

The Secure City: Design and Perception of Public Space Post 9/11

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Abstract

After September 11, 2001 efforts began in the U.S. to secure public space. The events of 9/11 and the continued threat of terrorism have caused many cities and the federal government to rethink issues of public accessibility, open space design and perimeter building protection. In its crudest manifestation, these protection measures take the form of the ubiquitous Jersey Barriers seen blocking vehicular/pedestrian access to many government buildings; more sophisticated attempts to secure public space include the Capital District Security Plan of 2002 which calls for a coordinated secure urban design approach in the nation's capital. While the AIA, the ASLA, and others have a growing interest in this burgeoning area of urban design/re-design, there is no research available on the social, political and economic forces that shape these efforts and on the effects of the decisions of both clients and designers on the public use and perception of the urban public realm.

The Secure City will use BSA funding for Phase Two of this research. Phase One of this project explored the extent of U.S. efforts to secure the public realm: what is being done and where? An extensive search in social science, design and professional literature was also completed and contacts have been established in major cities promulgating secure urban design/re-design. In Phase Two, four case studies – Boston, MA; New York, NY; Philadelphia, PA; and Washington, DC – representing some of the most active cities in the practice of secure urban design, will be explored. Working with student research assistants at a major educational institution, site visits, interviews, and before/after comparisons will be conducted to provide comprehensive information to design professionals, public officials, and academics about the decision-making processes and the impacts of secure urban design/re-design interventions. This information will answer questions such as: (a) what has prompted secure urban design efforts (federal government policies/mandates/funding, public/private pressure?), (b) which efforts are coordinated and “designed” and which are ad hoc responses, and why?, (c) how do these efforts affect public space (physical design and use patterns)?, and (d) what are changes in the public perceptions of these re-designed secure urban spaces? This research will provide a comprehensive and up-to-date assessment of secure urban design efforts in these four cities with special attention given to public use and perceptions of these spaces and to the creation of a database documenting design efforts. This phase of the project will also provide the context for journal articles, conference presentations, and an advanced graduate research seminar and it is intended that continued research in this area will lead to book publication.