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POLICE STATIONS, ARCHITECTURE AND PUBLIC REASSURANCE

Andrew Millie*

Architecture has for many years been of interest to criminology in terms of its role in social control and crime prevention. This article focuses on architecture as reassurance and the specific example of the police station—what is an under-researched topic. Supporting evidence is presented from a study of police stations in three English police forces. The study's aims were modest and exploratory, to draw on theoretical and empirical evidence to consider whether police stations are a worthwhile area of criminological/architectural study, and to investigate the possibility that police stations could contribute to public reassurance. Using the language of semiotics, the article argues that meanings attached to police stations can contribute to reassurance by affecting people's emotive 'readings' of security and safety; yet, to do this, there has to be a rethink for many existing stations in terms of what these buildings communicate. The article adopts an interpretivist view of meaning acknowledging that buildings can mean different things to different people. It is suggested that numerous police stations can be read as intimidating fortresses; many others are secret places; while others are potentially public buildings where the public are welcomed. Implications for a policy of reassurance are discussed in light of the current cuts to police budgets. An agenda for further systematic research is suggested.

Keywords: architecture, police stations, reassurance, semiotics

Introduction

Over the past decade, there have been calls for British policing to be a more reassuring presence in the community (Innes 2007; Millie and Herrington 2005; Millie 2010). 'Reassurance policing' was born as an approach to encourage positive encounters between police and public and to foster greater police 'visibility, accessibility and familiarity' (Povey 2001: 17). One way the police could achieve this was to respond positively to populist calls for 'more bobbies on the beat' and, by 2008, dedicated Neighbourhood Policing Teams were allocated across the whole of England and Wales (HMIC 2008). However, by 2010, the political and fiscal climate had changed, with demands for budgetary cuts and reductions in police numbers (HMIC 2011; Millie and Bullock 2012). This new 'age of austerity' has meant high police numbers are no longer an option.

The focus of this article is a part of policing that is largely overlooked by policing and criminological research: the police station. The police estate is also a target for budgetary cuts; yet, it is argued that selling police stations could be short-sighted. Furthermore, in the current economic climate, they may be sold too cheaply. Instead, it is argued that, rather than closing stations, police stations could emerge as symbols of reassurance in the community. The Audit Commission (1999: 1) has previously claimed

* Professor, Department of Law and Criminology, Edge Hill University, St Helens Road, Ormskirk, Lancashire, L39 4QP, UK; Andrew.millie@edgehill.ac.uk.

that 'Police stations are a visible form of reassurance for the public'. In their current form, this is somewhat optimistic, as not all police stations can be classed as reassuring. As a way of illustration, the following is taken from an interview on BBC's *The Culture Show* (1 August 2009) by Denise Mina with the author David Peace. The discussion was about a setting used for his *Red Riding* series of books on the Yorkshire Ripper: the Millgarth Police Station in Leeds:

Peace: Well that's the Millgarth, the Millgarth Police Station which obviously was, you know, the place where the Ripper enquiry was based. And in the book it becomes, you know, a central location for the characters in the novels, as it was for the real policemen. And it was just, I was going to say it's an intimidating building, but I mean I've never, I mean have you ever seen a police station that wasn't intimidating?

Mina: But it is really; no that's particularly intimidating. And it's like the arrow slit windows and the,

Peace: Yeah it's, er, medieval Leeds.

The starting point for this article is this quotation from David Peace: '. . . have you ever seen a police station that wasn't intimidating?' A few months later on the same programme (26 November 2009), Tom Dyckhoff reported on progress with building a new Riverside Museum in Glasgow, designed by the renowned architect Zaha Hadid. Dyckhoff asked the Project Director Jim Heverin 'what can people expect when they go and visit a Hadid building?'. Heverin's response was that:

> All of this is a celebration of how people use and respond to buildings. Quite often for a public building the ideas are quite simple, of actually trying to create transparency and porosity, and bring people into the building so that you get maximum usage out of buildings.

In this article, I ask whether police stations are public buildings and a reassuring presence in the community or, as Peace suggests, an intimidating presence. Furthermore, is a police station characterized by 'transparency and porosity' possible?

The academic literature has considered the functioning of police stations—albeit rarely—with important contributions being Holdaway's (1980; 1983) participant observations and Waddington's (1999) research into police canteen sub-culture. Furthermore, McLaughlin (2008) has considered police station closure in the context of performance management. There have been a few policy reports on the police estate (Audit Commission 1999; Home Office 2005) and a small study by the Institute for Public Policy Research (Rogers and Houston 2004). There has been no independent academic research on the importance—or otherwise—of police station architecture and design. This article is a small step in addressing this omission. The focus is on emotive communication and responses to police stations. According to Bahn (1974), police–public reassurance is all about feelings, defining reassurance as 'the feeling of security and safety that a citizen experiences when he sees a police officer or patrol car nearby' (Bahn 1974: 340). More recently, Innes and colleagues have focused on semiotic communication—on what crimes and disorders *signal* to communities, and whether police officers provide reassurance by acting as signals of control. According to Innes (2007: 135), the police have 'an important role to play not just in making people safe but in making them feel safer also'. Reassurance is thus associated people's subjective feelings of order and security/fear of crime. Public confidence in the police is assumed to improve if these feelings are addressed through increased visibility, accessibility and familiarity (Millie and Herrington 2005).

Using the language of semiotics, this article argues that meanings attached to police stations can contribute to reassurance by affecting people's emotive 'readings' of security and safety. However, rather than adopting a semiotic-structuralist approach (e.g. Barthes 1972)—where the same sign will mean the same to all readers—an interpretivist view of meaning is adopted where individuals are creative agents that make their own meanings. Clearly, not all people will be reassured or feel safer following encounters with the police and may prefer there to be no police stations in their community, no matter what meaning is intended to be communicated by the building. In this article, polysemy is acknowledged, that buildings can mean different things to different people, and—as with other art forms—may mean different things to the same people in different circumstances.

While it is argued that architectural style can contribute to meaning, it is acknowledged that it is only one—albeit neglected—aspect of police image and practice that can influence people's perceptions of policing. The public face of policing is made of a complex mix of images, encounters and expectations. For example, since the birth of the police, a semiotic iconography has evolved involving the police station alongside the uniform, the colour blue,[1] the chequerboard motif,[2] the police car and (in Britain) the blue lamp, all of which are hoped to reassure the public that they are secure and safe. Yet, negative encounters or attitudes may have a detrimental influence on reassurance. In the police station context, perception can be influenced by how a building is experienced or how its occupants are viewed. If the police are viewed as repressive, then the police station may be viewed as repressive, no matter what architectural style. Police (mis)conduct will also have a bearing on how the police are 'read'. From recent British history, the cases of Stephen Lawrence (Foster *et al.* 2005) and Ian Tomlinson (Greer and McLaughlin 2012), and the alleged police corruption that has emerged from the Leveson inquiry into press standards (Nicoll 2011), may all have an influence on individuals' images of the police, perhaps more so than any official attempts at 'reassurance'.

The article is structured as follows. After describing the methodology, meanings attached to architecture are examined with particular focus on the police station. Relationships between buildings and users are considered and how buildings are divided into different spaces, with particular reference to Holdaway's (1980) notion of 'front stage' and 'back stage' spaces within the police station. The article then draws on empirical evidence for the use and interpretation of police station buildings. Three approaches to police station architecture are identified and examined in turn, these being: police station as fortress; police station as secret; and police station as public building. Conclusions are drawn on the prospects for truly public and reassuring police stations.

Methodology

Supporting evidence is drawn from a qualitative investigation of police stations in three English police forces. These were chosen to represent a range of urban and rural settings—the Metropolitan Police, Leicestershire Police and West Mercia Police. As noted,

[1]Some countries have adopted other colour schemes, such as green in Germany.
[2]Also referred to as the Battenberg design in reference to the cake with the same pattern.

individuals are regarded as creative agents that make their own meanings. Although this leads to wide variety in interpretations, readers can be grouped into three overlapping populations for study—these being designers/architects of buildings, practitioner users and commissioners of buildings, and public users of buildings. For this article, the focus is on practitioner users and commissioners of police buildings. It is acknowledged that this is a limitation and views from wider publics and from designers/architects will be important for future research. However, the study's aims were more modest and exploratory, to draw on theoretical and empirical evidence to consider whether police stations are a worthwhile area of criminological/architectural study, and to investigate the possibility that police stations could contribute to public reassurance. The study aimed to set an agenda for further systematic research where wider public perspectives would shed more light on the subject. The study's focus on practitioner users and commissioners is a useful start, as it is this group that has the biggest influence on estate policy, and then has to manage police stations on a day-to-day basis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key police personnel in each force, including representatives from Estate Services, station managers, civilian front-counter clerks and police officers. A representative of the Home Office Design Policy Team was also interviewed. Sixteen people were interviewed in total, each identified through standard snowballing techniques. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymized and analysed for key and emerging themes. The data gained from the interviews were supported by site observations, including study visits to each police force area and the formation of a photographic database. The stations visited represented a range of size, function and location. It is acknowledged that the author's own judgments influenced interpretation. Where this is the case, or where a practitioner's view is presented, I have been explicit. Evidence is presented that, for quite a few police stations, architecture and design seem to conspire to make the public a low priority rather than a central requirement; and, in some cases, the buildings appear to be designed to repel the public rather than to reassure. Yet others are more promising and are buildings where the public might be more welcome.

Background: Police Stations and a Search for Meaning

Architecture has been an important consideration for criminology, most notably as an element of social control (e.g. Foucault 1977; Cohen 1985; Armstrong and McAra 2006), or as aid for crime prevention (e.g. Jeffery 1971; Newman 1972; Hopper and Droge 2005). Both aspects are relevant here; however, this article develops the idea of architecture as reassurance. Key to this are emotional responses and meanings attached to police stations. Semiotics is a useful way to try to understand sign-values of buildings. It is a (post)structuralist idea which Eco (1979: 7) defined as 'concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign'. As noted, buildings can mean different things to different people and so an interpretivist view of semiotics is adopted, that reading architecture is subjective. While (most) architecture communicates function, how this function is read can vary. Furthermore, other meanings are read informed by individual experience and expectation. For some, emotional responses to buildings are viewed in terms of topophilia or 'love of place' (Bachelard 1969; Tuan 1974). For others (e.g. Thrift 2004; Kraftl and Adey 2008), it makes sense to focus on affect;

as Thrift (2004: 57) has put, it: 'Cities may be seen as rolling maelstroms of affect. Particular affects such as anger, fear, happiness and joy are continually on the boil, rising here, subsiding there.' Architecture can clearly contribute to love of place and to such affect. Aesthetics is similarly relevant, the sensory feeling that, according to Tuan (1993: 1), 'is suggested even more by its opposite, anesthetic, "lack of feeling"—the condition of living death'. It is quite possible that some police stations have an anaesthetic quality.

Thus, how we read architecture is subjective and we can have different interpretations. Yet, these interpretations are influenced by a number of factors, not least the power dynamics of architecture, building use and the position of reader as powerful or powerless, as Markus (1993) has put it:

> A building's form, function and space each has meanings in the field of social relations, each is capable of signifying who we are, to ourselves, in society and in the cosmic scheme of things. And each speaks of both power and bond relations. (Markus 1993: 30)

Examples of architecture as power can include certain religious buildings, factories and schools that express power through building material, choice of architectural style, ornamentation or their size. Victorian municipal buildings, courthouses, prisons and principle railway stations were similarly designed with power in mind. Power was expressed through not only architecture, but also building use and location which dominated local—and sometimes national or even global—physical and psychic landscapes (Foucault 1977; Markus 1993). Power is important for police stations and, as shall be discussed, they can be very intimidating places. For the design of police stations, some power is clearly held by the architect, but more so by those doing the commissioning in outlining various requirements that have to be adhered to (this may or may not be influenced by public consultation).[3] To quote Gottdiener:

> The production of buildings always involves an articulation between the instrumentality of power and/or profit taking and aesthetic design practises that express the sign function of the producers. Implicit in this practice may also be designs composed with a particular consumer in mind. (Gottdiener 1995: 12)

In architectural discourse and practice, emphases on symbolic communication and representation may come and go; however, according to Hirsch (2006), they are back on the agenda:

> On the one hand architects tend to focus on the material, organising matter, afraid of connotations, narration, anxious to leave the safety of architectural language. But there is a—maybe still vague—suspicion that representation is back. (Hirsch 2006: 19)

For contemporary architecture, how a building is read can be as important as what it does—for instance, with talk of apartment blocks, hotels, shopping malls and stadia being iconic, even before they are built (Jencks 2005; Sklair 2006).[4] Key proponents of such representational or 'iconic' architecture include Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind,

[3]Theoretically, power is held by the electorate and the elected government in dictating the type of policing the country has and the finances available to deliver that policing.

[4]Whether the architect or developer can attribute 'iconic' status is a moot point, as such a label is only meaningful if it is earned through interaction with the public.

Herzog and de Meuron, and Zaha Hadid. The police estate does not enjoy—nor necessarily need—such high-profile architects; yet, what a police station means is still an important consideration and, with some encouragement, police stations might more easily represent 'reassurance'. According to an interviewee from the Metropolitan Police's Public Services Construction, 'if we raise the profile of buildings, we could raise our presence in the community and raise public reassurance'. Rogers and Houston (2004) took the view that the traditional station was already a signal of reassurance: 'The familiar town centre police station was designed to make the police force both visible and legible. It was an effective symbol of security and order' (Rogers and Houston 2004: 4). Yet, in Britain, the police estate comprises a ragtag collection of architectural styles, for example, including:

- Victorian gothic revival (e.g. Blyth, Northumbria Police, 1896);
- art deco (e.g. Bishopsgate, City of London, 1939);
- post-war modernism (e.g. Paddington Green, Metropolitan Police, 1971);
- post-modern[5] (e.g. Bolton Divisional Headquarters, built by John Laing for Greater Manchester Police under PFI (Private Finance Initiatives[6]), 2006); and
- contemporary (e.g. Lewisham, Metropolitan Police, built by John Laing under PFI, 2003[7]).

Stations are also built for varying purposes ranging from shop-front offices through to divisional headquarters. It is debatable whether all these buildings communicate the same meaning.

In Britain, the recent political context for police stations has been the emergence of PFI, the New Labour Government's endorsement of design quality through the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE),[8] the introduction of a design review process and the general promotion of 'better public buildings' (DCMS 2000; CABE 2006). Good design was seen to be 'about providing buildings and spaces that are fit for purpose, built to last and lift your spirits' (CABE 2006: 4), and both CABE and the Home Office provided project 'enablers' to help public bodies achieve this. Yet, despite greater emphasis on design quality, having a new-build police station was no guarantee of architectural quality. For instance, according to a member of the Home Office Design Policy Team:

> It's true to say that some forces, I think, don't give enough thought to getting the right architects. You can go out there and get an architect by whatever means, you know, perhaps you know somebody, Yellow Pages, or whatever. But part of the role of the enabler is to ensure that there is a robust process towards engaging the right architect.

[5]Postmodern architecture is generally associated with eclecticism, pastiche and parody (see Rose 1991). The Bolton police station, and other stations built for Greater Manchester Police under PFI (including Salford, Horwich, Ashton-under-Lyme and Heywood), are of similar style and have in common a circular glass-block stairwell with the police blue lamp perched on top. The comical positioning of the blue lamp seems a postmodern statement referencing the blue lamp that sat atop historic police boxes. See www.laing.com/project_portfolio/58/53/greater-manchester-police-authority-police-stations.html, last accessed August 1st, 2012.

[6]The use of private finance to fund public-sector developments.

[7]Bromley, Sutton and Lewisham Police Stations were all opened in 2003 under PFI.

[8]CABE was established in 1999. More recently, in April 2011, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government merged CABE with the Design Council as part of its wider public-sector cost-cutting and 'realignment' of quangos.

The Police Station: Relationships between Building and User

According to the West Mercia Police Estates Manager who was interviewed, their estate includes 'headquarters, BCU [Basic Command Unit]; each BCU will have a number of section stations . . . . And they will then have, yeah, what we've broadly described as Neighbourhood Policing Posts'. Leicestershire Police has a similar structure, with, according to an Estates Manager interviewed at their headquarters:

> You've got your headquarters . . . your BCU, your Basic Command Unit . . . and then below that you have your local policing unit, so your LPUs, and then we would have the smaller sort of beat offices, the sort of more Neighbourhood Policing Offices.

With this variety in mind, what is a police station? Buildings can be conceptualized as a series of spaces and an understanding of space is clearly important to architectural theory (e.g. Bachelard 1969; Hillier and Hanson 1984; Lefebvre 1991). For instance, buildings are divided into spaces that have different access, functions or normative rules and expectations. Buildings also sit within wider spaces with which they interact, affecting emotional responses and semiotic meaning attributed to them. Drawing on Goffman's (1969) dramaturgical perspective, Holdaway (1980) described the police station as a divide between 'front stage' and 'back stage' spaces. The back stage consists of all non-public functions such as offices, custody suite, canteen, locker rooms, meeting/interview rooms and so on (not all stations will have all these functions). Permission is required for public access to the back stage. The front stage is the space where the public is permitted and consists of the 'shop front', entrance and counter area. It is this public access that turns a police building into a police station, with the front stage space acting as the public face of the station.

Alongside members of the public wanting to report crimes or seek advice, another user group for the station consists of those reporting for bail, solicitors and others on official duties. In some stations, there is functional blurring, with the front counter used for legal and bail reporting alongside public enquiries. In other stations, bail reporting is via a separate entrance that bypasses this public space. The quality and design of the counter area will have an important impact on public reassurance; yet, public areas are often cramped, dominated by security screens dividing the 'front stage' from the 'back stage', have long queues and lack privacy (FitzGerald *et al.* 2002). Continuing the theatrical metaphor, the front counter area will add to a positive—or negative—experience in the same way that, for a well-designed theatre, the foyer and the building itself are a continuation of the theatrical experience and communicate that the public are welcome and will have a good night out. In fact, in the retail sector, architecture and design have been used frequently as theatre, to send a specific message to the customer. An example is in banking, where historically the building has communicated an aesthetic of 'solidity, wealth and respectability' (Doyle 2004: 84), often through use of neoclassical styles. Similarly, a well-designed retail shop front blurs boundaries between shop and street and is characterized by 'transparency and porosity' so as to entice the passing shopper and make them feel welcomed and at ease. A simple example is given by Doyle (2004: 84) of a shop that repositioned its entrance from the side to the front of the building: 'After the renovations, the store proudly welcomed its customers through large double doors positioned centrally to the front of the shop. This new door proclaims a number of things

about the company. It is more open, more accessible.' The question is whether this is possible for a police station.

According to Home Office guidance on *Design Quality for Police Buildings* (2005: 8), good police buildings should 'be a pleasure to use, visit and look at' and 'meet public needs'. In order to achieve this, police buildings must:

- be accessible, friendly and welcoming to the public, including the disabled,[9] balancing openness and security taking account of the threat level
- help the public feel protected and that the police are part of their community [and]
- help the police to feel proud of their service. (Home Office 2005: 8)

Within this list, how the public and the police 'feel' is clearly important. Yet, there are seemingly conflicting meanings attributed to police buildings which need to be 'friendly and welcoming', but also signifying 'security', protection at the same time as being 'part of their community'. What's more, the buildings need to be something of which the police feel proud. Further requirements are for 'having the right site' and for being 'operationally efficient'. It is an ambitious list. For the police station to be a reassuring presence in the community, the criteria of being 'accessible, friendly and welcoming' are clearly important.

As noted, each of the force's estates has a range of building styles and age. For instance, according to an Estates Manager for West Mercia Police:

> . . . 35 per cent of our buildings are under 15 years old, 41 per cent are 15 to 40 years, and 24 per cent are over 40 years old. . . . In that 'over 40 years old' bracket we do have a number that are over a hundred years old.

The West Mercia estates strategy was to replace these very old stations, as they were deemed 'not fit for purpose'. Similarly, according to a representative from the Metropolitan Police Property Services:

> . . . we have roughly six hundred buildings across the estate, and that's both territorial policing and main policing. Of that building stock, about thirty-five percent predates 1935, and the majority of that thirty-five percent are the police stations. . . . the youngest building in Haringey was built in 1904. So you can just imagine the sort of facilities they are.

For the Metropolitan Police, the emphasis was on replacing the old with new facilities that are seen to fit contemporary models of policing (MPS and MPA 2007; 2010), such as with improved parking facilities and at locations away from town centres with easier access to faster roads—the old town centre stations being replaced by smaller neighbourhood bases. The older buildings can be highly valuable real estate; yet, the closure of town centre stations that are familiar landmarks to the public is controversial. According to McLaughlin (2008: 266), at fault is an emphasis on police performance management which has 'systematically disassembled the "structures of feeling" and traditions associated with the Dixonian policing model [and] this includes the asset stripping of multi-functional "blue lamp" police stations'.

[9]Those interviewed often spoke of the need to be 'DDA-compliant'—by having the building fulfil the criteria of the Disability and Discrimination Act (1995 and 2005) and the Equality Act 2010.

The new (smaller) neighbourhood bases are meant to be closer to the communities they serve; yet, they do not offer the same as a traditional station. According to a member of the Metropolitan Police Public Services Construction, the new neighbourhood bases are 'much more informal. . . . A good percentage would be High Street based shop units with front counters. Some may be small areas in office blocks. Some, you know, may be in hospitals'. In reality, although some contain counters staffed by volunteers, a lot of these bases are used simply as sites for officers and PCSOs[10] to report to, and are not always open to the public (Millie 2010). Alongside neighbourhood bases was the development of 'Patrol Bases'—warehouse units rented by the Metropolitan Police for easy vehicular access (but not public access) and consisting of garage space, locker rooms and offices. For McLaughlin (2008: 273), this restructuring has not taken account of community concerns and attachment:

> The Metropolitan Police is adhering to its strategy, with powerpoint presentations attempting to reassure residents that the decision is based on objective criteria and that the sale of the properties will free up resources for frontline policing. The campaigners have been defined as unrealistic, unrepresentative and practising 'nimbyism'. For the campaigners, the police seem to be incapable of understanding that local communities are reacting so angrily because the closures are symptomatic of a wider pattern of state withdrawal. The shutting of police stations is happening at the same time as the closure of post offices, GP surgeries and primary schools.

Closure of stations may be justified by footfall counts, cost-cutting and efficiency drives, yet the presence of a police station may have reassurance meaning for communities, even if the station is not used frequently. This does not mean the police estate should remain static; however, emotional responses to local stations ought to be considered as part of any restructuring. However, according to a representative of the Metropolitan Police's Resource Management, specializing in asset utilization:

> . . . the overall assumption is that the Met. will move into property which is more flexible, which is easier to acquire and dispose of, which doesn't become a sort of community icon in the sense that many old police stations have become with all the difficulties that then presents in disposing of them or replacing them.

If an aim for policing is public reassurance, then acquiring 'community icon' status could be highly desirable. (As noted, proponents of representational architecture actively seek iconic status for their buildings—that they are part of the public's consciousness and well loved.) Later in the same interview, sympathy was shown for those mourning the loss of a traditional station, but the Metropolitan Police were following a modernist agenda where nostalgia and sentimentality (and attachment) should not get in the way of progress:

> We totally comprehend why communities are so attached to these old buildings, and in a lot of cases, you know, you have some sympathy with that, of course. But the bottom line has to be that London has got to be policed in the best possible way, and these older buildings constrain us in doing that, and so, you know, there comes a point at which you have to say, 'well, I'm afraid, nostalgia, sentimentality, really haven't got a place in this process'.

[10]Police Community Support Officers.

From this resource-focused, managerialist and modernist standpoint, community feeling for police stations is an inconvenience to progress rather than a central requirement. Yet, despite this, many traditional stations survive within the Metropolitan Police. In some London boroughs, high property prices and lack of suitable and available land for development preclude the implementation of a new police estate strategy; as a representative from the Metropolitan Police's Resource Management (asset utilization) put it, 'at this point in time, I don't see how we can deliver the generic model for Westminster, simply because you aren't going to find the sites to do it'.

The current economic downturn and government-imposed budget cuts have changed police priorities. Many forces have recognized that closing stations and neighbourhood bases may be a quick way of cutting budgets. For instance, according to the BBC, Essex Police are closing the front desks at 21 police stations, Lancashire Police is closing 14 stations during 2012 and Surrey Police has sold or is selling up to 13 of its stations (BBC Online 2011*a*; 2011*b*; 2011*c*). For Surrey Police, this cost-cutting choice is intended to 'ensure an extra 200 frontline police officers' (BBC Online 2011*c*). From a reassurance perspective, I would suggest such a policy is misguided. However, it is also true that not all police stations are reassuring places and would not necessarily be missed. Drawing on the three forces included in the study, three approaches to police station architecture are identified, these being: police station as fortress; police station as secret; and police station as public building. These aspects are considered in turn, before conclusions are drawn on the prospects for truly public and reassuring police stations.

Police Station as Fortress

As noted, criminology has long been interested in social control aspects of architecture. Much emphasis has been on prison as exemplar of controlling or disciplining architecture, but other institutions are similarly there to control and this is expressed in their architecture; as Foucault (1977: 228) famously put it: 'Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?' Maybe some police stations can be added to this list. Drawing on Foucault (1977), Bentham's (1791) panoptic prison is sometimes seen as an ultimate expression of social control and has been used by some as a metaphor for CCTV surveillance (see Coleman and McCahill 2011) and for wider aspects of security and surveillance (Davis 1990). Transferring this to the police station, the result is the station as secure fortress designed to provide the police with maximum security and surveillance of the community. In the UK, this model was most dramatically realized with the bunkering and securitization of Northern Ireland's police stations during the 'troubles'. The public face of the stations was high-security walls and watch towers—what Olley (2007) has called 'the castles of Ulster'.[11] It was an aesthetic of security, confrontation and dominance rather than being 'accessible, friendly and welcoming'—or, to use Ellin's (1997) words, an architecture of fear. And, for places outside the gaze of the watch towers, CCTV, checkpoints and military patrols filled many of the gaps in what Azaryahu (2000) has described for the Israeli context as an all-encompassing securityscape. Such examples are (hopefully)

[11]A selection of photographs from Jonathan Olley's project 'Castles of Ulster' is available at www.jonathanolley.com, last accessed May 28th, 2012. See also Carrabine (2012: 482), who describes Olley's photographs as capturing 'the sinister architecture of control'.

more unusual and, in times of conflict, securitization provides reassurance for some. Under more peaceful conditions, this would seem less likely; yet, for many Western urban centres, terrorism threats have meant that security has become a defining discourse (e.g. Coaffee 2000; Sorkin 2008; Graham 2010).

On a more prosaic level, defence can be integral to police stations in order to counter everyday threats. For instance, according to an interviewee from the Metropolitan Police's Property Services, the entrance can be designed with security in mind:

> . . . in London, the traditional police station was built with steps up to the front door and it was designed for three bodies to stand next to each other to stop the drunken hordes on a Friday night going up the stairs.

Once inside a police station, the size, layout and design of the front counter space can add to the feeling of a fortress—that the public are a low priority and should be kept away. Security requirements have often led to counters having full screens physically dividing the public from the police (or police-employed front-counter clerk).[12] According to a member of the Metropolitan Police's Property Services, 'we aspire to being as open as we can be, but then we have to balance that off with the security of colleagues'. The dilemma between opting for security or openness is summarized by an interviewee from the Home Office Design Policy Team:

> . . . well, first of all, you do want people to come in because the police rely on the support of the public, and you know, it might be that they're coming to report an incident or can give some information, so it's got to be the right thing to do to try and attract people. Once they're in the building, again, you want to make it appear welcoming. But the balance that you're having to strike is, sometimes, you get people come in who, perhaps, have got a grievance and are likely to, perhaps, cause problems. So it's really trying to establish how you balance those two conflicting issues together, isn't it?

There is a clear need for security for those working at the police station; yet, security does not have to compromise reassurance. Spaces outside the police station have also got security considerations. For instance, according to a representative of Metropolitan Police Resource Management, 'ideally, we like a certain amount of stand-off around a building, obviously, because you need that to ensure the security of the site'. Since Irish terrorist attacks on London in the 1990s (Coaffee 2000), and the more recent al-Qaeda-linked bombings of July 2005, the capital has witnessed increased securitization (Coaffee *et al.* 2009), especially surrounding selected high-profile targets—including 'high-profile' police stations and other police buildings (such as New Scotland Yard).

A further example of 'police station as fortress' is provided by Loughborough Police Station in Leicestershire. The station is at the end of a long, straight cul-de-sac on the periphery of the town centre—a building of nondescript modernist construction best described as a box with a large radio mast on top (see Figure 1). The public entrance is visible, yet public parking is restricted and the station's location makes for a less than ideal public welcome. My reading of the station

[12]The design of internal spaces for security is taken further for police station custody suites. Here, the desk is often set so the Custody Sergeant looks down on the suspect, who is made to stand looking up.

FIG. 1 Loughborough Police Station (left) and Redditch Police Station (right)

was as a fortress with officers released in twos to deal with local problems. Yet, according to an officer at the station, the location is also not ideal operationally—police stations should not be at the end of a cul-de-sac, as, without an alternative exit, it would not take a great deal of strategically placed public disorder to disable the town's policing capability. A representative from the Metropolitan Police's Resource Management made a similar point that 'We can't take on cul-de-sac locations, because you have to have a secondary access route in case the first one is unavailable for some reason'.

Redditch Police Station (West Mercia Police) is another particularly unattractive modernist building. My first impression of this station was as a grey characterless box on the edge of a supermarket car park (also shown in Figure 1). Efforts have been made to improve its public image with the construction of a new public entrance with canopy and DDA-compliant ramped access. Yet, my reading of the design was that public access is not the priority, with the entrance tucked into a corner of the building (compare the public entrance to the service entrance next door). Furthermore, the railings for the new access ramp provide a muddled way in.

In the current fiscal climate, replacing such buildings with new-builds is less of an option. However, with a bit more imagination, both Loughborough and Redditch could become reassuring, public buildings;[13] as a Station Manager interviewed at Redditch put it, 'you can tidy these buildings up with a little bit of thought. I am a great believer in flair, and I feel that we've lost flair at the moment'. This Station Manager makes an important point: that the solution does not have to be disposal or demolition—that, with the right designers/architects on board, existing structures can be reinvented. That said, some stations would require a lot of reinvention. For instance, according to a public respondent in the IPPR study (Rogers and Houston 2004: 2), 'I think they've designed it [the police station] on purpose to be as impersonal as possible. It's not a friendly place'. Another respondent commented about visiting a station: 'I feel like I was being punished as well.' For police stations to contribute to public reassurance, such sentiments ought to be taken seriously.

[13]Although their locations might still be less than ideal.

Police Station as Secret

The second aspect to police station architecture is 'police station as secret'. This has as much to do with location and operating issues as to do with specific design considerations; and some police property is kept deliberately away from the public gaze. As noted, the Metropolitan Police has introduced non-public access Patrol Bases that are kept away from the public. Some specialist policing units also need to be anonymous; for instance, according to a member of the Metropolitan Police Property Services, 'what we've found, in terms of designing buildings and thinking about implications of terrorism, is that anonymity is as important as protecting buildings'.

Yet, some police property that is intended to be public is secret more by accident. An example is the opening of a new shop-front neighbourhood base by West Mercia Police in Warndon, a suburban estate on the outskirts of Worcester (see Figure 2). The Estates Manager who was interviewed noted that the public just did not know where the previous office was:

> We've got people in there saying 'oh it's nice that the police have got a base here now'. Well we say, 'actually, we've had a base here for the last fifteen years', and it was literally just round the corner. But it was round the corner, up on the first floor of an office block, so you didn't tend to see us that much. So just the mere fact of a shop front with 'police' written across it has made a difference.

However, having a shop-front presence is not in itself enough for the public to realize the police presence. In the case of Warndon, according to the Force Estates Manager interviewed, 'The front counter is only open if an officer is there. We don't actually say we're open for business x-hours a day'. The lack of consistent advertised opening hours does not help a strategy of reassurance—a problem also identified for the Japanese system of neighbourhood bases known as *koban* (Leishman 2007) and for neighbourhood bases in the Metropolitan Police (Millie 2010). A phone was provided on the outside of the building for emergencies; otherwise, any visitor would have to take a chance on whether an officer was present to answer their queries—although, according to the Estates Manager, 'it is very obvious when the officers are there at shift changeovers, or if they're just going in for rest'. According to a Station Manager interviewed at Worcester Police Station, such neighbourhood bases 'because they're so small, they're not intended as a sort of mini police station. They're intended as a place for police officers to work out of the community'. However, if a neighbourhood base is designed to look like a shop, then it would be sensible to operate as a shop and have consistency of opening—and this needs to be public knowledge—rather than as simply a base for changing shifts. This is not primarily an architectural issue; however, it contributes to the visibility or invisibility of the building.

A further example is provided by Leicestershire Police, in this case a small shop-front office in the village of Castle Donington—since closed as part of the current financial cutbacks (see Figure 2). An officer based at Castle Donington made the following observation:

> I mean, I went to an old lady's house a few days ago. She goes to the hairdresser's next door, and I said, 'well actually, next door to where you have your hair done is the police station.' And although, I mean, you would think it's fairly obvious. I suppose that some people have busy lives and, one thing and another, it's, you know, how well known is the actual station?

FIG. 2 Shop front Police Stations at Warndon Worcester (left) and Castle Donington (right)

According to the Manager of a nearby police station:

> . . . a lot of people in Castle Donington, I think, don't even know that that's a police station which is quite interesting . . . I think it's a flat façade, and it's a question of, you know, we haven't quite got the old oil burning lamp outside to the front.

The blue lamp may not be too significant; however, one small design issue that could be important is the use of vertical blinds that block the view of the office interior (clearly shown in Figure 2 for both Warndon and Castle Donington—the photos taken while the stations were open). This at first seems a trivial issue; yet, to return to the criteria for police buildings laid down by the Home Office (2005: 8), the blinds signal an office space that is the opposite to being 'accessible, friendly and welcoming to the public'. Furthermore, as Heverin notes (Dyckhoff 2009), good public buildings ought to be characterized by 'transparency and porosity'. The simple closing of the blinds means this is not likely to be how the public 'read' the buildings. It is a common problem (see Millie 2010).

Police Station as Public Building

There is a dilemma in designing a police station: on the one hand, a station has to be a hard place, it has to have security and containment, and yet, on the other hand, there is a softer focus, that it has to be somewhere where the public will want to visit and will want to report crimes or seek advice, they will want to come in. Furthermore, a police station needs to be located so that it is accessible to the public. Many new-build stations have been build in out-of-town locations to improve public access by car and to provide greater parking for police vehicles. One such example is the West Mercia Police Station at Leominster, opened in 2007 (see Figure 3). The building is ideally located for vehicular access on an out-of-town industrial park. It is also well signposted. Yet, my first impression of the new station was its isolation. Not only is architecture important for creating meaning, but also the building's spatial context, in this case its location in a quiet industrial park. By moving away from the town centre, the station also lost the possibility of being a reassuring presence in the heart of the town.

FIG. 3 Out-of-Town Police Station at Leominster, West Mercia Police

Such out-of-town developments borrow from retail practices of the past 30–40 years (Thomas and Bromley 1993) where firms opted for cheaper rents, larger premises and easier car access, over the restrictions of having town centre shops. However, more recent retail developments have seen a return to the High Street. For instance, at one time, the grocery giant Tesco had largely left the High Street in favour of developing out-of-town supermarkets. More recently, the company identified that growth lay in opening mini-supermarkets, branded as 'Tesco Metro' and 'Tesco Express', which, over the past 10 years, have appeared on most High Streets in Britain. In terms of public reassurance and visibility, the police would benefit by learning from the retail sector and maintaining (or reinvesting) in some form of High Street presence. However, for Leicestershire Police, the current financial squeeze has led to the closure of some High Street stations. The model of policing attempted by the Metropolitan Police is promising, where out-of-town facilities are supplemented by neighbourhood bases (Tesco Express?) and some traditional stations (Tesco Metro?). The difference between this and the Tesco model is that the Metropolitan Police's out-of-town facilities are not public access, and not all the neighbourhood bases are consistently open to the public. Another area of learning from retail is in branding. West Mercia Police has opted for the internationally recognized simple chequerboard motif, clearly visible for Redditch Police Station in Figure 1 and Leominster in Figure 3. For Leicestershire Police, simplicity of signage was also identified as an issue. According to their Estates Manager:

> We used to go along the route of relatively small plaques that said things like, you know, 'New Parks Local Policing Unit'. Well, unless you were really working closely with the police, what does a 'Local Policing Unit' mean? So we tried to move then from that to a sign that said, in fairly bold letters, 'Police'.

For the small market town of Evesham, West Mercia Police took quite a different approach. Instead of having a dedicated police station, the police have gone into partnership with the County, District and Town Councils and Job Centre Plus, in providing a one-stop-shop for the town—the Evesham Community Contact Centre (see Figure 4). This is a refurbished former magistrates' court and police station. The 'back stage' policing functions are housed in a new building located in the back yard. However, the 'front stage' functions are carried out by counter staff who also deal

FIG. 4 Evesham Community Contact Centre

with local council issues. According to a Manager working from the Evesham Contact Centre:

> We've got six desks. Any customer coming in can go to any of those desks and, regardless of the person serving them, can report either a police incident, pay their council tax, arrange to have refuse collected, housing issue, benefits issue, or it could be something to do with the Town Council about cemeteries or, you know, issues to do with the mayor or local things. So it works very well. Our busiest days, we have about a thousand people through.

The Centre advertises regular opening hours and staffing costs are split between the partners. Once data-sharing protocols were agreed, a simple IT system was installed where, according to the Centre Manager, 'We have access to their [police] systems as well, so we tend to flick between our own District/County systems and West Mercia systems'. If someone wants or needs to speak to a police officer, one can be called from the offices located in the back yard.

As for the design of the Centre, the only indication that it deals with police matters is the traditional blue lamp hung from the outside wall. While exterior signage could be improved, Evesham is an example of creative reinvention of an existing building. Once inside, my impression of the front-counter space was that it was more akin to contemporary banking practice, more welcoming and softer than a standard police station. According to a Manager at the centre, this is a dramatic change from the old station:

> I think a lot of people used to find, when they went into the old reception . . . it was just the old building, the feeling, you felt almost as if you'd done something wrong as soon as you stepped through the door, you know?

The feeling of the new front-counter space is quite different. For instance, there is free internet access, the space is fully carpeted and access is DDA-compliant (see Figure 4). This softer approach is also applied to the use of language. For instance, instead of having 'interview rooms', these are labelled 'meeting rooms'—a simple change that may make people feel more at ease. Furthermore, the counters only have partial protective glazing. According to the Manager interviewed, 'we've deliberately gone for no glass;

just very slight sort of screens. And it really is what the customers prefer. [There is] very little problem with aggression, here, from customers'. Counter staff have panic buttons if necessary. In other stations that have opted for partial or no protective screens, quick-release shuttering is also available as a further protective option.

How such a softer approach would work for a station where there is, for instance, a busy night-time economy is less certain. It is acknowledged that usage and clientele characteristics of police stations may well change with time of day or day of week. However, during normal opening hours, the one-stop-shop model is especially useful for people making enquiries where it is not clear who has responsibility; as the Manager noted, 'people don't know where to go with them, you know? Neighbour nuisance, is it, is it a police issue or is it a housing issue?' The approach adopted in Evesham may not be suitable in all situations; however, the effect is one where the building is more clearly a public building.

Conclusions

As noted, the study's aims were modest and exploratory: to draw on theoretical and empirical evidence to consider whether police stations are a worthwhile area of criminological/architectural study, and to investigate the possibility that police stations could contribute to public reassurance. What this article has hopefully demonstrated is that the police estate can make for interesting criminological and architectural study. Furthermore, evidence is presented that police stations could contribute to reassurance; yet, to do this, there has to be a rethink for many existing stations in terms of what these buildings communicate. It is acknowledged that improvements to police stations will only be one aspect of a policy of reassurance. If reassurance is to mean more than image management, then perhaps it ought to be integral to *all* policing activity, from call handling and media and internet presence through to the policing of marginal groups and public order. As an officer working on a strategy trial of 'reassurance policing' put it, it ought to be a golden thread running through all policing (Millie and Herrington 2005: 54). Reassurance is clearly not a priority when certain populations are disproportionately policed, or when there is police corruption. Fundamental changes in such policing styles and attitudes may have a bigger impact on reassurance. However, a refocus on police stations as a reassuring presence in the community can only help with such a policy—and is an area of policy and academic enquiry that has been largely overlooked.

In this article, examples of fortress-like police stations have been given with the result that the police can be 'read' as an intimidating presence in the community, rather than as reassuring. Furthermore, other stations are effectively secret, with poorly advertised opening hours, or anonymous identities that cannot contribute to public reassurance. Drawing on architectural practice, it was suggested that truly public buildings are characterized by 'transparency and porosity' and that this is possible for police stations. This can be through architectural and design changes that emphasize the public entrance, or where the boundary between street and station is blurred so that the building becomes the opposite of intimidating. Transparency and porosity could also be improved by thinking about police station location, or providing a range of facilities including a High Street presence (the Tesco model?). Furthermore, it could be through building new stations in architectural styles appropriate for their setting. An example is a rural station at Peterchurch (West Mercia Police), built in 2005 as a contemporary

take on an agricultural structure, but clearly signed as a police station. According to a front-counter clerk working at this station, 'we make them welcome. Halloween we've had kids knocking on the door "trick or treating". I mean that's, I think it's quite nice that they feel they can do that'. Transparency and porosity are enhanced by improved signage and also through refitting or redesigning the front-counter spaces so they are more welcoming.

Key to any attempt at making police stations more reassuring to the public (and to getting more members of the public through the door) is finding out how people *feel* about their local station. According to an interviewee from the Home Office Design Policy Team, 'Looking at the perception of the building to the public, it's not really something that we've really engaged with, and I'm just wondering whether, of the projects that we do, whether that should be something'. I suggest that it should. There is *some* consultation and, according to a representative from the Metropolitan Police Resource Management:

> . . . it's not a charade . . . it's not quite saying to the public, 'What would you like us to do?', because in certain boroughs, the answer would be, 'Nothing, go away and leave us alone'. . . . but what you can say is, 'This is what we would like to do, we're interested in your views about it'. If there are serious issues that we're overlooking, for example, then we need to know about that.

If the public response is genuinely 'go away and leave us alone', then the police ought to be asking 'why'? Clearly, how local populations are policed is critical to answering this question; however, what this article has demonstrated is that meaning can also be transmitted by police station architecture.

The author David Peace asked 'have you ever seen a police station that wasn't intimidating?' Yet, there are stations that appear welcoming and, at a time of budget cuts, a policy of police station closure might be short-sighted. By taking seriously meanings attached to stations, and by learning from good practice, it would be possible to facilitate a shift in how policing is understood and acted out within communities. For CABE (2006: 4), a prerequisite for good public buildings is that they can 'lift your spirits'. This has to be possible for police stations, which could then emerge as symbols of reassurance in the community. This is surely preferable to stations as symbols of control and intimidation. What is now needed is research that considers the views of police station architects. More importantly, the next stage would be to consult the views of the public on police stations as fortress, secret or as public buildings, and whether stations can be reassuring and 'lift your spirits'.

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