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Preventing Crime Through Informed Urban Design

By Dr. Kelly W. Sundberg

Over the past seven decades, the world has experienced an unprecedented increase in urbanisation. Today, over 50 per cent of the world's population resides in cities – with most post-industrialised nations having over 75 per cent of their citizens living within metropolitan centres. Without question, increased urbanisation has profoundly impacted individuals, communities, economies, nation states, and the natural environment. When coupled with an equally significant rise in global migration and globalisation, cities around the world have truly become cosmopolitan centres that emulate what Canadian philosopher Herbert Marshall McLuhan coined as the “global village”.

With rapid increases in urbanisation, globalisation, and global migration, have come new challenges in maintaining public safety and security. Although global crime rates have generally declined, threats associated with terrorism and transnational crime have become increasingly pronounced. Likewise, with many cities experiencing hyper-gentrification as a result of increasing population density, concerns related to property crime and violence have become more evident. To ensure public safety and security in today's cosmopolitan centres, it is important for government and corporate leaders to extend beyond their current policing and security efforts by considering innovative new means to prevent crime and ensure public safety – in particular, considering how the design of public and private spaces can improve safety and security.



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Over a century of research supports the supposition that crime can be reduced through informed urban design. By identifying how the physical environment impacts individual behaviour, urban planners and developers can create (or redevelop) urban spaces that deter potential offenders from committing crime. Moreover, by designing urban spaces with the aim of promoting public safety and security, citizens become less fearful of crime and more focussed on community development. As a result, cities become more liveable cosmopolitan centres with vibrant economies and engaged citizens.

Historic Evolution Of Environmental Crime Prevention

Over a century of research supports the supposition that urban centres that are purposely planned, designed, constructed, and landscaped to promote stewardship, typically realise fewer incidents of crime. This research also suggests that well-planned urban centres generally are more liveable and economically viable. Key to successful planning is attention to sustained maintenance of urban centres. Well-maintained urban spaces promote social order, resulting in citizens identifying and confronting those who threaten the wellbeing of those living, working, and visiting the environment.

Emerging at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, professors Ernest Burgess and Robert Park were some of the first contemporary scholars to explore how city planning influenced social interaction. In their pioneering work *The City* (1925), Park and Burgess examined the nexus between economics and urban ecology; suggesting that competition for urban space and resources results in people of similar socio-economic characteristics gravitating into 'natural areas' within their urban environment. Park and Burgess argued this competition led to a division between urban community and neighbourhood – eventually resulting in conflict to develop among differing social groups. Known as *Concentric Zone Theory*, Park and Burgess observed that unique socio-

economic factors, present within various 'zones' of a city, resulted in distinctive social problems and crime emerging.

From the 1920s through 1940s, Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay expanded on the work of Park and Burgess (reflective of Émile Durkheim's 1893 theory of *Anomie*) by exploring the relationship between neighbourhoods and delinquency. In their study of Chicago, Shaw and McKay observed socially disorganised communities – where citizens generally were poor and had limited economic and social support – often had higher crime rates. Based on this observation, Shaw and McKay suggested neighbourhoods with high social cohesion and attainable economic opportunities typically had lower levels of crime. In her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs echoed Shaw and McKay by suggesting mindfully planned urban neighbourhoods could aid in promoting public safety. Jacobs argued that high-density and mixed-use urban centres that were well-maintained often enjoyed low incidents of crime and were perceived as being highly desirable places to live, work and visit.

Drawing from the works of Burgess, Park, Shaw, McKay and others, C. Ray Jeffery of Florida State University became one of the most influential figures in environmental crime prevention by identifying how architectural and landscape design could deter potential offenders from committing crime. In his book, *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* (1971), Jeffery argued crime could be prevented by creating urban spaces with well defined boundaries, affectively controlled access points, well-maintained landscapes and structures, and high visibility. In his 1972 book, *Defensible Spaces*, New York Architect Oscar Newman took a similar perspective to Jeffery by identifying urban residential developments that were designed to promote a sense of stewardship among residences, innately become more secure. Newman argued that criminals avoid targeting properties having high degrees of ownership and control, and that urban spaces can be designed so

as to cause criminals to feel exposed and vulnerable. While Jeffery and Newman have both influenced modern urban design, since the mid-1990s, Jeffery's notion of CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) has clearly emerged as the more commonly applied environmental crime prevention approach used by urban planners, developers, and security professionals.

As with CPTED, the *Broken Window Theory* has become a staple component in urban crime prevention efforts. Introduced in 1982 by Political Scientists James Wilson and George Kelling, the *Broken Windows Theory* contends vandals will continuously target buildings in disrepair, and if unaddressed, crime will escalate. Wilson and Kelling argue the only way to prevent escalating crime is to promptly repair and improve dilapidated urban sites. Resonating the work of Newman and Jacobs, the *Broken Windows Theory* proposes well-maintained urban environments innately deter potential criminals from committing offences. In short, the importance of property maintenance and citizen engagement is a central theme in most environmental crime prevention approaches and theories.

Contemporary Evolution Of Environmental Crime Prevention

Despite criticism that environmental crime prevention efforts do little more than displace crime, there is no disputing well-planned, well-designed, and well-maintained urban spaces result in more secure and vibrant communities. For nearly half a century, criminologists and security professionals from around the world have repeatedly shown environmental crime prevention approaches as highly effective means to reducing crime. Yet, despite the success of environmental crime prevention efforts, there is still much that can be improved upon.

Viewed through a multidisciplinary lens, social scientists, security professionals, and urban planners and developers have identified that traditional environmental crime prevention approaches are often overly subjective and





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applied inconsistently. Groups such as the SAFE Design Council (a Canadian based not-for-profit organisation focussed on achieving security through functional environmental design) have expanded upon traditional environmental crime prevention theories and approaches by exploring how desired architectural and landscape design can better enhance security while also reducing the public's fear of crime. By using a standardised approach in the assessment and design of urban spaces, the SAFE Design Council suggests environmental crime prevention efforts become more effective and consistent. Likewise, when desired urban design elements are used to enhance the physical security of a property – as opposed to using more obtrusive and overt fortification features – the balance between functionality and security can be optimised. Acknowledging the success Kim Rosmo at Texas State University has had in using geo-spatial technologies to identify and even predict crime, the SAFE Design Council advocates for the development of new technologies aimed at improving how environmental crime prevention efforts are applied.

Conclusion

While contemporary environmental crime prevention theories and approaches repeatedly have shown to promote public safety and reduce crime, there remains much space for improvement. With global rates of urbanisation continuing to rise, resulting in most major urban centres experiencing high increased levels of gentrification, the demand for new and innovative approaches to environmental crime prevention will undoubtedly intensify. In addition, today's cosmopolitan centres have become vital areas where civil society is evolving and our global economy is developing. Considering the importance modern urban centres play economically, socially, and politically, it is critical that leaders for both the public and private sectors meaningfully invest in the advancement and promotion of public safety and security. One easily implemented and economical approach to achieve enhanced public safety and security is applying contemporary environmental crime

prevention theories and strategies in the development and revitalisation of urban centres. Not only will today's cosmopolitan centres become safer and more secure, they will ultimately become more socially and economically vibrant.

Dr. Kelly W. Sundberg is Department Chair and Associate Professor at Mount Royal University (Calgary, Alberta, Canada). In addition to his teaching role, Dr. Sundberg is the President and CEO of the International Institute of Criminal Justice Research Ltd, and was appointed as the 2011 alternate non-government organization (NGO) representative for the Academy of Criminal Justice Science (ACJS) to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. He is also a former member of the Academy of Criminal Justice Science and a former Immigration Enforcement Officer with the Canada Border Services Agency where he investigated violations of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), with a focus on the location of persons wanted on immigration warrants.

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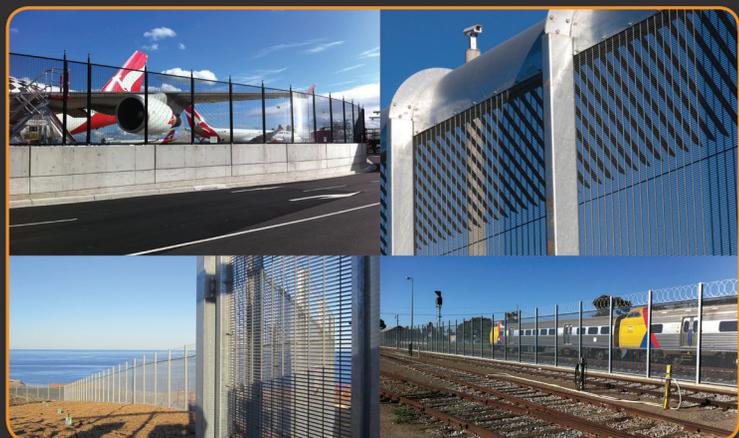


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