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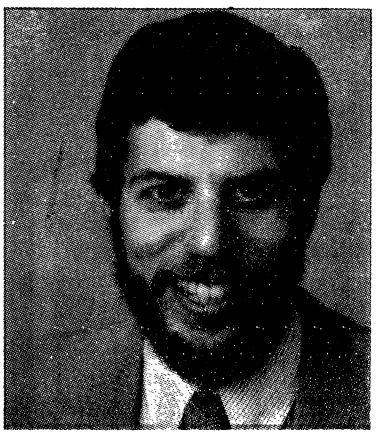

CRIME PREVENTION FOR AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC HOUSING

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Introduction

This article addresses the problems of crime and vandalism on Australian public housing estates. It is particularly concerned with crime prevention policies and strategies. It introduces the concept of "manageable space", which emphasises the interrelationships among all the social and physical factors operating in a housing estate. Central to this argument is an acknowledgement of the need for a comprehensive approach to crime prevention.

In Melbourne a large underground carpark at an inner suburb high-rise public housing estate is so dangerous that no-one parks there and few people are willing even to enter it. The carpark is a huge underground cavern with only a few entrances; it is not visible at all from above ground. When I visited that carpark at 12 noon on a sunny May day, the interior corners were so dark that I could not tell if anyone was lurking there. The cement floor was littered with broken glass, scraps of metal, and piles of unidentifiable refus. It smelled terribly. Officials of the Victorian Housing Commission and I agreed that the carpark was one of the most dangerous places on Australian public housing estates.

While we need to recognise that crime, vandalism, and violence in public housing has its roots in the society at large, we should be especially concerned about crime prevention on public housing estates for four major (and interconnected) reasons:

1. Crime and quality of life: In the United States and the United Kingdom, and increasingly in Australia, crime and the fear of crime are two of the most important factors in the quality of urban life. In this context the popular media is playing an increasing role in publicising crimes of violence, thereby leading to an increasing fear. Public housing and other low income communities are particularly vulnerable to these trends.

2; Unemployment: Unemployment is steadily increasing in Australia. Particularly high rates are found among the young and those in lower-income suburbs — the very areas which have high concentrations of public housing. Unemployment has direct, although complicated, links to rates of crime and violence. [1]

3. Spirals of crime: A spiralling cycle of crime in housing estates can develop, with crime and vandalism leading to high vacancy rates, leading in turn, to financial losses and other management problems, and perhaps resulting in abandoment of some units. Another spiral of crime (mentioned under [1] above) begins where crime leads to fear of crime causing social withdrawal of estate residents. Such withdrawal, with residents

[1] Keith Windschuttle's chapter on crime in his recent book *Unemployment* (Penguin Books, 1980) provides an excellent discussion of these issues.

reducing their use of public and community spaces, leads in turn to greater crime rates.

4. Low-income victims: Finally, we must recognise that lower income people (the bulk of public housing residents) are more vulnerable than rich people. Rich people can take care of themselves: they hire guards, build walls, and install better locks, alarms, and other security measures. Lower income people have limited resources which limit their housing choices. Their vulnerability makes them more prone to criminal victimisation.

DESIGN, MANAGEMENT, AND RESIDENTIAL CONTROL

Many people would say that bad design accounts for the problem of the underground carpark I described above: "What stupid bloke would design a carpark where no-one could see the cars, anyway? It's the same insensitivity that also produced those disastrous high-rises." I would agree with that assessment of the design faults. But I think that it is dangerous to simplify the problem like that. The greater problem — in any public housing estate with crime or vandalism concerns — is that the residents do not have any control over their own environment. This lack of control *may* be due to design: lack of surveillance and remoteness (in the case of the carpark), poor communal facilities, poor hardware, inadequate definition of territory, or other factors. But lack of resident control can stem equally from management policies and practices which prevent residents from becoming involved in their environment.

Why do I emphasise the importance of resident involvement? For reasons of efficient use of resources: residents are the best agents for their own security, and in this age of limited public funds we cannot rely on expensive new programmes and projects. Residential control is difficult to achieve, however. Why, for instance, must public housing residents develop a "sense of community" to protect themselves when we do not ask that from residents in private housing? And what about estate management which is often unable or unwilling to permit residents to take such control? These are difficult questions. Nevertheless, resident involvement should be encouraged at every turn: without their support crime prevention programmes will almost certainly fail.

MANAGEABLE SPACE

This article introduces the concept of "manageable space" as a theory of concerted and co-ordinated crime prevention planning for housing estates. While manageable space includes a number of crime prevention strategies (see Perlgut 1979), two are most important: management policies and practices; and the process of creating, through physical design and site layout, space which can easily be "managed" by residents. The importance of management cannot be overemphasised; it is a key actor in any crime prevention techniques employed in existing developments. Space which can be easily managed implies the design and construction of living environments which are under the control and influence of their residents.

"Unmanageable space" occurs when "hard" architecture is combined with "hard" management. Hard architecture, a term coined by Robert Sommer (1974), describes architecture which is impermeable, designed to be resistant to human imprint, with no connection to its surrounding neighbourhood. Hard architecture provides little possibility for experimentation, change, or creative involvement with the environment. Hard management is rigid management; it assumes that residents do not want to take responsibility for their environments, or that they are unable to do so. Therefore, maintenance and security can be achieved only by strict regulations or by the operations of paternalistic centralised management.

By contrast, "manageable space" advocates the interplay of "soft" architecture and "soft" management. Housing developments characterised by soft architecture are responsive to residents: instead of a hard resistance to human imprint, the design welcomes and reflects the presence of human beings. The theory is based on the belief that the best sort of security comes from occupants themselves (Sommer 1974). Soft management policies assume that most residents can learn to accept and even seek responsibility and to exercise high degrees of imagination and creativity in participating in their environment.

It is my contention that in public housing estates, because of limited financial and human resources, we can rarely afford a "hard" approach to management and design.

While manageable space urges using many complementary strategies of crime prevention (Perlgut 1979), its components may be summarised as follows: crime prevention, design, management, and housing policies. They are represented as four points on a compass (see Figure A). Historically, the original emphasis has been on crime prevention and design; over time the emphasis shifted to housing policy and management. I will discuss each of the four components in turn.

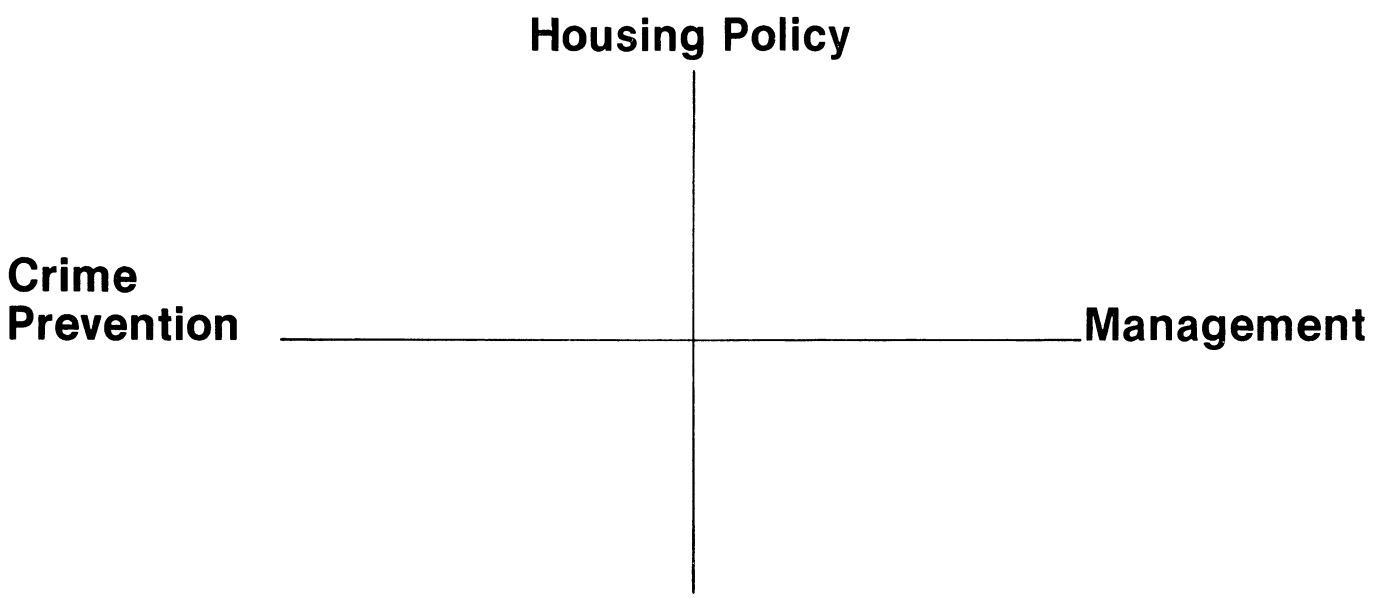

Figure A. Components of Manageable Space

COMPONENT 1 : CRIME PREVENTION

Defining the nature of the crime problems we wish to prevent is one of the most important concerns in planning for safety in housing estates. We should be wary of a one dimensional approach, that is, concentrating only on the criminal act. One helpful tool is a three-dimensional definition of the crime problem developed by William Brill Associates (1976):

1. *Victimisation:* the criminal act against a person, a housing unit, or some property.
2. *The fear of crime:* the degree to which one fears for oneself and one's household and regards the environment as dangerous and threatening.
3. *Altered behaviour:* the extent to which one alters behaviour to improve security.

Victimisation

Victimisation — what actually happens to people — is reflected in our crime statistics, to the extent that crimes are reported. It is the dimension of crime which is most often measured, and may be sub-divided into three categories: personal victimisation; crimes directed against the household; and victimisations involving loss of personal property.

Fear of Crime

Fear of crime is essentially a resident's perception of how dangerous and threatening the environment is. Unfortunately, it is not usually measured except in tenant surveys, although it could be a powerful measure of residential quality or the "livability" of a housing estate. A growing body of research confirms that often such fear, rather than victimisation rates, determines residents' attitudes toward their housing environment. (Also see Becker 1974)

Altered Behaviour

Perhaps a more useful measure is the extent to which residents alter behaviour to improve security. Faced with an external threat, residents will constrain their use of the environment by not going out at night and by not visiting friends. They will also institute measures to limit their vulnerability to attack by using taxis, installing extra locks, and even by acquiring weapons.

Theories of Crime Prevention

It may also be helpful to place public housing crime prevention in a theoretical context. Research has identified four separate categories of crime and delinquency prevention: corrective prevention; punitive prevention; mechanical prevention; and environmental prevention (Angel 1968). Generally, traditional urban planning employs *corrective* prevention: it emphasises the reduction of overcrowding, creation of viable neighbourhoods, rehabilitation of slums, and provision of recreation and community health clinics. Most sociologists and criminologists support this approach, with its "social services" orientation. *Punitive* prevention, the concern primarily of lawyers, police, courts, jails and our legal system, is applicable here insofar as we employ the concept of using police to deter crime. *Mechanical* prevention emphasises hardware (locks, doors, gates, etc.)

Environmental prevention, perhaps the newest strategy, emerged in 1961 with Elizabeth Wood's *Housing Design: A Social Theory.* Her design guidelines aimed at providing low-income tenants with specific places for exercise, formal meetings, casual encounters, and other services. Wood proposed the concept of social control of residential areas by resident surveillance, which had been suggested that same year by Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* Jacobs' book was the first influential work to suggest that active street life could hinder opportunities for crime. In 1968 Shlomo Angel extended the concept by proposing some physical configurations to deter crime and coined the term "environmental prevention" (Angel 1968). Not until Oscar Newman formulated the notion of "defensible space", however, did the new approach to crime prevention begin to receive serious attention (Newman 1972).

None of these authors has ever argued that planning for the security of residential environments can be reduced to a simple formula. Strategies must be tailored to individual problems: one strategy is not inherently better than another. For example, emphasis on a mechanical strategy to the exclusion of others will produce a locked "fortress", where residents may fear to venture out. A balanced strategy for the use of available resources is unfortunately prevented by a general lack of knowledge about crime prevention, including not yet being able to identify all the trade-offs among the available strategies and policies. Nevertheless, successful security planning will most likely incorporate some aspects of punitive, corrective, mechanical and environmental techniques.

COMPONENT 2 : DESIGN

Some social scientists argue that life in a housing estate exhibits a basic pathology which leads residents to deviant behaviour. Part of this pathology has been attributed to the institutional design of many estates. The form of the estate makes the residents highly aware of their own vulnerability and they become cautious in relations with neighbours (Suttles 1970; Rainwater 1966; Rainwater 1970; Montgomery 1966).

Pruitt-Igoe

Pruitt-Igoe, a public housing estate in St. Louis which was finally demolished, is regarded by many as a classic case where design was held accountable in large part for estate failure. An architectural award-winning estate when it was built in the early 1950's, Pruitt-Igoe became a symbol of a "bad design" created without regard to the real users of the project. By the early 1970's its vacancy rate had reached 80 per cent. Interestingly, its design may not have been the worst of its problems. As Roger Montgomery (1977) has argued, Pruit-Igoe was located in an urban renewal wasteland and was never provided with supporting services, such as schools, shops, and recreational facilities. Furthermore, its residents were victims of an official public housing policy of racism, ghettoization, and management brutality. Finally, a changing housing market in St. Louis in the 1960's meant that hundreds of thousands of dwellings became vacant, providing a wide range of housing choices for even the poorest people. Pruitt-Igoe *did* have serious design flaws, but public policy, a changing housing market, and poor management ultimately ruined the estate.

In some ways, Pruitt-Igoe has become a myth which effectively disguises the real crime problems in public housing estates. Many of those are social problems, which despite his original emphasis on design, Oscar Newman readily acknowledges: the social characteristics of a housing estate are stronger predicters of crime than physical design characteristics.

Design Considerations

While crime in housing estates is not caused by bad design *per se*, a poor design can undoubtedly aggravate potential security problems. Recent research has reinforced the importance of design considerations, such as: the definition of territorial zones, surveillance opportunities, proper hardware, provision of community facilities, adequate lighting, controlled access, and the avoidance of unassigned spaces and design "conflicts". Similarly, the neighbourhood characteristics, and location of an estate can significantly influence the estate's "vulnerability." (For details see Brill 1979; Newman 1972; and Cooper Marcus *et al* 1981).

"Defensible Space"

One of the most important theories relating crime prevention and environmental design is Oscar Newman's "defensible

space": a series of design (and management) characteristics which maximise residential control, particularly of crime, in a community. Although the original defensible space research was conducted in high-density urban public housing in the United States (such as New York, St. Louis, and Newark), it has had almost universal popularity, partly because it focuses on the level of the housing estate, not on the massive changes of urban form advocated by Jane Jacobs and Shlomo Angel. Its "empirical" base is another attraction (the theory evolved from mounds of New York City Housing Authority data). The concept successfully incorporates modern sociological and psychological theories, turning them into prescriptive "design guidelines". Finally, the appeal of "defensible space" lies in its inherent conceptual interest: it is well laid out and extensively documented. (See Mayhew 1979).

It is exactly the appeal of "defensible space" which is proving to be its downfall, evidenced, for example, by an alarming trend of describing **all** crime prevention programmes as "defensible space", thereby ignoring the complex interaction of factors outlined by Newman. Housing authorities throughout the world are trying simplified defensible space projects and then discarding the theory after the failure of their poorly planned programmes (Perlgut 1980).

While acknowledging these concerns, I feel the need for even greater caution about defensible space, particularly in Australia. First, some critics claim that Newman's research methodology is unsound (Bottoms 1974, Mayhew 1979), and that not all of the examples are fully proven. Recent research in the United Kingdom (Mawby 1977, Wilson 1978) has revealed the limitations of defensible space in reducing crime. But most importantly for Australia, the scope of the theory is too limited: we need a more comprehensive approach to crime prevention, including social services, the police, and employment programmes, and a wider consideration of social factors.

COMPONENT 3 : MANAGEMENT POLICIES

Because of its front-line position, the management of a housing estate has the most direct and immediate responsibility for security measures. Management influences the safety of the environment, not only by security planning and contact with police and other agencies, but also by its own policies and practices. Among the ways which management can influence crime are the following (Cooper Marcus 1972; Center 1973; Becker 1977):

- *Maintenance.* In a poorly maintained estate new vandalism attracts little attention. Vacant units may also be vandalised by tenants searching for spare parts for their unmaintained units.
- *Response to crime.* If management and police do not respond to crime in a timely manner, tenants will lose faith. This may result in non-reporting of crime and a lack of support for crime-control efforts.
- *Co-ordination with police and other agencies.* Management is responsible for contacting police and other government and social service agencies to co-ordinate security measures.
- *Tenant screening.* Poor tenant selection can result in a high percentage of "problem" families and delinquents.
- *Positioning of population among buildings.* Families with small children should not be housed in buildings with lifts or in the same building as elderly.
- *Tenant organisation.* A viable tenants' group can take the lead in operating a crime prevention programme.
- *Personalisation of units.* Encouraging exterior personalisation of units can help facilitate social interaction and pride in the buildings and neighbourhood and communicate to vandals and criminals that the estate is not an "easy mark".
- *Intervention in neighbour disputes.* Medium- and high-density estates are bound to produce occasional disputes among residents. Management reaction to these problems is of primary importance in the success of these estates.
- *Eviction.* It may be necessary to evict severely disruptive tenants so as to maintain stability on a housing estate.

It is now widely recognised (Wilson 1976) that estate managers, especially resident managers, are key actors in crime prevention in public housing. Therefore, it is important to increase the emphasis currently placed on training programmes for estate managers and tenancy officers.

The role of estate management in Australian public housing is undergoing some major changes, partly because of increases in medium-density low-rise housing estates, which offer a different lifestyle and necessitate different social arrangements between management and tenants and among residents themselves. But estate management is also changing with decreasing housing construction, and with the changing emphasis towards effectively "managing" the existing rental stock. We can only hope that in the future housing estate management will be given the recognition and status that it deserves and needs.

COMPONENT 4 : HOUSING POLICY

Housing policy is the fourth and final component of the "manageable space" theory: all crime prevention programmes should be comprehensive and emerge from an analysis of important policy issues. A good example of a crime prevention programme with this "policy orientation" is the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Urban Initiatives Anti-Crime Program (UIACP). (See HUD 1979). The UIACP is a one-year demonstration to combat crime in public housing estates around the United States. It is funded for $40 million, with 39 public housing authorities participating, and with programmes directed at one or more crime-ridden estates per authority.

HUD has included seven "Program Areas" in the UIACP, and has asked each participating public housing authority to develop a *comprehensive* crime prevention strategy addressing each Program Area. However, HUD has also cautioned that "no one Program Area is necessarily superior to any other" and that housing authorities should avoid undue reliance on any one. The Program Areas are:

1. Improved housing authority *management* of crime prevention, including more and better trained public safety and community service officers.
2. Rehabilitation of facilities to house anti-crime activities and improvement of physical *design* to improve the safety of buildings and spaces.
3. More and improved *tenant organisation* against crime, including patrols, surveillance, education and training of tenants.
4. Increased full and part-time *employment* of tenants, especially for youths and for anti-crime activities, in and around estates.
5. More and improved *services* to combat crime or assist victims and witnesses.
6. Increased use of better trained *police* officers.
7. Stronger linkages with programmes from *local and state government* and other sources which co-target on the estate and the surrounding neighbourhoods.

CONCLUSIONS : CRIME PREVENTION FOR AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC HOUSING

In Australia the relationships among crime prevention and physical and social planning, particularly in new communities, is now readily accepted. The ideas of R.W. Hewison (1979) are representative. Nevertheless, it is also clear that Australia still

looks to overseas research for most of its "environmental crime prevention" theory. Recent research funded by the Criminology Research Council, such as De Gruchy and Hansford's *Crime and Architecture in Brisbane* (1979) and Perlgut and Sarkissian's (1980) crime prevention research at the South Australian Institute of Technology, provide the beginning of an Australian-based pool of knowledge. Further research into crime prevention, especially as it relates to public housing and other low-income communities, is desperately needed, however.

Despite the efforts of the Australian Crime Prevention Council, crime prevention as a field and area of expertise has only slowly gained credibility among town planners, architects, public administrators, and housing managers. Crime prevention handbooks and training for these groups are needed. Similarly, there is a need to recognise management's key role in crime prevention, and to establish general training programmes for more effective and sensitive estate management. Because crime prevention in public housing cannot be undertaken in isolation, we need to develop better co-ordination among public housing, town planning, police, social services, and other agencies concerned with the welfare of the public housing resident. While the police must be involved, programmes for crime prevention in public housing should be initiated by estate managers and residents. We also must recognise that policing in public housing estates is often significantly different from policing in other areas. Therefore, police training programmes may be needed to increase police sensitivity to the needs of residents and to the physical form of housing estates.

Finally, we need to recognise that Australia has different problems and concerns from those of the United States and the United Kingdom (with respect to the rates, causes, and types of crime) in public housing estates and elsewhere. Therefore, we should question wholesale acceptance of defensible space or any other theories or programmes. Rather, we need to start with housing policy and management and analyse our problems in that context. Only then can we proceed to the development of comprehensive and complementary crime prevention programmes.

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