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From Eyes on the Street



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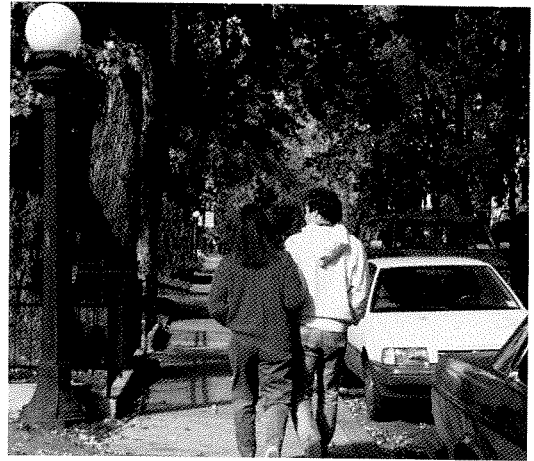
(1) Six-story apartment building in London includes transparent stairwell at front of building (2) Parking garage where symbols designate floors and lighting is enhanced (3) A "designated waiting area" on a Toronto subway platform (4) Retail strip in Toronto neighborhood includes housing above stores, fruit and vegetable stands, ethnic food vendors and restaurants (5) Educational campaign by City of Toronto Safe City Committee to prevent lesbian and gay bashing (6) Nineteenth-century pedestrian lighting in Toronto became the model for new pedestrian lighting that is also energy efficient.

Photos 1, 2, 4, 5, 6: Gerda Wekerle

Photo 3: Toronto Transit Commission

to Safe Cities

Gerda Wekerle



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Many people invoke the phrase, “there must be eyes on the street,” attributed to Jane Jacobs, to make arguments about the relationship between urban safety and design. Jacobs’ views on urban safety were, in truth, far more complex and nuanced than this phrase suggests, and they were widely reviled and dismissed when her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was published. Nonetheless, they have become the basis of a worldwide movement to foster safer cities.¹

Jacobs made an important contribution to our understanding of cities by linking the fear of crime to urban design and acts of incivility in daily life. Instead of focusing on crimes against property, or on the perpetrators and victims of criminal acts, Jacobs was ahead of her time in arguing that we should be concerned about the everyday experiences of city inhabitants, and about the ways in which planning and design diminish or can enhance people’s sense of safety.

Earlier than anyone else, Jacobs emphasized how not only crime but also fear of crime contributes to urban decline, writing:

if a city’s streets are safe from barbarism and fear, the city is thereby tolerably safe from barbarism and fear... . The bedrock attribute of a successful city district is that a person must feel personally safe and secure on the street among all these strangers... . It does not take many incidents of violence on a city street or in a city district to make people fear the streets. And as they fear them, they use them less, which makes the streets still more unsafe.²

Although Jacobs’ comment about the need for eyes on the street is still broadly invoked, her many other recommendations, based on close observation of public spaces, have received scant attention. For Jacobs, eyes on the street came from stores and public places, including bars and restaurants “sprinkled along the sidewalks,” street vendors and pedestrians. She recommended the installation of bright street light to “augment every pair of eyes.”³

But Jacobs widened her attention to consider urban safety in general, including parks and public housing projects, and debunking the prevailing myths about good design and expected behaviors. Noting the veneration that planners have for neighborhood open spaces, she defied the conventional wisdom of the time and argued against more open space in cities, if it meant parks that were little used and dangerous. She argued that parks could be “volatile places,” some of them downright dangerous. Instead of focusing merely on the green benefits of parks, she observed

Upper right:

A lone woman sitting at a Designated Waiting Area on a subway platform in Toronto. The waiting area includes enhanced lighting and an alarm button; a subway car with an attendant stops directly in front of the waiting area.

Photo: Toronto Transit Commission

that parks are successful when they encourage a range of activities and users.⁴

Jacobs' views on public housing were equally heretical. She noted that slum clearance projects that created high-rise towers with concentrations of poor people were often dangerous places that people with alternative choices avoided at all cost. Her critique of public housing design included a discussion of long, unwatched corridors, unguarded elevators, stairwells and courtyards that became settings for rape, theft and vandalism. She also noted that too often, public housing managers were more concerned with vandalism than danger to human beings.

Her recommendations to increase safety at public housing sites revolved around people, and on using design and management policies to foster interaction and commitment. She suggested reweaving public housing enclaves into existing street patterns and encouraging street activity by bringing in vendors and including stores and workshops in the buildings. She opposed fencing and security guards, which encouraged the creation of turf and insulated public housing residents from the wider community. She proposed removing income limits, to encourage public housing residents to make a long-term commitment to their communities. She even thought that women tenants might be hired as elevator attendants, to provide eyes on the vertical streets.⁵

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

The critics and experts who reshaped cities through practices like urban renewal and expressway construction were predominantly professional men — architects, planners and engineers. They argued that Jacobs was discrediting their expertise, which would not only “mislead the uninformed” but also “destroy progress.” They bridled at this amateur, this wife and mother, who had the chutzpah to challenge their projects and their paradigms, to substitute common-sense solutions based on lived experience, and to politicize planning by suggesting that ordinary citizens should have a say.⁶

In the 1970s, work by Oscar Newman and others built on Jacobs' insights into the relationship between urban design and crime and launched the new field of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED). But they simplified Jacobs' vision, focusing on an approach that relied on experts (either design or

security professionals) to define the issues and provide standardized solutions.

CPTED programs tended to ignore a key aspect of Jacobs' argument — the importance of fear of crime. Focusing initially on crimes against property and crime rates, CPTED programs tended to ignore crimes against persons and in particular the differences in fear of crime between men and women and between white and minority urban residents.

CPTED programs promoted target-hardening solutions, or hardware and design changes, rather than encouraging the presence of people and varied activities. Fences, buzzers, gates and traffic barriers were proposed to keep people out and to define territory, particularly in residential areas — contrary to Jacobs' injunctions against creating turf. CPTED largely ignored the more subtle elements of urban safety — such as a mix of activities and land uses that could attract diverse populations to streets, neighborhoods, housing projects, parks and civic centers — that Jacobs had suggested.

The evolution of high-security shopping malls illustrates this point. Following CPTED principles, shopping malls in high-crime areas in California have installed motion sensors on the periphery, centralized pan-opticon control towers that allow security forces to surveil the entire mall, and more visible security patrols.

In contrast, Dufferin Mall, in a working- and middle-class, ethnically diverse neighborhood in Toronto, has taken a community development approach to reduce crime rates and enhance profitability. The mall provides funding to youth theater, basketball and soccer organizations; it has established a youth internship program with mall merchants; it has provided rent-free space for youth services, a teen drop-in center, a program for high-school drop outs and a clothing exchange. These have brought a range of activities and users into the mall and reduced crime rates.⁷

Feminist and Grassroots Responses

Jacobs' focus on fear of crime, on the predation of the poor and molestation of women and children in dangerous places, presaged research by feminist geographers and planners that linked women's fear of crime, violence against women and urban design. These researchers argued that fear of crime was real, not fictive, and had real outcomes for women. Serving as a

mechanism of social control and contributing to systemic gender discrimination, fear of crime limited women's life chances by constraining their access to jobs and education and their use of public spaces and recreation facilities.⁸

Feminist researchers also began to conduct empirical research on the relationship between women's fear of crime, their avoidance of specific urban places and how this might affect the vitality and life of places like parks, neighborhoods, city centers and college campuses.

They found that women were twice as likely as men to report feeling unsafe, even though men are far more likely to be the victims of crime in public places.

Researchers asked women about where they felt most fearful, what places they avoided during the day and at night and what defensive strategies they devised in their everyday activities. These exercises, which mapped the environments of women's fear in cities, were then fed back into the planning and design process.⁹

This approach built on Jacobs' insight about the significance of starting from the standpoint of daily practice, particularly the experience of women, and engaging "amateurs" who are experts about their own surroundings in diagnosing and taking action to improve the safety of urban spaces.¹⁰

Where CPTED approaches had relied on experts, technical knowledge and public and private security agencies, feminist scholars and activists made urban safety the focus for women's political activism in cities such as London, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Melbourne, Montreal, Toronto and Minneapolis. In these cities and others, women demanded that municipal governments and civic agencies improve the safety of transit systems, housing projects, shopping areas and urban parks to make them more responsive to women's needs.

Toronto is noteworthy for a mix of initiatives related to women's safety, including projects by both grassroots women's groups and municipal agencies. In 1982, the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto set up and funded the Metro Taskforce on Public Violence Against Women and Children to make recommendations for policy and program changes; one subcommittee made recommendations on planning and design. The Metro government subsequently funded Metro Action Committee on Public Violence Against Women (METRAC), a research and advocacy group

established to implement the task force's recommendations. METRAC also provided funding for Women Plan Toronto, another advocacy group, to research women's fear of crime and their avoidance of places identified as dangerous.

METRAC pursued its interest in women's urban safety and environmental design in 1987 by demanding that the Toronto Transit Commission undertake a women's safety audit of the transit system, which was conducted in collaboration with METRAC and the Metropolitan Toronto Police.¹¹ In this initial project, we established some key principles:

- We developed a participatory research tool, a women's safety audit, that helped us observe public spaces and record our responses.
- We insisted that ordinary citizens, women, are experts on daily life in the city. Women have important insights into how urban spaces work and how they might be improved that have been missed by professional experts.
- We demonstrated that women's advocacy groups could work in partnership with the city agencies to mutual benefit.¹²

Over several years, most of the audit's recommendations were implemented. TTC established a Security Advisory Committee, comprising representatives of women's organizations, to comment on designs for new subway stations at the earliest stages, and developed new training programs to help staff respond to sexual assault and harassment.

Continued feminist demands for municipal strategies to prevent violence against women resulted in the creation, in 1988, of the Safe City Committee, a committee of the city council.¹³ The impetus came from the community. Barbara Hall, a city councillor, was asked by women in her ward to come out at night and do a safety audit of a local park. Subsequently, after wide consultation with women's organizations, Hall and five other councillors drafted a policy document, "Municipal Strategies to Prevent Violence Against Women." Council unanimously approved the recommendations and established the Safe City Committee, which comprised both politicians and representatives from groups working on preventing violence against women. Staff of key city departments were also involved.

Urban design changes have included new standards for underground parking garages, the installation of pedestrian-oriented lighting and park security plans. The Planning and Development Department provided half-day training sessions to all its staff on how to incorporate these concerns into day-to-day planning and design and produced a design manual that has become a model for other cities.¹⁴ The city's Parking Authority and Housing Department have reviewed design and management practices; safety audits are also being used by police, housing agencies, park users, neighborhood residents and local universities as a way to think about how to improve urban safety and reduce fear of crime.

Most importantly, having a Safe City Committee at City Hall has given a focus and legitimacy to feminist concerns for urban safety in Toronto. It has brought women's groups, many of them with years of experience in working with battered women and victims of violence, into City Hall. The committee's membership also included school trustees, who brought forward issues on violence in the schools. The committee's work expanded into projects related to community safety in housing, along retail strips, and in immigrant, cultural minority, and lesbian and gay communities. The committee also established a community grants program of approximately \$500,000 to fund community projects that were educational, directed at youth and immigrant communities.

During the decade in which Toronto's Safe City Committee was in existence, it engaged in ongoing struggles to sustain funding and staff, maintain a focus on preventing violence against women and continue supporting grassroots initiatives. After the amalgamation of the City of Toronto with five suburban municipalities in 1998, the Safe City committee was disbanded. A Task Force on Community Safety, co-chaired by two conservative male politicians representing suburban wards, held extensive community consultations and made recommendations in February, 1999, for a "Community Safety Strategy for the City of Toronto."

The recommendations reflected a strategic shift from a focus on women to an emphasis on crime fighting by targeting high-crime areas, community policing and sentencing, and neighborhood crime prevention. At the same time, the recommendations sought to

strengthen initiatives pioneered by the Safe City Committee: a commitment to using safety audits, making public buildings and spaces safer through the use of safety and design guidelines, training city staff, incorporating community safety in the city's official plan, and expanding the community grants program.

Beyond Eyes on the Street

Despite the homage paid to Jane Jacobs by CPTED practitioners, they do not follow in her footsteps. Their reliance on experts, hardware and controlling turf are precisely what Jacobs criticized. Instead, Jacobs' themes in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* have been taken up by feminist planners, architects and geographers who continue to build on her legacy.¹⁵

I have suggested that Toronto's Safe City Committee, and the range of initiatives that preceded it, are natural descendants of Jacobs' emphasis on the value of listening to the standpoint of ordinary citizens in order to create healthy and livable cities.

I would also argue that we have gone beyond Jacobs' vision. Although Jacobs identified the link between urban safety and healthy cities, she approached this as an outsider, a critic of urban planning and design practice, not as an organizer or political activist. Toronto's efforts are noteworthy because they are rooted in feminist scholarship and practice, effected through a partnership between grassroots organizations and local government, and linked to the international Safe Cities movement.

Our experience has been that physical design projects were often the starting point, and that community development strategies and more complex projects followed. As small groups achieved initial successes in making small physical improvements, they felt empowered to pursue longer-term, more complex changes.

Jacobs, by writing about her own experience of daily life in the city, and by urging planners to pay attention to how ordinary people actually use urban space, forced design professionals to re-examine their methods and assumptions. Drawing upon her experience as a wife, mother and resident of Greenwich Village, she arrived at a more humane vision of the city than the experts of the day did. Her concern about urban safety was prescient, and her manner of looking at the city still offers a critical vantage for evaluating crime prevention and community safety strategies today.

Notes

1. On “eyes on the street,” see Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 36. The passage reads: *...we seem to have here some simple aims: To try to secure streets where the public space is unequivocally public, physically unmixd with private or with nothing-at-all space, so that the area needing surveillance has clear and practicable limits; and to see that these public streets have eyes on them as continuously as possible.*

2. *Ibid.*, 30.

3. *Ibid.*, 36, 42.

4. *Ibid.*, 89-90, 102.

5. *Ibid.*, 43, 47, 399, 401.

6. On Jacobs critics, see Ivor de Wolfe, “The Death and Life of Great American Citizens,” *Architectural Review* 133 (February 1963): 91-3. De Wolfe wrote: *For Mrs. Jacobs getting clobbered is a much more pressing danger than getting knocked down by a car. For her, it seems, the first thing the sidewalk user has to think about is how to avoid what is known in the States as a mugging; that is, being stood up in some dark corner and relieved of one’s wallet by a cove with a club... It is hard to believe that all American citizens go in fear of their life.*

See also, A. Melamed, “Review: ‘The Death and Life of Great American Cities,’” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 28 (May 1962). Melamed mixed his metaphors, describing Jacobs as “angry and crusading,” “the enchanted ballerina of Hudson Street, with a chip on her shoulder.”

7. Interview with David Hall, manager, Dufferin Mall, 1993 and June 1999. According to Hall, police statistics showed a reduction in crime of 39 percent over a five-year period.

8. For example, see Margaret Gordon and Stephanie Riger, *The Female Fear* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), which focused on how violence against women and rape served as a constant threat in urban areas.

9. For example, see E. A. Stanko, *Everyday Violence: How Women and Men Experience Sexual and Physical Danger* (London: Pandora, 1990); V. Ware, *Women’s Safety on Housing Estates* (London: Women’s Design Service, 1988), or Metro Action Committee on Public Violence Against Women, Women Plan Toronto and Faculty of Environmental Studies, *Women in Safe Environments* (Toronto: METRAC, 1987).

Prior to these studies, feminist analysis tended to focus on the root causes of violence against women and proposed changes in the family, education and justice systems. The contribution of environmental factors to women’s fear of crime was viewed with some ambivalence at first; feminists were concerned such arguments would reinforce popular stereotypes that violence against women occurred primarily between strangers in public space rather than in the home, where, statistics showed, women were most at risk.

10. Feminist theorists articulate the concept of “women’s standpoint” as “the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds.” Women’s standpoint, according to Dorothy Smith, begins in the local, everyday world and is rooted in time and place. It acknowledges that people are “the experts of their own lives and local practices.” While Jacobs has never considered herself a feminist, her standpoint as a wife, a mother and, particularly, a woman living in Greenwich Village informed her critiques of contemporary planning practice.

11. The transit agency agreed, in part, to allay public fears about a serial rapist. The TTC had relied primarily on mass surveys and modelling analysis, and was skeptical about using observational and experiential data collected through safety audits. He became a proponent when, as a member of an audit team, he saw the negative comments and fears of women users, which contrasted with his own experience of relative comfort.

12. On the project, see Toronto Transit Commission, *Moving Forward: Making Transit Safer for Women* (Toronto: Toronto Transit Commission, 1989). On the safety audit, see METRAC, *Women’s Safety Audit Guide* (Toronto: METRAC, 1987, 1992).

13. The Safe Cities movement emerged in the Netherlands in 1985. Local governments received funding to prevent crime and fear of crime through projects that combined design and community development improvements in housing estates, city centers and transportation systems. National programs were started in France (1987), Australia (1988), Britain (1989), New Zealand (1992) and Canada (1993). Local women’s groups often used Safe City funding to conduct research on women’s perceptions of unsafe places or to create programs responsive to women’s needs, such as special transport services. See Gerda Wekerle and Carolyn Whizman, *Safe Cities: Guidelines for Planning, Design and Management* (New York: John Wiley, 1995).

14. City of Toronto Planning and Development Department and Gerda R. Wekerle, *A Working Guide for Planning and Designing Safer Urban Environments* (Toronto: City of Toronto Planning and Development Department, 1992).

15. One of the most comprehensive books on Jane Jacobs’ legacy is Max Allen, ed., *Ideas that Matter: The Worlds of Jane Jacobs* (Owen Sound, Ontario: Ginger Press, 1997).

This account is based on the author’s involvement as a community activist and research on various safe city initiatives. She was a member of the design subcommittee of the Metro Taskforce on Public Violence Against Women and Children, a consultant to METRAC in designing a study on crime prevention and design, and a member of TTC’s Security Advisory Committee. She developed and ran training sessions for city planning staff, and co-authored guidelines on planning for urban safety. She also took part in various advocacy projects to generate support for the initiatives of the Safe City Committee.