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Making Parks Safer

By: Cst. Tom McKay

I use my experience as a police officer and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED--pronounced sep-ted) specialist to question everything, think like a criminal and never look at a property the same way again. This has led me to challenge three common practices found in the design and use of parks which negatively affects people's behavior in unintended ways.

The Overuse Of Lighting

The issue of park pathway lighting was first explored in the "What makes a park safe?" article in the November/December 2000 edition of Recreation Canada. In that article, I suggested that the lighting of poorly observed or isolated walkways was an inherently risky practice. I would now like to explore another lighting application that is also fraught with problems.

The overuse of park lighting in parking lots and along walkways, whether isolated or not, can encourage the presence of people within the park at times when they're no longer desired. In the case of lighted parks, this routinely occurs after 11:00 p.m. when the park is suppose to be closed.

Constant light sends a signal that the park is still open. This is a conditioned response that results from our day to day experiences whereby the presence of light is equated with a premise that is open and the dimming or absence of light is equated with a premise that is closed. It should therefore not be surprising that late night users of the park use this frame of reference when deciding whether to enter, exit, or stay in the park. It is my belief that the failure to signal the closing of a park through a conventional reduction in lighting results in several lost opportunities. They are the timely communication and reinforcement of the park closing time, the elimination of excuses by potential offenders found in the park and the natural withdrawal of users both to and from the park.

In order to achieve these and other advantages, such as a savings in hydro electricity costs and associated maintenance expenses, I strongly advocate creating an environment that is capable of sending environmental cues to park users. In particular I recommend the strategic use of timers and a "high/low" lighting system.

High/low lighting systems were developed to provide a motion activated capability for large scale, commercial lighting applications that typically include high pressure sodium (bronze coloured) lights or other light sources that require an extended period of time prior to powering up.

High/low lights that are activated by timers can send a clear signal that the park is closing. This is best accomplished by powering down the lights to a predetermined level then selectively turning off the lights to signal the park is closed.

With such a dynamic place we can reasonably expect both normal users and loiterers not engaged in disorderly conduct, to head for better lit environments. The motivation for normal users to do this will be the perception of safety offered by the better lit environments. The motivation for loiterers not engaged in disorderly conduct to do this will be the desire to socialize in a lit setting.

The intelligent use of lighting can create the conditions where people naturally use the park in the way that it was intended for. It will also encourage police to increase their presence in the park as they will naturally be drawn to this environment once the lights are off.

Strategically Sited & Lit Playgrounds

Traditionally, there has never been a need to light children's playgrounds. They are, after all, intended to serve children's, and by extension parents', needs during the hour of light. Missing from this equation however is the real, yet unintended use of these facilities by teenagers, loiterers and other abnormal users during the hours of dark. This often results in damage to playground equipment, graffiti and litter including broken beer bottles, condoms and drug paraphernalia representing dangerous hazards to the kids.

In order to address these problems, the playground must be fundamentally sited where there is reliable witness potential from nearby residents and passersby on the street. With this witness potential established, a strategic lighting application

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is once again recommended, only this time the recommendation is to add and maintain a constant level of light to the playground so that the witnesses now have the ability to see the actual structure. A strategically placed and lit playground that is capable of being seen from surrounding residents or passersby will tend to discourage loitering by such abnormal users as beer drinkers, for instance, as their prolonged and potentially rowdy behavior is now more likely to be noticed.

To date the installation of a light adjacent to three problem playgrounds in the Meadowvale area of the city of Mississauga, Ontario has completely resolved a series of problems that were reported to local city Councilor Pat Saito.

Unrestricted Use Of Natural Wood Lots

Natural wood lots are one of the most challenging environments within a park setting. They are by their nature fragile environments that favour the offender and defy traditional CPTED responses, such as establishing sightlines by trimming back shrubs or limbing up trees. Nowhere is this more evident than Iroquois Park in the City of Mississauga.

Iroquois Park is a 9.4 acre community park featuring a substantial wood lot. It is bounded by residential streets to the north and south and a Catholic and public grade school on the east and west. I recently attended the wood lot, as a result of a call from the public school principal, who advised me that the school was experiencing wood lot related vandalism including the dismantling of their playground structure and its torching in the wood lot.

There, I found copious amounts of litter in a series of four, large camp-like settings. The litter included empty cardboard beer cases, the frame of a bicycle, a charred log which had been obviously used as a bench, upended metal garbage containers, upholstered cushions presumably gathered from the garbage of nearby residents, a no trespassing sign and large pieces of chipboard arranged in lean-to fashion. Perhaps the most disturbing discovery however was an act of mischief as can be seen in this picture where a large tree was felled by an axe in the centre of the stand.

This is all the more disturbing given the history of the park. Seven years ago the park was in pristine condition as a result of the work of the now defunct Mary Fix Vandalism Steering Committee. The efforts of the Committee were directed towards a clean-up of the wood lot as a result of a number of serious problems which spilled from the wood lot onto the Mary Fix Catholic School and surrounding area. The problems were so severe at the school that a portable classroom and its contents were lost as a result of a break-in and a \$40,000 arson.

The magnitude of that event united the community and gave rise to the Committee which, over a two year period, systematically addressed what had literally been two decades of unresolved problems. The efforts of the Committee and their partners, including the City of Mississauga Recreation and Parks Department, resulted in the removal of seven truck loads of litter, the widening of existing informal pathways and the spreading of wood chips on the forest floor. These and other complementary CPTED, programming and enforcement initiatives both inside and outside of the park resulted in a significant reduction in crime and disorder and a better utilized park.

The success of these efforts caught the attention of local media and was written up in the Parliamentarian's Guide to crime prevention after receiving a Crime Prevention Ontario community award in 1995. The story was also broadcast live on local cable television as a result of it being featured at a 1994 community summit on safety in the Region of Peel.

Given the dramatic ups and downs and the problems now reoccurring in the wood lot and surrounding areas, it is only appropriate that we ask the question why? Part of the answer can be found in the fact that the Committee eventually dissolved due in part to the routine transfer of its Chair, Principal Gail Vick and the natural tendency for people to let down their guards when problems seem to be in hand.

What then should we have done to achieve a more permanent solution? For the answer to this question, I will rely on my CPTED training. In this regard I will begin by conducting a space assessment. A space assessment will quickly establish that the fundamental purpose for the retention of a wood lot is its preservation. Knowing this, and given our design constraints, it is clear that we will have to address this problem through the wood lot's effective use.

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In this regard, I would suggest a wood lot's special and sensitive nature be reflected in a park policy, backed up by municipal by-law, that would effectively prohibit entry into these areas after dusk. This policy, which is essentially a compression technique (traditionally used to concentrate a limited amount of activity into a much more manageable area), is required to effectively deal with the natural and behavioral hazards that are commonly associated with these types of environments during the hours of night.

The night time closure of the wood lot will accomplish a number of objectives. In the case of a typical wood lot with informal pathways, it will discourage abnormal traffic and activity which is otherwise drawn to the wood lot as a result of the cover provided by its foliage and the instinctive withdrawal of normal users during the hours of dark. It will also readily identify improper users of the wood lot to still active residents, passersby, users of the adjacent green space or law enforcement officers who, as a result of the recommended municipal by-law, will be given a viable means to address these problems before they get out of hand.

In the case of a wood lot with developed pathways, the solution is not so simple. The presence of walkways fundamentally alters the purpose of the wood lot. The wood lot now has a second objective which involves the safe movement of people. As I believe these objectives cannot be practically reconciled and are for all intents and purposes mutually exclusive, a choice must now be made.

In this regard, it is important to remember that the safest wood lots are those that naturally cue normal users to avoid them at night. These do not have formalized pathways. The presence of formal pathways confuses most people's instinct for safety. As a result they should be removed.

While undoubtedly inconvenient and controversial, the re-establishment of the wood lot's primary purpose is the only practical and safe way to reconcile these conflicting objectives and, in the process, effectively reduce a considerable amount of criminal opportunity by getting normal people to instinctively bypass areas where there is substantial risk. This measure, along with a dusk to dawn closing, will go a considerable way towards preserving our wood lots, eliminating problems and getting people to react in a manner that is consistent with streetproofing advice.

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