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## Making room for driver error?

An inert stretch of highway has been designated "accident prone"<sup>1</sup> after one of the worst traffic accidents in Ontario's history. On Sept. 3, in thick morning fog, 80 vehicles collided on highway 401 outside Windsor. Of the 8 people who were killed, most were incinerated in their vehicles while desperate relatives and strangers, powerless to help, looked on in horror. The tragedy has been attributed to a combination of driver error, poor weather conditions and excessive traffic volume. Regulatory response was sympathetic and swift from Ontario's chief coroner, Dr. James Young, who has ordered an inquest, and from the province's transportation minister, David Turnbull, who has promised to beef up police surveillance and to consider the Canadian Automobile Association's recommendation to widen this stretch of highway to 6 lanes.

The notions that human behaviour can be changed by increasing surveillance and modifying spatial boundaries are tenets of architectural determinism.<sup>1</sup> This perspective was popular in the 1980s in Britain, where it framed central and local governmental response to public housing estate riots such as the one in Brixton. In 1985 Coleman<sup>2</sup> carried out research for the Home Office and identified 28 specific variables that appeared to be associated with environmental degradation, health problems, family breakdown and crime. The neat and precise design criteria she proposed as solutions were widely adopted as local governments tackled the problems of housing estates. This led to the enclosure and privatization of space that had previously been public and accessible.<sup>3</sup>

Although compelling to our aesthetic sensibilities, design modification is overly simplistic as a solution to patterns of injury or unrest. A methodology that focuses on spatial boundaries obfuscates, by definition, what those boundaries contain. How do the generations of poverty, discrimination, social isolation and desperation contained within public

housing estates factor into spatial analysis? Similarly, how do driver error, aggression, inattention, fatigue, inexperience and inebriation factor into the calculation of highway width?

In 1993 3.9 million Canadians reported involvement in 4.8 million accidents in the preceding 12 months. Approximately 30% of these were motor vehicle accidents.<sup>4</sup> When compared with middle-aged drivers, young drivers demonstrated excessive risk for speeding, alcohol use, inattention, falling asleep and not wearing seat belts, while elderly drivers demonstrated excessive risk for inattention and errors in judgement.<sup>5</sup> These results support the age-specific preventive strategies currently in place, such as graduated licensing and yearly testing of elderly drivers. Nevertheless, a comparison of drivers stopped by police for risky driving with comparable controls demonstrated that the risky drivers had violated traffic regulations more often than other drivers and that the offense rate did not decrease with age. This suggests that the worst drivers do not outgrow the risks they pose to themselves and to others fated to share their space.<sup>6</sup>

"Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds."<sup>7</sup> By expanding the width of highways to accommodate flow we must be careful that we do not tacitly make more room for dangerous drivers.

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