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Viewpoint

Planned Housing as a Social Trap

ALICE COLEMAN

'. . . men or organisations or whole societies get themselves started in some direction or some set of relationships that later prove to be unpleasant or lethal and that they can see no easy way to back out of . . .'

(J. Platt, 'Social Traps', 1973)[1]

A SOCIAL TRAP as conceived by Platt seems tailor-made to fit the plight of British housing after 40 years of official control. Our massive housing machine was switched on to achieve five laudable objectives, but in practice it has created five great failures which are proving extremely difficult to switch off. Solutions are not at all obvious. Many people are calling for even more of the well-intentioned government intervention that unleashed the problems in the first place, but this is hardly likely to guarantee success. We should not pursue what Roger James has called 'solutioneering' for its own sake,[2] but go back to the problems for a harder, clearer analysis and a more open-minded search for more effective approaches.

The purpose of this paper is to outline four of the problems and report more fully on the fifth, which has been the subject of a large research project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust and carried out by members of the Land Use Research Unit at King's College London.[3]

1 *A Sufficiency of Housing*. The first objective of public housebuilding was to redress the shortage of dwellings created by the Second World War. Although private builders had always previously met demand, they were considered incapable of making up for the lost interval of six years, and their output was restricted in favour of new housing bureaucracies. It is ironic that 40 years of this kind of salvation has never met demand. Long waiting lists have been perpetuated and homelessness has been increased.

2 *Improved Quality of Housing*. The second objective was to replace slums and preclude jerry-building to create better standards. It is true that dwelling interiors have improved (as they would have in any case, by natural evolution without planning), but slum-labelling has been abused so that structurally sound houses have been demolished and jerry-building has reached an unprecedented scale, with leaky flat roofs, dangerous concrete cladding, defective wiring and widespread condensation problems. While older housing took a century or two to deteriorate into slums, planned modern blocks have to be blown up as useless after only a decade or two.

3 *Affordable Housing*. Thirdly, no-one was to be denied good housing on financial grounds. Subsidies were made available to build council dwellings that were at least as expensive as private dwellings, and council tenants were privileged to have caretakers, cleaners and groundsmen to perform services that the average private household had to do for itself. There was also the cost of the housing bureaucracy, which expanded its role to cater for vastly more people than was originally envisaged, and consequently housing became an enormous drain upon public resources, contributing to inflation. Furthermore, the trend towards flats produced a shortage of houses, causing house prices to soar above the general inflation rate, while over-protective Rent Acts dried up the supply of rented accommodation, causing inflation in that sector too. All this led to a call for more council housing, which would further increase the strain on the economy.

Financially, therefore, housing has moved into a social trap, any form of extrication from which is extremely difficult.

4 *Aesthetic Control*. A much vaunted virtue of planning was its power to transform urban dinginess into a beautiful new build environment. Buildings were to be stretched majestically upward to make room for spacious green expanses around them. For a while the new scene was admired like the emperor's new clothes, but gradually it became recognised for what it was: brutal raw concrete rising

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from open air litter bins. The aesthetically impoverishing effect of official aesthetic control has been cogently explored in Diana Gurney's beautifully written paper in volume 8 of the LONDON JOURNAL.[4]

5 *A Better Community Structure*. The fifth presumption was that planned housing estates would foster a much more lively and kindly community spirit than ordinary traditional streetscape. This was a central tenet of Le Corbusier, the Swiss architect planner, who was a most effective communicator and succeeded in popularising his views as the International Style.[5] He believed that throwing people together at every scale – open plan rooms, communal tower blocks, and Radiant-City clusters of buildings – would automatically create a close-knit social structure, but he never actually tested whether his ideas were working in practice. Nor did British officialdom. Housing experts in the Department of the Environment and its various predecessors purveyed and elaborated the International Style in their design guides and encouraged its spread by means of subsidies and awards. One supposedly ideal estate, Oak and Eldon Gardens, Birkenhead, was made the subject of a coloured brochure circulated to local authorities as a model to imitate, yet it subsequently proved so disastrous that it became the first modern housing complex in Britain to be condemned to death by explosives.

The association of residential design awards with social disasters has become commonplace, and it seems to typify a social trap from which we cannot easily escape. It would be too costly to demolish all the offending buildings in favour of houses, and even if we could, we might still perpetuate the social problems, as modern estate layout seems to produce some of the kinds of breakdown in houses as flats. We need a more scientific understanding of precisely what is wrong before we can formulate a redemptive strategy with any hope of success.

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The Theory: Defensible Space

A fundamental step towards better understanding was taken by Oscar Newman who identified eight specific design features that were associated with the worst concentrations of crime in New York's 169 council estates (public housing projects).[6] He showed that these were all designs which were difficult for the residents to defend against intrusion by criminals, partly because they were so large and anonymous that the residents could not get to know each other and co-operate in a naturally self-policing way, partly because they could not exercise surveillance and control over the approach to their dwellings, and partly because the designs incorporated many interconnecting stairwells, lifts and exits that made it possible for criminals to make a clean getaway even if they were detected red-handed. Newman went on to supplement his observational evidence with experimental evidence; some of the offending designs were made more defensible to see if the crime rate would fall, which in fact it did.

Newman's breakthrough was enthustically welcomed in countries afflicted by the International Style including, at first, the United Kingdom. But shortly afterwards the government department responsible for housing design began to create a climate of disparagement, describing his findings as 'simplistic' and 'deterministic'. After a quarter of a century of advocating the indicted designs as socially beneficial, it now switched its stance to a denial that design could exert any social effect at all, and so skilful was its propaganda that the concept of defensible space became completely discredited in Britain and deleterious designs continued to be built.

Design Disadvantagement

It seemed to the writer that Newman's work was not being given a fair hearing, and that if it was true it was far too important to be sacrificed as a way of shielding the DoE's Housing Development Directorate from blame. In 1979, therefore with generous funding from the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust, the Land Use Research Unit at King's College London embarked upon a five-year project entitled 'Design Disadvantagement in Housing'. In order to avoid being thought to pick and choose designs that suited the defensible-space hypothesis, we decided to survey all the blocks of flats in two London boroughs, Southwark and Tower Hamlets, together with a large out-of-town estate in Oxford. The total numbers of blocks proved to be 4099 and to these we added over 4000 houses. We

investigated 70 different design variables and 20 socio-economic variables, and tested both these sets of factors against four kinds of social breakdown, ranging from mild to severe: litter, graffiti, vandal damage and faecal excrement in the entrances. When mapping the second borough, Tower Hamlets, we also included urine pollution in the entrances, while Southwark made available information on numbers of children in care. Subsequently the Neighbourhood Policing Research Project within the Metropolitan Police compiled statistics for nine types of residential crime in the 729 blocks of the Carter Street Division in Southwark: burglary, theft, car theft, theft from cars, criminal damage, bodily harm, robbery, sexual assaults and juvenile arrests.

Such exhaustive testing gave ample scope for refuting the influence of design, but in fact it did the reverse. Many of the 70 designs proved to have a significant relationship with the various measures of social breakdown, and in our report, 'Utopia on Trial', we picked out the 15 most powerful ones, on the grounds that if these are corrected, the others are automatically taken care of. In retrospect we would add a sixteenth, open apertures without doors, which was tested against five social breakdown measures in 264 blocks.

Table 1 includes all eight of the design variables discovered by Newman, which shows that the discrediting of his work was unjustified. Furthermore, the variables discovered by the Land Use Research Unit also illustrate his three principles of anonymity, lack of surveillance and alternative escape routes.

Anonymity is the lack of a normal social structure, where people do not interact as known individuals with an accepted set of social mores to support them. Instead, they function as isolated units, indifferent to each other's individuality and unwilling to become involved with strangers, who might be criminals. Anonymity is natural on a newly assembled estate, but on some the design and layout allows a social structure to develop, while on others they preclude it. Factors militating against the structuring of society include sheer size and identical units. Too many dwellings in the same block, and too many blocks in the same estate mean too many faces to be recognisable. The maisonette design, catering for larger families, means too many children to be recognisable, while communal play

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TABLE 1 *Influential design variables*

A	*Size Variables*	
	1	Dwellings per block*
	2	Dwellings per entrance*
	3	Storeys per block*
	4	Storeys per dwelling (flats, maisonettes or mixed)
B	*Circulation Variables*	
	5	Overhead walkways between blocks
	6	Interconnecting exits*
	7	Interconnecting vertical routes* (stairs and lifts)
	8	Corridor type† (number of dwellings: external or internal)
C	*Entrance Variables*	
	9	Entrance position*
	10	Entrance type (whether ground floor flats have separate external doors)
	11	Blocks raised over stilts or garages
	12	Doors or open apertures
D	*Features of the Grounds*	
	13	Blocks per site
	14	Access points (gates or gaps in the site perimeter)
	15	Play areas
	16	Spatial organisation*

* Variable identified by Oscar Newman

† Newman variable surveyed in a modified way

areas may concentrate hordes of anonymous children in one place. People give up the attempt to achieve the impossible and settle for living among strangers, with very few contacts outside their own household. This is socially impoverishing for most people, but criminals thrive on it. Freedom from recognition is security for them, but their unfettered activities create insecurity for everyone else, and the anonymous society is beset by stress and fear.

Surveillance is the power of the householder to control the approaches to his dwelling. This is easiest in houses with fenced gardens where the community can easily recognise and respect the boundary between public and private territory. This sort of layout deters criminals, as any visitor who fails to go straight up to the front door is seen to be behaving suspiciously not only by the occupants but also by neighbours and passing pedestrians. In small blocks of flats where the residents are few enough to know each other, the territory can be controlled co-operatively, but neighbours outside the block and street users at large are not able to exercise surveillance. In large anonymous blocks and estates, even the residents cannot exercise control. When blocks are raised up on concrete stilts they may not even be able to see who is using the entrances tucked away under the building and the sharing of the grounds among large numbers means that no-one can feel responsible for tending any part of them. If they try do to so, they are soon deterred by other people's litter, and they no longer bother to observe what they cannot control. Criminals feel sure they will not even be seen, let alone recognised.

Escape routes boost the confidence of criminals still further, as they know they can elude capture through ramifying corridors, overhead walkways linking block to block, alternative lifts and staircases, and a choice of exits from buildings and grounds.

So much for the theory; now we turn to the evidence.

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The Evidence of Trend Lines

To find out where the various types of social breakdown are concentrated we take each design variable in turn, and set out its values along the bottom of a graph. Then we examine all the blocks with each value of the design and plot what percentage of them has each type of social breakdown. It is expected that the most innocuous designs will show the lowest percentages and the most harmful designs the highest.

Figure 1 is a simple example, showing how each kind of test measure increases in frequency as the number of overhead walkways attached to any block rises from 0 to 5. All the test measures become most prevalent as the blocks are more interlinked, but the more mindless and involuntary forms of breakdown increase more slowly than crime, which is more deliberately maximised for motives such as profit or revenge. Walkways are the most powerful of all the designs in spreading crime from block to block, and their demolition would be the first stage in design improvement.

Figure 2 presents the more complex picture of trend lines for the number of storeys in the block. The Department of the Environment claimed that the problem with high-rise blocks was not their design but the presence of problem children, which carried the implication that if child densities were reduced the social breakdown associated with high buildings would disappear. Since then local authorities have progressively reduced the number of families with children in floors above walk-up height, with special efforts to transfer problem families from the tallest towers and slabs. This has resulted in a marked drop in the number of children in care and juvenile arrests in blocks of a dozen storeys or more, but even so the other test measures continue to worsen, showing that building height has a detrimental effect that is independent of the presence of children. Similar evidence is afforded by the dip in several trend lines and the flattening of others after about five storeys, the height where lifts become obligatory. Blocks taller than this would have progressively lower child densities, but they do not have progressively less vandalism and crime. There is only a temporary check before each curve resumes its rise.

It might be argued that taller blocks house more people and therefore bound to have more litter, graffiti, vandalism, crime, etc. However this simple explanation does not stand up under scrutiny. The tallest blocks are often slim points, housing fewer people than lower slab blocks, and the number of offences may increase much faster than block size. In blocks without walkways for example, there is

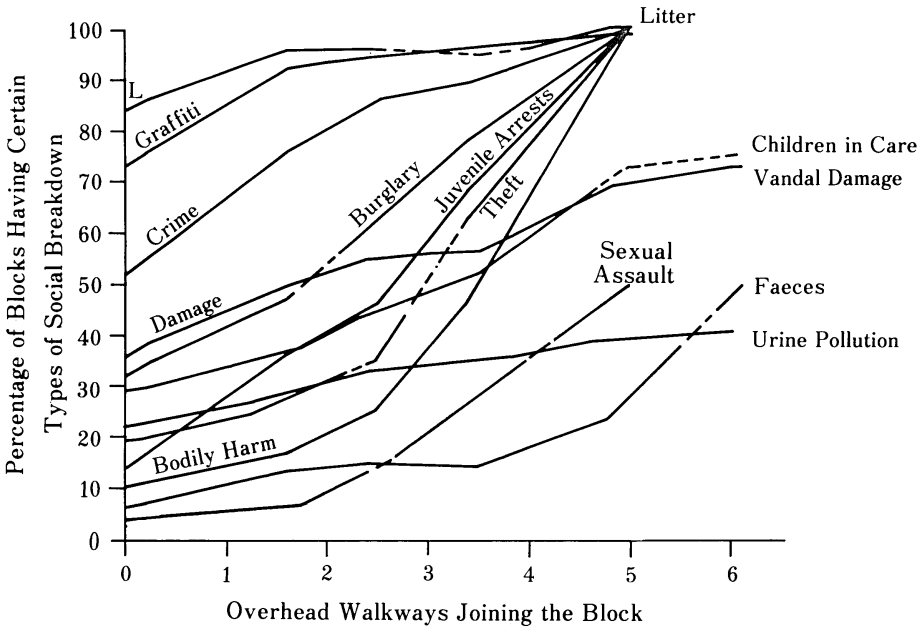

Figure 1. Social breakdown in relation to overhead walkways. The trend lines show an increase in eleven types of social breakdown as blocks of flats are joined by a greater number of overhead walkways. Four further types of crime, which show similar trends, have been omitted to avoid overcrowding the graph, but are included in the total crime line. (Curves are smoothed slightly by using running means of three values.)

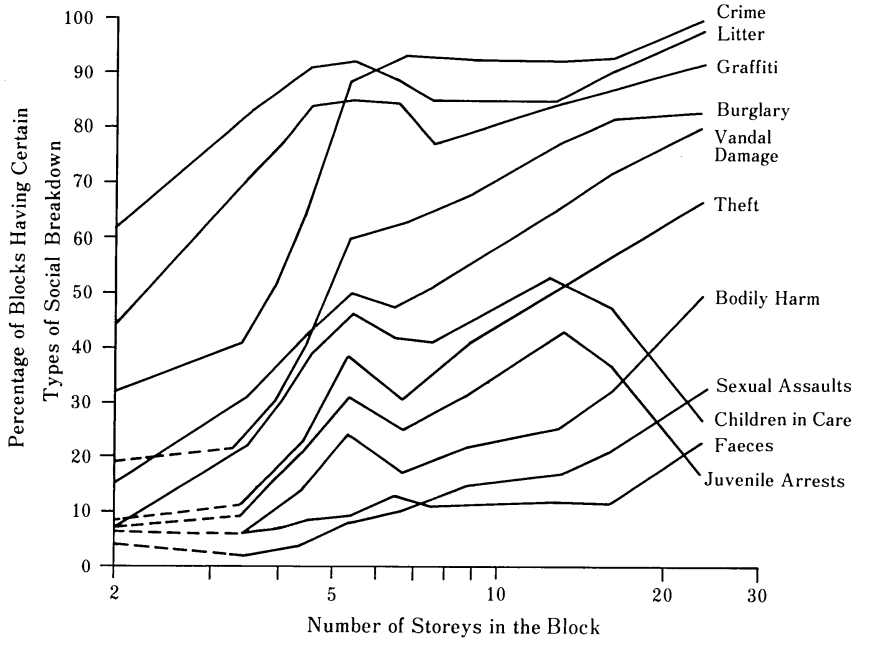

Figure 2. Trend lines for social breakdown with an increasing number of storeys per block.

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only one juvenile arrest per 74 dwellings whereas those with three to five walkways have one per 27 dwellings. Juveniles appear to be considerably more at risk where walkways have been incorporated into the design of their estates.

Threshold Levels

It is easy enough to demolish overhead walkways to create the optimum number of zero, but less easy to reduce every other design variables to its optimum. In fact, any attempt to do so would reduce each block to a house, with two storeys, and one dwelling per building. We need, therefore, to find a feasible compromise which will make definite improvements without being financially prohibitive, and the method adopted is to find a *threshold level* separating those values of each design which have better than average and worse than average frequencies of abuse. This is done by means of a precise statistical calculation and the resulting thresholds are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2 *Threshold Levels for Disadvantaging Designs*

Design Variable	*Threshold*
Overhead walkways	0
Stilts or garages	0
Play areas	0
Open apertures	0
Blocks in the site	1
Interconnecting exits	1
Vertical routes	1
Storeys per dwelling	1
Access points	1
Storeys per block	3
Dwellings per corridor	4
Dwellings per entrance	6
Dwellings per block	12
Entrance position	Facing the public street
Entrance type	Communal only (or if separate ground-floor entrances, fronted by individual gardens)
Doors or apertures	Doors
Spatial organisation	Semi-public or semi-private

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Disadvantagement Scores

The thresholds, once established, are regarded as a standard that can be used to assess the design disadvantagement of any individual block. This is done by making a list of the block's values for each variable and counting how many of them breach their thresholds. The count ranges from 0 to 16, and because it embodies the combined effect of all the design variables together, it provides an easy way of comparing different blocks. In fact it becomes possible to compare blocks anywhere in the world as the following example shows.

Frances Reynolds of Oxford University has assembled a set of pictures of blocks of flats in the Soviet Union. The worst ones, all of an identical design imposed throughout the country for a five-year period, have a disadvantagement score of 8, which is the same as the average for Southwark and slightly better than the average for Tower Hamlets, 8.3. In fact, nearly 60 per cent of the blocks in

these two boroughs appear to be as bad as, or worse than, the grimmest of the Russian blocks, which emphasises the horrific legacy of our planned housing.

The combined disadvantagement score, like the individual designs, can be used to produced a set of trend lines. Figure 3 shows the trends for nine test measures, and also for the total for all types of

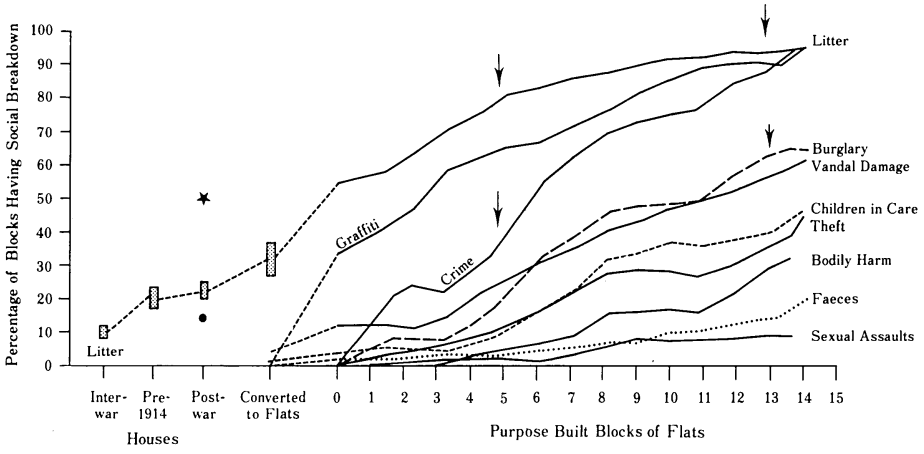

Figure 3. Trend lines by type of house, and disadvantagement scores of blocks of flats. The star and black circle represent, respectively, litter and graffiti percentages for Radburn-type housing not included in the original sample of 4,000 houses. Radburn-type is systematically worse than other houses. The arrows are located at scores of 12.8 and 4.8, respectively for before and after values for a design improvement scheme for the Mozart Estate, Westminster. They show how much each test measure would probably be decreased by design improvement of this order.

crime. It is of considerable interest that none of the blocks with a score of 0 reported a single crime during the year, while blocks scoring 13, 14 or 15 had an average of one crime per five dwellings. Indeed, some of the worst blocks sustained a rate of one crime for every dwelling, not counting any non-residential crime that the inhabitants may have suffered (Figure 4). This suggests that if the inhabitants of a single huge crime ridden block had been housed in numerous tiny blocks with zero scores they might well have been crime-free, or virtually so. British crime rates have been rising rapidly throughout the spread of the Utopian environment. Could it be that it is Utopian for criminals but not for law-abiding citizens?

The disadvantagement score is of practical use in guiding design improvement programmes (DI). A score of 10, for example, shows that a block has ten serious faults which need attention. If one of them can be modified so that if falls below its threshold level, the score is reduced to 9, and the more the score can be reduced, the better the social environment will become.

At present housing improvement funds are not directed towards DI. Instead they are allocated to RI (improvement through repair, refurbishing and relandscaping), SI (security improvement such as locks and entryphones) and MI (management improvement). The first 17 blocks accorded RI and SI treatment in Southwark and Tower Hamlets were resurveyed by us to obtain a before-and-after comparison. On the whole, litter was slightly better, excrement the same, graffiti somewhat worse and vandal damage over two and a half times as bad as before the 'improvement'. It could not really be said that the money invested in these schemes did anything to relieve the social stress that these estates generate.

A management improvement (MI) scheme in Westminster was also monitored. It could not be a before-and-after comparison, as the scheme was already in operation before we were invited to take an interest, but it was possible to show that litter, graffiti, vandalism and excrement were about 20 per cent lower than would be expected from the estate's high average disadvantagement score of 12.8.

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However, management improvement does not remedy the causes of social breakdown. It merely keeps it at bay through perpetual effort, and if the effort breaks down, then according to Anne Power, the originator of MI, the problems may come back in full force.[7] Furthermore, management improvement involves continuing expenditure. The Westminster estate was costing 14 times as much to administer as a better designed estate nearby, yet it still had a residual level of litter, graffiti, damage and excrement about 13 times as great. Better management was clearly not the whole answer, and it was for this reason that Westminster took up the possibility of design improvement.

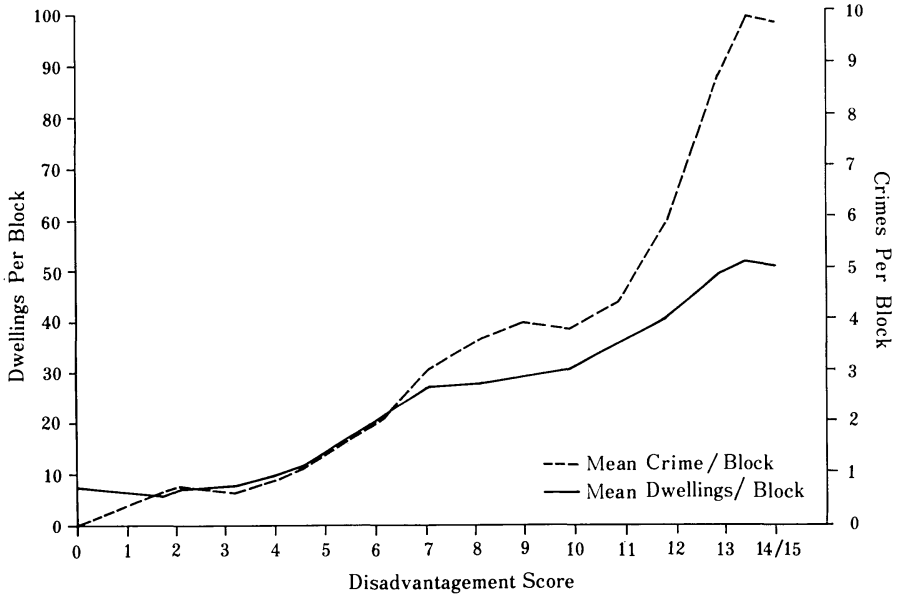

Figure 4. The average number of crimes per block increases faster than the average number of dwellings per block as the disadvantagement score rises. Crime, like social breakdown, is not a simple pro-rata reflection of block size.

Practical Measures

Oscar Newman proved that certain design changes could reduce crime rates. Westminster has shown that walkway removal, and corridor partitioning can give tenants a greater sense of security. Wandsworth has demonstrated that fenced and gated front gardens can dramatically improve child behaviour. Southwark has shown that isolating a block inside its own wall is accompanied by a drop in litter and graffiti, and a shedding of anonymity and insecurity.

What these successes have in common is the fact that they are all DI schemes, reducing disadvantagement scores by one or more points. As yet, however, they are all restricted to one or two design changes, and we still need to test whether a concerted reduction by as many score points as possible would have quite spectacular results. This may soon become possible as there are several projects at various stages in the pipeline.

Westminster has accepted our recommendations for reducing the disadvantagement score of its worst estate from 12.8 to 4.8, and has begun to implement them, noting that they would cost less per dwelling that current DoE Priority Estates Projects. Halton District Council officers (Cheshire), have received our report on two estates with the comment that our proposals for lowering scores by 6 to 9 points would be substantially cheaper than an existing alternative which would leave scores untouched. In both cases it is thought that there would also be continuing savings on maintenance costs. The GLC, before abolition, commissioned a design disadvantagement survey, and recom-

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mendations have been made for the Divis Estate in Belfast. Liverpool requested before-and-after surveys of test measures on two estates scheduled for design improvement, and a large firm of house builders has contracted for recommendations on a problem council estate which they are taking over.

We advocate that tests of design improvement should follow four main stages, all conducted in full consultation with tenants. Each reduction by one point will be indicated as (−1).

The first essential is to demolish all overhead walkways to leave each block free-standing (−1). Merely blocking the walkways is not enough; we have witnessed the circumvention of wire barriers, railings and brick walls alike. Walkway removal is more than an improvement in its own right. It also paves the way for improving several other design faults, and may even reduce some of them to their threshold levels immediately. Three design variables (dwellings per entrances, interconnecting exits and interconnecting vertical routes) are surveyed as all those that can be reached either within a given block or, via walkways, in neighbouring blocks, without having to emerge on to the ground. If the linked blocks are very small, then one or more or the three variables may be reduced to its threshold when the overhead links are severed.

The second stage is to divide up the grounds of the estate and allocate them to specific blocks. If each area is walled, it becomes a single-block site (−1), non-residents are not tempted to take short cuts across the territory, and residents can more easily come to recognise each other. If the whole of the grounds are allocated, with no left-over pieces of confused space between their back and side walls, the spatial-organisation variable is also reduced to its threshold (−1); and if play areas are also dismantled, or walled off from the estate with independent entrances from the street, this too is an improvement (−1). Division of the grounds is particularly important, as spatial organisation and access points are the chief factors in the sheer volume of crime, complementing the effect of walkways in maximising the spread of crime.

The third stage tackles blocks that still remain too large and anonymous, even when the building and grounds have both been separated from other blocks. The aim here is to partition it into smaller self-contained sections. A long slab block may be partitioned vertically by sealing off the corridors at intervals, so that each entrance serves only a few flats on each successive floor (−1), preferably by means of one staircase only (−1), and a total of no more than six dwellings (−1), with only one outlet (−1). It may also be convenient to partition the block horizontally, so that the ground-floor flats have separate front gardens with fences and gates, and also separate back gardens (−1). The common entrances should be similarly defended at the front, but any space at the back is better as an individual garden for one household rather than a communal garden. The effect of these layout improvements is to separate the grounds as well as the interiors into self-contained sections, so that each section becomes an independent attached block, like a terraced house, with no intercommunication except by going out on to the street and in again through a different gate. If these attached blocks are now small enough to meet the threshold size of 12, the score can be reduced by one point (−1), even if they are not small enough to merit the additional reduction for dwellings per entrance.

This programme leaves only the two most difficult designs: storeys per dwelling and storeys per block. Maisonettes are only indirectly a problem in that they house a high concentration of children, and it would be better to allocate them to childless households than to spend money on converting them to flats. In fact conversion is likely to worsen design, as it would create more dwellings per block, per entrance and per corridor. Lopping storeys off the block is not generally a practical proposition in the overcrowded south of England, but it has been tried with great success in the north where there are more flats than would-be tenants.

The design of British blocks of flats is so varied and gimmicky that the four stages of design modification outlined above can rarely be applied as a simple rule of thumb. Each site needs to be considered individually, and a great deal of resourcefulness may be needed to overcome its problems. In some cases, for example, a block can be aproached only by means of walkways through other blocks, and has to be provided with its own new staircase and exit when the walkways are demolished.

Fire regulations may also be an impediment. Whereas the police regard walkways and multiple exits and vertical routes as an invitation to crime, the fire service regards them as essential life-savers in the event of fire. However, recent work at King's College suggests that they are associated with a

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high incidence of arson, so the fire safety question needs fundamental rethinking.[8]

Furthermore, it is impossible to do full justice to the research findings in the space of this paper, and tenants, housing officers or councillors interested in DI potential are advised to read the full report, 'Utopia on Trial', to broaden their understanding.

Socio-economic Factors

Because of the assiduity with which the influence of design has been previously obscured, and because of the political prominence given to economic inequalities, people are conditioned to believe that socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment are to blame for social breakdown of the kinds included in our test measures. Those of us who have lived long enough know this cannot be so. The various kinds of malaise did not develop during the interwar depression when unemployment was rife and poverty much more severe than at present. On the contrary, all of these trends emerged during the boom period of post-war affluence, and while they have continued into the present depression they cannot have been caused by it.

This reasoning is confirmed by a correlation exercise using census data and also data on environment quality such as the amount of green space in estates of flats. Some of the postulated factors, such as population density and the extent of public open space prove to be completely non-significant. Others, such as pensioner poverty and residential green space prove to be negatively significant; old people are a force for good in maintaining civilised standards while too much council grass is a force for bad, presumably because it is the raw material of harmful confused space.

Other factors,such as derelict land nearby, are significant, but more weakly so than design. Social classes I, II and III (non-manual) are related to litter, graffiti and damage, although III (manual), IV and V are not. Child density is a weaker factor than it used to be before the policy of dispersing children from high tower and slab blocks.

The only factor that has been found systematically stronger than design, by a small margin, is private versus council ownership, but even this is largely a function of design differences. The average disadvantagement score for private blocks is 4.0 as compared with 9.1 for council blocks. If housing authorities had been as responsive to people's design preferences as private builders, the worst excesses would have been avoided, together with a great deal of human misery.

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Conclusion

Perhaps, therefore, we should review the fundamental assumption that the design of houses should be subject to planning control. It has not provided the safeguards and benefits that were expected of it, and the traditional system that allowed people to choose the best they could afford without official intervention seems to have great merit in comparison. If mistakes there must be, it is better for people to make their own, and learn from them and put them right, instead of having mistakes made for them, on a more massive scale and more irretrievably.

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