



Community living

In rural and urban environments, the community is a prized goal for the middle-aged middle classes as they seek to reconnect with 'people like us'.

In a number of the Future Agenda events, the increasing (not decreasing) desire among many of us to reconnect with others in deeper, closer and more localised communities came up as an issue. In discussions about the future of cities in Europe, 'village' communities within cities – where local facilities, local identities and closer connections all exist – were repeatedly highlighted as key ingredients for sustainable urban living: examples ranging from Greenwich Village to Hampstead to The Marais were given as role models. The need for a community to provide a common set of values and stability for people with increasingly complex lives was also recognised in a workshop held in an Oxfordshire village pub. In the USA, the rising popularity of gated communities, often marketed as places for 'people like us', was noted, not just in the fast-growing sprawls of Las Vegas and Houston but also in more established locations such as Washington and Chicago. Discussions in India identified the segregation of groups of people on a building-by-building basis as both notable and a growing trend – not just through an economic lens, but also by creed. All over the world, it seems that people are looking to reconnect with like-minded others, with common values or similar status, as part of a growing desire for community living.

On one level there is nothing new in this. In many places, ethnic groups already choose to live together within specific zones or areas: Chinatown is possibly the most visible manifestation of this in numerous

cities, but think also of the Greek community within Melbourne, cities like Bradford in the UK where there is a high concentration of Pakistanis, gay centres in San Francisco, Rio and Sydney, and even the ex-pat groupings in many capitals from Delhi and Beijing to Bogotá and Ankara. Perhaps as exemplified by Jewish ghettos, people of similar background have always lived together. What is changing, however, is the nature of the groupings of 'people like us' and also the manifestation of community living.

At one extreme, we have the steady rise of gated communities which seek to isolate the rich or the upper classes. In Brazil 'condomínio fechado' are closed housing estates with their own power supply, sanitation and security to protect residents from the violent outside world. Similarly, in post-apartheid South Africa, 'security villages' or 'enclosed neighbourhoods' fulfil a similar function. In Argentina, 'barrios privados' have been seen as a symbol of wealth while in Saudi Arabia, gated communities exist to accommodate Westerners and their families. The suburb of Fairview in the TV show *Desperate Housewives* is a typical media view of an American gated community. At the other end of the scale, we can clearly see areas of cities that market themselves as having specific qualities in order to attract certain types of people and, in some cases, they compete with each other to attract specific groups. In London this is visible at many levels, with the competition between Chiswick, Hampstead and Barnes for

People are looking to reconnect with like-minded others, with common values or similar status.

young families being emulated by the Marylebone versus Kensington versus Islington competition for pre-family professionals. 'Village living' within cities around the world has become an important feature of the real estate business.

One commenter on the Future Agenda blog envisaged 'a rise in gated communities as the poor get poorer and the rich get richer. In fact, I see gated cities re-emerging. Not only will we have subdivisions of major fast-growing cities such as Las Vegas (with its imbalanced economic distribution) continuing to give rise to gated communities, but also I see that key Western cities will become electronically walled. Just as in medieval times, being inside rather than outside the wall at times of crisis will be pivotal.'

In the workshop discussions, the increasing significance of community living was signalled numerous times with several different underlying drivers. Foremost of these, and a shift from the past, is the practical freedom for some to select where to live and work, enabled by both new technologies and new ways of working. The roll-out of fixed as well as mobile high-speed broadband in many countries has given individuals the ability to connect with others anywhere in the world as efficiently as being in a corporate office. This means that people in the most remote of villages will soon be able to access and share data as effectively as those in the heart of the metropolis.

As urbanisation drives a growing exodus of populations from rural communities into cities, in some regions the countryside is gradually becoming a place where only the wealthy can live – effectively a playground for the rich. Accompanying this, the adoption of flexible working by corporate employers means that some employees can enjoy the benefit of this, particularly as the need to be at work, to be seen to have a 'proper' job, is on the decline and increasing numbers of knowledge workers decide to go freelance. Free agents already account for over 30% of workers in the US and this proportion is expected to exceed 50% in the next decade as more people choose to work outside the corporate norm.

As we look ahead, the potential for us not to have to commute on a daily basis is increasing. Rather than facing long journeys to and from work, as urban congestion increases and the financial cost of commuting grows, remote working and telepresence will enable more and more of us to avoid unproductive travel. By 2020, there is forecast to be an overall decline in the number of people in Europe commuting to an office. At the same time, within each local area, the rise of community hubs where people can connect both socially and for work is expected to increase. As the pervasive Starbucks option for the freelance worker becomes too great a compromise, many developers are now including

In some regions the countryside is gradually becoming a place where only the wealthy can live – effectively a playground for the rich.

dedicated flexible work spaces within new housing developments. In addition, as co-location of work and home becomes part of many urban planning scenarios, office space is increasingly being included in mixed developments so that the daily commute could become a thirty-second ride in a lift.

The challenge for many urban planners and social scientists is finding to what extent community living can be planned versus accommodated: how much is it about zoning and cul-de-sacs, as occurs in many new cities, rather than natural movement as districts build up new identities and so attract different groups of like-minded individuals? Of course, it could all go badly wrong. The author J.G. Ballard was especially interested in how people living together in artificial environments often become detached from the real world. Several of his later novels, such as *Super-Cannes*, *Cocaine Nights* and *Millennium People*, revisited the concept explored in his earlier *High-Rise* of how tribalism could re-emerge within planned communities. Neal Stephenson's science fiction novel *Snow Crash* highlights a future where mass-produced gated communities operate as independent sovereign city-states known as 'burbclaves'.

The challenge for many urban planners and social scientists is finding to what extent community living can be planned versus accommodated.



Although in many parts of the world, returning to the real village community (as preferred in Europe) is not an option and the rural-to-urban migration is definitely a one-way journey, the impulse for reconnecting with 'people like us' is a highly visible trend in an increasing number of cities. For example, in Mumbai this is illustrated by new apartment blocks being reserved for specific creeds and in Dubai by the division between nationals and expats. Given all of this, it appears that, although cities are becoming more international and multicultural in their overall make-up, human nature continues to draw us towards those with similar mindsets and behaviours.

Related insights



Page 107



Page 117



Page 129