

THE COMPOUND: SOME PERSPECTIVES ON ITS MEANING

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INTRODUCTION

The housing compound, as found in developing countries, has been described as a living unit with certain distinctive characteristics which affect the nation-building process [1]. One purpose of this note is to define and classify the compound in general terms, placing emphasis on the company form of institutional compound. It is felt that this compound type has great influence on the environments of developing countries because it acts as a purposeful, goal-oriented, and dynamic representative of a more developed society.

Communication theory provides a particularly useful and appropriate framework for the analysis of the company compound as a change agent. It is argued that the compound acts as a complete communication system, and in this context it becomes not only a distributor of innovations, but an innovation in its own right. Thus while the primary function of a particular compound may be the production and distribution of some new good or service, the compound as a structure acts in conjunction with its occupants and their tasks to become an independent communication unit, maintained from outside the developing country, with characteristics foreign, and perhaps asystemic to the environment.

DEFINITION AND GENERAL CLASSIFICATION

In *The Community*, Irwin T. Sanders writes briefly about 'specialized local communities', such as prisons, military camps, and universities [2]. This type of institution is usually located in a particular place to serve a particular purpose. Since it is often supported and maintained by a 'parent' organization, such as a government or a company, the specialized local community need not depend on the normal factors affecting the well-being of most communities, such as the size of the tax base, etc.

More specifically, the specialized local community is an enclosed, secured, limited access social system. It is, to some degree, self-sufficient and semi-autonomous. Enclosure means defined boundaries beyond which the privileges, rights, and responsibilities found within the community do not pertain. Outsiders are physically restrained from participating in community activities. Physical restraint and the security of the community and its boundaries, then, are key elements in the definition of the specialized local community.

Any community which tends to be isolated from its environment must, of necessity, be somehow willing and able to protect itself. Indeed, one measure of its independence from environmental controls is the degree to which the community can protect itself.

Specialized local communities, such as company housing compounds, are not supposed to be dominant systems, however, but are created to be subservient to some higher authority.

Under most circumstances, the issues of control and authority are well defined and settled. The University of California, for example, does not control the State of California. The University is, in fact, dependent upon the State environment for its very survival. The University may create rules and regulations, and it may enforce them, but it cannot make and enforce laws. It may be able to hire and fire personnel, but it cannot imprison them. It may be able to hire a security guard, but this person is not a soldier. People are not citizens of specialized local communities, they are members, or employees, of such communities. Thus their higher loyalties are outside the enclosures, rooted within the authority of the larger system.

Yet spheres of specialized community authority do exist, and security is achieved in much the same way as in any municipality. Uniformed authorities do have some power to compel obedience. The community is semi-autonomous in inverse proportion to the degree to which it is integrated into the general social system. Often there is little evidence of a high degree of social integration in many developing societies, given such realities as tribalism, etc., and company compounds become unofficial states within states. In case of a conflict of authority, it is by no means axiomatic that the general system has the capability to dominate its component subsystem completely. For example, it has taken years for the Nigerian Government to bring the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company under control, so great is the company's power in that African country.

In any case, the interplay of independence and authority is important, especially as it relates to the efforts of governments in developing countries to be assertive in establishing and maintaining national authority, and even identity. Multinational corporations often have larger budgets than many of their host states, and exercise power through their intricate systems of specialized local communities, or compounds. As one expert puts it, if host-government sovereignty prevails, it will have to be at the expense of power now held by the multinational corporation. Institutional arrangements will have to be modified, and a new set of game rules established. 'Which of the two sides will have to yield more than the other in a given conflict will depend on their respective bargaining positions' [3].

Specialized local communities can be further

categorized as being either public or private, institutional or noninstitutional. Prisons and military camps are most often controlled by governments, and therefore tend to be public and institutional. Universities and retirement communities can be either public or private, and institutional. There is probably no such thing as a public, noninstitutional specialized local community, since governments tend to institutionalize all services.

Private, noninstitutional specialized local communities do exist of course, most noticeably in the form of family compounds. The extended family in a traditional society is a natural communication system, with its own lines of authority. The compound would therefore represent a more refined version of past family and clan housing and defensive systems. In Saudi Arabia, some of the growing number of family compounds bear an uncanny resemblance to local company compound models, complete with perimeter walls, and emergency water, food, and power systems.

Finally, whether or not the community represents public or private interests is of great importance. Governments create prisons, universities, and military bases in the name of public interest. They serve the wider system, and are part of the official organizational environment. Company compounds, unless nationalized to some degree, are not organized in the name of public welfare. Their first obligation is to their stockholders. Their well-being is nurtured from beyond the boundaries of their environment, and the question of to whom they are responsible is in some doubt. This question may be easy enough to answer in England or the United States, but somewhat more difficult to answer in a developing country where strong national authority may be nonexistent. In this case, a company's technical expertise and financial resources may be the closest thing to 'law' in the area.

FROM SPECIALIZED LOCAL COMMUNITY TO COMPOUND

Sanders does not utilize the term housing 'compound', probably because this terminology is not in popular use in the United States. One does not refer to a military post or a university campus as a compound. Similarly, private, institutional retirement communities like Sun City, and Leisure World, both in the United States, never call themselves compounds. What, then, is a compound? Common usage dictates that the compound is primarily a community of expatriates. It is a specialized local community abroad. Its simplest function is to provide a living and working

milieu for foreigners brought into a country for a variety of reasons, and isolated on the basis of nationality and purpose. Thus one may find compounds for Pakistani nurses, Korean construction workers, French teachers, and so on.

The most refined and influential compounds are usually those belonging to business organizations with long-term interests in a particular country. Complexity of organization and purpose combine to make the company compound an intriguing social system with a little understood communication capability.

THE COMPANY COMPOUND AND COMMUNICATION

Whether designed to keep insiders in, outsiders out, or both, the compound is separated from its environment by some sort of physical barrier. This barrier acts to inhibit contact between a compound and its environment while simultaneously expediting internal communication. The compound thus becomes a customized capsule resembling the primary cultural environment of its inhabitants. Information exchanged between the compound and its immediate environment is controlled, to a degree, by the compound and the environmental systems.

As a living artifact, the compound is both a social system and a physical object, as is the case with all communities. As an object, the company compound is characterized by the fact that it is not ordinarily representative of the culture in which it is constructed. Typically, the compound is built by a foreign contractor using foreign designs.

From the standpoint of the compound as a social system, it is people who act as communicators. Formal and informal communication channels are established to accomplish whatever is specified in the contracts. Yet, willingly or unwillingly, there is a continuous communication of innovations outward from the compound into the society at large, and contact is taking place on many levels. The local, commuting laborer works, and observes, within the compound. Compound radio and television may broadcast programs to the local population, revealing a vast number of things about the customs of those who have come as agents of modernization. Also, shoppers stream out of the compound by the busload into the local markets. These people communicate their own style, customs, norms, etc., and catch a glimpse of the people in whose name they are supposed to be working. If this communication process seems

'favorable' to the compound dweller, it is. Human change agents are not thought of as receivers, as well as sources/senders, of change, at least in the well-ordered context of the compound.

Returning to the subject of the compound artifact itself as a communicator, Kenneth Sereno and C. David Mortensen, writing in *Foundations of Communication Theory*, state that communication takes place in all discriminatory response to environmental stimuli. Even when one responds to an object, reactions, intellectual and emotional, and the meanings perceived in the object are a function of the influence of other minds [4].

Obviously, then, a compound acts as a stimulus regardless of intended role. It therefore follows that if the architecture, organization, and general style of a compound are foreign to a system, then the message transmitted to the viewer will be foreign. It also follows that if large numbers of foreign company compounds exist in any given developing area, then these will act in a multiplicity of ways as models for all types of compounds to follow.

It is often argued that the eventual takeover of a foreign company compound by nationals of a developing country can reverse the process of culture diffusion mentioned above, but this is unlikely. Those who assume compound roles are inevitably trained to play those roles by the company in charge, and, once entrenched, a fully developed physical infrastructure and accompanying social system are difficult to alter or dismantle. For these reasons, the clear articulation of a nation's sense of direction vis à vis developmental goals is helpful. Once the process of development begins it can be reversed, if at all, only under terms of extreme stress, and at tremendous cost.

Perhaps one of the most complete company compounds in the world is that belonging to the Arabian-American Oil Company in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. ARAMCO has only recently come under the full control of the Saudi Arabian Government, and more and more Saudi nationals are moving into the company's operation and compound. Yet the compound's 'personality' remains distinctly American, influencing all who live and work there. Symbols of American community life are everywhere, or at least those aspects reflecting white, middle class, suburban values. The schools, the supermarket, the movie house, the transportation system, the athletic facilities, etc., all are part of a highly refined and expensive network designed solely to meet the operational goals and needs of the company. If those needs do not involve the participation of, say, the extended family system

just beyond the compound gates, then it is for the extended family system to change.

Needless to say, the extended family is undergoing change in Saudi Arabia just as it is all over the developing world. This fact is seen in the large numbers of Saudis who do not even see their nuclear families for up to a week at a time when they go to work in the compound. If a worker's physical presence is deemed important, in a traditional sense, to the well-being of his family, and he is not present, then what, too, does this say for the future of the traditional emphasis on primary relationships in this and other developing societies? This sort of list, of course, is endless.

However, whether or not the company compound is dysfunctional or asystemic to the overall well-being, stability or direction of a developing society is a complex matter with many variables. Much depends on what is conceived, and by whom, as being in the best interest of a particular society. Also, the company compound is but one object on a typical developmental list of 'necessities', and the company can always argue that it is doing its job in the most efficient possible manner. Furthermore, probably no one object can be considered so singularly powerful that it can cause real dysfunction in the form of social conflict. But as part of a message grouping, provoking a whole series of interrelated, negative responses, the company housing compound most certainly plays its part in causing dysfunction in a traditional society. This is especially true if one uses traditional social perspectives in looking at change. Exhibiting one's social alienation from a traditional context, and then teaching social alienation, even to a willing audience, is a provocation which the company compound must perform by its very nature.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that specialized local communities, including compounds, are unique communication systems. They encourage residential differentiation over and above normal community standards. In traditional societies this emphasis on differentiation can be assumed to provide a form of cultural quarantine designed to ensure the integrity of the local culture by 'isolating' the expatriate presence. Differentiation may also be thought of as a mechanism which allows expatriates to create a culturally familiar environment without reference to the larger, traditional 'outside' system. Both assumptions,

however, fail to recognize the fact that a wall is not a completely effective barrier to the communication process. It is, in fact, a communicator. Cultural isolation is a myth unless there is absolutely no contact between cultures.

Is a company compound an appropriate model for community development in developing countries? Is it the sort of innovation, this modern version of an ancient theme, that promotes a sense of national identity? Can the compound help people transcend the family, the village, and the town and enter the larger social settings demanded by industrialization? Again, the answers are difficult. All innovations have latent consequences that may not be fully understood until well after the diffusion of an innovation has taken place [5]. If the construction of a compound is viewed only as a partial solution to a housing or job problem, then one may well think of it as a 'good' innovation. If, on the other hand, one sees in the compound a culturally disruptive message related to another value system, then it may be thought a poor innovation, and should be rejected, or, if not rejected, at least controlled in its adoption, form, and purpose.

Another consideration deserving of attention in evaluating the worth of the company compound is the matter of authority. It has been argued that compounds are semi-autonomous. In the absence of national will, or some definition of control by a government, it may be assumed a company will proceed to determine for itself what is proper or improper behavior by inhabitants who, in significant numbers, are citizens of other countries. While such autonomy may promote the company's best interests, it is not conducive to national social integration. Most innovations are diffused without particular interest in, or understanding of, their consequences. Company compounds, like cars and can openers, are always more than mere tools for making everyone's life easier. It would seem to be in the best interest of a developing society to be as selective as possible in its innovation demands to limit and temper the inevitable accidents and stresses inherent in development.

Some scholars contend that loss of community is one of the major consequences of modernization, and it is in the sense of community that traditional societies offer their most potent lessons to an ever more divided world. When communities disappear and meaningful alternatives fail to materialize, there is no longer a strong barrier to the forces of social change [6]. Is the company compound a meaningful alternative to the traditional community?

The modern company compound may be a community, but certainly not in the traditional sense. It reflects class and ethnic differentiation, competitiveness, productivity, the accumulation of material goods and their consumption, and emphasizes secondary relationships to the detriment of primary relationships. It is, in general, an alien social intrusion. This particular community draws its inspiration from other social worlds and even other time frames. The model, while attractive to many, is extremely expensive, and impossible to emulate for the vast majority of the world's people.

In today's postcolonial world, it is doubtful if the company compound, in its present form, is an appropriate community model in spite of its allure. Its purpose is too self-centered and narrow, and its impact as both a message and a channel is too expensive.

Developing countries are not usually economically or politically pluralistic, and they are not complex in structure. They are struggling to progress in a variety of ways. Under the circumstances it is probably unwise

to introduce expensive reproductions of sophisticated alien communities, especially communities lacking broad environmental focus.

An alternative to the sort of development atmosphere which makes housing compounds almost inevitable is a de-emphasis of the omnipresent five year plan, with its 'dash for the future' demands which are somehow never satisfied. True, meaningful communities do exist in the developing world, by the thousands. Developing countries might well profit in the long run by emphasizing development from below, in the smaller communities, away from the terrible problems of the city which are just now being fully comprehended. Local projects, built on a basis of labor intensity and given small, concentrated doses of capital and expertise, can mean community development and continuity. From this continuity emerges identity and, with discipline, social stability, and a minimum of the type of disruptions somehow always found in the neighborhood of the Big Project.