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“Circling the Wagons: City Planning and Design in an Age of Risk,” sponsored by the American Planning Association, National Capital Area Chapter and the Washington Architectural Foundation. Sept. 18-19, 1997

Crime rates in American cities may be plummeting, but Americans’ preoccupation with crime, especially their fear of victimization, apparently is not. So-called reality-based crime shows like *Cops* fan the paranoia that disaster lurks in every apartment complex or mall parking lot, that every buzz-cut, baggy-jeaned, body-pierced teenager is a drug dealer, gang member or worse.

Not surprisingly, a new cadre of planners and urban designers who cast themselves as public safety experts has quietly emerged. These designers, who have burnished Oscar Newman’s edgy catch-phrase “defensible space” into the respectably phrased “crime prevention through environmental design,” often team up with local police agencies or retired cops-cum-security consultants. Their prescriptions are trickling into zoning codes and design standards throughout the country.

Last September’s conference, “Circling the Wagons,” included a series of sessions that provided a basic primer on CPTED and examined the application of CPTED in public housing, neighborhood design and gated communities. There are two ways to control behavior, explained John Hayes, a security consultant to the Charlotte Housing Authority. “Punitive control” is meted out by the criminal justice system and “self-control” is enforced by social norms and other people’s behavior. “The environment gives you clues on how to behave,” explained Michael Downie, of the Neighborhood Design Center. “The proper design and maintenance of places can reduce fear and criminality.”

CPTED takes the latter route, advancing several design strategies for sending signals to influence people’s behavior and sense of safety. “Natural surveillance” means maximizing visibility, so law-abiding people feel more comfortable about entering a place and troublemakers know they will be noticed. “Territorial reinforcement” means reclaiming unused spaces, clarifying who is responsible for

which spaces, and marking buildings and spaces with signs of activity. “Natural access control” means identifying clearly where people should and should not go, thereby increasing an intruder’s sense of risk. “Target hardening” means designing features that inhibit entry or access.¹

The basis offered for these theories is Newman’s decades-old research on open space in New York City housing projects, glazed with common-sense slogans from writers like Jane Jacobs (“eyes on the street”) and James Q. Wilson (“broken windows”), and capped by a swirl of anecdotes, like the hyped claim that “in some CPTED communities, criminal activity has decreased by 40 percent.”² Unfortunately, this is about the level of argument one would encounter in an Internet chat room.

In fact, the evidence is ambiguous at best. In the 1970s, follow-up studies of projects redesigned according to Newman’s principles found positive short-term impacts but neutral long-term impacts;³ even New York City’s housing authority is revisiting the issue in a current research project. Newman’s latest book, *Creating Defensible Space*, “is not the ambitious defense or scientific examination of Newman’s hypotheses that is needed,” one reviewer wrote. “It is time to consider the authors’ hypotheses systematically... [and] time to add to the analysis the variables of tenant demographics, project location, security and management practices.”⁴

Zeroing in on public housing projects as crime hot spots is also problematic, Harold Holtzman, a criminologist with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, asserted at the conference. “We don’t know how much crime is in public housing because police don’t usually measure it directly. And even when we have some impression about crime, we don’t know how it compares to what goes on across the street.” At the other end of the spectrum, there is no evidence

that gated communities are safer than others, reported Mary Gail Snyder, co-author of a recent book on gated communities.

The CPTED projects described at the conference ranged from discouraging to absurd. Mt. Rainer, Md., police chief John Thompson recounted how he used a series of access control, surveillance and enforcement strategies to successfully eradicate a drug dealing hot spot in his town. Now this activity takes place in the adjacent community of Brentwood and just across the Washington D.C. border, he acknowledged.

Peter Smirniotopolous, of the Alexandria, Va., Housing Authority, argued that planners can design safer communities by heeding market forces. His agency is replacing a dilapidated low-income project in the city's historic core with a mix of market-rate and public housing. The new development won't have a playground, though; such places can attract noisy teenagers (or worse) at night, scaring off home buyers and depressing market values, he explained.⁵

Ironically, the most thoughtful advocates of CPTED are undertaking a serious reconsideration and rediscovery of the principles of good place and community design. "What is the secret to CPTED? Design that ... encourages people to 'keep an eye out' for each other," one guidebook begins.⁶ But CPTED initiatives often fall back on narrow, formulaic, prescriptive approaches and fail to take the next step — investing in stable communities where people are involved with each other. This process, of course, is harder to chart, takes more time and offers no guarantees — and it requires a much more optimistic outlook.⁷

Consider that the resident manager, community police officer and landscape designer for a crime-plagued housing complex in Seabrook, Md., came to exactly the opposite conclusion as Smirniotopolous did. They placed a new tot lot directly in the center of their troubled neighbor-

hood so it would be a constant reminder of their effort to reclaim territory, a statement that would give residents confidence that their participation really would make a difference. That act, coupled with tough policies for evicting drug dealers, has started to turn the community around.

Beyond the questionable research foundation for CPTED design prescriptions, beyond the tunnel vision that can result in dismaying, destructive projects, comes a more fundamental critique. Designing places that make people feel safer while ignoring underlying social and economic problems is outright unethical, charged designer Linnaea Tillet. CPTED may eliminate, thankfully, the blind spots where criminals are able to lurk, but it remains blind to the disintegration of the places and institutions that undergird American civic and community life.

Notes

1. City of Orlando, Planning and Development Department, *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design: Your Guide to Creating a Safe Environment* (Orlando, Fl.: City of Orlando, n.d.)
2. *Ibid.*, 1. As for anecdotes, crime has fallen just as dramatically in New York City, where a host of policing, prison construction and legislative initiatives in the tradition of "punitive control" have been credited — not CPTED.
3. Edward Krupat and Philip Kubzansky, "Building Against Crime," *San Francisco Chronicle This World Magazine* (24 January 1988), 15.
4. Richard E. Lloyd, "Review: Creating Defensible Space," *Journal of the American Planning Association* (Autumn 1997), 524.
5. Kids can go to playgrounds in the surrounding neighborhood or play in the tiny backyard behind each unit, Smirniotopolous added (but not in the front yards, which have been given over to parking pads).
6. City of Orlando, 1.
7. See, for example, Raymond L. Gindroz's discussion of the Diggstown project in Norfolk, Va. Raymond L. Gindroz, "Cross Section of Address," *Places* 11:1 (Winter 1997).