



200008795

REDISTRIBUTING DANGER

Except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the copyright owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a licence from Copyright Agency Limited

Enclosure and encounter in urban design

This paper is about the relations of safety and danger to urban design. I am neither a criminologist, nor a sociologist; whatever I might be able to add to this debate comes from an urban design perspective — from trying to understand the broader relations of urban form to social behaviour. While street-crime is one variety of such behaviour in public space, my interest is in the effects of urban design on the full gamut of urban experience. I begin from the view that the urban public realm needs to be at once safe, diverse, accessible, vital, creative and democratic. All of these are necessary, and none are sufficient. I will first briefly explore the relations between urban form and urban safety before opening up some broader questions. What is the relation of urban safety to these equally necessary values? How are the dominant forms of current urban development transforming the relations between them? And how should local government agencies manage their responsibility for safety in urban design?

Determinism

It is now widely accepted that there is a strong relationship between the design of urban space and all forms of public behaviour, crime and violence among them. However, there is rather less agreement about the nature of this relationship — the degree to which urban form 'determines' behaviour. In design practice, 'determinism' has become a dirty word. The idea that good buildings could produce a good society has haunted design practice ever since Le Corbusier

proclaimed architecture as the liberating alternative to social revolution. While the dreams of liberation through architecture are very much alive, determinists are widely denigrated as 'social engineers'. I would suggest some middle ground here — the physical environment cannot cause behaviour, but neither is it in any way neutral (Franck 1984). I prefer to use some terms borrowed from the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984): built form 'structures' social behaviour through a combination of 'enabling' and 'constraining'. At the most banal level a wall constrains movement and enables privacy, but it does not cause any kind of behaviour. Built form can prevent things from happening in a given place, or it can enable them to happen, but it cannot determine anything.

From this view crime and violence are social practices, based in social relations that are mediated by urban form. Controls over land use, the design of urban space and public access to urban places can indeed contribute to safety and danger in the city. However, the deployment of urban design as a means of 'designing out crime' is highly problematic (Bell Planning Assoc. 1995). Urban form mediates a certain distribution of crime and violence, design interventions may re-distribute such practices and may do so with positive effects. However, the idea that one might solve what is essentially a social problem with a physical intervention cannot in my view be sustained.

Retreat and enclosure

Having said this I want to talk about some

different ways in which urban form mediates safety and danger. The first of these is the ancient response to put either walls or distance between ourselves and that which we perceive as a threat. In urban design terms the nineteenth century retreat from the city is a paradigm case. Public space was regarded as both masculine and dangerous in the burgeoning industrial city — places of crime and danger from which women and children were protected and excluded (Wilson 1991). This was the first phase of retreat to the suburbs as a safe place for family life. The dangers of the city were dealt with by an anti-urban impulse. I mention this here, not to criticise suburbia, but because I think we are still dealing with this attitude to safety in urban space and this ideal of a retreat from it.

In an enormously influential book *Defensible Space*, published in 1972, Oscar Newman focussed on considerable evidence of crime in the newly created zones of inner-city public housing estates where a kind of no-man's-land emerged between the street and the front door. Newman's claim was that such crime could be 'prevented' through designs that encouraged a sense of control or responsibility over such space. This has tended to lead to the enclosure of such a zone, wherein strangers will be recognised. There was clearly some substance in Newman's critique — modernism had eradicated crucial zones of social control along the privacy continuum from the public street to the private house. However, Newman was severely criticised for his methods, his

determinism and for opening up a raft of prejudice about public housing and the associated high-rise forms. His work has been picked up as an agenda for a more general enclosure, retreat and privatization (Coleman 1985; Greenberg & Rohe 1984). As with the retreat to the suburbs, danger in public space is dealt with by separating oneself from that which is strange or different.

This tendency towards enclosure is as old as the walled city. It is evident in the suburban cul-de-sac where the ideal is that of a like-minded community, protected from through traffic, surrounding a shared space where strangers will be noticed and watched. It is apparent in the apartment house with its intercom or doorman. And it reaches an apotheosis in the enclosed and gated 'community', to which I will return.

Encounter

I first want to contrast this tendency towards retreat and enclosure with a second critique of how safety and danger are mediated by urban design. This can be seen in the work of Jane Jacobs whose seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was first published in 1965. This was also an attack on modernist planning, in this case a broader critique of the ideology which divided the city into zones according to function, destroying the vitality and diversity of street life together with informal modes of social control. Jacobs argued for a mixing of functions that would maintain street life at different times of the day and week. This was contrasted against places, such as exclusively financial districts, which became dead on evenings and weekends. There are many strands to this argument, but the argument about safety was that the volume of street life and a relation of buildings to the street which maintained 'passive surveillance' or 'eyes on the street' was a highly effective form of control of anti-social behaviour.

In this idea of passive surveillance there was some overlap between Jacobs and Newman, but the big difference was the encouragement of, even reliance on, the encounter with strangers. Jacobs recognised urban vitality as dependent on a highly permeable or 'ringy' urban structure with short blocks and multiple connections; this is the structural opposite of the enclosure model. The more recent work of Bill Hillier on 'spatial syntax' leads in a similar direction: a ringy

urban spatial structure which encourages strangers but controls them by adjacency to entries and windows. In Hillier's view: "strangers police the space, while inhabitants police the strangers" (Hillier & Hanson 1984: 18). One is not protected from contact with strangers, indeed such contact is seen as protective.

Tree vs Rhizome

I now want to broaden this discussion a little with a link to a seminal paper by Christopher Alexander (1965) entitled 'A City is not a Tree'. In another attack on modernist planning, the metaphor of the 'tree' is linked to the attempt to order the city hierarchically, the top-down desire for control. The tree has branches or zones of enclosure hierarchically ordered through a central stem. Alexander's concerns were for urban vitality rather than safety — cities will be killed if they are treated like trees since they rely on high levels of connectivity and chance. This idea can be linked to more recent work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (Karatani 1995, Deleuze 1985) who utilizes the metaphor of another kind of non-tree: the rhizome, a highly adaptive root-like plant which sends roots downwards and leafy shoots upwards. The rhizome is a metaphor for forms of life which move both horizontally and vertically, and in a fragmented or nomadic rather than hierarchic manner. They flourish under conditions that have not been created for them; growing roots and shoots in the interstices of some larger order. Rhizomes cannot easily be killed because they have no tap root and can reproduce from the smallest fragment.

The internet is rhizomatic in this sense with no single locus of control, full of junk and opportunity. The best and worst of ideas migrate around the globe. The most creative corporations, communities and institutions have such rhizomatic qualities and structures; and to return to my topic, so do the best of cities. Regardless of attempts to impose order on urban life, good cities have a capacity to enable diverse forms of life to shoot and take root, to migrate and sprout again. But crime and violence are also rhizomatic, as are the many informal practices of maintaining urban safety. All of this leads me to the key dilemma:

How to render the city safe without the kind of totalizing control that also kills off the diversity, accessibility, vitality and creativity of urban life?

What is a city?

This question takes us back to some rather basic questions about what a city is, and about the nature of urban life. The term 'city' shares a root with the terms 'civil', 'citizen' and 'civilized'. The idea of the 'polis' (which is Greek for city) shares its meaning with 'polite', 'politics' and 'police'. The term 'urban' comes from the Latin *urbanus*, meaning 'courteous'. The very idea of the city is based in the construction of a space wherein notions of civility, politeness and courtesy mediate behaviour. Each of these terms implies a respect for difference, the city is the place where we encounter strangers, where we learn to live with differences of class, race and political viewpoint.

Here I would refer to the work of Richard Sennett and a string of books from his *Uses of Disorder* (1973) to the recent *Flesh and Stone* (1996). For Sennett the unstructured face to face encounter with difference, with strangers, is necessary to civilized human development. The somewhat anarchic diversity of functions, people and activities is what stimulates the development of culture, art and identity. We discover and construct who we are in the encounter and contrast with what is 'other' to our given identity. By contrast the fear of and retreat from difference leads to a stunting of identity and to a retreat to purified ideals of a closed community.

I have sketched here two kinds of mediation of safety and danger in urban space that I would characterise loosely as the 'enclosure' model and the 'encounter' model. In my view, while forms of retreat and enclosure are understandable and necessary within limits, the encounter model is a far more sophisticated model for urban safety. Indeed it is the only model which is truly sustainable, urban, civil and civilized. My limited understanding of public policy suggests that the best of these ideas have percolated from the research into public policy documents which are now replete with at least the rhetoric of 'eyes on the street', 'natural surveillance', 'permeability', 'functional mix' and 'urban villages'. But I would add that they are also replete with the corporate newspeak wherein citizens are becoming 'customers' and public places are packaged and marketed with icons as logos. While there is a great deal of good urban design work proceeding, it has become a difficult struggle since the market pulls us strongly towards the

private enclosure model for our dominant forms of urban development. I want to briefly consider three proliferating urban development types from the viewpoint of urban safety: the shopping mall, the commercial office tower and the gated housing enclave.

The private shopping mall

The enclosed retail environment of the private shopping mall is the most popular and successful new building type of the second half of the twentieth century (Crawford 1992, Garreau 1991, Shields 1989, Gottdiener 1995). There are many dimensions to this success but safety is a primary one. The mall constructs a safe and predictable realm within an external world rendered dangerous by both crime and cars. The mall is a clean and highly designed place in contrast to a sometimes derelict context. While there is some crime in the mall, there is little fear of crime. All signs of difference and eccentricity are eradicated with management control over behaviour and even over clothes which are "likely to create a disturbance" (Beckett 1994). The mall offers the illusion of a vital public life and harmonious community — a stable and sheltered sense of enclosure. Its meaning is constructed in opposition to the perceived dereliction, danger and alienation of the public realm. Indeed the more the public places of our cities decline in quality and safety, the greater the relative advantage of the private mall.

The tower

The commercial office tower is not necessarily an example of the enclosure model. There is no inherent problem with tall buildings, up to certain limits. Yet beyond about 50 metres, towers tend to become vertical enclaves especially when combined with large parking garages (Dovey 1992). This creates a zone where the inhabitants arrive and leave via the car park reducing the need to use the street for access and thereby weakening the safety component of street life vitality. The need for parking at ground level often results in a street frontage with empty foyers, blank walls and black holes accessing parking dungeons. Beyond a certain scale the corporate tower produces streetscapes with less street life and with-out eyes on the street. As it grows higher the tower form becomes progressively isolated from the city — a vertical enclave.

The gated 'community'

The gated housing enclave, of which we have seen few thus far in Australia, thrives in the US where it is estimated that about 8 million people have now retreated to gated enclosures (Blakely & Snyder 1997: 85, Ellin 1997, McKenzie 1994). The motive is a mix of lifestyle, social class and security against crime. It is no accident that gated communities proliferate under conditions of social inequity in societies such as the US and Indonesia. One of Australia's notorious 1980s developers once argued: "Sanctuary Cove is an island of civilization in a violent world, and we have taken steps to ensure it remains so". Note the absurd idea that it is 'civilized' to retreat from 'civic' space. As with the mall, the market advantage of the gated enclave relies on the denigration of public space and the stimulation of paranoia — a paranoia which then flourishes in private zones of safety.

The private city

Each of these urban types gains a certain market advantage from the deterioration of the public environment, to which they then contribute. Nowhere have I seen this more apparent than in Los Angeles and Jakarta, both sites of major urban riots over the past few years. In his 1991 book *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis described Los Angeles as a city polarised into islands of safety in a dangerous sea of race and class division. He described an obsession with security and a retreat from public space: "as the walls have come down in Eastern Europe", he argued, "they are being erected all over Los Angeles" (Davis 1991: 228). No reader could have been surprised by the riots that soon followed.

Likewise in Jakarta during the 1980s and 90s a newly wealthy middle class began systematically insulating themselves from an impoverished and dangerous public realm. An extraordinary proliferation of towers, malls and housing enclaves connected by a network of private toll-roads was layered onto the old city. The popular mode of private transport is 4-wheel-drive type vehicles raised above the traffic with darkened windows, reflecting the broader retreat from public space.

These enclosed projects are also merging into larger hybrids that mesh work and leisure, production and consumption into private 'cities'. Before

the economic crash there were proposals in South-East Asia for enclaves of up to 30,000 hectares where one would never need to enter public space. A smaller version of such a private city may be developing on the Melbourne docklands where public land is offered for private developments of up to 40 hectares. While it is too early to cast a final judgement here, the high degree of secrecy and the market-driven ideology indicates that the levels of private control and enclosure may be high. The City of Melbourne is rightly concerned about having an economic competitor on its doorstep, but the social consequences could be even more profound.

Safety and security are paramount considerations within these emerging zones of private enclosure, but their broader effects on the safety and security of the public realm are highly problematic. The US experience is that those who have invested substantially in private safety will not willingly also fund public safety. Responsibility for the city is abandoned in what Robert Reich (1992: 270) has termed the 'secession of the successful' — a secession both from social problems and from collective tax responsibilities. Thus the enclosure model, beyond a certain scale, is a form of urban development that redistributes public danger in a manner that diminishes our collective willingness and capacity to deal with it.

This redistribution also occurs within public space where urban design is deployed to move the signs of social division and failure into invisible locations. Surveillance cameras, outdoor sprinklers and so-called 'bum proof' benches can be deployed to marshal the homeless or unwanted into spaces where they will not be noticed. Fences, lights and cameras can be used to shift injecting drug users into someone else's toilet, laneway or suburb. But since urban form does not cause homelessness, social division or drug use, they cannot be eradicated by moving them around. And notice how easily the division between danger and difference disappears; we move seamlessly from the production of safety to the production of sameness.

This leads to two important questions about the use of the physical environment as a tool in crime control. First, if we are using the enclosure model, then to what extent are we redistributing danger from the rich to the poor? Are we exacerbating the gap between them; stimulating envy

and resentment; constructing a seed-bed for a more dangerous city? Second, to what extent are we conflating danger with difference, saturating the city with the totalizing control of the shopping mall.

This second question leads me back to the positive imperative of urban design to nourish the creativity and vitality of urban life. Safety is necessary to urban life, but paradoxically, so is danger. In aesthetic theory there is a long-standing distinction between the 'beautiful' and the 'sublime'. While the 'beautiful' gives us pleasure by submitting to our gaze, the 'sublime' is associated with a sense of awe in the presence of that which overwhelms us. While we covet the beautiful, the sublime is a daring pleasure based in a proximity to danger. The great urbanist and philosopher Walter Benjamin suggests that the primary attractions of the city are linked to the sublime (Savage 1995). This is what attracts teenagers — the sense of immensity, of losing oneself in the urban throng, can be exhilarating and liberating. 'Losing oneself' entails re-inventing oneself. While one mall advertises its theme park concept as all the urban thrills without the ills, this is surely a false hope. The exhilaration of being on the edge of danger is a part of what urban life is about. It is at the limits of safety that we learn to rely on our wits. This is how we learn 'responsibility' in the older sense of the 'ability to respond'. The riskiness of the city is inherent to a vital urbanity.

One test for a good city lies in the capacity to walk the streets in safety — day or night, rich or poor, male or female, black or white, old or young. But another test lies in the capacity for all its citizens to gain access to the overwhelming vitality, creativity and diversity of urban life. The task is not to choose between, but rather to reconcile, these imperatives. It is one of understanding, managing and engaging with safety and danger in a creative and civilized manner. The struggle against the privatization and tranquilization of public space will be a long one. But the stakes for future generations are high and we will all be judged on the kind of city we bequeath them. ■

REFERENCES:

- Alexander, C 1965 'A city is not a tree', *Architectural Forum*, April: 58-62 & May: 58-61. Reprinted in LeGates, R & Stout, F (eds) 1996 *The City Reader*, Routledge, London.
- Beckett, A 1994 'The safe way to shop', *Good Weekend*, May 7: 34-38.
- Bell Planning Associates & Gaston, G 1995 *Crime, safety and urban form*, Dept. of Housing and Regional Development, Urban Futures Research Program, AGPS, Canberra
- Blakely, E & Snyder, M 1997 'Divided we fall', in Ellin, N (ed) *Architecture of Fear*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York.
- Coleman, A 1985 *Utopia on Trial*, Hilary Shipman, London.
- Crawford, M 1992 'The world in a shopping mall', in M Sorkin (ed.) *Variations on a Theme Park*, Hill and Wang, New York.
- Davis, M 1990 *City of Quartz*, Verso, New York.
- Deleuze, G 1985 'Nomad thought', in Alison D (ed) *The New Nietzsche*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Dovey, K 1992 'Corporate towers and symbolic capital', *Environment & Planning B*, 19: 173-188.
- Ellin, N 1997 'Shelter from the storm or form follows fear and vice versa', in Ellin, N (ed) *Architecture of Fear*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York.
- Franck, K 1984 'Exorcising the ghost of environmental determinism', *Environment & Behavior* 16(+): 413-435.
- Garreau, J 1991 *Edge City*, Doubleday, New York.
- Giddens, A 1984 *The Constitution of Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Gottdiener, M 1995 *Postmodern Semiotics*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Greenberg, S & Rohe, W 1984 'Neighborhood design and crime', *J. American Planning Assn* 50(1): 48-61.
- Jacobs, J 1965 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Karatani, K 1995 *Architecture as Metaphor*, MIT Press, Cambridge.
- McKenzie, E 1994 *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Private Government*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven.
- Newman, O 1972 *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design*, Macmillan, New York.
- Savage, M 1995 'Walter Benjamin's urban thought', *Environment & Planning D*, 13: 201-216.
- Sennett, R 1973 *The Uses of Disorder*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Sennett, R 1994 *Flesh and Stone*, Faber & Faber, London.
- Shields, R 1989 'Social spatialization and the built environment', *Environment & Planning D*, 7: 147-164.
- Wilson, E 1991 *The Sphinx in the City*, Virago, London.