

# War Zone to Safe Neighborhood

by R. Richard Fleener

Montclair, California, is a residential city of 25,000 located approximately 30 miles south-east of Los Angeles. The 1960s were years of community growth in Montclair. Multifamily apartments, generally two-story quadraplexes, were constructed with a minimum amount of open space, private areas, and parking. Each building was constructed on its own lot. The units were often purchased by unsophisticated “mom and pop” owners looking for a retirement investment.

In the early 1980s, these buildings had begun to decline physically. Simultaneously, significant cultural and social changes took place in the community. Single-parent families and latchkey children were becoming more common, and immigration from Mexico and Southeast Asia was increasing. The drug culture, with its accompanying criminal activity, seemed to escalate.

By the mid-1980s, Montclair had become one of the first cities to experience problems still common in many communities today. Drug dealing, prostitution, and gang-related criminal activities had infested the neglected apartment buildings to create extremely dangerous, undesirable, multifamily residential communities. An evening network television news show featured one of these neighborhoods and accurately labelled it a *War Zone*.

Neither property owners nor government officials were prepared for this deterioration. Some owners abandoned buildings after threats on their lives while attempting to collect rent. City officials experienced only temporary relief by sending additional police into the problem area. When the police left, crime soon returned to previous levels or increased.

The city council feared this complex, multifaceted problem would spread to other areas of the city. They wanted a permanent, cost-effective solution in which the property owners could participate. In 1986 the city council formed the Montclair Housing Improvement Task Force. Representatives from each city department joined a planning consultant to solve the problems. Quickly the task force identified two root causes of deterioration in the multifamily neighborhoods—poor management practices by apartment owners and poor physical site and building design.

The task force developed a coordinated plan to transform the *War Zone* into a safe neighborhood. Both short- and long-term plans were implemented. Short-term solutions included highly visible enforcement efforts by the police department and code enforcement officers. These actions drew the attention of owners and tenants, demonstrating the city’s sincerity and determination to make real, substantive improvements in the neighborhood.

The first long-term plan was to unite the fragmented building owners into a team that would function as a single landlord. The task force felt that working with current owners to salvage their properties was the only cost-effective solution. Under the Montclair approach, the owners united in an owners’ association under strict codes, covenants, and restrictions (CC&Rs). These CC&Rs included tenant screening procedures and property maintenance standards. Other considerations included joint landscape maintenance and coordinated exterior improvement standards.

Uniting the owners to manage their individual buildings as a single complex accomplished

the first plan, but more was still required. The neighborhood had been an ideal area for drive-by drug deals and shootings. It had no sense of security, no feeling of home, and no visible display of residential pride. Gangs and drug pushers were visible in the alleys and along streets, even in broad daylight. To create a safe multifamily neighborhood, physical improvements would need to be made to improve tenant attitudes and behavior, as well as to attract desirable future tenants.

To improve the physical environment, the task force worked closely with owners, starting with these simple but visible improvements:

- The perimeter of the neighborhood was enclosed by a 42-inch high wrought iron fence, set back 2 feet from the sidewalk. This fence defined boundaries between private and public spaces. Next the area between the fence and sidewalk was extensively landscaped to discourage sitting on or loitering around the fence.
- After the collective owners adopted a new name for the area, attractive monument signs were constructed in coordination with additional landscape and hardscape improvements.
- The drive serving the units was improved with the installation of security gates to prohibit access by nonresidents.
- Other additions included enriched paving of the drive and increased landscaping throughout the public areas.

These site improvements visually united the separate buildings. Similarities in facade, landscaping, entryways, fencing, and security gates at parking areas reinforced a single neighborhood image.

Funds from HUD's Community Development Block Grant program were used to pay administrative costs and fund site improvements, including security gating, landscaping, and wrought iron fencing. The total cost has been remarkably low. City-funded site improvement costs totalled \$640,000 for the first series of neighborhoods, an average of only \$1,290 a unit. Montclair estimates that this project saves \$280,000 annually in reduced service calls to police and fire departments. Effective planning and implementation of improvements may appear costly but, as the city of Montclair shows, they can actually be cost-effective ventures that improve the quality of life and reverse the plight of declining neighborhoods.

Today, although many of the same owners and tenants remain, new multifamily neighborhoods exist. Crime is greatly reduced and pride in the area is clearly visible. Children now play where drug dealers once dealt. Litter and graffiti have been nearly eliminated, and lawns are well maintained. Crime in these multifamily areas is no higher than in single-family areas. Crime, as a total percentage of city crime, has been cut by 70 percent. The Montclair multifamily neighborhoods show that physical planning and site design can bring about positive changes in social behavior.

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