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Policing Home Spaces

» RESIDENT WATCHERS

“When I first heard of Habitat, I used to think they gave people houses. But after being in the program, I found out they don’t give you a house. You work for your house.”

Estelle, a middle-aged African American stay-at-home mom, spent nine months in 2008 and 2009 logging sweat equity hours with Habitat for Humanity Detroit’s home ownership program.

“What do you like most about the house?” I asked.

Estelle answered emphatically, “Zero percent interest on my mortgage!” She laughed. “That’s what I like about the house.” Estelle had owned a home before, but she lost it when the variable interest rate tripled. With the Habitat house, she said, “there won’t be anyone telling me I got to leave.”

Habitat for Humanity built one hundred new homes in Estelle’s neighborhood between 2005 and 2013. They clustered those homes on six consecutive blocks on Detroit’s east side. Because of the foundation’s tight geographic work area, for Estelle joining the home ownership program meant agreeing to live in a very specific section of the city.

Estelle had lived on the west side for years, and she worried about moving east. She knew of the neighborhood, but she had never spent time there. “So they told us to drive around,” she recalled, to see if she would feel comfortable living on one of those six blocks. “So we drove around, me and my daughter. And I thought, ‘Oh my goodness.’ Because when we moved into the area, a lot of the houses on L— [Street] weren’t there. It was barren land.” Estelle had misgivings, she said with a shutter, but her daughter encouraged her to commit.

“She was like, ‘Ma, it is not about the neighborhood. It’s about our house.’ And I told her, I said, ‘You’re right.’ Because I knew this was a great opportunity. There was no other way for us to get a home.”

Shortly before moving day, Estelle had an encounter with a soon-to-be neighbor that gave her more confidence. “We need[ed] to go water the grass,” she said, but “it was hard to get to M— [Street] when we stayed on the west side.” She arrived after dark. “It was, like, eleven o’clock at night,” she recalled, “and we were over at the house trying to water the grass. And we were in the back of the house. And the lady that lives directly behind us came out her back door and asked us, who were we? She was about to call the police. And I went, ‘It’s OK, it’s OK, it’s our house!’ And she was like, ‘You gotta call somebody!’” The neighbors knew the home was supposed to be empty. No one had told them she would be coming by, and the neighbors were ready to defend the house. After moving in, Estelle heard similar stories of neighborly attentiveness protecting residents from home invasions while they were at work or traveling. “I thought, ‘They looking out. That’s good!’”

Estelle’s experience of being challenged by a watchful neighbor gave her confidence in her new community, and she designed her landscaping to promote those visual relationships. “We were going to build a privacy fence,” she said, “but once we saw how they looked out for you, it was like, well, we don’t want to put a privacy fence up, because then they can’t see. My neighbor’s got to be able to see my yard!” Estelle installed a fence to keep people from cutting through the yard and to protect her kids from stray dogs, but she chose chain link instead of solid boards to maximize the transparency between her yard and the now-trusted neighbor behind her.

Estelle’s neighbor acted essentially as an informal security guard watching her street and creating a sense of safety on the block. She worked alongside more formal community policing programs. Police departments nationwide began encouraging residents to form neighborhood watch groups and volunteer security patrols in the 1960s, and merchants began using business improvement districts to hire private security guards in the 1970s.¹ These civic- and market-based alternatives to municipal policing gained renewed traction in Detroit during the Great Recession. The city’s long slide into bankruptcy meant a shrinking operating budget for the Detroit Police Depart-

ment. Officers prioritized their resources. They stopped responding to scrapping and vandalism in empty buildings so they could focus on dangerous crimes, but they still had trouble responding quickly enough to prevent break-ins and violence. These municipal shortfalls encouraged residents like Estelle and her neighbors to find other ways to prevent nuisance and crime near their homes.

Some residents volunteered with formal community patrols, but many more—about a third of the people I interviewed (36 percent)—used informal, domestic strategies to keep an eye on their blocks. Like Estelle and her fence, these residents arranged curtains, vehicles, and vegetation to make their streets easier to see. They developed daily rituals that helped them become familiar with their environment and decide which activities were normal and which seemed suspicious. When residents saw something unusual, like a stranger in the backyard of an empty house at night, some neighbors confronted the stranger directly. But since face-to-face confrontations could be dangerous, many people developed indirect strategies using lights, sounds, and body language to challenge strangers at a distance. These practices helped residents put eyes on the street, parse what they saw, and make their eyes visible to others.

Residents often used the language of “eyes on the street” to describe their informal habits of watching. Urban activists like Jane Jacobs popularized the expression in the 1960s by asserting that everyday interactions among ordinary people in public spaces kept social behavior in check more effectively than aggressive police surveillance. Jacobs’s description of the “street ballet” in her dense, white, working-class community in New York City showed residents and shopkeepers enforced unwritten codes of conduct that, she believed, prevented nuisance and crime.² Recent ethnographies from minority communities reinforce the importance of street life in establishing local social norms, although not all norms are positive. Street vendors in New York City, gang members in Philadelphia, and nosy neighbors in Los Angeles regulate peer-to-peer economies, organize youth violence, and reinforce gender roles through the street ballets on their blocks.³ These routinized interactions in public space reinforce unwritten but well-established social codes that make environments predictable.

Reducing these interactions to eyes alone does violence to the rich

complexity of the social interactions involved, and the assumption that daily interactions reduce crime is questionable. But the expectation that peer pressure through public visibility will enhance safety has nonetheless become a cornerstone of design-based approaches to community policing. Advocates of eyes on the street challenge gated communities and privatized public spaces that use exclusion to make spaces defensible. Instead, they encourage community groups, merchants, and city planners to increase the number of people and the range of activities in public spaces. Operable windows, plentiful seating, and food vendors that increase interactions in those spaces can create greater potential for observation and added pressure to conform. City planners often use these principles as guides when designing urban spaces in growing or revitalizing neighborhoods nationwide.⁴

Residents with limited resources who live in preexisting environments cannot easily rebuild infrastructure, and increasing foot traffic in shrinking cities is difficult. The logic of eyes on the street still applies, but residents adapt it to suit their circumstances. The domestic, shrinking-city version of eyes on the street in Detroit looked somewhat different from Jane Jacobs's account. Residents made small physical retrofits to their homes and streets to create observable landscapes. They developed rhythms and habits that routinized their interaction with public spaces and made them familiar with the usual activity on their blocks. They also developed spatial routines to show neighbors and strangers they were watching. These practices intersected with other security responses, like hired guards and community patrols, and residents moved easily between these formal and domestic realms.

Residents used informal surveillance to feel safer in their homes, but these self-provisioning acts also had other socially generative effects. Resident watchers used their eyes on the street to negotiate shared landscapes of belonging and exclusion. They challenged people who looked suspicious at a glance, and they welcomed people who could prove they had an externally authorized or ethically justified reason for being in the neighborhood. Resident watchfulness also generated shared expectations about mutuality. People expected to help neighbors at times of crisis, and to alleviate the

anxiety of false alarms, they expected neighbors to notify them if they planned to deviate from their usual routines—for instance, by having a party, lending their car to a friend, or going out of town. I cannot say whether these practices reduced crime, but even in instances where crime persisted, resident watchfulness created a sense of environmental predictability that helped people negotiate their everyday lives.

» PUBLIC SAFETY IN DETROIT

Residents knew their city was infamous for crime. Media sources described Detroit as one of the most dangerous, violent, and murderous cities in the country. Atlanta, Orlando, St. Louis, Birmingham, Oakland, Memphis, and New Orleans had similar crime rates, but Detroit still emerged as a poster child for all things dystopian.⁵ Friends, family members, and strangers living in nearby suburbs reinforced this message. School children returned home from summer camps and sailing clubs with stories about suburban kids asking them if they saw dead bodies at home. Older residents had adult children who moved to the suburbs and then would no longer visit them, “because they have the boogeyman idea about Detroit.” Residents also described former schoolmates and childhood friends who refused to meet for lunches and parties on the Detroit side of the municipal boundary line and insisted Detroiters drive to the suburbs to socialize, instead. These everyday interactions underscored the public perception that being in Detroit was dangerous.

City residents said these outsider perceptions were wildly out of sync with their own life experiences. Rhonda, a middle-aged African American woman, was especially eloquent on this point. “There is crime. That’s the reality,” she said, “and then there’s the perception of crime that is either out of sorts or people who are unrealistic.” Residents said crime occurred everywhere, not just in Detroit. “I’m cautious,” Rhonda explained. “If I lived in Chicago, I would probably be the same way.” Only a handful of residents told me they often felt afraid, and even they said news reporters and suburban friends exaggerated the problems. As an antidote to Detroit’s sensationalized reputation, residents like Rhonda made explicit decisions to

keep their anxieties in check. “I don’t think I’m living in a fantasy world, thinking, ‘Oh, there’s no crime.’ Yeah, there is crime. And I’m cautious. . . . But I refuse to be afraid in my city.”

Residents used everyday knowledge to contextualize their public safety concerns. For residents parks, bakeries, street trees, theater troupes, and friendships defined neighborhood character more than crime, but those characteristics rarely appeared in media reports. Residents in some areas were also familiar with the sympathetic personal histories that pushed friends and neighbors toward criminalized or violent acts that were troubling but understandable given the circumstances. Residents used this everyday knowledge to qualify risk and contain fear despite social messages of a dangerous Detroit.

Residents who criticized hyperbole and encouraged compassion still felt safety was an important local issue, especially since the Detroit Police Department was understaffed and losing resources. In 2010, at 32.1 officers per 10,000 residents, Detroit had marginally more officers per capita than other Rust Belt cities like Pittsburgh (28.4) and Buffalo (29.0), but cities with similar crime rates like Baltimore (46.3) and St. Louis (38.4) had more officers per capita and a greater institutional capacity to respond to complaints.⁶ Detroit was also geographically larger than many peer cities, and its police department was downsizing. The police force shrank by 25 percent from 3,350 officers in 2009 to 2,500 officers in 2013. These combined factors meant that in 2012 Detroit police response times averaged fifty-eight minutes, compared with the national average of eleven minutes.⁷

Private guards and community policing represented two of the most media-publicized local responses to the dwindling municipal police force. In 2012 civic groups in at least eight neighborhoods hired off-duty officers carrying guns and wearing uniforms to patrol the streets on bicycles or in police department vehicles. These guards worked in relatively affluent areas where residents paid up to \$360 and merchants paid up to \$2,000 each year for the service.⁸ They responded to nuisances like loitering and public drunkenness so that on-duty officers could focus on urgent calls about home invasions and violence. They also acted as visual symbols of police authority in the neighborhoods that hired them. Some residents hoped to make private security more affordable by encouraging more neighbors to

share the cost, but it was still expensive for low-income residents, especially in sparsely populated areas.

Residents also organized volunteer patrols. Informal community patrols and neighborhood watches have a long history in Detroit. Residents in one neighborhood, for instance, had been operating a volunteer safety patrol for three decades. The Detroit Police Department began formalizing these volunteer groups in the early 2010s by training, certifying, regulating, and reimbursing them in an attempt to maintain service levels despite budget cuts. By 2013 the police department had certified twenty-five citizen patrol groups citywide, and they hoped to add three new patrols every year.⁹ Certified patrols were most popular in the same higher-income areas where residents also hired private guards. These formal police responses supplemented—but did not replace—informal resident watchfulness.

A large consumer industry of household alarm systems, window bars, and security cameras also prospered in Detroit, although it received less media attention than hired guards and citizen patrols. Professional alarms and infrared cameras were popular in upper-income areas. Many residents used smart-phone technologies to receive alerts whenever sensors detected movement around their home. Residents on lower-income blocks who could not afford special equipment often used large dogs to keep people away or used scrap metal to reinforce the locks on ground-level doors and windows. These private acts of fortification reflected resident security concerns, but compared with other forms of resident watchfulness, they generated fewer collective negotiations over social norms in public spaces.

Some residents occasionally joked about wanting to see state or federal officers standing guard on every corner, but most people said they did not want to live in a militarized city and instead wanted a holistic response to their safety concerns. An African American community advocate summarized this perspective in a 2013 newspaper article. “Police can’t be on every corner,” she said. “You should be able to walk your dog, push kids in a stroller or use the parks. We don’t want a handful of knuckleheads to take away our quality of life.”¹⁰ Comments like these emphasized the importance residents placed on building neighborhood ties and encouraging

everyday interactions as an alternative to gating homes and militarizing streets. Residents still hired guards and set alarms, just in case, but they hoped informal habits of watchfulness would make them unnecessary.

» EDNA'S OBSERVABLE LANDSCAPE

"The only house on this block that has a problem to it is this house over there," Edna said, pointing through her living room wall toward the house next door. "This house, to me, stayed a bad-luck house. The kids used to call it the Haunted House. I said, 'Why do you call it the Haunted House?' There was a murder there. First time in my life."

Edna held a photograph of neighborhood kids in her hand as we sat on her living room couch and flipped through old scrapbooks. It was early afternoon, but heavy curtains covered the front windows, and the only light in the room came from a dim electric floor lamp. Edna, a retired city employee, was seventy-six years old. She and her husband, Clarence, had lived in their house since the late 1970s when they became the third African American family to move onto the block.

"Clarence is sitting right here," Edna said, pointing to the couch as she continued her story. "He doesn't hear. He has hearing [loss]. He's sitting right here reading. I'm back there," in the kitchen, "doing something. And I thought, 'Oh, now, they're going to do the fire-crackers right in front of the house!' . . . Next thing we know, neighbors are calling, 'Are you alright in there?' And Clarence said, 'Yeah, what's going on?' And they said, 'You didn't hear what happened?' I mean, this was like a gunfight. This was so many bullets. Those little cones all around in the front of our yard. The caution thing was tied to our porch!" Edna chuckled softly, shaking her head. "He's sitting right there, reading! All this is going on. Never heard a thing."

Edna shared this sad story with the same good humor she showed every time we spoke. She felt safe in general, she said, and confident her neighbors were looking out for her. She explained this by telling me about a time the neighbors closed her garage door to protect her valuables when she left it open by mistake. She described another instance when her neighbors stood in the street stopping traffic so she could slowly cross the road with her cane to visit a friend. And

Edna emphasized the importance of watching. After the Haunted House gunfight, she said, “we got very strong as far as our security in this area here. We operate on . . . what is that called . . .” She paused, searching for words. “That police plan . . . the broken window theory from Boston. They’re starting to do that. . . . They say, ‘We’re watching you.’ My eyes are on you, too.”

Edna was a self-described resident watcher, and she approached the task pragmatically. It was easier to be observant when the environment was orderly, she said, so on her block “it was like a gentleman’s agreement that nobody parked on the street.” Edna and her neighbors followed this implicit, unspoken rule for years. “We did that,” she explained, “because that was our way of safety. If nobody was on the street and you saw a car with people sitting in it, *you know!*” The local convention of leaving the street clear was obvious to most neighbors, but it was less apparent to outsiders, and they enforced the rule informally. One family, Edna said, had not figured it out yet. “They’ve been here a couple years. They park on the street. They’re the only ones you’ll see parked on the street.” That one car aside, the neighbors’ habits of arranging cars in predictable patterns kept sight lines clear and made newcomers stand out.

Edna’s cars, like Estelle’s backyard fence, were part of a larger landscape of objects and plants carefully arranged to enhance the ability to put eyes on the street. Residents were especially likely to use brute-force methods to create sight lines around neglected gray spaces. A white block club president, for instance, decided to “open up” the landscape in response to “a mini-crime wave” on her block. She knocked on doors and recruited neighbors to remove debris, cut down large tree branches, and raze the shrubs to the ground around every vacant structure on their street. “It made a difference,” she said. “We had lots of problems before, and now there are very few. There’s nowhere to hide.”

Residents were less heavy-handed with their own homes and instead combined their aesthetic tastes with their interest in watching. Lamar, an African American auto worker, for instance, bought a house with his wife in 2009 to live near his extended family. When moving in, before the boxes were fully unpacked, Lamar immediately rearranged all the plants in his front yard. “I don’t like tall bushes,” he said, “because people can hide behind tall bushes. So I took all the

bushes out.” Several homes on his block originally had dense foundation shrubs planted by doors and windows. Those evergreens became thick and tall if left untrimmed, and Lamar and his neighbors worried criminals or animals would hide there. Lamar dug them up and replaced them with visually delicate ornamental grasses planted off center and “out of eyeshot” from inside the house. “I can sit in this window and look out and see straight across the street, on the sides, all across,” Lamar explained. “I just kept [the plants] really low, so I could see out from every direction if I needed to.”

Other residents chose window treatments that created filtered views of the street. A few people, like a white woman in Edna’s neighborhood, preferred to keep their windows “totally exposed. I keep my drapes open all the time,” she told me. “I never, never, ever, ever, ever pull the drapes.” The only exceptions were an hour she spent wrapping Christmas presents and an hour spent filing taxes. Otherwise, the curtains were open. This exposure helped her passively monitor the street without feeling paranoid. “I basically don’t look out,” she said. “But the fact that my windows are open . . . is a way of having eyes and ears [on the block].”

Edna took a very different approach to her windows. Transparency made Edna feel exposed and vulnerable. “When we first moved here,” she said, “everybody kept their windows open and all. Because that’s the way you lived in the white world. Where we lived, you didn’t have people driving by and seeing where your library was and where the TV was and looking all through.” Edna wanted some connections with the street. “We want people to know that we’re here. The lights on and all.” But when it came to direct views into the house, she wanted to shield herself from prying eyes. “Crooks think in a different way,” she said. “It’s, like, casing the place.”

Other residents preferred screened views for similar reasons. They trusted some neighbors to have their backs, but they did not trust everyone, and they worried so-called problem neighbors let people use their homes as “watching spots,” “exit routes,” and “hiding places” when breaking into homes and cars. These residents wanted to create sight lines with the neighbors they trusted while blocking the views that put them at risk.

Residents like Connie, the barricading booby-trapper, solved this dilemma by hanging white curtains and sheets in front of their windows. Connie, like Edna, kept her curtains closed all the time.

When I visited her house, I initially felt fully screened from view, but the white color was light enough that Connie could discern the movement of shapes and shadows outside. Several times during our conversation, she noticed a change and jumped up to peak around the curtains or walk outside for a clearer view. When I asked Connie and other residents about their curtains, they described their ability to see through fabric as a specially honed skill. "It's not easy," Connie said. "You learn to detect movement." Connie also arranged her furniture so that she faced the front window when seated in her favorite chair, which helped her keep her eyes on the street.

Edna's heavy curtains prevented these filtered views, but she still wanted to see what was happening outside. "We have a camera now," she told me. "We finally had a camera put up so he can watch."

"A security camera?" I asked, surprised. Other residents in the neighborhood used closed-circuit cameras to keep an eye on things. Some residents also placed baby monitors or other remote sensors in nearby vacant homes so that they could look into those spaces without being physically present. But seventy-six-year-old Edna and her husband had not struck me as the technophile types.

"Um hmm," Edna said, nodding. "Our own [security camera]. So we can watch." Edna had trouble walking and climbing stairs, and she wanted to keep an eye on her husband when he took out the trash or left the house on errands. The camera let her watch him from her bedroom television set. Edna said she felt safe, but she did not take her safety for granted. She and many other residents used parking habits, window treatments, and hidden cameras to create the filtered sight lines that put eyes on the street and sustained their sense of well-being.

» CAMILLE'S HABITS OF WATCHFULNESS

"I'm not afraid of anything," Camille said, not even the drug dealers who had sent so many of her neighbors running to the suburbs. "Me and this little old lady named L—, . . . we literally was not afraid of anybody in this neighborhood. We walked day and night. We would let them know that we were the eyes and ears and we were watching them." Camille laughed, remembering their walks. "It just never fazed us how dangerous it was until now when I sit back and say, 'Oh, we got a lot of nerve!'"



Figure 9. Window treatments that enhance eyes on the street. Photograph by author.

“When was that?” I asked. I was sitting on a toddler-sized chair in the basement of Camille’s house where she ran a state-subsidized childcare center.

“Oh, that was in the early ’80s,” Camille answered. “So I would like to say ’85 through ’90 that we literally patrolled. And the police department worked with us. We had a couple officers that gave us their personal number. So anytime we had a problem, we could personally get a police officer out here and take care of our problems that we were having.”

“Did it help?”

Camille shrugged. She and her neighbor quickly realized their walks and phone calls “really didn’t do anything. They would bust the house, and as soon as they raided the house, within an hour, they were open back up again.” Camille kept walking anyway, every day for ten years, because it helped her become familiar with the neighborhood dynamics and avoid the fear of the unknown she felt

paralyzed her neighbors. Walking was also an act of resistance that demonstrated her refusal to be intimidated. Camille said this environmental awareness and self-expression gave her the confidence to stay in her home and continue investing in her community.

Camille was one of many residents who self-consciously shaped their daily routines to put their eyes on the streets. Shaping observable landscapes helped, but people could see only so much from their windows, and they still had to decide whether what they saw was “normal.” Daily routines, like Camille’s walks, gave people a wider perspective on local norms. They also helped neighbors informally divvy up the watching workload and decide when to shift from passive awareness to active surveillance.

Camille investigated her neighborhood on foot, but other residents preferred to drive. Tony, a young African American barber, for instance, took a different route home from work every day. Some days, he would “fly by” his aunt’s house. Other days, he drove past his brother’s house. He rarely stopped to say hello. Instead, he drove by “just to look. Not to bug him and be like, ‘Hey, man, What you doing?’ . . . Still giving everybody their space. But more eyes.” Tony’s neighbor always followed the same route, but she said it sometimes took her a long time to get in or out of the neighborhood because she stopped so frequently to check on vacant buildings or scrutinize strangers she noticed through her windshield. These daily routines brought resident watchers away from home and created regular opportunities to put their eyes on the street.

Older residents who spent more time at home used their leisure activities and hobbies to study the activity on their blocks. Several retirees took coffee breaks on front porches or in front rooms around eight o’clock every morning and three o’clock in the afternoon, when young children were walking to and from school. They memorized which kids usually walked together so they could recognize if an unknown child was ever following them or bullying them.

Some residents in Camille’s neighborhood were especially purposeful in their gaze. Mara, for instance, started a garden on a vacant lot that gave her a clear view of “an active crack house.” Several other lots were available, but she wanted to use gardening as an excuse to discretely monitor the drug activity to help police officers make arrests. Mara was unusual. Most residents did not see themselves

as guards or spies. They told me they were not looking for anything in particular. They were just self-consciously watching, and they developed daily habits that put them in positions to see what was happening.

Block clubs encouraged people to invent reasons to spend time outdoors. Neighborhood newsletters urged residents to “take along a flashlight, a cell phone, and the number for our neighborhood patrol, and step by step we will make this a more connected community.” Organizational encouragement was important, but these practices remained fundamentally domestic. Residents following this advice met friends and neighbors for walks and bicycle rides simply to put more eyes on the street.

These daily routines became part of the sidewalk ballet bringing people into public spaces and establishing local norms, and many residents prided themselves on their expert knowledge of neighborhood street life. “There are lots of older people in this neighborhood who have been in the neighborhood a long time,” one of Edna’s neighbors told me. “People who are home a lot and who are familiar with the rhythm of daily life on the block. And several of them are great watchers. They don’t have computers. But they can tell you which car should be in the neighborhood and which car shouldn’t be in the neighborhood.” Coffee breaks and daily walks helped residents create the mental maps of everyday life they used to differentiate between normal events and suspicious activity.

The residents making these mental maps approached the task with varying levels of rigor. Dale, the incremental lawn mower, said he was just “nosy. I try to make it my business to know who’s coming and going on the block,” he explained. “My mother’s nosy, so I think I picked it up from her.” Some of Dale’s neighbors were more methodical. Lamar, for instance, had attended a police safety event that gave him an explicit vocabulary to systematize his observations. The police “had what they call a ‘baseline,’” he told me. “You know what goes on in your neighborhood usually.” He used his street as a hypothetical example. “There’s no cars parked in front of my house at midnight. Never. . . . But we wake up, and we see four cars in front of here [and] another here across the street. Look out. Watch something. Look at something. . . . Because history tells us, something’s not right. This is not the baseline. Watch those guys.”

Resident watchers' cognitive maps customized their baselines to reflect individual concerns, and without discussing it, they fine-tuned their watchfulness to informally divvy up the workload. Edna studied the cars parked on her street after dark. Dale memorized his neighbors' work schedules and the faces of their regular guests. These residents also knew who else on their block was watching and when. Some neighbors were retired and kept an eye on things during the day. Other people, like Edna, kept watch late at night. "I have insomnia," Edna explained. "So I'm awake at night. [The neighbors] say, 'What happened last night? Did you see?' 'Cause I'm the only one on the street that's still awake." Janet, the defensive matchmaker, expected her brother to keep the lookout during the early morning hours. "He gets drunk and passes out around nine o'clock," she said, and "he might wake up around three o'clock in the morning and can't get back to sleep. So if I see him out and about with a flashlight checking around, I know it's OK for me to go to bed. P—'s up."

Residents used these cognitive maps to collaborate informally in watching the street and to decide whether activities seemed suspicious. Connie could not prevent house stripping just by watching the shifting shapes and shadows through her white-colored curtains, and Camille could not stop the drug trade just by walking the streets. But they could learn the unwritten codes of conduct for their environment, which helped them navigate their streets safely and take action to deter unwanted behavior.

» DERRICK'S VISIBLE GAZE

"On our particular block, all the neighbors are very close, and we just pretty much looked out for each other. So if we see anybody that looks strange," Derrick said, pretending to dial a telephone, "'We see somebody out there, what are they doing? They know you?' 'No.' 'They know you?' 'No.' 'OK, keep an eye out.' That kind of thing."

Derrick and I met for coffee at a McDonald's near his home. We discussed home remodeling projects and squatters and then discussed a theft that had occurred that morning. Derrick prided himself on being "a nosy neighbor," and he eagerly shared his ideas about neighborhood safety. "What people don't understand [is] they think being safe and secure involves a lot of work. But it doesn't. It involves something as

simple as . . . [if] somebody pulls up on your block, you just open up the window. If somebody's doing something wrong, the last thing they want is somebody watching them." He paused. "You don't even have to be watching them," he added. "They pull up, they notice your window closed. Next thing they notice, your window's open, they're gone. Or whatever they were going to do, they stop doing."

"Have there been many incidents on your block?" I asked.

"No," he said, "only one." Before the "good squatter" moved in across the street, Derrick and his dinner guests noticed a utility van pulling into the driveway. "And I'm like, 'What? Who are these people?'" Derrick watched surreptitiously as the strangers got out and started shining their flashlights into the windows. "Well, we knew that real estate people normally don't come and do anything once it gets dark," he said, "so we knew it was suspicious." He opened his front door to let the light from his living room spill out into the night, and he and his guests lingered nonchalantly in the doorway, pretending to socialize. The van's driver noticed them and tried to diffuse the situation by saying his aunt owned the house and had sent him over to collect some things from inside. "And I said, 'What's your aunt's name?' He says, 'So-and-so. We been living over here for years. The neighbor next door knows.' And I said, 'OK, I want you to go next door, knock on her door, and let her know that you're taking some stuff out of the house. . . . You don't do it, I'm going to call the police.' . . . Of course, he ran back to his van, jumped in, and sped off." Derrick felt certain the men were scappers, and he was proud his gaze had protected the home.

Public visibility was only one part of the sidewalk ballet, and Derrick's experience underlined that the social effect of being watched came as much from the social interactions that followed as from the act of surveillance. Watching might encourage self-regulation, but only if the people being watched recognized authority in the gaze. When residents in Detroit saw something suspicious, they could call the police, but people often told me they wanted to verify the threat first or they felt some quicker response was needed. Some residents, like Estelle's backyard neighbor, took direct action by rushing outside to confront strangers quickly and forcefully. Other residents, like Derrick, preferred indirect tactics, at least initially, because direct confrontation was risky.¹¹

Derrick, like many other residents, made his eyes visible to the people he was watching. These residents opened doors, rearranged curtains, or stood on porches to let strangers know they were not alone. One of Derrick's neighbors told me she had recently seen a group of people walking in an unusual way on her street, and she suspected they might be casing the block. The woman grabbed the broom and dustpan she left by the front door exactly for these occasions, and she went outside and pretended to sweep her stoop. While outside, she said she just looked at the strangers, making sure to catch their eye, and then kept pretending to sweep until they seemed uncomfortable and left. Residents had a wide range of props they used in these types of circumstances. People pretended to water plants and change porch lights. Residents banged on doors while pretending to oil squeaky hinges, and they flipped through piles of junk mail they purposefully stored by their front doors.

Landscape props were important mediums in these performances. Make-work activities helped residents get a better look at what was going on outside, but the larger goal was to create changes in light, noise, and movement to attract people's attention and let strangers know they could be seen, even if the resident was not actively looking. These performances were intentionally indirect. As Derrick explained, "You don't even have to be watching them." Residents hoped reminding people they were exposed to public view would be enough to make them think twice before violating local norms.

Public displays of eyes on the street often sparked conversations between neighborhood watchers and the people they observed, and residents used those conversations to test the legitimacy of strangers. Cordial greetings like, "Hi, how are you?" and, "Are you looking for someone?" were polite phrases that carried the implied probe, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" Residents lingered over these conversations to see whether newcomers could sustain their stories over time. Residents also asked for information they could verify with neighbors. If someone said they were hired to make repairs on a home, residents asked to see badges and paperwork, and they called their neighbors to see if the information checked out. Residents wrote down names and took discrete photographs of faces, cars, and license plates and then asked neighborhood watchers whether those people were part of the baseline. The best references



Figure 10. Residents watching the pedestrian activity on the street. Photograph by author.

came from other neighbors who looked out their doors and windows and gave the strangers the nod.

Most residents had experience on both sides of these interactions. Sometimes, they were the watchful neighbor, and other times, they were the stranger under investigation. Many people found those confrontations reassuring. Patrice, the opportunity matchmaker, for example, asked her nephew to help her clean the seven vacant homes she bought at auction. When he went to the homes, he said, “neighbors came out everywhere, like, ‘Hey, how are you doing? What are you doing over here?’ You know what I’m saying? They took interest.” He appreciated these exchanges. “‘Who are you?’ That’s nice. ‘Thank you for coming over and letting me know that people have been watching the house.’”

Another resident had similar experiences while house hunting in 2008. Over a thousand vacant units were available in his neighbor-

hood, and they came in many sizes, ages, materials, styles, and price points. But when inspecting homes, he said he looked for “block-level indicators that aren’t obvious or aren’t in usual real estate measures.” He found what he was looking for when he arrived ten minutes early for an appointment with a real estate agent who was helping him inspect a long-vacant home. The front door was open, so he “poked his head inside” for a quick look around before returning to his car to wait. Within moments, he said, “there were neighbors knocking on my window, asking why I had been in the abandoned house and why I was sitting on their block. I found that encouraging.” He bought the house on the spot.

Not everyone appreciated nosy neighbors who knocked on their doors, questioned their guests, and took photographs of their properties. But everyone who agreed to speak with me said polite confrontations were comforting. Being watched by protective neighbors was a sign people lived on a good street where neighbors had their backs.

When resident watchers could not verify the legitimacy of strangers, they sometimes confronted them, using the landscape to protect them and to make the confrontation as publicly noticeable as possible. The window shout was an especially common technique, where residents shouted challenges or threats through open windows at a safe distance from the suspicious person. Some residents ran outside and acted crazy by shouting and banging on anything that would make a loud noise. Residents directed these shouts and performances at the suspected person, but equally important, they hoped their exaggerated, noisy spectacles would encourage other neighbors to open their curtains and let the light spill out from their front doors. While strangers might ignore one resident watcher, residents felt fewer people would ignore several neighbors who made a show of watching together.

» LAMAR’S ALMOST-FORMAL SECURITY PATROL

Lamar was a tall, broad African American man in his thirties, and he could be very intimidating when he wanted to be. As a volunteer peewee football coach, he prided himself on giving kids structure in their lives. “I’m very stern,” he told me. “I don’t take no BS. I don’t negotiate with kids. I’m that coach. You know, the coach you stay

away from if you get in trouble.” Lamar also had a generous, affable side that came through during our two-hour conversation at a suburban shopping mall during his lunch break. But his commanding stance demanded respect, and he seemed able to turn his charm on and off at will.

Lamar’s no-nonsense attitude was most apparent when he described his two-year effort to organize a neighborhood security patrol, an effort that drew him into a turf battle with a competing patrol group Lamar believed was corrupt. Under the police department’s citizen patrol program, the police chief could certify one patrol group per neighborhood. Official recognition came with training sessions and access to a citywide \$270,000 pot of money used to reimburse volunteers for mileage and incidentals.¹² The police chief had already certified another resident in Lamar’s neighborhood as the president of their official patrol, but Lamar and his neighbors believed that man was filing fraudulent paperwork to collect reimbursements.

Lamar’s elderly neighbor, Gloria, was a resident activist who decided to challenge the suspect group. She first tried to join them by recruiting new members she trusted would perform legitimate patrols. “And they’d kind of box her out,” Lamar said. “Not having meetings. Not telling her when the meetings were. And Gloria’s a really sweet, sweet girl. She’s so sweet. And I would see her get so emotionally upset about how they’re doing.” Gloria eventually decided to patrol the neighborhood informally on her own. One evening, while her neighbors gathered in a local church for their monthly community meeting, she put a small yellow light on the top of her car and drove through the streets. “And Gloria was driving around,” Lamar said, “and some kids threw a brick at her window. . . . And they hit her. Her eye was busted open or some such stuff.” Two years had passed since the incident, but Lamar’s voice still strained in anger. “That’s how I got involved,” he said. “Mainly because of Gloria. And I’m seeing her frustration. And I said, that could be my mom. That could be anybody’s mom. Just being ran over and disrespected. So I really took issue with that and got involved because of Gloria.”

Lamar approached the problem patiently and directly. “Along with Gloria,” he said, “I got a group of people together. And I said, since they don’t want to let us in, we’ll build our product. That’s what I taught them. Packaging the product.” I asked for more details.

“They don’t have bylaws? We’ll have bylaws. They don’t have meeting minutes? We’ll have meeting minutes. They don’t have organized patrols? We’ll have organized patrols on our own.” Lamar kept working for several months and recruited thirty-three neighbors to join his patrol, but “the city,” he said, “they’re still overlooking our program.”

Lamar was unfazed. He kept a detailed record of volunteers’ names, the dates they patrolled, the routes they followed, the protocols they implemented, the incidents they reported, and the planning meetings they attended. Then, with his paperwork in hand and with a meeting scheduled with the deputy police chief, he confronted the competing patrol president. “And I say, ‘Well, I hate to see you and your other people get arrested for taking money from the city for something you’re not doing.’” Lamar went to the meeting with about twenty people in tow and spread his paperwork on the table. The other president, who attended the meeting with only his girlfriend, announced he no longer had time to run the patrol and resigned his certification.

Lamar’s heroic effort to build a community patrol resonated, up to a point, with the growing citywide movement toward community policing. Residents in most neighborhoods organized patrols of various kinds. Some residents eagerly embraced the official police model. In Grandmont Rosedale, for instance, a resident volunteer proudly proclaimed, “This area has the best radio patrol in the city!” During a ride along with two middle-aged white women, I learned they usually had cars circulating through the neighborhood a few dozen hours each week. Participants passed police background checks and attended police-run training programs. They attached magnetic patrol signs to their cars while driving, and they were not allowed to carry guns. Residents traveled in pairs, and they communicated by radio with a third volunteer who acted as a base station while they were out.

“What are you looking for?” I asked.

“With the [magnetic] sign out,” the driver replied, “we’re just another indication to people that people are watching.” She said she had never seen a crime in progress and patrolling was just another way to perform watchfulness. Her patrol partner nodded, saying she used her patrol time to check on vacant homes, document cases of vandalism, and verify government officials had delivered on promised services. The driver agreed. “For my perspective,” she said, “this

is just another version of being eyes and ears. So when I go out, I'm not looking for anything. I'm just being out."

News reporters investigating community policing praised this patrol group as an inspiring success story, but it was also an unusual case. It operated in a comparatively affluent neighborhood with a strong neighborhood association, low vacancy rates, and low crime rates. The residents often discussed safety in us/them terms, which imposed an imagined distance between the supposedly law-abiding local residents and the externalized criminal elements they hoped to control. These features encouraged patrol-style security solutions, since the risks seemed minimal and the neighborhood appeared united.

In other neighborhoods people faced different risks and had different perceptions of criminality, and those differences discouraged residents from joining formal patrols. Residents in high-vacancy areas said the scale of scrapping made a few scattered hours of volunteer patrols irrelevant. Residents were even more hesitant to get involved with robberies or violent crimes, and people living next door to scrappers and drug dealers said it was impossible to play the cop a few hours a week and then expect their neighbors not to challenge them during the rest of the month. In those contexts official signs, slow speeds, and deliberate gazes felt dangerous. "Radio patrols work better in higher-income areas, where incidents are more isolated," one man told me. "In our area I don't want to make myself a target."

Resident distrust of the police department also limited participation. Instead of seeing citizen patrols as a two-way partnership, residents like Lamar said officers were more interested in controlling the volunteers than responding to their concerns. Even after spending two painstaking years building a patrol, Lamar and his neighbors intentionally dragged their feet in getting certified themselves. Many volunteers would not agree to criminal background checks. Volunteers said they felt exploited, since citizen patrollers did not receive priority attention over other 911 callers and since officers refused their requests to patrol certain streets at certain times of day. Even the promise of money seemed suspect. "I don't want to take anything from you without you giving the specifics," Lamar said. "I'm not that smart, but I'm not that dumb." He laughed derisively. "What am I actually signing up for? If . . . I'm taking money from you, I'm at your mercy."

Residents who were interested in community policing but who

also worried about attracting unwanted attention still watched their streets, but they worked informally. The aesthetic of informal watching while pretending to sweep stoops and sort junk mail did not create the same sense of vulnerability as flashing lights and official patrol signs. Even residents who volunteered with citizen patrols often developed domestic surveillance strategies, as well, and they moved easily back and forth between official patrols and informal watching.

» STREET BALLETS OF RESIDENT WATCHFULNESS

Floretta, an elderly African American woman, lived in a well-kept two-story brick home with symmetrical windows, bright-green grass, and a cheery flower garden framing her front door. She loved that door. It had a large glass window in the center and a clear glass storm door in front. "It's not a security door," she told me proudly. "It's transparent!" Floretta went shopping for her door in the suburbs. When the salesman learned she lived in Detroit, he steered her toward their metal security doors. "I was so upset," she said. "I went to the manager and said this salesman was making a value judgment that my neighborhood [and] my street was not safe for me to live on." Her eyes glistened as she spoke. "I don't like the way they look," she added. "It sends a bad signal and indicates that the neighborhood is not safe." Floretta refused to be part of a landscape of fear. She bought a clear glass door, and she was proud of what that door said about her community. "I don't need a security door," she told me. "We look out for each other."

Political activists in other cities like Los Angeles, San Diego, and Seattle have argued fear has become a new organizing logic of urban space. Privatized public spaces and increased police surveillance are cornerstones of postindustrial reurbanization that caters to affluent, white consumer tastes. Cities also figure as prime potential battlegrounds and contact zones in the contemporary era of social inequality and international terrorism.¹³

These trends toward militarized space were visible in Detroit, especially in neighborhoods where public officials and private developers were consolidating their investments. But most Detroit residents lived far away from the artifice of scripted street ballets in private

malls and privatized plazas. Instead, resident watchers arranged domestic props and daily routines to self-organize eyes on the street.

Detroit residents were not unique. Urban planner James Rojas, for instance, describes Latino residents in marginalized Los Angeles neighborhoods who bring streetscapes to life in similar ways. “What may look like random groups of people,” he writes, “are actually sets of well-ordered interactions in which everybody has a role. Children play, teenagers hang out, the elderly watch. These roles enhance the street activity and provide security for families, neighbors, and friends.”¹⁴ These practices are informal but predictable, and residents use them to create landscapes of mutuality, surveillance, and belonging.

Floretta’s street was not like the one James Rojas described. Floretta did not know her neighbors’ names. They did not spend time talking on street corners, and they did not visit each other’s homes. But her street still had a rhythm and a pattern residents knew how to read. Floretta noticed when a neighbor stopped arriving home at the usual time every day, and her neighbors noticed when the man’s yard began looking unkempt. Without ever discussing it, they began taking turns disguising the newly vacant house and maintaining the yard. Floretta also knew which neighbors she could call to start a phone tree alert if something happened on the block. And she kept her front door transparent as a symbol physical fortifications were unnecessary, because the neighbors were paying attention. There had never been an incident on her block, she said, not even a burglary or a loud argument in the street. Their security was built into the landscape and the street ballet that sustained it, and that was the way Floretta liked it.