

Planning News – Commentary

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Malice in Wonderland

One of the memorable scenes from the wonderful movie of last year – *The Descendants*, involves the opening shot of Oahu showing a traffic-choked H-1, a homeless guy pushing an impossibly-stuffed shopping cart slowly down the sidewalk, graffiti and trash blowing around buildings. George Clooney’s voice-over opines about how his friends on the Mainland idealize how paradisiacal life in Hawaii must be. “Are they nuts?” he intones.

Distanced from the sepia-toned travelogue and visuals being churned out from the tourism industry to the rest of the world, I have to believe most residents of Hawaii reacted to that opening scene with a knowing chuckle. I sure did. As beautiful as Hawaii can be, it is certainly not immune from the same societal and physical ills plaguing the rest of America. The great recession has exacerbated the problem as homeless encampments, graffiti, trash, unmaintained public facilities and yes broken windows, have all become more prevalent.



Vandalized, Foreclosed Home, Taking the Neighborhood With It?

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The *Broken Window Theory* is a sociological construct taken from the title of a 1982 article by criminologist James Q. Wilson and George Kelling. This theory argues that,

“a broken window left unrepaired will make a building look uncared for or abandoned and soon attracts vandals to break all the other windows. Indicators of neighborhood disrepair such as a broken window foster criminality. The logic is that signs of neighborhood decay lead residents to withdraw from public life of the neighborhood and thereby reduce the efficacy of informal social control, leaving the area open for serious criminal misdemeanors”.

As Urban Designer and Planner Andres Duany has observed, *“human beings are amazingly quick to pick up on the signals that a place is sending. The character of an environment registers on their consciousness in an instant. It doesn't take much of a disturbance in a street scene or a public space before a considerable number of people become ill at ease. And when people are made uncomfortable, a street or a neighborhood can quickly become a place that people avoid”.*

And this sixth sense-of-place is not limited to one's own neighborhood or city. When traveling abroad or to new areas, most humans immediately, intuitively and continuously 'read' their surroundings and their place in it. Many, if not most of our negative intuitive responses are formed from 'broken window'-type criteria. Sometimes people note that an area 'just doesn't feel right' for reasons they cannot put their finger on.



Trash left to accumulate in a vacant lot

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We see a small amount of graffiti on the side of a garage in an otherwise clean neighborhood and we ask ourselves, “why doesn’t the property owner clean that up? Is there something going on in this (my!) neighborhood that I am not aware of? Is this an indicator of a larger community problem?” Left unchecked these minor quality of life issues can foster crime because criminals are also ‘reading’ these same surroundings to determine areas that may be more vulnerable/advantageous to their nefarious endeavors. If they see smashed windows, mounds of trash, broken street signs and sidewalks, they assume the neighborhood is disengaged, lacks any informal social controls and will be an easy mark for crime.



An obstacle course of homeless encampments along a Honolulu Street

But aside from the obvious law-breaking criminal activity that can result from lack of neighborhood upkeep, can the broken window theory apply (albeit less overtly), to the behavior of more garden-variety citizens? If one sees trash accumulated off a side street and no one ever picks it up, are they more inclined to throw their candy wrapper into the mix since the place is already ‘trashed out’? And are drivers less inclined to follow the speed limits and come to complete stops if they see people jay-walking back and forth across this street, street signage broken and cars double-parked? Or where bus stops are dirty, litter-strewn and tagged, are bus riders more inclined to eat on the bus and leave their wrappers behind?

Many sociological studies have shown that indeed, we adjust our behavior based on the subtlest of stimuli from our surroundings. One fascinating study showed a doubling in the number of people who were prepared to steal in a condition of disorder. In this case an envelope with a 6 Euro note inside (and the note clearly visible through the address window)

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was left sticking out of a Dutch post box. In a condition of order, 13% of those passing took the envelope (instead of leaving it or pushing it into the box). But if the post box was covered in graffiti, 27% did. Even if the post box had no graffiti on it, but the area around it was littered with paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and empty cans, 25% still took the envelope.

Source: http://www.economist.com/node/12630201?story_id=12630201

Another example of a study involved Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo who parked a car on a street in Palo Alto, Calif., where it sat untouched for a week. After a week, as a part of the experiment, Zimbardo smashed one of the car's windows with a sledgehammer. Within a few hours vandals stripped the car bare.

Chicken or Egg...

Conversely, a study out of Chicago - *Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy*, downplays the role of broken windows-type theories and puts forth the concept of 'collective efficacy' defined as:

"social cohesion among neighbors and their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good. It's not so much that broken glass or disarray in neighborhoods is the source or root of crime, it's really in the social relationships that exist among neighbors, among people who work in neighborhoods, among services and so forth, that the social conditions are there to engage or not to engage citizens, neighbors in watching out for crime or crime-related activity in the neighborhoods".



**Dumping of trash off a rural road.
Who does this, and who lets it remain there?**

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What holds its value in all these authors' minds is the conviction that a safe neighborhood is one in which the residents feel safe enough to take a hand in defending it. Yet others have argued crime and order in a neighborhood is predicated on everything from race, socioeconomic status, cultural differences, even the legalization of abortion in the early 1970's. (see the book *Freakonomics*)

Locally, one small effort in my neighborhood of Waikiki was recently initiated, offering promise and a test case for trying out the broken window theory in Hawaii. It involves a neighbor's concern over increasing graffiti, public drinking/drug use, fighting and crime in a small, dark public area between her apartment building and a bus stop at Kuhio Avenue and Liliuokalani Street. The police teamed up with the neighbor and a local graphic artist to commission local young artists to create a Hawaiian-themed graphic to replace the graffiti, install plantings, lighting and facilitate on-going upkeep in the small area. The idea is to reclaim the pocket park for everyone's enjoyment and to contribute to the safety of those at the bus stop. The place looks great and the people waiting on the bus look more content.

I can't definitively speak with certainty about the applicability of the broken window theory to crime but I can say I do like the grassroots effort at this bus stop and the idea that this area of Waikiki will be a more pleasant place for me to be and improve my quality of life in a small but nonetheless very meaningful way. Let's hope efforts like this are contagious.