

# THE FORTIFICATION OF URBAN AMERICA

RONALD E. SCHMITT

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

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Unlike the picturesque medieval city, walled-in for fortification, Berlin was divided by a wall physically, culturally, and politically. Removal of the wall allowed unification and was symbolic of the triumph of democracy. However, in America new walls are being erected that divide society. Fear of crime and desire to separate from groups of people perceived to cause crime are dynamics changing built-America. The result is the fortification of America as democratic liberties are traded for (perception of) enhanced security. What can alter this trend of fortification? The basic strategies first outlined in 1972 by Oscar Newman and inherently manifested in many designs of the New Urbanism, seem to offer viable alternatives to outright fortification. This paper will first summarize the most popular ways to fortify in the United States and then suggest some more benign and democratically compatible alternatives.

Among the many ways to fortify, the most obvious is the "gated community." Enclosed by fences or walls, the gated community is a relatively new phenomenon although private compounds, mostly for the wealthy, were found in 19th-century America. For example, St. Louis had a number of gate-controlled private streets called Places. However, gated communities have become common in the late twentieth century. More than one-half million people reside within gated communities in California.<sup>1</sup> Nationwide, an estimated eight million people live in more than 20,000 gated communities. Some gated communities try to eliminate people as guards and resort to dangerous devices to secure entrances. At Hidden Valley in Santa Clara, California, an unmanned entry gate is activated by a plastic identification card; and, if a vehicle tries to enter without I.D. clearance, it is disabled by a metal cylinder launched from a kind of underground mortar.<sup>2</sup> More common is the protected gate of angled metal prongs that puncture the tires of a vehicle not approved for entry. In 1995, the Chicago suburb of Rosemont implemented check-points at its public streets entrances. Police guards stop incoming traffic and question motorists' business while recording times and license plates. Perhaps the 4,000 residents feel more secure, but civil rights erode.<sup>3</sup>

Even the popular press questions the trade-offs of the gated community. *USA Weekend* debated: "Proponents say the safety, livability and neighborhoods of gated subdivisions restore a lost sense of community. Others

worry they have the opposite effect, walling off the "haves" from the "have-nots," negating America's already fragile sense of common ground."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is unclear how much crime is really deterred by walls and gates. A Bellingham, Washington, community removed its gates, and crime actually decreased. It was surmised that criminals bypassed the development as if there wasn't anything worth stealing since there were no gates.<sup>5</sup> Research by Edward Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, who are preparing a book on Gated Communities, indicates crime rates initially fall but then usually match prior levels about a year after gating.<sup>6</sup>

Like the gated community but on a smaller scale and identified with individual buildings, the use of walls for security purposes is even more prevalent. Usually these are freestanding; however, security walls have become integral with buildings, such as Frank Gehry's Goldwyn Library and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Furthermore, Los Angeles architects have pioneered "camouflaged" buildings. Mundane exteriors disguise opulent interiors as a comparable exterior would invite burglary. For example, Brian Murphy's design for actor Dennis Hopper's residence appears to be an industrial shed clad with corrugated metal. For the Dixon Residence in Venice, California, Murphy incorporated a graffiti-covered abandoned-looking house as an outer shell denying the richly skylighted interior.

The 1992 riots in Los Angeles prompted this attention to security.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the bombings at the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City (1995) and the World Trade Center in New York City (1993) suggest that building designs should incur functional changes such as removal of parking from under a building and erection of barriers between building and street to stop vehicles carrying bombs.<sup>8</sup> So far, we have resisted designing (most) buildings as bunkers, with thick concrete walls and minimal, if any, windows. But some people are advocating such a response, especially for governmental buildings. However, security hardware, such as surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and card-reading access devices, is now standard building equipment.

At the current time, when the "New Urbanism" calls for gridded street layouts rather than winding connector streets laced with cul-de-sac off-shoots, large cities are experimenting with interruption of the existing street grid by barricades and cul-de-sacs. The grid-iron of city

streets, it is argued, provides easy access and multiple quick escape routes for criminals. Therefore, the city street grid is modified to reduce access by the introduction of barriers or cul-de-sacs and becomes another form of fortification. For example, the Chicago residential neighborhoods of Beverly and South Shore have undergone street alterations and redirected traffic patterns. The curtailment of traffic is an attempt to strengthen neighborhood identity as defendable territory and thereby thwart crime. Streets have been barricaded to sever connections to surrounding communities, where criminals are perceived to reside and from where they emanate to prey on the more prosperous neighborhoods. Those streets, which remain intact and connect to the "outside" communities, become more congested with funneled traffic. Symbolic gateways announce identity of the reclusive neighborhood while anticipating the fully gated community.<sup>9</sup> Although originally associated with colonialism, the gridded street pattern is a symbol of Democracy, with free and equal movement along any route and in any direction. Reduction of the grid into a maze for isolation and segregation seems counter to Democratic principles.

Another subtle way to help fortify an urban neighborhood from "outsiders" is the permit-only parking zone. Only motorists with permit stickers can park vehicles on neighborhood streets. Therefore, city streets are effectively no longer for use by the taxpaying public. Many cities, such as Toronto and Chicago, have established such permit-parking zones. Most restricted parking zones have been established in fashionable areas where curbside parking is at a premium. Established under the pretext of reserving car spaces for residents, permit-parking zones essentially ban non-resident motorists from stopping in these areas. The "outsiders," who dare to park, may find their vehicles towed and searched as well as subject to exorbitant fines and inconvenience. Businesses, especially restaurants and entertainment centers, suffer as customers can not park and go elsewhere.

Public open spaces have become a concern as witness the Centennial Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta. Some people have criticized such public gathering spaces as inviting targets for terrorists. Certainly such places pose special problems but succumbing to paranoia and eliminating these civic spaces would be surrender. However, many plazas are the product of modernism and are little more than leftover spaces that become voids in the city fabric. Such is the case for the poorly-used ill-proportioned plaza at the Phillip Burton Federal Building in San Francisco and the subject of a recent design competition. The program called for increased security in addition to wind control and aesthetic improvements. The plaza is a major gap in the adjacent street frontages and has little meaning in its redundancy to the open-space provided by the nearby civic center. A proposal that redefined street edges by building about a courtyard sparked this reaction: "The Jury was intrigued and alarmed by this design that captures the plaza program in a series of architectural forms and inverts the notion of 'plaza'."<sup>10</sup> In essence, the jury responded with a status-quo Modernism reaction by favoring retention of the open plaza with only cosmetic revisions. This was a

missed opportunity as street life would have been introduced in place of a barren plaza and thereby increase urban vitality, with its by-product of increased security.

The key to increasing security is increasing urban vitality. Vitality includes density and identity to promote a sense of community and thereby instill a sense of responsibility. Most agree a responsible and concerned citizenry is the key to a safer and more secure environment. How can this be achieved? As designers, we need to understand the principles and solutions for various security problems and issues. We need to be well-versed in security design and what each solution represents. Design characteristics to enhance security were codified by Oscar Newman in 1972.<sup>11</sup> The principal concepts of territoriality and natural surveillance as outlined in Newman's book, *Defensible Space*, are still relevant. These common sense characteristics were inherent in the design of earlier cities, with well-defined and pedestrian-friendly streets. Stable neighborhoods, active street life, viable civic spaces, and a vital core characterized American cities until the growth explosion after the Second World War.

Primed by Federal construction of the interstate highway system and other government subsidies, suburban development became rampant and sapped the strength of the central city. Putting distance between one's abode and potential adversaries, i.e., criminals, is a fundamental security concept. In addition to seeking relief from high property taxes and a perception of an improved quality of life, people move to suburban areas in an attempt to escape criminal activity. However, the result is dehumanizing sprawl and inefficient decentralization. The city is further eroded. With decline and loss of a sense of community, cities become less safe.

In her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs railed against disintegration of the city.<sup>12</sup> As Jacobs advocated, traditional city patterns have been resurrected. The "New Urbanism" replicates many of the positive features of the pre-war city and provides a positive alternative to suburban sprawl. Such New Urbanism features as narrower lots to front more population on the street, houses with front porches, which shift living patterns from backyard to front, and pedestrian-friendly streets and paths, provide the "eyes" for natural surveillance and increased security. Similarly, such features as human-scaled and personalized structures, attractive fences for well-defined yards, and intimate streets help define territory and enhance security in the Newman mode. With higher densities and design strategies which establish a sense of community, the New Urbanism promises not only to conserve land, resources, and energy, but improve security as well.

Obviously physical design will not do this alone. Political, economic, educational, and social institutions must refocus to be successful in improving American society, including reduction in crime. But, architects can understand, educate, and lead in the adaptation of the basic planning principles of the New Urbanism. A redirection of development from sprawl to well-designed urban environments can have many positive benefits, including an alternative to fortification.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Community Association Institute, Alexandria, VA.
- <sup>2</sup> David Diamond. "Behind Closed Gates," *USA Weekend*, Jan. 31-Feb. 2, 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> Alf Sievers and Phillip J. O'Connor, "Rosemont Police Guard Neighborhood's Gates," *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 9, 1995. p.1.
- <sup>4</sup> David Diamond. *USA Weekend*, Jan. 31-Feb. 2, 1997. p. 4.
- <sup>5</sup> Evan Perez, "Please Fence Me In," *Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette*, Nov. 17, 1996. p. B-1.
- <sup>6</sup> David Diamond. *USA Weekend*, Jan. 31-Feb. 2, 1997. p.5.
- <sup>7</sup> Jerry Adler with Marc Peyser, "Architecture: A City Behind Walls," *Newsweek*, October 5, 1992. pp.68-69.
- <sup>8</sup> William Smith, "Architect's Dilemma: Buildings or Bunkers?" *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 24, 1995. p. 20.
- <sup>9</sup> Tamara Kerrill, "Traffic Barriers Divide Beverly," *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 15, 1996. p. 8.
- <sup>10</sup> "S. F. Prize/GSA Plaza Design Competition: Report of the Jury," September 25, 1996.
- <sup>11</sup> Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space* (New York: McMillan, 1972).
- <sup>12</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).