in which anyone can enter, providing that they have the sufficient economic stature to enter an elite *club de campo*, and that it is like a “small world” because a couple of Koreans and one Japanese family live there. She juxtaposed the idea of a “heterogeneous” *Highlands* with other UCs that had very strict admissions policies, such as a *club de campo* called *Armenia* in which only people of Armenian decent can live. Maria Florencia also brought up an interesting point during her interview in that in many of the UCs, there is a strong sense that the residents are “of the middle class.” They wish to distinguish themselves from the upper class, who are associated with corruption and dirty money by many Argentines. Although there exists a greater degree of homogeneity within the UCs than

in the open city, there is still a great deal of diversity as well as conflict and tension inside.

The theme of norms and rules that regulate the conflicts as well as create a sense of order was brought up in each interview. Nina explained that in her *barrio cerrado* they only consisted of “rules of coexistence,” such as the speed limits. Mariela believed that rules in *Highlands* “seemed excessive at times,” such as the restrictions and rules on construction, rules of transit, hours that the service employees may work, rules on the appearances of the houses, and regulations on the vegetation, but that “rules of coexistence” were necessary. Jorge had a much more positive outlook on the norms and rules of *Nordelta*, stating that “every neighborhood (inside *Nordelta*) has its own set of rules to maintain a harmonious life.” His neighborhood had a fairly extensive and strict set of regulations, including the obligation to have a sprinkler system so the grass appears green, and a committee of discipline that “resolves conflicts.” None of the residents believed that the rules were oppressive, but it was obvious from the responses of Mariela and Jorge that life is much more regimented inside their UCs than life in the open city.

Following the questions concerning the community and organization of life inside the UCs, the residents were asked if they felt or perceived a strong sentiment of *nosotros* inside and *los otros* outside. All the residents denied the existence of such a sentiment or answered the questions in a vague manner. Nina did explain that, “Pilar has a huge clash between people with a lot of money and very, very poor people” in reference to the affluence of the UCs in the city and the traditionally poorer neighborhoods around them, but did not identify herself with any group. Aspects of the sentiment of *nosotros* and *los otros* could be inferred from other statements made by the interviewees, however.

Two common themes arose concerning the relations between the UCs and the communities outside during the interviews, which were that of the service and security employees that come into work in the UCs from outside every day, and the charity organizations that many of the UCs form to support poorer communities in their respective areas. Both *Highlands* and *Nordelta* have a very poor community located in close proximity to them. *Los Cachoros* is situated right outside a section of the 10 ft concrete wall surrounding *Highlands*, and 90% of the people that live there work inside *Highlands* according to Mariela. The community outside *Nordelta* is a *villa miseria*, the term for a very poor, informal settlement in Argentina, called *Las Tunas*, and Jorge explained that many of its residents work in domestic services and construction inside *Nordelta* as well. In both cases, the workers were referred to as outsiders coming in. Jorge also made a point to explain a charity organization that exists inside *Nordelta* called “Foundation of Nordelta” that provides resources and support for the community of *Las Tunas*. Each neighborhood in *Nordelta* has a responsibility to gather resources to donate to *Las Tunas*, and Jorge’s particular neighborhood has to gather 150 litres of milk each month to donate. The fact that the foundation only supports one specific neighborhood suggests that the charity may be a public relations stunt as much as an act of pure benevolence.

When speaking of the interactions between the residents of the UCs and those outside, Lara stated that “they do not share anything, they do not share places of consumption, restaurants, shopping centers... so there are not common spaces where they can have confrontations.” Nina also expressed this absence of interaction saying there are few places within Pilar that you will find both residents of the UCs and residents of the poorer neighborhoods. The fact that not only do the residents wall their houses and communities off from the outside, but that the public spaces of their lives,

such as the schools, commercial areas, and restaurants, are only frequented by other UC residents creates a large degree of isolation from the outside world with many of them.

This isolation can be especially prevalent with the children of the UCs, and all of the interviewees recognized this fact and expressed concern over it. 4 of the 5 interviewees referred to life inside the UCs as a “bubble” whose reality was different from the reality outside. Although the resident interviewees believed that the UCs were providing a safe environment for their children to be raised in, they also believed that their children were missing an important aspect in their development by not becoming accustomed to the outside city. Nina had particularly strong feelings about her children’s isolation saying “its very crazy... they are a little useless, vulnerable in the urban environment... they are not accustomed to ‘do not talk to strangers in the street’ or ‘look before you cross’ .” Mariela also spoke of her child, explaining that when she took her youngest son Francisco, who was 5 years old, on the subway for the first time, he cried because it was completely alien to him. Lara went so far as to say that “the children lose much of a connection with the reality of the country,” and Maria Florencia noted that the children of UCs sometimes do not recognize the idea of limits, as they can go wherever they want whenever they want within the UCs, and do not understand that this is not the case in the outside city.

During her interview Maria Florencia referred to residents of UCs that she had talked to who had created strategies for their children to leave “the bubble,” such as going to a school that is shared with non-UC children or playing sports outside the UC. Both Nina and Jorge expressed the desire to expose their children to the outside world also. Nina stated that once her children grew a little older, she would look for a residence within the city to move into so they could become used to the open urban environment. Jorge said that *Nordelta* only allows a very limited perception of the

world for his daughter, and that they look for ways that she may participate in activities outside. All these sentiments add up to a very real concern over the healthy development of the children within the UCs, and a realization that the confinement and isolation in these communities may have detrimental effects on the children's growth.

These concerns always come into conflict with the sensation of insecurity and fear that many of the residents have for the urban environment outside. All of the interviewees were asked if they feel that perceptions of fear and insecurity exist for the outside urban environment within their UC. As mentioned before, all had responded at some point that they felt the open city was an insecure place to raise a family, and that their UCs provided a much more safe and secure environment. Nina articulated this sensation when she said that "things occur on the other side (of the wall) that do not occur inside." But none of the interviewees ever identified a specific concern or actors of which they had a specific fear of. Like Capron et al concluded in their article, the insecurity expressed by the interviewees was somewhat abstract and was much more a sensation of insecurity than an actual perceived threat.

A statement of note was made by Jorge when talking about security within *Nordelta*, saying, "it is not absolute security, because in a place so large, there are many people that do not live here that pass through *Nordelta*," implying that the outsider is potentially dangerous. He went on to name construction workers as one type of outsider who comes to work within *Nordelta*, yet earlier he had said that many of the construction workers were from *Las Tunas*. Although Jorge may not have an open fear of the people of that community, he may consciously or sub-consciously perceive them as being potentially more dangerous. A somewhat more blatant fear of the outsider was expressed by many residents of *Highlands* during the crisis of 2001-2002 according to Mariela. There was a rumor circulating for a period of time that the people of *Los*

Cachoros (the poorer community outside) were going to invade *Highlands*, which turned out to be a complete lie. Mariela stated that she had never taken the rumor seriously.

Maria Florencia, who has researched the sensation of fear inside the UCs extensively, raised an important point during her interview. She claimed that there are not very strong, documented statistics available that show a significant, marked increase in urban crime in Buenos Aires during the period in which the UC phenomenon has occurred. What is obvious is a significant marked increase in the sensation of insecurity and urban fear, and that this sensation is partly constructed by the media in the form of newspaper and magazine articles and television reports that focus on and exaggerate urban crime. It may be this general, abstract, and diffuse sensation of insecurity in the open urban environment that permeates the thoughts of residents of the UCs and drives them to move into a walled-off community. But as Maria Florencia emphasized, each situation depends on its context, and many of those who move into UCs may have experienced direct threats or acts of crime in the open urban environment before the move.

What can be observed with these interviews and the existing academic literature is that there exists a perception of a different life inside the UCs, one of greater security, tranquility, and a general higher standard of living. Lara made a somewhat striking observation concerning this sentiment during her interview. She explained that there has always been a certain dichotomy in Argentina between those who perceive themselves as civilized and those they perceive as barbarians. Lara suggested that the residents of the UCs may believe that they are participating in the new form of “civilization” in Argentina, and that what occurs in the open city is perceived as the new “barbarianism.”

VII. Conclusions

The phenomenon of *urbanizaciones cerradas* in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires is reshaping the physical and social composition of the city. These enclaves of affluence create a high degree of social fragmentation in which those of the middle to upper class are physically separating themselves from the rest of the city, and breaking their ties with the public life of the urban environment. The decisions to move to these developments and participate in the active and voluntary segregation depend on a variety of factors such as the search for a more secure and safe environment, a larger house to raise a family in, a higher quality of life, and a greater sense of tranquility and contact with nature. The residents of the UCs have become unsatisfied with life in the open city of Buenos Aires, and have opted for a much more secure, regimented, and isolated environment to live in.

The *urbanizaciones cerradas* may be a response to something greater than the dissatisfaction with city life, however. The recent history of Argentina has been a turbulent one, with drastic shifts in national politics, a military dictatorship that ended only 20 years ago, and an economic crisis in 2001 that brought the entire country to its knees. With such a past, many Argentines do not share a strong sense of security and confidence in their government and economic stability of their country. There is a sense that anything can occur at any moment in this country and an uncertainty in the future of Argentina in the globalized world. The UC phenomenon might be a response to this sentiment, in which these developments provide a contained and secure environment in which the residents can feel a higher degree of control over their lives and their families well being. These new forms of “civilization” may be providing a security blanket in a world that is perceived to be insecure.

Appendix

Observations and Photos from visits to *Highlands* and *Nordelta*

I was able to observe the *club de campo* of *Highlands* and the *megaemprendimiento* of *Nordelta* during my interviews with Mariela and Jorge, which were held at their homes. The environment within both the UCs provided a stark contrast with that of the urban environment of metropolitan Buenos Aires. The first visit was to *Highlands*.

I visited *Highlands* with my academic advisor, Brenda, who drove us to the location. The first aspect of *Highlands* that caught my attention was the 10 ft. high concrete wall with barbed wire lining the top that surrounded the *club de campo*. When we entered, we encountered a very high degree of security. There was a large gate with numerous security personnel, and we had to stop at a booth to have our entrance confirmed. The security guard first checked Brenda's registration and identification, then called Mariela to confirm that she was expecting us, and then took a photo of Brenda for their records. On our way past the gate, I observed at least two guards with shotguns on duty.

The actually setting inside was very tranquil and quiet. There is a large quantity of green space, with trees lining all the streets, various parks and open spaces, and with each house having a large, landscaped lawn. The houses themselves were also very ample in size, and were of varying styles and dimensions. Some had grand windows without curtains facing the street, allowing passer-bys to look in. Many houses also had 4X4s outside in their driveways, of which one rarely sees within the Capital Federal. *Highlands* has its own mini-supermarket, a community center, and various sport offerings, such as a golf course, tennis courts, and futbol fields.

Mariela explained to us that *Highlands* is a community of status and living there is a form of demonstrating how much money one has. She also noted that there are 660 houses in the community and that every house has multiple service employees working within. Those who were workers were obvious as we drove around the area, as many were ethnically different than the owners of the houses, being of either indigenous or mixed decent. Mariela said that 70 security guards are on duty during a shift, and there are 3 shifts per day, totaling 210 security personnel. When we left, a security guard checked our trunk to make sure we didn't steal anything.

Brenda also drove me to *Nordelta* to hold the interview with Jorge and make observations. The development is enormous, as it is basically a gated city that will have over 9,000 residents when completed. Although we only passed through certain parts, I received a general feel for its setting and environment.

The whole development appeared to be very new, somewhat incomplete as construction is still occurring, and sterile. It evoked a very similar feel to new suburban developments in the United States. When we entered we had to pass through two security checkpoints, in what *Nordelta* terms double security: one to enter the development as a whole and another to enter the neighborhood where Jorge lived. The security was less zealous than that of *Highlands*, with just a guard house and a gate, when entering. The guard confirmed our visit, and obviously had some subjective leeway in determining if we looked fit to enter *Nordelta* (ie if we looked well dressed and respectable).

The neighborhood in which Jorge lived in revolved around a man-made lake. The roads were all curved, with barriers on the sides preventing cars from being driven at high speeds. The houses all appeared to be very new and were constructed in the

same Mediterranean style, similar to suburban developments in the states. There were very little trees, as they had just been planted recently and have not had the chance to grow. Each house had a small green lawn and a concrete driveway. The whole neighborhood felt very pre-planned and devoid of much character.

When completed, *Nordelta* will have 9 neighborhoods, 3 high schools, at least one university, a medical center, various club houses and sporting facilities, a golf course, a commercial center, and an office park. We visited the commercial center, which is complete, and it also resembled something one would find in a suburban development in the US, with chain stores and stark architecture. One difference was that in this commercial center, there were multiple guards posted at various locales, observing the comings and goings of the people.

The whole development felt very quiet and vacant. There was a little more activity inside Jorge's neighborhood, however. When we left, we saw a kid, alone, bicycling in the street.

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