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Gating and Gatedness: Interpreting the Procedural Refiguration of an Enclosed Residential Compound in Guangzhou

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Abstract

This paper proposes a relational spatial lens and methods to investigate the drivers underlying the production and reconfiguration of the gating space and the meaning of gatedness in an enclosed residential compound in the Chinese urban context, which is commonly referred to as a Gated Community. The conceptual lens helps reveal the fluid character of the materialized gating spaces and their polyvalent meaning. This is accomplished by systematically employing a relational conceptualization of space, as well as the concepts of refiguration and translocalization. Empirically, we focus on a perennial and dynamic case in Guangzhou city, an enclosed residential compound called ‘East Lake New Village.’ We examine the distinct phases through which its physical ‘gating spaces’ and perceived ‘gatedness’ have grown and transformed over time. We address the causal relations between translocal spatial knowledges, contextualized practices, various material figurations of gating spaces and the multivalent meaning of ‘gatedness.’ We argue that the formation of gating spaces needs to be examined relationally, addressing the ways in which local and translocal objects are welded together in a place, which in turn either blurs or sharpens the rooted perception of gatedness in a local context.

Keywords: Chinese urban-context; gated community; gating and gatedness; polycontextualization; translocalization; refiguration of space

1. Introduction

Making our way to the first ‘gated community’ project in Guangzhou, the East Lake New Village (ELNV) residential compound, we get off at the nearest metro station and walk another 300 yards to its main, southern gate. We take a two-lane avenue with wide, slightly worn sidewalks, curbside parking, low walls, fences and densely packed storefronts on both sides. High-rise residential buildings sculpt our field of vision to the front and to the sides. Our view is also shaped by dense, leafy orchid trees. They shade both sides of the lanes, aromatize the air and ease our nerves on this hot summer day.

On a typical weekday afternoon, it is mostly elderly people, young mothers and adolescents who are drawn to the sidewalks at the edge of ELNV in the streets and area between ‘gated communities.’ Passersby pop in and out of a retail strip consisting of banks, mobile shops, beauty salons, a bakery, a tea house, a convenience store and other vendors. People are not in a hurry. Bikes or cars occasionally pass by, at reduced speed. The area feels energetic but not bustling. The ELNV’s main, southern gate (Figure 1) is located in this strip. Fulfilling the criteria of a ‘typical’ gated community, the entrance is controlled via a card system. It excludes non-residents. However, the visual, audio, and olfactory signals first tenderly invite, then intimidate incoming outsiders like us. Our perceptions challenge the established notion that the ELNV residential compound represents the prototypical gated community in mainland China (Fan 2006: 34). We therefore regard this ostensibly ordinary residential compound as a particularly interesting research object to understand the *actual* processes and context-specific meaning of the gated community phenomenon. Our interest stems firstly from the fact that the compound’s wall space has gradually emerged, grown and changed over the course of the last three decades as social structures in the wider context have changed. It is also due to the fact that urban planners and academics have recognized ELNV as the forerunner model of reform era ‘gated’ real estate developments, justified by the combination of private investment, land-use rights, and the involvement of a property management system in its design (Li 2008: 4). Its social-spatial constellation laid the legislative and practical bases for the subsequent gated community phenomenon. In the following investigation, we focus on how its wall space – constituted by a variety of material artefacts both inside and outside of the gates – was gradually refigured by multiple actors with different intentions. We firstly investigate the process of *gating*, by which various knowledge sources are combined resulting in refiguring processes of the wall space. Secondly, we also examine the local perceptions of gatedness by combining a perspective grounded in the sociology of space with urban design and urban planning, thereby enriching current debates on the relationship between the meaning and materiality of the ‘Gated Community’. We begin by reviewing existing interdisciplinary debates on the causes of the gated community phenomenon in the post-reform Chinese urban context, followed by an introduction of sociologically developed concepts of relational space (figuration and refiguration) and the two

analytical dimensions (translocalization and polycontexturalization) most relevant to the present discussion and analysis¹.



Figure 1. Left: The inviting atmosphere emanating from roads between ‘gated communities’ in Guangzhou. The left-hand side street demarcates the southern boundary of the East-Lake New Village residential compound. Right: The southern gate of the East-Lake-New-Village Residential Compound. Source: Photo by authors, 2019.

2. The debates on the gated community phenomenon in the Chinese context and their conceptual inadequacies

The concept of the gated community was firstly associated with the image of privileged enclaves located in urban outskirts in the US and Brazilian social contexts. It was coined to address a reduced sense of community, practices of social or physical exclusion aimed at particular social groups, and increasing inequality in urban settings in the 1980s and 1990s (Caldeira 1996). The notion conjures up a broader range of social-spatial phenomena in its transference to the global context (i.e., West Africa, India, Istanbul and China) – as it became detached from singular material formations and particular groups of social actors and their resources, stakes, and rights. It was also disassociated from social-cultural problems closely tied to neoliberal political-economic discourse, such as in the club goods theory (Atkinson/Blandy 2013).

The residential compounds in China’s post-reform urban context predominantly take the material form of gated communities (Miao 2003). Many have noted that the gated community phenomenon is geographically widespread in China and displays a high level of diversity in architectural styles, built forms, and social constitution (Feng/Zhu/Breitung 2014). Others have argued that walls and segregated spaces, most pervasively the Danwei work-residential unit compound constructed in Maoist China, have constituted an enduring physical feature of the Chinese urban landscape long before the marketization of urban housing in the post-reform era

¹ see also the research conducted by CRC 1265 subproject B03 on gated communities in Asian cities (e.g., Bartmanski et al. 2022).

(Deng/Chen 2019; Lu 2006: 141). These two diverging lines dominate the main debates on gated communities in the Chinese context.

Existing studies suggest that two main causal mechanisms are behind the emergence of the gated community phenomenon. Along the first line, scholars consider diachronic cultural-historical aspects for their rationale. They address local causes, arguing that both the enclosed physical form and the urban organizational form are ingrained in urban planning, design and governance practices across social regimes and historical periods in China. These forms are congruent with the control-oriented intentions of urban governance (Xu/Yang 2009). Others contend that the gated form results from the values and the internalized structural factors of urban planners and their practice (Liao/Wehrhahn/Breitung 2019). Scholars working in the other direction tend to highlight synchronic, global and neoliberal factors. They argue that the emergence of gated communities in post-reform China is part and parcel of a world-wide class project, alongside growing social-economic inequality. One example is Li Zhang's argument in *Privatizing China*, a book that focuses on the consuming practices of emerging middle-class actors. Zhang asserts that the emergence of the gated community "reflects a global trend toward the privatization of space, security, and lifestyle in the neoliberal era as states are passing on more and more of their responsibilities to private entities and individual citizens." (Zhang/Ong 2008: 40). The argument contrasts Wu's emphasis on the gated community aesthetic in suburban settings and property developer practices, where he contends that the "club of consumption" and "discourse of fear" perspectives inadequately explain the phenomenon. Wu suggests viewing such spatiality as the result of a development strategy or "packaging and branding" initiated by real estate developers (Wu 2010).

2.1. Proposing a conceptual lens: towards a procedural analysis of the refiguration of (relational) gating space and a contextualized interpretation of the meaning of gatedness

We argue that the term gated community, like many hyper terms circulated in the domain of international urban studies (i.e., ghetto, gentrification, public space), is either imposed on or learned by scholars conducting research in China. The mutually exclusive epistemological positions (local vs. global, practice vs. order) in such adopted lenses render contradictory interpretations.

We find two main flaws in existing examinations of particular cases of gated communities in China. First, the material and symbolic dimensions of the gated community are analyzed separately, leaving the findings partial or at least unsystematic. Either, scholars tend to address the diachronic persistence of the general material forms (the enclosure) and attribute this continuity to general and enduring social-cultural symbolic structures. Or, scholars direct their attention to the transformation of the particular constituents of the enclosure (the gate, the wall, the social groups), attributing it to a change in symbolic framing held by some situated

practitioners (e.g. the consumer, the developer, the urban planner or the urban administrator). Both fail to attend to the processes by which the material and the symbolic configuration of the phenomenon become interrelated, as a result of the practices of heterogeneous yet interdependent social actors. Second, we find arguments emphasizing *either* the local *or* the global perspective to be inherently faulty. They fail to capture how the gated community, as a relational assemblage of social and material elements, is dynamically constituted by the circulation of knowledge, representations, and things in both local and global contexts.

Like other scholars – Vesselinov, Cazessus and Falk (2007), for instance, studied spatial inequality in gated communities using a sociological framework – we propose an approach that also employs a *sociological relational concept of space* (Löw 2001, 2008), which views space as a relational ordering of living entities and social goods. Martina Löw's sociological concept of space divides space-constituting practices into two processes, which she terms *spacing* and *synthesis*. The former refers to the process by which static or mobile social bodies and material entities are positioned in relation to one another, while the latter refers to the process by which “goods and people are connected to form spaces through processes of perception, ideation, or recall” (Löw 2008: 35).

We also draw on Elias, Löw and Knoblauch's use of the term *figuration* to grasp various spatial relationships between assemblages and their overall spatial order, the relationalities external to constituents. These scholars argue that the notion of figuration “makes it possible to address spatial relations of any order and across different scales” (Knoblauch/Löw 2017: 5). They have hypothesized that the spatial transformation of contemporary society is better described as “refiguration,” a term that entails the processes of mediatization, polycontexturalization and translocalization. By translocal, they mean that units such as families, friends or religious communities – but also things and technologies – are integrated into circulations and anchored in several places. Translocalizing can be understood as the activity of linking places and encompasses the possibility of one site being related to one or more other sites, wherever they may be. We assume that increasing possibilities and the growing necessity to link places relative to each other blurs common notions of proximity and distance, local and global. Translocalization, it is further assumed, does not lead to a devaluation of places and localities but to an increasing relevance of local ties, because translocalization enables places and feelings of belonging to be experienced more relationally (Knoblauch/Löw 2017: 15). Polycontexturalization refers to the heterogenization of people's references when they act. In contrast to translocality, the concept of polycontexturalization looks to networked communication and its consequences for spatial constitution (Knoblauch/Löw 2017: 11).

3. Research design: a multi-stage analysis

Our examination covers the three main constitutional phases to understand the complex material constitution of the gating space and the polyvalent meaning of gatedness in the case of ELNV. The first is the *planning-conception* stage, which entails processes of assembling social and material bodies, i.e., the pertinent translocal stakeholders, monetary resources, architectural elements, and land are brought together into a collaborative unity, establishing rules of placement such as setting the design principles, objectives and criteria for construction and evaluation with regards to the ELNV project. The second and third are the *adaptation* and *appropriation* stages, which follow the completion of the initial design. They entail processes by which rules of placement are interpreted and appropriated by a myriad of actors in various ways. The materiality and meaning of gatedness at the ELNV is negotiated and transformed as a result.

We focus on two aspects for each stage: the symbolic and material figurations of the ELNV's wall space, paying particular attention to the coming-into-being of the gating elements and intricate perceptions of the compound's gatedness (between private and public, insider and outsider, near and far etc.). In the first stage, we focus on examining the assembled resources and the established rules in the process of drafting and actualizing plans for the ELNV. Given that the stakeholders are both translocal and endowed with access to diverse material resources and spatial knowledge(s), we consider processes involving the *translation-interpretation* of knowledge relative to the rules of symbolic and material ordering in ELNV plans. We compare its planning principle and typology to the Huangpu New Harbor Residential Compound (HNH) – a classic, archetypical Danwei (working unit) enclosed residential compound planned in pre-reform Guangzhou. For the second stage, we focus on the current configuration as well as further refiguration processes of the gating space as they relate to the perceived gatedness in the ELNV. We examine the current gating space's *material and symbolic thickness*, i.e., the multiple symbolic meanings and activities embodied and afforded by the materiality of a wall as such (Pullan/Baillie 2013: 27).

3.1 Sampling and interpreting refiguration processes of gating space and perceived gatedness

We understand and analyze gated communities as relational spaces in their material and social dimensions, necessitating both spatial analyses (materiality) and observations and interviews to describe material deployment relative to actor sociality. We collected archival and media reports revealing narratives about the formation process of ELNV between 1979 and 2018. This contextual knowledge enabled us to develop a demo-diagram of the “procedural development of the wall” from non-existence to “thin walls” and eventually “thick walls.” Here, we drew on M. R. G. Conzen's urban morphology method (1960, 1962, 2004), which was originally applied to walled towns and later transferred to other spatial areas. Consequently, we recognized the

three-dimensional physical boundaries of material entities as the units of analysis. We also took the Lynch (1960) approach in grasping the perception of urban spaces (path, edge, etc.). The first step of this spatial analysis follows a so-called materialistic spatial concept for the collection of “quantitative spatial data” (Dangschat 2014). Spatial composition is examined through a detailed look at building typology and open space elements, with special attention given to the characteristics, dimensions and materials used in the construction of building facades and walls, open spaces as well as visible evidence of the appropriation of space (e.g., facade and storefront design, added greenery and plants, furniture). In this step, hand-drawn sketches (partly in the form of layer plans, which are superimposed in the analysis and transferred into 2D and 3D-CAD drawings) and photographs were also produced. In a second step, we collected “qualitative spatial data” (Dangschat 2014) in the form of participant observations and interviews (Spradley 1980) in an effort to grasp the symbolic meaning of materialities. Taken together, these steps allow for an in-depth analysis of the relations between materiality and its social representation.

3.2. Approach to producing base images and coding

We took detailed photos showing the materiality of walls on the ELNV premises while following streams of pedestrians around the residential compound. We then entered the gates and took more photos of what might be perceived as boundary objects from the inside. We converted the initial data collected into diagrams showing the procedural development of the wall (Figure 6) and also used photos as a communicative medium to stimulate interpretations from our interviewees. To answer our research question – i.e., what constitutes the thickness of the gating space and gatedness – we integrated the historical archive with our on-site observations, and also invited residents and passersby to interpret contents of our diagrams and photos. We conducted our coding first from the impartial observer’s perspective, before examining how this coding matched or contrasted with the narratives of random pedestrians and selected local actors around the ELNV.

In transcribing multi-perspective descriptions of gating elements and narratives, we identified and coded 1) the perceived figuration of the gating space, namely, the elements that were identified either as clear or ambiguous boundary objects; and 2) the aspect of scales of contextuality and gatedness. This means that we examined the extent to which artefacts are embedded in the local context in relation to how they came into being to create a sense of distinction. Interpretive data was derived from interviews with five randomly selected pedestrians, six local residents, and six ELNV administrative staff.

4. The procedural figuration and refiguration of the East Lake New Village Residential Compound

To describe the procedural figuration and refiguration of the East Lake New Village Residential Compound (ELNV), we first shed light on the conceptualizing-planning and implementing phases. We then describe three phases of the gradual refiguration of the gating space at ELNV, from a more transitional gating space in the late 1970s, to a thinner gating space in the late 1990s, to a thickening of the gating space from the 2010s to the present.

4.1. The conceptualizing-planning and implementing phases

The ELNV residential compound was planned and designed in 1979, shortly after the reform and opening-up policies were formally launched in late 1978. Placing the ELNV project in the timeframe of the national political-economic agenda clearly shows that the ELNV was planned in limbo between political-economic systems underpinned by divergent ideologies. The planning regulation most relevant to pre-reform housing projects is *The Decision on Strengthening the Construction of Industrial Zones and New Industrial Cities* (the State Council, 1956) (abbr. *The Decisions*) issued by the State Council in 1956. Here, new housing projects were viewed as auxiliary appendages of industrial production plants, both were planned from the top-down. The *location, quota of land, and public infrastructure* allocated to the ancillary residential area were prescribed in the five-year plan prepared by local planning officials, in strict alignment with the national five-year industrial projects planned and approved by the national planning commission.

To reasonably and economically construct the residential, commercial, educational and cultural facilities affiliated with the industrial city and towns in our country, they need to be planned, designed, invested, constructed, distributed and managed in a unifying manner. (State Council 1956, own translation)

Yeh and Wu note that prior to the reform (1949–1978), the state allocated quota and resources to central sectoral departments, which then distributed them to sectoral departments in cities (Yeh/Wu 1996). Licenses for planning, financing, designing, registering and managing the construction of public housing projects were owned solely by a few state-designated local institutions (The real estate archiving office of Guangzhou City 1990: 89).

Given this institutional setting, the residential projects planned and constructed in Guangzhou between 1949 and 1978 fall into four categories: the workers' village, housing projects for intellectuals, housing for Chinese abroad and housing for the Tanka ethnic group (Guangzhou City Archiving Committee 1995: 49). The former two categories were centrally planned as state-owned *Danwei* (working-unit). They constitute the stereotypical gated community of the time (Lu 2006: 35). According to Chen, the *Danwei* housing units in Guangzhou designed between the

1950s and 1979 follow one of the few standardized floor plans, many of which failed to take the local region's subtropical climate conditions into account (Chen 2014: 110–115). Residential buildings were lined up along the determinant matrix, with windows facing south or north, representing the egalitarian principle that people should live in equitable housing conditions with minimal material difference. This pattern is visible in the residential compounds surrounding ELNV, constructed prior to 1978 (Figure 2).

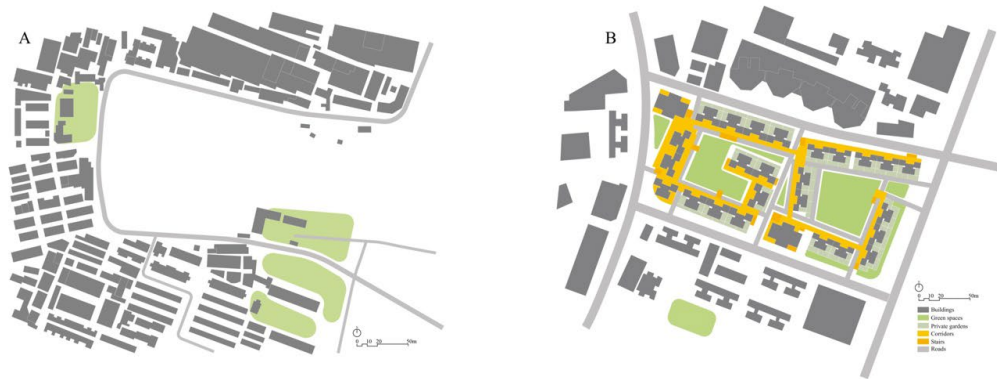


Figure 2. A: The Surroundings of ELNV in 1978. Source: Illustration adapted from Guangzhou historical aviation atlas (Volume 1) B: Plan of ELNV 2010s. Source: Illustration adapted from Yu (2012); Zhu (1996).

New residential compounds built in Guangzhou between 1949 and 1978 were typically intended for working and intellectual class citizens and were located far from the built-up urban core. They were more expansive in size and walled by simple architectural elements. As illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 5, the case of the Huangpu New Harbor Residential Compound (HNRC), a concurrent counterpart to the ELNV inaugurated in 1975, can help contrast the two forms. The former materializes local spatial protocols in Guangzhou, whereas the latter materializes translocal ones. The housing units in HNRC are designated as social housing and distributed by the state-owned companies to their employees. The residential compounds also known as *Danwei* were inhabited by social actors *homogenous in terms of their social-economic status*.

In sum, the typical enclosed residential community in Guangzhou planned under communist political-economic institutions between 1949 and 1979 had the following features:

- Expansive and heterogeneous land-use in gated enclosures. Exclusive commercial and service infrastructures placed in a central location within the enclosure.
- Homogenous social configuration of inhabitants.
- Housing units suggest minimal differences in form and quality. The layout follows egalitarian, economic and functional principles.

In this context, allocating the right to use urban land was the exclusive purview of state actors under the communist regime; it was not considered a tradable and monetary material resource. The ELNV project development, by contrast, was initiated by actors on the lower political levels,

the Guangzhou Dongshan District Administrative Division (GDDAD). The GDDAD was in charge of a piece of land, 0.14 km² in size, that had been granted by the Guangzhou Municipal Government for the development of public housing for distressed local residents. Yet apart from providing the land, the monetary resources granted to district-level administrations was far from sufficient to get any new housing project off the ground. According to senior local residents, due to the special concession policy for overseas Chinese in Guangzhou, it was common informal practice before the reform for an affluent overseas Chinese relative to purchase property and transfer the de facto housing right to their family members in Guangzhou. Upon noticing this phenomenon, the GDDAG acquired special permission to set up the Command Office for Introducing Foreign Investment (abbr. "the Office") to formalize the common local practice of monetizing the use-rights of the land. Choosing from many competitors from Hong Kong and Macau, the Office decided to cooperate with the Hong Kong-based Chrysoberyl River Development Ltd. in the development of a housing project with 60,000 m² of living area (Qingfu 2018).

All this is to say that translocalization of knowledge was at play in the ELNV planning process from the very beginning. The participating stakeholders came from different political-economic contexts and had different spatial knowledge. The district administrative division learned how to monetize use-rights of the land from norms prevalent in Hong Kong. Li, one of the project managers, has revealed that the process of communication and knowledge transfer gave rise to a number of difficulties and conflicts among actors from the given institutional setting (Li 2008: 5–6). For instance, the representative from Chrysoberyl River Development Ltd. needed the Office to set up the electricity, water and telecom infrastructure, as well as to notarize the contracts and civil engineering insurance for construction, which was not the norm in pre-reform Guangzhou. To resolve such unprecedented difficulties, the Office reached out to higher administrative bodies at the provincial and central levels and received permissions to operate it as an exception project.

Apart from the organizational and procedural figuration, the physical design of the ELNV also became infused with translocal spatial knowledge. The Guangzhou-born and Hong Kong-based architect Li Yunhe was commissioned to plan and design the ELNV project. The layout of the residential buildings and the architectural design in ELNV resemble the typical "Hong Kong model" of the time (Figure 3), guided by principles of economic land-use and residential comfort. It is conceived as a mono-functional residential compound with residential buildings encircling green spaces and playgrounds in the center. To ensure local acceptance, Li adjusted and adapted the prevalent planning and design formats from Hong Kong to ELNV, thereby creating new spatial forms. For instance, Li constructed a joint corridor connecting the buildings and placed the entrances above the ground floor. This design makes the courtyard openly accessible, while still offering the residents a sense of enclosure.

The plans envisioned 25 units of residential buildings with eight stories and two mixed-use tower buildings with 16 stories. The project's building coverage ratio is 0.302 with a floor area ratio

(FAR) of 2.5. It varies greatly from the classic residential projects planned and constructed under a top-down approach, which fall between 0.6 and 0.9 FAR (Hu 2010: 16). The plan (Figure 2) of the urban fabric surrounding the ELNV shows the aforementioned different material figuration that the two contrasting building principles brought about. Instead of thin walls, the second-floor corridor was designed to be a transitional zone to blur the boundary between private and public space (Figure 4).

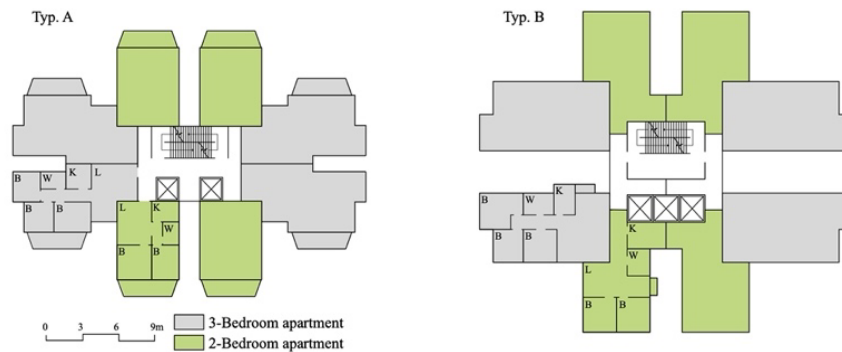


Figure 3. A: Plan of tower building in East Lake New Village. Source: illustration adapted from Yu (2012: 46). B: Hong Kong “Home” Block A, Sun Lai Garden, Ngau Chi Wan. Source: illustration adapted from Ding (1986: 14–19).

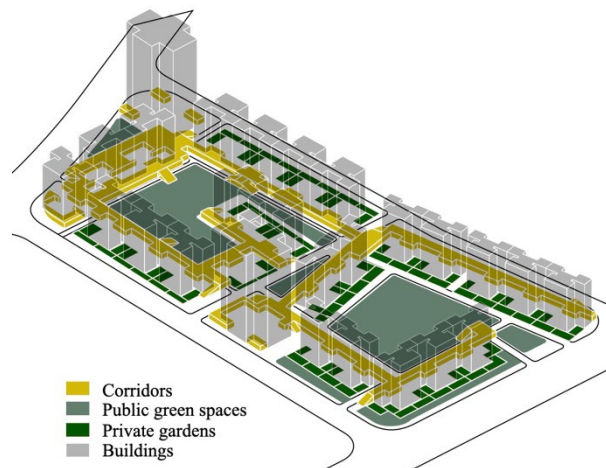


Figure 4. Initial ‘gating space’ designed to connect exterior, buildings and courtyard in ELNV. Source: illustration adapted from the plan in Yu (2012: 37).

The multi-lateral negotiation also resulted in a socio-demographic figuration that was more heterogeneous than the then dominant working-unit (*Danwei*) model. According to Li, actual sales show that one-third was bought by individual Hong Kongese citizens for their mainland relatives or for themselves; one-third was sold to trading companies to accommodate their employees; and the final third went to local individuals who were either successful local entrepreneurs or received wealth from overseas relatives (Li 2008: 7).

Placing the ELNv project in the broader historical context and comparing it to the typical residential compound of the time, one can see how its spacing – the project’s material and social layout – resulted from the refigured social-spatial relations at play during the planning processes. For comparison’s sake, the Huangpu New Harbor Residential Compound (HNN) can again be cited, as it shows that the pre-reform institutional setting only allowed vertically hierarchical administrations to structure the transmission of spatial knowledge (regulations for designing and constructing a residential compound). It also structured the allocation of land and the provision of economic capital (sectoral remittance), from the ministry to particular *Danwei*. In the ELNv case, horizontal transfers of economic capital and spatial knowledge (design concept and rules of property management) occurred between the Hong Kong developer and its Guangzhou co-developers. In summary, the pre-existing forms of social and physical enclosure of the *Danwei* model broke down in the planning and design of the ELNv. The new forms resulted from the translocal knowledge transfer and mediation processes.

Table 1: Comparison of land-use between the East-Lake New Village and the Huangpu New Harbor Residential Compound

| Name of Residential Compound | East Lake New Village | Huangpu New Harbor |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Year of Inauguration | 1980 | 1975 |
| Size of the Site (km ²) | 0.14 | 0.1297 |
| Floor Area Ratio | 2.5 | 0.75 |
| Building Coverage Ratio | 30.2% | 25% |



Figure 5. A: Plan of ELNv. Source: own illustration based on Yu (2012); Zhu (1996).

Urban Design and Land Use

Tower buildings encircle two central green spaces, including facilities such as outdoor exercise equipment. Main access points are available on four sides. 24 eight floor buildings have private gardens on the first floor and duplex apartments on the top. Two sixteen floor buildings contain offices on the first three floors.



Figure 5. B: Plan of Huangpu new harbor. Source: own illustration adapted from (Hu 2010: 15).

The residential buildings are all five-floors high, forming six smaller agglomerations. Public infrastructure is located in the center of the settlement. The plan represents the typical urban design of a *Danwei* enclosed residential model in the pre-reform Guangzhou City.

4.2. The gradual refiguration of the gating space at the ELN

In this section, we focus on the procedural refiguration of the gating space at the ELN, which has involved various actors in its construction over the years. We begin by dividing the gradual transformation of wall space at the ELN into three main stages.

At the first stage, the gating space was configured according to the initial planning and design. The planning process, as indicated before, was infused with translocal planning, design, and administrative knowledge. More specifically, the enclosed spacing and layout of residential buildings were designed with reference to the common real estate model in Hong Kong at the time. The recontextualization of translocal knowledge is evident in the way the architect built the entrance corridor on the second floor to an openly accessible courtyard on the ground floor. The architect envisioned the transitional ‘gating space’ to be comprised of the garden, staircase, overhead corridor, building entrance, hallway and the entrance to one’s own home. As a result, the courtyard of the ELN ground floor is in principle a public space, striking a contrast to Hong Kong’s fully privatized models.

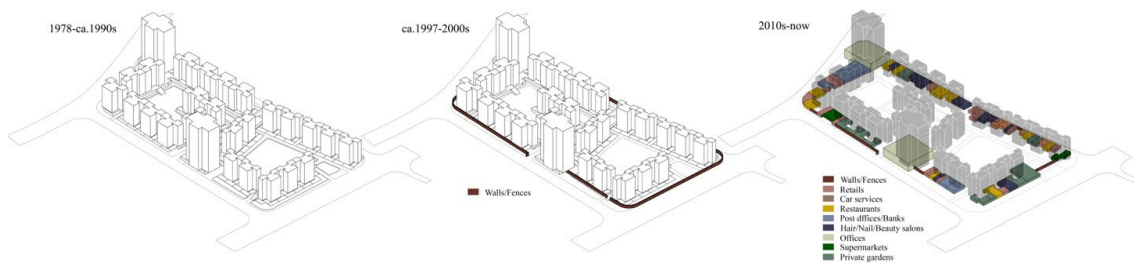


Figure 6. The 3 stages of constructing the ELN’s gating space. Source: illustration adapted from the plan in Yu (2012: 37).

Stage 1: The figuration of transitional gating space (1978-ca.1990s)

Unlike the *Danwei* models, the ELN is conceived without hard physical boundaries. However, the synthesis of the gating space and its meaning was not shared by all stakeholders. In accordance with the law at the time, the road in the middle of the plot was planned as a municipal road that would allow the Municipality Administrative Division to continue to do maintenance on the streetlights, indicating the public ownership of the plot (Yu 2012: 42). Residents considered the courtyard as part of their assets. Some recall that the planned central garden was constantly appropriated by the ground-floor residents planting vegetables. Such narratives imply a clash of understandings of the public-private-gating space as conceived and perceived by the designer, administrators and homeowners.

The second stage saw the gradual introduction of a set of architectural and social elements such as fences, a gated entrance, walls, and security staff, eventually resulting in a physical barrier

that closed up the courtyard. Neighborhood administrators told us that the open gaps between buildings were gradually closed on account of residents' increasing complaints and demands for public order in the shared courtyard space. One police officer observed that three entrances were blocked in 1997, and the enclosed spaces were converted into bicycle sheds for residents. The year 2000 saw the closure of two more gaps, and three gaps were set up as main entrances for the residents, equipped with iron gates and guarded by security staff. These gates were later outfitted with IC card access control systems in 2007, as the increasing resident turnover necessitated the use of machines for membership recognition. These narrated gating practices suggest that residents gradually assumed a practical sense of differentiation between insider and outsider, collective and public space, materializing it in various forms of thin walls.

Stage 2: The figuration of thin gating space (ca. 1997-2000s)

During the second stage, the material figuration of the gating space and the meaning of gatedness became more heterogeneous and fluid. According to one interviewee, a long-term resident of ELNV who works for its property management company, the "thickening" of the wall began in the 2000s. These processes were consolidated by the "apartment-to-storefronts" policy issued by the Guangzhou Planning Department. She recalls that local actors – many of them former state-enterprise employee-residents who were laid off around that time – sought ground floor space as a way of exploring new opportunities in life. Some administrators recall being approached by a number of migrant sojourners looking to do small business. Ground floor apartments, with their sidewalk-facing entrance and small garden leading up to the apartment door, became the perfect location for makeshift pop-up stores, which can still be seen today. According to our interviews, the types of shops located here change rapidly over time, responding to the changing demographics and lifestyles in and around the ELNV. There are supermarkets, eateries for non-Guangzhou cuisine, a market offering German technical equipment, tea shops, a Hong Kong-style barbershop, and Chinese mobile phone and electronic goods stores. The interviewees, however, did not associate this thickening of the walls with an increased awareness of fear, exclusion, and prejudice, but rather with an accommodation of enriched life opportunities.

Stage 3: The thickening of gating spaces (2010s-now)

In the third stage, the actors and their practices in constructing these storefronts were highly translocal and time-sensitive. We have selected a few angles that illustrate the relationship between translocal practices and the materializations of fluid and heterogenous senses of gatedness: The second floor of the building on the left in Figure 7, for example, used to be occupied by a consultancy company catering to overseas Chinese in the trading business. The company moved away as this business model has become normalized since China joined the WTO in 2001. Its replacement, the Postal Savings Bank of China (the green one in the image), used to occupy two floors, but currently occupies only one. As noted above, one-third of the housing in the ELNV was sold to state-owned companies due to their perceived social and economic credibility, which include the Postal Savings Bank and trade bureau. The physical

presence of such institutions and their affiliated social bodies indicates an ambiguously demarcated outside-inside work-life space particular to the residents who are also employed by these companies.

When certain spatial constituents of gating no longer make sense to the primary locals, the refiguration of its materiality follows. Wang, a young mother living in the ELNV, told us that she rarely notices this corner in her daily life, apart from parking, as “only elderly still use the Postal Savings Bank’s services nowadays. We do everything with smartphones.” The fact that the meaning of this space is diminishing for residents is an indicator that the spatial constituents of this corner may transform again in the foreseeable future.



Figure 7. One corner of the gating space constituted by changing service institutions. Source: Photo by authors, 2017/2019.



Figure 8. Left: One segment of gating space, 2017/10. Right: The refiguration of the same segment of gating space, 2019/4. Source: Photo by authors, 2017/2019.

New forms of services and the way they configure space are constituted by drawing on knowledge embedded in other localities. Very often, existing spatial components in the vicinity and their perceived meaning predict the direction of the refiguration process. For example,

many tutoring centers and a baby-swimming center materialized as storefronts around ELNV. According to the locals, they are in high demand by the many young families who have relocated to the area to take advantage of the school resources in the neighborhood. Figure 8 shows that a gating corner that used to consist of a variety shop and a garment shop has been replaced by a trendy juice bar chain on the left and a traditional herbal tea shop on the right. The new shops indicate a strong association with popular drinking trends in Hong Kong. Our interviews confirm that locals share an appreciation of Hong Kong's food and aspirations for its lifestyle. This is to say that these imported symbols connect to and extend the primary perceptions and practices existing in the locality, manifesting high *levels of contextuality*. The gating spaces are thick here, but they are not meant to create a sharp division for people between inside and outside, near and far. On the contrary, the polycontexturally negotiated forms of symbols bridge the local and the global.



Figure 9. Left: One segment of gating space, 2017/10. Right: the other segment of gating space of the same category, 2019/4. Source: Photo by authors, 2017/2019.

Some sections of the gating spaces remain thin in their in their figurations of materiality and meaning (Figure 9), primarily constituted by fences, trees, temporary roadblocks, or wrought-iron gates. “The fences are necessary to keep order within our community. As you can see, these shared bikes appear everywhere overnight, so randomly parked. We have to keep these roadblocks away from our community,” says one resident. Many interviewees reveal a strong view of the shared bikes as intrusive objects, as there is no way of associating their anonymous users with the community space. The thin gating space at such sections suggests how a commonly shared sense of gatedness is reinforced.

After a thorough examination, we have drawn up the typologies of wall spaces in ELNV in the following diagram (Figure 10). These types illustrate the varying thickness of the gating space in relation to the sense of gatedness induced. Overall, our findings reveal that the translocal elements that are anchored in local constellations of meaning thicken the physical gating space-

walls, blurring the perception of inside and outside, near and far. Incomprehensible objects keep the gating space thin, reinforcing the locally embedded sense of separation and gatedness.



Figure 10. Types of gating space in ELNV. Source: Own drawings and photos by authors, 2019.

5. Conclusion: Reading the gating space and gatedness relationally

First, we argue that concepts of relational space and refiguration are useful for understanding processes related to the constitution and transformation of gating space in enclosed residential communities in a contemporary Chinese urban and societal context. Rather than adopting absolute or relative epistemological positions to read the architectural enclosure, we examine how various material artefacts of the wall(s) are held together in different processes in the rapidly changing local context. This enables us to analyze the processes of spatial knowledge transfer, contextualization and resulting spatial practices and materializations carried out by multiple translocal actors. We provide an analytical apparatus and methods for looking at the multiple, co-existing interrelationships between the socio-symbolic contents and the material forms exhibited in the gating space.

To illustrate the concept's analytical power, we have further explored the richness of social symbolic content and material forms in the case of the ELNV. Hereby, we could demonstrate the value of combining sociological perspectives with urban design and planning research approaches. Our analysis of the case concretely demonstrates: 1) The material gating space in this residential compound was constituted gradually. Its gating spaces are of varying thickness and result from planning and everyday spatial practices carried out by groups of social actors from different social positions and geographical locations at different phases. Our findings refute prevailing arguments that attribute the rationale behind the formation of the enclosed residential form in urban China to continued cultural-historical practice. It also disproves arguments that point to the gated community as a product of consumer-driven planning practices under neoliberal political-economic institutions. 2) Both the actors involved in the planning process and those involved in appropriation or adaptation processes have brought in heterogeneous design techniques, material forms, and interpretations of forms that alter the material constitution of gating space and the symbolic meaning of gatedness. The material and symbolic dimensions of its gating spaces are becoming thicker. 3) The scales of contextuality manifest themselves in varying ways in the translocal spatial objects and practices introduced. They either thicken the gating space and blur the sense of gating, or reinforce the thin gating space and sharpen the sense of gatedness.

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