

THE POWER

OF PLACE

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**HOW OUR  
SURROUNDINGS  
SHAPE OUR  
THOUGHTS,  
EMOTIONS, AND  
ACTIONS**

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1993/  
2007

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## THE CRIME OF THE CITIES

LIKE A river that meanders through a varied landscape, two long blocks on Manhattan's Upper West Side that run from hard-edged Amsterdam Avenue to sylvan Riverside Drive move past different worlds. A snapshot of the avenue's bustling corner might have been framed in a Caribbean *barrio*. Big families spill out of crowded, down-at-the-heels tenements onto noisy, littered sidewalks where children play ball, women chat, and men play *salsa* or cards. A photograph taken at the next intersection, just off the main artery of Broadway, would show a prosperous scene of well-tended prewar apartment buildings with marble lobbies and uniformed doormen. While conditions on this half-funky, half-fancy block might be termed "fair," the one directly to the west between Broadway and Riverside is unequivocally "good"—a metropolitan wonderland of fine townhouses festooned with Art Nouveau details. Beyond this small pocket of livable blocks, however, those immediately to the north and east are pocked by vacant lots turned into seedy parks, unkempt public buildings, and little in the way of decent much less attractive housing. These undeniably "bad" blocks are the perennial settings for local misdeeds from car theft to murder.

When the uninitiated come here or to many similar polyglot neighborhoods in big American cities, they are taken aback by the precise suggestions about safe routes and places to avoid that seasoned residents offer. Although they are surprised that a territory whose boundaries can be walked in five or ten minutes can encompass urban heavens and hells along with purgatories, most soon learn to read the cityscape for signs of danger and oasis. Like urban veterans, they navigate toward a row of windows decorated with flowerboxes and away from boarded-up ones, toward a street of brightly lit row houses and away from the barren lawns of an apartment complex. Like scours in the wild, experienced metropolitan travelers rely on their surroundings to help them figure out what is likely to occur where and to guide their own behavior.

According to Roger Barker's theory of behavior setting, we are apt to act in certain ways in certain places; the more clues a place provides about what we should do or not do, the more we will conform to them. Teenagers on their way to Riverside Park who stride across Amsterdam Avenue blasting their tape players usually turn them down once they cross Broadway and enter the bijou block. There, even small children intuit that a candy wrapper dropped on a sidewalk punctuated by blooming planters is anathema. The setting's ambience promotes observance of the proprieties where larger issues are concerned as well; the local cocaine wars, for example, take place on nearby bad blocks, despite a stronger police presence. Although twinkling gas lamps, marble steps, and tidy, flower-decked curbs alone can't defend against mischief makers and criminals, they radiate an almost palpable aura of the residents' concern with the social as well as physical standards of civility. On penetrating this invisible shield, the ill-willed immediately sense that here, wrongdoing will be met with individual and communal opposition as well as the official sort, and most go elsewhere to make trouble.

Two blocks away, on what is perhaps the most dangerous street in the neighborhood, things look very different. A big junior high school and its cyclone-fenced yard are an asphalt wasteland for most of the day. On the other side of the street from this anonymous expanse is a "vest-pocket park" whose broken fixtures and littered terrain repel all but vagrants and addicts. Beyond the park are several garages that, along with a few barred tenements, are the block's only

privately owned buildings. This kind of no-man's-land setting, which supplies few of the physical cues that encourage good behavior, which the door for the big trouble that regularly walks in.

Yet even this mean street and those to the north in Harlem were not always benighted. The process by which venerable neighborhoods, many of which were prosperous only twenty to forty years ago, have turned into slums involves myriad forces ranging from poverty to drugs to racism to disintegrating families. Among the afflictions that converged to wreak havoc in North Philadelphia, Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, and Watts, however, the disruption of well-established behavior settings is rarely mentioned. Yet the boarded-up buildings and vacant lots of the inner cities are not just symbols of the disastrous change in the northeastern urban ecology but also active agents in its downward spiral.

Abandoned housing and other urban eyesores are the figurative and sometimes literal detritus of the legion of manufacturers and other employers who have abandoned the older cities for more profitable places to do business, from the Sunbelt to Taiwan. "When Bill Cosby grew up here in Philadelphia, his dad worked in a factory and probably made the equivalent of fifteen bucks an hour," says Ralph Taylor. "Today that guy can only get four or five bucks an hour at McDonald's, and the implications of that are enormous. For the first time in history, most of America's poverty is urban, yet the federal money for fairly effective poverty programs meant to address this shift, such as Head Start, has dried up. The cities are left to educate and otherwise service a huge, needy population that has few opportunities for advancement."

The socioeconomic plague Taylor describes has drastically afflicted the body as well as the soul of the city, physically pocking it in a way that, in a particularly vicious circle, aggravates the social sickness. "The places in which poorer groups grow up today are radically different than they were twenty-five years ago," he says. "A house's transition from a prime homeowner's property through the rental stage to abandonment happens much faster now. The huge volume of vacant housing that results has created an enormous opportunity for illegal drug activities, which is what most of it is used for."

Because vacant housing affords them plenty of room, marginal characters move in and take over a block's behavior setting from the

established citizens that Taylor calls the "regulars." Once that begins to happen, the regulars can be pushed toward one of two unfortunate paths. Those who can afford to do so may panic and leave, giving way to unprepared, less committed newcomers and transients, which helps ensure the collapse of the setting. On the other hand, those who remain in the troubled setting by necessity or choice often try to protect themselves by retrenchment, thereby shrinking the amount of communal territory under surveillance. Instead of viewing the whole block as their turf, they may limit their involvement to their end of it, or even to their building.

The role played by abandoned housing in the decay of urban life is hard to overestimate. "Here in Philadelphia, at the urging of some ministers, former Mayor Goode sealed up eight hundred crack houses at great expense," says Taylor, "but there are so many empty buildings that when one drug place was bricked up, a new one could open right next door. If you combine a lack of jobs, enormous opportunities for 'social deviants' to flourish, fewer settings for 'regular' behavior, reduced public services, physical dilapidation . . . If I could do one thing to improve urban life, I'd rehab all the vacant housing."

As the ravages caused by crack houses and shooting galleries have shown, a community's troubles are apt to occur in the gaps in a behavior setting—spots in which the neighborhood's usual standards and degree of vigilance do not apply. That is why shady activities flourish not just in abandoned housing but on corners, in parks, or near bars, stores and other places where residents' control is limited. When these gaps expand, say, jumping from a candy store used for gambling to a nearby abandoned house used for prostitution and drug dealing to a vacant lot filled with trash, a deadly domino effect sets in. The worse the social climate, the more dilapidated the setting becomes, and vice versa. Before long, there are fewer symbols of the individual and group territoriality, from brightly lit doorways to clean sidewalks, that could help turn things around. Tragically, it doesn't take much—some peeling paint, an abandoned car, a boarded-up window—to set off the deadly chain reaction of fright, flight, or withdrawal on the part of solid citizens that destroys a once sound urban setting.

The more diverse the residents of a setting, the harder it is to band together to eliminate the gaps that invite bad behavior. Because

a sense of community rests on shared values, feelings of belonging, and the ability to influence events, it is harder to achieve within an ethnically and economically mixed group. The members of a certain we-happy-few beach colony in Massachusetts are in such accord about the way things should be that all houses are painted gray and white, most of the dogs are descendants of a single black Lab bitch, and no laundry is ever hung outdoors. For similar reasons of homogeneity, populations. In melting pots like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, however, sharing a setting is a challenge, particularly since the acceleration in cultural diversity that began in the 1960s. For a pedestrian example, consider the parking problems experienced by one traditionally blue-collar Brooklyn block simultaneously undergoing Central American immigration. At one end, the long-established families of white longshoremen would have nothing to do with their new neighbors, both groups of whom they saw as threats; they vigilantly defended the area in front of their houses by stabbing the tires of any "outsiders" who dared to park there. At the other end, the new gentrifiers were very much disturbed by the cars their foreign neighbors often parked in their driveways; to them, these vehicles were physical symbols of looming disorder and lawlessness—the thin end of the wedge. If something as seemingly simple and objective as parking can cause trouble among a diverse group sharing an urban setting, far more difficult problems can seem insurmountable, further encouraging aggression or withdrawal. "If you live on a block with lots of people you understand and get along with, things go fine," says Taylor. "But if your neighbors are really different from you, it's going to drive you crazy."

If a row of dilapidated and vacant houses creates a setting that begs for bad behavior, it seems reasonable to assume that renovating those buildings to their former Victorian splendor must be a solid step toward urban renewal. Despite the fact that the restoration of old urban neighborhoods is one of the few visible signs of hope in many cities, Taylor cautions that plugging in a few showplaces doesn't necessarily benefit a neighborhood. Gentrification means diversity, and that means not just clashes but anxiety, because we feel safest when we're near people like ourselves. In ethnically mixed neigh-

hoods, this fear of each other not only adds to stress but also decreases our sense of territoriality, which in turn increases the likelihood of trouble. "By definition, gentrification is a spotty process in which two very different groups—lower-income renters and higher-income owners—are thrust together. This polarity boosts the level of concern among those at the upscale end and dramatically intensifies the others' feelings of inequity. As soon as the rich people move in, you hear the long-term residents saying, 'Hey, I thought my kid would be able to grow up and buy a house here, and that ain't going to happen now. My taxes are going up. They're on my case about my cousin working on his car out front with the radio on. And where's the good old white bread in the supermarket?'"

In modern urbanized society, the greatest potential for misunderstanding concerns not race but money, says Taylor. "Can middle-class black and white people get on okay as neighbors? We don't yet know, although they seem to in many places. But there are chasms when poor and middle-class people, black or white, try to share a community."

The most chilling example of how the destruction of a supportive environment can accelerate a community's behavioral collapse may be the plight of the Central African tribe called the Ik. After they were displaced from their hunting grounds in the 1930s and left without an adequate material or spiritual substitute, the Ik culture disintegrated until, when anthropologist Colin Turnbull studied them in the 1970s, moral and social values were such that parents laughed when their own children were hurt. While the Inuit have traditionally coped well with extreme scarcity in the cradle of their homeland, the rootless Ik were unable to sustain the culture that sustained their humanity. Although the predicaments of two very different cultures can't be strictly compared, the negative influence of the setting plays an important role in the misery of the ghetto, just as it did in the decline of the Ik.

Seemingly planned to thwart a sense of belonging, the forty eleven-story buildings that comprised the infamous Pruitt-Iggo housing project in St. Louis finally had to be blown up in 1972. Its design was initially celebrated for the way it conserved space and reduced opportunities for vandalism. Because it offered none of the small, semi-

private communal areas that repel interlopers and encourage residents' territorial feelings, use, and surveillance, however, the development thwarted its tenants' psychological needs and the de-social networks that typically shore up the standards of urban neighborhoods. Sixteen years after its erection, the project was a nadir of depravity that begged for comparison to Calhoun's behavioral sink. By the time the towers were scheduled to be dynamited, rape, assault, and the damage to property—elevators were routinely used as toilets—were so widespread that more than half the buildings were vacant, especially their upper stories. At the very least, the nightmare of Pruitt-Iggo serves as a warning that when people's worlds are turned into wastelands, souls are starved and neglected as well as bodies.

As the Pruitt-Iggo debacle made clear, new-and-shiny isn't necessarily better, and good fences don't necessarily make good neighbors. The high-rise estrangement it epitomized can shadow affluent apartment complexes as well. A national survey conducted for the Federal National Mortgage Association in 1992 showed that 80 percent of Americans—particularly lower-income people and blacks and Hispanic Americans—still think that the single-family detached home with a yard is "the ideal place to live" and are willing to make substantial sacrifices to have one. Because of its high cost, however, home ownership has declined from 66 percent of the population in 1980 to 64 percent in 1990, which means that an increasing number of people are unable to secure something that is very important to them.

As "rugged individualists" distrustful of communal living, Americans have traditionally refused to regard an apartment as a "real home," implicating it in everything from the transmission of disease to impaired development. Even the first rich people to brave life in a Fifth Avenue triplex had to be wooed by the "maisonette," or town house built into a high-rise structure. Along with this antiapartment bias, residents of big tower developments, often set back off the street in nondescript grounds that discourage use, have to struggle harder to bond with hundreds of anonymous neighbors, keep watch, and even supervise their children. Not surprisingly, occupants of low-rise apartment buildings based on the personalized "real-home" model, grouped around smaller, semipublic yards, feel more territorial and neighborly than those who live in towers.

Although planners can identify a number of the circumstances

that make for a vital neighborhood, rich or poor, the serendipity involved can elude programming, and the disadvantaged have not been the only guinea pigs for failed communal experiments. In the 1960s and 1970s, large tracts of rural land were turned into utopian "new towns" whose 15,000 to 100,000 middle-class residents were eager to sidestep urban hassles and suburban isolation. To reduce traffic congestion and pollution while affording convenience, the designers of Columbia, Maryland, planned things so that residents could shop within a five-minute walk or bike ride from their homes. It turned out, however, that many preferred to drive to larger, less expensive stores, which meant plenty of cars on the road and the bankruptcy of the smaller shops. In a similar burst of well-meaning but doomed hyperdesign, the planners decided to promote socializing by clumping an entire block's mailboxes in one spot. The citizenry complained, protesting that they couldn't run out to get the mail in their bathrobes. Although new towns do provide better facilities, people weren't any happier there, and by the early 1980s, many of the sixteen federally funded projects had been sold to private developers.

A major factor in the fallibility of utopian schemes is the gap between what we say we want from our surroundings and what actually fosters our health and contentment. Although the new towns were built on the assumption that tasteful buildings, attractive landscaping, and fine facilities lead to the good life, the reality seems to have as much to do with the familiar turf and rich network of slowly fostered relationships typical of a more venerable behavior setting. Although it might surprise the uninitiated, ghetto residents often have fond feelings about their neighborhoods. After razing miles of dilapidated cityscape, bureaucrats have discovered that appearances can be deceiving, and some very good things can be destroyed in the name of urban renewal—particularly cheap housing and complex webs of social support. Within what outsiders perceive as an unrelieved slum, convenient shops and services and the frequent crossing of residents' paths help shrink an impersonal city down to size, lower stress, promote socializing, and provide a forum for attacking problems too big for individuals to handle. Whether they're rich or poor, some neighbors can usually be counted on to watch out for the kids and the elderly, give practical advice, pull a group together, and last

but not least, smile on their daily rounds. In an unusually clever study that compared the positive as well as negative feelings of poor and wealthy city dwellers and suburbanites, researchers discovered that although slum residents had more complaints about their surroundings than the other two groups, they made the same number of benign observations. Their reaction helps explain why people stuck in "bad" housing may resist being relocated to impersonal new developments, and why, if forced to go, they often grieve: no fewer than 50 percent of a group of displaced Bostonians in one survey were still depressed by the move a year later, and 25 percent a year after that.

If outsiders find it hard to believe that residents of what seems like a ghetto might want to stay there, they find it even harder to understand why waves of newcomers struggle to join them. "Slum" is really a psychological phenomenon—a state of hopelessness—and despite what they look like, places labeled that way can be filled with hope," says Alaskan anthropologist Kerry Feldman. "In the Philippines, I studied 'squatter settlements' to see what influenced the poor to leave the inner-city slums for those farther removed—their 'suburbs.' After interviewing three thousand people, I found that those with the higher incomes moved. Now, we're talking about families who make fifty dollars a month, but that's different from thirty dollars. The little country villages these people had migrated from may look more picturesque to Americans, but to them, a squatter site isn't a slum, it's a step up. You ask, 'Why are you here?' and they say, 'For a job and a better education and life for my children.' That's pretty much what urbanization is about worldwide. If they can make enough money to climb to the next rung on the ladder, people are willing to live in a place filled with disease and crime."

If urban squatter and wealthy landlord, public-housing tenant and brownstone renovator are united by any response to the city, it is the dread of crime. Back in the fifteenth century, the Muslim Ibn Khaldun wrote that in contrast to the high-minded types bred in the open desert, the congested capitals of the West whelped depraved criminals. His bias persists, although, as Taylor points out, "People do plenty of bad things in the country, but Channel 10 news isn't

there to record them." Of all the reasons people give for disliking big cities, crime tops the list, not without reason: compared with rural areas, urban rates of violence and murder are respectively eight and three times higher. The reasons for the discrepancy range from more poverty and bad role models, to more victims and goods to prey upon, to the decreased likelihood that the criminal will be caught and punished. But the physical setting plays an important, often overlooked role in the incidence of crime as well.

Crime rates are lower in places where the setting's regulars share and display a strong proprietary sense of territoriality. In certain urban, socially homogeneous working- and middle-class neighborhoods, for example, there may be little of the historical-society splendor found in more affluent districts that attract tourists, yet the atmosphere of communal involvement and concern is similar. Instead of bronze door knockers and marble facades, these humbler communities use neat houses, clean, well-populated streets, and planted borders to repel troublemakers. Even a birdbath or a statue of St. Francis helps send a strong message to potential miscreants that, as Taylor puts it, "if they try to climb in a window, they'll meet somebody charging through from the other side. If only one person on the block hangs a window box, nothing much will happen. But if many people do, and they also take action against troublemakers, then you're talking. It's not the fixtures—the lights, the shrines, or the flowers—that prevent crime, but the social dynamics that drive and are driven by these environmental features. The phenomenon works in the opposite direction, too. As crime increases, the territorial markers that discourage it decrease, making things worse."

In posh suburbs, where just about everything is privately owned, markers abound and crime rates are lower. Poor communities, on the other hand, are often dominated by publicly owned developments and big stretches of no-man's-land where surveillance is minimal. Because most criminals come from such neighborhoods and usually venture less than two miles from home to do their dirty work, they particularly prey on these poorly marked and unguarded parts of their own backyards. Yet even in high-crime neighborhoods, pockets that encourage and display more territorial concern contend with less trouble: one housing project deliberately designed to encourage res-

idents' supervision of common areas suffered only half the crime visited on another just across the street.

Crime is bad, but the majority of Americans will not be its victims. For them, the fear it inspires is worse. "We assume that our anxieties about being mugged or robbed vary in proportion to the number of crimes committed in the places where we live and work, but in fact, there's much more fear than crime," says Taylor. "This modern worry is far more widespread than the crime rate, particularly among the poor, black, female, and aged. It limits our behavior and generates stress. Among people who already feel beset, the specter of crime causes higher levels of anxiety and depression. This fear is not only a social problem, but also a mental-health problem."

Our settings play such a crucial role in our anxiety about crime that its level can usually be predicted by the physical deterioration of a neighborhood—really the residents' perceptions of deterioration, because different groups read those signs very differently. "The Main Line looks great to newcomers," says Taylor, "but people who have lived there all their lives see the changes wrought by urbanization, such as more apartments, fewer private homes, more people of various sorts, and less social cohesion, as being profound. From the opposite perspective, inner-city people, especially the young, might interpret graffiti, litter, and loitering as legitimate social responses to unfair treatment, just as a riot can be viewed as a political statement rather than a rampage. But to middle- and upper-class people, the mere trappings of incivility—spray paint that isn't removed or a window that isn't fixed the next day—spell risk. To them, these physical cues symbolize moral collapse, poor police service, and the regulars' lack of control over local behavior. A high-rent area such as Manhattan's Upper East Side can have plenty of robberies, but if there aren't any physical signs of deterioration, people don't move away, as they might in a less attractive area with the same crime rate."

Despite the deterioration of the urban setting, Taylor and others who study our interactions with it insist the future isn't hopeless. More than thirty years of their research have shown that modern urban environments can reinforce good behavior as well as bad; even in the much disparaged and potentially troubled milieu of public housing, for example, simple measures such as landscaping, the use of color, and the orientation of buildings to the street can help

increase the community's control and decrease crime. To environmentally minded behavioral scientists, part of the tragedy of the cities isn't that no one knows what to do about them, but that we know some things that could help yet haven't done them.

As more and more Americans flee the troubled setting of the cities for the suburbs, they are pushing back the perimeters of the countryside. At the end of a long discussion of the influences of urbanization on behavior, Taylor adds another concern. "Although it's not as visible as overt urban decay, since the 1980s the conversion of rural land into suburbs has accelerated to a degree that affects not just our well-being but that of all species. Even if only ten or fifteen acres out of a hundred are perturbed, that can mean a radical disruption of a habitat, because breaking into a core area of some species can make a whole territory dysfunctional. In South and Central America, a species that only existed in a particular valley can be wiped out. Nature is a human need, and we're wiping it out."