

WOMEN AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

Wendy Bell
Bell Planning Associates
South Australia

Paper presented at the conference Safer Communities: Strategic Directions in Urban Planning convened jointly by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Victorian Community Council Against Violence, held in Melbourne, 10-11 September 1998

This paper explores women's experience of safety in general, the implications of fear for their use of, and access to, the public realm, the role of urban design in planning safer places for women and some of the trends and solutions to issues of women and community safety.

Urban Planning and planning education are becoming increasingly sensitive to gender perspectives in response to the past tendency to exclude the experiences of women in urban space when defining, interpreting and acting upon planning issues. Tertiary Planning courses are now including subjects such as Gender and Planning aiming to explore, examine, analyse and challenge conventional planning thought and practice from the perspective of gender (Ferretti, 1997).

Women and community safety in the context of planning and urban design have been the focus of a number of initiatives in Australia and overseas, in recent years (Liverpool City, METRAC Toronto City). The aim of such projects has been to influence the planning and design of urban areas and introduce programs which increase the safety and perceptions of safety for women in their use of the public domain.

'Women face problems of such significance in cities and society that gender can no longer be ignored in planning practice' says Leavitt (1986, 181). Cooper Marcus Sarkissian (1986): and Stimpson et al. (1981) also write of the importance of gender as a focus in planning practice. Feminist perspectives on the patterns of inequality in both space and culture, acknowledge fear to be a more important concept in the theory of social control than violence itself (Valentine, 1989). Fear is often based on myths about safety for women in public places and many programs now focus on dispelling these myths. However, fear affects women's experience of safety in the public realm which can be designed and planned in a way that reduces this fear.

Women's Experience of Safety in the Public Realm

Women's experience of safety in urban areas is different to that of men. Urban settings and the way they are designed affect levels of fear which are higher amongst women and which vary by location, time of day, mode of transport and the level and nature of other uses. Women in particular, construct detailed mental maps of parts of the urban area which feel safe, and those that don't and should be avoided. They should therefore be involved in this design and planning process.

Women's fear of violence and crime affects their lifestyle and routines and the way they experience urban areas and the public realm in particular. The recent research undertaken as part of the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime (Centre for Cultural Risk Research, 1998) explores the nature of fear of crime and those more vulnerable to fear than others. This research suggests 'that it is far from clear that individuals who have experienced victimisation are necessarily more fearful than those who have not'. The literature goes on to report that it is important in understanding women's fear to see crimes against women as focused acts of intimidation. There are many myths about levels of victimisation of women, crime location and offenders.

The research also suggests that females are socialised into vulnerability and their 'need' for protection; males into the need to protect. The greatest reported fear is from random stranger danger in public places, another myth in terms of crime levels compared with violence in the home.

Women, particularly older women, are more likely than men to modify their behaviour to avoid the risk of crime and this has repercussions for their use of the public realm, eg go out less, return home earlier, or go out at night only with an escort. Women are more fearful of some crimes and locations than others. They feel less safe on public transport than in the general community (NSW Police Service Community Attitude Survey, 1996), but are in fact at lower risk.

The consequence of the comparatively high level of fear amongst women as reported by the Centre for Cultural Risk Research (1998), is that women's use of public space is less than men's in that they utilise a narrower range of locations and frequently limit use to the daylight hours.

Other aspects of the environmental setting which increase levels of fear, including higher traffic flows, rapid change in a neighbourhood, evidence of disorder or incivility in an area, signs of physical and social decay and lack of community cohesion, the dominance of males who are drunken and disorderly, and low levels of street activity,

Research in Australia and overseas shows overwhelming evidence that women are fearful of particular situations including :

- any mode of transport other than the car;
- going out at night;
- walking to the nearest shops;
- use of public transport, in particular train travel at night;
- the use of a public telephone;
- walking to a friend's house;
- walking through a neighbourhood park or walk home from the cinema, restaurant, bar or pub;
- the situation at either end of a public transport journey i.e. waiting at a bus stop or walking from the station to a parked car;
- the use of city centre car parks particularly at night and if multi-storeyed;
- driving alone at night; and
- open spaces (parks and the countryside) and pathways (alleyways and underpasses).

For both men and women, the presence of a companion of either sex increases the level of safety felt if walking in the local neighbourhood at night.

Women's fear is affected by whether spaces are deserted leading to them feeling vulnerable to stranger attack because there are no others to deter or prevent the attack. In enclosed spaces fear is linked to the limited number of exits and the opportunity for offenders to hide out of sight of others. Therefore levels of activity and potential entrapment spots are factors which affect levels of fear.

'Women need to be seen as multiple identities as stressed by the recent NACAVAC research (1998) which reveals how differing ages fear different things, eg teenage girls are more likely to be fearful about travelling on public transport although they are more likely to take risks even though they may fear certain settings. Older women are, in many respects, the most relaxed about travelling, although they avoid travelling at night.

In conclusion, fear plays a part in the way women use public space, whether they use it at all, and if so, when they use it and what locations they use. The impact of fear, whatever the cause, on women's use of urban places has implications for the role that planning and design of the public realm can play in increasing the use of spaces by women and reducing levels of fear. The design of the public realm has been shown by research in the UK (Valentine 1990) to be a major influence on women's sense of safety in that space. This limitation placed on women to enjoy the use of urban areas during the day and after hours in particular should be tackled.

Women's experience and use of the Public Realm

Women's mobility and travel patterns affect their access to the public realm. They have higher levels of use of public transport which is considered to be one of the least safe urban settings and where they have high levels of fear. Women are over-represented as car passengers (Morris et al), as a result of age and lower levels of car ownership than men. Fewer elderly women drive than men and after 5pm less than half of travellers are women. Women are also dependent on the use of private cars although they have lower levels of car ownership than men, as their journeys are more complex. However, a significant proportion of women live in households without a car due to age. It is therefore apparent that women are more likely to be pedestrians especially at night, when most fear urban places.

Women's use of the public realm is characterised by higher use of shopping centres, parks, pathways, residential areas and public transport settings, all of which are locations which research has shown to be vulnerable to crime or incivility.

In terms of housing and residential neighbourhoods, women as the dominant elderly population group, are over-represented in public housing. They are more likely to be pedestrians and require access to public transport therefore the design of neighbourhoods for safety in and around the home and from the home to transit stops and facilities is paramount.

Women are higher users of shopping centres and are less likely to use cars to access them than men, although they are designed as though all users arrived by car. They are vulnerable in shopping centre car parks which often allocate distant spaces for staff in favour of shoppers. This further disadvantages women, as they are more likely to be the very staff leaving the premises late at night. Larger shopping centres are now a major provider of leisure activities and are popular places for older and younger people alike to congregate.

In conclusion, the very spaces and modes of transport which women fear most are likely to be the ones they spend most time using.

Urban Design and Safety of the Public Realm

Particular attention has been given in the application of crime prevention theories such as Situational Crime Prevention or Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) to those spaces and settings which women have greater use of, but most fear.

While noting that theories about the relationships between design and crime have been criticised for their environmental determinism, Valentine (1990) asserts that 'by facilitating a perception that a physical space is informally controlled the design and layout of public space can increase women's confidence in going out'. She proposed ten design strategies, concerning location, visibility at doorways, lighting, painting walls, footbridges, alleyways/subways, landscaping, ground floor development, and corners/dogleg bends. Valentine extends her approach to the social environment: 'women feel safer in the actual or potential presence of others because they assume that offenders will be deterred by the possibility of bystander intervention', even though 'witnesses frequently fail to intervene in crimes taking place'.

A women's perception of safety is strongly related to how well she knows, and feels at ease with, both her social and physical surrounds. Accordingly, 'social relations within a space and the group(s) who control that space socially are more important influences on how safe women feel than its design'. Land use planning policies influence the level of use of public places and the nature of users and planning and urban design can influence the processes of control and management.

The observations raised in the W.I.S.E. project in Toronto (METRAC, 1987) about the design of urban spaces for women's safety are summarised as follows:

- The planning and design features of some environments can and do contribute to women's perception of personal risk in a city.
- Sensitive design and planning could contribute to women feeling safer.
- Women identified the factors that reinforced their perceptions of personal risk: the socialisation process, family background and relationships, a woman's image of herself etc.
- Although women were fearful of areas of their environment, especially at night they felt that they could not influence environmental design decision-making processes.

Urban planning and design do not create problems of violence to women but a recognition of the dangers and the implications for women's use of the city could do much to create a safe environment. The 1991 Official Plan of the Safe City Committee in Toronto Canada, comprised two main strategies to make the city safer for women: creating guidelines for safe open space and training city staff to look at proposals from that perspective. The guidelines are presented for lighting, sightlines, movement predictors, entrapments spots, surveillance, land use mix, activity generators sense of ownership/maintenance, signage and other information, and overall design quality.

The recommended guidelines are then applied to specific places that are commonly considered to be unsafe or where people feel unsafe, i.e. transportation related locations, residential neighbourhoods, city centres and other places (including public toilets, elevators, fire escapes and stairwells).

Such guidelines are now used commonly in Australia although a recent comparative analysis of the application of CPTED policies at a local government level (Bell Planning Associates, 1997) found that the more useful ones were the least complex and there was a general need for training in the subject for development assessment staff and those involved in the design, maintenance and management of the public realm.

Recent urban design guidelines prepared for the Gold Coast City Council (Bell Planning Associates 1997) used the following typology to group vulnerable locations.

‘Vulnerable Elements’ refers to uses, features or areas within the built environment that are associated with public perceptions of being unsafe places, and which may in themselves generate crime and/or nuisance behaviour.

Vulnerable elements include:

- uses such as licensed premises, large entertainment and recreational venues, large institutional uses (eg tertiary campuses, hospitals), open space and schools;
- features such as car parks, public toilets, telephone booths and Automatic Teller Machines; and
- areas such as public spaces, public transport facilities and the edges of shopping centres, tertiary campuses, hospitals and other large institutions.

‘Vulnerable Settings’ refers to settings that are isolated or concealed, or which otherwise generate a poor perception of safety, especially where regular after hours use is anticipated, and include:

- access routes (pedestrian and bicycle) to and from shopping centres, tertiary campuses, hospitals and other large institutions, car parks, public transport, places of employment or entertainment and community facilities;
- entrances to venues and car parks; and
- entrapment points.

Trends and Solutions

There are a number of trends which will require particular attention if the safety needs of women are to be assured. These include the following:

- the use of CPTED guidelines by local government planning authorities and public sector agencies responsible for public transport and educational and institutional settings;
- the move to foster the ‘night economy’, the subject of a Conference planned for later this year in Adelaide (Urban Design Forum);
- reintroducing housing in centres;
- giving greater priority to pedestrians in urban design;
- increasing the involvement of women in planning and design and the introduction of gender related subjects in tertiary planning courses;
- the promotion of ‘urban villages’ as an alternative to traditional centres and based on walkable catchments around centres and transit stops;
- cultural animation programs in urban areas;

- programs such as women safe transport schemes; and
- women safe campuses.

Use of CPTED

The increasing use of CPTED guidelines is a reflection of the willingness of planning authorities to respond to community concerns about safety. However, they should be accompanied by adequate training for staff and elected members and should not be overly prescriptive or complex if they are to be accepted and easily interpreted by the public and private sectors alike. There should also be greater promotion of such guidelines with public agencies and they should apply to the public works of local governments as well as private developments. Such guidelines should be part of a wider urban design movement which includes the provision of safety audits in regeneration and renewal schemes and in the revitalisation of centres in particular. Such safety audits should target women in particular as a separate user group. This was found to be particularly useful in recent work undertaken by the ACT Attorney General's Department and the former ACT Planning Authority (Bell, Gaston and Woodroffe, 1995).

While urban design is not the only factor affecting women's feelings of safety, it should be part of a multi-faceted approach to improving community safety. The Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design and Situational Crime Prevention techniques have adopted a number of principles of safety which are increasingly being included in planning policies around Australia as shown in the recent comparative analysis of the use of CPTED. Such principles can be adapted as a series of requirements for the assessment of development in general and specific guidelines developed for particular types of development.

- Visibility by Others
- Awareness of the Environment
- Security of Buildings and People
- Focus on Vulnerable Elements.

Use of CPTED for Vulnerable Locations

Visibility by Others

Given women's vulnerability to deserted spaces, their 'need' for protection and the feeling that there is informal control of the public realm or the potential presence of others viewing the place, the following principles increase the visibility of users and reduce the vulnerability of settings through:

- visibility of public spaces and routes
- landscape design
- activity mix and
- clear ownership.

The presence of ground level activities, occupied spaces/rooms overlooking streets, footpaths and parks provide visibility and therefore effective informal surveillance of spaces. Land use zoning affects activity mix and the transition between public and private spaces provide a clear indication of ownership.

Awareness of the Environment

In order for women in particular to gain safe access to urban spaces after dark, to easily interpret the environment they are in so that they know where they are, what is ahead, and how to leave the space and where to find help if needed, the following are important principles:

- lighting
- safe routes
- signage and other information
- legibility.

As women are more likely to be users of public transport and therefore pedestrians in large shopping centres for example, particular attention should be given by planners to such detail and local government should share the responsibility as they are usually responsible for some of the streets in centres.

Security of Buildings and People

Not only is the physical security of buildings important through target hardening techniques and maintenance programs, but the security of women can be improved by a range of measures including the provision of escort services where required for women who work or study late at night.

Focus on Vulnerable Elements

Women are fearful of certain locations and the dominance of males. It therefore important to:

- avoid a concentration of land uses that generate crime and nuisance behaviour
- ensure a system of early identification of vandalism and graffiti and quick response to any potential problem; and
- promote community crime prevention in public spaces through community and cultural development programs aimed at promoting positive behaviour.

There are specific planning and design requirements for land uses and settings if women's higher levels of fear in such locations are to be reduced. Such development includes:

- residential areas
- public open space
- centres
- public toilets and telephones
- car parks
- laneways/alleyways/underpasses
- tertiary campuses, hospitals and other large institutions and employment settings such as Back Offices and Call Centres where female staff outnumber men.

Residential Uses

The particular requirement for residential uses is to ensure the safety of women who are more likely to live alone and occupy the house during the day when others are not around by designing for maximum surveillance of the street, reducing concealment opportunities and providing adequate privacy and discouraging access by intruders.

Public Open Space

Women are relatively high users of open space which should be designed for maximum surveillance, signage providing clear information about exits and entrances and the location of public telephones and the nearest busy street and offer a sense of security through user activity.

Centres

Recent research in Australia and overseas (Bell & Gaston, 1995) has shown that malls, markets and other public shopping areas are vulnerable to crime and perceived to be unsafe under certain circumstances. The following locational factors characterise levels of crime in malls:

- City centre malls or those with theatres and bars, or near public transit stops are likely to have many more problems than suburban shopping centres accessible only by car.
- The location of malls influences crime and nuisance behaviour in surrounding areas, as these areas become part of the natural travel paths of persons who commit crimes in the aftermath of more law-abiding pursuits.
- Where apartment buildings are located close to malls, these buildings appear to be at a substantial risk, because they are more likely to be unoccupied during the day and therefore have the lowest levels of natural surveillance.

These findings were confirmed in a study of Rundle Mall in Adelaide (Bell & Sarkissian, 1991) where the nearby railway station and areas with a concentration of bars were revealed to be areas of high crime concentration and higher levels of fear.

The design of shopping malls has drawn from earlier findings of criminologists (Brantingham and Brantingham and Wong, 1990) who suggested that in order to deter offenders, there should be fewer opportunities for people to congregate, by making the layout more complex, having fewer benches to sit on and railings designed to keep people moving. However, these measures also make centres more uncomfortable for older users and women.

Public Transport Settings

Public transport settings are particularly vulnerable and there is therefore a need to promote safety at bus stops, railway stations and other public transport settings by ensuring that all set down and pick up points are located, designed and managed to promote user safety by their siting in areas of high activity, surveillance from passers by and by ensuring good maintenance and lighting.

Car parks

The particular requirement for car parks is to optimise the informal surveillance and illumination, and to control illegitimate access and ensure good visibility and signage.

Laneways

Laneways provide essential access in residential areas and in some parts of centres. However, it is important to ensure safe access is provided for cyclists, pedestrians and motorists through lighting, designing for more than one entrance, visibility of entrances and avoiding unnecessary access.

Tertiary campuses, hospitals and other larger institutions

Of particular concern in such locations is the safety of staff, users and the general public by providing safe routes and a high level of surveillance.

The 'night economy'

The 'night economy' movement which is emerging in Australia is likely to largely affect centres particularly city centres and has particular implications for women. Firstly, women are less likely to be users unless the safety of public transport access and transit stops is improved, the design of car parks takes into account safety issues and the design of malls and routes connecting to them is improved. The advantage of the night economy now being promoted is that it is likely to bring a mix of people into centres at night, lighting and public transport services will be improved, cultural animation programs such as events and activities will revitalise streets, there will be a greater mix of uses, tenancies now vacant would be used if only temporarily and there will be a range of venues for cultural activities. Lighting will be designed to attract more people by the use of lighting 'trails' to draw people through and around the city centre, coloured lights for decoration of streets and buildings and the light thrown from shop windows. These will all have the added value of improving safety.

A framework for developing the evening economy has been proposed by John Montgomery (1994) as follows:

Adoption of urban management ethos

- a change of attitude; stewardship rather than problem solving
- relaxing licensing and opening hours

Fostering business development

- providing business support and advice
- fast-track grants and loans
- encouraging new investment

Planning, environment and support services

- Lighting and designing-out crime
- An evening transport and parking regime
- Planning for diversity and variety
- Making sense of public spaces and the connection between them
- Temporary uses for empty premises

Animation

- Promoting street life and cafe culture
- Devising a cultural animation program

Other

- Living over the shop and new residential development
- Investing in existing nodes of activity.

Such initiatives could be enhanced by ensuring that business groupings are formed to provide surveillance and 'guardianship' of centres. This has been shown to be a major factor in recent research in Canberra Civic (Bell Planning Associates and Planning Solutions 1998) where the involvement of tenants and owners in a safety project substantially contributed to improved safety.

Housing in Centres

Housing in centres should include a social housing component if women are to have equal access to such facilities. The design and location of car parking will be a factor in the safety of such programs. However, there is a view (Montgomery 1994) that parking should be made easier, not more difficult as being promoted in many centres as a way of increasing use of public transport. This would certainly favour women who are less likely to use public transport but may use car parks which are supervised and designed for safety, as is being required in new car parks in Toronto City.

Centres

Management of shopping malls and streets is an important component of achieving improved community safety and therefore safety for women as major users.

The work of the Toronto Transit Commission is a good examples of ways in which public transport and settings can be improved. Physical security measures (including safety and security features, maintenance, signage, and planning and design), sensitivity training for TTC employees, more meaningful reporting of sexual assault occurrences, community liaison and policy making issues.

Priority to Pedestrians

As women are more likely to be pedestrians than men and community safety as largely about safety for pedestrians, the emerging emphasis on pedestrian priority in urban areas is long overdue. However, there is a tendency for the design for pedestrian movement to be treated separately from other design processes. There is a need for urban designers and transport planners to increase their knowledge of and skills in planning and designing for pedestrians and for tertiary institutions to give greater emphasis to safety for women as pedestrians.

“Urban Villages”

The new urbanism movement which has been promoted in Australia in recent years has contributed to the ‘urban village’ ethos being cautiously adopted by some state and local governments. There is a need for a major review of the framework for development planning policies, which still promotes segregation of uses and usually results in separate planning policies for housing, centres and employment areas. Current work being undertaken by the author in South Australia has revealed that there are some advantages of using the ‘urban village’ model as a means of strategically planning for mixed use although emphasis should be given to revitalising established centres, involvement of the development sector in setting priorities, involvement of the public sector in the planning for urban regeneration which usually means renewal of areas with a concentration of public housing. The needs of women in terms of access to public transport, pedestrian movement and access to local facilities should be taken into account in such processes.

Women Safe Transport Schemes

These are rare in Australia although most public transport authorities and the private sector providers are aware of safety issues and should be required to take particular account of women’s safety needs.

Conclusion

Women have different experiences of safety to men and different experiences of urban settings. In particular, these affect women’s equal access to the public realm, which should be under

increasing scrutiny as the development sector moves towards the 'night economy', and planners promote 'urban villages'. The priorities of the development sector are often in conflict with people's needs and women's needs in particular as has been seen from the era of large shopping centres and malls. The priorities of professions involved in the design of the public realm have favoured the motor vehicle to the detriment of pedestrians and the car parks which serve that mode have been largely unsafe for the majority of users: women. We all need to be alert and on guard of the trends which will shape urban development in the future are to serve women better than the past.

REFERENCES

- Bell & Gaston, 1991. "Crime Safety and Urban Form", *Prepared for the Urban Futures Program of the Commonwealth Department of Housing and Regional Development*. Canberra.
- Bell Planning Associates & Planning Solutions. 1998. 'Interim Civic Safety Evaluation', *for the Canberra Parks and Urban Spaces*. Canberra.
- Bell, Wendy. 1995. 'Violent Cities and Peaceful Spaces', *Paper to Conference of the Australian Democrats*. Brisbane.
- Bell, Wendy, & Cheesman Architects & Davis, Cathy. 1993. 'Crime Prevention at Aldersgate Village - An Urban Design and Community Development Approach', *Prepared for the Adelaide Central Mission*. Adelaide.
- Bruce, Catherine. 1993. 'Women's Fear of Violence in Public Places', *Planning Thesis for Bachelor of Applied Science Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology*. Melbourne.
- Centre for Cultural Risk Research, 1998. 'Fear of Crime Volume 1', *Audit of the Literature and community Programs as part of the National campaign Against Violence and Crime*. Canberra.
- Huxley, Margo. 1997. 'Ecologically Sustainable Cities, environmentally Friendly Transport or Just 'More Work for Motyer'', *Proceedings of the Second National Women on the Move Conference*. TransAdelaide. Adelaide.
- Leavitt, Jacqueline. 1986. 'Feminist Advocacy Planning in the 1980s'. In *Strategic Perspectives in Planning Practice*, edited by Barry Checkoway,. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Morris, Dr Jenny et al. nd 'The Emerging Needs of the Majority - Women, Young and Old, *Paper for the Transport Research Centre*. Melbourne.
- Reedy, Liz. et al. 1995. 'Liverpool Station Area Safety Audit Report, *A report of an inspection of the physical environment of the Liverpool Station and surrounding areas by Liverpool Station area Safety Taskforce*.

Sandercock, Leonie. & Forsyth, Ann. 1992. 'A Gender Agenda: New Directions for Planning Theory', *the Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 58(1).

Valentine, Gill. 1990. 'Women's Fear and the Design of Public Space', *Built Environment*, Vol. 16(4), 288-303.