



BLURRED LINES

Richard Ellis *rethinks crowd protection in a hybrid threat world*

There was a time when securing a major event meant drawing a firm line around it. A perimeter was established. Entry points were controlled. The task, broadly speaking, was to keep threats out and people in. For decades, this model held. It aligned with how venues were designed and how cities functioned. Event security was contained and, to a degree, predictable. That model no longer reflects reality.

Today's major events unfold across fluid, interconnected environments. The stadium may still sit at the centre, but the event itself begins long before the turnstiles and lingers well after the final performance. Crowds gather in transport hubs, spill into surrounding streets, occupy fan zones and public squares. The event footprint has expanded into the wider urban fabric, and with it, the security challenge.

At the same time, the threat landscape has become more complex. Vehicle-borne attacks remain a defining risk, but they now sit alongside a broader spectrum of concerns including traffic accidents, traffic mismanagement, protest activity and the cumulative pressures of dense urban movement. The result is what might be described as a hybrid threat environment, one that resists simple categorisation and demands a more nuanced response.

As such, event security is undergoing a quiet but significant transformation. It is moving away from static, perimeter-led thinking towards something more integrated, more adaptive and, crucially, more aligned with

how people actually use space. Perhaps the most important shift is conceptual. Security is no longer anchored to the edge of a site. For security professionals, this raises a fundamental question: where does the responsibility for protection begin and end? In practice, the answer is increasingly blurred. The areas of greatest risk are often those that fall between jurisdictions, such as public realm spaces that are neither fully controlled nor entirely unmanaged.

These are precisely the locations where large crowds tend to gather: outside transport interchanges, along approach routes, in informal meeting areas. They are also the spaces where traditional security infrastructure has historically been lightest.

The implication is clear and so protecting a venue in isolation is no longer sufficient. Security strategies must extend outward, engaging with the wider urban environment and recognising that the safety of an event is inseparable from the safety of the spaces that surround it.

This demands a level of coordination that goes beyond any single organisation. Local authorities, transport providers, emergency services and venue operators must operate within a shared framework, aligning priorities and accepting a degree of collective responsibility.

As this broader perspective has taken hold, so too has a shift in how hostile vehicle mitigation is understood. For many years, HVM was framed in terms of products such as bollards, barriers and blockers. These remain essential, but focusing on them in isolation risks missing the bigger

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picture. What matters is not the individual component, but how it functions within a system.

A modern approach to perimeter security begins with movement specifically, how vehicles and pedestrians interact within a space. Where do vehicles enter? How fast are they likely to be travelling? Where do crowds concentrate and how do they disperse? These questions form the basis of a design process that is less about placing barriers and more about shaping behaviour.

In practice, this often means working with the geometry of the environment itself. Road layouts can be configured to reduce speed and limit direct approaches. Access points can be positioned to create natural choke points. The alignment of physical mitigation can be used to guide both vehicles and people in predictable, manageable ways. Seen in this light, HVM becomes less of a defensive layer and more of an organising principle, one that helps structure the interaction between different elements of the urban environment.

If there is a defining aesthetic of modern-day event security, it is subtlety. The overt, fortress-like interventions that once characterised high-security environments are increasingly at odds with the expectations of modern audiences. Major events are not only about safety; they are also about experience. Visitors expect spaces that feel open, accessible and above all welcoming.

This has led to a growing emphasis on integration, embedding security within the design of the public realm rather than imposing it upon it. Increasingly, the focus is on creating layered environments that guide movement naturally, rather than relying on continuous lines of overt HVM measures.

In practical terms, this might involve incorporating mitigation into everyday features such as seating that doubles as a protective barrier, planters that provide both greenery and resistance or lighting columns engineered to withstand impact.

Bollards, too, continue to play a pivotal role within these schemes. While often associated purely with security, carefully designed bollard arrays can also help to signpost and funnel pedestrian movement effectively within busy areas. In some cases, they can even maintain or slightly improve pedestrian flow, particularly outside major event spaces and transport hubs where crowd management is critical. The intention is not to disguise security entirely, but to ensure that it does not dominate the visual or spatial experience.

For security professionals, this represents a subtle but important shift in mindset. Success is no longer measured solely by the robustness of a solution, but also by how well it coexists with its surroundings. The most effective interventions are often those that go unnoticed.

Events are, by definition, temporary. Yet the infrastructure that supports them has not always reflected this. Historically, temporary HVM has been treated as an emergency measure, deployed in response to specific risks, often at short notice and removed once the event has concluded. While this approach provides flexibility, it can also lead to inconsistency and operational strain.

A more mature model is now emerging, in which temporary and semi-permanent solutions are treated as integral components of event planning. Rather than being improvised, they are pre-designed, rehearsed and embedded within operational frameworks.

Increasingly, organisers are recognising the value of combining permanent and temporary measures within

a layered security strategy. Having the right mix of infrastructure allows spaces to effectively turn security 'up' or 'down' depending on the scale, nature and longevity of an event. Permanent measures can provide a stable baseline of protection for busy public spaces, while temporary solutions can be deployed to support more short-term or changeable requirements.

This approach brings several advantages. It allows for greater consistency across events, reducing the likelihood of gaps or oversights. It supports more efficient deployment, with trained teams and established procedures. It also enables organisers to scale their response according to the specific requirements of each event, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach. Over time, investing in the right balance of permanent infrastructure and temporary support measures can also deliver significant long-term cost efficiencies.

EACH EVENT PROVIDES NEW INSIGHTS, NEW CHALLENGES AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Crucially, it also acknowledges that security does not begin on the day of the event. It is part of a longer lifecycle that includes planning, setup, live operation and decommissioning. Each phase presents its own challenges, and each must be accounted for within a coherent strategy.

One of the more complex aspects of modern event security is the management of authorised access. Major venues must accommodate a wide range of vehicles such as team transport, broadcast units, logistics and emergency services, often within tight time windows and under heightened security conditions. The biggest challenge is to facilitate this movement without introducing vulnerability.

Effective solutions require a careful choreography of space and process. Access routes must be clearly defined and physically secured. Control points must be positioned to allow for verification without causing bottlenecks. Systems must be reliable, responsive and capable of operating under pressure.

Increasingly, these elements are being integrated with wider operational systems, including surveillance, communications and control room functions. This creates a more cohesive environment in which decisions can be made in real time, based on a comprehensive view of the situation.

However, it also raises the stakes. The failure of a single component, whether physical or digital, can have cascading effects. Resilience, therefore, becomes a central consideration, not just in terms of individual systems, but in how they interact.

If the past decade has been defined by the integration of security into the built environment, the next may be defined by its integration with data. Advances in analytics, sensing and connectivity are enabling a more dynamic understanding of how spaces are used. Crowd density can be monitored in real time. Traffic flows can be analysed and adjusted. Patterns of movement can be identified and, in some cases, anticipated.

For event security, this opens up new possibilities. Physical mitigation can be complemented by

intelligence-led decision-making, allowing responses to be tailored to actual conditions rather than assumed scenarios. This is not about replacing physical measures, but about enhancing their effectiveness. A barrier remains a barrier, but its role within a wider system becomes more sophisticated when informed by data.

At the same time, this convergence introduces new questions. How is data managed and shared? How are systems secured against cyber threats? How are decisions made, and by whom? These are not purely technical issues – they go to the heart of governance and accountability.

SECURITY DOES NOT BEGIN ON THE DAY OF THE EVENT, IT IS PART OF A LONGER LIFECYCLE

Across the UK and internationally, there is now a growing body of experience in delivering large-scale, integrated security solutions for major events. Certain themes recur.

Early engagement is consistently identified as critical. When security is considered at the outset of a project, whether a new stadium or a temporary event, it can be woven into the design in a way that is both effective and unobtrusive. When introduced later, it is more likely to result in compromise.

Collaboration is equally important. No single organisation has a complete view of the risks or the environment. Effective solutions emerge from the alignment of different perspectives, from urban planning to policing to event operations.

Perhaps most importantly, there is a recognition that no solution is ever final. Each event provides new insights, new challenges and new opportunities to refine approaches. Security, in this sense, is not a fixed state but an ongoing process. While much of the focus in event security is rightly placed on

prevention, there is an increasing recognition that planning must also account for the unexpected. Not all threats can be mitigated through physical design alone. Incidents may arise from a range of causes, whether deliberate acts, accidents or unforeseen crowd dynamics. In these moments, the effectiveness of an emergency response plan becomes just as critical as the preventative measures that precede it.

For venues and event organisers, this means developing clear, well-rehearsed procedures that define how incidents are identified, communicated and managed in real time. Evacuation strategies, lockdown protocols and coordination with emergency services must be considered as integral components of the overall security framework, not secondary considerations.

Importantly, these plans must extend beyond documentation. They require regular testing, cross-agency collaboration and a shared understanding among all stakeholders of roles and responsibilities under pressure. Resilience is not only about stopping threats from materialising, but about ensuring that if they do, the response is structured, swift and effective.

The language of security often emphasises control: controlling access, controlling movement, controlling risk. Yet the reality of modern events is that control is always partial. Crowds are dynamic. Cities are complex. Threats are evolving. The goal, therefore, is not absolute control, but informed management, creating environments that are resilient, adaptable and capable of responding to change.

Modern-day event security recognises that protection cannot be separated from experience, that physical measures must be integrated with operational thinking and that security is as much about enabling safe participation as it is about preventing harm. For security professionals, this represents both a challenge and an opportunity. It requires new ways of thinking, new forms of collaboration and a willingness to engage with disciplines beyond traditional security boundaries. But it also offers the possibility of creating public spaces that are not only safer, but better designed with care, informed by insight and capable of supporting the complex, vibrant life of modern cities ●

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