Defensible Space, Community Safety, the British City and the ‘Active Citizen’: Penetrating the Criminal Mind

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This paper is concerned with how both housing design and management and ‘active citizenship’ are perceived to influence crime and ‘defensible space’. It explores the way in which criminals decode the ‘active citizen’, common housing designs and levels of safety within the British city.

Urban designers, planners, the police and city centre management teams are already employing concepts associated with Newman’s theory of ‘defensible space’ in seeking to produce safer urban environments. Despite such initiatives, however, some parts of the city are not defended by the residents. The social elements of ‘undefended’ and ‘offensible’ space are discussed in relation to the concept of ‘active citizenship’. It is suggested that the call for a change in the social behaviour of individuals in the urban place, inherent within the notion of ‘active citizenship’, is not always safely achievable and may in some instances jeopardise personal and community safety.

The paper argues that the perceptual dimension to ‘defensible space’ remains largely under-investigated, particularly in the British context, and that ‘image’ is a significant factor in the ‘design-affects-crime’ debate. Findings are presented which suggest that well-maintained housing designs are associated to a greater degree with ‘active citizenship’ than are their poorly maintained counterparts. Policy recommendations and potential areas for further research are reviewed.

Key Words: Perceptions; defensible space; crime; property management; community safety; active citizenship; offensible space; undefended space; ‘image’

Introduction

Safety within the community is an issue that persistently and repeatedly demands critical attention, at both the local and the national level. The ‘design-affects-behaviour’ debate is a perspective that continues both to offer solutions and to attract critical commentary, yet still requires further investigation. Indeed, defensible space techniques remain largely unproven, and may be neither affordable nor easily implemented for the benefit of all citizens in all communities. Similarly, the behavioural consensus, and the power or inclination to encourage ‘active’ intervention, may also not be evenly distributed across all sections of society. Indeed, in certain inner-city communities safety may well be jeopardised by indiscriminately promoting ‘active citizenship’ without paying considerable attention to the complex relationships that already exist between people and space.
Jack Straw, the then British Home Secretary, called for more ‘active citizenship’ in the community in the continuing struggle against anti-social behaviour and crime. In a speech to the Social Market Foundation, he commented:

If we want to live our lives free from crime, we must recognise that we all have a responsibility to help reduce it. (quoted in Jones, 1999: p12)

This message essentially encouraged members of the public to act ‘more responsibly’ and to speak out against, to report or to actively intervene to prevent the occurrence of ‘petty’ incidences of youth crime within their communities. Examples of this ‘have a go’ outlook included the apprehension of a 20-year-old mugger by the Home Secretary himself.

Mr Straw’s sentiment raises various issues that are fundamental to Newman’s theory of ‘defensible space’ (1973): namely territoriality, surveillance opportunities, and ‘image’ and stigma. Jacob’s (1961) notion of ‘eyes on the street’ is an important foundation for these ideas, highlighting the routine contribution of citizens, rather than the police, in crime prevention. In short, Newman’s theory argues that architectural design in housing can:

release latent attitudes in tenants which allow them to assume behavior necessary to the protection of their rights and property. (1973:xii)

The criticisms of Newman’s theory are many and varied (see Adams, 1973; Bottoms, 1974; Hillier, 1973; Kaplan, 1973; Mawby, 1977; Merry, 1981; Poyner, 1983; Smith, 1987), although these arguments lie outside the scope of this discussion and are reviewed elsewhere (Cozens et al, 2001a). However, the theory of ‘defensible space’ certainly has relevance and application to the discussion of ‘active citizenship’ and to the promotion of safer communities. Indeed, Newman also states that defensible space influences tenants to provide:

a significant policing function, natural to their daily routine and activities … [which would] … act as important constraints against anti-social behavior. (1973:xii)

It is not the intention here to highlight the many and deep-rooted problems associated with ‘difficult-to-let’ estates or to discuss urban spaces that are considered ‘poorly’ designed according to Newman’s findings. This paper discusses the perception of defensible space in a variety of social settings, and investigates three types of housing common in the British city. It has been argued that the ‘image’ of housing can significantly influence perceptions of defensible space (Cozens et al, 2001a) and this exploratory investigation focuses upon offender perceptions of ‘active citizenship’ associated with a selection of housing types characteristic of the British city.

‘Active citizenship’

The notion of ‘active citizenship’ appears to be subject to several interpretations, and encompasses a broad range of themes including social and moral responsibility, community involvement and developing political awareness (Institute for Citizenship, 2002). These themes are often interwoven with notions of pride in one’s country or region. However, in criminological terms the concept refers to citizens taking control of their community spaces from those who seek to intimidate and who openly engage in incivilities or offending.

The subject of active citizenship continues to receive significant media coverage in Britain in the light of the tragic cases of Liz Sherlock and most recently, Kevin Jackson. Mrs Sherlock was murdered as she attempted to reclaim her possessions from thieves driving away from the scene.
of the crime, while Mr Jackson was savagely stabbed to death after pursuing two car thieves. In these two separate and highly publicised incidents, both citizens courageously responded when an offence was being committed—and subsequently lost their lives.

The notion of the active citizen is both commendable and firmly rooted in British social history. Indeed, Johnston (2001:1–2) has observed ‘the deployment of ‘active citizenship’ as a rationality of government during the past two decades’. He also acknowledges the crucial role of local social networks in understanding citizen-based security practices in British towns and cities. However, it must be noted that the physical and social design of the built environment has the capacity to facilitate or to impede the creation of this dimension within the psyche of the residents, and to influence how it might be interpreted by criminals. Socio-spatial aspects of design may also encourage or discourage further development of active citizenship in terms of just how ‘active’ residents may feel, and how much of a ‘citizen’ they might regard themselves to be. More importantly, perhaps, is the way in which criminals decode the environmental cues that may be associated with differing levels of informal social control.

Figure 1 represents a basic framework to illustrate the fundamental socio-spatial tensions. Briefly, this diagram highlights how the active citizen may well be a more common presence in environments that experience low incidence of crime and that also conform to the defensible space model. However, as with much research into this complex subject, there are notable exceptions. Indeed, Baumgartner (1988) studied an American middle-class suburb and found that active citizenship was not particularly prevalent, while there is also evidence of active citizenship in high-crime areas. Taylor et al (1984; 1985) found that in terms of socio-economic status both low- and high-status groups demonstrated low territorial concern, while those in the middle socio-economic groups demonstrated much higher levels. However, it is argued that the active citizen generally is less likely to be so prevalent in areas that are either ‘not defended’ or are manipulated by criminals exploiting ‘offensible space’, where higher crime rates are more likely to exist. In Figure 1, the area of overlap represents active citizens who might find themselves in offensible space with high crime rates. In addition, also located within this component of the model are ‘inactive citizens’ who might reside in defensible space with lower incidence of crime, as in Baumgartner’s study (1988). This element of the diagram serves to emphasise the potentially complex nature of socio-spatial interactions for the active citizen within the built environment.
Indeed, certain urban environments may not be conducive to generating patterns of active citizenship, and the actions of an active citizen in such an area may well compromise both the safety of that individual and the stability of the immediate community. A proportion of the 3000 neighbourhoods in the UK experiencing deep-seated social problems of neglect or physical dereliction, as identified by the Social Exclusion Unit (1998), might represent such urban environments.

It is not the intention, however, to discourage community members from becoming actively involved in the day-to-day management of their locality. Rather, it is to highlight a serious and frequently ignored issue within the concept of defensible space. This concerns the ‘image’ and perception of either those parts of the city that are not defended by residents or, more despairingly, parts that are used, owned, defended and ‘actively’ controlled instead by deviants, delinquents or criminals. Such locations have been labelled as space that is ‘undefended’ (Merry, 1981) and more recently the concept of ‘offensible space’ (Atlas, 1991) has been identified; as such, both concepts require scrutiny. First, though, a discussion of defensible space theory is necessary to provide essential background to the issues.

**Defensible space**

Defensible space, for Newman:

... is a surrogate term for the range of mechanisms – real and symbolic barriers, strongly defined areas of influence, and improved opportunities for surveillance – that combine to bring an environment under the control of its residents. (1973:3)

There are four key elements of defensible space which act individually and in concert to assist in the creation of safe urban environments. Each of these elements contains an inherent focus upon the behaviour of the citizen as an active agent in the creation and maintenance of defensible space.

First, ‘the capacity of the physical environment to create perceived zones of territorial influence’ (Newman, 1973:50) necessarily involves the citizen in the creation and maintenance of surveillance and territoriality. How people demarcate and command the boundaries of their territory is a social as well as a physical phenomenon. Residents play an active role in revealing how they regard their territory by, for example, keeping gardens and property well maintained. A poorly maintained neighbourhood may indicate to a potential criminal that these residents are less likely to be active in their citizenship than those in a locality that is clearly well maintained.

Second, ‘the capacity of physical design to provide surveillance opportunities for residents and their agents’ (Newman, 1973:50) similarly relies as much upon the residents’ propensity to observe and act as it does upon the physical configuration of urban space. Again, residents must actively carry out surveillance of the neighbourhood before any design advantage can become meaningful, let alone operational.

Third, ‘the capacity of design to influence the perception of a project’s uniqueness, isolation, and stigma’ (Newman, 1973:50) appears also to be founded upon individual perceptions, in turn based largely upon personal experiences. Design alone will not adequately explain why a certain ‘image’ has arisen and been attached to a particular area. Uniqueness, isolation and stigma may also be created by the behaviour and active (or inactive) participation of members of that community.
Finally, ‘the influence of geographical juxtaposition with ‘safe zones’ on the security of adjacent areas’ (Newman, 1973:50) involves the placement of a particular area within the wider social and physical environment, and therefore encompasses the active social ingredient of people in the wider sense. ‘Safe zones’ nearby may also be the result of active citizenship in those areas. It is clear therefore, that the active involvement of the citizen within the community is an essential component of all four elements of Newman’s theory of defensible space. In exploring the rudiments of ‘defensible space’, Newman continues by implicating the environmental design of buildings as a causative factor to explain the differing crime rates in the two broadly similar housing projects in America that his study focuses upon. Newman (1973) states that:

the physical form of the urban environment is possibly the most cogent ally the criminal has in his victimisation of society. (1973:2)

The above four elements of defensible space can translate the latent territoriality and sense of community of inhabitants into an imperative responsibility to secure and promote a safe, productive and well maintained neighbourhood. These ideas have been popularised, refined and operationalised by subsequent researchers (eg Clarke, 1997; Clarke and Mayhew, 1980; Crowe, 2000; Poyner, 1986; Sarkissian and Walsh, 1994; Saville, 1995; Taylor et al, 1980; Wilson and Kelling, 1982; Zelinka and Brennan, 2001).

Newman’s ideas are now firmly entrenched within the modern global concept of ‘crime prevention through environmental design’ (CPTED) (Jeffery, 1999; Moffat, 1984; Steventon, 1996). These ideas have become widely accepted and have received support and funding from successive British governments. This support includes the multi-million pound ‘Design Improvement Controlled Experiment’ (DICE), carried out by Coleman’s Land Use Research Unit (Coleman, 1985), and the British police force’s current ‘Secured by Design’ initiative. The latter, initiated in 1989, was re-launched at the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors in September 1999. Significantly, the scheme is now obligatory for all new social housing developments in Wales. The active citizen residing in an area therefore has a clearly defined role to play in such an arrangement of theoretical ideas.

Undefended space

Some areas within the city may conform to Newman’s design criteria, yet may still not be actively defended. Merry (1981) ponders why this might be so. In her study, half of all robberies reported in a victimisation survey occurred in what were considered appropriately configured designs, that is, safe spaces, using Newman’s architectural criteria.

One possible explanation concerns the fact that a project possessing good defensible space may contain elements of contradictory or confusing design features within it, which can hinder or prevent surveillance. Second, observable space does not guarantee the presence of an observer, and even when one is present intervention is neither necessarily automatic nor always effective. Finally, certain delinquents and criminals may positively seek the attention received, while carrying out less than clandestine activities; therefore good surveillance may, in some instances, assist and actively encourage certain criminal groups or individuals. Equally, others may be under the influence of alcohol or drugs and have little concern for the possibility of being observed and/or apprehended.

The concept of territoriality itself has been vehemently criticised as being empirically unfounded (Hillier, 1973). Steventon (1996) notes that it is not instinctual in all animals, that the human–animal comparison in this regard is overtly simplistic, and that territorial displays may not be
universalist or necessarily of a positive character. Such displays can often be highly individualistic and negative, as the apparent frequency of neighbourhood and neighbourly disputes now clearly demonstrates.

The actual display of territoriality and the extent of tenant intervention can be affected by specific social factors. When ‘the intricate web of informal social control’ (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) breaks down and residents embark upon a fear-induced withdrawal from the community, the vital elements of territoriality and surveillance are reduced, and may dissipate entirely.

In an American study, Merry (1981) found that Chinese citizens commonly extended their considered territorial domain to the door of their premises only, while white and black residents displayed notions of territoriality which included somewhat wider spatial penetration onto the street and into the immediate neighbourhood. Ethnic heterogeneity and lifestyle variability may in some cases hinder social interaction, and therefore the propensity to intervene. Low levels of commitment and familiarity can encourage lack of concern and interest. Perkins et al (1993) further note that territoriality and subsequently the propensity to intervene will routinely vary both between and within neighbourhoods.

Lack of effective intervention modes, or of a determination to intervene, such as a feeling of futility towards involving the police or an attitudinal dislike or fear of the police, may also reduce the possibility for resident intervention, as might the existence of a general sense of powerlessness. Indeed, if there is an attitude of apathy displayed by the police towards a particular area, the likelihood of residents seeking to become directly involved will be diminished, despite any residual sense of active citizenship that individuals may harbour.

The fear of crime, or of retaliation relating to intervention, may also be important. In an environment where criminal activity is both blatant and visible, and has potentially become socially embedded, citizens may fear reprisals or even personal attack if they become involved. The fear of crime itself has been persistently revealed to vary with gender, age, socio-economic status and race (Hough, 1995; Kinsey, 1984; Maxfield, 1984). This reinforces the individualistic nature of the desire in any particular situation to become an active citizen. Furthermore, ambiguity of city design has also been shown to increase levels of fear (Lynch, 1960).

Finally, the social fabric of any neighbourhood may affect the ease of identification of ‘outsiders’ and influence both the levels and the extent of intervention. Culturally and ethnically mixed areas may mean that such identification is more problematic, and may limit the potential for assistance by residents to friends and immediate family only. In her study, Merry (1981) also discovered that black residents found it difficult to distinguish between those individuals from the Chinese community, on the grounds that ‘they all look the same’. Such a comment should seem inapplicable in Britain, but consideration of the recent history of race relations may suggest that such a perspective might persist amongst some sections of the white community and possibly even at an intra-ethnic level.

In some neighbourhoods, an absence of community spirit and the desire for privacy may render the identification of the outsider more problematic and subsequently reduce the likelihood for intervention. In an Australian study, Lupton (1999) confirmed the findings of other studies and found that the ‘unpredictable stranger’ is often identified as the locus of fear. The presence of such ‘others’, who may not share ‘our’ approach to life or our principles and sensibilities, may further restrict the actions of the active citizen. This point arguably raises the issue of the degree of heterogeneity within the community, and therefore introduces the issue of housing allocation policy into this complex discussion.
Merry identified certain key characteristics of those who intervened when a criminal act was evident:

… those who intervene are highly committed to the neighbourhood in terms of length of residence, social networks, and time spent in daily social interaction inside the project. They find it a familiar and relatively safe place to live. (1981:410)

Individuals from some ethnic minorities not only differed in the size of the spaces they sought to defend but also in the frequency of such intervention. Similarly, certain social conditions may nurture fear and powerlessness, and therefore also reduce the inclination to intervene. Being fearful may result in the withdrawal of the self into the home, which may become heavily fortified as a result. Venturing outside may be restricted and the curtains of such homes are generally drawn to protect privacy and to prevent the surveillance of personal valuables within the property. Such individuals are considerably less likely to intervene. Summarily, Merry notes:

This behaviour enhances the opportunity for crime by creating large sections of the project where residents can be expected not to defend the space, even when it is architecturally defensible. (1981:411)

This scenario is further exacerbated when the concentration of such individuals in an area is particularly high.

Merry (1981) has demonstrated that both the presence and the attitude of the user of urban residential space is an important issue. The shortcomings related to the ‘under-active’ citizen have been stated; however, it must also be noted that ‘over-active’ citizenship can also be problematic. Indeed, the problems associated with vigilantism clearly indicate it is not an appropriate way forward, and this approach should be actively discouraged.

**Offensible space**

Atlas (1991) expresses similar concerns, noting how ‘outsiders’ or criminals, in space that is defined architecturally as ‘safe’, may well create a sense of danger for the inhabitants and users. Similarly, familiarity with an area and the anticipation of intervention can nurture a sense of safety in environments defined as being architecturally more hazardous. It would seem prudent then, for such as Jack Straw, law enforcement agencies and housing authorities, to keep a watchful eye upon those environments that are considered ‘architecturally safe’, since the residents may at certain times feel compelled to ‘walk on by’ as temporarily inactive citizens of these communities.

Having discussed defensible space that may be undefended, Atlas extends and intensifies the debate with his concept of ‘offensible space’. This is defined as ‘… the use of defensible space and environmental design strategies for enhancing security for the criminal element and obstructing justice’ (1991:65). He notes that it is not just town planners and designers, or indeed police architectural liaison officers, who have successfully utilised the principles of defensible space. Drug dealers and criminals may posses an intuitive or learnt understanding of the concepts of territoriality, surveillance and control of access to create safe or offensible space within which they may safely conduct their criminal activities.

Atlas (1991) notes how the ‘drug den’ can often be protected like a fortress and utilise offensible space features to:

- identify outsiders, and especially police;
• inspect or investigate others who may approach;
• transmit identified problems to those who are in control of the situation;
• maintain communication networks to warn offenders of approaching police; and
• apply target-hardening mechanisms (eg reinforced steel doors) to the environment to impede police entry and help prevent the theft of drugs or other ‘goods’ by outsiders.

The successful implementation of offensible space relies on two key conditions for the criminal. Resources, in the way of illegally earned money, enable target-hardening mechanisms to be installed, and allow the control and manipulation of the immediate environment. This is created by acts of intimidation and by a willingness and ability to carry out threats. Surveillance activity, a network of spotters, and the installation of peep-holes, barred windows and strengthened doors are all examples of the access and surveillance control features found in the study of 21 crime sites in Florida (Atlas, 1990). Corner locations were preferred as surveillance nodes, while criminal sites were commonly located in the middle of a block, insulated by surrounding dwellings and additionally providing multiple escape routes. Interestingly, a recent study of burglary in the UK has echoed some of these findings, in that terraced housing in the middle of a block is found to be less vulnerable to burglary than end-of-terrace properties (Leam, 1998).

Jacobs (1961) argued that increased participation, in the form of street-level activity, could assist citizens in gaining control of the streets. It was opined that by optimising the number of ‘eyes on the street’, opportunities for crime would be reduced. However, it must be stated that this may not necessarily hold true for all urban dwellers. Lupton (1999) argues that reactions to crowding are subjective, and that while increased activity can reduce fear for some, it can increase it for other citizens. Atlas (1991) concurs with Jacobs, and argues that criminals think similarly about space. Pathways and streets can become part of the criminal ‘turf’, bolstered by fences, walls and barricades to inhibit the movement of police. The enhancement of territoriality is achieved by the presence of other employees and associates, such as look-outs, enforcers and distribution agents. The outsider in such an environment then becomes the person who is not doing illegal business there, and who is made to feel uncomfortable; an outsider, surrounded by a sense of danger, and possibly at risk of personal injury or attack. Indeed, such behavioural and environmental cues provide the non-criminal with the information that signifies that they have entered a zone of offensible space. A display of active citizenship in such an environment could have devastating results, and advice from politicians and policy-makers that encourages intervention in such locations is potentially naïve, irresponsible, hazardous and inappropriate.

Perceptions

The perceptions of defensible space qualities and a community which is engaged in self-policing can be actively supported and encouraged through thoughtful and appropriate environmental design. Indeed, Newman’s theory clearly rests upon a perceptual dimension in that promoting defensible space may create ‘perceived zones of territorial influence’ and ‘influence the perception of a project’s uniqueness, isolation, and stigma’ (1973:50). Furthermore, for increased surveillance opportunities to be effective, offenders must both perceive that someone may be watching and anticipate that intervention is probable. For determined offenders, this process may also involve an evaluation of the potential effectiveness of such intervention.
Ham-Rowbottom et al (1999) investigated police, burglar and resident perceptions of defensible space for detached properties. They found burglars' views contrasted with those of the police and residents, who broadly agreed. Actual barriers, traces of occupancy and road surveillability were favoured by the police and the residents as factors which affect vulnerability. Symbolic barriers, house value and occupant surveillability, however, were most important for the burglars, while road surveillability was the only cue category of defensible space consistently held by all three groups. It is argued, therefore, that one objective of this study is the theoretical and operational extension of such work to a wider study of sample groups and a range of characteristic British housing designs.

There has been widespread research concerning the extent to which territorial markers are perceived as a deterrent to offending by burglars. In a study by Brown and Altman (1983), it was argued that burglars infer certain neighbourhood characteristics from the appearance of the house itself. Consequently the series of photographs presented to the respondents in this study did not show neighbouring houses. Brown and Bentley studied territoriality and vulnerability in burgled and non-burgled homes and found that perceptions of territorial concern, neighbourhood reactivity and homes judged as ‘difficult to enter’ characterised non-burgled properties. They also suggest that ‘burglars’ perceptions that neighbours would react to their presence clearly and frequently predicted non-burglarised judgements’ (1993:51).

The influence of ‘signs of incivility’ upon levels of fear of crime has been discussed extensively (Skogan and Maxfield, 1980; Lewis and Salem, 1986) and implicates dilapidation (graffiti, rubbish, vacant properties and abandoned cars) as a factor influencing both crime and fear of crime. The seminal work of Wilson and Kelling (1982) powerfully demonstrated the role that a lack of ongoing and effective maintenance of the environment may have in the ‘design-affects-crime’ debate. Indeed, Ross and Mirowsky (1999) and Kraut (1999) have recently reinforced these findings in studies of disorder and vacant properties. The pertinence of such imagery to the design-affects-crime debate cannot be understated. Tijerino (1998) opines that the process by which a person perceives personal space and the built environment ‘is a concept essential to defensible space evaluations, and one that has been absent from previous evaluations’ (1998:327). Moreover, research concerning the potential impact of ‘poor maintenance’ on the perception of defensible space and active citizenship has not received adequate deliberation, particularly within the British context.

The study

Design is certainly only one aspect of what Wilson and Kelling (1982) referred to as the ‘intricate web of informal social controls’ which may encourage social cohesion and active citizenship within the community. However, investigating contrasting images of housing and how they are decoded by criminals focuses on some of the complex social dimensions of image and status, as well as providing insights concerning behaviour. This exploratory investigation probes the perceptions of a group of ten convicted criminals regarding the extent to which the active citizen is associated with a range of British housing designs. Since defensible space has a crucial perceptual dimension (Cozens et al, 2001b; Ham-Rowbottom et al, 1999; McGahan, 1984; Tijerino, 1998), two versions of each housing type were selected: a well-maintained version ‘A’ and a poorly-maintained version ‘B’. The contrasting ‘image’ of each design is illustrated in Figure 2, where low-rise/walk-up flats, terraced housing and semi-detached housing, with visible signs of decay, are presented and subsequently investigated alongside their better-maintained counterparts. The criminals were shown photographs of the housing types and asked three questions designed to probe perceptions of active citizenship and three to investigate defensible space.
The data collected was in a binary (‘yes/no’) format. This guaranteed not only robust measurements but also a straightforward analysis of the basic findings, thereby allowing active citizenship and defensible space to be readily and easily compared. The questions adopted to measure active citizenship were:

- Do you think that you would be noticed by residents?
- Do you think that the residents would notice strangers?
- Do you think that the residents would intervene if crime/nuisance behaviour was taking place?

The questions probing defensible space were:

- Do you feel that the residents are proud of their property?
- Do you think that the boundaries of the property are clearly defined?
- Do you think there are opportunities to hide?
The findings: criminals, design and the active citizen

Figure 3 provides an illustration of the responses provided by the criminals for the three designs used in this study.

Active citizenship was perceived to exist at higher levels for traditional housing designs such as semi-detached and terraced housing, rather than for flats. However, the findings clearly reveal that the well maintained designs (A) were associated with residents who were perceived to be more likely to exhibit characteristics of active citizenship than those who resided in their poorly maintained (B) counterparts. The criminals perceived residents as more likely to notice potential offenders and the presence of ‘strangers’ in such areas. In addition, they perceived the residents to be more prone to intervention for the well maintained designs (A) than in similar designs with visible signs of decay, dereliction and incivility (B).

Figure 3. Criminals’ perceptions of active citizenship and defensible space associated with British housing designs

Note: in this study a score of 30 would indicate maximum levels of active citizenship and defensible space.

In terms of defensible space, the criminals clearly perceived these more active citizens to express higher levels of territorial concern, where boundaries were clearly defined and opportunities to hide were not commonly envisaged to exist. Clearly, Figure 3 suggests that criminals’ perceptions of the active citizen and defensible space are related and that this relationship is influenced by both design and management issues.

Such contrasting perceptions of proprietary concern and active citizenship certainly reiterate the powerful influence of image in how the criminals decoded the three housing typologies. Notions of affluence are certainly complexly interwoven within these perceptions and Logan’s ‘stratification of place’ (1978) appears relevant. Indeed, comments provided by the criminals reinforce the importance of housing image and stigma on perceptions of defensible space and active citizenship.

Clearly, there are powerful cultural associations attached to each design type. The socio-economic inferences that have been made in relation to the photographic representations provide significant
insights into how the residential environment is decoded, and lends further support to Logan’s notion of the ‘stratification of place’. He asserts that:

[Place is … a partially autonomous dimension of stratification in the same sense as the more familiar dimensions of class and status. (1978:408)]

Notions of status and class partially influence perceptions of crime, fear of crime and nuisance, and perceptions of active citizenship. Lupton argues that cultural identities may require the concept of ‘otherness’ with which to compare ourselves. She states that:

… as part of a strategy of dealing with the risk and uncertainty of crime, each person develops a ‘mental map’ of places, defining some as likely to be ‘safe’ and others as ‘risky’. This ‘mental map’ does not simply rely on geographical aspects of a space or place; but also draws on ideas and assumptions about social relations and the kinds of people who inhabit or pass through these spaces and places at specific times of day and night. (1999:13)

The findings from the qualitative analysis lend further support to the existence of the stratification of place (Logan, 1978). Moreover, since behaviour may be influenced by environmental indicators and perceptions (McGahan, 1984; Wilson and Kelling, 1982), this stratification may act as a mechanism for social control. Indeed, housing allocation policies and the mechanics of the housing market would seem to reinforce this point. From a social constructionist perspective, Franck has argued that:

[Buildings and other designed spaces are intended to support society’s expectations of what activities should take place where, who should pursue those activities, and how they should relate to one another. (1985:157)]

Furthermore, the imagery of certain housing typologies presented by the media, and particularly in police ‘soaps’ on television, do little to redress these powerful cultural associations.

Clearly, housing design and maintenance levels act as microscopic indicators for notions of containment and levels of social order/disorder. Indeed, Walinsky (1964) suggests that one reason for maintaining the visual stigma of public housing projects in America was that the ‘working’ and middle classes did not look favourably upon members of society who required government assistance. Truly mixed communities may contribute to avoiding such stigmatisation, although such sentiments are arguably quasi-utopian in the status-conscious and materialistic environment of contemporary urban society.

Conclusions

The image and criminogenic associations relating to three British housing designs in this study clearly demonstrate that active citizenship is perceived to be more prevalent in environments characterised by well maintained designs without visible signs of decay or incivility. Ongoing and effective management of housing is therefore a potentially useful tool in influencing perceptions and creating and maintaining a ‘positive’ image. An understanding of both undefended space and offensible space should arguably influence and modify the development of the concept of the active citizen. In neighbourhoods where vacancy and dereliction predominate, indefensible space (Cozens et al, 2001b) may be created which may become ‘incapable of being defended’. As far as Jacob’s notion of ‘eyes on the street’ (1961) is concerned, the findings from this study suggest that perceptions of different groups may well vary in terms of who are perceived to be watching and whether they are considered to be likely to intervene or not.
To expect residents of such areas to police themselves arguably constitutes at the very least an apathetic lack of governmental responsibility. The re-affirmation of active citizenship may also involve the rapid learning of a new script for all the actors on the urban stage. In areas that are undefended, offensible or indefensible, active citizenship is unlikely to represent a straightforward approach to creating safer environments for the majority of the community. To insist upon such a behavioural change, without providing relevant support networks, training, new skills, or the legal apparatus with which to achieve it, is arguably capricious.

The notion of the active citizen has, however, provided the opportunity to propel the concept of defensible space back into the spotlight of public scrutiny, and raises some interesting considerations and complications for police, urban designers, town planners, housing officials, politicians and community members alike. People reside in communities within the built environment, and to attempt to make sense of the problems facing society by resolutely ignoring crucial inter-relationships is the singular failing that has distinguished many previous policy initiatives.

Undoubtedly, active citizenship appears to offer considerable promise, but evaluating its operational contribution requires considerable caution and discretion. However, if community safety is to be enhanced, further detailed enquiry into the complex dynamics that bind people and place together becomes increasingly essential. Research suggests that further investigating such ideas, particularly in relation to the perceived deterrent effect that associations of active citizenship generate, may well provide further insights.

Notes

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