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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 Cop in the Para noia 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 design- ers, who have banished Oscar Newman's edgy catch-phrase "defensible space" into the respect- ably phrased "crime prevention through environ- mental 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-con- trol" 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 sur- veillance" means maximizing visibility, so low-abid- ing 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 the intruder's sense of risk. "Target hardening" means designing features that inhibit entry or access.

The basis offered for these theories is Newman's decades-old research on open space in New York City housing projects, galvanized with common-sense slogans from writers like Jane Jacobs ("eyes on the street") and James Q. Wilson ("broken win- dow"), and copped by a swirl of anecdotes, like the hyper claim that "in some CPTED communi- ties, criminal activity has decreased by 40 per- cent." 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 im- pacts; 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 exami- nation 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 demo- graphics, project location, security and manage- ment practices." Zoning in on public housing projects as crime hot spots is also problematic, Harold Holzman, a criminologist with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, asserted at the confer- ence. "We don't know how much crime is in public housing because police don't usually mea- sure 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, re-
ported Mary Gail Snyder, co-author of a recent book on gated communities.

The CPTED projects described at the confer-
ence ranged from discouraging to absurd. Mt.
Rainer, Md., police chief John Thompson re-
counted how he used a series of access control,
surveillance and enforcement strategies to suc-
cessfully 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 Smirnopolous, of the Alexandria, Va.,
Housing Authority, argued that planners can design
safer communities by hedging 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 de-
velopment 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, commu-
nity police officer and landscape designer for a
crime-plagued housing complex in Seabrook,
Md., came to exactly the opposite conclusion as
Smirnopolous 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 existing drug dealers, has
started to turn the community around.

Beyond the questionable research foundation
for CPTED design prescriptions, beyond the tun-
nel vision that can result in disinquising, dehumanizing
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 Linnaeas
Tiller. 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 Depart-
ment, Crime Prevention
Through Environmental Design: Your Guide to Creating
a Safe Environment (Orlando, Fl., City of Orlando, n.d.)
2. Ibid., 1. As for anodinous,
crime has fallen just as dra-
monstously in New York City,
where a host of policing,
prison construction and leg-
islative initiatives in the tri-
domains of “positive control”
have been credited — not
CPTED.
3. Edward Knaut and Philip
Kolczynski, “Building Against
Crime,” San Francisco Chron-
icle This Week Magazine (14
January 1986), 17.
4. Richard F. Lloyd, “Review:
Creating Defens-
ible Space,” Journal of the
American Planning Association
(Autumn 1973), 314.
5. Kids can go to play-
grounds in the surrounding
neighborhood or play in the
tiny backyard behind each
unit, Smirnopolous noted
but not in the front yards,
which have been given over
to parking pads.
6. City of Orlando, 1.
7. See, for example, Ray-
mond L. Grandin’s direc-
tion of the Diggsmen pro-
ject in Norfolk, Va. Ray-
mond L. Grandin, “Cross
Section of Address,” Place
21 (Winter 1977).