

URBAN DECAY AND CRIME

Crime, like fire, can be prevented. All that is needed is to maintain law and order, by upholding bylaws, and create a pristine environment by fixing all physical defects. But the authorities, who should uphold bylaws, and fix the defects, are not always able to do so. They often understand the needs, but are under-resourced, or worse, they lack the will to act as they feel that many bylaws are outdated and perceived as infringements of a person's rights and that many defects are too minor to warrant the cost of repair. Unfortunately such an attitude is likely to cause deterioration, attract criminals and force the homeowners to install alarms, build high walls, and try to take back the streets by erecting booms and employing security guards. They, like the doctors of old who operated with dirty hands in dirty operating theatres, do not understand the basics. Learn to recognise and combat the three phases of urban decay and you can save your sick neighbourhood from dying.

The first phase is the decay of the environment

Here are some typical examples:

- Street gutters that are never swept
- Weeds growing in street gutters
- Unkempt verges
- Potholes
- Cracked paving slabs
- Weeds growing through paved areas
- Old litter
- Broken benches
- Poles that are not vertical
- Broken fences
- Unpainted walls
- Graffiti
- Stagnant water

These seemingly trivial defects are big neon signs that beckon criminals with their message.

There is no law and order here. Anything goes.

The Americans call this the broken window theory. If your neighbourhood has broken windows, then get them fixed immediately. Take ownership of your neighbourhood. Make sure it is to your liking. Criminals hate neat and tidy area as much as they hate law and order.

Frank Lloyd Wright said:

"People can't have beautiful souls if they live in ugly surroundings"

But the stark reality is:

"People with ugly souls prefer to live in ugly surroundings"

The second phase of deterioration – The innocent breaking of bylaws

The second phase is the breaking of bylaws by people trying to make a living. Authorities find it emotionally difficult to police bylaws broken by innocent people. It is easy to go and sweep a street or mow the grass on the verge, but extremely difficult to arrest a lady with six dependants, all living below the bread line, for trading without a permit. Hence the rapid growth of such illegal activities. These illegal informal traders need to avoid public officials and will therefore choose a neighbourhood that is neglected by the officials. A diligent public official will remove the weeds from the gutters, make sure that the verges are cut and will chase away an illegal trader who invariably abuses municipal property.

The second phase of an influx of bylaw offenders is therefore directly related to the first phase of lack of maintenance of the physical environment.

Here are examples of the second phase:

- Scavenging to earn a living from recycling
- Rummaging through dustbins
- Trading from makeshift tables
- Begging
- Trading at intersections
- Self-appointed motor vehicle attendants
- Sleeping in public
- Vagrancy
- Street busking
- Illegal posters
- Itinerant traders converting their trolleys into stalls
- Car washing in the streets
- Handing-out of pamphlets
- Dogs not on leashes

All these seemingly innocent activities are illegal and provide blanket coverage for criminal activity. People who partake in illegal activities are often reluctant to get involved in any police matters as they know they themselves could get reprimanded.

The criminals capitalise on this and feel more comfortable in the presence of people who break bylaws, than they would in the company of do-gooders who are quick to report any misdemeanours to the authorities. In other words, uphold the trivial bylaws and you inadvertently chase away the criminals. If you do not uphold the trivial bylaws, then you move into the third phase of deterioration.

The third phase of deterioration – The Defiant Breaking of Bylaws

The deliberate breaking of bylaws is but a short step away from your neighbourhood experiencing full-blown major crimes. The criminals are no longer in disguise; they are now flaunting themselves in full immunity.

Look out for:

- Double parking
- Illegal parking
- Graffiti
- Drinking in public
- Gambling in public
- Sleeping in public
- Urinating in public
- Loud music

Any of the above is a danger sign. Have you ever wondered why some men do not bother to walk ten or twenty metres to find a discreet place to urinate?

Why does a man choose to blatantly urinate in full view of everyone?

It is because he is defiant. He wants to be seen.

He is saying, "I am in charge, there is no law and order."

He is also saying, "I can do what I like. No one is going to stop me."

He is testing the system and the system is failing.

The same goes for drinking in public. The little drinking parties are never discreet, but are in full view of the public. They are deliberately teasing the onlookers. It is a common sight to see them wave their bottles of alcohol in the air as a gesture of defiance.

All of the above are signs that the criminal is in charge.

This third phase follows very quickly if phases one and two are allowed to take hold because it is precisely the scruffy surrounds of the first phase and the innocent offenders of the second phase which attract the defiant offenders.

They move in and do what they please, and what pleases them most is to commit a crime.

Conclusion

To get rid of crime you need to stop the deterioration when it is in the first phase. Don't allow phases two and three to take hold. Put out the fire while it is still small. It is much easier to fight small fires and almost impossible to control a blazing fire. It is much easier to police the petty infringements and almost impossible to control rampant crime. Create a crime-free area by upholding all bylaws, especially those broken by innocent offenders, and keep the environment pristine.