

SUMMARY

CONTRACT NO : RG/1999/BE/03

TITLE : A STUDY OF SOCIAL MALAISE AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS ON THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT :
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO URBAN
NEIGHBOURHOODS.

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR : Dr. L.S.R Perera

COLLABORATOR : B.H.M.P Wijesinghe

Department of Architecture
University of Moratuwa
Moratuwa.

March, 2000

(a) Title of the Project : A Study of Social Malaise and its Implications on the Built Environment
With Special Reference to Urban Neighbourhoods.

(b) Research Institute : University of Moratuwa

(c) Principle Investigator : Dr. L.S.R Perera
Collaborator : B.H.M.P Wijesinghe

(d) Period of Contract

Date of Award : 15th July 1999

Date of Completion : 14th March 2000

(e) Scientific Background and Scope / Objectives of the Project

Background

Social Malaise is one of the major problems that the countries all over the world are facing today. It has been observed recently that social malaise has increased alarmingly in most of the developing countries including Sri Lanka. It is believed that social malaise is caused mainly by stress and frustration, mostly in urban neighborhoods. This urban stress is formed in the minds of people due to the causes of high degree of pollution in the urban environment, overloading of environmental stimulus and economic, social, cultural, political and religious conflicts. However, due to the lack of personal control, stress goes out of proportion thus resulting in emotional, cognitive, behavioral or physical reactions.

Social malaise in this study is defined as 'the behavioral reaction' in two forms, namely,

- (i) Offences against individuals. E.g.: - theft, minor robberies, interference to the family structures, corrupt the minds of children etc.
- (ii) Offences against built environment. E.g.: - Vandalism, litter- dropping graffiti, scrawling, pollution by excrement and arson.

In addition, it is known in general that it is the latter which directly affects the habitable built environment creating dull, in-sanitary, unpleasant urban spaces. Large amount of public money is being wasted for replacements and reconstruction of such spaces. Nevertheless, the harmful effect run much deeper and includes distress to those who live in the surrounding areas. Therefore it has become a need to study the particular subject area which is further justified by the following international research evidence.

The Problem

According to the statistics of United Nations International Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), it is estimated that urban crime and violence has risen by 3% to 5% per year during the past two decades. The most important fact here is that even in Asia, where crime has decreased (1975 - 1990) there has been a considerable increase in; **crimes against property**, organized crime and drug trafficking. According to the UNICRI, urban crime is dominated by crimes against property, which account at least half of all offences in cities all over the world. Sri Lanka, being a developing country in Asia this problem seemed to be getting more and more complex due to various, economic, political and social conflicts. Therefore it is timely to investigate the relationship between crime and property, particularly crime and the built environment.

Aims and Objectives

According to Jane Jacobs (1961), Oscar Newman (1973) and Alice Coleman (1985) poor City planning and building designs accelerate the degree of social malaise in urban neighbourhoods. This controversial idea needs to be re-investigated due to the reasons cited above. Therefore in this study it is intended to explore the underlying relationships between social malaise and design disadvantages with reference to a selected urban context in Sri-Lanka. The study attempts to determine the possible design strategies to deter urban crime and formulate a set of guidelines for architects and planners that will help to minimize such offences. Furthermore, the study also attempts to fill the gap in the knowledge between offences against the individuals, (which has been done previously) and offence against the built environment (which will be dealt with in this study)

Scope and Limitations

As stated initially, this study deals with offences against the built environment only. In doing so it drew its attention towards vandalism. It does not deal with offences against the individuals. In the study of Implications of social malaise in the built environment, it has only considered the urban situations where the problem is severe. Therefore the conclusions are specifically related to urban situations. Nevertheless, it directed its attention towards the residential neighborhoods, as they are the pulses of the city, which brings life to the city thus subjecting to socio –cultural, economic and political variations of the city or country. The detail field survey as stated above is limited to only 1920 dwelling units in 2 housing schemes and unstructured interviews only on 23. Therefore the conclusions are limited to the information gathered from these limited number of cases.

(f) Method

Firstly, a literature review was conducted to identify the relationship between social malaise and the built environment. This leads to understand offences against people and their belongings and offences against property and the built environment separately. A windshield survey conducted in Colombo revealed that offences against the built environment are highly prevalent in public housing schemes. Subsequently, a reconnaissance survey was carried out in 38 public housing schemes in the city. The findings of this survey revealed Jumma Masjid Road Housing Scheme and Maligawatta Housing Scheme as two cases where offences against the built environment are highly visible. These two cases involving 94 housing blocks and 1920 housing units were selected for detailed case studies. The case studies consisted of,

- (i) recording of incidence of offences against the built environment particularly vandalism and graffiti in relation to their location in the scheme, type of offence, extent of damage, nature / finish of the affected surface and possible causes
- (ii) photographic recording and assessing the above
- (iii) Unstructured interviews with randomly met residents to obtain an idea of the offenders.

Based on the literature survey and the field survey several conclusions were arrived at.

(g) Results Obtained

The research results show that highly dense public housing schemes located in inner city areas are the most victimized by offences against the built environment. There is a clear relationship between the housing density and the incidence of offences. Multi-story housing blocks with more than four floors were more subjected to vandalism and graffiti. Small pockets of spaces were seen less vulnerable than extensive areas of community spaces. Unconcealed service networks located in public spaces were highly vandalized irrespective of their accessibility. Introvert housing blocks with large open spaces trapped in the middle showed more incidences of offences than extroverted housing blocks. Undefined spaces nooks and corners formed by unauthorized additions and under-utilized green areas in the vicinity of the housing blocks were seen as most vulnerable for offences. Under-utilized spaces between housing blocks and common play areas were also seen as highly victimized. The interviews with residents revealed that the offenders are mostly residents or accomplices of residents who often visit the housing blocks.

(h) Conclusions

The above findings indicate that 'surveillability and 'territoriality' of space as argued by Newman (1972) are very vital in deterring social malaise. In contrast Newman's notion of 'defensible space' may not be applicable in a similar manner since the offenders come from the community itself. Therefore, community spaces in public housing should be designed in such a way to ensure that they merge with the living spaces and territories of individual households. This will enhance the surveillability and defensibility of space and thereby reduce the opportunities to commit offences against the built environment.

(i) Papers Published on Work done Under the Contract

A presentation based on the findings of this research was made at the annual sessions of the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science – (Section F), held at the Open University, Nawala on 3rd Dec. 1999. However, no written paper was prepared for this occasion. Only the abstract of the presentation was published in the proceedings. A copy of the same is annexed herewith.

F 05

The effect of social malaise on the built-environment of public housing

L A S R Perera and B H M P Wijesinghe

Department of Architecture, University of Moratuwa

Social malaise is often manifested in behavioral reactions of individuals against people or on the built environment. Theft and robbery and vandalism and graffiti are some of such reactions. Defensibility, surveillability and territoriality of space are vital in deterring offenses against people and the built environment. Examining this notion with reference to the public housing in Colombo. A general study in 38 public housing schemes and two case studies were conducted. The incidence of vandalism and graffiti in relation to their location and extent of damage were recorded. Causes of offences were studied by conducting unstructured interviews with randomly met residents.

Findings show that housing blocks having more than four floors, under-utilised public spaces and unconcealed service networks are more vulnerable to vandalism and graffiti. Undefined spaces, pocket spaces formed by unauthorised additions, and under-utilised green areas in the immediate vicinity of the housing blocks are also vulnerable. The interviews revealed that the offenders are mostly residents or accomplices of residents. These findings indicate that surveillability and territoriality of space are vital in deterring offenses against the built environment. However the notion of defensible space may not be applicable in the same manner since the offenders are mostly from the same community.