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Newman, Oscar: Defensible Space Theory

Newman, Oscar: Defensible space theory

The concept of “defensible space” was first explicated by Oscar Newman in a 1972 book by the same title. The concept, which contains elements of a theory of crime as well as a set of urban design principles, became popular in the 1970s as urban crime problems continued to rise. Defensible space was discussed, utilized, and critiqued widely by criminologists and other social scientists, as well as urban planners, law enforcement officials, and architects. The design concepts have also been implemented in numerous communities in the United States and around the world. Later works by Newman, including *Community of Interest* and *Creating Defensible Space* provide further elaboration of his ideas.

Newman states that defensible space is a model that can inhibit crime in residential environments. These environments might be specific buildings, projects, or entire neighborhoods. His earliest writings focused on urban public housing projects, in particular, the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis. Newman was a professor of architecture and city planning at Washington University in St. Louis when he noted that many of the public spaces in the housing project were crime ridden, vandalized and dirty while more private spaces were much better maintained. Newman later extended his ideas to urban residential neighborhoods. He argued that it was possible to design the physical environment of these areas in such a way to decrease crime levels by affecting the behavior of both residents and potential offenders and thus lead to lower levels of crime. More specifically, it was possible to create physical layouts of residential areas that allow residents to better control the areas. It was also possible to create physical layouts that would discourage or deter potential criminals from committing their offenses in these areas.

There are four key concepts in his theory and design principles: territoriality, surveillance, image, and milieu. Newman suggests that physical space can be designed to create areas of territorial influence. Physical elements or markers can be used to define private or semi-private spaces that encourage residents to assume more responsibility for the areas than they would if the areas were fully public spaces. Physical subdivisions that create smaller spaces can encourage occupants to adopt proprietary attitudes which serve as deterrents to crime. Residents will come to see these areas are their own spaces, be more concerned for them, and exert more control over the activities occurring in them. The

same elements or markers, whether real (e.g., fences, gates) or symbolic (e.g., signs, plantings) can deter or discourage outsiders from intruding into the areas to commit crime.

Newman also suggests that the physical layout can be designed to improve natural surveillance opportunities for residents. The ability of residents to casually and regularly observe the public areas in one's environment is an important factor in reducing crime in these areas and in lessening residents' fear of crime when they use these public areas. This idea is similar to the argument offered by Jane Jacobs that buildings should be oriented to provide natural surveillance of the street. Specific physical designs that improve surveillance opportunities include the following: the placement of internal public areas such as hallways, lobbies, and elevators in such a way that they can be observed from outside the building; the location of external public areas such as parks and playgrounds so that there are clear sight lines from traffic on surrounding streets; and the provision of adequate lighting to make surveillance possible at night. Newman points out that ensuring opportunities for surveillance does not guarantee that residents will respond to events that they do observe. Here he notes the importance of the interplay between territoriality and surveillance opportunities. Residents will be more likely to intervene when they can observe the area and when they feel some sense of responsibility for what goes on in the area.

Newman's discussion of image and milieu focuses primarily on his analysis of public housing projects. He argues that the image of high-rise public housing projects contributes to a stigmatization of the project and its residents. The large group of high-rise buildings that usually stand out as significantly different from the surrounding community create an image of these areas as "easy hits" for criminality. The image of these areas is also linked to the social characteristics of the residents and to serious design flaws that create the conditions for high crime rates. He suggests that the location of public housing projects within the broader community milieu will have an effect on the level of safety within the project. Specifically, he recommends that these projects should not be built in areas that are already high crime areas; rather, they should be located adjacent to safe activity areas. These areas would include alongside busy public streets and near government offices and institutional areas. Newman reiterates that image and milieu do stand alone in reducing crime but that they must be linked to designs that encourage territoriality and surveillance.

Although aspects of Newman's designs have been implemented in various projects and neighborhoods around the United States and the world, both his theory and his claims about the effectiveness of his design principles in reducing crime have been the subject of much criticism. The broadest challenge to the theory is the claim that it is a form of physical determinism, that is, that the physical environment determines human behavior. While Newman denies that he is making that argument, in his later work he does admit being troubled by his failure to clearly communicate his ideas about both the physical and the social bases of his theory. His writings evolve over time both to revise his original ideas and to incorporate more considerations from other perspectives.

Studies seeking to evaluate the defensible space program would also reveal a number of other conceptual difficulties with Newman's writing. Newman suggests that the theory of defensible space can explain, and that the design principles can reduce, crime. However, he consistently refers to crime in very broad terms. He does not distinguish between very different types of criminal offenses that afflict residential areas. He does not recognize that his theory and design principles might apply more appropriately to some types of crimes

than others. Another criticism is that Newman's arguments sometimes appear to be contradictory. For example, in some places, Newman argues that making spaces more private can reduce outsiders' access to these areas and hence improve safety. But he also argues that closing off streets through housing projects can lead to an increase in crime by reducing the natural surveillance that comes with busy thoroughfares.

The results of the many studies of the defensible space designs reveal inconsistent findings. Some of the discrepancies may be due to the varying methodological approaches used to test the theory. Some focus on the building level, while others focus on the block or neighborhood level. Some examine the impact on residents' territoriality and surveillance, while others directly study offender patterns. Some of the studies were conducted in sites where the only difference between communities, or the only change in a community over time, was in the physical design of the area. In other places, the changes in the physical environment were part of a broader, multifaceted plan to reduce crime. In these cases, it is difficult to distinguish the effects of the changes in physical design from the effects of the other elements in the plan.

A number of studies question Newman's assertions about physical design and territoriality. They suggest that there is not a clear, consistent relationship between the physical design of an area and territoriality or informal social control. These studies suggest that the relationship between physical design and territoriality may vary across communities and across different populations. For example, Sally Merry's study in a public housing project found that defensible space designs had very limited influence on the residential social climate. On the other hand, Floyd Fowler and Thomas Mangione's study in one urban neighborhood reported that defensible space features were related to increased territoriality and informal social control, and that in the short term, there was a lower rate of crime in the area. A study by Patrick Donnelly and Charles Kimble examined the effectiveness of a Newman-directed plan that created small, distinct mini-areas in one urban neighborhood by closing off streets that significantly reduced cut-through traffic. Newman argued that these mini-neighborhoods would see less crime since these areas would become more private, neighbors would get to know each other better, and look after their neighbors more closely. Both property crime and violent crime went down dramatically immediately after the plan went into effect. The decline was not due to increased residents' territoriality or surveillance. There was no change in residents' territoriality or informal social control after the plan was implemented. The plan appears to have a direct effect on offenders since the large reductions in crime were due primarily to reductions in crimes committed by persons who lived outside the neighborhood. The street closing plan reduced outsiders' opportunity to become familiar with the area by reducing access to the area. It may also have increased the perceived risks of being caught by reducing potential exit routes from the area after crimes were committed. It also led to a decrease in unpremeditated, opportunistic crimes by reducing routine drive-through traffic.

Many later approaches to criminological theory and crime prevention incorporate ideas and concepts presented by Newman. Over the last three decades, there has been a growing acceptance of the significant role that the physical environment plays in shaping crime. The field of

environmental criminology (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1991) emphasizes the importance of place. Routine activity theory focuses on three factors—availability of suitable target, the lack of a suitable guardian to prevent the crime, and the presence of a likely offender—all of which are affected by physical design, territoriality, and surveillance (Felson, 1998). Rational choice theory assumes that offenders weigh the potential benefits and costs of their offenses. They weigh the likelihood of their offense being observed and interrupted and of their being caught. Again, each of these factors are affected by their perception of the physical environment (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Finally, the crime prevention through environmental design and situational crime prevention approaches provide a broader perspective on the physical environment than Newman's original work (Clarke, 1997; Jeffery, 1971).

Patrick G. Donnelly 10.4135/9781412959193.n185 **See also**

[Brantingham, Patricia L., and Paul J. Brantingham: Environmental Criminology](#)

[Clarke, Ronald V.: Situational Crime Prevention](#)

[Cohen, Lawrence E., and Marcus K. Felson: Routine Activity Theory](#)

[Eck, John E.: Places and the Crime Triangle](#)

[Felson, Marcus K.: Crime and Everyday Life](#)

[Jeffery, C. Ray: Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design](#)

[Physical Environment and Crime](#)

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