

Reframing CPTED: Designing for security before risks arise

Henk Neddermeijer

Security Risk Consultant | CPTED Practitioner

Introduction

We often talk about safety and security in terms of risks: what could go wrong, and how do we mitigate that? Yet there is another way. CPTED—Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design—is not just about fixing risks. It’s about designing spaces where problems are less likely to arise—and where quality of life improves as a result. Lately, CPTED is often placed under the umbrella of Security Risk Management (SRM)¹. That may seem logical, as both deal with security. However, it risks overlooking CPTED’s proactive, community-focused design philosophy—one that addresses underlying conditions rather than surface-level threats. This article explains why CPTED is a unique design approach—not just another risk tool, but a way of thinking about how we shape the environments we live and work in.

Why design comes first

SRM focuses on known threats. You assess a risk and apply a control. CPTED works differently. It starts with the space itself—how people use it, how it feels, and how it encourages safe behavior. The goal is to create places where people naturally feel safe and connected. While CPTED is not driven by quantitative risk scores, it relies on design insights and lived experience—how people interact with and perceive their surroundings. It’s about good design based on how we live and move through places. Take, for instance, a school campus: thoughtful layout, clear sightlines, and communal seating areas reduce tensions and promote interaction. By contrast, a fenced-off site with warning signs and cameras may control access—but it fails to build community. For example, a well-lit path with open sightlines may show up in both CPTED and SRM plans. But in CPTED, it’s there to invite natural movement, visibility, and community presence. In SRM, it’s simply a response to a known risk. Yet the underlying logic diverges: CPTED sees it as a means to foster natural surveillance and community presence, whereas SRM might introduce it as a targeted response to incident data. CPTED begins earlier in the timeline and often requires closer collaboration with designers, planners, and local communities, including the end-users themselves. CPTED requires the participation of all stakeholders.

Security is also a feeling

We often measure safety with numbers. But people don’t experience life through statistics alone. While data informs security strategies, the emotional and social dimensions of safety—how spaces make people feel—are equally vital and often overlooked. They live in neighborhoods, parks, and streets. And how people feel in those places matters. A well-used

¹ See for instance ISO 22341 and ISO 31000 Series.

square with benches, trees, and friendly lighting feels safe—without needing a camera or security guard. That said, complementary measures—such as formal security systems—may still be needed in certain contexts. CPTED acknowledges this emotional dimension of safety. It focuses not just on what is ‘safe’, but on what feels safe. When people feel ownership over their environment, they care for it and each other. A friendly face at the window, a neighbor watching the street, a child playing outside—all contribute to a safer atmosphere. While this example is illustrative, we recognize that without concrete case studies, it may appear less convincing. Nevertheless, numerous real-world experiences—such as local urban renewal projects in Rotterdam^{2 3 4} and Malmö—confirm the effectiveness of this approach. Projects such as the ‘Wijk van de Toekomst’⁵ in Rotterdam South or Malmö’s Augustenborg district demonstrate how design, community participation, and a sense of safety can go hand in hand.

Aesthetics play a crucial role

Design is about more than just function. It’s also about appearance. A security post or bollard can look aggressive—or it can look like part of the street furniture. People react differently depending on what they see and how welcoming it feels. CPTED encourages designs that are not only effective, but also attractive, showing visible attention and care, and socially accepted. Cities that invest in aesthetic, people-friendly spaces are not just safer—they are more vibrant, inclusive, and enjoyable for everyone⁶.

CPTED Before SRM

CPTED helps prevent problems before they appear. Security Risk Management (SRM) is all too often reactive in nature, addressing only those risks that have already been identified, rather than proactively shaping environments to prevent new or unforeseen risks from emerging. This is why CPTED should take precedence. If we design well from the beginning, we may not need as many controls or barriers later. It’s the difference between nurturing a resilient forest and chasing smoke with a bucket. In practice, this means involving CPTED principles in early planning phases, not as a checklist after the fact. Because SRM often centers on already identified problems, it risks neglecting the lived experience and early warning signals that could be provided by ‘less likely subjects’—like local youth, frontline workers, or informal community leaders—who are rarely part of conventional risk assessments but essential for proactive, design-led prevention. If, despite CPTED measures, residual risks remain, additional SRM-based measures may then be considered. A possible objection is that this approach may be too subjective. Yet practical knowledge - from

² Mak, A. and Stouten, P. (2014), “Urban Regeneration in Rotterdam: Economic and Social Values”, in: European Spatial Research and Policy, Vol. 21, 1.

³ Schouten, P.L.M. (2012), “Thirty years of Urban Regeneration in Rotterdam”, in: International Journal for Housing Science and Its Applications, Vol. 36, 1.

⁴ Schouten, P.L.M. (2017), “Gentrification and Urban Design in the Urban Fabric of Rotterdam”, in: Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal Vol. 11, 1

⁵ The ‘Wijk van de Toekomst’ program in Rotterdam South (Prinsenland) combined sustainability measures (such as district heating connections and solar panels), climate adaptation, social infrastructure, and age-friendly housing. The approach resulted in future-proof residential concepts with active resident participation and is now being scaled up across the city.

⁶ De Nadai et al. (2016) – “Are Safer Looking Neighborhoods More Lively?”

residents, neighborhood officers, and others - shows how everyday observations often generate key preventive insights. Even though they are rarely formally documented, they represent an essential source of knowledge in the design process.

What about evidence?

A common critique is that CPTED's effectiveness is difficult to capture through conventional metrics. Indeed, its impact often unfolds gradually—through cultural shifts, behavioral change, and new patterns of use—factors not easily reduced to numbers. This places CPTED squarely within the so-called prevention paradox: when prevention works, nothing happens. That is precisely the challenge.

Yet these invisible successes matter. CPTED builds trust, reduces fear, and fosters local ownership—deep changes that shape how people experience their environment, even if they resist quantification.

To strengthen its position, the CPTED field must continue to develop ways of demonstrating its impact: through more case studies, improved observational methods, and collaboration with social scientists.

Rather than weakening CPTED's value, its resistance to easy measurement should prompt a broader understanding of what counts as safety—and whose experiences define it. In this sense, CPTED's true impact lies not just in numbers, but in lived experience, collective behavior, and everyday life.

Conclusion

CPTED is about more than managing risks—it's about designing environments where risks are less likely to emerge in the first place. It focuses on creating places that feel safe, encourage everyday use, and support meaningful social interaction.

Although CPTED can complement Security Risk Management (SRM), it deserves to be recognized as a discipline in its own right. Its strength lies not only in preventing harm, but in shaping environments where people feel welcome, connected, and at ease. That is its enduring value—and why it must be embedded at the very foundation of how we plan and build our shared spaces.

As professionals, designers, or citizens, we all share responsibility for shaping environments that foster trust, inclusion, and well-being. True security begins when design, strategic thinking, and local knowledge come together from the start.

Design security in. Don't just manage risk out.

Contact

henk.neddermeijer@kernel-groep.nl

Bio

Henk Neddermeijer is an independent security consultant and CPTED expert. He holds a Master of Science in Security Management from the University of Leicester and has advised cities, companies, and communities on creating safer environments through design.