

Safer Space – by Design

For over 50 years criminologists and other academics have been discussing and hypothesizing on what causes crime, how to strike at its roots, how best to reform an offender. Theories and remedies have ranged from legal, social, psychological, political and even biological. It wasn't too long ago that we were actually counting the bumps and their location on new-born heads and pre-determining an infant as a career criminal or community leader.

What became evident was awareness that the true nature of crime is not limited to the number and location of the bumps on our head or to the lower socio, economic levels of society. Criminal behaviour is spread throughout all levels of society, the workplace and government. One common thread ran through the study of criminal behaviour and that was opportunity and human honesty.

Since it was very difficult to reform the 'man', theorists began asking the question, is there any relationship between the physical environment and the behaviour of humans? Some 25 years ago, thinking and realizing that it may be easier to reform the environment and remove or reduce the opportunity for the built environment to support nuisance and criminal behaviour, phrases such as: crime control through environmental engineering, defensible space, crime control through urban planning and design, crime prevention through urban design led to the term Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED).

CPTED (Pronounced Sep-ted) has been defined as the proper design and effective use and maintenance of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the incidents and fear of crime and an improvement in the quality of life. Reducing crime has obvious effects that are easy for most to appreciate.

Dealing with the fear of crime would appear to have an intangible affect, yet it is perhaps the more important of the two. When a person, consumer or community has a perception of crime that makes them feel unsafe in certain environments, they withdraw themselves from that activity, location, or destination. The results are vacant streets, less active parks, commercial and retail venues avoided and less socialization of space. The avoidance of space by legitimate users sends an environmental cue (message) that offenders pick up on and soon ownership slips from legitimate use to nuisance behaviour, graffiti and vandalism, creating opportunity for criminal activity.

When a person's fear of crime is removed or reduced, there is more socialization of neighbourhoods, parks, streets and commerce. Increased human activity puts more eyes on the street or in the working environment and one of the main affects of this humanization of space is the perception to offenders that their behaviour will be discovered and their identity less anonymous. They will perceive this type of environment as not a safe place for them to carry out their nuisance and criminal activity thus reducing the opportunity for crime.

The main concept of CPTED is that there is a direct relationship between the Physical environment and the behaviour of people, the productive use of space and crime and loss prevention. These behavioral effects can be accomplished by reducing the propensity of the physical environment to support criminal behaviour.

There are four key overlapping design strategies in CPTED. They are conceptually distinct yet are mutually supportive. They overlap in practice and one does not stand out as a stronger principal than another. They are: Natural Access Control, Natural Surveillance, Territoriality and Maintenance. These natural design strategies are best applied at the concept and design stage of development when change is easy, inexpensive and able to occur.

Since CPTED's parents have come from criminology, architecture, urban planning and science, the CPTED analysis process consists of a crime analysis, demographic study, land use information, site observations and user interviews and/or surveys. Any development will have a direct impact on the surrounding environment and the surrounding environment (.25 km, 2 -4 block radius) will influence the safety and sustainability of any development.

For over 25 years CPTED principals have been developed and tested to the point where CPTED has been taught in schools of criminology, urban planning, landscape architecture and law enforcement and incorporated into Official Community Plans (OCP's) in Canada and design by-laws across the United States and Great Britain. Its application has proven to reduce crime and the fear of crime, enhance property values and create sustainable development. Provincially cities such as Surrey, Vancouver, Victoria, Langley, Kelowna and Mission have various wordings for designing CPTED into development.

Brenda Clark, City of Surrey Architect writes, "The City of Surrey recently amended its Official Community Plan (OCP) to incorporate a new section on Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). Unanimously adopted by City Council, comprehensive CPTED guidelines are now incorporated in all new development projects in the City, by means of the design review process. These guidelines are available on-line, as Division F of the OCP. In addition, many City planners have received CPTED training, and the primary design professionals on staff have all completed extensive CPTED studies."

Surrey is in the process of turning around problematic areas by designing CPTED into civic renovations and all new development. CPTED doesn't cost, it pays! The results of incorporating CPTED into all aspects of development translate into safer, sustainable more profitable space. When the 7-Eleven corporations designed CPTED into their stores, sales increased by 50% and they reduced loss associated to robbery by 65%. Canadian and American malls reduced criminal incidents by 24% when CPTED was designed into their layout and construction.

CPTED is now part of the due diligence process in the U.S. workplace. CPTED professionals are now being called upon in the United States to analyze physical environments after serious crimes have occurred. If deficiencies are discovered in the over-all design that contributed to the offender carrying out the act, liabilities are being assessed and awards increased.

The results of properly applying CPTED will help to create safer environments and reduce liability both real and vicarious whether on a micro or macro scale. I don't know of any design professional, developer or political leader that is not interested in creating safer, sustainable more profitable environments. The reality is that this type of development will not occur by accident; it must be planned for and designed in to all development in order to be successful. Crime and the fear of crime do not have to be a part of life nor a cost of doing business. The tools are available to us and we have it in our power to affect crime and the fear of crime by creating environments that are safer, sustainable and more profitable – by design.

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