



Conversations on Future Lifestyles:

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Defending Public Space – June 2006 Introduced by Leon Yates

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Defending public space – how good urban design can reduce the fear of crime.

Good urban design addresses the potential of crime taking place in the public realm. Avoiding conflict between public and private spaces, providing entrances onto the street and not at the rear of properties, avoiding the use of fortress style boundary treatments such as high brick walls, solid roller shutters etc. all contribute to making people feel safer in public spaces.

Well-designed urban environments promote a sense of self-worth and improve quality of life. To create sustainable communities where people want to live, work, shop and enjoy their leisure time, we must design them to promote people's self-worth. Housing design and layout discourages contact between neighbours, more people live alone, and many do not speak to their neighbours at all. A sense of isolation in communities is prevalent. Poor design of many neighbourhoods, at worst encourages crime and at best fails to provide any deterrents.

Why is the issue important?

Antisocial behaviour and crime in the public realm is a major concern in many UK cities and towns. There is a feeling that many neighbourhoods are, in the words of some residents, "out of control", as gangs of predominantly young people behave in an increasingly lawless manner. The fear of crime is of course more significant than its incidence in most cases, but the quality and structure of the local environment is a major contributory factor in the level of fear. Closed-circuit television is not necessarily the panacea that many think it to be. So effective design that reduces the incidence of crime and the fear of it is not a luxury today, but a necessity.

The access-ways in our 1960 and 1970 built neighbourhoods are a maze. Public space is ill defined. Planting is often overgrown. Pedestrian routes through the neighbourhood are often dark and unwelcoming. Local facilities, shops and community centres are provided in small arcades that are themselves visually unattractive and at night are literally solid steel-shuttered bunkers.

Some potential solutions are just common sense: defensible space, promotion of mixed-use development, often with higher densities of housing, and parts of towns remaining open after dusk. The creation of distinct neighbourhoods in housing areas with their own character and legibility are required so that people begin to recognise and associate with their neighbours again. In order to deliver 'sustainable communities' and provide a good quality of life in our neighbourhoods we need to ensure more cross-departmental working at the local level. Planners and police crime prevention officers need to be aware of what good urban design principles are, what good design actually is and what it means to communities.

We have the tools:

Planning guidance is already in place: PPS 1, PPS 6 and PPS 12 all contain guidance on addressing crime. "Secured by Design" should be re-visited as there are contradictions between good urban design principles and crime prevention criteria that it includes. Police architectural liaison officers should be seen as fundamental. "By Design" (CABE 2000) looks at the ways local authorities have to help to deliver better design and how to use them effectively. "Better Places to Live", a companion to PPG 3, provides sound practical guidance on how to achieve quality residential environments. "Planning out crime" the government guidance is currently under review, and PPS on sport, open space and recreation states that "security and personal safety" must be principles for planning new facilities and open space.

Paying proper and due consideration to urban design principles will deliver safer neighbourhoods.

Key arguments:

- People derive a sense of their own self-worth from the condition of the environment around them
- Community safety & crime prevention should be central concerns for LAs when exercising planning responsibilities
- Effective design that reduces the incidence of crime and the fear of it is a necessity.
- Local authorities must ensure that good urban design principles are embedded in the master plans, proposed housing layouts and regeneration schemes being put together by various partnerships
- Public realm strategies should incorporate all the players involved in designing the urban environment.
- Government should consolidate legislation relating to the design, management and use of the street.