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Defensible Space, By Oscar Newman

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BOOK REVIEW

DEFENSIBLE SPACE. By Oscar Newman. New York: MacMillan. 1970. Pp. 264. $8.95.

Crime is a problem. Politicians campaign with slogans about "crime in the streets" and "law and order," but one seldom reads of any proposals of practical ways to reduce crime. It was a relief, therefore, to read Oscar Newman's book, *Defensible Space*; his book is the first book on crime prevention that I have read in recent years to offer specific, concrete proposals that are both politically possible and humanistically inspired.

Newman states a hypothesis—the design of a housing unit and its immediate environment is causally linked to crime—and he offers evidence in support of the hypothesis. Furthermore, he is specific; the recommendations that are the result of his study can be used as guidelines by architects. He has proposals for designing new buildings and remodeling old buildings that he argues will lead to a reduction in crime.

I suppose that you are curious about how anyone could conduct a study that could prove such a thing. He did it by studying the New York City Housing Authority, and he makes the claim that it is "an incomparable laboratory for measuring the effect of different housing environments on crime and vandalism" (p. xiv). If one looks at what he says about the housing run by this Authority, his data base, it does seem to live up to his claim that it is an "incomparable laboratory." There is first of all the rather remarkable fact that 19% of all of the public housing in the country is run by this one authority (p. 10). The authority has 169 housing projects which contain 150,000 individual residential units and 528,000 residents (p. xiv). The authority has elaborate data about just who its tenants are; it has data on such things as age, income, years of residence, and history of family pathology (p. xiv). The author's conclusion about this part of his data is that throughout the projects studied there is "only a limited variation in the social characteristics of resident population" (p. xv). Thus, one of the variables that is often linked to crime, social characteristics, is uniform throughout the data base.

Another variable that is often linked to crime is location; some parts of a city are more dangerous and have more crime than others. Here again, the sheer size of this particular housing authority makes it possible to control this variable. First, the projects are spread throughout the greater New York area, some in high crime areas and some in low. Second, the physical characteristics of the housing projects often differ from those of the neighborhood in which it is located.

There are high-rise, high-density projects 20 miles from central Manhattan in the midst of single-family residential areas; there are low-density projects in central Manhattan (p. xv). Thus, this variable can be analyzed; one can compare whether location is more significant than design.

As to the variable that Newman is interested in, the design of buildings and projects, there is all the variety that one could wish for. The range of building types, for example, goes from 2-story row houses to 30-story elevator apartments (p. xiv). Indeed, as I read the book, I was surprised at the variety of this variable; I would have thought that a bureaucracy would have turned out a more uniform product.

What then are the conclusions that Newman reaches? How are the variables correlated? It turns out that the most significant correlation is the height of the buildings in the projects (pp. 27-28). The taller the buildings, the higher the crime rate. For projects with buildings that are six stories or less, the size of the project does not make much difference. However, if the project is made up primarily of large buildings, then the statistics do show that large buildings in large projects have more crime than large buildings in small projects.

It would be possible for me to set out the statistics in further detail, but I suppose that most people who will read this review are not very good at statistics and find them hard to fathom. Therefore, I would like to set out one example. There are two housing projects in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn that are right across the street from each other; they are known as the Brownsville project and the Van Dyke project. Both house about 6,000 people at a density of 288 people per acre. The social statistics such as family size, income, race, percentage of broken families, age distribution, and turnover rate are substantially the same for both projects. However, the building types are very different. The buildings in the Brownsville project are all 3 to 6 story buildings; these buildings occupy 23% of the land. In the Van Dyke project, the buildings occupy only 16.6% of the land and, consequently, in order to get the same number of people at the same density of people per acre, the buildings in Van Dyke have to be larger. Van Dyke does have some smaller buildings; to be precise, there are nine 3-story buildings. However, 87% of the residential units in Van Dyke are in thirteen 14-story buildings. As you might have guessed, the Van Dyke project has substantially more crime; 60% more felonies, 264% more robberies (pp. 39-49).

One of the most remarkable lessons to be drawn from Newman's statistics is that the phrase "crime in the streets" is a misnomer. The buildings themselves are far more dangerous. To demonstrate this,

let us divide all projects in New York City into three areas: the apartment unit, which is a private place; the interior public places such as lobbies, elevators, stairs, roofs, etc.; and the exterior public places, *i.e.*, the grounds. Then let us take a crime index of felonies per thousand inhabitants and distribute these felonies among the three areas. By my calculations, the following chart is the result (pp. 32-33).

Number of stories in building	Felonies per thousand	Apartment	Interior Public	Grounds
3	9	3.6	1.6	3.8
6 & 7	12	4.2	4.8	3.0
13 & over	20	4.0	11.0	5.0

If you examine the chart, you can notice how the crime index increases from 9 to 20 as one goes from the small buildings to the largest buildings. Note that one gets only a small increase of crime in apartments, but there is a fantastic increase from 1.6 to 11.0 for the interior public places.

The obvious next question is, Why? Why are large buildings unsafe? So far, I have presented only statistics, and everyone knows that statistics show only correlations. The facts of correlations tell us us nothing about causation; we want to know the cause. Our desire for causal knowledge is not based merely on our desire for scientific accuracy; we need accurate causal knowledge if we are going to be able to take remedial action. For example, is the only way to reduce crime to tear down the big buildings and put up small ones? Is there something about big buildings that causes crime and that we can change? If our causal knowledge is precise enough to let us answer the second question with a Yes, then we would probably choose building modification over building destruction on the grounds that modification would be less disruptive, both economically and socially.

Newman is able to offer causal explanations; for example, he is able to explain the fact that I have just discussed: the dangerousness of interior public spaces in large buildings. As a preliminary matter we must remember that public housing apartment buildings do not have doormen; anyone can walk in the door and ride up the elevator. Indeed it is this very fact that led us to characterize them as interior *public* spaces. Yet even though they are public, they are not under the same sort of public observation as streets and their sidewalks are. Furthermore, fire regulations require a particular number of stairwells and exits, and certain configurations of stairwells and exits have

become common. There is no way that I can give an adequate description of the architectural details; the reader must consult Newman's book (pp. 34-35). However, I can state the result of the architecture; the stairwells and exits connect so as to make a maze in which a criminal can hide, from which he can suddenly sally forth and attack, and to which he can return for escape. Pursuit of a criminal through this maze by a policeman is impossible; in order to seal off a building a squad would be required. Later on in this review, I shall return to the issue of why it is correct to say that this sort of explanation is a *causal* explanation. For now, let us continue with what Newman has to say.

Newman offers us two lists; one describes an unsafe project, and the other describes a safe project. There is an interesting difference between the two lists. The charactistics of the unsafe projects are given by physical description, and it is apparently a composite picture of existing unsafe projects. Unsafe projects are large, with more than a thousand families; the buildings in the project are towers (slab or cruciform) of more than seven stories that house 150 to 500 families; the site is an assembly of 4 to 6 blocks into a superblock with no interior traffic; the buildings are positioned on the site in a free compositional pattern; the grounds are designed as one continuous space, open to the street (p. 22).

The list for safe projects is more general. It is not a direct description; it is indirect in that principles are given that can be used to generate different designs and provide a choice among them. The general principle is that the architect must create a hierarchy of zones from public through semi-public and semi-private to private, and that the boundaries between these zones must be marked by symbolic (not real) barriers. This territorially defined space must have the following characteristics: an intruder must be able to read the symbols that define the boundaries of the zones; inhabitants must be able to have surveillance over the boundaries; the space must require an intruder to declare his intentions; the inhabitants must be able to challenge the intruder (pp. 63-64).

This last paragraph is probably meaningless to you; the language is both general and metaphorical, and so there is no way that you can understand how an architect is supposed to use this language to help him design housing projects. Let me use a simple example that is removed from the sort of problem that Newman is speaking to but that may illustrate some of his concepts. Suppose that you live in a suburb, that you have a front yard that is level with the street, and that you are unhappy with the way that your neighbors are using your front yard. For example, there are very few cars on the street and so

that street is used for playing ball; part of your yard has become part of the playing field. A Newman-like analysis would point out that the street was clearly a public place, your front-stoop was clearly a private place, your front-stoop was clearly marked as a private place, but the space in between is ambiguous. After all, there is a right of way that is broader than the asphalt of the street and that does belong to the public, but where does it end? A symbolic boundary would be privet hedge; it would not keep out anyone who would wish to come in, but if you put in a hedge, the use of your front yard by others would be lessened.

The problems of a city, however, are very different from the problems of suburbia, so my example does not provide the key to the book. A better example is a walk-up apartment building that runs the length of a city block, facing the street. It could have a central corridor on each floor running the length of the building; individual apartment units would open onto the corridor. A different method of construction would be to have a set of stair-wells with the individual apartment units clustering around and opening upon the stair-wells. In other words, the choice is between building the unit with an integrated and basically horizontal interior traffic pattern as opposed to building it with a series of disconnected and basically vertical interior traffic patterns. The latter way of building is safer (pp. 71-77). Why? There is no lack of a symbolic barrier in either case; the passage from the public space of the street to the semi-public space of the corridor or stair-well is clearly marked by an unambiguous symbol (a door) under either building technique. The real difference is that the requirements of surveillance and the ability to challenge are met in the stair-well method but are not met in the corridor system. There is no mystery as to this. A stair-well in a walk-up will probably serve twelve families at the most. Consequently, the inhabitants are able to identify anyone who is on the stairs as either a resident or an intruder. This sort of recognition is not possible if there is a long corridor. Lack of knowledge results in an inability to challenge; consequently, the corridor does not receive surveillance but becomes a no-man's land.

The bulk of the book is the exploration of details such as this last one. If you are interested in the details, read the book. As a practical matter, you need not be an architect or property manager to be interested in the details. If you ever hunt for an apartment in a big city, there is a good deal of information in the book that can equip you to make judgments as to relative safety of different apartments. One more example must suffice. The building entry should face the street and not the interior of the project. If the entry faces the street, then

you can give surveillance to the street when you leave, and when you return you can see the entrance from the street. In either case, you can know whether there is any danger ahead of you. An added bonus is that the police can give surveillance to the entrance from the street (pp. 80-82).

As one reads the details of the book and inspects the diagrams and photographs, it all seems so obvious. Why then do we not build the way Newman thinks we should? If we look at the history of architecture, it turns out that generally speaking, we always have built that way (pp. 4-7). Territorial definition and symbolization have been the ordinary motifs of city architecture; it has been only in recent years that we have built housing for the poor (and sometimes for the middle class) that has lacked these features. Why? Newman gives several reasons. The sort of knowledge that has guided our building in the past was "not held within the conscious verbal bank of human knowledge." When building design becomes the product of schools and bureaucracies, this sort of knowledge can become easily lost. The architects who have designed the buildings that Newman criticizes are partially at fault. Some of the dangerous features appear to be nothing more than the product of aesthetic whim (p. 12). This would seem to be a violation of the architectural profession's primary maxim—form follows function. In other words, the social functions of buildings have not been carefully enough examined by the profession. A rather more significant cause is cost. The most dangerous type of building is the high-rise, elevator-serviced building. Inflated land costs have led to building at higher densities, and once the density of 75 apartment units per acre is reached, then the high-rise slab becomes the only option, unless one makes a fairly radical change in building design (pp. 25-26).

Granting all of the above, we still do not have an explanation. After all, the book is primarily an examination of public housing. Could not the government have absorbed some of the cost and built safer buildings? Aside from and in addition to ignorance, the particular dynamics of public housing is significant. Generally speaking, the largest public housing projects have been a by-product of urban renewal. In urban renewal, the ghettos were cleared to make room for businesses and for middle-income housing. There was then a need for replacement housing, but there was not much space that was available. Typically, an out-of-the-way portion of the cleared land near the existing ghettos was used to build housing at five to ten times the density of the old ghetto (pp. 36-37). The result was high-rises. Newman's account of these dynamics contains one particularly depressing sentence: "placing federally sponsored housing of high-density on

urban renewal land insured that a higher price per acre could be paid by a city's housing agency to a city's urban renewal agency" (p. 37).

I would like to return to an issue that I discussed earlier in this review—the problem of causation. In the human sciences (sociology, psychology, etc.), we want proof of causation and not proof of correlations. Newman observes the distinction; he does not theorize about it. I would like to theorize a bit, to talk about what counts for causal explanation in the human sciences as opposed to the physical sciences. I would like to argue that the environment, whether physical or social, causes (or "influences") our actions whenever we give a symbolic reading to the environment. Newman's account of the impact of building design illustrates this thesis. Unfortunately, it is hard to demonstrate this in a review, since one cannot follow the details of his argument without looking at his diagrams and photographs. Of course, it is not practical to reproduce them in this review, and word descriptions of the relevant architectural details would not convey much to a reader who is not familiar with architectural vocabulary. However, I can quote a passage from his discussion of playgrounds that I think anyone can visualize. The issue is whether recreational space should somehow be enclosed.

> Studies of the use of grounds of housing projects in many different cities—New York, Cleveland, San Francisco—indicate that the grounds of projects which were intentionally left open for public use (as a contribution to the open-space needs of the surrounding city) end up unused and neglected, by housing residents as well as members of the surrounding community. Each group, by experience, has found their activities easily disrupted by other groups and found that their claim to the use of space for recreation difficult to enforce. By contrast, recreation space located within the interior of a housing project, clearly defined by surrounding dwellings, was found to be used more frequently by both groups. Project residents had clearly laid claim to these play spaces and set up an unwritten, but understood, set of rules for their use. These rules were enforced by parents and other children. Project residents had first claim to this use, followed by surrounding neighborhood children, who came both spontaneously and by invitation. Disputes almost always resulted in the expulsion of the visitors (p. 205).

Note how the causation works in the playground example. The non-enclosed playground is not used by anybody. The enclosed playground is used by both the inhabitants of the project and by visitors. The change in the physical structures appears to be a necessary condition. Note further what the problems are. Use of a particular piece

of terrain for baseball means that it cannot be simultaneously used to play tag. If both or either or these games is to be played, there must be some rule or convention as to the allocation of the terrain to a use, or else someone must be strong enough to appropriate the terrain. In the unenclosed playground, it appears that no one has either the power to appropriate or the authority to make rules. When the playground is enclosed, the situation is changed. One of three things must have happened: the balance of power changed; authority became recognized because of the symbolization of an enclosure; or some combination of these occurred. The first hypothesis, a change in the balance of power, is untenable. If I read Newman correctly, the type of enclosure of which he speaks is not accomplished by locked gates and guards; consequently, if the outsiders had the physical power to disrupt before enclosure, they would still have so after. There would still be entries into the enclosure which the outsiders could use. Furthermore, Newman asserts that "an unwritten, but understood, set of rules" were generated, albeit by some process of which we are ignorant. One plausible hypothesis is that the fact of enclosure gave the residents of the project the confidence to assert control and intimidated the outsiders into accepting control. Such words as "confidence" and "intimidated" refer to mental states, so the hypothesis suggests that the topic for investigation is the link between the environment's physical shape and the inhabitants' mental state. The link might be physiological or biological; however, Newman's hypothesis, which is both plausible and worth investigating, is that the link is symbolic, *i.e.*, people read certain physical shapes as having meanings which they understand and which thus influence their mental state via this route of meaning and understanding.

I would like to close this review by commenting on a rather curious passage from Newman's book. It is not what he says that is curious, for what he says is perfectly reasonable; what is curious is that he would feel the need to say it.

> The essential ingredient of our proposal is territorial definition coupled with improvements to the capacity of the territorial occupants to survey their newly defined realm. Territorial definition may appear to be the antithesis of the open society, and surveillance a further restriction on its freedom. Territory and surveillance have after all traditionally been understood as the devices of the propertied classes and their agents or police authority. We, however, are advocating territorial definition and the creation of surveillance opportunities to allow the *citizen* of the open society to achieve control of his

> environment for the activities he wishes to pursue within it—to make him instrumental in curtailing others from destroying his habitat (p. 204).

I gather that Newman fears that he will be charged with advocating something inimical to democracy and freedom by his advocacy of territory and surveillance. Such a charge would seem so bizarre that I at first wondered why he would enter such an anticipatory defense. Alas, I fear that he may be right; the low quality of our current political debate probably makes his defense necessary, those against whom he is defending himself use words in an abstract way; in particular, the key words of a theory of democracy, "public" and "private," are subject to this corruption. People forget that these terms are polar terms; without one the other does not exist. This pair of terms is like "right" and "left" or "up" and "down"; you can't give one member of the pair a meaning without also giving the other pair a meaning. The public thing, the res publica, the republic, is something in which everyone must have a stake; if no one cares about it, then it ceases to exist. Similarly, if one cares about what happens in playgrounds and on staircases, then someone must care; someone must be given a stake. The innovative and encouraging thesis of Newman is that one can create a private stake in things without creating a private legal title in them; architectural design that has the right symbolic meaning is enough.

I also suspect that the critic against which Newman is striving to erect his anticipatory defense would suffer from another confusion. Newman wishes to organize space into a hierarchy of uses so that rules for the use of these articulated spaces can be generated by the community. There are those who view a hierarchy of rules as inimical to freedom. The best refutation of such a view is the description of grounds and lobbies of public housing projects, where space is not organized, but uniform. It would be hard to defend such bleak landscapes as a realm of freedom. The point that is often forgotten is that freedom requires variety and variety requires order. I mean this last sentence as a strictly logical point. One must remember that there is only one way to be random. By definition, a random space is a space for which one area is not distinguishable from another. A random space (just like a vacuum) is perfectly uniform, without order. Variety requires order. The only sensible question is: what variety of orders do we want?

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