

# Defensible Space

by Barry F. Hersh

Twenty-five years ago I had the opportunity to work as a graduate student on the Defensible Space project team. This innovative study, led by architect Oscar Newman, then Associate Professor at New York University, researched the complex relationship between physical design and safety. The team also included environmental psychologists and urban planners. Our model for the study was the New York City Housing Authority, and HUD provided part of the funding for the study as well as modernization funds for implementation.

The study showed strong relationships between environmental design factors and the occurrence of crime, in many cases confirming the intuitive experience of both HUD and New York City Housing Authority officials (notably Mr. Bernard Moses). An overall statistical analysis of design factors was correlated with crime occurrences. Housing Authority projects, comparable in population and location but differing in design, were compared. The results demonstrated that highrise structures were more difficult environments, particularly for families. A mother taking care of an infant in a 20th-story apartment was unable to supervise her other children playing in front of the building. With hundreds of families utilizing the same entryway, hallways, and elevators, residents found control of those semipublic spaces impossible. Lobbies, elevators, and corridors could only be secured by policing. While density was a key factor, project design features were also significant.

The Defensible Space study proved that low-rise buildings, with a smaller number of families sharing an entryway and with clearly

marked recreational spaces located near the apartments, provide a safer environment. Actual crime statistics kept by the New York City Housing Authority Police demonstrated that, given virtually identical populations and densities, nearby projects with better design characteristics experienced less crime and were more under the control of the residents.

Highrise family public housing developments, such as Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis where Oscar Newman first focused on the issue, were already in trouble, and these projects continue to be demolished. The Defensible Space study had an enormous impact since HUD, after reviewing the results, would no longer support the construction of highrise family developments. Instead, HUD's focus shifted to the construction of midrise and townhouse developments. However, a portion of HUD's modernization funds were designated to improve security and safety in existing highrise projects. The design of many newer public housing projects reflects these concepts, helping to restore the public image of subsidized housing.

The Defensible Space study reached well beyond the realm of HUD and public housing authorities. Results made the front cover of *Progressive Architecture*—one of the first times public housing issues reached the architectural design community. Consequently, private multifamily housing also benefited from insights regarding the relationships among physical environment, resident control of semipublic spaces, and reduction in criminal activity.

The study also revealed a great deal about the way cities and their neighborhoods function. Another part of Defensible Space dealt with street closing as a way to limit access and improve neighborhood control. This approach continues to gain popularity and recently received national publicity. Oscar Newman continues to consult with communities across the Nation, and a growing focus exists in the field of environmental crime prevention. A recent *New York Times* article referred to Defensible Space, quoting Newman on antiterrorism physical design efforts.

Of course, design is only one of many factors influencing crime and public safety. While the physical environment can facilitate neighborhood and police control, it alone cannot deal with gangs, drug-related crime, or families with multiple problems and security issues. The Defensible Space study does, however, represent a major step toward focusing on design as a key element to ensure safer housing, helping HUD to meet its basic responsibility to provide secure homes and communities.

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