

Creating a Safe and Vibrant Downtown Guelph: Determining Elements of the Built Environment that will Enhance Women's Feelings of Safety

Executive Summary

Women are more likely than men to report unsafe feelings in cities (Wekerle and Whitzman, 1995). Accordingly, researching the issue of women's safety in public spaces is important because the results will help to improve urban planning and policy, and inform police regarding Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). Through the use of a Community Safety Audit (CSA), women are given the opportunity to address features of the built environment that reduce their feelings of safety. The goal of the safety audit is to use the results to make improvements in communities to enhance women's feelings of safety in the built environment. The safety audit process empowers women as experts in their community as they are given the chance to voice their concerns about safety issues in public spaces. Furthermore, the safety audit tool is not exclusive to women, and all community members can be involved. Ultimately, the goal is to make a community safer for everyone.

This research project sought to identify attributes of the built form within downtown Guelph that contribute to women's feelings of safety and/or lack of safety. Using qualitative methods, research was conducted by interviewing five female participants using the CSA tool. In addition, an interview was conducted with a professional who is familiar with downtown dynamics. This interview helped to validate the responses of the safety audits, and to inform the recommendations.

The literature presented relevant information regarding crime prevention and the built environment, perceptions of safety and the fear of crime and sexual

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assault, as well as the role of planning in crime prevention, and finally, information on the safety audit process. A few major themes were prevalent throughout the literature. One major theme that arose was that surveillance is critical as a form of neighbourhood policing. For the purposes of this report, and in line with the use of the term 'surveillance' by CPTED principles, 'surveillance' means observation akin to the concept of 'eyes on the street' provided by Jane Jacobs. CPTED plays a major role in enabling this observation, as it promotes designing cities that allow for 'eyes on the street'. Another major theme that emerged was that social inequality and neighbourhood deterioration were significant factors in stimulating fear in people, especially for those with low income who live in neglected neighbourhoods.

Each of the safety audit participants expressed in one form or another that they enjoy downtown Guelph, but that there are some features that could be improved. The problem areas discovered through these audits included feelings of isolation and fear in places like alleyways and pathways, especially at night. Bus stops were also mentioned as an area of concern, especially at nighttime. Baker Street, and in particular the Baker Street parking lot, was unanimously determined to be an area that required caution as the participants expressed that it feels isolated. Lastly, an issue that was brought up with most participants was that there appears to be large groups of youth who 'loiter' in the area. Some participants mentioned drugs as being a problem, as well, with particular emphasis given to 40 Baker Street, a location that provides a variety of social services.

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Information gathered from the literature review and the results from the safety audits helped to inform the following list of recommendations for the City of Guelph.

- Increase awareness and educational programs regarding issues of discrimination and stigmatization. This will help with the problems facing the various people who frequent the downtown area who access social services, such as 40 Baker Street. Furthermore, it will likely enhance people's feelings of safety in the downtown area.
- Conduct CSAs throughout the City of Guelph. Conducting audits at multiple locations, rather than focusing on just one location, is recommended. This is to avoid the possibility that focusing on one location may inadvertently send the message that the area is unsafe. Whereas having multiple locations would hopefully be perceived as a community development project to improve safety in Guelph overall.
- Conduct further research in the areas that a gendered analysis informs, such as race, class, sexuality, ability, and more, and incorporate this knowledge into the CSA process. Future research in this area is necessary and would be beneficial in terms of how these differences affect policy and practice in the area of community safety planning.
- Follow the six-stage process of community safety planning outlined by Carolyn Whitzman in *The Handbook of Community Safety, Gender, and Violence Prevention* (2008). This systematic procedure will help guide the process of integrating safety into community development.

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- Incorporate some or all of the above recommendations into any new developments in the downtown area.

The City of Guelph can benefit from this report as it provides the foundation of research regarding safety and the built environment in downtown Guelph. Furthermore, the results prove that improvements can be made to enhance women's feelings of safety in the downtown area. Focusing on women is critical because they fear for their personal security on a much larger level than men. However, all community members would benefit from the safety audit process, and implementing such a community development project will help to increase everyone's feelings of safety.