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# Securing Public Space

Lawrence J. Vale

Self-conscious efforts to design for urban security go back at least to Jericho, but have had a new kind of salience in the last several decades. The situation is particularly problematic today because the perennial questions—Secure from what? and Secure from whom?—keep yielding shifting answers. Those who care about the planning and design of desirable places are being asked to attend to such questions with increased urgency, but the goals associated with security are frequently poorly framed, incomplete, and often contradictory. The response of designers to the challenges of securing public environments demands more attention from the community of researchers who are concerned not only with matters of security, but also with broader social, cultural and political questions about how matters of security are transforming or delimiting public life.<sup>1</sup> This important area of work would seem particularly suited to the EDRA/*Places* awards. Yet—except for one entry, which provoked lengthy debate among the jurors—questions of security were all but completely absent from this year’s awards cycle.

Those who design, plan, and conduct research about places must face up to new kinds of risk and uncertainty. Whether the threat is a potential terrorist strike or a catastrophic hurricane, the forms of public space become altered by the struggle to grapple with external threats. Faculty and students at MIT have launched a colloquium examining such challenges, and this essay sets out some of the directions such an inquiry might take.

## The Temptations of the Securescape

Designers and planners respond quite differently if they are charged with protecting against bomb-laden vehicles than if they are also asked to consider the potential for bombs carried by pedestrians, air attack, or terrorism with chemical or biological weapons. Thirty years ago, in what retrospectively seems a less explosive time, Oscar Newman launched his calls for “defensible space,” rooted in notions of territoriality. This coincided with the birth of an entire movement called Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED).<sup>2</sup> Both viewed the central task of urban design as deterrence of criminal behavior at the interface of the public and private realms. The focus was less on creating positive and desirable designed places than on the necessity to design secure space as a prerequisite to any such higher aims. This nurturing of informal surveillance in dangerous places has indeed frequently been credited with improving the quality of life. Yet designing for

security now entails matters that go well beyond the fears of assault, robbery, and drug dealing that prompted the earlier calls for defensible space.

Today’s new set of threats from within the public realm initially led to public outrage at landscapes littered by crude profusions of hardened planters, concrete barriers, and seemingly random acts of bollarding. This too has led in many places to more considered and considerate efforts to produce a public realm that is both secure and attractive.

The recent transformation of Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House, now reopened to pedestrians, stands as perhaps the most successful resolution of a difficult set of problems. The new design is closed to vehicles, thereby rendering the casual notion of a “1600 Pennsylvania Avenue” address little more than a quaint vestige of a more open era—not unlike the locked-gate fate of London’s 10 Downing Street. Nonetheless, restoring public access to the perimeter of the White House grounds is surely a welcome development, and has been designed to accommodate a future transit Circulator, as well.

More generally, the National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan, developed by the National Capital Planning Commission in 2002, is an exemplary effort to marry increased security and improved design. But it is also a reminder about the great expense of such planning, and it so far stands out as an exception.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, unfortunately, planners and designers have all too often been defeated by the temptation to construct what may be called the securescape—the uneasy confluence of security, landscape, and escape from public contact.

At a time when urban designers across the globe are seeking ways to retrofit massive modernist superblocks, often by reintroducing the finer-grained networks of premodern streets, the tenets of the securescape work in precisely the opposite direction. Urban designers extol mixed-use developments with street-level retail and enhanced pedestrian connectivity; but the pressures of the securescape push toward street closures, enhanced setbacks, and strict design guidelines for types of buildings that are considered most vulnerable.

Both the public and the design community cheered when the plan for redeveloping the World Trade Center site called for opening up the broad boulevard of West Street. But somehow the glaring disconnect revealed by the close connection between this road and the gleaming glass target of the Freedom Tower on its eastern flank was lost on those who moved forward with the design. Only in April 2005—a year and a half after the plans were unveiled—did such “security concerns” surface publicly, calling many

Conflicting values in the twenty-first-century city. Photo by author.





aspects of the chosen design into question. Soon afterwards, yet another building proposal emerged—an impenetrable tower base that signaled fortress far more than freedom.

New Urbanists and old urbanists alike call for eliminating wasteful and unsightly surface parking lots, and advocate hiding cars in lots beneath buildings or in the center of blocks; yet the impulses of the securescape work exactly against this too. A parked van submerged beneath a building is an unacceptable risk.

Similarly, the “rediscovery of the street” has often entailed a new appreciation of the value of a line of parallel-parked cars as a means to buffer and protect pedestrians from the rush of ongoing traffic, and “traffic-calming” measures have narrowed streets to accommodate a combination of such parking spaces and widened sidewalks and tree-graced allées. Yet, here too securescape advocates view cars as incendiary devices, and 50-foot setbacks are anathema to efforts to create, revive, or retain vital retail strips.

Closed Circuit TV monitoring is a common feature of public space in London.  
Photo by author.

Perhaps the most far-reaching effects of security-conscious design on public space are those attempts to impose new urbanistic standards that apply to whole classes of buildings rather than to particular single sites. If the major threat is considered to be a car bomb, the response may be to increase “stand-off” distance between buildings and vehicles. If the 50-foot setback becomes ubiquitous, however, this risks undoing decades of efforts to retrofit the alienating streetlessness of the modernist superblock.

It is not surprising that the U.S. Department of Defense would issue guidelines specifying setbacks of at least 82 feet for all facilities that it owns or leases, but it is less obvious why other, less risk-prone facilities should have to recede (or secede) from the public realm. What happens as other public and private institutions, fearing either attack or seeking to limit financial liability for what such an attack could wreak, also choose to seek comfort in the securescape?

Will security considerations delimit basic architectural devices such as the roadside cantilever? Rem Koolhaas’s celebrated Seattle Public Library and Boston’s planned Institute for Contemporary Art (designed by Diller and Scofidio) both feature dramatic overhangs that maximize both visual drama and vulnerability to concentrated blast waves. Similarly, C-shaped open courtyards, such as at the Louvre and other less majestic creations, also are vulnerable to explosives. And, for those who really want to do the calculations, the physics of bombs and bodies suggest that a detonated box truck with 5,000 pounds of TNT generates sufficient atmospheric overpressure to cause certain death at 100 feet, not just 50.<sup>4</sup>

As the dictates of the securescape become established in residential housing markets, private developers may feel at a disadvantage if they do not provide the same outward trappings of secured perimeters as their competitors. And as sealed residential developments congeal into a network of secured pods, the spaces between walls (formerly called streets) increasingly must fight for life and livelihood. Gated housing estates for the rising middle class in China mimic not just the walls, gates, and private security forces of their Western counterparts, but sometimes take the military metaphor quite literally, with small battalions of security officers marching in formation through landscaped tot lots.

### Security and Democratic Space

In the United States, the epicenter of the securescape remains Washington, D.C. Fortunately, given the symbolic importance and touristic centrality of so many treasured monuments, Washington is also the place where the



most sustained and serious thought (and the most sustained and serious spending) has been dedicated to finding ways to combine protection of buildings with efforts to introduce quality design. In the best instances—such as the proposal for subtle interlocking oval plinths to replace the ring of Jersey barriers around the Washington Monument—designers have acted both unobtrusively and sensitively, providing not just a coping mechanism but an improvement to the landscape.

In other instances the demonstrable need to achieve greater levels of security yields more mixed results. At the U.S. Capitol, for instance, visitors can no longer ascend steps and pass through the east portal to reach the grand rotunda. Instead, with the enormous new visitor's center that has been excavated into the Olmsted landscape opposite the east Capitol front, they will descend underground at considerable distance from the Neoclassical portal that welcomed entry in the past. Now, safely detached, they can be more securely processed, organized into groups, and given a systematic education about the importance of the U.S. Congress and its imposing home. There is much to be gained by this, but what is lost is the experience of entering a building in the normal manner, using an entrance once carefully designed to convey that this monument to democracy was indeed open and accessible to all (or at least all who did not need a wheelchair). Now, instead of entering a building, visitors will be subjected to an orchestrated experience—perhaps a much more enriched one—but inevitably a different one.

A security-driven urban aesthetic of “stand-off” setbacks changes the boundary between public and private space,

and it alters the relationships among streets, sidewalks and facades. It changes the way that buildings are seen and the way that they are entered. It can even change the sequence with which they are experienced. Thus the setback may affect the sense of welcome that the institution conveys, and it may result in subtle changes of attitude on the part of the visitor. For example, a building with multiple entrances conveys a different hierarchy than a complex that must be accessed through a single secure portal, let alone one that is first entered below ground. On the positive side, buildings designed to have a single securable entrance will need also make such an entrance accessible to visitors with disabilities, thereby eliminating the two-class system of access that currently remains prevalent.

Other concerns remain, however, as more and more buildings—and building types—come to be seen as potential targets for attack. Eventually, the daily experiences of urban life may become attenuated by the pauses at building perimeters, and more and more places may become places of secured sanctuary, detached and edited from the flows of open accessibility.

Furthermore, all too often, “securing public space” means securing space from the public, rather than for it. And it may mean that both public and private realms now face the prospect of ubiquitous new forms of surveillance. Intended to protect and reassure, such monitoring may also threaten the role of the city as an active and unpredictable social space of encounter.

Random acts of bollarding in London and Washington, D.C., Photos by author.

## Sensors and Censors: Surveillance and Freedom in the Wired City

The gradual incursion of technology into the monitoring of public places has been accompanied by dramatic increases in privatized security.

Increasingly, cities have been secured by private police forces supported by corporations or private owners rather than by regular police. To some, this is an invidious “privatization of public space.” The rapid proliferation and global spread of corporate plazas and shopping malls over the last four decades are but the most visible dimensions of these trends.

At the same time, public spaces (such as traffic intersections and sidewalks) have increasingly taken on the sorts of camera-based surveillance arrays long present in privately owned places. Vast networks of CCTV cameras now scan public life in cities and towns throughout the United Kingdom, and are a growing presence in many other places as well. Such surveillance systems are deliberately visible, since the cameras themselves are meant to deter misbehavior, criminal or otherwise. Having noted the presence of a camera, the calculus of risk of capture and prosecution is altered. But such deterrence is scaled to the purse snatcher—not the suicide bomber, who is immune to such concerns. When terrorists struck London’s transit system in the summer of 2005, the camera network greatly facilitated efforts to track the perpetrators—but only after the fact.

Decisions about how to secure cities inevitably are implicit or explicit responses to particular perceived threats. Often, the design response comes in delayed reaction to whatever major security lapse has occurred in some other place. An attack on an embassy, a truck bomb in Oklahoma City, an explosion outside a Balinese nightclub, a terrorist act in Manchester, a teen gunman in an isolated high school—each generates an urbanistic response, often in highly distant locales.

Some cities are certainly much more vulnerable than others, especially if they hold headquarters of controversial organizations, subject to impassioned protest or simmering contempt. But making sense of a landscape of risks generally entails an ethics of urban intervention, according to which designers and planners must reflect on their practice and the value systems that drive it. Every decision about bollard intervals, hardened benches, strategic plinths, stand-off dimensions, community gates, CCTV cameras, rerouted traffic, private police forces, racial profiling, privacy policy, and prison construction is taken in relation to judgments about terrorist risk, impact on the global capitalist economy, media coverage, and political will.

Those who care about quality places and sustained civic participation in public life must recognize the imperative to address the urban fear that comes from perceived threats to security. But boundaries also new to be set on the technologies of control and regulation. Ultimately, the challenge for designers, planners, and those who commission them is to strike a balance between the risks of insecurity and the risks of a diminished public life.

### Notes

1. Two edited books provide an excellent start on the analysis of security-obsessed designed environments, and begin to provide guidance to designers and planners: Nan Ellin, ed., *Architecture of Fear* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997); and Stephen Graham, ed., *Cities, War, and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). Various professional societies and government agencies have also issued recent manuals dealing with security issues in the built environment. See, for example, Joseph A Demkin, ed., *Security Planning and Design: A Guide for Architects and Building Design Professionals* (New York: Wiley, 2004); and Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Reference Manual to Mitigate Potential Terrorist Attacks Against Buildings* (2003) ([www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)). In 2004 the American Society of Landscape Architects organized a symposium on “Safe Spaces: Designing for Security and Civic Values.” The American Planning Association’s *Planning* magazine entitled its June 2005 issue “Safe Growth America.”
2. See, for example, Timothy D. Crowe, *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* (Stoneham, MA: National Crime Prevention Institute/Butterworth-Heinemann, 1991); Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); Oscar Newman, *Design Guidelines for Creating Defensible Space* (Washington, D.C.: Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, April 1976); Gerda Wekerle and Carolyn Whitzman, *Safe Cities: Guidelines for Planning, Design, and Management* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1995); Al Zelinka and Dean Brennan, *SafeScape: Creating Safer, More Liveable Communities Through Planning and Design* (American Planning Association, Planners Press, 2001); and Leonard J. Hopper and Martha J. Droge, *Security and site Design: a Landscape Architectural Approach to analysis, Assessment, and Design Implementation* (New York: Wiley, 2005).
3. National Capital Planning Commission, *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan* (Washington, D.C., October 2002).
4. Demkin, ed., *Security Planning and Design*, p. 29.