CASE 12
Survival of the fittest:
On retail in the information age

X, a department store specializing in clothing, asked the Designing Out Crime center in Sydney whether it could help redesign the stores' fitting rooms, as evidence was showing that the fitting rooms were a major location for the stealing of clothes.

1   ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PROBLEM SITUATION

Theft of clothing from stores is a huge problem worldwide, and highly professional organizations like X already have sophisticated, multifaceted approaches to the issue in place. Measures like security personnel, mirrors, cameras, tags, and exit scanners all work together to make life hard for the clothing thief (Gamman 2012). The particular problem with the fitting room is that cameras are not acceptable there for privacy reasons, and the clothes tags are the only active defense against theft there. Although these tags are very difficult to remove by the average customer, a prepared criminal can pull them off and hide them while ostensibly trying something on in the fitting room. X has responded by placing the fitting rooms in an easier-to-control area away from the store's exits, reducing the number of the fitting rooms, reducing the number of clothing items that prospective customers are allowed to take into the cubicle, and taking away obvious hiding places for the ripped-off tags, such as shelves, chairs, and mirrors (the question is whether this has really helped: a quick scan of X's fitting rooms produced dozens of tags hidden in double ceilings, wall partitions, etc.). Meanwhile, the size of the fitting rooms is also being reduced, as rising commercial rents put pressure on the stores to maximize the floor space for their stock.

2   ESTABLISHING THE CORE PARADOX

The initial design paradox here is clear: fitting rooms are meant to provide privacy, and thus they are good places for hiding criminal activity. These hiding places can also be misused to remove tags and hide them. There is no way out of this paradox ...

Because the fitting rooms provide privacy to deliver a good shopping experience, they are good hiding places.