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ROBBERY INC.

The Business of Bank Robbery

By: Cst. Tom McKay

As a Constable and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (C.P.T.E.D.) specialist in the Peel Regional Police, Crime Prevention Services, I am always on the lookout for effective CPTED applications or learning opportunities. Never have I seen a better learning opportunity in this Region, than the handwritten notes of a former CEO turned bank robber who meticulously profiled the banks he was about to rob.

Described by the Toronto Star as “obsessive about detail”, John Laramie “the bank robber with a Master's Degree in Business Administration” carefully planned “each project with the dispassionate calculation of a hostile takeover”. Known as the Tilley Bandit, for the distinctive headgear he wore, this self-described 48 yr. old “down and out” businessman was responsible for 17 holdups throughout southern Ontario. Captured after an intense police shootout, following a 10 month spree, Laramie, the man “who ran his heists like a corporation”, directed police to the detailed diaries he kept of his crimes.

A meticulous planner and record keeper, Laramie “put the skills he learned researching companies into researching the banking industry”. Compiled with the “fastidiousness of a chief executive officer preparing an annual report to his shareholders” Laramie effectively constructed a template that noted and rated details of location, visibility, observation points and exits and escape routes. Also recorded for posterity were the details of the completed jobs.

Conventional CPTED Analysis

While most often considered as an effective deterrent against opportunistic crimes, CPTED techniques are routinely practised against the highly motivated offender.

Properly applied CPTED enables opportunities for superior natural surveillance, access control and territoriality which when recognized by the offender results in him seeking out a “softer” or more opportunistic target. Specifically, the offender will most often be attracted to an environment which offers poor or limited sightlines, numerous points of entry or exit and limited feelings of ownership.

It with some surprise therefore, that I noted that the majority of the banks that the Tilley bandit hit, did not fit this softer target profile.

The Profiles

An analysis of the profiles of the 17 completed “jobs” reveals a relatively consistent profile with the following particulars:

- **Natural Surveillance Variables Cited:**

- Visibility To Inside From Out	
Excellent	3
Good.....	8
Fair To Good	2
Poor	3
Other.....	1

- Observation Points	
Indicated.....	9

- **Access Control Variable Cited:**

- # of Exits	
One Only.....	8
Two Indicated.....	9

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- Evacuation Routes	
Rated As Excellent.....	11
Good To Excellent	2
Good.....	3
Fair	1

As is evident from the above, Laramie rated 11 out of the 17 banks as having good or excellent visibility to the inside of the bank from out and 8 of the 17 banks as having a single exit. Expressed in CPTED parlance, 11 banks had good or excellent natural surveillance while 8 out of 17 had excellent access control.

As suggested earlier, such a combination of factors would normally result in the offender looking elsewhere but in each of the Tilley bank jobs, Laramie carried out his plan.

Faced with this apparent contradiction, a much more careful analysis needs to be developed.

Bank Robbery From The Robber's Perspective

Using a “sort of feral animal cunning”, the bank robber makes “exceptional use of every opportunity given to them”. This was a conclusion of the 1985 study by the Bank Administration Institute (BAI) entitled Bank Interiors and Bank Robberies. The study, the outgrowth of a research project which recognized the need for meaningful research on how CPTED design strategies for banks could reduce the risk of bank robbery, remains a definitive yet largely unknown document.

The conclusions developed by the study help to explain the actions of the Tilley bandit. In particular, Laramie's penchant for banks with good natural surveillance and observation points supports the BAI's conclusion that “high visibility into the bank seems to actually work for those robbers with guns or takeover intent”.

Acknowledged as contrary to conventional thinking, the study reasons an armed offender is more likely to consider good natural surveillance as a tactical advantage for casing the interior of the bank and not a reason to avoid it.

A similar lack of convention applies to the application of access control. The study found that single entrance banks were preferred by robbers who displayed a firearm or were intent on taking over the bank. The reason for this attraction was that a single entrance bank offered a tactical advantage to offenders wishing or taking control.

What Can Be Learned From This?

For CPTED to be effective against the major threats associated with most banks, special care must be taken to limit CPTED's inherent tactical advantages to the bona fide users of the bank and its immediate surroundings.

With respect to natural surveillance, I believe the major challenge facing the banking industry is the limitation of observation points from which the criminal can surreptitiously gather intelligence.

This is apparent from an analysis of Laramie's favourite observation posts. His strategic use of public benches, phone booths, bus stops and bushes acted as a one-way blind while generally legitimizing his presence.

In order to better control their environment, bankers must learn to very carefully arrange or influence the placement of street furniture so that it is strategically placed closer to their buildings. This will provide a much better connection between the outside of the bank and its interior space which will:

provide for better natural surveillance of the bank's interior from passers-by, and significantly increase the conspicuousness of anyone loitering in this space.

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With respect to access control, I believe that design solutions must be developed to lessen the likelihood and opportunity for the bank's greatest threat, an obvious armed hold-up or takeover situation. In this regard, I agree with the BAI's recommendation to develop a secondary entry/exit point which, along with the first entrance, is difficult for a single individual to monitor once inside the bank.

Summary

The Tilley bandit's strategic use of the larger environment resulted in pre-planned escape routes and observation posts. These factors, when combined with a determined mindset, overcame the positive CPTED design features of the bank buildings themselves.

In order to provide a more effective deterrent, CPTED design must include the larger environment. In the case of the banking industry, designers must be aware of the reverse CPTED potential for superior natural surveillance and access control by training themselves to look through the armed criminal's eyes.

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