

The Key Question: Is there a link between planning and neighbourhood crime? Can good urban design improve community safety?

What went wrong?

A number of planned environments of the last 40 years have produced unforeseen criminogenic side-effects. Notable examples of this are single-use area zoning, which has resulted in various parts of conurbations being unoccupied at certain times of the day or week, and traffic/pedestrian segregation schemes which have provided more opportune locations for street crime and offender escape routes.

How they're trying to put it right

For the last 15 years "crime prevention through environmental design" has been widely promoted as a cure, and a number of design advice guides have been produced by local authorities and government departments. There is much common sense in this approach, but also a danger of over-stating its impact and slipping into a design determinist philosophy whereby people are seen as mere automatons whose behaviour is entirely conditioned by the environment they find themselves in. There are examples of "well" designed environments where crime levels are high and "bad" environments where, due to management and social factors, the disadvantage of the surroundings has not manifested itself in high levels of crime.

So what are the key issues that planners and urban designers need to bear in mind when they're addressing community safety?

- The problems are not just associated with actual crime, but with fear of crime. Fear can restrict peoples' activity and use of environments. Fear and actual risk of victimisation do not necessarily reconcile.
- Social planning is as important as physical planning. It will be necessary to work in collaboration with other professions and users to achieve plans that integrate the social with the physical.
- Some environmental measures introduced in one area may displace crime problems to other areas or may prompt different approaches to offending. Similarly, a heightened sense of security generated by the design of one localised environment may exacerbate the fear generators in its surroundings (eg: pedestrian access routes or hinterlands).

Four examples of how good planning and urban design can contribute to safer environments

1: Designing for the optimum mix of uses. Balanced, stable neighbourhoods with a heterogenous mix of demography and activity, reduce crime and fear, through informal social control networks and round-the-clock surveillance.

2: Designing and maintaining to give the right psychological signals and cues. A high-quality, cared-for environment will encourage respect for that environment and its users. Conversely, harsh, fortified and neglected environments may reinforce fear and actual risk of victimisation.

3: Designing for control of environments by users. This is not just about "ownership" and surveillance of space, but engaging users/residents in the design and development process so that they have an investment in the end result which they will wish to safeguard.

4: Right-sizing. Small, identifiable, communities seem to offer better mutual support and security to their residents, and public services seem to work better when they are decentralised to manageable neighbourhoods.

In Summary

- Planning and urban design measures alone cannot significantly and durably reduce crime and insecurity, but they can make an important contribution to a multi-disciplinary approach to community safety. Each design has to be site and context specific. Layouts and designs that work in some areas can be a criminogenic disaster in others.
- The results of physical planning and urban design provide the backdrop against which changing social activities and dynamics evolve. There is little evidence to suggest that the design of the physical environment determines people's behaviour in a such a direct cause and effect relationship. Social planning (involving other disciplines and agencies) should complement physical planning.
- Design guidance for security and crime prevention is valuable but limited if it is not augmented by user consultation and anticipation of variations in use and side-effects. People are infinitely adaptable and innovative in how they respond to built environments, but they will also over-rule attempts by designers to alter their preferred use of space (eg: short cuts and desire lines).
- Built environments need to be robust but adaptable enough to accommodate changing social dynamics and demographics. Cheap-finish, mass solutions have proved to be costly (both financially and criminogenically) in the long run.
- Planners and the planning process can provide valuable components in effective approaches to preventing crime and improving community safety, which almost inevitably require long-term, strategic and multi-disciplinary interventions.

(This topic is discussed in more detail in my chapter entitled "Planning for Crime Prevention" in Greed & Roberts (eds) (1998) *Introducing Urban Design*. Longman and is further developed in the chapter: "Planning out crime: the appliance of science or an act of faith?", in Tilley N (ed) (2005) *Handbook of Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, Willan Publishing)