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# The Beleagured City

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Two ideas, one from military history, the other new – a bang uptodate notion in urban planning! The BBC's weekly journal, "THE LISTENER", which reprints the best of the discussions on both radio and television, reproduced a talk on LETHAL GEOMETRY in its issue of 27.9.73. Five months later, on 7.3.74, it gave the script of a TV discussion on DEFENSIBLE SPACE in which the visiting speaker was an American, Oscar Newman who had recently published a book with that title. What have the ideas in common, that I should bring them together in my headline?

Both of them, in fact, were designed as systems of security. LETHAL GEOMETRY was the science of fortifying towns in Europe after the introduction of gunpowder dictated superior methods of constructing the encircling walls to withstand bombardment by siege guns, but also – even more important – the shaping of those walls so that the defenders could train the fire of their guns upon the assault forces, even if the latter got to within close range of the walls. Typically, at the apex formed by each change of direction in the wall was a projecting platform where the guns were placed. Before them (often on ground sloping steeply away, because whenever feasible such fortified towns occupied a height) was a wide perimeter kept clear of obstructions which might cover the approach of the besieger. This was known as a 'glacis' – the best of the military engineers of the period were French, and thus the terms come from them. If elements of the attacking force did succeed in entering the glacis the guns on the projecting platform could be swivelled to bring them under defensive fire almost up to the very walls themselves. In Northern Italy and France many of these little fortress-cities still exist behind their now useless but picturesque walls. In other regions where economic growth was faster in the succeeding years of peace, the rigid geometry was burst open for new roads and streets, and in many places the walls were wholly removed. Much of the beauty of Vienna in its late Imperial heyday came from the magnificent girdling boulevards known as "The Ring" which were laid out on the land once occupied by the walls and glacis.

Lethal Geometry, then, was a defensive mechanism against the **threat from outside**, the common enemy of all the townsfolk, assuming them to be united behind their rulers. A large assumption, but the menace of an external enemy tended to forge such a unity in the ranks! DEFENSIBLE SPACE, on the other hand, is the way in which, according to American architect Newman, townsmen can so plan parts of the residential area as to make them safe from the **threat from inside** the city, represented by an element of criminals.

Newman is on good ground when he criticises the design of some of the huge housing projects that have disfigured American and British (and we could add, Australian) cities during the past two decades. Undoubtedly

some of the great high-rise tenements, monotonous in their form, repellent in their tactile surfaces, anonymous in their endless repetition of residential "cells", are as alienating as anything could be, and likely to drive their denizens to crime or drink or suicide if these thoughts hadn't accompanied them there. The distances — vertical and horizontal — between mothers at their house-chores and their children below at play, the ambiguity of the spaces between or beneath the towers or banked-up terraces (whether that space was meant for children's play, or old folks' quiet enjoyment, or to park more cars — almost always yielded wholly to cars in the end) and the soullessness of a cityscape where towers cast cold shadows or reflect the sun's heat back, and draughty winds blow papers in the man-made canyons — none of these conditions is conducive to the good life, to the close emotional bonds that are present in a contented society, where only a few kick over the traces.

But from the impressive evidence that certain types of urban mass-housing are correlated with a high crime rate, Newman postulates that housing intended for the same sections of the populace can be, if already existent, modified, or else newly devised, to virtually eliminate the incidence of crime in those districts. The principle he flourishes is DEFENSIBLE SPACE, the rearrangement of unenclosed spaces — sometimes by token enclosure — to remove the sense of anonymity and ambiguity (an aim we may agree to be laudable) and to restore to those who dwell between them a sense of proprietorship in those spaces, sometimes by the contiguous individual household, more often by a fairly small group of neighbours all known to each other. (In terms of the prevailing American sentimentality, all of these people are mutually tolerant, and call out "Hi!" to each other on their first encounter every day). From this sense of common possession of the space, and having means — either by direct line of sight or through electronic gadgetry — by which they can keep it under surveillance, these neighbours will immediately be able to identify the stranger, the intruder, and to set the alarm bells ringing. Indeed, says the Newman theory, the stranger will feel so strange and conspicuous in this well-defined territory that he will be thrown into "frightened relief" and not attempt any "funny business". He will instead slink away and it should not therefore be necessary for the householders to call the children in and slide the door-bolts.

Crime in Newman's scenario doesn't begin at home. It's not your son who pops out the street-lights, it's not my daughter who breaks into the chemist's, or the young bloke in the third house down the street who way-lays and molests girls walking home from the station. The criminal is someone from another suburb or district, some sleazy slum, and within your boundaries you know him because he is foreign, he is the 'outlander'. As a trenchant review of Newman's book in an American student journal so aptly put it, the notion of defensible spaces is less the inspiration of the natural sentiments of community and mutual aid than the catalysing of suspicion.

The richest society in the world, North American society, has got the less-well-off part of its citizens in a double bind. Its consumerist culture has programmed them with urgent 'wants', more and more of this and that, yet denies to them the means, i.e. the level of income, to satisfy many of these synthetic wants. The frustration of such expected satisfactions is reflected in high rates of petty crime, or even of organised gangsterism, by these

under-capitalised practitioners of the private enterprise system. Since the volume of wealth in the hands of the better off is so great, the official law enforcement agencies even if comparatively incorrupt are ineffectual in protecting either property or persons, and in the worst policed cities the wealthy have retreated behind steel doors, with closed circuit TV monitoring devices in their vestibules, and even a reliance on their own private security guards. What Newman is now preaching is a diluted version of these defensive principles for the public housing sector, rationalising the fears of the "poor but honest" in the devisal of a system of surveillance of their surroundings which will somehow depose the prowler with nefarious intent.

I am sure that Newman and his followers would claim this to be a travesty of their proposals, and it is true that the canons of design of high-density human dwelling places that he accentuates, the redefinition of extramural space, the repulsion of the car, the mitigation of monotony, and so on, could, if seriously taken up do much to humanise the kind of life that goes on in the large public housing developments.

Yet a termite-heap is not a human city, and a community is not created merely by the multiplication of the dwelling places, however well defended. It is in its public expression that one judges the culture and urbanity of a community, in how its members conduct themselves in the streets, in the pubs, in the theatres, the stadia — yes and in the schools and libraries. The range of amenities could be extended, their number indicating the breadth, their quality the depth of the culture in the so-called pluralist society. But the planners of the termite-heap seldom allow for any but the most rudimentary, and now even those might be considered the lurking-places of the strangers. For it is the emphasis given to the phrase 'defensible space' that betrays the real nature of Newman's prescription. His primary concern is with an 'atomised' society (essentially a contradiction of terms), of possessing classes secure in their family redoubts. The sectors of the city would become citadels for the virtuous, insulated by "fire-free zones" from the bandit-infested areas outside.

If this picture presents some affinities with the strategies employed by the US generals (advised by the whizz-kids of Washington, dubbed by Noam Chomsky "the New Mandarins") it is not, I venture to say, accidental. Ideologically they are the same, strategies of defence against the challenge of the have-nots. What should not surprise Newman and others who embrace his false-sociology is that the definition of crime as a thing that arises only outside of his citadels, and the stigmatisation of the depressed classes as nurseries of criminals, must bring appreciably closer to realisation the spectre that haunts him, the politicisation of the deprived people into a revolutionary force.

Because in the end the citadels are not secure. Just as the big-shot scoundrels are within the steel walls so are there revolutionary cadres. The redoubts of New York will fall, just as surely as those of Saigon. The defensibility of the surrounding space will not avail (any more than the geometry of the historic walled cities continued to be lethal) when the ideas of revolution well up within the fortress.

#### References:

"Lethal Geometry" : a talk by Christopher Duffy on BBC Radio 3

(THE LISTENER 27.9.73)

"DEFENSIBLE SPACE – Oscar Newman talks about new housing estates in Britain and America"

'Horizon' (BBC 2)  
(THE LISTENER 7.3.74)

"Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design" by Oscar Newman (The MacMillan Co.)

reviewed by W. Russell Ellis, and republished in JOURNAL OF ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION: VOLUME XXVII, NUMBER 1 (at pp11/12)

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### WOMEN, CRIME AND CRIMINOLOGY:

#### A Feminist Critique

by Carol Smart – Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977

Glenys Pernu

One of the important tasks the author had in researching and writing *Women, Crime and Criminology* was to examine and challenge the existing ideological framework based on existing studies of female criminality which refer to women in terms of biological motives, domesticity, maternal instincts and submissiveness. Carol Smart presents in this refreshing, straightforward and very readable work a discussion of classical and contemporary theories of female criminality, criminal statistics, sex-specific offences, the treatment of female offenders, the relation between women, crime and mental illness and finally examines the possibility of formulating an alternative women's perspective in the area of women and crime.

Traditionally it has been argued that because statistically the numbers of female offenders have been so small and insignificant compared with male offenders, there has been little need for research or interest in the area of female criminality. Ms Smart argues, however, that where women are definable as a social 'problem', areas such as maternal deprivation, insanity and mental breakdown, there is no shortage of research material. Thus the impressive neglect of female criminality would seem to be directly related to the low status of female offenders as a pressing social problem. One consequence of this is that those studies which do exist tend to accept many culturally specific assumptions about the nature of women. In her own words, the author says:

*"In advanced industrialized societies, there tends to be a prior assumption that women are irrational, compulsive and slightly neurotic. Criminological theories of female criminality have reflected this predominant paradigm, often using unfounded assertions about the 'true' nature of women as proof of their assertions and explanations of female behaviour. In turn such theories have influenced general conceptions of the female*