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The Normed Constituency

Marc Angélil & Cary Siress

Norms tend to have a boomerang effect. While designed with a specific purpose in mind, they sometimes backfire and yield unintended consequences. In the case of the Sun City retirement community established in the early 1960s on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona, the suburban norm returned with a vengeance. Just as developers capitalized on the nuclear family, they also sought to profit from demographic ageing, specifically from those retirees wanting to spend their later years in a sunny enclave at a safe remove from the hassles of life. As it was with the beginning of suburbia, segregation was built into age-restricted communities for the active elderly who were allowed to become members. One had to be above a certain age – strictly no children allowed – and part of a specific income group with the means to afford all amenities of a tailored lifestyle, leisure infrastructure included.¹ As ‘a paradise town’, Sun City was marketed above all as a space of exception, with norms tooled to insulate a constituency and pool together like interests. What this concentration of affluent senior citizens produced was an influential power base made up of ‘Sun Citians’ who challenged

the state government in the mid-1980s by opposing the levy of local school taxes, claiming they had already fulfilled said obligation earlier in life back home. This erupted into a full-blown war, the ‘Sun City War’ as it was named, essentially amounting to a ‘secession of the successful from the larger polity.’² So here again, norms work to facilitate a social and spatial divide. Market segmentation and its attendant forms of territorial segregation give rise to breakaway communities, with groups withdrawing from civic responsibility altogether. What comes as a surprise is that ageing plays a role in such processes of fragmentation. While divisions, whether based on class, race, or religious belief, have always served to carve territory into pieces, age has become yet another criteria for building walls. With private developments, including age-segregated towns, gaining the upper hand, all-out secession from the public realm may be the terminal stage of privatization, a stage that literally takes the ground out from under the public edifice.

¹ Melanie I. Sturgeon, ‘It’s A Paradise Town: The Marketing and Development of Sun City, Arizona,’ unpublished Master Thesis (Phoenix: Arizona State University, 1992), p. 1.

² Kevin McHugh, Patricia Gober and Daniel Borough, ‘The Sun City Wars: Chapter 3,’ *Urban Geography*, vol. 23, no. 7 (2002), p. 646.

Illustration: Newspaper cartoon lampooning residents of Sun City, one of the first age-segregated retirement communities in the US, for wanting to secede from the local school district in Arizona to avoid paying taxes (Arizona Republic, 1987).

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