

Criminal opportunities

It can't solve the social and cultural issues that cause crime, but design innovation has a role to play in reducing it, discovers **Emma Germain**

The image of a crime-fighter is normally one of a sexy superhero such as Superman or Batman. But designers too, such as Sebastian Conran and Michael Wolff, have been working to 'design out' crime for nearly a year, as part of the Home Office's Design and Technology Alliance.

When the alliance formed in September 2007, its intention was to promote innovation, to identify incentives for business to use design to lower crime, and to advise on what consumers want. These crime-fighters cannot fly and do not possess secret weapons, but they are armed with the power of design knowledge. Conran, a founding DTA member and director of Studio Conran, says, 'So far it has been a research and scoping exercise with a clear understanding that crime is not one, but thousands of issues and an equal number of possible solutions'.

Other alliance members include Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment chairman and Sorrell Foundation co-founder Sir John Sorrell, Design Council chief executive David Kester, Royal College of Art Professor of Design Studies Jeremy Myerson, and Central St Martins College of Art and Design's Design Against Crime Research Centre director Lorraine Gamman. Each is responsible for one of the five key areas that the initiative was set up to look at: housing, schools, 'hot products' such as iPods and mobile telephones, alcohol-related crime and business crime.

While most design is user-centred, designing to prevent crime is about making products and environments abuser- and user-sensitive, and designing out crime opportunities.

'Generally, criminals start as opportunity-takers, and finding the chances plentiful become opportunity-makers,' says Professor of Crime Science



1

at the University of Loughborough Ken Pease. His brief within the alliance is housing, where design characteristics are strongly linked to rates of crime. Objects suggest themselves to criminal users in distinctive ways – for example, a bin can be used to reach an open window.

Adam Thorpe – director of the DACRC-offshoot research initiative Bikeoff, which advises the police, local government and cyclists to understand how design can stop bicycles being stolen. He has developed an M-shaped bike-stand, rather than the traditional N-shaped model, and bike accessories supplier Broxap is introducing it into its product range.

Improving business is one of the aims of the DTA, says Gamman. The anti-crime solutions need to be integrated seamlessly into products. Shoe shop seating, for example, offers thieves opportunities to snatch buyers' handbags when customers try shoes on and then move to a mirror to view them. The design solution is simple: create seating units with access to mirrors. The challenge, says Gamman, is making businesses realise that anti-crime design gives their stores an edge. The selling point? Shop with us in safety.

Speaking on this theme on BBC Radio 4's Today programme, Gamman called on mobile phone manufacturers to start using anti-theft technologies in their designs (www.designweek.co.uk, 15 May).



2

However, according to Conran, 'A hurdle is that most of the "hot products" of everyday life which we purchase are made outside Europe and it is often difficult to influence global manufacturers.'

Another challenge is that crime's many facets cannot be dealt with quickly. Sorrell is keen to stress that the work the alliance is doing in schools is in the initial stages. 'To get to the heart of the matter takes a long time,' he says. He predicts that the list of key priority issues regarding crime in schools will not be completed until early next year. Environmental design has a part to play in eliminating 'crimes' such as intimidation in schools. He cites as an example the designs for the new boys' toilets in Westminster Academy created by architect Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, which have two exit doors, no urinals, floor-to-ceiling doors on the cubicles and a closed-circuit television camera. 'This reduces the opportunity to bully,' says Sorrell.

With reports of knife-crime becoming a daily occurrence, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith has emphasised the need for early intervention to stop children drifting into crime, and the alliance has a specific mandate to tackle street and

FIVE-POINT PLAN

The initiative focuses on five key areas:

- Housing
- Schools
- Hot products
- Alcohol-related crime
- Business crime



3

1 Stop Thief anti-theft furniture concepts, devised by the Central St Martins College of Art and Design's Design Against Crime Research Centre

2 M-shaped bike-stand, designed by Bikeoff director Adam Thorpe and distributed by Broxap

3 Sebastian Conran, founder member of the Design and Technology Alliance, and director of Studio Conran

DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY ALLIANCE

- The Home Office set up the Design and Technology Alliance under Barry Webb, head of design against crime at the Home Office
- The Design Council is involved with the alliance as part of its work with the Government to develop a design-led programme supporting public service innovation

youth-related crime. It is difficult to tackle these issues from a design standpoint, even if anti-stabbing knives could be developed, because the thought-processes of people prepared to wound others needs to change. 'It is evident that many of these problems relate to conditioning, culture and acquired attitudes, both to and by youth, and are largely, but not exclusively, due to parenting, education and circumstances,' says Conran.

Another of crime's hot topics is graffiti. The alliance is involved in encouraging the design of robust street furniture which makes graffiti difficult to apply and easy to remove. However, this does not stretch to working out why vandals tag. 'A lot of crime has a creative element and we need to figure out ways to use this,' claims Gamman. There is a need to differentiate between street art by designer artists such as Banksy and tagging. The DACRC is working with the Elisava School of Design in Barcelona to encourage young people to develop useful skills. It is hoped that this research will tackle root causes of the problems, while the DTA needs to address basic causes across each sector.