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Weeding out crime with the help of an urban garden -- Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design takes root at the Ernest Majury Learn. Play. Care. Child Care Centre

by

Cst. Tom McKay, Peel Regional Police, Crime Prevention Services

As a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design specialist with Peel Regional Police, Crime Prevention Services, I am regularly asked to apply Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (C.P.T.E.D.) techniques to problem properties throughout the Region of Peel. C.P.T.E.D. (pronounced sep-ted -- as it is more commonly known) is a proactive, crime fighting technique that believes that the proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the fear and incidence of crime as well as an improvement in the quality of life.

In November of 2006, I was asked by Bassem Bessada, a Capital Project Manager for the Commercial Property Management Unit of the Region of Peel to assist with a security review of a problem plagued Child Care Centre located in the heart of a residential community in the City of Mississauga. This is the transformational story about that CPTED application.

The Ernest Majury Learn. Play. Care. Child Care Centre is bounded by Williamsport Dr. on the south, a park to the east, two schools to the north and a townhouse development to the west, the latter being hidden by a row of trees. The Centre is situated on sloped piece of land with the majority of the grade occurring on the neighbouring school properties just beyond the Centre's property line.



The design of the building and slope of the land has necessitated the development of a large, concrete, retaining wall in the north-east corner of the property. The retaining wall was intended to serve two main functions. First, it carves out the space needed to accommodate two fire exits found at the rear of the property while providing room for snow storage. Second, it serves as its own safety barrier by acting as a knee wall for people using the path above.

Unfortunately, the wall serves a third, yet unintended function. It is used for cover by trespassers, loiterers and other abnormal who are attracted to the dry and sunken nature of the space as defined by the wall. This, along with a variety of other factors, has made this a favoured hang out for area teens who use it as sort of a staging area prior to engaging in a range of illegal or undesired activities that include graffiti, access to the roof and damage to the vents, break-ins, drug and alcohol use and sexual activity.

A list of the factors that compounded this problem included the placement of the doors relative to the main source of natural surveillance; the development of a landscape screen in front of the neighbouring townhomes; the limited hours of activity associated with the recreational and institutional use of the neighbouring properties and the substantial grade change behind the building which limits natural surveillance to the edge of the school property.

With these factors in place, it is not surprising that an earlier attempt to double the lighting did little to improve the problem. A proper resolution would require a change in the basic nature of this space, one that was inspired by CPTED principles.

A basic space assessment

CPTED practitioners routinely conduct space assessments to determine the appropriateness of how a space is designed and used. In the case of the Child Care Centre it is critically important to recognize that the area served little purpose other than as egress from the fire exits and a place to store snow. Given its limited role and utilitarian nature, it is not surprising that staff had very limited reasons for using it or developing a sense of proprietorship about the space. This lack of ownership was especially obvious during operating hours when area youth felt comfortable enough to gather in the space, despite the presence of windows and visible kitchen staff.

In order to correct this problem, a match between the space and its proper function had to be achieved. For inspiration, I thought of ways to exploit the CPTED's three main concepts of surveillance, access control and territoriality by deploying the standard CPTED strategy of placing a safe activity in a vulnerable area. The purpose of this strategy is to generate sufficient levels normal activity and ownership so that abnormal users recognize that they are under increased risk of scrutiny or intervention and normal users recognize that the area is now safe.

My first choice of a safe activity was an "urban" garden. Urban gardens typically transform small, lifeless, confined areas, the world over, into a garden oasis. Their hands on activity and obvious benefits are ideally suited to develop and release people's "latent sense of ownership", a concept Oscar Newman first identified as a critical element in the development of *Defensible Space*.

The suggestion for an urban garden was enthusiastically received by Filomena LoRusso, the Supervisor for the Child Care Centre, and her staff. Filomena saw, and immediately expanded upon, the benefits of the idea including the on-site growth of vegetables, composting and related programmed activities and the use by staff as a recreational space.

With the critical step of buy-in established, design could now begin. The ultimate goal of the design process was to assure that the intended activity could function well and

directly support the control of behaviour. This, along with the previously mentioned CPTED concepts and strategies, resulted in:

- the development of a large concrete planter,
- a reduction in the height of the retaining wall,
- the development of a black vinyl, chain link fence with access controlled gate around the perimeter of the garden and patio area, and
- the installation of a sheet metal baffle around the natural gas pipe found at the rear of the building.

The fence would serve a multiple purpose. It would fundamentally provide a controlled area when the area was to be used as an outdoor classroom for programmed activity. It would also provide for clear border definition and access control of the controlled space.

Bassem Bessada advised that these recommendations would be supported by a passive Closed Circuit Television system (CCTV) at the rear of the building. Passive CCTV systems principally serve as an investigative tool with limited deterrent value. The total cost for the entire project was \$14,000. It would take approximately one year to complete.

With construction finished, Filomena took ownership of what she now proudly refers to as “our backyard”. With the arrival of the warm, spring weather in 2008, the first garden of radishes, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, onions, celery broccoli and flowers were planted. When I contacted Filomena for a progress report in August of that year she stated “You would love it. Its wonderful! We just had a salad from there.”

A site visit in August of that year revealed the transformation that took place. Tomatoes were carefully staked, cucumbers grew up the fence, flowers bloomed. A patio set which “would not have lasted a day” according to Filomena sat out, untouched, in the afternoon shade.



Filomena could barely contain her enthusiasm when talking about the garden. It has made a “huge difference. Staff use it during the day. Kids come out here as well saying let’s go to the backyard. They love it. They picked cucumbers for a cucumber salad saying we picked it”. Filomena also reports that “staff use it all the time”. “Before they really didn’t sit out here, now its used 100 times over. The kids do programming. We’ve got tons of pictures of that”.



Filomena's glowing remarks are supported by the first year's crime statistics. Reported vandalisms have dropped by 100 per cent from the previous year with no vandalisms occurring within the garden. A careful inspection of the fence has revealed that there is very little evidence of trespass or other abnormal activity.

And it that were not enough, Filomena noted that enrollment continues to increase from previous years and a wait list has now developed. The entire experience "says a lot about partnerships and solving problems" according to Jan Graves, Manager Directly Operated Centres. CPTED services are available by contacting Cst. Tom McKay at Peel Regional Police, Crime Prevention Services at 905-453-2121, ext. 4025.