

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

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Executive Summary

The events of September 11, 2001 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. Urban design responses addressing security concerns are creating profound changes to the public realm but very little research is 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 use and perception of the urban public realm. Because security interventions are presented as necessary for public safety, there has been limited public discourse about design methods, allocation of public money, motivations, and resulting changes to the use and perception of public space. Through literature reviews, public document assessments, interviews, and field work, answers were sought to fundamental questions involving public realm redesign in the city of Boston: What are the motivations for public safety design interventions? What changes are the results of government regulation (or not)? Who are the actors involved? How do these efforts shape the new public realm of the city?

The research illuminates a decision-making landscape that conceals complex and varied actors and motivations in the efforts to secure public and private space. Field work and interviews reveal a range of motivations behind secure city design/redesign, including: security fears; market competition; peer pressure/tenant comfort levels; legal liability concerns; profit motive; ready access to newly available/re-allocated government and private business monies; search for prestige; shock reaction/lack of government oversight; and lastly, the reclamation of privately-owned public space for private use. Field work identifies a vastly changed public realm in Boston with a significant decrease in urban porosity and connectivity, translated in part by a decrease in thru-block connections in business areas. This shift in the public realm has seemingly gone unnoticed by public planning officials, even as it erodes previous progress toward some long-held goals for Boston's public realm. The research shows that far from resulting from post 9/11 government security policies, most changes to Boston's public realm have been the result of private decision-making outside the web of public regulation. Lack of active public oversight by planning officials has allowed the unprecedented level of cooperation and collaboration in the private sector to drive the security design/re-design agenda; with no oversight, the piecemeal and sometimes "temporary" public realm changes have resulted in security creep wherein there has been a gradual acceptance of security interventions as "white noise" and a natural part of our public realm. What was once shocking and unacceptable has become commonplace; temporary interventions have become permanent, new interventions are introduced over time, and little is done to regulate or slow the pace of change. However, because the private sector is driving the security redesign effort in the city, city officials and public realm advocates have room to act and take back control and responsibility for the public realm.