Iain Moran explains why it's important to balancing aesthetics and security in urban design

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GRAND DESIGNS

Research found that 39 percent of urban design professionals believe that making their developments look safe enhances their architectural appeal

Public awareness of security issues in the UK has undoubtedly risen in recent years, following a number of high-profile terror incidents starting with the July 2005 suicide attacks in London.

However, despite the terror threat in the UK remaining 'substantial' more than 15 years on from those atrocities, we recently conducted research that revealed not everybody is always enthusiastic about the inclusion of physical security measures in public spaces.

A third (32 percent) of architects, specifiers and urban planners have found that local residents are often reluctant to have the look of an area changed by the implementation of physical security solutions.

Encouragingly, given the ever-present threats to city life, the research also showed that the majority of urban design professionals are aware of the importance of incorporating security solutions into their projects, with 82 percent agreeing they make a positive addition.

However, some also expressed their own concerns around the impact that these measures can have on a development's aesthetic appeal. According to the survey, 40 percent find incorporating security measures into new developments without impacting their aesthetic appeal a key design challenge.

A surprising 2 percent admitted they actively dislike them and try to avoid including security measures in their designs wherever possible. On the other hand, 8 percent said that, while they would prefer not to include security measures in their projects, they are conscious that many people like to see them.

This undoubtedly illustrates the importance of striking the right balance between security and aesthetics when securing public spaces, particularly in locations of historic interest or with recognisable design vocabularies.

Although it's clear from the research that it is important for security solutions not to detract from

a location's appeal, there are some important reasons that they should be visible to the public.

The first is that in a climate of heightened awareness around different security threats, security measures can provide much-needed reassurance to those using a public space. When out in busy, crowded locations – particularly those than have been the target of attacks in the past, visible security solutions can help to put people's minds at ease and enable them to enjoy themselves. Indeed, our research found that 39 percent of urban design professionals believe that making their developments look safe enhances their architectural appeal.

The other key role that security products play is deterring would-be attackers from attempting their plan in the first place. For example, if they can see bollards or barriers around the entrance to a building or event, it may be clear to them that any attack would be unsuccessful.

BROKEN WINDOWS THEORY

In 1969, Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted a field study in which two identical cars were abandoned in two very different neighbourhoods: one was left within a deprived, crime-ridden area of New York City and the other in a fairly affluent neighbourhood in Palo Alto, California. Both cars were parked with their number plates removed and their bonnets open.

Within just 10 minutes, passers-by began vandalising the New York car, first stripping it for parts before smashing the windows and tearing out the upholstery. Meanwhile, the car in Palo Alto remained untouched for more than a week. It was only when Zimbardo returned and damaged the second car with a sledgehammer himself that people began giving it the same treatment as the one in New York.

The experiment demonstrated how visible signs of crime and anti-social behaviour in a neighbourhood, such as a broken window, seem to encourage further, more serious crime and disorder. Zimbardo thought this to be because these signs make the local community seem apathetic and the area generally uncared for.

The enduring relevance of the broken windows theory when it comes to urban security was recently highlighted by Najib Barissoule, COO at Armada Technology and Advisor to Gulf Security & Safety Organisation, during his excellent key note presentation at a high-profile seminar hosted by ATG Access for security professionals in one of the Gulf Cooperation Council states.

He argued that an ordered, well-maintained environment signals that an area is monitored and that criminal behaviour is not tolerated. On the other hand, a disordered, neglected environment sends the signal that the area is not closely monitored and criminal behaviour consequently has little risk of detection.

Mr Barissoule asserted that the theory therefore underlines the importance of carefully considered environmental design when it comes to managing crime levels in urban areas.

Visible security solutions are therefore one of the ways in which we can signal that an area and

its inhabitants are valued and actively looked after. However, it's important that these security measures are not obtrusive or overwhelming, as this can create an oppressive atmosphere that can be counterproductive.

For the best, most effective outcomes, we should try to find ways to ensure that public spaces are not only visibly secure and well-maintained, but are also welcoming, functional and aesthetically pleasing spaces that residents can enjoy and be proud of.

Many well-known landmarks and heritage sites are among those locations most likely to require rigorous security, given that they often attract large numbers of visitors, can be of historical importance and are frequently situated in busy cities or urban areas. However, it is also these security installations that are the most likely to cause upset among the public if not done with utmost care and consideration for the surrounding environment.

> ## SECURITY MEASURES PROVIDE MUCH-NEEDED REASSURANCE TO THOSE USING A PUBLIC SPACE

In order to ensure that security solutions, such as barriers and bollards, fit seamlessly into the built environment that surrounds them, specifiers should look to implement systems that mirror or complement the aesthetics of the spaces they protect where possible. Thanks to constantly advancing security technology, solutions are now available that provide maximum protection with growing flexibility around their design.

For example, the Eiffel Tower last year installed a range of anti-terror measures, such as 10 feet-high metal barriers surrounding the tower – measures that, on the surface, ran a serious risk of despoiling one of the world's most iconic landmarks. However, because the barriers were designed with a brown metal finish that looked almost identical to that of the landmark itself, they looked more like a natural extension of the development than a security measure; keeping tourists safe without compromising on aesthetics.

The St Pancras Renaissance Hotel in London is another pertinent example of how security solutions can be blended seamlessly into wider developments.

The hotel, being an iconic urban heritage site with an elevated threat profile, needed to ensure it was adequately protected against hostile threats such as vehicle ram-raid attacks. However, the Grade 1-listed building also needed to make sure that any security solution implemented did not tarnish the character that originally made the building so architecturally significant. To solve this conundrum, the hotel specified shallow-mount bollards covered in bespoke burgundy sleeves designed specifically to fit the building's traditional aesthetic, preserving its architectural character.

Traditional products, such as bollards, barriers and road blockers, play a key role in protecting the urban

environment. They are often the most effective and practical choice when securing crowded spaces, with the right combination of products capable of offering a tailored, flexible solution no matter how complex the requirements. And when selected carefully, these products should complement the design of the surrounding area, with many different styles and finishes available.

However, protective street furniture such as lighting, seating, water features, planters, litter bins and cycle stands can now be used alongside more traditional solutions, offering architects and planners more freedom in the design of public spaces.

SECURITY PRODUCTS CAN DETER ATTACKERS FROM ATTEMPTING THEIR PLAN IN THE FIRST PLACE

A classic example of this can be found at Changi Airport in Singapore, wherein bespoke bollards were converted into large metal plant pots and fitted outside the airport's main terminal. Not only is this solution an extremely effective way to dissuade attacks with a moving vehicle, the presence of the bollards make passengers in the airport feel more safe and have even enhanced the overall aesthetic appeal of the space.

Impact-tested street furniture should therefore be a useful tool to help overcome resistance to security measures from architects and planners, and from the general public.

Indeed, according to our research, more than a third (36 percent) of urban design professionals think that it is a great innovation that effectively prevents vehicle attacks. Despite this, our research also uncovered some clear reservations and issues with the ranges of products currently on offer. 59 percent said that, although they think protective street furniture is a good idea, they think that architects should have more say in their design from the ground up.

BESPOKE SOLUTIONS
A further 19 percent said that they wished there were more options to choose from. From this, it's clear that while attitudes towards impact-tested street furniture among architects and planners are largely positive, there is definite demand for access to more bespoke products. A more collaborative approach between suppliers and design professionals might therefore be the key to changing perceptions of the aesthetic impact of security measures and encouraging even more widespread implementation of both protective street furniture and traditional solutions.

Simply enough, security systems no longer need to be an eyesore to be effective – they can be designed to fit in with the surrounding landscape, just visible enough to act as a deterrent and offer peace of mind.

As security becomes an increasingly important consideration for architects and specifiers, we can – and should – take a far more cohesive approach than in the past. Such co-operation will be key to creating a collaborative environment wherein urban design professionals and security specialists can work in tandem to ensure robust security is combined with a sensitive awareness of aesthetics.

Through working together in this way, the security measures specified can protect developments directly, preserve their aesthetic character and safeguard the built environment and its inhabitants, both now and in the future ●

Iain Moran is director at ATG Access

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