

Accommodating Public Space to Uphold Rape Myths:
The Danger of Using Environmental Design to Prevent Sexual Violence

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In 1998 Trisha Meili was sexually assaulted while jogging in New York’s Central Park, one of the most frequented public spaces in the U.S.¹ Five young men were convicted for the assault, rape, and attempted murder of Meili before later being found innocent.² The Meili assault induced a national news frenzy, in part because of the brutality of the crime, but also because it so accurately confirmed a common fear of public space. The majority of headlines did not center Meili or the names of the attackers, but instead the park itself. She is referred to as the “Central Park Jogger”, and those convicted were called the “Central Park 5”, “Central Park Rapists”, and the “Central Park Attackers”.³ Newspapers also framed the perpetrators as “savage” and a “wild dog pack”, in which describing them as animals simultaneously helped frame Central Park, a national symbol of public space, as untamed, unpredictable, and dangerous.⁴ The coverage of this infamous attack created a clear dialogue between the threat of sexual assault and the threat of public space as one and the same, building on rape myths and supporting a widely held belief that public spaces are not safe for women.

Don’t walk home alone at night. Avoid shortcuts through alleyways. No loitering in parks after sundown. Always walk with a buddy. Be aware of your surroundings. This advice is offered by well-intentioned friends, family members, educators, and law enforcement to women about moving through the world, yet these warnings elucidate a deep misunderstanding of the realities of sexual violence while policing the actions of women in public. The focus of

¹ William Kormblum and Douglas Blonsky, Report on the Public Use of Central Park, report, Central Park Conservancy (New York, NY, 2011).

² Natalie P. Byfield, *Savage portrayals: race, media, and the Central Park jogger story* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple Univ. Press, 2014).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

conversations around sexual violence are dominated by rape myths that perpetuate the fear of stranger rape and public space, and because of this fear consequently solutions for addressing sexual violence have been tailored to address environmental concerns. Public spaces like city parks and college campuses are criminalized, and large infrastructure projects are implemented to fundamentally change their designs in an effort to prevent sexual assault. This practice, regularly implemented by states, cities, and colleges, is called Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). Utilizing environmental design strategies to prevent sexual violence is a flawed approach that accommodates public space to respond to and uphold rape myths.

In 2010, less than 38% of reported non-fatal violence was committed by a stranger, and fewer than 2% of those reports were of rape or sexual violence.⁵ Even though women are more likely to report sexual violence to the police when they are assaulted by a stranger than if they are assaulted by someone they know reports still show that between 85-91% of sexual violence victims know their perpetrator.⁶ Despite the rarity of being sexually assaulted by a stranger the perpetuation of rape myths make stranger rape appear common. Rape myths are perceptions about sexual violence that justify sexually violent behavior.⁷ The myth that sexual violence is most likely to be committed by a stranger permeates many of the narratives that inform preventative measures taken to address sexual assault, despite empirical evidence to the contrary.

⁵ United States of America, Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Violent victimization committed by strangers, 1993-2010, by Erika Harrell (Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012).

⁶ "Most Victims Know Their Attacker," National Institute of Justice, 2008, , accessed June 2, 2017, <https://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/rape-sexual-violence/campus/Pages/know-attacker.aspx>.

⁷ H. Gerger et al., "The acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (AMMSA) scale: development and validation in German and English," *Aggressive Behavior* 33 (2007):.

This is often seen in the media's portrayal of sexual assault, with crime shows predominantly featuring cases of young women, typically white, walking home or jogging in the park being attacked by a stranger hiding in the dark.⁸ Similarly, news stories that fit this narrative of sexual violence tend to be sensationalized and widely circulated. This can again be seen in the central park jogger case, in which the news closely followed and reported the trials of the five young men, and the story was adopted into documentaries, books, and T.V. show plot lines.⁹ This myth that rape is primarily committed by strangers has supported a lasting conscious of fear around sexual assaulters lurking in the public.

It was a series of cases like these in the 1990's, where a woman was assaulted by a stranger in a public space, that pushed forward a national conversation around safety in public space. These conversations gave rise to the now influential Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) model. CPTED is a tool for analyzing the design and architecture of a public space to identify areas of risk, and to suggest modifications to that space to deter and prevent crime.¹⁰ CPTED utilizes three main tactics: Natural Surveillance, Access Control, and Defensible Space.¹¹ Natural surveillance techniques allow enhanced visibility through modifications like adding lights, limiting landscaping, and increasing foot traffic. Access control encourages having defined entry and exit points or 'closing' the space during certain

⁸ Katie M. Edwards et al., "Rape Myths: History, Individual and Institutional-Level Presence, and Implications for Change," *Sex Roles* 65, no. 11-12 (2011): , doi:10.1007/s11199-011-9943-2.

⁹ Natalie P. Byfield, *Savage portrayals: race, media, and the Central Park jogger story*

¹⁰ Julie Samia Mair and Michael Mair, "Violence Prevention and Control Through Environmental Modifications," *Annual Review of Public Health* 24, no. 1 (2003): , doi:10.1146/annurev.publhealth.24.100901.140826.

¹¹ "CPTED," Seattle Police Department, , accessed June 2, 2017, <https://www.seattle.gov/police/community-policing/cpted>.

hours, like at night. Defensible space utilizes strategies of territoriality through creating clear separations between private and public space, like fences and entry gates. These techniques, which are all motivated by a fear of strangers in public spaces, are intended to make certain types of people feel unwelcome and deter criminals from committing crimes.¹²

In a study interviewing college women about the strategies used on their campus to prevent rape, researchers found that women most commonly supported and adopted those that addressed the fear of rape by strangers on or near campus through environmental design.¹³ When asked by researchers where on or around campus they felt most at risk of sexual assault, the women cited routes between campus that were dimly lit, over planted, or less traveled.¹⁴ Therefore, when asked what measures the university had implemented had been the most successful at preventing sexual violence on campus, the participants most favorably ranked blue light telephones, increased lighting both on and off campus, and campaigns encouraging students to walk in a group or with a buddy.¹⁵ Both the perception of high risk areas and the preventative measures taken by the university to address them were oriented around the design of public space and utilized CPTED strategies. Most of the women interviewed were satisfied with the measures their university had taken to deter sexual violence and felt safer on and near campus because of them.¹⁶ The combined fear of public space and validation of these fears through rape

¹² Julie Samia Mair and Michael Mair, "Violence Prevention and Control Through Environmental Modifications," (2003)

¹³ Kristen Day, "Assault Prevention As Social Control: Women And Sexual Assault Prevention On Urban College Campuses," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 15, no. 4 (1995): , doi:10.1006/jevp.1995.0024.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

myths is what makes design measures like those implemented by the university and programs like CPTED feel effective despite having little to effect on the prevalence of sexual assault.

Using rape myths to criminalize public space is not only prevalent on college campuses, but also in many urban cities, especially within city parks. Rape myths, specifically those around stranger rape, have changed the ways parks are viewed, utilized, and designed. A notable example of this is Seattle's Freeway Park, a site praised as a model for CPTED success. Freeway Park is a 5.2 acre city park designed by Landscape Architect Lawrence Halprin, located in the heart of downtown Seattle.¹⁷ Opened in July of 1976 the park features four main terraces, each mixing different elements of Halprin's brutalist architecture and pacific northwest ecology.¹⁸ The terraces, made up of large towering geometric cement rectangles, mirror the natural forms of the Cascade and Olympic mountains, emphasized through the park's many water features embodying the rivers and gorges of the northwest.¹⁹ These forms also create a natural wandering effect in the park, with paths winding through cement corridors in and out of the abstracted northwest mountains created by the park's distinct architecture. Freeway Park was the first project of it's kind, building a public green space over Interstate 5, connecting two parts of the city previously divided by the imposing priority of automobile infrastructure. The park has been praised as a Halprin masterpiece both for its architectural uniqueness and it's symbolic shift towards

¹⁷ "Freeway Park," Freeway Park | The Cultural Landscape Foundation, , accessed June 02, 2017, <https://tclf.org/landscapes/freeway-park>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Marc Treib, *Modern landscape architecture: a critical review* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

prioritizing public and pedestrian needs in urban areas. For these reasons Freeway Park has been protected as a National Historic Landmark.²⁰

Much of what makes Freeway Park an architectural icon is also what CPTED points to as it's biggest downfalls. The winding paths, sharp corners, loud water features, dramatic shadows, abundance of entrances, centralized restrooms, tall bushes, and dense tree groves are all blamed for the park's many issues with crime in the late 90's and early 2000's.²¹ After a series of high profile cases, including a 1998 altercation where a woman was raped at gunpoint in a "hidden corner of the plaza"²², another in 2002 where a woman was "pushed into some bushes"²³ and raped, and a third less three weeks later where a woman was murdered in the park's restroom. Reports of this attack claimed her screams for help could not have been heard "over the park's thundering artificial waterfalls and the traffic rushing beneath it".²⁴ In the local newspaper articles covering the cases, as well as in the police reports themselves, the park's design elements are described as a participant in the crime. When the police were unable to track down the man believed to be the perpetrator of the 2002 murder they blamed the parks "maze of pathways"²⁵, citing the architecture as an accessory to the crime itself.

²⁰ "Freeway Park," Freeway Park | The Cultural Landscape Foundation.

²¹ Charles Mudede, "Topography of Terror: Seattle's Freeway Park is a garden of earthly delights--for the city's crazed murderers and inhuman rapists!," *The Stranger*, August 22, 2002, , accessed June 02, 2017, <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/topography-of-terror/Content?oid=11685>.

²² Valerie Easton. "In the concrete jungle, Freeway Park will offer respite once again." *The Seattle Times*. July 26, 2008. Accessed June 02, 2017. <http://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/in-the-concrete-jungle-freeway-park-will-offer-respite-once-again/>.

²³ Charles Mudede, "Topography of Terror" (2002)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

The language tying the crimes explicitly to the problems of Freeway Park is similar the coverage of the Central Park rape years earlier, and showcases the deeply intertwined relationship between the fear of sexual violence and the threat of public space. Like Central Park, local coverage of the attacks in Freeway Park framed the park as wild and unpredictable, calling it a “Topography of Terror”,²⁶ “Garden of Earthly Delights for Seattle’s crazed murderers and inhuman rapists”,²⁷ and a “Concrete Jungle”.²⁸ The belief that Freeway Park’s architecture was the cause of Downtown Seattle’s rising crime rates became the main argument of the Freeway Park Neighborhood Group, and in late 2002 they began applying for a series of grants and proposals to bring in groups of CPTED consultants to analyze the space and purpose solutions for the park.²⁹ In 2005 the city adopted a plan to redesign Freeway Park based on the recommendations from a report prepared by the New York City-based Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a CPTED consultation group. The renovations concluded in early 2017 after spending nearly \$100,000 on park ‘improvements’.³⁰

The renovations affected nearly every aspect the original Halprin design. The number of pathway lights were increased and their height was lowered from the original 100ft to 20ft in order to prevent them from casting long shadows.³¹ Over a dozen trees were removed from the

²⁶ Charles Mudede, "Topography of Terror" (2002)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Valerie Easton. "In the concrete jungle, Freeway Park will offer respite once again." (2008)

²⁹ Joel Connelly, "Time to take back that park over the freeway," Seattlepi.com, , accessed June 06, 2017, <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/connelly/article/Time-to-take-back-that-park-over-the-freeway-1206756.php>.

³⁰ "Freeway Park," Project for Public Spaces, 2005, , accessed June 02, 2017, <https://www.pps.org/projects/freewaypark/>.

³¹ Charles Mudede, "Topography of Terror" (2002)

central grove, opening the space to clearer sight lines and less shadows.³² The water in the waterfall has been reduced from 28,000 gallons per a minute to 9,500 gallons per a minute (less than 30% of it's original capacity), and even at it's reduced flow the waterfall now only runs for special occasions.³³ A steel fence was erected in front of main architectural gorge and it's surrounding paths, limiting access to their 'maze' and preventing people from interacting with the water.³⁴

The park's remaining trees have been trimmed to above 10ft, bushes cut to below 3ft, and all ivy and hanging plants have been removed leaving entire sets of planter boxes built into the cement architecture empty.³⁵ A series of walls along the far edge of the park have been removed, and many paths were changed to offer a more direct route through the park.³⁶ The bathroom, which despite the CPTED insistence that restrooms belong at the entrance of a space where foot traffic is heavy,³⁷ is still centrally located due to cost but has had it's surrounding trees and plants removed and motion sensing lights installed to make it visible from the plaza at the top of the park. Through a private-public partnership the adjacent Convention Center has provided regular security staff at one of the park's north entrances.³⁸ This partnership has also allowed the convention center to add a gate around the north plaza that is locked and inaccessible to the

³² Charles Mudede, "Topography of Terror" (2002)

³³ "Freeway Park," Freeway Park | The Cultural Landscape Foundation.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Freeway Park," Project for Public Spaces, 2005,

³⁶ "Freeway Park," Freeway Park | The Cultural Landscape Foundation.

³⁷ Julie Samia Mair and Michael Mair, "Violence Prevention and Control Through Environmental Modifications," (2003)

³⁸ "Freeway Park," Freeway Park | The Cultural Landscape Foundation.

public outside of the Convention Center's operating hours. These design changes are all meant to address the dangers of public space by using environmental designs to deter crime and prevent sexual assault in Freeway Park.

The Freeway Park redesign has been praised as a success, and just like the students who were interviewed about sexual assault prevention efforts on their campus, residents near Freeway Park feel the prevention measures have genuinely made the park a safer place.³⁹ While CPTED has come under scrutiny for some of its design principles that have been utilized to address homelessness, like adding spikes to sidewalks and under freeways, putting dividers on benches, and locking public restrooms at night, these design measures have been successful at accomplishing CPTED's goal of deterring unwanted strangers in public. These methods have effectively pushed homeless people out of targeted spaces, and actively showcase the reality of who the CPTED theory is designed to serve: Community members with the privilege to be able to approach homelessness as an inconvenient byproduct of design. CPTED is a tool implemented in neighborhoods where affluent community members want a clear architectural divide between them and the public they fear. Investments in public infrastructure projects do little to address the reality of sexual violence while spending thousands of dollars to uphold rape myths and comfort the affluent community members CPTED serves at the inconvenience of the broader public. As cities and universities invest in environmental design strategies as the solution for preventing sexual violence they reinforce the narrative that rape is something that happens by strangers in

³⁹ Ana Sofia Knauf, "Freeway Park Had Its 40th Birthday This Weekend," *The Stranger*, July 2016, accessed June 02, 2017, <http://www.thestranger.com/slog/2016/07/05/24303647/freeway-park-had-its-40th-birthday-this-weekend>.

dangerous public spaces, ignoring the reality that 85-90% of rape victims are assaulted by someone they know.⁴⁰

This fear of public space is not only reinforced by design features themselves, but also in the ways environmental design gets discussed when notifying communities about crime. After a student was raped and murdered on a college campus the federal government adopted the Clery Act, which requires that universities “give timely warnings of crimes that represent a threat to the safety of students or employees.”⁴¹ Schools like the University of Washington now have a notification system that sends out a campus wide alerts, typically through text or email, after a crime has been committed on or near campus. In cases where a student is the victim of a sexual assault perpetrated by a stranger the campus police send out a notification, yet sexual assaults that occur between acquaintances and are reported to UWPD are not required to be a part of the same notification system.⁴² The Clery Act requires notification of crimes that “represent a threat”,⁴³ and the fact that notifications are only sent in cases of stranger offenders showcases that known perpetrators are not seen as a threat in the same way, even if they are still actively participating in campus life. The perceived difference in threat between known and stranger perpetrators exemplifies the ways rape myths shape campus safety. The difference in notification requirements also skews the perceived prevalence of stranger rape on and near campus, reaffirming rape myths that support investing in measures that primarily address the design of public space. The notifications often focus in great detail on the location of the attacks, pointing

⁴⁰ "Most Victims Know Their Attacker," National Institute of Justice, 2008

⁴¹ "Clery Act Policy," Clery Center, accessed January 07, 2018, <https://clerycenter.org/policy-resources/>.

⁴² "Crime Alert Programs," UW Police, , accessed June 06, 2017, <http://police.uw.edu/services/crimealertprograms/>.

⁴³ "Clery Act Policy," Clery Center

out environmental dangers like lighting, time of day, and if the victim was walking alone or in a group, and are followed by a series of ‘crime prevention tips’ that often only address these environmental concerns.⁴⁴

A 2016 ‘Notification of Criminal Intent’ sent out by the University of Washington campus police demonstrates many of these qualities: ⁴⁵

“ The female victim stated that during the late evening hours on May 6, 2016, she was walking alone on the 5200 block of 15th Avenue N.E. when she was approached by the suspect... At approximately the 5600 block of 15th Avenue N.E., the suspect pulled the victim into an alley and sexually assaulted her... The suspect is described as a white male, in his 20's, approximately 5'8" tall with blonde hair and wearing glasses. If you witnessed this incident or have additional information about this crime or suspect, please call the Seattle Police Department at (206) 625-5011.

Crime Prevention Tips include:

- * Perpetrators seek opportunities to commit sexual assault. Be cognizant of your surroundings.
- * Trust your instincts. If you feel unsafe, get to a safe place and call for help.
- * Sexual Assault is a crime and a violation of the UW Student Conduct Code.
- * On campus, call Husky NightWalk: 206-685-WALK for a security guard escort 7 days a week.

”

This notification builds on the mythology that it is the victims responsibility to avoid sexual assault, and that making choices to be “cognizant of your surroundings” and avoid perceived high risk environments will prevent rape. The rhetoric being supplied through university police only reinforces rape myths and affirms student fears of public space.⁴⁶ University reporting mechanisms that focus on environmental factors in criminal notifications of stranger rape, but saying nothing about the threat of known perpetrators on campus, reinforces

⁴⁴ University of Washington Police Department, “Notice of Criminal Intent,” email message to author. May 8, 2016

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Kristen Day, "Assault Prevention As Social Control: Women And Sexual Assault Prevention On Urban College Campuses," (1995).

praise for university investments in safety measures that only address environmental factors like lighting while doing little to address a campus culture of sexual violence.

Through its widespread implementation CPTED has been normalized as a part of every day environmental decision making. One place where this can be seen is the impact of sex offender registries on the ways peoples use and view both public and increasingly private space. A series of sexually violent child abductions and murders in the late 80's and early 90's, all of which included a stranger-offender, received national media attention that led to an inflated threat of stranger abductions in the minds of parents and policy makers alike.⁴⁷ Despite the reality that child abductions by a stranger are incredibly rare, a wave of policies targeting convicted sex offenders were adopted nationwide.⁴⁸ Most notably are the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children Act of 1993, which created the requirement for a national sex offender registry, and shortly therefore Megan's Law which made the registry publicly available information.⁴⁹ This registry requires convicted sex offenders upon release to regularly register with law enforcement, providing their address, a photo, and detailed physical descriptions, all of which can then be easily accessed online.⁵⁰ Along with the registry there are laws banning convicted sex offenders from public spaces frequented by children like schools and parks. Despite little to no proof that the sex offender registry is affective for preventing future offenses people gain sense of security that their parks, neighborhoods, and even private homes are safer

⁴⁷ Justine Taylor et al., "An Examination of Gender and Age in Print Media Accounts of Child Abductions," *Criminal Justice Studies* 26, no. 2 (2012): , doi:10.1080/1478601x.2012.724683.

⁴⁸ Susan Bandes, "The Lessons of Capturing the Friedmans: Moral Panic, Institutional Denial and Due Process," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2007): , doi:10.1177/1743872107076384.

⁴⁹ Justine Taylor et al., "An Examination of Gender and Age in Print Media Accounts of Child Abductions,"

⁵⁰ Erica R. Meiners, "Essay: "Never Innocent: Feminist Trouble with Sex Offender Registries and Protection in a Prison Nation"," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 9, no. 2 (2009): , doi:10.2979/mer.2009.9.2.31.

because they are able to locate and visualize the stranger hiding in public space that they have been conditioned to fear.⁵¹

This fear of strangers and specifically registered sex offenders has shaped not only public parks, but traditionally private spaces like the home as well. Following the series of high profile assaults committed by strangers trends in the design of housing began to incorporate CPTED principles, primarily defensible space.⁵² Clear architectural boundaries were built between properties through tools like front lawns and decorative fences, increased street lights in suburban areas, and mechanisms for psychological surveillance like the rise of the cul de sac, a form notably similar to the traditional panopticon.⁵³ Many areas of the country took defensible space to the most formal level by investing in gated communities. In 1998 just over 4 million people lived in a community that required an entry code, and by 2001 that number had more than quadrupled to close to 17 million homes.⁵⁴ Many of these neighborhoods have clear community standards that require background checks and ban convicted sex offenders from buying homes.⁵⁵

The privatization of neighborhoods, a traditionally public space and one that still relies on public resources like roads and utilities, have become another attempt at trying to protect oneself and ones families from the public and the strangers that lurk within it. This shift towards defensible private space both requires and produces fear of the public, all while ignoring the

⁵¹ Erica R. Meiners, "Essay: "Never Innocent: Feminist Trouble with Sex Offender Registries and Protection in a Prison Nation"

⁵² Setha Low, *The Politics of Public Space*: (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁵³ Oscar Newman, *Design Guidelines for Creating Defensible Space* (Washington: National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1976).

⁵⁴ Setha Low, *The Politics of Public Space*

⁵⁵ *Ibid*

actualized threat of sexual violence within the home.⁵⁶ 70% of all sexual assaults with a child victim happen in the residence of the victim or the offender, with the prevalence increasing to 89% for children under the age of 5.⁵⁷ Sex offender registries, which like CPTED are a tool meant to empower people about their environmental surroundings, have changed the ways people design both private and public space to respond to rape myths instead of the realities of interpersonal sexual violence.

Environmental design as a tool for crime prevention is rooted in the idea that crime is an act of opportunity. While CPTED has proven some success in curbing crimes like theft,⁵⁸ claiming that it will be successful in preventing sexual violence only upholds the myth that sexual violence is a crime of opportunity. CPTED places the responsibility of preventing sexual assault on the victim, blaming attacks on an individual's choice to utilize dangerous public spaces, making themselves vulnerable to attacks. This belief can be seen in the UWPD notice of Criminal Intent where one of their crime prevention tips reads: "Perpetrators seek opportunities to commit sexual assault. Be cognizant of your surroundings at all times".⁵⁹ Using environmental design as a response to sexual violence validates the stranger rape myth and perpetuates a fear of public space. In doing so these design approaches uphold systems that limit

⁵⁶ Erica R. Meiners, "Essay: "Never Innocent: Feminist Trouble with Sex Offender Registries and Protection in a Prison Nation"

⁵⁷ Howard Snyder, "Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics". Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000.

⁵⁸ Julie Samia Mair and Michael Mair, "Violence Prevention and Control Through Environmental Modifications," (2003)

⁵⁹ University of Washington Police Department, "Notice of Criminal Intent," email message to author. May 8, 2016

the opportunities for women to navigate parks, cities, neighborhoods, and the world around them in a truly autonomous way.

When sexual assault is seen as a problem of public space, something that can easily be torn down, trimmed, lit up, and redesigned, the realities of sexual violence go ignored in exchange for a false sense of safety. Public space is not violent, but designing it to support and uphold a rape myth is.

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