

PLANNING AND CRIME IN CITIES

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Looking at planning literature in preparation for this talk, I was surprised to find how little notice has been taken of the possibility of crime in cities. I should have remembered that modern planning sprang from the belief that an improvement in the physical environment was going to be followed by improved "moral and social" standards. Indeed it is only the critical evaluation of the post-world-war growth in cities and planning which has been going on in the last decade, that makes most of us doubt the cheerful physical determinism of the early theorists and practitioners. After all they determinedly turned away from the blighted century conurbations and built new towns and dormitory suburbs in green acres for like minded people who wanted to escape from the great wen. It was only when the new towns and in particular urban renewal areas, accommodated forcibly dislocated and relocated population that the inadequacy of the assumptions about people's interests, needs and lifestyles began to show.

Before proceeding to discuss these I want to enter a caveat. It is a part of the "received wisdom" that our large cities are riddled with crime which grows daily making them ever-more dangerous due to the alienation and consequent indifference to others of city dwellers. A cursory recording of social history in most ages shows that crimes against property and persons are virtually inseparable from human settlements. Also while socio-economic conditions shape the types of crimes and the provenance of the perpetrators, the larger the gathering of humans in one place the greater the opportunities for criminal offences and the number of likely offenders. Unfortunately the historical and literary evidence of criminality in past ages lacks comparable statistical base to present day information. There is also a strong tendency to idealise the past particularly the pre-industrial one. And the revolution in the instantaneous dissemination of news combined with the stress on the personally sensational (the so called human element of news) makes us more aware of current crisis than our parents and grandparents. Nevertheless, I doubt if criminality is on the increase apart from the usual cyclical variations. There is certainly very much more research, investigations and description of criminal and/or deviant activity with or without the undertone of moral indignation and leading to the advocacy of very different policies.

One such advocacy centres on physical means of crime prevention based on research in U.S.A. — mainly in public housing of New York Housing Authority, but supplemented by information from other planned developments, some of them private. "Defensible Space" by Oscar Newman concentrates on design strategies for the safety of dwelling areas of the poor and middle income groups, since the rich buy their protection through guards and sophisticated technology. This is only a partial admission that the whole city may have to remain unsafe. Actually Newman rationalises his concern for the safety of housing by quoting Lee Rainwater's study on "Fear and the House-as-Haven in the Lower Class". On one hand this allows him to prove that safety in and around the dwelling areas is a universal concern cutting across class and cultural differences. On the other hand he expresses a hope that a feeling of safety and the development of responsibility for one's own little area may carry over to the rest of the city.

Newman's strategies are basically defensive and commonsense. He advocates:-

- (i) Maximum visibility for areas which are most prone to harbour attackers e.g. stairwells, lift lobbies, lifts, entrances, etc. This means that such areas should be glazed, well lit and placed so that as many residents and passers-by as possible can keep them under observation. Where this is clearly impossible e.g. in lifts, he advocates permanent closed circuit T.V. surveillance.
- (ii) In defiance of the conventional architectural and planning wisdom which stresses the private, the leafy and the picturesque and turns away from the mixed traffic street to placing the access to dwellings from well planted internal green spaces, Newman advocates placing entrances so that passers-by and drivers-by have them fully in view. The green spaces instead of being inviting public walks at the same time as giving access to private housing should, in his view, clearly delineate public footpaths and semi-public and totally private areas. In design terms this ranges from changing levels between the footpath and the more private landscaped areas to actual fencing in of the spaces. The return to fences — some of them six foot ones rather than merely symbolic is something of a revolution in planning and landscaping thought in the U.S.A. in particular.
- (iii) Finally — Newman turns to some social factors. He advocates the avoidance of stigma which large public housing estates tend to acquire by blending their design with surrounding private housing. To develop a better sense of communality he advocates grouping of actual housing units' doors in district small enclaves. Furthermore he condemns without much ado high rise design (above six floors) particularly with long double loaded corridors. Experience in much of public housing in the U.S.A. and in Britain shows that families in particular, are quite unwilling to live high. Newman also points to the greater fear and alienation where anonymity develops because of the impossibility of knowing all one's neighbours even by sight. In such circumstances a stranger wandering in the shared areas is not likely to be challenged, not only because of fear but also because of the impossibility of disproving any assertion of residential rights which renders intervention both futile and socially unacceptable.

Thus far Newman's strategies definitely seem to improve the defensibility of **low cost** housing though such design features as closed circuit T.V. might be economically beyond public housing authorities. Also the slight decrease of site densities due to the use of lower buildings, even when balanced by less open space (that is less landscaped public open space but more private and semi-private controlled open space) may prove economically unacceptable in high land cost areas.

But Newman's greatest deficiency lies in the lack of any general social analysis. Taking the socio-economic relationships for granted nowhere shows more deficient than in his helplessness in the face of the behaviour of adolescents and the young in general. He assumes that they seek . . . "dissociation from physical neighbour" . . . (p.101) and states:

"It should be mentioned, however, that these are examples where the proximity of certain types of institutions act to im-

pair the safety of a neighbourhood. A recurring problem of juxtaposition results from the close proximity of housing projects with high schools and junior colleges.”

And he ends the paragraph with:

“Where it may not always be possible, or even desirable to intentionally avoid this sort of juxtaposition, it is certainly feasible, to design the site plan of the project so that access to apartment buildings is not from those streets directly opposite schools.” (p. 111)

This may be useful to the families and middle aged people whose concern for security Newman seeks to articulate, but even the young live somewhere. In fact most of them live with their families and cannot be summarily dismissed from the block of flats, the suburb and the human race until they acquire family or age status and with it the “proper” regard for security in and around the dwelling.

Nevertheless this view of adolescence is not peculiar to Newman. Bernard Davies in “The Life of Adolescence” (New Society, 20.3.75) points out that despite the importance of this period in the life of the growing up individual, society as a whole prefers to emphasise the transience and the deviance often very superficial e.g. in clothes or hair length of this age group. This emphasis tends to exacerbate the division and stress between the adolescents and the adults, the results of which I shall touch on later.

To put Newman’s defensive measures in their proper perspective as palliatives it is necessary to examine the ‘world taken for granted’ of his social surroundings. This examination will be of necessity very brief.

To begin with I shall be concerned only with crimes against person and property and that subsection of such crimes which is generally ascribed to adolescents and young males in particular: vandalism. It is true that there is an almost universal condemnation of such crimes in print, from the pulpit, at school and even in private conversations. But what are the values transmitted wordlessly by the socio-economic organisation of our society?

To begin with much importance is attached to the acquisition of material display goods. Not only one’s circumstances are supposedly improved by a mass of new gadgets, but one actually acquires personal status through being the first with the mostest.

The value of competition, of acquisition, of personal gain are all inherent in such stress on consumption. Moreover these values are strengthened by the organisation of work and the meaning we ascribe to it in society.

The post-industrial-revolution organisation of production not only separated home from work (a circumstance nicely articulated in use zone separation in town planning) but it virtually cut off women and children (yes, even the growing ones) from the world of “real concerns” i.e. earning for both necessities and the conspicuous consumption.

Of course not all women or even all children could afford to stay at home and rely on support from their bread winner. But this decided separation of home and work not only introduced ambivalence into women’s role as wage earners but made it harder for them and for the children to learn their way about in this remote world of production.

Moreover the organisation of this world of production put much emphasis on the workers’ mobility and flexibility in acceptance of challenges and changes. In the ‘Organisation Man’ William Whyke talked of executives severing ties with their relations and communities of origins, being prepared to move often in order to gain promotion, knowing themselves in competition with all the others and owing loyalty not to people but to the Organisation — until another organisation made them a better offer. Not much stress on the intrinsic value of a human being as a person in all of this or on loyalty and duty to

one’s family or friends. One might object that this applies only to a small percentage of working population who are climbing up their career ladders while the great majority of breadwinners are stuck in mediocre or downright dull jobs in one place for a lifetime. But being a small cog in a large machine with no autonomy or power over one’s circumstances and with a real consciousness of being interchangeable with others does not convey the conviction of the value of the individual either.

Taken together with the emphasis on consumption, which incidentally is quite essential to our organic sation of production, the system clearly conveys the high value of material goods and the low value of individuals. To these must be added the potential for violence always present in unequal power relationships. The feelings of individual powerlessness which most people experience at work and in their dealings with bureaucracies whether state or corporate, can lend as easily to anomic withdrawal as to violence depending on individual circumstances. But violence in unequal power relationships predates our present production and political organisations. The position of women and children vis a vis their males was always one of potential exposure to violence whether the man wanted to assert his owner rights or relieve his own frustration and help less in the outside world. Indeed the analyses of this situation, its exposure and the attempts to intervene before serious bodily harm or even death result, may in time introduce a change into the situations.

Till now, however, if the value of an individual human being does not amount to much, that of a woman or a child is too low that rapes or killings have been known to be used to teach the man who owned them a lesson, the humanity of the victim does not enter into such transactions at all. Nor does it enter into some of the latest advertising trends which picture human victims maimed or killed in the headlong pursuit by others of some consumption item. The implicit message is there: things are valuable — humans are not.

“Do as I say and not as I do” was never a very good teaching method. Yet this is a message of our society to all, but particularly to the young. Some of them internalise without difficulty the double standard inherent in this message and its corollary “do what you will — just do not get caught”. Others find it more difficult for various reasons of their individual situations as persons, in the family or in society. John Kraus in “Classification of Juvenile Offenders and Ecological Factors” (Aust. Journal of Social Issues Vol. 12, No. 3, 1977) proposed an interesting division of juvenile offenders which gave somewhat more details than the usual ones. Briefly, crimes were committed by low academic achievers from middle class homes who had a history of neurological disturbances (whatever this may mean in reality) including attempted suicides. These young people often came from broken homes, tended to live by themselves and committed their crimes alone. However the majority of crimes by boys from poor and/or working class homes (Kraus calls them low educational status) were committed in company. These adolescents come preponderantly from intact families, lived at home and tended to have higher academic achievement than the other group though still below the level of skills required by today’s society. This group sounds remarkably like the north of England adolescents described by many researchers but perhaps most recently and sympathetically by Paul Corrigan in “Out with the lads: the dialectics of doing nothing” (New Society 5 July, 1979). Corrigan talks of working class youth drifting around the streets to avoid grown ups, aimless by getting into trouble which may start from things as simple as playing ball in the street or smashing a milk bottle with a kick, but which escalate into a full scale trouble with “the law” or fights with other groups. This is not even

Whyke's street corner society of gangs so usually romanticised in "West Side Story". The prevalent feelings in this group is simple boredom arranged by the filling in of time with one's peers. In the book from which Corrigan's article was taken, not yet available in Australia (Schooling the Smash Street Kids, MacMillan 1979), the situation of the adolescents was aggravated by the total lack of employment in their town. Once even the promise of work was withdrawn the whole validation of social organisation, however dubious, went with it. The possibilities of this happening in our own society are quite real particularly when one remembers the differences in youth unemployment between the better suburbs and the poor ones, which returns us to the city, geographic locations and ways of combating crime within it.

It must be obvious by now that most physical design defences against crime are merely local palliatives. Moreover the inherent inequalities of city locations which are roughly positively correlated with the status and affluence of the areas tend to apply to crime prevention also. It is perfectly sensible to call for better observability of dangerous spots. It is only common sense to avoid planting of "romantic" paths between say public transport terminus and residences. It is most important that public transport be provided at all hours manned by responsible employees who can be called upon by passengers in trouble rather than by unresponsive computerised ticket machines. The facts of the matter are that all these measures cost money and as long as the real value of humans is low or nil precautions will be taken privately by those who can afford it rather than out of the public purse on behalf of everybody. At the moment I can foresee these words adding an argument to those developers who do not wish to contribute to the provision of parks or open spaces against the environmentalists who want some open spaces to help clear the air, delight the eye and soothe the mind. And this certainly was not my intention.

The issue resolves itself into three possible ways of actions and we ought to count the real as opposed to merely short time monetary cost of each.

There is the possibility of repression. This is being advocated by those who feel that punishment is the only deterrent. Without repeating all the tedious arguments for and against this view, I would only point out that paying for and monitoring a police force (among many other factors) capable of defending a really large city from crime is very likely beyond our purse unless we add to it eventually the curfew and other social limitations on all citizens inherent in heavily regulated societies. Whether we shall consider this a small price for internal security only time will tell. I, personally, hope that the price will be considered excessive.

To continue as we do now by introducing piecemeal changes in various areas also carries a heavy price. It means that the most disadvantaged areas get their protection only when the government in power decides to invest in public

spending. Otherwise it comes down to private protection by private means and underlines the inequalities in the city and the state. In both these eventualities nothing is done about the real message of our socio-economic structure of the cheapness of human life.

The last possibility is to include the values we pay lip service to in our everyday life and to evaluate and change socio-economic organisations with them in mind. Perhaps it might start from as little as changing the organisation of work to let teams decide on their output and ways of work which is already being tried elsewhere. It may be that in the end we shall not count efficiency as applying to cost of output of production only but include in it human autonomy and sense of dignity which now count for nothing. Certainly we shall have to make good the notice of personhood and autonomy of women and children. All of which might invalidate our simplistic and short term notion of profit. And it might even change the structure of cities more radically than the piecemeal reorganisations of which planners are now capable. I do not underestimate the resistance to change which exists in all societies as against material possessions, particularly in one like ours which manages to provide comfortable material circumstances for the bulk of its members.

There are, nevertheless, signs of deterioration. The growth of unemployment is one of them, and a potent one, the threatened loss of energy source is another. The worry about growing criminality is a symptom, just as the concern for environment and the fear of the growth of science and technology. All of these points to the possibility and even imminence of some changes. It is, therefore, a right for statements on the direction in which changes ought to occur.

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