

A BRIEF ORIENTATION TO “CPTED” CONCEPTS IN PUBLIC HOUSING

DEFINITION

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design,¹ known as CPTED (pronounced “*Sep Ted*”), is a field of knowledge developed in response to research demonstrating that the architecture of some buildings deters crime while that of others encourages it. These concepts were originally designed to help reduce crime *to* a property (e.g., a burglar breaking in). They are now known also to help prevent crime *from* a property (e.g. drug dealing, drug manufacturing, illegal gang activity).

Essentially, it is important that lighting, landscaping, and building design combine to create an environment where drug dealers, burglars, and other criminals don’t feel comfortable. Basic steps include making it difficult to break in, closing off likely escape routes, and making sure public areas can be easily observed by nearby people as they go about their normal activity. The basic elements of CPTED:

- 1. Natural Surveillance.** The ability to look into and out of your property. Crime is less likely to happen if criminals feel they will be observed. Examples: Keep shrubs trimmed, so they don’t block the view of windows or porches. Install glass peepholes so children and adults can see who is at the door before they open it. Prune tree branches that hang below six feet. Install low-energy-usage outdoor lighting along the paths. Install motion-activated lights in private areas such as driveways. Keep drapes or blinds open during the day, leave porch lights on at night.
- 2. Access Control.** Controlling entry and exit. Crime is less likely to happen if the criminal feels it will be hard to get in or that escape routes are blocked. Examples range from as simple as a gate that is closed after hours to a 24-hour guard station or remote-activated gate. Applies to individual apartments too: deadbolt locks, security pins in windows and sliding-glass doors. In high rise apartments, the “buzzer” for opening the front door from inside an apartment is an access control device.
- 3. Territoriality.** Making a psychological impression that someone cares about the property and will engage in its defense. Conveying territoriality is accomplished by posting signs, general cleanliness, high maintenance standards, and residents who politely question strangers. Signs that tell visitors to “report to the manager,” define rules of conduct, warn against trespassing, or merely announce neighborhood boundaries are all part of asserting territoriality. In other examples, cleaning off graffiti the very day it appears or painting a mural on a blank wall both send a message that minor crime won’t be overlooked.

¹ While using the built and natural environment to protect inhabitants is as old as civilization, the term crime prevention through environmental design is relatively new. Among other references, see: *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design*, C. Ray Jeffery, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1971), and *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design*, Oscar Newman, (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

- 4. Activity Support.** Increasing the presence of law-abiding citizens can decrease the opportunities for criminals. Neighborhood features that are not used for legitimate activities are magnets for illegal activities. Organizing events or improving public services in parks and school yards, holding outdoor gatherings on hot summer nights, and accommodating cyclists, runners, and pedestrians are all examples.

How these concepts are best applied in a given property depends on many factors, including the existing landscaping, building architecture, availability of resident managers, management practices, presence of security personnel, desires of law abiding residents, and more.

THE LIMITATIONS OF CPTED

Effective application of the concepts includes an understanding of its limitations. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design must work in concert with management of the landlord-tenant relationship. In particular, three important cautions about the applied use of CPTED principles should be understood:

- **Beware of using CPTED to compensate for other shortcomings.** For example, closing off more streets or adding more powerful lighting will not cure a problem caused by weak lease enforcement or poor police response. CPTED works in concert with property management, law enforcement, and resident involvement techniques. It cannot do the job alone.
- **Avoid changes in the name of CPTED that reduce livability or promote fear.** Unless you are building a prison, a ten foot fence is usually counterproductive — the extra height generally does more to advertise the community's fear than it does to increase the community's safety. Tree removal (instead of simply trimming up branches) is another example. Trees add to the livability of a community, offering a comforting natural counterpoint to the housing structures. While it is true that removing a tree can increase natural surveillance, the action may also degrade the livability of the area, making it less attractive to good residents. A third example would be over-reliance on the fortress-like look of window bars.
- **Be careful of changes that inconvenience good residents.** Every change that takes away from the quality of life for good residents has the potential of undermining the intent. Closing off all entry points but one may be important for access control, but it must be weighed against the need of residents to reach their units conveniently. If the inconvenience is too high, the change becomes counterproductive. Whenever possible, find solutions that seriously inconvenience criminals while allowing good residents to enjoy all possible freedom.

In general, if the planned physical change will reduce the appeal of the property, it is likely that the wrong solution has been chosen for the problem at hand. From a housing management standpoint, therefore, a given crime problem should never be looked at exclusively from a CPTED standpoint. The following are examples of key factors that determine the level of illegal activity in rental property:

- 1. TENANT SCREENING. *Impact on CPTED: Access control measures are seriously undermined when crime problems are perpetuated by the public housing agency's own residents.*** It doesn't make sense to put up a higher fence around a population that isn't screened well to start with. Further, decisions about CPTED changes become less

relevant when we must dramatically modify designs to protect facilities from our own residents and guests. For example: managers at one particularly hard-hit housing authority we worked with expressed concern about adding lighting because they feared that residents, or their guests, would be likely to shoot them out. While one solution would be to invent a bullet-proof light bulb, a better solution is to develop a resident population that doesn't shoot at the lights. Unless a Housing Authority makes a committed effort to screen its tenants, many otherwise valuable CPTED changes become meaningless.

2. **MAINTENANCE STANDARDS. *Impact on CPTED: Maintaining a sense of territoriality is very difficult without a substantial ongoing effort.*** Whether the issue is planting flowers, watering a lawn, replacing burned out lights, patching a fence, picking up litter, or removing graffiti, communicating a sense of territoriality requires continuous effort. Such innocent-seeming features as maintaining a well-tended garden strip that pushes foot traffic a few feet away from first floor windows can be highly effective. A criminal stepping into the garden to get to the window will know he has visibly violated private space, but would feel no such psychological barrier standing on hard packed dirt or a common lawn adjacent to a first floor window. But the garden strip must be maintained. Likewise, allowing the visible effects of litter, vandalism, and deferred maintenance to persist is a formula for undermining the impact of even the most sophisticated CPTED changes. Hard packed dirt, litter and broken glass, broken fences, and aging graffiti communicate all the wrong messages about who *really* owns the territory.
3. **LEASE ENFORCEMENT. *Impact on CPTED: If a landlord doesn't evict tenants who have allowed dangerous lease violations, little else matters.*** Like screening, lease enforcement is the other major tool available to landlords to limit the unacceptable behavior of residents and guests. It will never matter how high the fence, or how bright the light, if known lease violators are permitted to continue non-compliant behavior year in and year out. There is no point in planting flowers or watering the lawn just to give drug dealers in an adjacent unit a better view. In particular, drug distribution and violent behavior by residents *or their guests* must be answered. With a few very specific exceptions, evidence of such behavior, provable at civil levels of evidence, should be sufficient to cause a housing authority to use all available legal means to remove the tenants of the unit. No citizen — the offending tenants included — is served by learning that even the most serious of lease violations will go unchallenged.
4. **RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT. *Impact on CPTED: All solutions have greater impact when residents help too.*** Natural surveillance, for example, works best when residents are willing to report crime when they see it. Activity support is virtually impossible without residents getting involved. While inspiring involvement is not easy, it isn't as hard or mysterious as many believe it to be. After all, the law-abiding residents of an impacted community have a greater personal interest in the outcome of crime reduction strategies than any other stakeholder. The levels and types of involvement are highly dependent on many factors, including fear levels, faith that management will act when notified, faith in police to act appropriately, possession of basic coping skills, understanding of citizens' relationships to government and each other, and many more. While a lower crime area can benefit immediately and substantially from management-sponsored neighborhood watches, resident councils, and much more, organizing efforts in severely impacted communities must be done with extreme care until the most dangerous situations have been brought under control.
5. **POLICE INVOLVEMENT. *Impact on CPTED: Criminals fear observation only when they believe it could lead to arrest.*** It doesn't matter if one's address is clearly posted, visibility

is good, fences are strong, and the territory is well cared for if the criminal knows that police in the area are unresponsive. Equally, awareness by criminals that police are working proactively in an area can substantially dampen the enthusiasm of the criminally inclined.

It can seem an uphill, complicated task to improve the many elements in the craft of managing public housing. In the long run it holds the promise of public housing staff enjoying the pleasure and freedom of proactive problem-solving rather than coping with constant, dangerous crises. Preventive management, while a lot of work at the start, consistently proves less expensive and simpler in the long run. Most important, it allows public housing staff to experience the intrinsic reward most of them seek: the satisfaction of creating a dignified, safe community for low-income citizens.

