

Snapshots of a Community's Preferences



Using photographs and good old fashioned voting, designers get to the heart of what a community wants to see when they look out their windows.

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The Language Dilemma

“What do you want your community to look like?” It is a difficult question which can lead to some very vague or esoteric answers. People just don’t know how to put their feelings about neighborhood design into words. We often resort to listing examples; “You know, like downtown Aspen,” or “It should sort of look like Savannah.” The trouble with answers like these is that not every community has the geographic or historic context that make communities like Aspen or Savannah work the way they do. When you’re planning in, say, West Lincoln, Nebraska, examples like these just aren’t that relevant.

A Picture is Worth...

Sometimes it is best to give up on words, to toss aside the tangled jungle of jargon that can separate us from the physical world we are attempting to build around us. We can see what we like, and what we don’t like, but most people can’t draw for you what they’d like to see, and having designers draw, and redraw, and redraw, and redraw development options just isn’t efficient. But still, people know what they like, even if they can’t find a way to communicate it. This is the basis of the concept of the Visual Preference Survey (VPS); a graphic survey of stakeholders. The term was coined by A. Nelesen Associates (ANA) for their public participation visioning process. The Visual Preference Survey (VPS) is a method of gathering information from the stakeholders of a planning or development project by showing a variety of images in a short period of time and collecting their reactions to the features conveyed in each image. Since ANA’s invention of the concept, other forms of photo based surveys have been developed to gather the aesthetic desires of the stakeholders of planning and development projects.

How the VPS works

ANA uses a variety of images, from those gathered in the community to images from the firm’s image library. Additionally, ANA incorporates computer generated simulations of alternative development options, created using the photos taking in the community. The VPS is administered in conjunction with a Demographic, Economic and Policy Questionnaire. The image evaluations and the

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questionnaire responses are reviewed and, the results of the two, taken together, inform the planners and designers working on the project what the stakeholders want and need in their public realm.

The Visual Ranking Slideshow

A slightly different system was developed by Peter. J. Musty of CharretteCenter Inc to gather information to be used in planning and the writing of urban codes and design guidelines. In Peter's Visual Ranking Slideshow, a slideshow of images is created, using an assemblage of images from both in and near the planning area and from an archive of photos from a variety of places. Images fall into one of three categories; Streetscape, building use, building frontage. Participants receive a score sheet. Each image is ranked on the score sheet as one of the following: Required, Encouraged, Permitted, Restricted, Prohibited. The results are tallied, and a second slideshow is given with bar graphs of the results laid over the corresponding images. The participants get a chance to explain why they voted the way they did and in doing so give the designers get a better feel for the community member's values.



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