Title
"Deputizing" the Streetscape   [Forum]

Author
Krieger, Alex

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The National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan is based upon a very simple idea: integrate the street improvements that cities and property owners already make with the measures that security officials are seeking. That way, cities are not trying to accomplish two things with two separate budgets over time, and we can eliminate the ad-hoc systems of barriers you see in cities everywhere.

The question is, can security and streetscape be combined in some fashion? Can you harden, or "deputize," street elements like benches and planters, light poles and newsstands, information kiosks, so they both provide a measure of curbside security and continue to do what they've already done, which is to enliven the character of the street?

GSA's guidelines for security define six zones of concern. The first two, which deal with improving a building so it can withstand attack, are not a concern of this study. We are essentially dealing with zones three, four and five — the parking lane, the sidewalk, and the building setback, if there is one. Obviously, the deeper the setback, the better it is from a blast standpoint. But deep setbacks create the problematic condition of buildings that are not very good from an urban standpoint. That's a challenge for GSA as it develops new buildings and has to address these new setback requirements.

The task forced wanted to come up with a strategy for central Washington, a "kit of parts" of elements that might be designed, with a little more cost, to provide security and avoid the proliferation of Jersey barriers. We looked at ordinary components of the streetscape that are sometimes thought of as embellishments but could also be components of security — benches, lampposts, planter walls, wastepaper containers, newspaper boxes, and so on. This could include trees, by the way, if they are of a certain caliper.
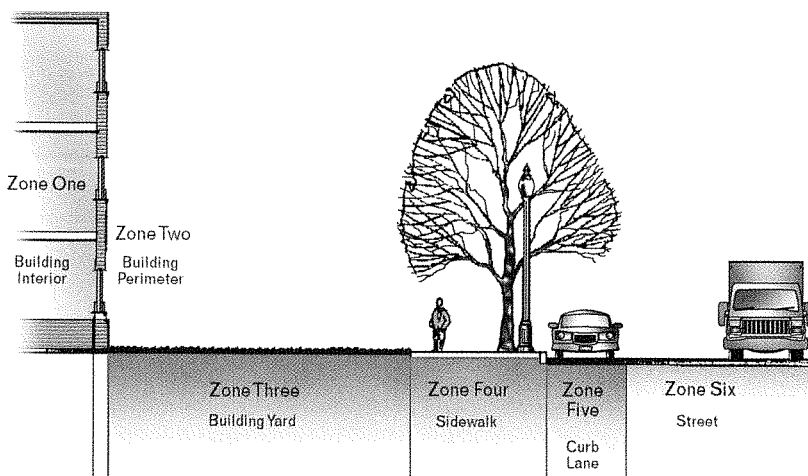
Can we deputize all of these elements? Can we design components that would be part of making our street environment more gracious, while providing security?

The greatest challenge is not the monumental core, but downtown. What you want to avoid is each building doing its own thing. You would like to establish certain corridors in the city along which you create a more continuous streetscape, just as you would if you were doing an ordinary street project, but in this case you are trying to incorporate security as well. The point is not to work building by building, but block by block, not only to provide security but also to enhance the street environment.

— *Alex Krieger*
Alex Krieger is chair of the Department of Urban Design and Planning at the Harvard School of Design, and principal in Chan Krieger Associates.

Left: Security zones established by GSA.
Opposite top: Ad-hoc security streetscape, West End, Washington, D.C.
Opposite bottom: Detail of proposed perimeter fence streetscape element.
All photos and graphics courtesy of National Capital Planning Commission.