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The CPTED Vacuum

By: Cst. Tom McKay

In a recent Viewpoint article entitled “Can CPTED practitioner's end bunker mentality” I used the term “target hardening trap” to describe a troublesome and sometimes extreme condition that prevents some people from seeing the value of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). I now wish to explore the opposite extreme, an innocent, yet misguided, condition I refer to as the “CPTED vacuum”.

The CPTED vacuum can occur when an enthusiastic lay-person, lacking police, security or crime-related academic credentials, is exposed to CPTED training and embraces its principles. Armed only with this knowledge, the lay-person, typically a planner or designer, sees it as a panacea against crime and quickly forgets that CPTED was meant primarily to reduce opportunity crime and, in certain circumstances, needs to take to a secondary role.

This is certainly the case in a 1994 botched hold-up of a City of Toronto restaurant. In that incident a group of armed bandits shot and killed a patron in front of a restaurant full of people. Yet a newly inspired “CPTED convert” used that incident to suggest that CPTED applications may have made a difference. In a nationally published article, the CPTED practitioner wrote:

“The robbery and slaying of a bystander at the Just Desserts cafe in Toronto earlier this year is a case in point. Just Desserts is located within a commercial and residential neighbourhood. The adjacent commercial buildings are for the most part closed after 5:00 in the evenings. Proximity to other residential buildings is separated by distance and a busy roadway. Pedestrian traffic is light. Escape routes are ready made. The criminal can operate with chances of success increased, because he worked with the natural environment.”

The dubious nature of this conclusion ignores the fact that the design of the restaurant was not an issue and the robbery occurred when the restaurant was busy and there were plenty of witnesses. As a result it is my belief that CPTED was a limited factor and as such does not offer a meaningful solution. Instead, a better balanced conclusion would have focused on robbery prevention and the need for cash control.

In another instance, a CPTED trained planner was concerned that a lack of windows at the rear of a commercial building might encourage loiterers to hang-out in a staff parking area. Her solution, the introduction of a picture window at the rear of the premise to provide for natural surveillance. My reaction, a significant increase in the break-in potential.

These are two of just many examples of CPTED's version of tunnel vision. Like the target hardening trap, it represents an extreme condition with which more experienced or better grounded CPTED practitioners must contend.

In order to maintain and develop CPTED's credibility, it is essential that all CPTED practitioners offer an informed opinion. This can be best accomplished by developing a working knowledge of other crime prevention techniques and asking ourselves the routine question “what problems might we create, when we try to solve another”.

Only when we have satisfied ourselves, can we be sure of satisfying others.

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