

## Image preference survey



**An view down the New River** near Fort Lauderdale's central business district.

The Image Preference Survey (IPS) for the Broward County County-wide Community Design Guidebook was conducted on September 8, 2003 at the African-American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale. The survey duration was approximately 30 minutes, with another 45 minutes afterward for a question and answer and audience comment period.

The Image Preference Survey used here was based on the work of both Anton Nelessen and Nick Wates, as outlined in their works on the subject of obtaining community evaluations and commentary concerning environmental design in participatory workshops. (Nelessen 1994, 83-86; Wates 2000, in toto). Nelessen's Visual Preference Survey has a well-documented efficacy from approximately 50,000 trials over many years, which has provided an 85% agreement among respondents on what are the preferred attributes of the designed physical environment. (Nelessen 2000, 88; Nelessen 2000, personal communication with author).

This IPS consisted of photographs shown in series to a public audience to obtain their preferences for, or against, the physical attributes of the illustrated environments. The chosen photographs were all illustrative of public spaces, from both inside and outside Broward County. The audience rated their positive or negative preferences on a scale from -5 to +5, a '0,' rating being a neutral score that indicated no preference or disinterest in the image. The total of 60 images were chosen as pairs, enabling the comparative analysis of the design attributes of the pairs, and relative to different attributes in other pairs, by comparing the scores. Such attributes included the design of sidewalks, streets, building facades, landscaping, signage, etc. Thus, a picture of the community's impression of what constitutes good and bad environments comes forth, furthering the building of a consensus on future environmental design.

A total of 102 audience members returned ballots, where the majority of images received a voter participation of 97% or greater.



**The highest rated image** indicates the most liked scene.

A review of the ballot tally indicates the following:

### Positive ratings

1. Buildings in close proximity to, or directly contiguous with, the sidewalk are preferred to buildings set well back from street/sidewalk or separated by a parking lot, while similar buildings heights are preferred to a context with highly variable building heights.
2. People and activity in public spaces are preferred to spaces without people and activity, and diversity of activity receives an even higher rating, such as standing and sitting at a café, walking, pushing a baby cart, etc. Despite this, the presence of few or one person in the image is apparently enough to contribute the positive rating of people's presence.
3. Complex and orderly paving patterns, such as brick or concrete pavers are preferred to asphalt paving.
4. A dense cover of shade trees is very much preferred, where the greater the density of the trees, the greater the apparent positive rating. It should be noted that non-shade trees such as palms receive a positive rating, although not as high as shade trees.
5. However, shade should be distinguished from darkness. Thus, sidewalk and street spaces that receive adequate direct or reflected sunlight to appear well lit are rated positively.
6. The presence of other landscaping also receives a positive rating, such as planters with trees and ground cover, or large areas of ground cover, shrubs, and trees.
7. The presence of street furniture amenities, such as trash receptacles, graphic guides, benches, tables and chairs at cafes, fountains, etc. is preferred.
8. Higher quality materials for street furniture (and buildings), such as wood, metal, and stone, are rated positively. As with the bus shelters, modern design of the street furniture can also receive a positive rating.

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9. The presence of bus shelters is preferred over no shelter, where seating and enclosure from the sun and weather increase the positive rating.

10. A modern, orderly, and clean appearance of the street furniture and bus shelter is preferred to those that are overtly historicized, disorderly, or not maintained, and unclean. Thus, utilities, lighting, street furniture, and shade placed in an orderly pattern, as in, for example, a rhythm along a straight line, is preferred to more disorderly patterns. Further, if the style is too radical or does not provide apparent shade or protection from the weather, it receives a rating below more conventional shelters and street furniture.

11. A dedicated mode of transit (such as fixed rail) is rated more positively than a vehicular mode (such as a bus).

12. The proportional relation of the width of the sidewalk to the pavement width increases toward the positive as it approaches 1:1. Thus, the highest rated image in the entire survey had very broad sidewalks, a relatively narrow (two lane, transit corridor) pavement, extensive street furniture, shade trees, with these amenities in an orderly pattern, people involved in a diversity of activities, and buildings of four to five stories, immediately contiguous with the sidewalk, having a diversity of styles, a diversity of materials and colors, where many had an authentic historical style or modern style.

13. In more suburban areas, parkways with dense trees and sidewalks are seen as positive, and thus the immediate proximity of buildings is not important here. Apparently, a number of attributes reach a threshold and constitute a context that is recognized as a certain type of street, or plaza, or building, etc. Thus, in the 'urban' context, the absence of buildings on the sidewalk would be rated negatively, while in the suburban context, the lack of the buildings does not seem to detract from the positive rating.

14. Streets with few relatively narrow lanes, with a broken vista or interesting object in a long vista, are rated positively.

15. This context dependent nature of the preferences shows up again in the rating

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of signage. Thus, straightforward, uncomplicated, and color-coordinated signage and graphics receives a positive rating, but more conventional signage in an otherwise positive context will also receive a positive, although lower, positive rating.

16. Where lighting is provided, simple, orderly, but unobtrusive fixtures are rated positively, although historicized styles of fixtures are also accepted as positive.

17. Multi-story buildings in the 'urban' context are rated more positive than single story structures, even up to an apparent height of about eight stories.

18. Building elements that provide shade and visual interest, such as canopies, overhangs, solar control screens, or loggias, are rated positively.

19. Apparently the garage use can also produce a positive rating for the general context, as long as the structure meets the other positively rated attributes listed above.

20. Entries to structures on the street front were rated more positively than when entries are hidden.

### **Negative ratings**

1. Cars or other objects such as benches, fire hydrants, and signage, crowding the path of pedestrians, such as in a sidewalk space, or arranged in an otherwise disorderly manner, are rated negatively. Further, when automobiles dominate the scene, even if placed in an orderly fashion, the ratings are negative.

2. Back-out parking is rated negatively.

3. Several rows of parking between the street and buildings is rated negatively.

4. A lack of trees in the public space is rated negatively. This is especially true for a lack of shade trees.

5. A lack of people in the public space is rated negatively.

6. An unkempt appearance of the street space with visible trash or dirt is rated negatively.

7. Conventional bus technology, with apparent diesel exhaust, is rated negatively.



The lowest rated image indicates the least liked scene.

8. An overly expressive or fanciful architectural style, lacking practical weather and solar protection, at least with the bus shelters, is rated negatively.
9. The absolute size, apparent scale, and style of the bus shelters are also dependent on the context for a positive rating. Thus the appearance of shelters as too large and out of scale seems to confuse the respondents and produce a relatively negative rating.
10. Apparent low-quality materials, such as molded plastic, in the street furniture, are rated negatively.
11. Broad streets with many lanes and a lack of amenities, such as a lack of shade trees or a lack of people, are rated negatively.
12. Narrow sidewalks with a clutter of objects or encroaching outdoor restaurants are rated negatively.
13. Dark sidewalks and spaces are rated negatively.
14. Streets with an apparent endless vista are rated negatively.
15. A blank façade with a lack of interesting features on the street is rated negatively. This applies also to a line of shrubs as well as a blank wall or a building façade.
16. Large blank facades with few windows or windows in a disorderly pattern are rated negatively.
17. Buildings with visible mechanical equipment at ground level or on the roof are rated negatively.
18. Buildings that are not kept up or that appear as unoccupied or uncared for are rated negatively.
19. Signage or graphics on conventional support structures that appear flimsy or with sharp edges are rated negatively.
20. Signage or graphics that are not well kept, with a complicated variety of colors and shapes are rated negatively.

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## Conclusion

The following overarching principles are identified from a review of the results of the survey.

1. The preference for or against environmental design attributes is dependent on the apparent context.
2. The presence of natural elements in the scene is always a positive.
3. Surfaces with complexity and interesting, meaningful elements that have an apparent ordering are preferred.
4. Well proportioned, light, open architecture integrated with the environment is preferred over dark, overly decorated, or poorly proportioned architecture.
5. The quality of fit and finish of built structures is important, where higher quality materials that are fitted with craftsmanship or high manufacturing standards are preferred.
6. Climate tempering in the form of shade is especially important in the South Florida environment, where a dense cover of shade trees is apparently the preferred method.
7. The presence of people, especially people involved in diverse activities congruent with public spaces, is an especially positive attribute.
8. Spaces or infrastructure that produce apparent dirt, trash, clutter, or pollution are rated negatively, and conversely, spaces or infrastructure that appear clean, well-kept, orderly, and low-emission or pollution-free transit, are rated positively. In keeping with this, street furniture should be in place to take care of the trash and other needs.
9. The size of spaces devoted to automobile-related infrastructure relative to pedestrian and transit infrastructure is important, as space for pedestrians, and other low-speed modes such as bicycles, and transit is apparently seen as fundamental to a positive environment, whether in the ‘suburban’ or ‘urban’ context. Further,

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pedestrians and pedestrian amenities seem to be preferred over auto-related infrastructure or the presence of moving automobiles.

### References

Nelessen, Anton. 1994. Visions for a New American Dream. Chicago, Ill.: Planners Press, American Planning Association.

Wates, Nick. 2000. The Community Planning Handbook. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd.