

Crime in high-rise housing – is it the built environment's fault?

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Commencing in the 1960s, there was a dramatic increase in the rate of construction of high rise dwellings throughout Europe. This was mostly a response to the need to build a large amount of accommodation after the destruction of the Second World War. However, the particular style of dwelling type (tower blocks and deck or corridor access buildings) was based on the modernist principles of architecture that arose from the "Bauhaus" movement in Germany and the ideas of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier.



Photo 1: Berlin



Photo 2: Birmingham

Although this mass, system-built, production of housing managed to provide a large quantity of housing, there have been problems in some countries with the quality of life within them. These problems have not been universal throughout Europe, but particularly in France and the United Kingdom, many of these blocks have been vulnerable to crime. The question is whether this problem of crime has something to do with the design and construction of such blocks, or whether it is to do with broader social and demographic factors.

With funding from the European Union's "AGIS" programme and co-ordinated by the Max Planck Institute in Freiburg, Germany, a cross-national team of researchers used a "carousel" approach to compare and contrast the fortunes of six high rise housing estates in five European States. The case study areas were located in Berlin [2], Bristol, Amsterdam, Krakow and Budapest. They made for excellent illustrations of many of the themes being debated in the field of crime prevention, social policy and environmental design. As well as assessment visits to all the sites by the entire team, the evaluation consisted of: analysis of recorded crime data, interviews with key local staff (eg: housing managers, police, community development workers) and a household survey using the same format across all the sites.

The Bristol estate (Hartcliffe) appears to have the highest crime rate of any of the case study estates and yet has had the most physical security and design improvements explicitly aimed at crime reduction. These consist of direct fortification measures, such as new security doors, through electronic measures, most notably CCTV, to design measures such as new perimeter fencing.



Photos 1 & 2: Anonymous security monitoring at Hartcliffe contrasts with friendly concierge in Marzahn high rise block.

The most successful estate (and certainly the one that has been transformed most radically) appears to be Marzahn in Berlin, where a holistic approach has been taken, aimed at overall quality of life improvement rather than specifically a crime reduction one. Although Marzahn has some good security practice such as a concierge scheme, with linked CCTV in one of the biggest high-rise blocks (see photo above), it also has some design features, (such as ground floor balconies adjacent to luxuriant foliage) that, from a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) point-of-view, are distinctly dubious. The same applies to Gropius-stadt in Berlin, where access doors to low-rise apartments and garages often offer poor natural surveillance opportunities and would be distinctly risky in higher crime areas (such as Hartcliffe in Bristol!):



Photo 3: Ground floor apartments have no "buffer" from public to private space.



Photo 4: Little natural surveillance of garages. (Gropiusstadt)

Bijlmemeer (Amsterdam) has had a huge amount of redesign work aimed at making the estate safer (including demolition, remodelling and improved security measures), yet still appears to have problematic public space layouts and potential entrapment spots:



Photos 5 & 6: Ill-defined public spaces around existing and new housing - Bijlmermeer, Amsterdam

The other two former soviet housing estates in this study (apart from Marzahn, which was in the former East Berlin) -in Krakow and Budapest have had very little done to them and are in a relatively mediocre physical condition (particularly relative to the two Berlin estates), yet they appear to be faring relatively well in terms of low crime levels.

Pradnik Czerwony, in Krakow, has numerous potential problem areas in terms of natural surveillance and defensible space, both in and around the dwellings; similarly Bekasmegy, in Budapest, where the only real safety and security improvements are the fortification of some individual apartments and attempts to improve the quality of some open spaces.



Photos 7 & 8: Poor natural surveillance and defensible space designs at Bekasmegy.

However, the concern is that unless substantial improvements are made to the built environment on these Polish and Hungarian estates, the inevitable socio-economic polarisation driven by free market forces will exert an increasingly strong influence, with the result that, over the next ten or twenty years they could become "places of last resort" in the same way that British council estates have done. The prevention of such a downward spiral appears to have been the rationale behind the Berlin administration's heavy investment in the comprehensive improvement of Marzahn and Gropiusstadt.

The overarching conclusion from the research team's assessment of the case study areas is that, indeed, physical security and design improvements aimed at crime

reduction alone, will not in themselves guarantee a safer built environment. Community safety is reliant much more on socio-economic, community cohesion, demographic and estate management factors, although good design and appropriate levels of fortification can provide the backdrop to a better quality of life for residents of high-rise estates.

*Further details of the project and its findings can be obtained from the co-ordinator:
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