

Making it safe

While government tax incentives and proddings have helped make the road more enticing for developers and residents, the focus — indeed, the impetus — has been on the real and perceived safety and comfort of urban centers. With blight comes flight, with flight comes crime, with crime comes, well, no one, say the experts. Fear of crime keeps people away and empty streets breed more crime. The reverse, they say, is also true.

“A lot of it is just having eyes on the street, having people on the street,” Hord says. “Downtown safety is many times based on ‘is there anybody else there?’ If you’re alone, it’s scary, but if you’re in an area teeming with people, you feel fine.”

So how do you attract people to an area that’s become known as a crime magnet? By focusing on the key architectural features that make people *feel* safe, says Robin Boyle, professor of **urban** planning at Wayne State University in Detroit.

“Overcoming a sense of dead and dark spaces is what gives people a sense of security,” says Boyle. “People also tend to feel ... more comfortable in slightly smaller spaces.”

“And generally speaking, where you have a number of blind corners, where people are not terribly sure as to what’s going to happen when they turn that corner, can lead to insecurity. If you have clear sight lines, then again people will feel more secure, and people will tend to take that route, which leads to more eyes on the street, or activity which, again, makes people more secure.”

And, ironically, it’s the older buildings that tend to have these key features, which is why they’re so much in focus when it comes to today’s **urban revitalization**.

Whether the building’s new or old, though, a focus on good lighting can establish the right “feel,” agree Boyle and Hord.

“The nearer we get to a full spectrum of light, the better we feel, the better we can see people coming, the safer we feel, and it’s just more pleasant,” Hord says. “Putting a 40-watt bulb in a store window to have some warm illumination costs pennies a night, but it’s a way to make cities feel alive and a lot nicer.”

It all helps people feel better.

“The other psychological part of this is a feeling ‘if somebody’s willing to invest a million dollars to fix a building, this must be a good place,’ ” says Parnes. “When they do that, street life changes, the people walking the streets change, and then the properties around that building start to become valuable.”