



What is really different between cohousing and gated communities?

Francesco Chiodelli

To cite this article: Francesco Chiodelli (2015) What is really different between cohousing and gated communities?, *European Planning Studies*, 23:12, 2566-2581, DOI: [10.1080/09654313.2015.1096915](https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2015.1096915)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2015.1096915>



Published online: 15 Oct 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 37



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

What is really different between cohousing and gated communities?

Francesco Chiodelli

GSSI Cities Research Unit, Gran Sasso Science Institute, L'Aquila, Italy

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on differences and similarities between two types of intentional private residential communities: cohousing and gated communities. The academic debate is dominated by the view that cohousing and gated communities are completely different phenomena in terms of aims, goals, nature and characteristics. However, I do not find these opinions entirely convincing: hence, in this paper, I shall discuss some of their weaknesses with regard to the (alleged) differences between cohousing and gated communities in terms of the reasons guiding the choice of the community, openness of communal spaces and the speculative nature of the projects. Some critical perspectives in terms of public policy are introduced in the last part of the paper.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 December 2014

Accepted 16 September 2015

KEYWORDS

Cohousing; gated communities; homeowners associations; housing; community

1. Introduction

According to many authors, cohousing is a highly distinctive and positive phenomenon (see for instance: Crabtree (2006), Fromm (1991), Jarvis (2011), Jarvis and Bonnett (2013), McCamant, Durrett, and Hertzman (2011), Meltzer (2005) and Scotthanson and Scotthanson (2005)) which helps counteract some trends in urban neo-liberalism such as socio-spatial polarization, marketization and individualism: 'Cohousing [...] provides an answer to the rise of hyper-individualism and the breakdown of community' (Lie- taert, 2010, p. 578). See also Fromm (2012):

[Cohousing communities] can model good neighbouring: successfully mixing residential incomes [...]; stabilizing a vulnerable or marginalized group [...]; introducing a different residential population into a building or neighbourhood [...]; [increasing] involvement within communities in volunteerism and local politics. (pp. 387–388)

For these various reasons, cohousing is seen as antipodal to some varieties of homeowners associations (in particular gated communities, but also, for instance, executive communities and retirement communities), which are most widespread in the US, but exist in some European countries as well. In fact, private residential communities of these kinds are mainly interpreted as by-products of increasing levels of social division, privatism, enclavism and fear (see, among many others: Atkinson and Blandy (2013),

Atkinson and Flint (2004), Blakely and Snyder (1998), Blandy and Lister (2005), Davis (1990), Le Goix (2005) and Low (1997, 2001)).

The view that cohousing and gated communities are antipodal phenomena is very well represented by a paper recently published in 'Sociological Inquiry' by Ruiiu (2014), in which the author conducts a literature review on the differences between cohousing and gated communities. A large part of her paper is devoted to rejecting certain theses that I have asserted in two previous papers (Chiodelli, 2009, 2010).

Ruiiu's literature review is extensive and thorough, and her reasoning is convincing in several respects. Nevertheless, generally speaking, her interpretation of cohousing (as well as the interpretation currently dominant in the academic debate) has, in my opinion, some major weaknesses—and, on some points, it seems to be grounded on a rather 'ideological' stance which lacks empirical evidence supporting it. Therefore, in this paper, I shall continue my academic argument with Maria L. Ruiiu. I hope that this will be something more than a sterile and introverted debate between Ruiiu and myself: in fact, the phenomenon of private residential communities is of great importance, very controversial and in need of much more research and analysis. Moreover, as said, Ruiiu's viewpoint is paradigmatic of a very common interpretation of cohousing communities. It is for this reason that, by replying to Ruiiu, I hope to make a valuable contribution to the international debate on cohousing and gated communities—as well as on other forms of intentional private residential communities.

To this end, the paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, I summarize Ruiiu's main thesis and arguments on the differences between cohousing and gated communities; in Section 3, I highlight what are, in my opinion, the main weaknesses and fallacies in Ruiiu's analysis (evidence from the Italian case is provided in the last paragraph of the section in order to support my reasoning); in Section 4, I discuss some ideas and critical perspectives on policy implications which ensue from my viewpoint on cohousing and gated communities. The last section sets out my conclusions.

2. Differences between cohousing and gated communities: Ruiiu's Thesis and argument

In this section, I highlight the main thesis of Ruiiu's paper, and I summarize her principal arguments in support of it.

Ruiiu's main thesis is that 'the comparison between cohousing and gated communities suggests more differences than similarities' (Ruiiu, 2014, p. 329). In her opinion, these differences derive from five main elements.

First, the role represented by security in terms of reasons for choosing the community, and the way in which security is achieved. According to Ruiiu, in gated communities, security is 'the "star" around which the system revolves' (Ruiiu, 2014, p. 329), and it is achieved in particular through explicit surveillance systems (gates and fences, closed-circuit televisions, security patrols, etc.). By contrast, in cohousing communities, security is the result of dense and close social connections among residents (a kind of social control à la Jane Jacobs, according to Ruiiu), not the product of some 'external' object or device.

Second, the degree of closure to the outside. In gated communities, facilities and common spaces are available only to residents—they are 'privatized public spaces'

(Ruiu, 2014, p. 325) tending ‘to produce social exclusion because they do not make available facilities for outside’ (p. 326). By contrast, in cohousing communities, activities and spaces are ‘open to the outside to encourage the integration within the wider context’ (p. 329).

Third, the sense of community. In gated communities, ‘the development of the sense of community is not a primary aim, but it could be a secondary result consequent to the proximity of people’ (Ruiu, 2014, p. 330). Therefore, the residents are more linked with ‘the feeling of being part of a “club” rather than a “community”’ (p. 328). By contrast, since cohousing settlements are intentional communities, residents decide to settle there precisely because of their desire to live in a close-knit community.

Fourth, the genealogy and nature of the community. Gated communities are the result of ‘the speculative market system that produces top-down logics’ (Ruiu, 2014, p. 329). In contrast, cohousing is ‘outside of any speculative logic’ (p. 327).

Fifth, values embedded in the community. Gated communities are characterized by values such as privacy, exclusivity, refuge and separation from the ‘Stranger’. In contrast, cohousing rests on the concepts of sharing, mutual help and consensus among residents.

Ruiu recognizes that some similarities exist between these two kinds of communities. However, it seems that, in her opinion, these similarities are superficial and secondary. For instance, Ruiu admits that both types of community tend to exclude the poor because of the costs of accessing housing units, which are generally higher than those of traditional housing (because they provide residents with several facilities and common spaces, the cost of which is incorporated into the price of the housing unit). But, according to her, when considering this fact, it is not possible to ignore the different forces (speculative in the case of gated communities, non-speculative grass-roots in the case of cohousing) that produce these communities: it seems to be that, in her opinion, exclusion of the poor is intrinsic to the concept of a gated community, whilst in a cohousing community it is the involuntary and accidental by-product of financial constraints. Another similarity that Ruiu mentions is the fact that both kinds of communities are regulated by internal (private) agreements—for instance, regarding the use and management of shared spaces. However, in Ruiu’s opinion, the aim of these rules is different: it is a purely functional aim in gated communities, a way to promote social life inside and outside the community in cohousing settlements.

To sum up, according to Ruiu, cohousing and gated communities are profoundly different in terms of aims, goals and development, even if ‘it is possible that some cohousing examples can be similar to the gated communities model, and *vice versa*’ (Ruiu, 2014, p. 330).

3. Similarities between cohousing and gated communities: a reply to Ruiu

3.1. A taxonomical analysis of private residential communities

Before analysing the points in Ruiu’s reasoning that are not entirely convincing, a specification is necessary—also because an interested international reader may find it difficult to access the two above-mentioned papers on which Ruiu’s argument rests (Chiodelli, 2009, 2010) because they are written in Italian (however, an insight into my ideas on

the cohousing phenomenon can be obtained from a paper recently published in English: Chiodelli & Baglione, 2014).

Even if Ruii is quite correct in reporting the theses expressed in Chiodelli (2009, 2010), her pivotal statement that ‘According to Chiodelli, gated and cohousing communities cannot be distinguished’ (Ruii, 2014, p. 324) is not completely accurate. In fact, my thesis is rather different: I maintain that cohousing and gated communities are two different objects from many points of view (therefore, they are quite well distinguishable); however, in my opinion, they can be regarded as parts of the same phenomenon, that of private residential communities, because they share constitutive characteristics. By ‘constitutive characteristics’ I mean institutional and organizational features, such as, for instance, their legal (private) status, the rules governing everyday life, the existence of a mechanism of resident selection and restrictions on the use of communal services by people from outside the community.

These features can be deemed necessary because the existence, specificity and functioning of these private residential communities rely on them. Also to be stressed is that, even if there are wide differences among private residential communities in different contexts (for a review on differences among cohousing communities in European countries, see for instance Tummers, 2015), I think that these features can be considered as characterizing the majority of these communities across different countries.¹ By private residential community I mean a private settlement in which ‘a residential association [...] provides collective goods for a membership of residents [...]. Such associations are governed by real-estate contract law and by their internal private rules, such as conditions, covenants, and restrictions’ (Foldvary, 2002, p. 273).²

There are many types of private residential communities. Apart from cohousing and gated communities, there are, for instance, retirement communities, that is, residential communities intended for elderly people (McHugh, Gober, & Borough, 2002; McHugh & Larson-Keagy, 2005), and religious communities, such as the Ave Maria community in Florida, which was founded for the principal purpose of establishing an all-Catholic residential community (Bollinger, 2009). (For further types of private residential communities, see for instance Blakely and Snyder (1998).)

The constitutive characteristics of cohousing and gated communities can be recognized in the following five elements (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2014): (i) communitarian multifunctionality (they offer community facilities and services in addition to more traditional private residential functions); (ii) constitutional and operational rules of a private nature (they are governed by a corpus of private laws that are accepted unanimously by the community’s components to assure its specificity and functioning); (iii) residents’ participation and self-organization (inhabitants are involved in the everyday management of the community); (iv) residents’ self-selection (the association governing the community can select residents and decide who has access to community areas and services; this prerogative is due to the private nature of the association and of community space); (v) value characterization (residents often share some kind of value or preference).

To make this point clearer, I suggest thinking of cohousing and gated communities in terms of a ‘taxonomy’. We could say that cohousing and gated communities—together with other kinds of private residential communities—belong to the same ‘family’, that of the so-called contractual communities, that is, territory-based organizational forms (tied to a specific tract of land) which members join on the basis of a contract unanimously

Table 1. Taxonomy of private residential communities.

Taxon	Name
Family	Contractual communities (or private communities)
Species	Residential contractual communities (or private residential communities)
Varietas	(x) Cohousing (y) Gated communities (w) Retirement communities (z) ...

underwritten, and in light of the benefits it will guarantee them, for instance in terms of services (Brunetta & Moroni, 2012). They also belong to the same ‘species’, that of residential contractual communities (or private residential communities), that is, a contractual community with a main residential function. (Not all contractual communities have a main residential function: this is the case, for instance, of shopping centres, land trusts and marinas.) However, they differ in terms of ‘varietas’³ (see Table 1) (just as a Jack Russell Terrier and a German Shepherd both belong to the family of ‘Canidae’ and to the species of ‘Canis familiaris’, but differ for instance in terms of size and breed and are, therefore, clearly distinguishable from each other, even if they are both dogs).

The difference between cohousing and gated communities rests on specific nuances of their constitutive characteristics; for instance, the quality and quantity of the communal services provided (in gated communities, they are intended more to provide security and protect privacy; in cohousing communities, they are intended more to enhance communal life), or, the mechanisms for residents’ selection (which in cohousing settlements are based primarily on informal processes aimed at exploring the values of applicant co-housers, whilst in gated communities they rest on the ability or willingness to pay for residential association fees and communal services).

The fact that cohousing and gated communities share their constitutive characteristics, and differ only in terms of certain superficial and secondary features has significant consequences, which I will argue in the following sections.

3.2. Some analytical weaknesses in Ruiu’s reasoning

Ruiu’s reasoning is well structured and convincing in several parts. However, there are some imprecisions relative to the description and analysis of cohousing and gated communities that I would like to stress. It is because of these imprecisions that Ruiu’s thesis appears somewhat unconvincing.

In this section I focus on three main imprecisions.

The first concerns the main reason why a person chooses to live in a cohousing or in a gated community. In some cases it is probably true that, as Ruiu states, a person chooses to live in a gated community mainly for security reasons, and in a cohousing community because s/he is looking for communal life and close-knit relationships with neighbours. However, this does not seem to be an idea shared by the entire academic community, nor a general rule supported by strong empirical evidence. For instance, with reference to gated communities, Glasze, Webster, and Frantz (2006) state that:

The spread of privately governed and secured neighbourhoods has been associated with a growing local security problem [...]. However, the empirical bases for these assumptions have been for a long time rather superficial. [...] Security is only one of the services the

residents want and usually in conventional and private neighbourhoods it is packaged up with other services. Locational choice can be made on the basis of subjective evaluation of bundles of civic goods. (pp. 1–2)

A similar point concerning the diverse reasons why the residents choose to live in a gated community is also stressed, among others, by Lee and Webster (2006), Manzi and Smith-Bowers (2005), Moroni (2014) and Nelson (2005). Walks (2014), in his survey on the preferences that induce people to move into gated communities instead of non-gated communities in Canada, finds that

The three most important reasons that distinguish between moving into gated or non-gated communities relate to the demand for space for empty-nesters to retire and downsize, the demand for collective services and maintenance-free living and the demand for security and safety, generally in that order, with the prominence of each factor dependent upon local context. (p. 62)

Setha Low (2003), too, in her research on gated communities in the US, received a diversity of responses to her questions about the reasons for moving into a gated community from the residents whom she interviewed. To sum up, according to several authors and field research, insecurity and fear are not the only reasons (and often not the main ones) for choosing a gated community.

Just as gated communities can be chosen for a variety of reasons, it may be that also cohousing is chosen for many reasons other than the attraction of communitarian values: for instance, for functional reasons (e.g. because of the services that cohousing provides), or because it is preferred to have people of a specific kind as neighbours—since the selection of residents assures a certain homogeneity in residents' values, attitudes and preferences (co-housers are generally environmentally friendly, politically progressive and well-educated) (Bresson & Denèfle, 2015; Meltzer, 2000; Rogers, 2005; Williams, 2008). In fact, there is a scarcity of accurate and extensive field and quantitative research on the factors that induce people to move into cohousing communities. There are very few studies of this kind. One of them supports Ruiu's thesis: Esther Sullivan (2015), in her ethnography of the cohousing community of Sunrise Place (Austin, Texas), finds that members of the community are strongly attracted by communal life. However, we lack similar works on other cases, and more precise and extensive surveys on the motivations of co-housers (Sullivan's work too is 'just' an ethnography, and not a survey), in order to formulate a general rule on the factors attracting people to cohousing communities. This is why I think that it is at least hasty to maintain that, as Ruiu does, in ('all') cohousing communities the development of a strong community and mutual exchange are primarily the aims and main motivations of the inhabitants when they decide to move into the community. For instance, as I will argue in the next section, this is certainly not the case of 'all' Italian cohousing communities.

A second imprecision concerns closure to the outside. As I have previously mentioned, according to Ruiu common facilities and spaces are available only to residents in gated communities, but they are open to use by people who are not members on the community in cohousing settlements. However, in this case too, the real situation seems to be more nuanced than the one described by Ruiu. Not only in gated communities, but also in cohousing communities, communal spaces and services (e.g. the communal laundry, kitchen or orchard) are paid by, dimensioned on and maintained by residents (see the

examples from Italy in the following section); it is, therefore, quite normal for them to be used almost exclusively by residents. Then, even when these spaces and facilities are open to the outside, they are ‘selectively’ and ‘temporarily’ open (not whatever service or space, and not whenever), and the rules of access and conduct of external users are decided discretionally by the community (On limits to homeowners associations’ right to select and regulate residents and visitors’ access and behaviour, see for instance: Alexander (2002), Ellickson (1982), Rahe (2002), Rubinfeld (2002) and Strahilevitz (2006).)

At this stage, it is worth stressing another issue concerning communal spaces in private residential communities. These spaces are defined as public or semi-public by several authors (see for instance: Jarvis (2011), Ruiiu (2014) and Sargisson (2000)). However, it does not appear correct to talk of public or semi-public spaces in the case of communal spaces within both cohousing and gated communities: they are indubitably ‘private’ spaces—more precisely, we could label them ‘complex private spaces’:

making such cases ‘complex’ as such is not simply the joint use of a given space by several individuals, but chiefly the fact that there is a (private) contract in force, a binding agreement endorsed explicitly by members, that establishes the entitlements and duties pertaining to the use of the space in question. (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2014a, p. 169)

Note that it also seems to me incorrect to speak of the privatization of public space with reference to the development of residential private communities (and of gated communities in particular), as some other authors do (see for instance: Kohn (2004) and Lang and Danielsen (1997)). What happens in private residential communities is that some privately owned spaces are open to a certain number of people (the members of the residential community): this is a form of collectivization of a private space. But there is no privatization (i.e. subtraction) of any (previously) public space (on this topic, see: Ben-Joseph (2004) and Moroni and Chiodelli (2013)).

To sum up, the point is that what differentiates cohousing from gated communities with reference to common spaces and facilities is the ‘degree’ of openness of some of those spaces (in some specific cases) and the specific rules of access and conduct enforced, but certainly not their (private) nature. According to Manzi and Smith-Bowers, we should properly refer to these spaces as ‘club goods’, as conceptualized by Buchanan (1965):

like private goods, [the club good] had excludable benefits but was allocated through groups. This allowed the club members the enjoyment of the benefit but was unlike the private good which is limited to the individual or shared by all in the case of the public good (Manzi & Smith-Bowers, 2005, p. 347).

(On club goods and private residential communities, see also Webster (2001)).⁴

A third imprecision relates to the genealogy and nature of the communities in question. Even if it is true that gated communities are the result of the speculative market through a top-down logic, the nature of cohousing projects as grass-roots bottom-up initiatives, argued by Maria L. Ruiiu, does not seem to be the norm. Indeed, only in a minority of cases are cohousing projects directly developed by the future residents. In the majority of cases, a traditional housing developer is involved. The developer can work in partnership with the future residents, or can be the sole promoter of the project. This is true not only for the US (see Williams (2005a, 2008)), but also for Italy (see next section). As a consequence, it is hardly the case that ‘cohousing is outside any speculative logic’ (Ruiiu, 2014,

p. 327). Note also that the mere fact of being extraneous to a speculative logic does not necessarily imply a specific and indisputably positive outcome (such as, for instance, enhanced cohesion, tolerance and sustainability), as Ruiu seems to imply: there are a number of grass-root movements and organizations that are extraneous to a speculative logic, but are nevertheless not at all 'positive' or 'desirable' (consider, for instance, the case of white supremacist associations). At the same time, an organization or a community built and managed according to a speculative logic can have some desirable features or outcomes (as in the case of land trusts⁵; see also the next section with reference to the case of public amenities and services offered by the private residential community of San Felice, Milan).

In my opinion, in light of these and previous reflections, it is possible to state that cohousing and gated communities are more similar (or, at least, less different) than might be thought—and argued, for instance, by Maria L. Ruiu. An important consequence of this thesis is the following: cohousing communities may run the risk of sharing with gated communities some of the problems that are often stressed with reference to the latter. For instance, gated communities (and private residential communities in general) have often been accused of fostering segregation, homogeneity and social exclusion (Blakely & Snyder, 1997, 1998; Caldeira, 2000; Lang & Danielsen, 1997; Le Goix, 2005; Low, 1997, 2001).⁶ However, if we admit that this is true for gated communities, it may also be true for cohousing. Consider for instance, as shown by some authors (Bresson & Denèfle, 2015; Williams, 2008), that co-housers tend to be homogeneous in terms of affluence, education and race. This is the result, among other factors, of the principle of residents' self-selection: notwithstanding co-housers' good intentions towards diversity and integration, the idea of creating a close-knit community naturally leads to a search for affinity with residents in terms of preferences, values and attitudes (Meltzer, 2005; Rogers, 2005; Williams, 2005b). Then, because the openness to the outside seems to be more declared than practised, cohousing communities may also run the risk of fostering isolation and separation from surrounding areas.⁷

3.3. *An overview on some Italian cases*

A brief analysis of the case of Italy is useful for clarifying and supporting some of the previous points. Private residential communities in Italy are less common than in the US and in some Scandinavian countries, and the phenomenon is more recent. Nevertheless, the analysis of some Italian cases is interesting: in fact, it shows that, also in a country where only a limited number of private residential communities exist, a variety of cases have already emerged. As we shall see, this variety contradicts some of Ruiu's assumptions.

In Italy cohousing is a very recent phenomenon. The first case of an accomplished cohousing community dates to around 2010 ('Urban Village Bovisa 01', in Milan). Since then, a dozen other cohousing projects have been completed (for an in-depth analysis on some cohousing projects in Italy, see Baglione (2011), Baglione and Chiodelli (2011), and Durante (2011)).

To be stressed is that the first case of cohousing in Italy—and a number of the other projects undertaken in the following years, such as 'Cosycoh' in Milan; 'Terraciolo' in Rodano, Milan; and 'Cohlonia' in Calambrone, Pisa—has been executed by Cohousing Venture (now NewCOh), a private firm specializing in the promotion and construction

of cohousing projects. Hence, these cohousing projects are developer-led ventures: in many cases, the company has promoted and developed the project and has looked for the residents 'ex-post' the physical definition of the project (hence, the participation of residents is limited to everyday management of the community); adopted in certain cases has been a partnership model whereby the private firm has worked together with a core group of funder residents (as in the case of 'Urban Village Bovisa 01'). Generally speaking, the inhabitants of these projects are mainly young professionals (such as designers, journalists, consultants, psychologists, teachers and architects), single people or families with children. Communal services in the settlements are reserved for their use alone. Community life is important in all these cases; but, at the same time, some communitarian aspects that are typical, for instance, of cohousing communities in Northern Europe, such as a collective daily meal, are not present.

In Italy, cohousing communities closer to the 'ideal-type of cohousing'—self-promotion of the project by future residents, strong participation and communitarian lifestyle, and openness to the outside—exist, but they are rarer. One of them is 'NumeroZero' in Turin. It has been promoted by CoAbitare, a non-profit association, as a fully resident-led case: the group of future residents was created 'ex-ante' the physical completion of the project; they managed all the phases of the project (they were also directly involved in some activities of the building phase) and currently they are fully involved in everyday management. 'NumeroZero' is in a small apartment building (eight housing units) located in the Porta Palazzo neighbourhood in Turin, a problematic area largely inhabited by poor immigrants and subject to a number of public regeneration policies: this location is an integral part of the cohousing project, because 'NumeroZero' aims at contributing to the area's rehabilitation. Indeed, its residents want to foster close interaction with the neighbourhood and, therefore, offer some services to their neighbours (such as a nursery and a 'gruppo di acquisto solidale'—a purchase group which buys products at wholesale prices on behalf of all the residents; they are often fair trade and organic products). Nevertheless, 'NumeroZero's' communal spaces (a multi-functional room, a gym, a warehouse, a laundry, a terrace and a courtyard) are not usually open to use by non-residents.

What this brief overview on two Italian paradigmatic cohousing communities makes clear is that some of the characteristics that, according to Maria L. Ruiu and other authors, are typical of 'all' cohousing communities are not always present or distinctive—at least in the Italian case: for instance, we can state that in Italy cohousing is not outside any speculative logic; on the contrary, in many cases it is promoted by a private (speculative) firm. Moreover, only in a few cases are some communal spaces (a minority of them) open to the outside.

If we continue our exploration of the Italian context and analyse San Felice, one of the (few) communities that can be labelled a "gated community" in Italy, once again we can identify features that are not compatible with Ruiu's analysis (some cases similar to San Felice in the Milan area are 'Milano 2', 'Milano 3' and 'Borgo Vione'). San Felice is a private residential settlement located in an area of 600,000 square metres just outside the eastern municipal border of Milan; it is part of the metropolitan area of Milan, about 10 kilometres from the centre of the city and some hundreds of metres from the villages of Segrate and Limoto (for an in-depth analysis of the case of San Felice, see Beretta and Chiodelli (2011)). It was built in the 1970s, by a real-estate company

(Beni Immobiliari Italia). Today almost 4500 people live there. The settlement is composed of around 2000 housing units and a number of retail shops (such as a supermarket, restaurants, bars, bakeries, clothing stores, hairdressers and banks). Some communal spaces and services also exist in the neighbourhood: a kindergarten, a library, a church, sports fields, parks and playgrounds. The homeowner association managing San Felice also provides the settlement with street cleaning and lighting, snow removal and green areas maintenance. The entire settlement is walled; the only entrance is controlled by private security guards, who also patrol the internal areas. However, a number of features that contradict the stereotypical image of a gated community (and Ruiú's depiction) must be noted. First, although there is a patrol station at the entrance to the area, access is free and unchecked during the day. Then, some of the communal services are also open to the outside. This concerns not only shops, which have numerous customers from the surrounding villages, but also, for instance, the library and the church. In fact, the library was established and is managed voluntarily by the residents of San Felice. However, it is open to everyone: some years ago the homeowners association decided to make the library part of the network of Milan's public libraries, so that its books can be borrowed by all residents of the Milan province. The church was built privately by the developer, but was subsequently donated to the Roman Curia. Consequently, it is now open to the general public—and the same applies to the cinema that the Curia later built on church premises.

Therefore, even if San Felice has many characteristics usually associated with gated communities, it is not isolated from its surroundings or inaccessible from the outside. Paradoxically, it is far more open and accessed from surrounding areas and it offers to the public more relevant services (a library, a church and a cinema) than many Italian cohousing communities.

4. Discussion: some open questions towards policy

Ruiú's literature review mainly concerns the descriptive-analytical side of the cohousing and gated communities issue. However, I would like to mention here some open questions and critical perspectives regarding policy that are implied by my viewpoint, since I am convinced that the role of public authorities in the development of cohousing communities is very problematic and needs further exploration. The policy issue related to private residential communities is particularly important with reference to Europe, since many European countries have only recently begun to experience the phenomenon of cohousing (and, more generally, of private residential communities) and to enforce public policies in their regard.

Ruiú's reasoning seems to imply that public authorities should actively promote cohousing communities. This is claimed by several authors, such as Lietaert (2010) and Williams (2005b). They argue that public support of cohousing settlements is justified by the public benefits (allegedly) provided by cohousing communities: they would make communal facilities available to the outside, produce new semi-public spaces and promote civic engagement, mutual respect and sustainability. Note that, in some European countries, public institutions already directly or indirectly support the development of cohousing (Brenton, 1998; Williams, 2005b). This is, for example, the case of Germany, where

twenty-six municipalities were found to be supporting cohousing projects. The support ranges from simple offers, like a website with information about local housing companies or other interested persons, to more comprehensive approaches with the provision of special funding or building plots. (Ache & Fedrowitz, 2012, p. 405)

See also the case of Italy: some Italian municipalities are beginning to promote cohousing (for instance, the Municipality of Bologna through the project entitled 'Dalla rete al cohousing' ('From network to cohousing')).

However, from my point of view, public support for cohousing seems to be, at the least, "hurried". There are several reasons for this. I mention two of them.

First, I think that public support cannot be justified in terms of the public benefits provided by cohousing communities, simply because, as I have argued in this paper, we lack strong empirical evidence concerning the 'necessary' connection between cohousing and specific positive externalities that could be considered publicly relevant. Some of the (alleged) positive features of cohousing communities (for instance, the offering of communal services and spaces to the surrounding neighbourhoods) depend on the contextual characteristics of the specific project, and do not automatically ensue from the fact that the settlement is labelled 'cohousing'. As we have seen in the case of Italy, these features characterize some cohousing communities, but not others. Can we find other publicly relevant reasons for publicly supporting cohousing? I am not sure.⁸

A second problem concerning public support for cohousing communities is this: if it is decided to finance cohousing communities, how can it be decided what exactly cohousing is for? As Tummers (2015) stresses, cohousing is often used as a generic term covering a variety of cases. For instance, is it possible to define as cohousing a residential project promoted by a private (profit) developer, in which a limited number of private communal spaces and services are provided for the exclusive use of residents (this is the case of several cohousing settlements in Italy), and, as a consequence, would it deserve public support?

To sum up, this suggests that not only from an analytical but also (and in particular) from a policy point of view, the phenomenon of cohousing is more controversial and problematic than is assumed by many of its supporters. Hence more caution would be desirable before implementing public policies for cohousing promotion.

Before concluding this section, a last point related to the policy issue should be stressed. The main thesis of this paper is that cohousing and gated communities share constitutive characteristics and hence can be seen as varieties of the same phenomenon. A logical consequence of this thesis in terms of policy is the following: cohousing and gated communities should be treated in the same manner by public authorities—at least in our liberal-democratic societies, in which formal equality of all citizens before the law is a fundamental principle and, hence, should tightly bind public actions. As a consequence, if we want public policies that support cohousing, we must accept equivalent policies that support all the other kinds of private residential communities (since, as I have argued, there are no strong, shared and undeniable publicly relevant reasons for an exception to the principle of equal treatment). I suspect that many supporters of policies for cohousing communities might be rather uncomfortable with this idea.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have stressed some weaknesses in some common views on the differences between cohousing and gated communities; I have done so by replying to a literature review recently published on this topic by Ruiu (2014). Ruiu's main thesis is that cohousing and gated communities are two very different phenomena: despite the fact that there may be some similarities in certain specific cases, generally speaking they exhibit marked differences in terms of aims, goals, nature and characteristics. However, as I have argued, this viewpoint suffers from some weaknesses and inaccuracies. The three main ones are the following. First, the fact that there is no strong empirical evidence to support the assertion that gated communities are chosen mainly for security reasons, and cohousing communities mainly because of a preference for communitarian values. On the contrary, several authors oppose the view that gated communities are chosen mainly for reasons to do with security and safety—their opinion is supported by some surveys on residents' motivations for moving into a gated community. At the same time, even if we can presume that communitarian values play an important role in the choice of a cohousing community by its residents, there are no accurate surveys and quantitative research with which to weigh up the different motivations of these residents.

Second, the fact that the openness of cohousing communal spaces and services to the outside may be more alleged than effective. My research on cases of private residential communities in Italy shows that there is no linear correlation between the type of residential community and the degree of openness of communal spaces.⁹ Indeed, in some cases, cohousing communal spaces are restricted to the exclusive use of residents, as usually happens in the case of gated communities.

Third, the fact that it is not true that cohousing is outside any speculative logic; on the contrary, in many cases cohousing communities are promoted by (speculative) real-estate developers—sometimes in partnership with future residents, sometimes not.

These points undermine Ruiu's thesis that there are constitutive and major differences between cohousing and gated communities. Of course, many differences exist. However—and this is one of the main points of my argument—they are mainly 'epidermal' differences. These may be important from the individual viewpoint of a prospective resident who wants to choose among a range of private communities; they are surely important from an analytical point of view (in particular from a sociological or an ethnographical perspective); however, it would be difficult to consider them as 'publicly' important and, therefore, as grounds for promoting public policies supporting cohousing.

To sum up, I think that, despite our different views, Maria L. Ruiu, myself and all the scholars working on cohousing communities could (and should) agree on the following point: since the alleged positive and negative externalities of cohousing settlements (and, generally speaking, of private residential communities) are not supported by incontrovertible empirical evidence, more research on the matter is needed and, at the same time, more caution is necessary in the field of public policy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Among non-constitutive features there are, for instance, some architectural or psychological characteristics. These are certainly important from an analytical viewpoint (or from the point of view of a person who decides to buy a house in one of these communities). However, they appear to be of secondary importance in regard, for instance, to analysing their externalities on the surrounding areas, or to deciding a public policy. It is for this reason that I do not consider them in this paper.
2. Different names can be found in the literature to denote this phenomenon. Among them: home-owners associations, common interest communities, intentional communities, privately governed communities and contractual communities.
3. 'Varietas' is one of the last rungs of the taxonomical ladder. Distinctions among elements in the 'variety' category are sometimes not very clear – this is why 'variety' is not considered by the most rigorous systems of taxonomical classification.
4. Another related point should be stressed. The simplistic reduction of ownership to only two models (the private one and the public one) is insufficient when dealing with many urban issues: urban reality is far more complex. It is therefore better to break these two models down into a set of subcategories, each characterized not only by different forms of control and management, but also by different rules of access and conduct (see Chiodelli & Moroni, 2014). This implies, for instance, that not all the private spaces are closed and exclusionary (i.e. are characterized by a high degree of restriction of access and conduct). This is, for instance, the case of common spaces in many private residential communities, which may be open to a large number of people. At the same time, not all the public spaces are completely open (i.e. without restrictions of access and conduct); on the contrary, some of them are characterized by severe restrictions of access and behaviour (indeed, in certain cases, we could say that they are more exclusionary than some private spaces). On this topic, see for instance: Blomley (2009), Ellickson (1996), Moroni and Chiodelli (2014), Teir (1998) and Valverde (2005, 2009).
5. For a discussion on land trusts, see, among others: Brewer (2004), Eizenberg (2012), Hodge and Adams (2012), and Logan and Wekerle (2008).
6. For a different view on this point, see for instance: Manzi and Smith-Bowers (2005), Salcedo and Torres (2004), Walks (2014), and Webster (2001).
7. These arguments have been developed in more detail in Chiodelli and Baglione (2014).
8. In my opinion, the intentions and declared values of residents cannot be taken into consideration to justify any kind of public support. Even if the declared values of co-housers (e.g. mutual aid, solidarity and sustainability) are good and desirable, they are not sufficient for grounding a public policy.
9. See also Sullivan (2015) on the spatial insulation and physical closure of the Sunrise Place cohousing community in the US.

References

- Ache, P., & Fedrowitz, M. (2012). The development of cohousing initiatives in Germany. *Built Environment*, 38(3), 395–412. doi:10.2148/benv.38.3.395
- Alexander, L. (2002). Illiberalism all the way round: Illiberal groups and two conceptions of Liberalism. *Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues*, 12, 625–636.
- Atkinson, R., & Blandy, S. (2013). *Gated communities: International perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2004). Fortress UK? Gated communities, the spatial revolt of the elites and time-space trajectories of segregation. *Housing Studies*, 19(6), 875–892. doi:10.1080/0267303042000293982
- Baglione, V. (2011). Cohousing. Riconoscizione e classificazione di un modello di comunità contrattuale. *Urbanistica*, 146, 104–107.
- Baglione, V., & Chiodelli, F. (2011). Progetti di cohousing a Milano e Torino. In G. Brunetta & S. Moroni (Eds.), *La città intraprendente. Comunità contrattuali e sussidiarietà orizzontale* (pp. 33–42). Roma: Carocci.

- Ben-Joseph, E. (2004). Double standards, single goal: Private communities and design innovation. *Journal of Urban Design*, 9(2), 131–151. doi:10.1080/1357480042000227799
- Beretta, A., & Chiodelli, F. (2011). La comunità residenziale di San Felice a Milano. In G. Brunetta & S. Moroni (Eds.), *La città intraprendente. Comunità contrattuali e sussidiarietà orizzontale* (pp. 23–32). Roma: Carocci.
- Blakely, E. J., & Snyder, M. G. (1997). *Fortress America: Gated communities in the United States*. Washington: Brookings Institute Press and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.
- Blakely, E. J., & Snyder, M. G. (1998). Separate places: Crime and security in gated communities. In M. Felson & R. B. Peiser (Eds.), *Reducing crime through real estate development and management* (pp. 53–70). Washington: Urban Land Institute.
- Blandy, S., & Lister, D. (2005). Gated communities: (Ne)gating community development? *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 287–301. doi:10.1080/026730303042000331781
- Blomley, N. (2009). Homelessness, right, and the delusions of property. *Urban Geography*, 30(6), 577–590. doi:10.2747/0272-3638.30.6.577
- Bollinger, J. M. (2009). Homeowners' associations and the use of property planning tools: When does the right to exclude go too far? *Temple Law Review*, 81(1), 269–302.
- Brenton, M. (1998). *We're in charge: Cohousing communities of older people in the Netherlands – Lessons for Britain?* Bristol: Policy Press.
- Bresson, S., & Denéfle, S. (2015). Diversity of self-managed cohousing initiatives in France. *Urban Research and Practice*, 8(1), 5–16. doi:10.1080/17535069.2015.1011423
- Brewer, R. (2004). *Conservancy: The land trust movement in America*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Brunetta, G., & Moroni, S. (2012). *Contractual communities in the self-organising city: Freedom, creativity, subsidiarity*. Berlin: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-94-007-2859-2
- Buchanan, J. (1965). An economic theory of clubs. *Economica*, 32(125), 1–14. doi:10.2307/2552442
- Caldeira, T. (2000). *City of walls: Crime, segregation and citizenship in Sao Paulo*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chiodelli, F. (2009, September 9–12). *Abbasso il cohousing? Analogie e differenze fra cohousing e le cosiddette gated communities*. [Down the cohousing? Differences and similarities between cohousing and gated communities]. Paper presented at the XXX Conference of the Italian Association of Regional Science, Florence.
- Chiodelli, F. (2010). Enclaves Private a carattere residenziale: Il caso del cohousing [Private residential enclaves: The case of cohousing]. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 51(1), 95–116.
- Chiodelli, F., & Baglione, V. (2014). Living together privately: For a cautious reading of cohousing. *Urban Research and Practice*, 7(1), 20–34.
- Chiodelli, F., & Moroni, S. (2014). Typology of spaces and topology of toleration: City, pluralism and ownership. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 36(2), pp. 167–181. doi:10.1111/juaf.12028
- Crabtree, L. (2006). Disintegrated houses: Exploring ecofeminist housing and urban design options. *Antipode*, 38(4), 711–734. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2006.00473.x
- Davis, M. (1990). *City of quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles*. London: Verso.
- Durante, C. (2011). Active citizenship in Italian cohousing: A preliminary reflection. In C. Perrone, M. Manella, & L. Tripodi (Eds.), *Everyday life in the segmented city* (pp. 307–333). Bingley: Emerald. doi:10.1108/S1047-0042(2011)0000011017
- Eizenberg, E. (2012). The changing meaning of community space: Two models of NGO management of community gardens in New York City. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 36(1), 106–120. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2427.2011.01065.x
- Ellickson, R. C. (1982). Cities and homeowners associations. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 130, 1519–1580. doi:10.2307/3311980
- Ellickson, R. C. (1996). Controlling chronic misconduct in city spaces: Of panhandlers, skid rows, and public-space zoning. *Yale Law Journal*, 105, 1665–1248. doi:10.2307/797175
- Foldvary, F. E. (2002). Proprietary communities and community associations. In D. T. Beito, P. Gordon, & A. Tabarrok (Eds.), *The voluntary city. Choice, communities and civil society* (pp. 258–288). Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

- Fromm, D. (1991). *Collaborative communities: Cohousing, central living, and other new forms of housing with shared facilities*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Fromm, D. (2012). Seeding community: Collaborative housing as a strategy for social and neighbourhood repair. *Built Environment*, 38(3), 364–394. doi:10.2148/benv.38.3.364
- Glasze, G., Webster, C. J., & Frantz, K. (2006). Introduction: Global and local perspectives on the rise of private neighbourhoods. In G. Glasze, C. J. Webster, & K. Frantz (Eds.), *Private cities. Global and local perspectives* (pp. 1–8). London: Routledge.
- Hodge, I. D., & Adams, W. M. (2012). Neoliberalisation, rural land trusts and institutional blending. *Geoforum*, 43(3), 472–482. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.11.007
- Jarvis, H. (2011). Saving space, sharing time: Integrated infrastructures of daily life in cohousing. *Environment and Planning A*, 43(3), 560–577. doi:10.1068/a43296
- Jarvis, H., & Bonnett, A. (2013). Progressive Nostalgia in novel living arrangements: A counterpoint to neo-traditional new urbanism? *Urban Studies*, 50(11), 2349–2370. doi:10.1177/0042098013478235
- Kohn, M. (2004). *Brave new neighbourhoods: The privatization of public space*. London: Routledge.
- Lang, R. E., & Danielsen, K. A. (1997). Gated communities in America: Walling out the world? *Housing Policy Debate*, 8(4), 867–899. doi:10.1080/10511482.1997.9521281
- Le Goix, R. (2005). Gated communities: Sprawl and social segregation in Southern California. *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 323–343. doi:10.1080/026730303042000331808
- Lee, S., & Webster, C. (2006). Enclosure of the urban commons. *GeoJournal*, 66(1), 27–42. doi:10.1007/s10708-006-9014-3
- Liettaert, M. (2010). Cohousing's relevance to degrowth theories. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 18(6), 576–580. doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2009.11.016
- Logan, S., & Wekerle, G. R. (2008). Neoliberalizing environmental governance? Land trusts, private conservation and nature on the Oak Ridges Moraine. *Geoforum*, 39(6), 2097–2108. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2008.08.009
- Low, S. M. (1997). Urban fear: Building the Fortress City. *City and Society*, 9(1), 53–71. doi:10.1525/ciso.1997.9.1.53
- Low, S. M. (2001). The edge and the center: Gated communities and the discourse of urban fear. *American Anthropologist*, 103(1), 45–58. doi:10.1525/aa.2001.103.1.45
- Low, S. M. (2003). *Behind the gates. Life, security, and the pursuit of happiness in fortress America*. London: Routledge.
- Manzi, T., & Smith-Bowers, B. (2005). Gated communities as club goods: Segregation or social cohesion? *Housing Studies*, 20(2), 345–359. doi:10.1080/0267303042000331817
- McCamant, K., Durrett, C., & Hertzman, E. (2011). *Cohousing: A contemporary approach to housing ourselves*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- McHugh, K., Gober, P., & Borough, D. (2002). The Sun City wars: Chapter 3. *Urban Geography*, 23(7), 627–648. doi:10.2747/0272-3638.23.7.627
- McHugh, K., & Larson-Keagy, E. M. (2005). These white walls: The dialectic of retirement communities. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 19(2), 241–256. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2004.07.004
- Meltzer, G. (2000). Cohousing: Verifying the importance of community in the application of environmentalism. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 17(2), 110–132.
- Meltzer, G. (2005). *Sustainable community. Learning from the cohousing model*. Trafford: Victoria.
- Moroni, S. (2014). Towards a general theory of contractual communities: Neither necessarily gated, nor a form of privatization. In D. E. Andersson & S. Moroni (Eds.), *Cities and private planning property rights, entrepreneurship and transaction costs* (pp. 38–65). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. doi:10.4337/9781783475063.00010
- Moroni, S., & Chiodelli, F. (2013). The relevance of public space: Rethinking its material and political aspects. In C. Basta & S. Moroni (Eds.), *Shared spaces, shared values: Ethics, design and planning of the built environment* (pp. 45–55). Berlin: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-94-007-5246-7_3
- Moroni, S., & Chiodelli, F. (2014). Municipal regulations and the use of public space: Local ordinances in Italy. *City, Territory and Architecture*, 1(11), 1–7. doi:10.1186/2195-2701-1-11
- Nelson, R. (2005). *Private neighbourhoods and the transformation of local government*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

- Rahe, L. T. (2002). The right to exclude: Preserving the autonomy of the homeowners' association. *The Urban Lawyer*, 34(2), 521–552.
- Rogers, B. (2005). Living together. *Urban Land*, 64(2), 69–73.
- Rubinfeld, J. (2002). The anti-antidiscrimination Agenda. *The Yale Law Journal*, 111(5), 1141–1178. doi:10.2307/797619
- Ruiu, M. L. (2014). Differences between cohousing and gated communities. A literature review. *Sociological Inquiry*, 84(2), 316–335. doi:10.1111/soin.12031
- Salcedo, R., & Torres, A. (2004). Gated communities in Santiago: Wall or frontier? *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 28(1), 27–44. doi:10.1111/j.0309-1317.2004.00501.x
- Sargisson, L. (2000). *Utopian bodies*. London: Routledge.
- Scotthanson, K., & Scotthanson, C. (2005). *The cohousing handbook*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.
- Strahilevitz, L. J. (2006). Exclusionary amenities in residential communities. *Virginia Law Review*, 92(3), 437–499.
- Sullivan, E. (2015). Individualizing Utopia: Individualist pursuits in a collective cohousing community. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0891241615587527
- Teir, R. (1998). Restoring order in urban public spaces. *Texas Review of Law & Politics*, 2(2), 255–291.
- Tummers, L. (2015). The re-emergence of self-managed cohousing in Europe: A critical review of cohousing research. *Urban Studies*, 1–18. Advance online publication.. doi:10.1177/0042098015586696
- Valverde, M. (2005). Taking “land use” seriously: Toward an ontology of municipal law. *Law Text Culture*, 9(1), 34–59.
- Valverde, M. (2009). Laws of the street. *City & Society*, 21(2), 163–181. doi:10.1111/j.1548-744X.2009.01020.x
- Walks, A. (2014). Gated communities, neighbourhood selection and segregation: The residential preferences and demographics of gated community residents in Canada. *Town Planning Review*, 85(1), 39–66. doi:10.3828/tpr.2014.5
- Webster, C. J. (2001). Gated cities of tomorrow. *Town Planning Review*, 72(2), 149–170.
- Williams, J. (2005a). Designing neighborhoods for social interaction: The case of cohousing. *Journal of Urban Design*, 10(2), 195–227. doi:10.1016/j.futures.2007.08.022
- Williams, J. (2005b). Sun, surf and sustainable housing – Cohousing, the Californian experience. *International Planning Studies*, 10(2), 145–177. doi:10.1080/13574800500086998
- Williams, J. (2008). Predicting an American future for cohousing. *Futures*, 40(3), 268–286. doi:10.1080/13563470500258824