

The built environment

by Helen Gillett, Brian Martin and Chris Rust

Architecture and town planning have a big impact on the willingness and capacity of people to engage in nonviolent struggle.¹ By the design of workplaces, people may find it easy to get together to talk or they may find it easier to remain separate. For example, if there is an attractive and convenient place to eat lunch, workers are more likely to get together then; if not, they are more likely to eat separately. Similarly, the design of housing and layout of streets have a big impact on communication patterns, such as whether people speak to their neighbours or visit other people's homes.

Cultural traditions play a big role in social behaviour, but town planning and architecture are quite influential. In high-rise blocks of apartments, without convenient communal facilities, there is little sense of community. In typical US suburbs, the dispersed physical layout encourages families to mostly interact with themselves and perhaps a few neighbours. In the Israeli kibbutzim, by contrast, the buildings are originally designed to foster high social interaction, for example in the communal child rearing. At intermediate possibility is "co-housing," found for example in Denmark, which combines private living quarters with some collective facilities such a dining hall.²

Transport systems have an important impact on the capacity for nonviolent struggle through their effect on community solidarity. The automobile is a major problem in this regard, since a dispersed, car-dependent society tends to separate people from each other, putting them in suburbs remote from work, shops and leisure. Freeways are notorious for breaking up communities. Automobility for those with access to cars reduces mobility for those without, causing social inequality and reducing social solidarity. The transport modes most likely to foster a sense of community are those which cater for everyone, including children, the poor and people with disabilities. This means walking and low-priced public transport.³

In facilitating nonviolent resistance it is desirable that members of a community interact and communicate with each other in a manner that produces a “sense of community” which also facilitates organisation of their defence. One way in which the built environment is likely to aid this is through the provision of “meeting places.” A number of public arenas can be meeting places, including footpaths and pavement cafes, market squares, shopping malls, community centres and town halls, fair and sporting grounds, gardens, parks (especially those containing water sites), playgrounds, and commons. Though many cities incorporate such places in their layout, the number, location, design, and style of public spaces influence community solidarity.

To achieve this, meeting places should be abundant enough to be easily accessible by members of the community, preferably within a short walk by local residents. The provision of meeting places in this way could make high density housing much more enticing. Suburban housing blocks tend to emphasise individuals more than communities. Where space considerations limit housing to high rise apartment buildings, meeting places (similar to office tea or staff common rooms) could also be contained near, and open to, the stairwell of each building floor or level.

A preference for higher density housing is echoed by Edmund Fowler when he discusses deconcentrated housing. Higher density housing environments foster neighbour interaction, which can cause tensions and culture clashes, but also can be valuable toward solving social problems. In contrast, physically segregated communities lead to diminished social and political skills and responses, and hence reduced civic participation. Contact between people is greater with mixed land use and building age, and short blocks with concentration of use. Under such combination of private and public life, residents tend toward “looking after their street,” and developing networks of trust and confidence. These conditions deter vandalism and similar problems. Unfortunately contemporary urban environments are “justified” by supposedly “objective” economic indicators, such as household incomes and the number of owner-occupied houses, though, Fowler argues, servicing and supplying deconcentrated housing costs more.⁴

Though meeting places may be instrumental toward nonviolent struggle, when they are in the hands of private developers, they may

be a hindrance to social action. Owners of enclosed shopping centres may control such things as opening hours, entry and exit locations, who can lease shops, what notices can be put on public display, and even who uses their centre. Likewise, whole sections of the community can be similarly affected if private developers are given the go-ahead to control walled suburbs or apartment blocks with security entries. Town planners and other relevant authorities need to keep these points in mind if they wish to use meeting places and town layout to promote community solidarity.

The rise of consumerism and the growing affluence of western societies have enabled vast numbers of people to leave the inner city areas for the perceived peace, security and clean air of the suburbs. Instead of living with the everyday problems encountered in these inner city areas, such as poverty, crime, and pollution, and perhaps doing something about them, many could now afford to simply escape them. The ultimate form of escape is to be able to buy into one of the walled, permanently patrolled security estates which are becoming increasingly common.

Another problem associated with many contemporary meeting places arises out of public space “misuse” by street gangs and vandals. One possible way to help solve this problem is offered by Colin Ward under the term of “unmake.” This concept suggests that, instead of providing youths with just traditional meeting places such as playgrounds and parks, more subtle meeting places such as safe “construction sites” or “adventure playgrounds” are needed to redirect the energies of would-be trouble-makers. The trick to this idea seems to be the nonobvious association with conformity and intervention of authority.⁵

Closely related to design for nonviolent struggle is design to reduce crime, something that has been studied and implemented in cities in a number of countries. Factors that reduce crime, and the fear of it, include lighting, sightlines, activity generators and visibility by others.⁶ It seems plausible that many of the approaches used to improve safety in public places will also help build community interactions and a sense of individual security that will enhance the capacity to wage nonviolent struggle.

John Turner argues that a key issue is whether people build, control or manage their own housing. He provides many examples from both rich and poor countries. When housing is centrally

planned, specified and built, it is likely to be more expensive, wasteful of resources, hard to adapt and socially inappropriate. Expensive, centrally built housing is vulnerable to vandalism. Centrally controlled housing is more susceptible to takeover by an aggressor. When people choose and manage their own styles of housing, they are likely to be more satisfied with it, even when it is materially far poorer than centrally provided housing.⁷

Autonomy in housing is linked to greater flexibility, which is good for nonviolent struggle. The skills that people develop from building, controlling and managing their own housing provide resilience in the face of attack. People will know what to do in case housing is destroyed or services such as electricity and water are interrupted.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, having a surplus of housing is a good idea for a community wishing to defend itself nonviolently. If some dwellings are destroyed, then there are places for occupants to stay. More importantly, though, a surplus of housing should mean that no one need be homeless. A society that ensures housing for everyone is less likely to be divided socially. Generally speaking, community solidarity is greater when there is greater equality. This applies to housing as much as to anything else.

There are numerous examples of people taking control of their own destinies and creating the type of neighbourhood or community in which they desire to live. Urban renewal programs, formulated and imposed from above, have generally been very expensive and spectacularly unsuccessful. Fowler lists several examples of people living in run down, depressed, inner city areas successfully instigating their own urban renewal programs. These range from the establishment of community gardens to the renovation of derelict buildings—whereby the inhabitants contribute labour rather than capital, which is generally in short supply—to secure an improved standard of living. These cooperative efforts can generate a genuine sense of community. The renewed sense of pride in their environment and themselves reduces crime rates and other social problems.⁸

This chapter has provided a number of examples of the sorts of building design and town planning that seem likely either to hinder or help nonviolent resistance. A key factor is community solidarity. Designs that foster cooperative interaction are the most helpful ones, whether the points of congregation are inside office buildings, in co-housing complexes, at street corners or in village squares.

Notes

1. This chapter is adapted from Helen Gillett, Brian Martin and Chris Rust, "Building in nonviolence: nonviolent struggle and the built environment," *Civilian-Based Defense*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Fall 1996, pp. 1, 4-7, which also describes military influences on the built environment.

2. Kathryn McCamant, *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* (Berkeley, CA: Habitat Press, 1988).

3. Donald Appleyard, *Livable Streets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974); K. H. Schaeffer and Elliot Sclar, *Access for All: Transportation and Urban Growth* (Hasmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

4. Edmund P. Fowler, *Building Cities that Work* (Montreal: McGill/Queen's University Press, 1992). Fowler discusses a number of issues along these lines; see also Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: The Modern Library, 1969).

5. Colin Ward, *Connexions: Violence—Its Nature, Causes and Remedies* (England: Penguin Education, 1970).

6. Gerda R. Wekerle and Carolyn Whitzman, *Safe Cities: Guidelines for Planning, Design, and Management* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1995). I thank Nichole Dusyk for suggesting this reference. Designing the built environment to reduce crime does not preclude efforts to address poverty, discrimination and social policies that create crime.

7. John F. C. Turner, *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

8. Edmund P. Fowler, *Building Cities that Work* (Montreal: McGill/Queen's University Press, 1992).