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Empty Spaces, Dangerous Places

By: Cst. Tom McKay

As a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) specialist with Peel Regional Police, my attention is most often directed toward the built (or soon to be built) environment. The body of knowledge, literature, and -- in the Peel Region -- case studies detailing the relationship between crime and the built environment continues to grow. Missing from this focus, as a review of almost any index on the subject will show, is sufficient attention to under-utilized or vacant space. This article documents the impact of these spaces on a southern Ontario community, and shares its success in addressing the concern.

Reactions To Empty Spaces

Criminals consciously scan the environment for criminal opportunities. A public place that lacks significant ownership interest is often perceived by prostitutes, drug dealers and others as an environment which may tolerate and support their activities. These and other under-utilized and empty spaces are readily recognized and exploited by criminals. Often referred to by environmental criminologists as "good" (for the criminal) environmental cues, they draw the offender's attention with their apparent lack of activity, ownership, maintenance or care.

Equally important is the fear empty spaces generate in the average resident or normal user. Frequently seen as intimidating, these spaces are avoided by normal users, thereby exacerbating the problem and encouraging the criminal element. Vacant lands can be exceptionally problematic given that many absentee landlords pay little attention to them. The Victoria Hills community of Kitchener provides a fairly representative example of the difficulties encountered with vacant lands.

Victoria Hills

Consisting of a vacant lot surrounded by a school and three high-density, low-rent apartment buildings, the Victoria Hills site had become an overgrown, garbage-strewn, and intimidating place to the more than 1,200 residents of the area. Illegal activity in the area closest to Mooregate Crescent resulted in police constantly being called to this locale. Many residents simply avoided the place, considered "an unsafe and negative presence in the community."¹

Recognizing this problem, Constable Rob Davis, a CPTED-trained Waterloo Regional Police Officer, spearheaded a successful transformation of the area by applying the standard CPTED strategy of placing a safe activity in an unsafe or vulnerable area. Constable Davis introduced the idea of a community garden, effectively assigning a purpose to the space and compensating for its lack of legitimate activity and overt signs of ownership.

The results were tremendous. In the first summer of activity, police incidents at the three apartment buildings surrounding the site dropped by 30%. The results continued to improve in 1995 and 1996 with reported police incidents dropping by 48.8 and 55.7%, respectively. Plus, local residents now had their own fresh vegetables to eat!

Nowhere has the crime rate changed more dramatically than at 80 Mooregate Crescent, a previous trouble spot. Crimes reported at this location decreased 75.4% in 1996, from a pre-garden high of 187 to a post-garden low of 46.

As impressive as these results are, a qualitative measure of safety showed that participants also experienced a decrease in their concerns about property vandalism and walking in their community at night. Indeed, residents cited many factors contributing to a safer feeling in their community. Most prevalent among these were "the physical presence of people in the garden late into the evening;" the fact that they "knew more people in their neighbourhood;" and the feeling that "neighbours were also watching out for them, their children, and property."

These increased feelings of trust and friendship translated into more interaction between ethnic groups and increased cohesion in the community. A boost in community pride was also evident: qualitative survey responses showed that people now feel "good about the fact that they are involved in their community" and are "more attracted to living in their community." Other positive developments included a feeling of empowerment by the residents and a general physical improvement of the area. Even outside observers saw benefits to the community.

Empty Spaces, Dangerous Places

Lessons Learned

The introduction and development of a community garden is a classic example of the CPTED strategy of placing a safe activity in an unsafe area. In Victoria Hills and other communities, such as Selby-Dale in Saint Paul, Minnesota, the garden transformed an unsafe vacant lot into a positive and safe community space.

It is the challenge of planners, city officials, and police officers to recognize the deleterious effect empty spaces have on a community, to guard against their presence, and where empty spaces are unavoidable, to mitigate their impact. By encouraging the sale of undevelopable parcels of land to adjacent landowners, empty spaces can be eliminated. Where they are unavoidable, creative partnerships and solutions must be sought to make these spaces part of, and not apart from, the communities in which they are found.

Endnote

The details about the case and quotes cited are available in the Victoria Hills Community Garden Project Program Evaluation. 1994. John Howard Society of Waterloo.

Published in Plan Canada Magazine, January 1998; also published in Reader on Canadian Planning: Linking practice with theory, Nelson 2007

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