



## Urban renewal and the “defensible space” model: the growing impact of security issues on the way our cities develop

Camille Gosselin

*Translated from the French by Oliver Waine*

*In transforming the urban planning and architecture of social-housing estates, urban-renewal policies are not just about changing the image or populations of these neighbourhoods. They also seek to control public spaces more effectively. Guided by the principles of “situational prevention”, the implementation of such policies reflects the growing influence of security-related issues in urban development.*

The French urban renewal policy initiated in 2004 presented a threefold objective: to change the image of social-housing neighbourhoods; to transform the living conditions of their inhabitants; and to (re-)create social diversity. The diagnostic assessment on which this policy was based was the result in particular of the connections made in the public debate between episodes of urban violence and certain social-housing neighbourhoods, consigned to the outskirts of large cities – or, to put it another way, between the theme of “insecurity” and certain areas in the disadvantaged *banlieues* where large-scale and often high-rise housing projects – known as *grands ensembles* in French – are the archetypal form of architecture. In addition to the social objectives of “rebalancing the population” and transforming the housing stock on offer, urban renewal can also be defined as a security policy. For example, Hacène Belmessous (2010) described urban renewal as the application of police dogma to urban development and sees in the reorganization of neighbourhoods a device primarily aimed at facilitating the intervention of the police. While it is true that the intentions of the PNRU (Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine – French National Urban Renewal Programme) cannot be reduced to a purely security-related objective, this programme plays an important role in the principles that guide the implementation of this policy.

Based on an analysis of the ways in which security issues are taken into consideration in the implementation of ANRU<sup>1</sup> projects, this article<sup>2</sup> shows how the paradigm of “situational prevention” has gradually become established in the planning and development choices made in priority neighbourhoods. This paradigm considers architecture and planning to be factors that have an influence on decisions to commit criminal acts. More specifically, it considers that action on public space can be used a tool for combating issues related to security and criminality. The spread of this model has taken place in two phases: first, through the widespread use of “residentialization”<sup>3</sup> operations, justified by the theory of “defensible space” – that is, a space

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<sup>1</sup> ANRU: Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine (French National Agency for Urban Renewal).

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on a study by the IAU-ÎdF (Institut d’Aménagement et d’Urbanisme de la Région Île-de-France – Paris Region Planning and Development Agency) into how security issues are addressed in the context of urban renewal: Gosselin, C. 2015. *Quel traitement des enjeux de sécurité par la rénovation urbaine ?*, Paris: IAU-ÎdF. Available online at the following URL: [www.iau-idf.fr/savoir-faire/nos-travaux/edition/quel-traitement-des-enjeux-de-securite-dans-la-renovation-urbaine.html](http://www.iau-idf.fr/savoir-faire/nos-travaux/edition/quel-traitement-des-enjeux-de-securite-dans-la-renovation-urbaine.html).

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: for reasons of brevity, the word “residentialization” is used in this article to translate the French term *résidentialisation*; however, it should be borne in mind that what this typically means is redefining spaces in order to make neighbourhoods better places to live. See also footnote 4.

whose configuration facilitates monitoring and surveillance by residents, and consequently reduces crime and vandalism – and, second, through the appearance of specific planning and development measures to address security issues, reflecting the growing presence and influence of security-related dimensions in urban policy.

### **The paradigm of situational crime prevention**

In France, urban-renewal policy emerged in a context associated with the development of a situational approach to crime prevention. Situational prevention – a successor to the work of Ronald V. Clarke (1995) on crime prevention through environmental design, conducted in the UK in the 1980s – is built on the principle that the situation, that is to say the physical and environmental context of a criminal act, is a determining factor in the decision to commit a criminal act. In France, the interpretation of this paradigm has become a major guiding factor of crime-prevention policy. It focuses on architecture and urban layout as factors that have an influence on deviant behaviour, and seeks to reduce the vulnerabilities of urban spaces in order to eliminate opportunities to commit criminal acts.

The first reflections to combine security issues and development issues are often attributed to Jane Jacobs. In 1960, this American journalist published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, a work in which she criticizes modern architecture and calls for the creation of the conditions for an intense social life within a carefully designed, welcoming public space. She identified the mix of functions as a condition for the urbanity of cities. Through the life it generates, functional mix is supposed to result in the “natural surveillance” of a given space: in turn, it is this mechanism, whereby residents take ownership of the space, that is supposed to help produce urban security.

In the wake of Jane Jacobs’s work, Oscar Newman, in his book *Defensible Space* (1972), proposed a more proactive vision of the role of planning and development in the production of security. In his view, insecurity and dysfunction in urban spaces are directly linked to the urban form of the *grand ensemble* and its communal areas, which all too often are neither pleasant nor convenient, and furthermore encourage inward-looking attitudes centred on the private sphere of one’s dwelling. From this analysis, Newman formulated a system of architectural rules, based on the idea of establishing a hierarchy of residential spaces (private, semi-private, semi-public, public) whereby a space’s status defines its function, thus making it easier for residents to take ownership of this space. The aim here is to improve the control over spaces exercised by those responsible for them (in this case, the social landlord) and to develop a form of “informal surveillance” whereby residents all keep an eye on their neighbourhood. Consequently, Oscar Newman is often considered the originator of the principles corresponding to what is today referred to in France as “*résidentialisation*”.<sup>4</sup>

### **“Residentialization”: situational prevention by another name**

In France, under the impetus of the PNRU, residentialization has become a new means of envisioning “ways of living”, with the aim of taking an approach diametrically opposed to the functional model of the *grands ensembles*. The massive diffusion of this type of operation responds as much to a desire on the part of public authorities as to the calls of a portion of residents, who are not so much concerned with residentialization *per se* but would like to see symbolic action taken to improve their estates. While security issues are regularly highlighted by estate managers and project

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<sup>4</sup> The term *résidentialisation* appeared in France in the late 1990s in the social-housing sector and among architects to designate new practices in the development of social housing. Residentialization “[...] involves, at the very least, clarifying the status of external spaces and marking the boundary, by means of some kind of enclosure, between the private space belonging to the housing complex and the public space of the city. The spatial measures involved [...] may range from a simple gate, to avoid people passing through, to the creation of a residential unit that offers spaces that residents can take ownership of” (Lelévrier and Guigou 2005).

leaders at the design stage of residentialization operations, the security-related dimensions of such operations have not featured prominently in the justifications of the PNRU; rather, they are presented as a tool for clarifying the statuses and functions of external spaces.

The parallel between the various discourses of French urban-renewal policy and the urban solutions proposed by the defensible space theory has already been underlined (Vallet 2006). That said, the discourses on urban renewal do not address the question of security head-on, instead promoting more consensual concepts – “urban quality” and “residentialization”, for example – that make it possible to appropriate the principles of situational prevention, but without overtly mentioning security issues. A number of these principles are frequently incorporated into the redevelopment of public spaces (e.g. delimiting paths, green spaces and play areas; visibility and legibility). When new facilities are installed, the choice of one type of facility over another may also reflect security concerns, although these issues will not necessarily be brought to the fore.

It seems to be a commonly accepted idea among architects and planners that it is not the role of urban planning to intervene in the field of security, notably through fear of encouraging the development of “security-oriented urbanism”. Security is often considered a responsibility of the state, which should therefore preferably be dealt with by the forces of law and order. However, it would seem that security concerns have, in fact, long been incorporated into urban planning and its various constituent areas of intervention (Oblet 2010).

**Figures 1 and 2. Two examples of operations realized as part of urban renewal in the Val d’Argent neighbourhood of Argenteuil (8 miles north-west of Paris)**



The “residentialization” of apartment buildings, green spaces and play areas is used to structure pedestrian routes and reduce the amount of public space used solely as paths and thoroughfares.

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**Figures 3 and 4. Two further examples of renewal operations: the Colbert neighbourhood of Meaux (25 miles east of Paris) (left) and Val d'Argent in Argenteuil (right)**



“See and be seen” is one of the key principles of situational prevention, and is often incorporated into the redevelopment of public spaces.

© Brigitte Guigou, March 2014 (left) and September 2014 (right).

### **A regulatory approach**

While situational prevention principles were already being implemented informally via residentialization operations and the redevelopment of public spaces, it was only in 2010 that they were formalized in regulatory terms, with an obligation to conduct public security studies for ANRU operations. These studies do not concern all projects, however: they are required only for urban-renewal operations that include the demolition of at least 500 dwellings and that are deemed, by prefectural order, to present risks for the protection of people and property. Their perimeter can also be determined by prefectural ordinance.

In the Paris region, only three public security studies have so far been recorded for ANRU sites in accordance with these regulatory obligations. This measure arrived late in the day for projects that were already well advanced, which explains the small number of studies and the low level of importance that are sometimes placed on them by contracting authorities. As the urban design of projects can no longer be reoriented at this stage, the recommendations contained in these studies therefore tend to emphasize technical fixes and security enhancements: installation of CCTV cameras, access control, consolidation of materials and street furniture, higher-intensity street lighting, and so forth. In cases where an operation already incorporates aspects of situational prevention, the recommendations of these public security studies contributes to the dissemination of new surveillance technologies in the context of development projects.

### **Structuring a field of action**

The implementation of urban renewal is thus marked by the growing influence of these security-related measures, which reflect a defensive vision of how to take security issues into consideration via urban layout, where the environment and the spatial context are used to prevent the occurrence of certain acts. Several aspects come together in the development of the paradigm of situational crime prevention.

This paradigm results first of all from the “co-production” approach initiated by the French framework act relating to security of 1995. Non-state actors (local authorities, social landlords, transport operators, etc.) are regularly called upon by the legislator to organize the secure protection

of their property assets and their spaces. As it happens, social landlords, in addition to their legal obligations in terms of situational prevention<sup>5</sup> (street lighting and access-control devices at entry points, in communal areas, in cellars, and in car parks), have gradually integrated security measures as part of the quality of service provided to tenants/customers.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, security has become a key argument for the marketing of their properties.

Second, contracting authorities are more and more frequently seeking assistance in the field of prevention and security. While it is difficult to obtain a precise view, this accompaniment may cover a broad range of missions: performing diagnostics or “security audits” of sites, training personnel in how to manage security issues, or assisting with the coordination of local prevention and security partnerships. For contracting authorities and project leaders in search of tangible responses, situational prevention measures combined with surveillance technologies seem to offer instant solutions to the challenges of crime prevention.

Lastly, units devoted to situational prevention are structured within the departments of the French interior ministry. Their creation reflects the desire to reinforce the field of intervention and bolster a professional culture among police officers. Moreover, contracting authorities regularly call upon the forces of law and order on this subject, as they are the only actors with the legitimacy to formulate recommendations on the safety and security of (re)development and construction projects. This tendency is a source of considerable concern. The risk is that it could create an imbalance in the way these issues are understood between planners on the one hand and security professions on the other, and lead to operations that incorporate crime-prevention measures based only on a policing standpoint.

Through residentialization and public security studies, urban renewal thus contributes to the dissemination in France of a situational crime-prevention approach, by incorporating principles of “defensible space” into its theoretical framework. The implementation of these principles does, however, raise certain questions. First, while this theory puts residents at the heart of the surveillance and control of their neighbourhoods, urban renewal has not initiated any framework to help residents take ownership of their living spaces, nor created the necessary conditions for their participation in the surveillance of their neighbourhoods. And second, situational prevention and the forms it takes in French (re)development operations raise the question of how national security policies will evolve. By focusing primarily on the manifestations of crime, and not on its social causes, the risk is that they will lead to a normalization of urban space rather than tackling the challenges of crime prevention in depth.

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<sup>5</sup> As per the French decree of 3 May 2002 relating to day-to-day security and modifying the Building and Housing Code.

<sup>6</sup> On this point, see the report by Virginie Malochet for the IAU-ÎdF on the subject of the GPIS (Groupement Parisien Inter-Bailleurs de Surveillance), which provides security services for a number of social landlords in Paris (2015).

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### Further reading

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**Camille Gosselin** is an urban planner at the IAU-ÎdF (Institut d’Aménagement et d’Urbanisme de la Région Île-de-France – Paris Region Planning and Development Agency). Her current work concerns the links between the development of urban spaces and security issues. More specifically, her work focuses on situational prevention, and analyses territorial policies from this perspective.

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