

Securing car-centric cities:

An ecological reconstruction of ‘Designing out crime’

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Abstract

What can we learn about urban crime and disorder by ‘following’ the car and its infrastructural supports? In this paper, we address this question via an ecological critique and reconstruction of the ‘crime prevention through environmental design’ (CPTED) movement. We first describe the ways in which cities across the Global North were reimagined and rebuilt for cars during mid-20th century and consider the direct and indirect effects this auto-centric city making had on crime and disorder. We then identify the ways in which the framers of CPTED overlooked the impact of automobility on urban life and danger, before analysing how contemporary exponents of ‘designing out crime’ have taken against urban proximity by focusing on property crime at the expense of car-generated crime and disorder and the wider provisioning of viable neighbourhoods. CPTED has, we suggest, been an agent in the formation and securing of car-centric cities. We then seek to critically reconfigure the aspiration to ‘design’ out crime in ways that encompass the mundane harms of auto-centric mobility systems, and attend to the active role that socio-material infrastructures can play in fashioning both safe and liveable urban environments under conditions of climate breakdown.

Keywords

Automobility; crime prevention; environmental criminology; infrastructure; roads; urban design

Introduction

What can we learn about urban crime and disorder by ‘following’ the car? Have urban environments built to prioritize the efficient flow of motorized traffic contributed to criminal and broader forms of harm, either directly or indirectly? If so, how? In this paper, we address these questions by means of an ecological critique and reconstruction of environmental criminology and the crime prevention through environmental design movement (CPTED). In so doing, we trace discursively how protagonists in the CPTED movement selectively took up the impact of automobility on urban life and danger, seeking to ‘design out crime’ in ways focused on property crime at the expense of car-generated crime and disorder, and the wider provisioning of viable neighbourhoods . CPTED has, as a result, been an agent in the formation and securing of car-centric cities. We then seek to critically reconfigure the aspiration to ‘design’ out crime in ways that encompass the mundane harms of auto-centric mobility systems, and attend to the active

role that socio-material infrastructures can play in fashioning both safe and liveable urban environments under conditions of climate breakdown.

Two further arguments are threaded through the paper. First, we problematize the sharp distinction that CPTED proponents tend to make between ‘safe’ and ‘liveable’ urban environments, and their narrow prioritization of the former over the latter. The hostility that environmental criminologists display towards proponents of ‘liveable’ neighbourhoods is both puzzling and misplaced, as we shall show. Under conditions of profound ecological mutation, that opposition, and its false oppositions, are literally untenable. Second, we take up and extend the key organizing insight of CPTED: namely, that built environments matter when it comes to everyday safety. We seek to extend that insight by playing fuller attention to the role of objects and infrastructure as constitutive agents in shaping the (safe/good) city, thereby bringing criminology into closer dialogue with the social analysis of infrastructure and material culture. It is with such questions that we begin.

Designing in crime? Making cities safe for cars

Urban life is constituted by and mediated through infrastructure. Infrastructure is ‘matter that enables the movement of other matter’ (Larkin 2013: 329). It comprises built networks – roads, pipes, cables and the like – ‘that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allows for their exchange over space’. It is the socio-technical architecture of circulation. It generates the ‘ambient environment of everyday life’ (ibid.). Infrastructures are embedded, sunk into other structures and social arrangements, installed on the sedimentary layers of past infrastructural projects. They are ever-present, but also absent: typically becoming visible, or getting noticed, only when they break, or fall into disrepair, or become obstructed (Star 1999). But infrastructure is never merely the dull, silent backdrop to the drama of human life and conflict. To attend to infrastructure is to access the more-than-human character of the worlds we are trying to understand, to replace the human as the privileged epistemic subject and grasp urban life through a distributed notion of agency (Buier 2023: 49). Infrastructure is not inert but, as Amin (2014) puts it, ‘lively’. It is a formative part of cities that need to be understood as a mangle of machines, networks, humans, nonhumans, matter and nature (Amin and Thrift 2017: 9) – the city as an ‘infrastructural entanglement with considerable agency’ (ibid.: 33-34).

Nor are infrastructures neutral. They are sites and products of political power. They reveal political rationalities. Infrastructures supply affordances for some modes of being, acting and moving, while hindering or foreclosing others. They are the foundation of social practice – enabling and constraining, facilitating and blocking, the generative condition of possibility and impossibility, well-being and sustainability, in everyday life (Corchia and Borghini 2025). If we are to make the ‘imbrication of infrastructure and human organization’ the starting point for enquiring into urban life and danger, as Star

(1999: 379) suggests, we need to ask: What forms of human and human-material interaction are buried in the design and infrastructure of cities? What values, what principles of social ordering, and what hierarchies, does it install? (see, generally, Tonkiss 2013).

If, as Star argues, infrastructure has a ‘master narrative’, a ‘voice that speaks unconsciously from the presumed center of things (Star 1989: 384), then across most cities of the Global North the organizing voice is that of motorized vehicles, especially cars. The physical infrastructure of modern urban environments has during the past century been re-fashioned to prioritize the speedy, efficient flow of private cars, first across the US and Global North, latterly if unevenly across cities in the Global South (Gopukumar 2020). Norton (2008) recounts the bitter battles that broke out across US cities in the 1920s over the use and meaning of city streets, which had till then hosted an array of practices and mobilities. As car ownership spread beyond elites, battle waged between the interests of pedestrians, anxious parents, police, traffic engineers, and the newly—formed alliance of motoring interests (what Norton terms ‘Motordom’) over competing ideologies of safety, order, efficiency and freedom. By 1930, Norton shows, Motordom had largely triumphed in its battle over the meaning and allocation of urban space. As ‘rhetorical closure’ was affected over the conflict, a ‘new kind of city emerged’ and a new kind of urban disposition had taken shape. It was a city that had been designed and disciplined to satisfy the ‘needs of motorists’ (ibid.: 7).

Cognate battles resurfaced in the 1950s and 1960s, as the car became a mass consumer object and symbol of aspiration, prosperity, status and freedom. The Interstate Highways Act 1956 triggered a road building programme that entrenched the place of the car in American life and further transformed its cities. It did so in ways that flattened, disfigured or disorganised poor Black neighbourhoods, while cementing racial segregation in the built environment (Lewis 2013, Archer 2020). The new highway network also underpinned the movement of millions of fearful white residents who materially and ideologically abandoned US urban centres for sprawling, low-density suburbs (Kruse 2005; Henderson 2006). In Simmel’s (1994) terms, highway infrastructure offered a ‘bridge’ out of the city for middle-class whites and Blacks, while erecting ‘doors’ within and between the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of those left behind. But this is not simply an American tale. In the face of the seemingly inevitable tide of rising car ownership, city after city across the Global North was remodelled to suit the interests and convenience of the car (Buchanan 1963; Klemek 2011; Gunn and Townsend 2021). Cities became habitats whose built infrastructure was reconstructed with ramps, bypasses, tunnels, expressways and roundabouts and where the mundane experience of all urbanites (drivers and nondrivers alike) was to become inseparable from the ‘flexible coercion’ wrought by the dominance of automobility (Sheller and Urry 2000). Motorized traffic became constitutive of the urban condition. Cities had been made safe for cars.

An adequate account of social life and relations in cities in general, and urban crime and disorder in particular, has to reckon with this foundational fact. Criminology

has highlighted various relevant consequences of the automotive transformation of (American) cities. Cars have been acknowledged as an active agent in the extended mobility of offenders and offending, spreading ‘big city problems’ to smaller towns and rural areas (Headworth 2023: 87). The mass ownership of automobiles in the decades after 1945 created millions of valuable and portable objects, the theft of which contributed enormously to the exponential rise in volume crime from the 1960s to the mid-1990s (Garland 2001; Felson and Boba 2010). The subsequent crime drop has been a consequence in significant measure of ongoing (though only partially successful) efforts to make cars more difficult to steal (Farrell et al. 2011). Suburban sprawl was an indirect cause of property crime becoming ‘a prominent fact of modern life’ (Garland 2001: 106) during the latter third of the twentieth century: by separating where people lived from where they worked, suburbs became collections of homes containing ‘suitable targets’ in relatively empty neighbourhoods lacking ‘capable guardianship’ (Felson and Boba 2010; Singer and Drakulich 2019). Sporadic attention has also been paid to the ways in which highway construction ‘produced isolation and immiseration in the neighbourhoods they cut through’ (Headworth 2023: 80), with concentrating effects upon levels of poverty, property crime and violence (Kim and Hipp 2018; McCutcheon 2021). Marshall Berman’s (1982: 290-299) analysis of the impact on local neighbourhood life of Robert Moses’ Cross-Bronx Expressway offers an evocative case-in-point of highway-induced social disorganization.

It is an often-overlooked detail of Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) influential – and notorious – account of urban disorder that the eponymous ‘Broken Window’ is a car window. The neglect of this small fact is telling. For the most part, auto-dominance and its infrastructures are taken-for-granted in research on collective efficacy, urban disorder and fear of crime. They are treated as the immutable backdrop against which crime and disorder play out (something so buried in our sense of the city that we barely notice it), rather than active causal agents in the process of creating motivations or opportunities for crime, or disrupting or destroying the conditions of possibility for informal social control and community cohesion, or generating urban anxieties (cf. Hunter and Baumer 1982; Pina-Sánchez and Davies 2026). Robert Sampson’s longitudinal study of neighbourhood effects in Chicago has little to say about the impact of the motor age on the social life of the city (Sampson 2012).¹ A recent textbook on *Urban Criminology* contains not a single index entry to ‘cars’, or ‘infrastructure’ or ‘road traffic’ (Atkinson and

¹ For a partial exception see Sampson and Levy (2022) – though this paper is focused on the criminogenic effects of everyday urban mobility, not so much on *how* people move and its impact on neighbourhood life. Much the same holds for Browning et al.’s (2021: 100) call to acknowledge ‘the often submerged assumptions regarding mobility embedded in several prominent criminological theories’. Their subsequent analysis of social disorganization, collective efficacy and urban disorder theories collapses different forms of movement – walking, cycling, driving – into the singular category of ‘mobility’ in ways that are analytically unhelpful.

Millington 2019). The car and its infrastructural supports have remained a curious blind spot in social disorganization and related theories of urban crime.

Environmental criminology and the crime prevention through environmental design movement stand as partial exceptions in this regard. CPTED grasps the importance of physical infrastructure in creating or mitigating opportunities for crime, and for embedding informal surveillance in the routines of everyday life. It is, in fact, its animating insight. That recognition has been partial, however, due to systemic inattention to the forms of criminal harm and social disorder directly created by mass motoring, and the indirect effects of car-centric mobility systems on the environments in which criminal activity and informal social control take place. CPTED practitioners have also become active protagonists in contestation over the forms, meanings and use of public space in ways that have unduly separated 'safety' from 'sustainability' and privileged the former in ways that are, under conditions of ecological breakdown, rendered untenable. So, it is worth spending some time reconstructing and appraising the key claims.

Car harms and designing out crime: Or, did no one read Chapter 18?

The framing ambition of environmental criminology has been to focus attention on 'the ways in which the structure of the urban environment can be used to control and prevent crime' (Jeffrey 1971: 215). In the book that launched a crime prevention movement, Jeffrey argued that such environments can influence criminal behaviour – and behaviour in general - in one of two ways: 'physically, by providing the physical surroundings to which individuals respond; and socially, by providing the social relationship to which individuals respond' (ibid.). Cities, Jeffrey intriguingly suggests, 'can be designed so as to increase human contact of an intimate nature. Anomie, loneliness and alienation need not characterise urban life' (ibid.: 225). In his view:

Streets which have pedestrian *and vehicular traffic*, which have small shops and cafes open late at night, and which have residents living in apartments overlooking the street level are safe streets. (ibid.: 216; emphasis added)

The fullest original articulation of these ideas came in Oscar Newman's (1971) *Defensible Space*. Newman was an architect interested in the design of, and spatial relation between, buildings. His focus lay in how physical design enables or hinders the ability of communities 'to come together in joint action' – what later came to be known as collective efficacy (Sampson et al. 1997). The particular target of Newman's ire – and subsequent interventions – was high-rise public housing projects, which he claimed had prevented 'such amity and discouraged the natural pursuit of collective action' (ibid: 2) by creating anonymous, unloved, hard to supervise and neglected public spaces (see, on the UK case, Coleman 1985). Newman's response was to (re)model the physical fabric of residential

environments to enable them to inhibit crime. Defensible space describes ‘an environment in which the latent territoriality and sense of community of inhabitants can be translated into responsibility for ensuring a safe, productive and well-maintained living space.’ (ibid.: 3) The potential criminal perceives such space as controlled by residents. Defensible space is comprised of a range of mechanisms - real and symbolic barriers, strongly defined areas of influence, and improved opportunities for formal and informal surveillance – that combine to bring an environment under the control of its residents. The ambition is to ‘create areas for which people will adopt concern’ and ‘conditions for mutual support’ (ibid.: 2024). Newman too had things to say about the properties of safe streets:

streets provide security in the form of prominent paths for concentrated pedestrian and vehicular movements; windows and doorways, when facing streets, extend the zone of residents’ territorial commitments and allow for the continual surveillance of police in passing cars. Jane Jacobs in her *Death and Life of Great American Cities* contends that surveillance provided by casual passersby on foot or in a car is important as a deterrent to criminal activity. (1971: 25; emphasis added)

Jane Jacobs (1961) is frequently cited as inspiration for the CPTED movement. But she did *not* – at least in full – make the contention that Jeffrey draws from her work and that Newman explicitly attributes to her. As we shall see, the part that they erroneously presume to be present – vehicular surveillance – matters. In fact, it matters a lot. Jacobs describes streets and sidewalks, the main public spaces of a city, as its most vital organs (see also Pollack 2026). They are also the key to urban safety, understood as how to be and feel secure among strangers. For Jacobs, famously, ‘the first thing to understand is that public peace of cities is not kept primarily by the police, necessary as police are. It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves and enforced by the people themselves. . . No amount of police can enforce civilization when the normal, casual enforcement of it has broken down’ (1961: 31-2.). The ingredients for the intricate ‘ballet’ of social control are a clear demarcation of public and private space; eyes on the street belonging to its natural proprietors; and facilities that draw a diversity of users to the street on a fairly consistent basis (ibid: 46-7). These ingredients are destroyed if one tries to solve the problem of urban insecurity by spreading people and urban life out thinly. ‘A well-used street’, Jacobs (ibid.: 44) contends, ‘is apt to be a safe street’.

Jacobs believes that ‘we blame automobiles too much’ (ibid.: 353); their damaging effects are less a cause than a symptom of the failure to design workable cities. But – in Chapter 18 of *Death and Life* – she nonetheless contends that the constitutive elements of the system of automobility – ‘traffic arteries, parking lots, filling stations and so on’ (ibid. 352) – are ‘powerful instruments of city destruction’ resulting in city streets being ‘broken down into loose sprawls, incoherent and vacuous for anyone on foot’ (ibid.: 352). The problem, for Jacobs, is ‘the overwhelming numbers of vehicles, to which the most minimum pedestrian needs are gradually and steadily sacrificed’ (ibid: 359). Cities, as a

result, face a key question: 'erosion of cities by automobiles, or attrition of automobiles by cities' (ibid.: 363).

Erosion, Jacobs suggests, is a slow, barely discernible process. Cars start nibbling away at urban space; they sometimes take hefty bites. As, over time, more space is given over to enable cars to be moved or stored, the greater becomes the need for cars, hence more space is needed. Public transport is trimmed back or removed, creating yet more demand for cars. The cumulative effect is enormous, and is described by Jacobs in ways that provide a contender to 'Broken windows'-influenced accounts of the spiral of urban decline and disorder: 'erosion, little by little, subtracts reasons for using the eroded district, and at the same time makes it less lively, less compact, less safe for those who continue to have reason to use it' (ibid.: 365). The process proceeds, she continues, with no stopping off point, becoming genuinely harder to halt or reverse. Efforts towards reversal require what Jacobs calls 'tactics of attrition', small acts of taking back (ibid.: 377). These seek to make conditions 'less convenient for cars' (ibid.: 377), gradually seeking to reduce the number of people using private vehicles. Jacobs identifies several such acts: increasing the size of sidewalks, installing public parklets into urban space, using bollards to stop traffic overspill from arteries, and protect the localized use of streets. There are good reasons to believe that she considered these in part to be crime prevention measures.

There is little to suggest that Jeffrey, Newman or their many successors either read Chapter 18 of *Death and Life* or, if they did, considered it relevant to criminological work. The effects of this oversight are evident from the get-go. They are, as intimated, discernible in the way Jeffrey and Newman collapse pedestrian and motorized surveillance and insist that relevant eyes-on-the-street can be those of passing motorists: 'vehicular access provides', Newman (1971: 60) writes, 'a form of continuous natural surveillance'. This is an unannounced and barely noticed break with Jacobs.² It more importantly overlooks the phenomenology of driving (Randell 2017): the speed and shell of the car cocoons its driver from the sounds, feel and rhythms of the street, rendering them a poor observer of its interactional order (and dangers). Such insulated movement renders informal surveillance close to impossible. Expecting drivers to attend to the social life of sidewalks also distracts them from the task at hand: navigating a large steel machine through busy – and fleshy – urban environments. It is hard not to see this claim as an instance of public safety being mentally separated from road safety and pursued at the latter's expense (cf. Loader 2026).

An intriguing contrast can be drawn here with gated communities. Newman (1971: 14) was a critic of middle-class gated living, which he derided as 'high-rise fortresses of semi-luxury'. His objection was that such living gave rise to 'introversion and intentional isolation' that has three 'dangerous characteristics' (ibid.): indifference to the crime

² It is a fair bet that neither Jeffrey nor Newman even noticed this slippage. It may simply have been the result of the auto-centric world in which they lived and worked, of which they were barely conscious.

problem once it has been evaded; relegation of security to formal security alone, and achieving security as the expense of the adjacent area. 'A natural mechanism providing safety to our streets', Newman (1971: 15) writes, 'has been sacrificed to ensure the security of the walled-off complex'. It is worth asking how much of this analysis can be extended to the insulated and isolating movement offered by cars. Jane Jacobs (1961: 56) is clear that 'taking refuge in vehicles' is one technique people adopt in the absence of urban safety, an avoidance strategy that reproduces the conditions that give rise to urban danger in the first place. She places cocooned private mobility in the same vein here as 'cultivation of a turf', or gated living. It maybe that the central criminological irony of the car is that it satisfies a deep need among its users to feel safe and secure in public space, while simultaneously undermining the safety and security of its non-users, which is most urban dwellers, most of the time (Gossling 2020).

A further consequence of this collapsing of modes of movement is a failure to register the way in which heavy car traffic indirectly contributes to crime and disorder by damaging the landscapes of, and conditions of possibility for, informal social control and community efficacy. One dimension of this relates to how cars insulate likely offenders from their surroundings, making easy identification by residents difficult. But car traffic also interrupts the capacity of residents to develop Newman's preferred sense of proprietorial rights and willingness to engage in natural surveillance and amity-building in their living space. This much became clear from a parallel literature on urban environments initiated at the time that Jeffrey and Newman were writing. For example, in their study of the effects of traffic on the quality of social interaction on city streets, Appleyard and Lintell (1972) show that residents on the 'heavy traffic' street they studied in San Francisco made no clear demarcation between public space and local territory that was their responsibility. There was, moreover, little or no sidewalk activity and sense of community, and residents failed to notice and remember details of the environment around them. 'Heavy traffic' was, in short, 'associated with withdrawal from the physical environment' and social interaction beyond the home (ibid.: 97). We can only speculate as to how the history of CPTED would have unfolded if it had from the outset taken account of the growing body of literature on the environmental impact of road traffic (see also, Appleyard 1981; Bosselmann and O'Hare 1983; Hart and Parkhurst 2011; Appleyard and Appleyard 2020).³ Might such encounters have generated an altered – perhaps radically different – sense of what it means to create 'physical design that enables residents to control their environment rather than become its victims' (Newman 1971: 8)?

Neglecting to attend to the car's impact on urban environments also lead the pioneers of CPTED to overlook the direct criminogenic effects of car-centricity on urban safety: road crime. Car-heavy cities are landscapes of mass law-breaking and criminal

³ It should be noted that in some of his subsequent crime prevention interventions Newman came to see the value of reducing cut-through traffic and implicitly acknowledged that heavy car movement erodes territoriality in the affected neighbourhoods and leaves them more exposed to crime (see Newman 1996).

harm, albeit often committed by offenders who understand themselves to be law-abiding (Wells and Savigar 2017). They are environments in which drivers routinely exceed speed limits, move carelessly or recklessly, or while impaired by drink or drugs, or – nowadays – distracted by mobile phones. They are environments in which humans are killed or seriously injured in acts of road violence, in ways marked by significant socio-spatial disparities, as are countless numbers of non-human animals.⁴ They are places beset by the harms of congestion, noise and air pollution (Moore and Kay 2025; Loader 2026). None of this criminal harm merits a mention in the framing texts of Jeffrey and Newman. What, we are left wondering, would have happened to the analysis and prescription if road crime, and the socio-spatial patterning of serious injury, death and environmental despoliation, had been present at the outset and formed part of the ensuing urban safety conversation? At the very least, Newman (1971: 204) would have found it more difficult to characterize *Defensible Space* in these terms: ‘the areas most usually identified as safe are heavily trafficked public streets and arteries combining both intense vehicular traffic and pedestrian movement’.

Safety first? The curious criminological war on urban proximity

The CPTED movement has mushroomed in the decades since Jeffrey and Newman made their framing contributions. It now encompasses academics working internationally across environmental criminology, routine activities and rational choice theory, and with close affiliations to situational crime prevention (Schneider and Kitchen 2007). It extends to committed practitioners in police, crime prevention and urban planning and in some jurisdictions has found institutional form, notably in the UK police’s *Secured by Design* programme launched in 1989.⁵ Branches of CPTED has evolved into self-styled ‘second’ and ‘third’ generations whose concerns seek to connect design to questions of social cohesion, community-building and liveability (Cleveland and Saville 1997; Mihinjic and Saville 2019; see also Cozens and Love 2015). It now operates largely in and upon cities that have been further transformed by processes of suburbanization and low-density living, urban forms that CPTED often seems eager to defend, as we shall see.

This expansion and diversification notwithstanding, CPTED has coalesced around some core claims. Foremost among these is a preference for enclosure, for ‘properties designed with minimum access/egress’ (Armitage 2013: 85). The attendant concern is that increased street activity heightens exposure to motivated offenders and

⁴ In 1971, the year *Defensible Space* was published, there were 54,700 motor vehicle traffic deaths in the United States. The year marked a period when highway fatalities in the US were at historic highs; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motor_vehicle_fatality_rate_in_U.S._by_year. In the same year, there were 17,730 reported homicides.

⁵ <https://www.securedbydesign.com/about-us/about-sbd>

provides those offenders with access points and escape routes, such that more enclosed, less permeable environments may ultimately be safer (Birks and Davies 2017). The consequent ambition – as alluded to in Secured by Design guidance – is for single-family, low-density, residential cul-de-sacs (Secured by Design 2025). Houses should also, on this view, be designed to accommodate vehicle parking, or laid out in ways that enable cars to be stored in view of adjacent housing. Permeability is cast here as creating opportunities for crime, while undermining possibilities for proprietorial oversight of public space and effective natural surveillance.⁶ For the most part, permeability means walking: the aim is to restrict street not road connectivity (cf. Crowe and Zahm 1994). In fact, road connectivity is necessary to render these forms of low-density settlement feasible. What is being described and secured is a form of living that depends upon, and bakes in, car-dependency.

This is the backdrop to the objections CPTED protagonists made to ‘New Urbanist’ planning. Two related forms of New Urbanism are called out for attention here: the creation of ‘neo-traditional’ environments that use high-quality design features and lay-outs to foster social interaction and community;⁷ and forms of high-density, multiple use, compact neighbourhoods that seek to counter the economic, environmental, public health, and social ills of low-density, car-dependent urban forms (Southworth and Owens 1993). Though it has post-dated most of the active criticism levelled at New Urbanism, the most salient contemporary iteration of such ideas is the ‘15-minute city’, urban environments that make it easy for people to navigate by walking or cycling and bring basic provisioning within reasonable distance of people’s homes. Carlos Moreno – one of the key architects of the ‘15-minute city’ – couches them as a vital urban adaptations to climate breakdown, what he terms ‘the proximity revolution’ (Moreno, 2024).

The objection levelled at these ideas by proponents of CPTED is that the emphasis on sustainability and quality of life has come as the expense of public safety, which has been neglected (Town and O’Toole 2005). Worse, the contention goes, New Urbanist principles have generated forms of urban design that are actively criminogenic. ‘The crime prevention dimensions to this theory are limited’, Cozens (2008: 433) writes, ‘and lack both critical discussion and systematic evidence’ (see also Schneider and Kitchen 2007: 52). CPTED advocates charge that New Urbanism ‘overlook[s] 30 years research [that] has repeatedly found that permeability increases opportunities for crime’ (Cozens 2008: 434); ignores increased risks of damage to, and theft of cars, that are parked away

⁶ Though Newman is often cited and frequently lauded as laying ground for such arguments, we have arguably travelled some way from his framing concerns. Environments are made safe on this (re)formulation of defensible space, not by the continuous flow of pedestrian movement, but by emptying streets of such movement. By insulating private property from the threats posed by outsiders, this sometimes feels more akin to a suburban variant of the gated living that Newman decried.

⁷ Perhaps the most well-known UK example is Poundbury, in Dorset: <https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/poundbury>

from adjoining homes, and generates housing forms that increase the cost of policing (Knowles 2008; Armitage 2007). New urbanism, in short, promotes the very thing that modern proponents of CPTED believe urban design should seek to avoid: 'greater levels of movement past the home are generally associated with higher degrees of risk' (Armitage 2007: 88). The case prosecuted against New Urbanism is – in these terms – emphatically pressed. The CPTED prosecutors generally consider it to be closed.

Elsewhere, we have sought to re-open the case, and challenge the consensus portraying walkable neighbourhoods as criminogenic (Pina-Sanchez and Loader 2026). We did so by highlighting two key issues – one methodological, the other substantive – that have been overlooked by CPTED and environmental criminology more broadly. Our first critique concerns the adoption of crime counts as opposed to victimization risk as the predominant outcome variable analysed in the literature, and, relatedly, the excessive emphasis placed on police-recorded property crime, residential burglary in particular (Birks and Davies 2017). This choice confounds human interaction with risk of victimization and inevitably points to the conclusion that more seclusion equals greater safety – in extremis, it implies that the only safe urban design is one composed of completely disconnected spaces. We then argue that enclosed habitats do not prevent but rather *increase* crime, elsewhere and in different forms. Specifically, low-density cul-de-sac neighbourhoods, the alleged safest type of urban design, deepen car-dependency which, in turn, leads to motoring offences and other forms of street crime across the road network. The importance of this second-order effect cannot be understated: in England & Wales, motoring offences have grown in number and proportion, accounting for 60% of all cases sentenced in 2024. They consume more criminal justice resources than any other crime type. Yet, they have long been – and remain – curiously overlooked in CPTED research on urban safety.

On these grounds, we sought to make the case that walkability is *for* crime prevention. But there is also value in seeking to protect walkability *from* crime prevention, or at least insisting upon a more holistic – or ecological – appraisal of the properties that make neighbourhoods safe and those that make them liveable or sustainable in other ways, and of the relation between them. The protagonists of CPTED have in the main neither attempted still less accomplished such appraisal, with the partial exception of its second and third generation fringes. Some have gestured in the direction of 'balancing sustainability and security' (Cozens and Love 2009: 348) or else wished the tension away by suggestion that 'the elements that make a neighbourhood safe are the same elements that make a "good" neighbourhood' (Crowe and Zahm 1994: 22). Others have worried about a possible 'dark side' of CPTED in terms of 'extreme target hardening, overfortification and exclusionary methods' (Cozens 2017: 2). But for the most part, proponents of CPTED draw a sharp distinction between 'safe' and 'liveable' or 'sustainable' neighbourhoods, before focussing on, and affording priority to, the former over the latter. They tend to proceed wielding (property) crime prevention as some kind of trump card, thereby giving the control of burglary and vehicle crime privileged status

in contests over how to design and sustain ‘viable’ neighbourhoods and ‘the good city’ (Amin 2016). These moves rest, as we have sought to show, on systematic neglect of the criminal harms directly and indirectly created by the forms of low-density, car-dependent living to which CPTED has become attached. They also risk making crime risk the arbiter and enemy of the forms of provisioning that make neighbourhood’s nourishing places to inhabit (see, Harper 2022). It takes quite some criminological hubris to believe it legitimate to curtail the mundane – and in so many ways beneficial – practice of urban walking (and wheeling).

There is, in fact, something bafflingly antagonistic about the rearguard CPTED has put up against the ‘proximity revolution’. The antipathy can sometimes be detected in the passingly sneering tone of some among its authors, not merely chastising New Urbanism for its neglect of public safety, but disparaging ‘the dubious goal of reducing auto-dependency’ (Town and O’Toole 2005: 1) or placing ‘sustainability’ issues in scare quotes and dismissing New Urbanism’s “slick” professional marketing and promotional campaigns’ (Cozens 2008: 430). But it is more apparent in the one-way character of the engagement. New Urbanists are extolled to take the crime question seriously (like naughty school-children being brought into line), when they in fact take very seriously motoring offences, death and injury of the road and industrial levels of car-generated environmental harm, and seek pathways to combat them. That demand is pressed, however, with little or no sense that the direction of influence might also be reversed, that we need today to think and act on public safety in ways that consider, and are conditioned by, pressing ecological questions. Given the predilection of CPTED for evidence-based analysis and intervention, there may be value in its proponents appraising themselves of the evidence on Anthropogenic global warming and thinking through its possible implications for the design of safe urban neighbourhoods (see, Loader et al. 2026: ch. 6)

CPTED was forged in the midst of, and as response to, the post-1945 explosion in rates of volume property crime across the Global North which, to be fair, its practical proposals helped in part to stem (Farrell et al. 2011). It was a constitutive component of the ‘culture of control’ (Garland 2001). But while concerns about burglary and vehicle theft have not disappeared, they have abated, and co-exist today with a pressing mix of insecurities pertaining to the protection of personal safety, community and the wider planet (Loader et al. 2026). CPTED risks here looking like a legacy project, trapped in an ‘old’ ecology of security, and now seeking to orient itself amid a set of everyday (and broadly environmental) security concerns that its practitioners struggle to apprehend. In the face of such concerns, we may urgently need to adjust the operative sense of what is at stake when we design material and social infrastructures to inhibit crime and foster a sense of urban security, and recalibrate the relation between safety and liveability. The harms of car-centric mobility systems need to be at the heart of such recalibration.

Ecologizing safe neighbourhoods: Or, learning to love the humble bollard

- 1) Common critical criminological response to these concerns has been one of expose and dismissal of the 'designing out crime' paradigm. Critics have objected to its architectural determinism and reductive account of the relationship between the built form and urban life. They have objected to interventions that display hostility to the unhoused, protestors and assorted marginal urban others. They have highlighted and objected to what is seen as the defensive securitization of urban space (see, inter alia, Persak and Di Ronco; A. Young, Never mind the bollards paper and so on.
- 2) But what if we do not take the path of critique and dismissal. What if, instead, we take seriously the point about the importance – and we might add – agency of socio-material infrastructures to urban life and safety, but do so in ways that think more capaciously about what urban safety means under conditions of ecological crisis and fold into our consideration of that question regimes of automobility as a source of harm and violence in modern cities.
- 3) What lines of thinking about, and acting upon, urban security then open up . . . ?

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