

GATED COMMUNITIES

POLAND HOLDS THE EUROPEAN RECORD IN HOUSING FOR THE DISTRUSTFUL

by **Peter Johnsson**

Marina Mokotów is on the outskirts of one of the most famous districts of Warsaw. After the war, high-rises were built here, most during Gomułka's time in power. They are characterized by the frugality of the five-year plans, with low ceilings and windowless kitchens. The new development included an industrial area just south of prewar Mokotów, but no heavy industry was located there, as in the northern part of the city.

Marina Mokotów covers part of the old industrial property. There are 1,800 housing units, single-family homes and apartments, on an area of 30 hectares. They were ready for occupation in 2006. The entire area is enclosed by walls or fences. There are two gated entrances that are guarded round-the-clock by uniformed guards in a sentry box next to the gate. The community is home to a restaurant, a couple of small grocery stores, a bank, hairdressers, a spa, and a few other businesses. There is an oblong lake in the middle. Water flows in from a manmade waterfall and then is pumped back again. A couple of bridges cross the narrow "lake" and there is a little playground on an island. It is this body of water that inspired the name – verging on the ironic – Marina Mokotów.

If you want to visit someone who lives in Marina Mokotów, you have to tell the guard at the gate whom

you intend to see. The guard usually calls the person to ask whether the guest is expected or welcome. Once inside, you walk along streets that all have names shown on every city map and are posted with ordinary municipal street signs. But none of the city maps indicate that these streets are inside a private enclave. The street names were chosen to instill a sense of security and nearness to a maritime realm: alongside Storm Street and Frigate Street, there are Paradise Street and Quiet Street. Every house or small group of houses is surrounded by a fence about two meters high. The gate is locked and CCTV-monitored. Behind the locked fence is a playground for the kids who live in the houses.

The streets in Marina Mokotów are nearly deserted, and even though it was a weekend when I visited the area, there were no crowds around the artificial lake. The residents are far from chatty. "Yes, we like it here", they say and hurry on. One of the store owners, who does not live in the neighborhood, is more outspoken:

"Not only do they have a wall around the whole place and guarded gates and locked fences around their own houses, when they park their bikes inside

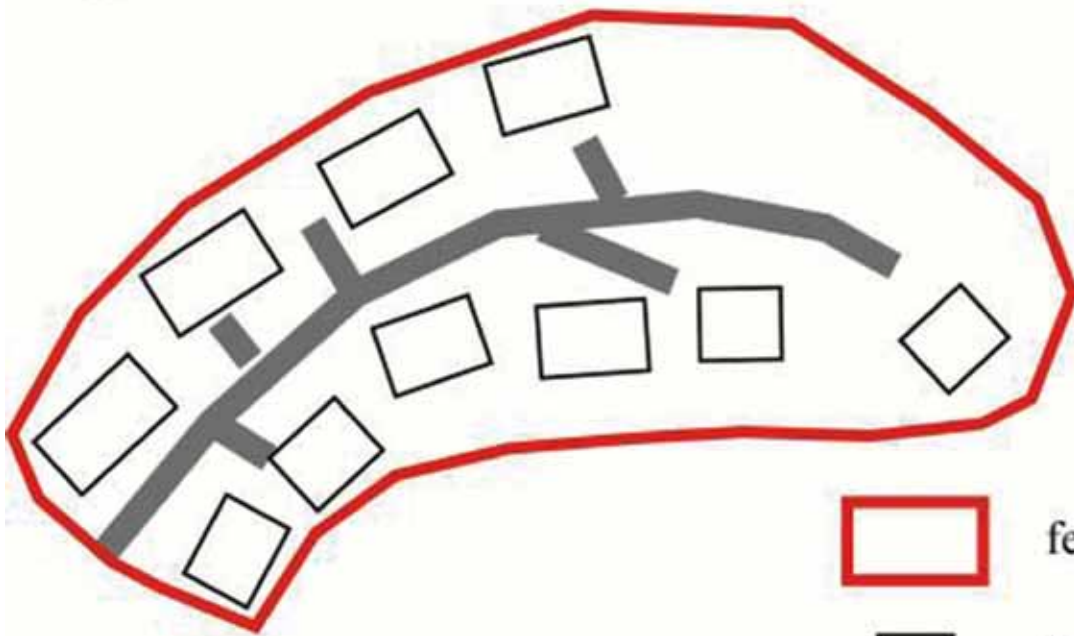
the second fence, they lock them with heavy chains!"

Sociological studies show that Poles on the whole are better off and happier with their lives than they were twenty years ago. In one survey undertaken by CBOS, an opinion institute, only 12 percent of respondents stated that they live in bad conditions, compared to 40 percent in 1993 and 30–35 percent throughout the 1990s. In the same survey, 39 percent said they live in good conditions and 48 percent said they have no complaints.¹

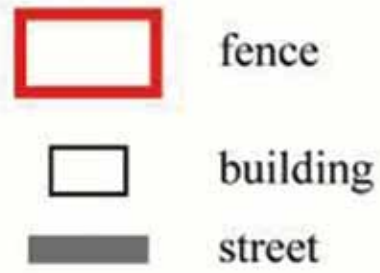
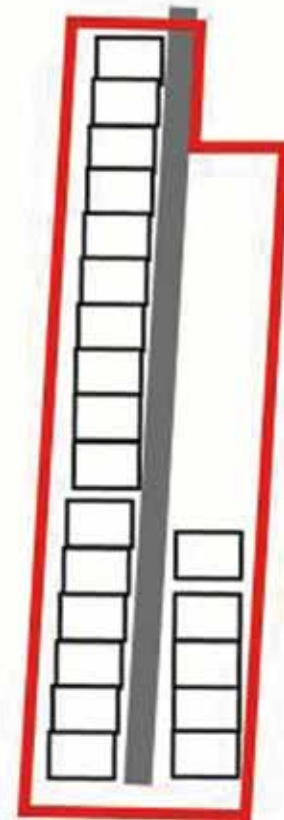
When one of the first gated communities was built in Warsaw in the late 1990s – a neighborhood of single-family homes in the bedroom community of Piaseczno – the houses arrived from the United States ready to assemble. The *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper crowed that "an oasis of luxury and a slice of America" had now landed on Polish soil. The houses came from America for one reason: the contractor, Zbigniew Niemczycki, was a Polish businessman who had returned to his native country after a successful career in the US and founded Curtis International, a company that built one of the first commercial skyscrapers in Warsaw.

The flight from the central parts of the city and traditional outlying areas to newly developed bedroom communities – classic suburbanization – started in

Type A



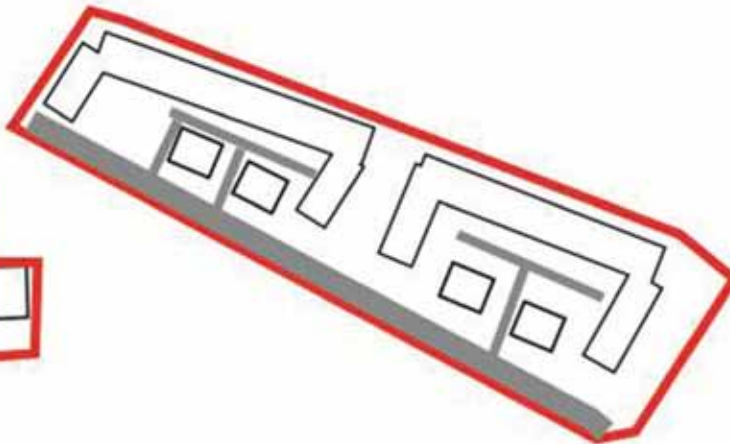
Type B



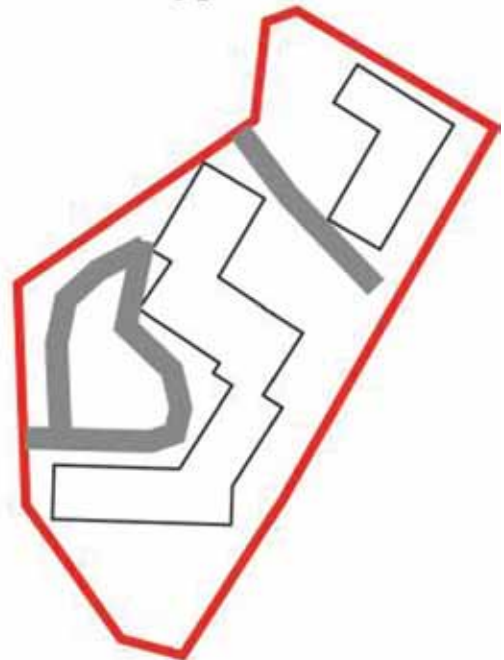
Type C



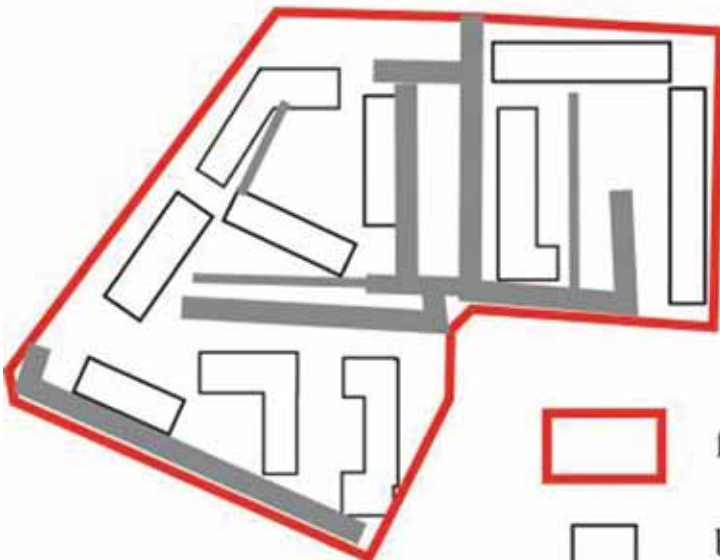
Type D



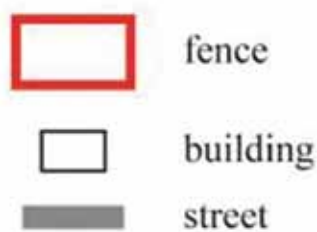
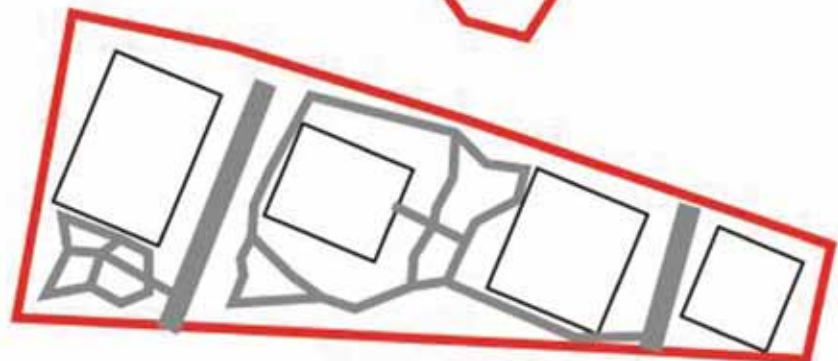
Type E



Type F



Type G



the 1980s. The trend was fueled when free market forces were unleashed and foreign capital began flowing into the country. Capitalism created new opportunities for the building industry. State, municipal, and private lands quickly became the targets of speculation and substantial investments.

South of the historical Mokotów, a large neighborhood called Ursynów had been built in the 1970s on hitherto virgin land. In the first phase, ten-story high rises were erected. Further south, three- or four-story buildings are the norm. The buildings are of uniform architecture, defined by prefabricated concrete slabs. Large green areas, football fields, and playgrounds were laid out between the buildings, and they are still there. Schools, libraries, and cultural centers were included in urban planning. What they did not have was enough parking: the neighborhood was built with no thought for the surge in car use that happened in Poland in the 1970s and took off again after 1990.

In the early 1990s, private entrepreneurs started buying farmland between Ursynów and Las Kabacki (the Kabacki Forest) nature reserve. New houses popped up like mushrooms on this land over a period of twenty years. Architecture was varied and concrete slabs nowhere to be seen. Instead of unrelenting gray, the façades were in various colors. Parking was built into the projects, usually in the form of underground garages with elevators up to the building stairwells. There were no green expanses, but the narrow strips of grass that often surrounded the buildings were neat and tidy and the sidewalks smoothly paved. Debates raged in the newspapers and trade papers as to what should happen to the old neighborhoods: Were they carcinogenic? How long would it take before the concrete slabs started to crumble and the buildings fall like houses of cards?

The new district that grew quickly south of the “communist” Ursynów was named after the nature reserve: Kabaty. It took a while for sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers to realize that what was being built often added a new element to the cityscape: the gated community.²

During the initial phase, according to Jacek Gądecki, this was seen “as the logical outcome of undefined events and [...] the advent and existence of this type of community was regarded as something normal and not ascribed any particular significance.”³

A few years into the 2000s, some professional analysts began to draw attention to the negative consequences of this trend. A critical breakthrough in the national discussion happened, Gądecki argues, when Henrik Werth, a German architecture student from Berlin, arrived in Warsaw in 2004 and drew a map of gated communities. There was one such at home in Berlin (Arkadien), but here he found more than 200, almost three times as many as in all of France, where there were 72 of them at the time according to the statistics.⁴



The gated community Marina Mokotów in Warsaw is built around a water reservoir.

Photo: www.apaka.com.pl

Although most gated communities are located in the south, where available farmland and the absence of industry have made it natural for the city to expand, later cartography has complicated the picture. Magdalena Górczyńska has shown a substantial increase in gated communities in Bielany in the northwest, which was formerly regarded as a working-class neighborhood. Two thirds of the housing built in Bielany in the 2000s has been either gated or guarded. Górczyńska reports that old neighborhoods in this district have also been fenced in.⁵

At present, there are probably more than four hundred gated communities in Warsaw and an estimated 75 percent of all new homes on the market in Warsaw are in gated communities. No other European capital has numbers this high. The tendency is the same in other larger Polish cities. Dominika Polanska has investigated the tri-city area of Gdańsk-Sopot-Gdynia and Paulina Tobiasz-Lis has studied the traditional working class city of Łódź. And there is a similar trend in other countries in the former Eastern Bloc.⁶

How should this strong need to lock oneself in and build walls around one’s home be explained?

References to the United States are common. Most Polish studies cite Setha Lowe’s *Behind the Gates* and Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder’s *Fortress America*. Interestingly, the rapid development of gated communities in the US is also associated with the 1990s and 2000s. Lowe states: “The number of people estimated to be living in gated communities in the United States increased from four million in 1995, to eight million in 1997, and to sixteen million in 1998.” A study performed in conjunction with a census in 2001 showed that 6 percent of the US population then lived in such settlements, or almost 20 million Americans. In several US states, current estimates are that at least 40 percent of new housing units are in gated communities.⁷

Blakely and Snyder, like Lowe, differentiate between three different types: lifestyle communities, prestige communities, and security zone communities. Lifestyle communities are neighborhoods that appeal to people who want to live near or with people who have a similar lifestyle and who enjoy roughly the same things. The first gated communities in the US arose in the Sunbelt and were often connected to resorts or golf courses. When gated communities first crossed the Atlantic, this is the type established in southern Europe. According to Blakely and Snyder, prestige communities are now the fastest-growing type in the US:

Their gates symbolize distinction and prestige and create and protect a secure place on the social ladder. They lack the recreational amenities of the lifestyle communities, often differing little from a standard residential subdivision except for their gates.

Security zone communities have arisen due to “fear of crime and outsiders”. Lowe’s study undertaken in the US in the mid 1990s was based on interviews with residents of a gated community on the outskirts of New York and three communities in San Antonio, Texas. Respondents said that fear of crime and a longing for safe surroundings were the primary reasons they had chosen to live behind walls or fences.

Peter Stoyanov and Klaus Frantz have analyzed a corresponding development in Bulgaria – mainly Sofia – and noted that gated communities, as in the Soviet Union, existed for a select group of the communist nomenklatura. It is difficult to correlate this to Poland. While it is true that certain streets in central Warsaw like Aleja Przyjacioł and Aleja Róż were mainly the preserve of high-ranking party officials,



A gated community in Bielany, in the northwest of Poland. This area was formerly regarded as a working class neighborhood.

Photo: www.ugk.hom.pl

these streets were also home to art and culture workers and the intelligentsia, who could not be associated with the machinery of power. The streets were not closed off and there were no walls around the buildings. An enclosed house was indeed built on Parkowa Street under Gomulka, which is still the prime minister's residence. In the adjacent building at Sulkiwicz Street 3, apartments were reserved for government and politburo members and security guards. The first party leader to use the house on Parkowa Street was not Gomulka, but his successor Edward Gierek. Gomulka preferred his house on Frascatti Street, a pattern that was more the rule than the exception for high-ranking politicians and officials in those years. Minister of Internal Affairs Czesław Kiszczak lived – and still lives – in his relatively modest house in Mokotów. So did General Wojciech Jaruzelski, whose house is in another part of Mokotów. As a rule, high-ranking officials had single-family homes with fenced-in yards and some kind of security monitoring, and government and party leaders had enclosed holiday resorts at their disposal. There were special – strictly delimited – neighborhoods for military personnel near places regarded as strategic objects. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see any direct connection between these phenomena and the gated communities currently being built in Poland.

Certainly, some areas of Warsaw are more attractive than others, and thus gated communities are more common there. But “despite the existence in Warsaw of areas with a relatively uniform social structure, the nature of the city is not one of social-spatial zones characteristic of Western European cities; the picture of Warsaw is instead ‘mosaic-like.’” As Anna Gąsior-Niemiec, Georg Glasze, and Robert Putz have noted, the “city as a whole is being transformed into a field of complex mazes in which buildings are isolated from their surroundings”.⁸

There have been few field studies of gated com-

munities in Poland, and they are usually based on relatively limited interview material and discussions in the press and social media. In these studies, residents readily report fear of crime and the desire for personal safety for themselves and their children as reasons for choosing to settle there. Opinion polls show that the proportion of Poles who believe “Poland is a safe country to live in” declined drastically in the early 1990s, from 75 percent to about 20 percent, and began to rise again in the middle of the decade. According to a 2008 CBOS study, a full 87 percent of Poles feel safe in their neighborhoods.⁹ Crime statistics indicate that Poland is a safe country compared to most other countries in Europe. That includes Warsaw, where the burglary rate per 1,000 inhabitants does not differ from other capital cities in Europe.¹⁰

Safety as a motive for settling in gated communities must be critically examined:

Although many researchers maintain on the basis of surveys that the main incentive which motivates people to reside in gated communities is the threat/insecurity factor, it seems that this slightly exaggerated assertion should be commented on and corrected taking into account other analytical data and tools focusing, among other things, on the semantics of signs in space and discourse analysis.¹¹

The wall or the fence [...] is also perceived as a boundary, in the sense that in the minds of residents, it connotes new norms and constitutes protection of privileges. [...] The boundary often cited as a security requirement is actually an attempt to separate the space in order to gain complete control over reality, a flight from chaos, and a foundation upon which to build personal identity.¹²

If the strong growth of gated communities in Poland is closely associated with the new middle class created since the fall of the old regime, sociologists argue that the explanations of the phenomenon must be sought in what is constitutive of this class or social group. In this context, Bohdan Jałowiecki makes reference to globalization and the transformation of Warsaw into a genuine metropolis.

At the end of the 1980s, about a third of the labor force in the capital was still employed in industry. Today, that proportion has been cut in half. In its place, a number of new occupations have developed in Polish society and given rise to a “metropolitan class”. Jałowiecki refers to Alain Bourdin's idea that the metropolis is constantly in motion, it splits and it fragments: while the city created “freedom”, the metropolis is creating “a world of isolated individuals”.¹³

This new class is well-educated and its members have relatively high incomes, but they generally lack the property that was the hallmark of the traditional bourgeoisie. It is more mobile and thus has looser ties to its home districts than the old middle class. It is consumption-oriented to a great extent, and “new kinds of individualism, self-actualization, and creativity are essential characteristics of this class”.¹⁴ It has, according to Jałowiecki, deliberately set itself apart from the rest of society behind walls and fences. His explanation draws a parallel to postmodernist theories of the current phase of development of Western civilization. One of the prominent theorists is sociologist Zygmunt Bauman:

Originally constructed to provide safety for all their inhabitants, cities are associated these days more often with danger than they are with security. [...] The war against insecurity, and particularly against dangers and risk to personal safety, is now waged *inside* the city, and inside the city battlefields are set aside and front lines are drawn. Heavily armed trenches (impassable approaches) and bunkers (fortified and closely guarded buildings or complexes) aimed at separating, keeping away, and barring the entry of strangers, are fast becoming one of the most visible aspects of contemporary cities.¹⁵

Bauman finds the cause in the adverse consequences of globalization – in what he calls “the passage from the solid to a liquid phase of modernity”, where “social forms [...] can no longer keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them”, and therefore cannot “serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies”. In this “liquid modern” era, power and politics have been separated and “community [...] sounds increasingly hollow”. This is a world that “promotes division, not unity, and puts a premium on competitive attitudes, while degrading collaboration and teamwork”.¹⁶

This fragmented, individualized, liquid time engenders, by extension, what Bauman has called liquid fear – fear of failure and fear that the foundations of life will crack. A great paradox of liquid modernity, Bauman writes, is that people in the west are living in

the safest, most comfortable and benign world that any human being has ever experienced, yet feel more threatened, unsafe, and afraid than people have in most historic societies.¹⁷ Once again, he finds the cause in the negative consequences of globalization:

Both the village and the city are an arena for forces that reach far beyond their borders and the processes set in motion by these forces cannot be understood and cannot be controlled by the inhabitants of the village or the city and not even by those who initiated them.¹⁸

The local “cannot be regarded only as an answer to global processes”, writes Jacek Gądecki. Looking at the process that produces, reproduces, and consumes the space and especially the social interpretation of these as global phenomena is “certainly justified, but also dangerous”, he argues in an indirect polemic with Bauman.¹⁹ Gądecki uses four components to address the Polish discussion of gated communities: fear and safety, prestige, aesthetics, and class identity.

He also finds that the safety of gated communities is important to their residents, although it never seems to be connected to any direct fear of what is going on in society as a whole. The matter of prestige is related primarily to how the communities were marketed, often with intimations that they are peaceful areas created for and/or populated by people who belong to a certain social class.

In the first phase, the aesthetics were the dominant element of the discourse: the architecture, the building materials, the planning of the immediate surroundings including the sidewalks; everything that definitively set the new neighborhoods apart from the gray and often dilapidated buildings in the “communist” neighborhoods. In the second phase, aesthetics first gave way to the issue of safety, but later returned as a dominant element. The aesthetics in a “well-organized community are one of the most important factors that separate it from the surrounding urban chaos”.²⁰

Gądecki contends that the aesthetics of the living environment are part of the identity of the new middle class. He uses the concept of the visualized landscape

– which encompasses architecture, natural surroundings, amenities, beauty, and peacefulness. The *visualized landscape* not only distills the “composition” itself, but also the individual’s subjective relationship to it.²¹

If sociologists like Jałowiecki have emphasized the fluid and weak ties of the metropolitan class to their local milieu, Gądecki gives a different and more contradictory picture of the identity of the new class. Like other analysts, he emphasizes the mobility of this class as a distinctive element of the new lifestyle. Without an understanding of the implications of mobility, Gądecki argues, it is impossible to understand what gated communities mean to this new middle class: “[I]t is primarily this mobility that gives the separation meaning”.²²

Life to a large extent is realized outside the gated community. The mobility covers work, leisure, the whole lifestyle. In that light, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of a seemingly banal thing like a garage. Paradoxically enough, according to Gądecki, the other face of mobility is that people seek out their new identity in relation to the place in which they live. In this way, the visualized landscape becomes a spatial manifestation of social relations. One can go so far as to say that the visualized landscape “constitutes an ideology, concentrated to the degree that it can be seen in materialized form”.²³

The visualized landscape is a product in a changeable market, but it is a product that when consumed is transformed by the consumer: “Under circumstances in which identity is strongly associated with ownership of products and consumption, the visualized landscape becomes a way to express personal identity; the kinship with a concrete visualized landscape may thus become one of the most important markers of class identity.”²⁴ When Gądecki summarizes the significance of gated communities to the emergence of Poland’s new middle class, he refers, not surprisingly, to Pierre Bourdieu and his concepts of *milieu* and *habitus*.

Jacek Gądecki has pointed out fundamental local factors for the transformation of housing that began in Poland in the second half of the 1980s and was given a huge push forward when free market forces were unleashed in the early 1990s. The significance of the aesthetics and the visualized landscape to this

transformation of Polish society is not limited to the new neighborhoods or gated communities. It can be seen in the countryside and can be applied to the significant “landscape change” that large parts of the old high-rise neighborhoods have undergone: few high-rises in the vast Ursynów with its 130,000 inhabitants now boast gray concrete slabs. The buildings have been insulated, plastered, and painted; the elevators have been replaced along with the entrance doors, alongside which one now finds entry phones, sometimes with video, just like in the new neighborhoods.

Jacek Gądecki argues that applying the American pattern to Polish reality was not easy or even possible. However, one fundamental question remains: Why are gated communities so popular in Poland? The new middle class could very well create their own milieu and their differentiating habitus without building walls and fences.

The results of the first more comprehensive field study of gated communities were not published until the autumn of 2011. The study, led by Dominik Owczarek, was based on a survey of 415 people, of whom 265 live in gated communities and 150 live in open communities in Warsaw. The nine gated communities as well as the open communities were selected to ensure the representation of widely varied city districts. In brief, the study showed that those who lived in gated communities were “younger on average, had lived for a shorter time in their neighborhoods, perceived a higher degree of safety, were less active in the community, possessed less local social capital, had a stronger connection to their apartments but were less strongly connected to the city, and finally, had a more favorable attitude towards gated communities than the people who lived in open communities”.²⁵

Average age in the respective areas did not differ by much. The 22–31 age cohort was exactly equally represented, at 32 percent, in both types of community. Not unexpectedly, the 32–41 age cohort was proportionately somewhat larger and the 52–61 cohort smaller in the gated communities. There was no marked difference in level of education: 58.5 percent of those in the gated communities and 52.3 percent of those in the open communities had university degrees.

To be sure, people who lived in the gated communities earned more than those who lived in open communities, but income disparities were significant in both cases and the proportion of low-income residents – people with wages of less than 2,000 zloty per month – was essentially the same (12.8 percent in the gated communities and 15.5 percent in open communities). The biggest difference between the two types of areas had to do with those at the top of the pay scale. In the gated communities, 18.2 percent earned between 7,500 and 10,000 zloty per month, while only 10.0 percent in the open communities were in this income bracket. The study unfortunately does not report income differences between the same age cohorts in the different types of communities. Nonetheless, these figures take the wind out of a commonplace assertion that the people who have partitioned themselves off from the rest of society are a uniform and affluent group in terms of income and education.²⁶

The study further shows that it is difficult to make any claims of animosity between the groups in the two



Fenced green space in front of a building in a gated housing estate in Bielany.



One of the gates in the housing estate in Bielany.



Marina Mokotów in Warsaw was constructed between 2003 and 2006.

Photo: www.apaka.com.pl

types of communities. A tiny minority in both said that they felt rancor or resentment against residents of the other type of community. One third of the respondents in the gated communities had a favorable attitude towards the open neighboring communities, while 64.4 claimed a “neutral” attitude. Twenty percent of those who lived in the open communities had a positive view of the gated neighboring communities, while 51.3 took a neutral position. A full 30 percent of the respondents in the open communities had a favorable attitude towards the gated communities in general. Only 20 percent believed that gated communities are a bad thing.²⁷

Dominik Owczarek concludes that “the actual physical separation may *not* be an important factor in people’s evaluations of their own housing”.²⁸ This field investigation thus undermines the findings reached earlier by several Polish sociologists that there is a strong opposition between the residents inside and outside the “walls”, perhaps most clearly formulated by Anna Gašior-Niemiec, Georg Glasze, and Robert Pütz:

[I]n the analyzed discourse the dichotomy assumes the shape of aggressive, mutual exclusion, verging on negation of the right of the other to exist.²⁹

The Polish reality appears to be somewhat more complicated, and if such a large proportion of the population in Poland has a positive attitude towards gated communities, perhaps this visualized landscape is the hallmark of the ideology that a significantly broader

group in Polish society carries with them throughout their lives. In other words: Are there other and more fundamental structural changes? Must one actually look back in history to understand this Polish pattern and behavior?

If one were to set off on a journey through Polish terrain, visiting small towns and villages, it would be hard to avoid noticing that virtually every house and its plot of land are surrounded by a high fence or wall with a gate that can be locked. One sees this pattern even in villages where every villager knows everyone else. Remarkably, there are also many undeveloped plots of land that are carefully enclosed.

Several studies confirm that Poland is a country whose people have little trust in the authorities. In the aforementioned EU study of crime which made it clear that Poland is a relatively safe country, Poland ended up at the bottom of the statistics when it came to trust in the work of the police.³⁰

Other studies indicate that Poles have little trust in their fellow citizens. The sociologist Piotr Sztompka states that “in countries characterized by a high level of trust (Norway, Sweden, Holland, Japan, the US, Germany), people act according to the motto that ‘you should trust others as long as they are not proven fraudsters,’ while in low-trust countries, people act according to the motto that ‘everyone else is a potential thief, swindler, taker of bribes, or secret agent unless he or she has proven otherwise’”. These differences are inscribed in the “collective memory of the given culture”, Sztompka argues. The level of trust or distrust in a society is usually dependent upon how deeply rooted democratic values and democratic traditions are in each country. Sztompka talks about “cumulative social trust”, but also says that sudden

upheavals in society can lead to further declines in already weak trust: “a typical example of this is the situation in the post-communist countries, where we can note several types of trauma.”³¹

Kazimierz Sowa, professor of sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and head of the Department of Studies of the Civil Society, is attempting in a series of lectures on the public space and Polish civil society, entirely in the spirit of Sztompka, to find historical roots for both the lack of trust in Polish society and the general weakness of the civil society. There has never been any fundamental trust in public institutions or representatives of power in Polish society, Sowa argues. Nor has “civil society” created in Poland from time to time ever resembled civil societies that characterizes modern Europe, where they early on became part of a functioning social organism. In Poland, civil society “arose and was organized either in parallel or in opposition to the existing state”.³² Cooperation in this version of civil society was not based on any trust in public institutions or fellow citizens. Trust was reserved for individuals who were part of the family, the circle

of friends, or otherwise reliable people. This “dual” society was even a constitutive element of the social economy in the former regime, when people had to get things done through private networks.

On my way to the airport, passing one gated community after another, the taxi driver unknowingly makes a connection to Kazimierz Sowa and Piotr Sztompka:

“My dear man, last week I had a customer who lives here and complained that he has been fenced in. It was, he said, a company that manufactures fencing that had persuaded the chairman of the housing association to put the question on the agenda of the annual meeting. My customer voted against it, but a majority of the members at the meeting were for it. They let themselves be persuaded by the chairman.

“You understand what it was all about”, says the driver, and rubs his thumb and forefinger together: money, money, money.

There is no simple answer to the question of why gated communities are so infinitely more widespread in Poland than in any Western European country. Each of the theories recounted probably contains part of the answer. Nor – however difficult it might be to see anything positive for Polish society in this development – is there any simple answer to the question of the long-term consequences for modern Poland. ❌