

PROPRIETARY RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT. Proprietary residential communities constitute a major component in the evolving geography of urban America. In many metropolitan regions, proprietary residential communities or common-interest developments, and associated forms of urban management, have emerged as the dominant form of residential development. Critical discourse on these communities and their residential community / homeowner associations has focused principally on the negative consequences for urban social and political life. It is argued here that many critical assessments are grounded in an idealistic view of contemporary society and an outdated conceptualization of citizenship. This article is intended to reenergize debate on these developments through a realist interpretation of the benefits and disbenefits of a form of residential development destined to exercise a major influence on the sociospatial structure of U.S. metropolitan areas in the early twenty-first century. *Keywords:* citizenship, democracy, homeowner associations, proprietary residential communities, U.S. metropolitan regions.

Processes of globalization and postmodernization, contextualized at the urban scale by increasing cultural diversity, social polarization, residential segregation, and political fragmentation, together with critical social trends promoting individualism, materialism, and consumerism, combine to reconfigure the form and functions of metropolitan regions in the United States. In the context of the changing residential geography of urban America, proprietary residential communities (PRCS) or common-interest developments (CIDs), and their associated residential community associations (RCAs) and homeowner associations (HOAs), are the dominant form of housing development in many metropolitan regions. The PRC or CID is a community organized on the principles of shared ownership of community property, facilities, and space; private-land-use controls through conditions, conventions, and restrictions (CC&RS); private government via an RCA or an HOA; and master planning. As Spencer Heath (1957, 82) observed, “the entire community is operated for and not by its inhabitants. Other than good behavior they have no obligation beyond making the agreed or customary payments for the services they receive.”

The rapid growth and spread of PRC/CIDs and RCA/HOAs have fomented academic and political debate. The majority of assessments have focused on the drawbacks of the PRC/CID–RCA/HOA phenomenon (Davis 1990; Sorkin 1992; McKenzie 1994; Bell 1998a; Blakely and Snyder 1999; Damstra 2001; Sandercock 2002; Low 2003). Polarized positions have been adopted. From one extreme, Mike Davis (1990) portrays PRC/CIDs as part of an apocalyptic vision of urban social disintegration resulting from privatization and residential segregation. From the other extreme, Fred Foldvary (1994) depicts PRC/CIDs as an ideal form of urban development that protects property rights and ensures efficient provision of public services. Protagonists speak different languages: Proponents emphasize rational choice theory, invoking

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