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Crime stoppers

By Rachel Sa

Preventing crime is not solely the job of locks on doors or security cameras scanning entranceways. The makeup of a physical environment can influence where crimes are committed. That's why Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) is an essential component to the crime prevention strategy of any building or area.

"CPTED is based on the belief that crime can be directly related to the design of the physical environment," says Harry Erickson, a consultant with CPTED Security Consultants. Based in California, Erickson works with governmental organizations and private companies to assess existing and planned properties and make environmental recommendations to make those properties safer. "That means that, when a criminal selects a target, there is some thought, whether it be formal planning or a subconscious feeling that makes them think: I can commit a crime here and not get caught."

Dim lights, a lack of pedestrian traffic, the presence of graffiti or litter, all of these can make a location look more appealing to a criminal.

When implemented properly, CPTED can reduce the likelihood that crime will occur by creating an environment in which a criminal feels uncomfortable or likely to be caught.

CPTED has seven essential components according to Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in their document *Creating Safer Communities: An introduction to Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) for architects, planners, and builders*. Those components include:

Territoriality allows for the feeling of pride or ownership of a place while also creating a welcoming environment. It is important to project the image that a property is well cared for and those responsible for it will protect it.

Natural surveillance maximizes the ability to spot suspicious people or activities. Clear sight lines and visible entranceways are helpful while dimly lit or isolated areas create a more comfortable location for criminals to act.

Activity support encourages the intended use of public space by residents. An unsafe area may see a loss of business or a lack of people on the street, for example. An area active with legitimate users deters criminal activity.

Hierarchy of space identifies ownership of an area by clearly delineating private from public space with boundaries such as decorative sidewalks, lawns, and hedges.

Natural access control utilizes walkways, fences, lighting, signage and landscape to clearly guide people and vehicles to and from the proper entrances.

Image and maintenance ensure that a building or area is clean, well kept and free of graffiti or litter. If a property is untidy and littered with trash and graffiti, it sends the message that no one

cares for the property and undesirable behavior will be tolerated.

Finally, the **proper allocation of space** features a design or location decision that takes into account the surrounding environment and minimizes the use of space by conflicting groups. In addition to creating an environment in which criminals feel uncomfortable, the goal of these design principals is also to foster an environment in which law-abiding citizens do feel comfortable and secure.

“A very important aspect of CPTED is that it can reduce a person’s fear of crime,” says Erickson. People naturally avoid areas where they don’t feel comfortable. “Sometimes you can’t even put your finger on why, but you just feel unsafe. And if a person or people feel unsafe, chances are they are unsafe, and the criminal element will be more apt to operate there.”

CPTED has applications in all environments, including private businesses, homes, parks and neighborhoods. Schools can also be made safer through the application of CPTED guidelines, which can help to prevent crimes such as bullying.

“Natural surveillance is probably one of the most important aspects of CPTED for schools,” says Erickson. For example, if the administration office has windows that look out over a main entranceway, it serves as a deterrent. “Also in schools, you want to minimize access points because, if you have too many, it becomes impossible to keep track of who is coming and going, who is supposed to be there and who is not.”

Ideally, CPTED principals will be designed into a structure or environment in the planning and building stages. If it is not, nuisance areas that cannot be addressed by retrofitted CPTED design can emerge, areas such as a boiler room, or other isolated space, that have the potential to become an attractive space for mischief or crime. Sometimes the only solution to prevent crime in these areas is to lock them down.

So how can security technology and hardware help CPTED planners to do a better job?

“Locks and target hardening alone are not enough. But CPTED alone is not enough either,” says Erickson. “They need to be incorporated together. But they are definitely distinct individual components of a comprehensive plan. You have to incorporate the two and make sure they compliment each other and are not in conflict.”

For example, security experts should take care to not “overdo it” with hardened physical features, Erickson points out. “If you do, it could cause people to feel unsafe because they sense an overbearing presence of security devices and feel that the area must be unsafe due to the need for obvious security devices.”

Because CPTED is designed to blend in with the environment in which it is applied, it is ideal if target hardening devices do the same.

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