

Design Against Crime and Socially Responsive Design for Public Space

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Abstract

Crime is a voracious form of premature obsolescence. Replacement of insured stolen items increases levels of product consumption that are unsustainable. Additional to the ecological cost of crime are the social and economic impacts linked to 'courts, cops and corrections' - money better spent on building sustainable social innovation in public space. The user/ abuser centered methodology of the Design Against Crime Research Centre (DACRC) at University of Arts London as a socially responsive design movement is described in our visual presentation which is further introduced by this short paper. It argues that DACRC's approach is unique. It addresses social agendas by accommodating consideration of multiple, often competing, user-demands in a given context, and responding in ways that produce both fiscal and social capital through sustainable design that addresses needs of public space.

Our visual presentation is written in the following sections:

Introduction

This paper argues that design against crime constitutes sustainable design because it attempts to anticipate and design out crime and other problems from public space, in a sustainable way, rather than solving problems after they have arisen, with inconsiderate design.

Why Design Against Crime i.e. Why Crime Is A Barrier To Sustainable Development

A widely accepted international definition of sustainable development is "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Sustainable Development Commission 2008). Crime, clearly contradicts these objectives, and as the UN and most domestic governments acknowledge, is a barrier to sustainable development.

To understand why crime is a barrier to sustainable development, and how it connects to design approaches, it is important to understand its impact at both the macro and micro levels. There are four levels of impact that should be briefly reviewed here including (i) economic (ii) environmental (iii) emotional and (iv) ecological influences.

i. Economic impact of crime

The total burden of costs of crime against individuals and households in England and Wales was estimated by the British Home Office in 2003-4 (the most up to date figures we could find on record) to be around £36.2bn (Home Office 2005). This economic cost estimate is primarily linked to actual crimes measured in the annual British Crime Survey (BCS), rather than those recorded by the British police. This fact is important because, as the report explains: "cost components are effectively weighted by the probability that they will be incurred, which in turn depends on the probability that an offence is reported, recorded, investigated and so on." (p5).

The economic impact of crime is not just experienced by victims, but also by wider society through consumption of public funds from the criminal justice system and health service, for example. We argue that such costs, in the long term, are not sustainable. Anticipating and designing out crime - using toughened beer glasses, for example, to reduce the effects of wounding in a bar room brawl - can reduce costs of violent assault to the tax payer and the state, as well as the number of victims of serious wounding. Our perspective on the cost of crime is that monies currently spent on policing crime and dealing with its consequences could be better invested developing the capacity to successfully design 'out' or 'against' a significant proportion of crimes that occur i.e. prevention rather than cure linked to designing out opportunities for crime.

ii. Environmental impact of crime

Fear of crime can produce vulnerability-led design responses that operate to negatively influence and determine the aesthetics of the environments we live in, as well as interaction with such environments, by individuals and communities.

Bill Durodie has discussed the “widespread presumption of human vulnerability that influences our discussion of disasters well before they have occurred” (Durodie 2004, 19) and speculates about the negative impact the accentuated focus on vulnerability leads to. Similarly we argue that security-led design responses that display an overt focus on crime and vulnerability can have a negative influence on the built environment and enjoyment of the public realm. One approach to address crimes that make people feel vulnerable has been to keep environments clean and friendly; to tidy up evidence of vandalism or civil disobedience and avoid what has been called the “broken window syndrome” i.e. “One un-repaired window is a signal that no one cares, so breaking more windows costs nothing... Untended property becomes fair game for people out for fun or plunder” (Wilson and Kelling 1982). This can be simplified as bad leads to worse. Similarly we argue that ‘bad’ design against crime (design that promotes an overt address to security over other considerations) leads to fear of crime. Insensitive fortification of the environment, often from the outside, against attack – locks and bolts, fences and gates, cameras and floodlights – exemplify this approach. We believe there is a lot to be said for ‘stealth design’ responses in which security is provided covertly by ‘the invisible hand of the designer’ within the objects and environments they design. In short, security issues should be addressed within certain design briefs and responses but should not define them. Security-led design briefs and responses tend to ignore the importance of users, and instead view the design process as if blocking the abuser’s intentions was the primary goal. Consequently, vulnerability-led design responses assume a high level of fortification regarding objects, services or spaces. The semiotics of this protection are often over-determined and contribute to paranoid ‘fortress aesthetics’ that are disproportionate to risk and detrimental to human well-being.

iii. Ecological impact of crime against ‘hot’ products

Crime trends often follow consumer trends. Those products that are seen as most desirable and ‘hot’ are often those that are stolen most regularly according to the British Design Council (Design Council 2008).

Recent reports indicate that a third of mobile phone theft in England are linked to theft from children under 18 years of age, who simply replace their phones lost to theft, which may have been stolen but are often also linked to incidents of bullying rather than straightforward robbery incidents (Higgins 2006). Often replacement is with another or newer mobile phone model. Indeed, most individuals who have insurance cover usually replace items

stolen - laptops, iPods, games consoles, bikes, mobile phones - with more up to date models. Crime is consequently a voracious promoter of premature obsolescence. It could be argued that the failure of designers to consider, and seek to mitigate, the criminogenic nature of these products is another voracious form of planned obsolescence. Anti theft functionality integrated into objects and buildings, without hindrance to the user, helps not just to design against crime, but also to protect the longevity of object use. Such an approach therefore is compatible, to some extent, with the idea that both objects buildings and cities, in designing against crime, constitute more sustainable design (Knights, Pascoe and Henschley 2003).

iv. Emotional impact of crime

We have proposed above that the design of objects, services and environments have an emotional impact on those that experience them. Whilst Situational Crime Prevention (SCP), and the case studies presented by scholars such as Ronald Clarke (Clarke 1992) and Marcus Felson (Felson 2002) have persuasively made the case that environmental manipulation can help design out crime by affecting behaviour, the account of impact of the environment on well-being is also linked to other evidence based research disciplines, not just those from criminology. To give just 2 examples from health care and economics; Roger Ulrich, currently Professor of Architecture at Texas A&M University, has delivered research that demonstrates that hospital patients recovered faster (and their medication demands were lower) when the hospital environment was designed to afford them views of the natural world outside and enjoyment of natural light, compared to those that were afforded no such considerations. Richard Layard, Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics, comes from a completely different perspective when he argues that negative perceptions of community safety militate against personal happiness. He suggests (Layard 2005) that despite increased prosperity and better material conditions for the majority, British people are no happier now than 50 years ago. Layard discusses many issues relating to why this might be before observing that post industrial countries with the highest productivity and prosperity are not always the happiest. He goes on to suggest that fear and poor perceptions of community safety may significantly detract from personal happiness (although he does not fully develop this line of argument or test it in the evidence based way Felson's, Clarke's and Ulrich's research has done so).

In drawing attention to such research we are saying that environments can operate to design out crime, but if designers are not careful about the visual impact of secure design (linked to fear of crime and over fortification) this can lead to stress and negative emotions. More significantly we argue that crime inhibits sustainable development because individuals need to feel safe, both

personally and publicly, in order to be able to participate in the creation of sustainable communities.

Whilst it is true that not all products that exhibit anti crime functionality (cars for example) have made the best use of resources or materials in relation to ecological impact, in terms of the intensity of change it brings, DAC is nevertheless compatible with the aims of sustainable design. Our visual presentation will use our own design benchmarks to argue that models of design which anticipate and attempt to design out crime problems will be more sustainable in terms of human and economic resources as design for public space than those that don't.

Conclusion

To truly develop DACRC outputs we must maintain a relationship with the public sector, and to design for it, but also make interventions in consumer-led markets to gain evidence of the commercial effectiveness of DAC. Here we may aid providers, via product differentiation in saturated markets, to generate fiscal capital linked to products for public space. Indeed, it is precisely DACRC's potential for generating 'innovation' in terms of the marketplace and public space, that means we do not simply equate with purist definitions of socially responsible design, such as Victor Papanek (Papanek 1971). We think, like Nicola Morelli (Morelli 2007) that "the time has come to review Papanek's recommendations from a new perspective, which reduces the distance between market-based and socially oriented initiatives". At least 6 years ago, with delivery of the Karrysafe range, DACRC decided to abandon Papanek's socially responsible account of design for the real world and use the phrase "socially responsive design" to describe our practice-led design model and outputs. This model is ethical in its implication, and in tune with what Thackara calls 'design mindfulness' as we recognize that sustainable aims must be applied in social as well as ecological terms if sustainable design is to address the needs of the real world of the 21st century.

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