

Crime Prevention Through Design

By Diane Zahm



A vigilant view from a porch in the Third Street Cottages community in Langley, Washington.
Photo by [Jason Miller](#).

Our urban neighborhoods are suffering from years of suburban development, which has destroyed their physical, economic and social fabric, and left it torn and frayed. In some neighborhoods this process has created an urban wasteland of vacant lots, buildings, streets and sidewalks that have become havens for crime. It is these vacancies—or voids—that are now the most problematic. Abandoned buildings serve as residences for drug users and prostitutes. Vacant lots full of trash and weeds attract homeless persons or become the local hangout for gang members. Vacated or unused alleys function as a street network for drug dealers.

In

many ways, land-use policies exacerbate the problem. Long ago, in an effort to promote economic development, downtown neighborhoods were rezoned for commercial or industrial uses, eliminating any opportunity for ongoing investment in residential or mixed-use development. Instead, property ownership became highly speculative. Nonresident investors accumulated parcels for profit, all the while renting to tenants who themselves lacked any emotional investment in the neighborhood. Real property tax revenues dried up; so did neighborhood support services. Grocery stores, pharmacies, department stores, banks, doctors and dentists—all moved to the suburbs. But this was not just



Uniform setbacks (or "build-to's") in [Kentlands](#), Maryland.
Photo by [Jason Miller](#).

a loss of residents or taxes or services; the process destroyed the dynamic mix of uses and activities that made urban neighborhoods vibrant and contributed to community safety and security.

Studies

show that crime occurs most frequently in those places without observers or guardians; in other words, in the voids. Many years ago Jane Jacobs, in her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, offered observations regarding those elements that contribute to a safe and healthy urban neighborhood. Among them are a mix of uses, clearly defined public and private spaces, 24-hour activity, eyes on the street, adequate lighting, uniform setbacks, architectural variety and short blocks. Many planners and designers took Jacobs' insights as a wake-up call, but were undeterred by her disdain for the "doctrine of salvation by bricks." Their new plans called for mixed uses, uniform setbacks and other important physical elements without considering the extent to which residents, property owners, business managers, visitors and others must be engaged in order for a neighborhood to be truly safe. For what good is a mix of uses if the activity they generate never attracts people who care about the neighborhood around them, who pick up litter and scrub off graffiti and report drug dealing? Without them the neighborhood is also without the observers or guardians who are so critical to safety and security, a need that cannot be filled by police or private security.



A clearly defined public green in Northwest Landing, Washington.
Photo by Michael Seidl Photography.

Traditional

neighborhood development represents an important step toward safer, more secure urban neighborhoods. It begins by mending the physical and economic fabric of the neighborhood, by filling the voids left by vacant lots, buildings and alleyways. Open spaces, then, are no longer merely voids, but carefully located and designed streets, walks, yards and parks that knit together the uses and activities that surround them. Traditional neighborhood development has the potential to re-establish the social network of the neighborhood as well. Of course, traditional neighborhood development cannot guarantee "community," but it can provide a dynamic and attractive mix of uses, with lot sizes, building scales and floor plans that reflect contemporary lifestyles. If traditional neighborhood development is successful, no space or place in the neighborhood will be without a guardian or owner, someone who participates in its management and upkeep—and who, therefore, helps to prevent crime.



Harbor Town, Tenn., offers impressive architectural variety, including several homes with front-loaded garages, as appropriate. This is plan [LRK-93029](#).
Photo by Mark Englund.

