

Feeling Safe: Principles in Practice

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A significant volume of research has already been conducted on designing out crime, designing for community security and defensible space, environmental design to prevent crime and to reduce situational opportunities for crime and fear. Dutch, French, British, American, and Australian works abound; *inter alia*. And many unsavoury places have been adapted, successfully, as a consequence. A great many remain. Rather than pursue more research of an empirical nature, via crime mapping and community participation and attitude studies and so on (see bibliography for a selection of relevant works), in this paper I would like to simply reflect on what a safe place feels like - and extract principles embedded in practice, in a heuristic and phenomenological, experiential kind of way. But, notwithstanding, also back it up with recent research results which reflect on the issues.¹ The approach is to use photographic imagery as the medium for the message, to set the scene, provide the opportunity to extract in-built principles, and around which a brief experiential narrative is woven.

Some things are simply felt; somehow known, sixth-sensed. Other sensations are more visceral, like the pleasurable feeling of being warm in winter or cool in summer, and its inverse. Some situations we can do something about, others not, like engendering feelings of being respected or appreciated by others. Feeling safe falls somewhere in-between: dependent on situational indicators in-built, as potential, in the form of environmental cues and the ethereal ambience generated by other people in places – both of which function below the threshold of consciousness, and also on past experience, attitude and intention – and genetic inheritance. A strapping young rugby player is unlikely to feel afraid in circumstances where a pregnant young woman might well be intimidated. But generically, we are sentient in ways way beyond our five senses: everybody *knows* when it feels safe to walk down a street or enter a park or building or walk to ones car in a parking lot.

On a personal level, I have been involved with crime, community and design research for close on thirty years; and am thus versed in parameters which are more likely to induce fear - all lodged in my mind's eye. At the same time, I am an inveterate flâneur, wandering about timeless European cities whenever fortune favoured me, immersing myself in their ambience and culture, the peopled streets and squares. But unlike the poets like Baudelaire who wandered about Paris aimlessly, I set out with a considered a set of theoretical principles in the

back of my mind, actively observing the interactions of people and place (and planet), and recording and chronicling those impressions with photographic evidence, where I perceive principles embedded in the everyday praxis.

These epitomizing experiences in these perennial places of great quality can also be appreciated to great advance by looking at them comparatively with low quality places at the extreme of the liveability spectrum, such as public housing agglomerations, for instance.

Let me begin this brief narrative with some salient insights from recent research into Australian public housing located in very low density 'superlot' suburban tracts, in States across the nation. (And end with some comparative Europhilic reflections). These are Radburn designs, by and large, which proliferated in Australian social housing domains around the mid-twentieth century, abysmal places with their back to front housing accessed by adjacent vast realms of open space, poorly lit, like the streets, dormant and depopulated afterdark, peppered with underpasses and cul-de-sacs with easy escape laneways, and lanes snaking past the exposed back yards - where hooligans can even ride their motorcycles.

This latter scenario is currently being played out in the Macquarie Fields 'superlot' in the Campbelltown LGA of Sydney, but community regeneration projects are currently underway, to address issues such as these. During July of 2009, the Designing-out-Crime Research Centre at UTS conducted a winter studio with some 200 students and 39 separate projects, each with a 'client', one of which was the regeneration of a townhouse precinct in Macquarie Fields. Emanating from an 'urban' perspective, consideration was given to creating a precinct or micro-neighbourhood where the central area became an urban place where pedestrians and the community are given priority (over cars). Provision was made for parking cars within each dwelling's front yard, under a carport, and even, in the situation where some townhouses were joined together, in an inside garage with additional parking available in the driveway.

Issues of density are always paramount in these developments; in order to sell off a housing department property it needs to be Torrens titled, which requires 300sq meters of land, which, in its turn, results in an even lower density development. Higher densities are preferable, however, in order to reach a critical mass where a sense of community starts to override the individualism and separation which characterises these super low density housing areas normally. Similarly, for a mixed-use precinct to become viable, a certain density is also required, and in this instance a locally run food co-op was built-in to the scheme, simultaneously enhancing responsibility and employment opportunities - a community regeneration and social inclusion notion.



Figs 1 & 2: Macquarie Fields townhouse complex; with underpass leading from dead-end to vast open space behind the dwellings via a rear lane; and internal car dominated space, with high front fence barriers at the front of the houses; and sign of privacy-seeking behaviour.



Figs 3 & 4: Two examples of precinct resolution from winter studio student-groups; inclusive of closed off back lane and 'urbanized' internal 'square'. Fig 3 has a new street-facing (grey-roof) building also housing a food co-op. Fig 4 shows the revamped space, currently vacant, opposite the development adjacent to the school, and the proposed orchards in the triangular space on the left, also currently vacant.

The previous work on nine areas of public housing concentrations included two Radburn superlots in NSW.ⁱⁱ In one (see 5-year trend graph of Area 2.1, Fig 5) radical spatial interventions had had no apparent influence on reducing crime, over a five year period.

In Area 2.2, however, a place of the highest incidence of crime, it was actually reducing. It had been subjected to intense social interventions and virtually nothing spatial. This included empathetic community housing managers and crime prevention officers, and a raft of policies aimed at community empowerment.

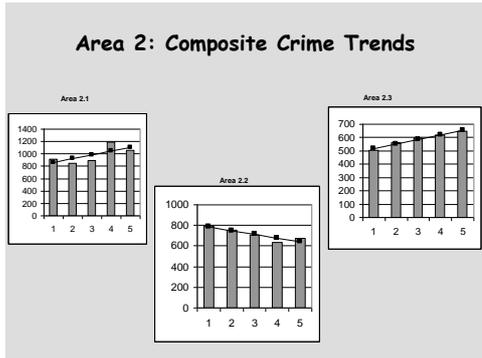


Fig 5: Two Radburn estates in NSW (areas 2.1/spatial emphasis and 2.2/social) with differing interventions and crime incidence outcomes.ⁱⁱⁱ Fig 6: Archetypal example of rear lane access.

Empirically, from this crime mapping research, it also became self-evident that crime accumulates in the concentrated social housing zones.^{iv}

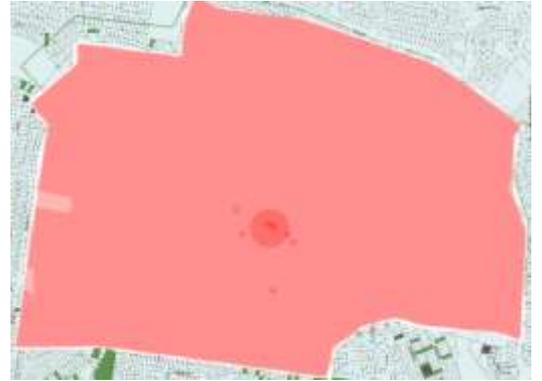
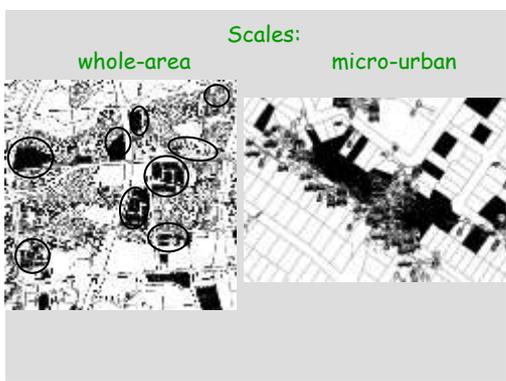


Fig 7: Generic example from 1995 AHURI research, showing circled crime hotspots coinciding with public housing areas (black lots; white lots are private) at areal level, and at micro-scale; over a five year period. Fig 8: A fear map, where red indicates a high incidence, here covering an entire housing area, with a very hot spot at the centre.^v

Meanwhile, the original Radburn setting, in concept and reality, is a totally different kettle of fish. Medium-density, middle-class private housing of high quality with appropriate rear entrances and adjacent to well-tended and lush spaces of moderate extent with low fences in a parklike setting. There is no sense of fear or vulnerability at all; and people I asked said it was a 'great place to live'; 'feel no fear here'. Did any Australian planners go to Radburn before they laid out these bland, depersonalized low-density poor-quality concentrations - intended for the most disadvantaged, disenfranchised, impoverished and marginalized people?



Figs 9 & 10: Salubrious Radburn New Jersey housing: rear and car access, and front onto path

Thankfully, currently the State housing departments are spending vast sums of money trying to engender community empowerment and participation and enhance personal and community life-chances, as well as reversing the Radburn estates. The strategy includes upgrading dwellings for sale by private treaty - to attempt to alter the demographic configuration and return income to help finance the interventions. This unfortunate legacy will slowly be turned around, certainly, in due course, but in the meanwhile the disadvantaged population that is allocated to them continues in the vicious cycle of poverty and unemployment and subliminally indoctrinated negative role modelling.

From an environmental criminology point of view, certain design indicators are common to these high crime high fear places. Vast open spaces and very poorly lit streets, dormant and desolate afterdark, like the shopping areas; dark and isolated back lanes affording very easy access to the separated dwellings; and no public realm provision of the urban square type, and no sense of a 'commons'.

Simultaneously, much social housing worldwide takes the form of depersonalized high-rise towers, seeped in anonymity and community indifference, blighted with ambiguity and low sense of responsibility. Utter failures; criminogenic in the extreme; a terrible Corbusian legacy...



Fig 11: High-rise high density housing in Singapore; and Fig 12: on the outskirts of Rome

So, to try now to address what is it about the distinctive sense of liveability that permeates the 'timeless' European city centres that have survived throughout the ages, I will address the general scene first.

The very fact, unpalatable to many, that these places are sought out by millions of tourists, who spend fortunes for that experience – and absolutely shun the high rise estates on the periphery of towns and cities, speaks volumes.

Basically, they are there because it feels good to be there. And safe. They sit at sidewalk cafés, or down the centre of streets, eating and drinking and watching each other; and wander about without compunction, late into the nights. Come evening, the streets and alleyways fill with happy strollers, always locals, mingling with tourists during the high-seasons, lined with spectators; the sense of well being pervasive and palpable. This continues for several hours into the evening, and if it happens to be in a Spanish city, like Barcelona or Segovia, well into the night. People with kids can be seen eating their evening meal at 10pm; nothing out of the ordinary at all.

Generating a safe afterdark experience always involves both urban design and place management - for instance possibly progressively shutting public places down as community policing diminishes while increasing the level of formal policing.



Figs 13 & 14: People streets in Barcelona;



watchers watching and being watched



Figs 15 & 16: Café lane in Stockholm; and dining in the centre of street in Perugia

Certainly, unavoidably, there will be crime (there are humans living there), but the urban environment itself is not criminogenic, not opportunistic for malevolence. In the town-spaces, what untoward behaviour does occur will be petty in nature I'd wager – having never experienced or witnessed anything in the scores of cities I've been in. Pick-pocketing in the main (possibly, fleecing well-heeled well-fed tourists of a few bob is ok?). Sometimes the confusion engendered by finding ones way around these unfamiliar organic webs of streets makes for vulnerability, like standing pondering train times in a foreign station with ones mind not on ones handbag. Placing signposts in the centre of historic squares to propel confused tourists past the darkened edges where they might be dazzled and confused and be vulnerable to predators as they enter from side streets, has been suggested but is unlikely to be implemented if it impinges on the heritage quality of the place. Progressively increasing the illumination coming out of side streets to match the illumination of the square might be a more feasible designing-out-crime and fear resolution.

So, in a nutshell, what is it that seems to work so eminently in European 'old cities' then?

Philosophically: a palpable 'sense of place', of a continuous and cherished history, of embedded culture, at a humane meso-urban scale, imbued with a feeling of community like-mindedness, and of community security; places where people come first: in walking-talking opportunity settings.

Interestingly, as an aside, there is graffiti, not street art, plastered all over these European cities, and no-one seems perturbed enough to bother to remove it. In Australia, meanwhile, graffiti is considered an arch-crime, except where it becomes street art, like, say in some lanes of Melbourne.



Fig 17: Lisbon graffiti



Fig 18: Old city of Lyon, no transition spaces

Specifically:

- 1 Medium-rise and medium-density *meso-urban* settings (neither high nor low density); frequently without transition spaces between the private and public realms, where a coherent and cogent relationship exists between the buildings and the streets they inhabit (Fig 18, above)



Figs 19 & 20: Generic examples of old city meso-urban configurations and geometry -
Stockholm



Rome

- 2 Narrow, often organic grid, labyrinthine streets and personalized, identifiable precincts (a sublime order in the apparent chaos); where nodal connectivity and permeability is maximized in conjunction with all-round inter-spatial visibility in the urban squares where streets seamlessly integrate themselves; and few if any cul-de-sacs but many permeable arcades as peerless transition zones.



Figs 21 & 22: Arcaded streets in Bologna: inside and outside



Figs 23 & 24: Organic geometry, Paris & Dam Square, Amsterdam: integral streets and square

3 The extreme relevance of accommodating animation and activity, into the early hours of the day, is indisputable. Winding narrow streets at the edges and in the less populated parts of town do engender a sense of fear and vulnerability at night, when they are not sufficiently illuminated. Even a small lit café alters the ambience in its vicinity noticeably. Prominent lighting regimes and reflective surfaces turn night into day.



Figs 25 & 26: Main square in Barcelona, safe day and night

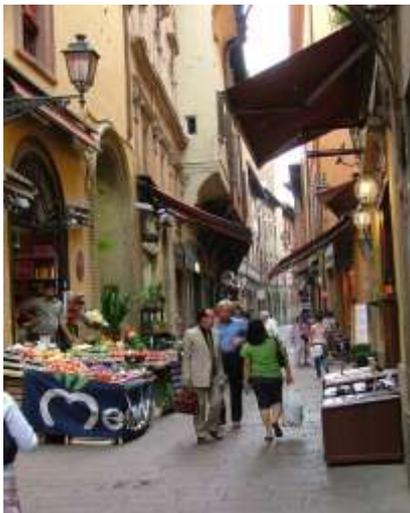
4 Pedestrian-only streets and mixed-mode streets where walkers are prioritized and mingle safely with slow moving vehicles and scooters animates and bolsters natural surveillability and community presence.



Figs 27 & 28: Mixed mode places, Rome and

Aix-en-Provence

- 5 Mixed-use functions, with coherent afterdark facilities for all segments of the community, thus animating the otherwise dormant public realm and streets; community interactive events (street markets; festivals...)



Figs 29 & 30: Mixed use in Bologna &

Barcelona

- 6 Natural surveillability in the public realm, and from the dwellings and commercial outlets facing directly onto the streets, with an enhanced sense of territoriality emergent from assumed long-term generational residential occupancy.
- 7 A space syntax of convex sightlines; no large open tracts of land; visibly permeable pocket parks; and closed off vistas at the ends of streets



Fig 31: Safe street, mixed-mode, mixed-use, and closed off vista, Bologna

- 8 Finally, secure courtyard buildings, with verandas onto streets permitting amplified surveillability, with controlled accessibility (and oftentimes sustainably planted with natural air conditioning trees and plants).

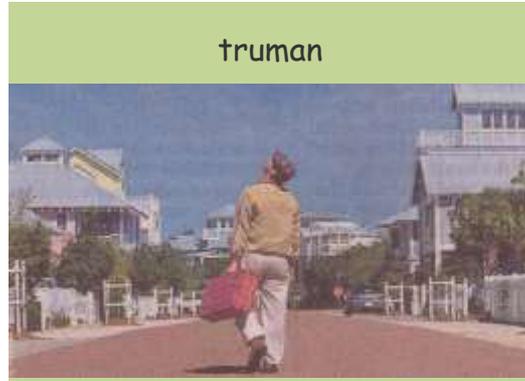


Figs 32 & 33: Superb surveillability in courtyard/squares; and typical court apartment in Paris



Figs 34 & 35: Courtyard building in Rome; Barcelona folk looking over the peopled-domain

New urbanism USA style, meanwhile, and by the by, is not at the urban scale reflected on here, although it would surely help induce a feeling of being enveloped in a community-oriented area, where surveillability potential is maximized, especially where traditional porches from the pre-war era are part of the design.



Figs 36 & 37: Seaside new urbanism sub-urbanism; and the Truman Show (which you thought was a movie set!)

In conclusion, urban anthropology and environmental psychology insights form the groundwork for these reflections into *sensible* environmental criminology. Feeling safe or unsafe might be difficult to define, and involve complex socio-cultural and demographic paradigms, but nobody doubts it when they feel it. And it's not random: crime and fear, like community empowerment and places for neighbours to meet formally and spontaneously, are clearly influenced by the designed environment.



Figs 38 & 39: Epitomes of a Safe City: Amsterdam & an Unsafe Place, *a la* Radburn Australia.

All Imagery Credits: Author

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Figs 3 & 4: Student Groups 23 & 24, Macquarie Fields Studio "Social Housing and Community Regeneration"

UTS Winter Studio - Designing-out-Crime, July 2009

Fig 23: Photograph taken at Paris Exhibition, at the Arsenal Museum, Paris

Fig 24: Scan of postcard, Aeroview, Rotterdam

Fig 36: <http://www.theseasideinstitute.org/>

Fig 37: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYj2m1yVpGU>

Reference

- i Samuels, R., Judd, B., O'Brien, B. and Barton, J. (2004), *Linkages Between Housing, Policing and Other Interventions for Crime and Harassment Reduction on Public Housing Estates, Final Report*, AHURI/Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne [www.AHURI.edu.au]
- ii Samuels, *et al*, 2004, idem
- iii Samuels, *et al*, idem
- iv Samuels, *et al*, idem
- v Samuels, *et al*, idem

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