

## Towns and Cities - One Man's Plans for Planning

Nick Elliot

"The first thing to understand is that the public peace - the sidewalk and street peace - of cities is not kept primarily by police, necessary as police are. It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves." (1)

Jane Jacobs

*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

It is the inhabitants of cities, simply going about their daily business, who make a successful environment. Formal policing is not what makes a city safe. The streets are kept safe by people coming and going to work, by neighbours peering out of windows, by parents collecting their children from school, all of whom, without realising it, maintain safety by being potential witnesses. The pattern of behaviour in cities is a form of spontaneous order. Where people choose a landscape which allows this natural co-operation to flourish, then the city is safe and pleasant to live in, where they do not there is urban decay. This process, operating freely, leads to an evolution of safe cities, as successful behaviour is copied.

Pervasive neglect of the idea of spontaneous order in public policy is common to urban planning. Jane Jacobs subtitled her book "The Failure of Town Planning". The book was a path-breaking analysis of the order of cities and, at the same time, a completely devastating rebuttal of the idea of "town planning". For many years planners and architects had proceeded under constructivist illusions. Inspired by the grandiose utopian dreams of Le Corbusier and the Garden City Movement, they believed that order originated on the drawing board. Viewed from the top of an ivory tower, cities do look messy. After looking down upon the apparent melee of city life, planners gave to themselves a vast job of social engineering. One bastard offspring of this was the "New

Town" building program started in Britain during the 1950s: In the plans for these towns the precise routes of inhabitants were traced out and arranged with the aim of forcing different classes and cultures to mix - needless to say, such schemes failed, but they do show the extent to which planners hoped to direct the most minute details of behaviour. On paper, cities can be drawn with straight lines. What urban planning has attempted to do is to reproduce this in reality by taking out the untidy bits and putting everything into neat compartments. What this did was to destroy the intricate webs of co-ordination which keep a city orderly.

In the urban landscape there are three features essential to public safety. The first of these is that there must be a clear demarcation of private and public space. In the example of a typical residential street, the dividing line between private garden and public pavement is clear, and a stranger could not easily wander onto private property. By contrast, one of the characteristic failings of post-war residential blocks is that inhabitants are unable to identify the boundaries which delineate their own private domain; consequently, strangers can wander in and out without challenge. One important difference between public and private property is in the respective rights of access. To be excluded from public property a person must be found guilty of committing a crime, whereas on private property there need only be suspicion:

Perhaps the defining characteristic of private property is the right of a property owner to control its use. You need not admit into your house any person who knocks on your door; nor must you wait for a guest on your property to commit an aggressive act before you may ask that person to leave. (2)

The second essential feature is that the windowed outlook of housing should maximise surveillance of the street:

The inter-war semi-detached home was the most advanced design achieved by British mass housing before natural evolution was broken off by planning control. Bay windows maximise surveillance of the approaches and the fenced and gated

frontages maximise control of the territory.  
(3)

Lack of surveillance is a recurrent failing of post war design: within enclosed corridors and hidden passageways violence and vandalism can proceed with relative privacy. Criminal Damage is the most common crime in Britain, and it is noteworthy that the average age of the criminal is estimated to be 14.7. Until planning, children had always played in the street, under the watch of adult neighbours. Not only was supervision easy, but also, in the small societies formed by streets, naughty children could be identified and reported to parents. In the residential complexes built by planners no-one can be quite sure whether the children outside do live locally, or where among the many anonymous concrete boxes they live. Alongside the aim of dividing cities into compartments came the idea that children should be left to play on their own. Taking children out from under the eyes of adults allowed them to run amok:

The reason that surveys show parks and playgrounds to be the worst vandalised areas is a simple and obvious one, the law of vandalism is that it rises with increasing numbers of children and decreasing adult supervision. (4)

Thirdly, there should be a wide variety of land uses to ensure round-the-clock use of public space. For example, consider an area with residential housing, a few cafes, shops, a school and a night-club. The first people about in the morning will be cafe and shop owners opening up, followed by men and women going to work. A little later there will be activity as parents escort their children to school. Throughout the day there will be a steady flow of people to and from the shops. Later in the day children will be collected and then people will return from work. The cafes will maintain a presence of people during the early evening, and as the night goes on the nightclub will attract visitors. The night-clubbers will go home at perhaps two o'clock, and there will only be a few hours in the early morning when there is no one about. Constant activity makes this a safe place to live in. Now in this context look at town planning. A city divided into compartments lacks this mixture of land-

uses. Imagine that all commerce was sectioned off into one area. In this area there would be large portions of the day with no-one around. Anyone passing through at these times would be alone and unseen. The order which follows from the continual presence of people is not designed, and most of those who form it and benefit from it do not consciously recognise it. In a way this is unfortunate because it means that interference in that order will not be seen as interference either. In the past few years the area in which I live has become noticeably safer in the evening. This is at least partly due to the opening of several new restaurants, of video hire shops which open in the evening, and the arrival of several more fast food shops. A stream of people to these places deters vandalism. And yet no-one seems to realise what has happened, and locals complain about the noise and litter caused by these places. Government intervention proceeds with the inherent logic that in most forms of regulation benefits will be specific and obvious while costs will be dispersed and often imperceptible. Take the example of the Shops Acts which limit the opening hours of shops during the week, and largely prohibit Sunday opening. These regulations ensure that for a large part of the day people will be absent - they make the city less safe (for one thing, how many "smash and grab" raids take place during opening hours?). Few people will make this connection. Many more will envisage the increased activity only in terms of more litter, nuisance, noise and so on. The networks of city order really are, as Jane Jacobs says "intricate, almost unconscious".

The implications of one piece of intervention are very wide. Preventing shops from opening at night does not only distort economic markets. One policy can send out ripples of disorder to many spheres of life. This subtlety is rarely appreciated. Most people, thinking about crime, do not see beyond numbers of policemen and severity of sentences; where the problem is one of disorder, policemen and courts are as likely to create it as to relieve it.

## **Free Life**