

Segregation and seclusion: the case of compounds for western expatriates in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract In discussions on the “fragmented city” and the boom of private and guarded neighbourhoods, several authors have stressed the importance of a growing differentiation of lifestyles and “cultural” orientations for this trend. The compounds for western foreigners in Saudi Arabia are explicitly based on the idea of a spatial seclusion of social groups with different “cultural” backgrounds. This study presents an overview of the development of these western enclaves. Narrative interviews with former expatriates provide insights into their daily life, their social relations within the compound, and to the Saudi Arabia behind the gates.

Keywords Compounds · Expatriates · Saudi Arabia · Segregation · Urbanism

Introduction

In recent years, urban research has seen an extensive discussion of new forms of segregation via private and guarded neighbourhoods. Previous discussion on the polarization of a “dual city” (Castells & Mollenkopf, 1991; Marcuse, 1989),

focused mainly on socioeconomic differences has been largely replaced by the idea of a “fragmented city.” In this perspective, the private and guarded housing complexes are described not only as a consequence of a deregulated and flexible economy, but also as a consequence of a growing pluralization of lifestyles and “cultural” orientations at large. Taking Los Angeles as model for the metropolis of the 21st century, Dear and Flusty (1998, p. 65) predict a growing number of such autonomous enclaves.

The compounds of western expatriates in Saudi Arabia were established in order to enable people with profoundly differing cultural backgrounds to live side by side. But it is only in recent years, as a consequence of the tragic attacks on several housing complexes in Saudi Arabia, that these complexes have found some interest in the media.¹ In this paper I will first sketch out the historical background of compounds for western expatriates in Saudi Arabia. Second, I focus on the lifestyle of these residents, their daily life, their social relations with their neighbours and especially their relation to the Saudi Arabia “behind the gates.” This part of the paper is

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¹ See for example *Gulf News*, 16 November 2003: Foreign workforce edgy after suicide bombings in Riyadh. *Katar Gulf Times* 9 November 2003: Terrorist bombers strike Riyadh compound. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 9 November 2003: Mehrere Tote bei Bombenanschlägen in Riad.

based on six narratives, partly biographical interviews (Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal, 1997; Meuter, 2004) with German and Lebanese families² who lived for several years in the 1980s and early 1990s as expatriates in Saudi Arabia and are familiar with life in a compound.

History of secluded housing in the Arab World

The compartmentalization of the old towns

In cities of the Arab World the spatial seclusion of social groups is not a new phenomenon. Urban research on pre-modern towns depicted the socio-spatial and material fragmentation of urban patterns in small and distinct quarters as one of the most typical characteristics of Arab cities. As Raymond describes in 1994 the “compartmentalization of the city [... was] particularly marked in the case of numerous religious and ethnic communities” (p. 15). But based on extended family structures it also existed in cities with a more homogeneous population. Many scholars have identified two reasons for this fragmentation (Abu-Lughod, 1987; Raymond, 1989; Wirth, 1992). First, is the quarter as an extension of private space. Wirth (1992) interpreted the courtyard-houses as well as clusters of different houses along a commonly used blind alley as a material expression of the retreat from the public sphere. The social space of the quarter offered a jointly used extension of the private space (Eickelman, 1974, p. 283). Second, the quarter serves as a self-governing and protective community. Frequently, the inhabitants had a high degree of autonomy and as the pre-modern state often “failed to concern itself with matters of day-to-day maintenance,” the neighbourhood fulfilled functions of a self-governing entity (Abu-Lughod, 1987, p. 169). Furthermore, in contrast to European cities of the Middle Ages, cities in the Arab World have seen many conflicts *intra muros*. Therefore, the residential quarters, often accessible through only one single gate, which could be easily barred and de-

fended, offered protection, which the city’s central authorities did not always assure.

In the 20th century, inner city areas were transformed by cutting straight axes through the old *medina* or by replacing old structures with formal geometric street patterns, thus adopting European ideas of enlightened “modern” urban planning. Walls and gates between different quarters of the old city lost their function and with the exception of very few government and diplomatic districts newly built quarters in the suburbs were not fenced or walled.

The establishment of western enclaves

Socioeconomic and socio-political background of immigrants into Saudi Arabia

At the beginning of the 20th century the Arabian peninsula was situated on the economic periphery of the Arab World. The limited importance of the later capital Riyadh with not more than 20,000 inhabitants lay in its role as the Wahabi spiritual and political centre (Pape, 1977, p. 16). With the exploitation of oil in the middle of the 20th century a process of rapid modernization in Saudi Arabia began. The Saudi state as the receiver of the rents derived from oil used this income for two purposes: to ensure a growing individual prosperity for Saudi citizens and to develop a modern infrastructure (transport, supply of water and electricity, health care and education) (Barth & Schliephake, 1998). Saudi Arabia is a monarchy and the political power remains concentrated in the hands of the ruling family Al-Saud. Notwithstanding the country’s advanced technical modernization, the ruling elite tries to preserve the feudalist power structures and to conserve or re-establish social norms, which are derived from a rigorous and rigid puritanical Wahabi interpretation of the Koran and the Sunna.

With a growing individual prosperity and the need for technical assistance, a large number of foreigners migrated to Saudi Arabia as guest workers. In the 1980s the nearly 6 million foreigners represented 40% of the total population and more than two-thirds of the working force. After the first Gulf War the Saudi government

² The interviews were conducted and transcribed in French and German—citations in the text have been translated to English.

followed a policy of a “saudisation” of the economy, that is, trying to reduce the number of foreigners in the economy and to increase the number of working Saudis. As a consequence, the total number of foreigners decreased to 5.2 million in 2000, which represented a quarter of the population and half of the working force in Saudi Arabia. The demand for unskilled workers and domestic servants is covered by foreigners from South East Asia, a continuously growing group of nearly 3 million today. The second largest group of foreigners comes from the Arab World, roughly 2.5 million people. They work chiefly as semi-professionals or technicians. In addition, there are several tens of thousands of professionals from the Western World, especially the US, the UK, Germany and France (Barth & Schliephake, 1998; Courbage, 2001; Meyer, 1991).

From camps to compounds

The discovery and exploitation of oil on the Arab Peninsula by western oil companies in the late 1930s led to an influx of western professionals to the Gulf region and created a surging demand for housing. Companies like the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO), the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) and in Saudi Arabia the Arab American Oil Company (ARAMCO) responded to this growing demand by building residential camps for their employees, beginning in the 1940s; examples include “Awali” in Bahrain, “Ahmadi” in Kuwait and “Dhahran” in Saudi Arabia (Barth & Schliephake, 1998, p. 179; Bourgey, 1987, pp. 18–19). Saudi government policy promoted these developments, obliging foreign companies with more than 50 foreign employees to offer housing for their workforce, not least in order to limit and control the cultural influences of western foreigners in the Saudi society (Bombacci, 1998). Generally, three different forms of compounds for foreigners in Saudi Arabia can be distinguished. First are camps for single unskilled or semi-skilled workers; they offer basic accommodation in portable units, mobile homes or rapidly constructed prefabricated units. Second are camps for single or unmarried semi-professionals or technicians, which consist of simple lodgings with few amenities and support services. Third are compounds for

expatriate professionals, who are accompanied by their families. These compounds are generally well maintained, landscaped and offer a range of support services including kindergartens and local clinics as well as amenities like tennis-courts and swimming-pools (Talib, 1984; Fig. 1).

In Riyadh temporary gated camps for semi-skilled foreign workers were developed close to construction sites, but removed thereafter in the 1950s. The first private gated compounds for foreign professionals were built during the 1970s when the country experienced a major building boom. In 2000 there were around 50 private gated complexes in Riyadh, which accommodated between 6,000 and 8,000 inhabitants (about 1% of the total foreign population in the city) (Glasze & Alkhayyal, 2002). Most of these complexes represent the third type, that is, houses for high income western professionals, who are provided with accommodation for their whole family as part of their employment contracts. A small proportion of the residents comes from the Levant states, especially Jordan and Lebanon. The compounds are guarded and patrolled by security guards. Access is strictly restricted to residents and their visitors. Administration and maintenance are provided through an on-site management. Saudi nationals are mostly excluded from residing in these communities.

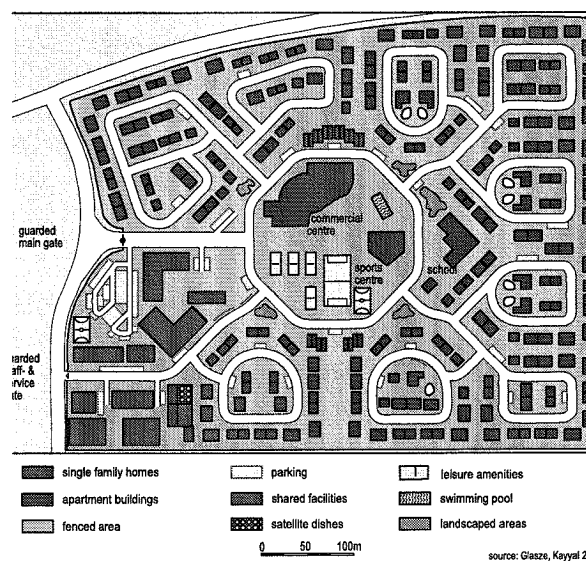


Fig. 1 The compound “The Kingdom” on the outskirts of Riyadh

Rental values in these communities represent the highest stratum in Riyadh's residential rental market. The rental value for a residential unit in a private gated compound is more than double the rental value for an equivalent unit in a non-gated development; the premium can be taken as a valuation of the collective goods and services provided. Gated developments within central parts of the city are smaller in size, contain fewer amenities and are valued lower than gated developments located in the peripheral areas. In central Riyadh there are about 40 gated compounds which range from 10 to 70 residential units. While the smallest developments include only a common swimming pool, larger compounds have sports, leisure and commercial facilities. In peripheral parts of the city there are 10 large private gated compounds, all built during the 1980s and 1990s (Glasze & Alkhayyal, 2002). These developments encompass between 100 and 300 residential units and offer a wide range of services and facilities; some estates include golf courses and internal cable TV systems which broadcast movies in English, French or German. To increase security measures within and outside, these larger compounds make use of security measures such as surveillance cameras and concrete barricades.

Living the compound-way-of-life

The compounds are an important element of life for western expatriates in Saudi Arabia. Life in them occupied a large space in the narrated biographies of the interview partners, especially those women interviewed.

Ethnic networks

Expatriates who have been living within a compound and those living outside alike describe their relationships with friends and colleagues in Saudi Arabia in the warmest of terms. Their narratives include long histories of barbecues, holidays and excursions. Thus a German who spent several years with his wife and children in Saudi Arabia states:

Together with other families, we did a lot of things together. Trips here and there, shop-

ping, restaurant. This was very important and intense. And that was actually the beautiful thing and that pleased my wife very much. This community of people, who had not known each other before. For parties one met in the afternoon around five, and then everybody brings this and that along. And then we cooked, perhaps till ten o'clock, and then we stayed together till the morning. These things are alive in our memory, the community life.

While the contacts were concentrated on compatriots, unanimously these contacts were very international and this "colourful" milieu is described as an asset of the time spent in Saudi Arabia. Only very few of those interview partners who had been living outside of a compound for a certain time gave an account of close contacts with Saudis. In general, but especially for the people living within a compound, social life was focused on an "ethnic island" of westerners.

A public sphere behind the gates

Paradoxically, the life behind gates and fences is associated with openness and freedom. A German interview partner described how his family moved from a normal house in a Saudi Arabian neighbourhood to a huge compound as "an escape from confinement." The residents find a western style "open" environment, which allows them to escape from the strict cultural restrictions on the other side of the gates (Fig. 2). Very important is that women within the boundaries of



Fig. 2 Swimming-pool in a compound in Saudi Arabia

these compounds are not obliged to comply with the traditional Saudi dress code otherwise enforced outside.

A Lebanese Christian woman describes about her life in a compound in Saudi Arabia:

[...] for a family who does not live in a compound it is very hard [...] because with the Saudi people – they are very nice, but it is different, it is another culture [...] you see the women who veil themselves; you know, in Arabia the woman does not have the right to drive and I had the car in the compound of Holzmann³ the compound was so big that I wanted to drive, it became a pleasure, so I took my car in the compound because Saudi people do not enter the compound, it was prohibited [...]; the women, one was always in a bathing costume and shorts; [...] when we left the compound we dressed well, long you know [...].

All the interview partners stressed the importance of weekend excursions to unsettled areas, on the coast, in the desert or in the mountains. Apart from the possibilities for sports activities (hiking, snorkeling, surfing, etc.) and the scenic attractions, these excursions allowed the families to escape the social control within the social sphere of the Saudi Arabian society while leaving their house or apartment. Especially the women interviewed stressed the importance of weekend excursions, as a German woman who lived for 8 years in Saudi Arabia stated:

The only activity, which we had and which we were really very happy to have, was to drive in the desert, which is so fantastic. We still adore these excursions today and reminisce about them with shining eyes, when we talk about it. Into the desert, with people, as many people as possible, in a small convoy and then stay overnight with campfire and barbecue driving and talking and this was marvellous [...].

One interview partner stressed the fact that within the compounds one could possibly spend

the weekend at home. There was no need to leave every weekend for an excursion as the compound offered a proper public sphere.

And there you didn't have to leave for Thursday and Friday. No, all the facilities were there one step from your door. This was really great in the compound.

For western professionals, who live as expatriates in Saudi Arabia often for several years, the compounds offer a material and social basis foundation for their lifestyle, a lifestyle which is largely independent from the social surrounding and therefore "transportable" (Peißker-Meyer, 2001, p. 152). The possibilities for leisure time activities and the ease of establishing new social contacts are often verbalized by the metaphor of a "club méd."

Résumé: worlds apart

The western enclaves were developed as the result of a confluence of traditional socio-religious urban segmentation and western models of gated master planned communities. To a large extent they are autonomous from their surrounding. Western expatriates who are living within a compound and those living outside of a compound alike do concentrate their social relations on their own ethnic network within the expatriate community. Hardly any of the western expatriates learned to speak Arabic. The compounds represent the nodal points of these networks. Compared to the immediate environment, they provide enclaves of western lifestyles, a space where totally different social norms and institutions apply.

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³ One of the biggest German construction companies.

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