Results of the Visual Preference Survey™

Fort Collins
CITY PLAN
Changes & Choices

Acknowledgement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Fort Collins Visual Preference Survey™ (from now on called the *VPS™) was part of the City's efforts to update the Comprehensive Plan. A. Nelessen Associates (ANA) and the City of Fort Collins conducted the VPS™ on cable television, video tapes and public meetings during September and October of the year 1995. More than 1500 residents, an excellent sample size for the VPS™, participated. The results were presented in a taped public presentation on October 26, 1995.

Everyone in Fort Collins was invited to participate in the rating of 240 slide images of various development forms. These Visual Preference Survey Results™ document the citizens' view for future growth, development and what future development in the community should be like. To compile these results ANA studied the positive and negative visual preferences in order to determine the many problems and opportunities faced by the City. The VPS™ findings relay various community attitudes regarding various aspects of development. They will help to form a community vision and then develop a more specific city structure plan and subsequent policies, standards and guidelines for development.

The fifteen sections in this document follow the format in which the VPS™ was administered. The main conclusions drawn from the results are as follows:

1. The development of mixed and multiple-use neighborhoods, community services and retail areas should be thoroughly integrated within the open space system of parks, pedestrian and bicycle paths leading to the foothills, reservoir, and the plains.

2. In general, the VPS™ participants consider the natural environment a valuable resource significantly contributing to and defining the character, legacy and heritage of Fort Collins. It is important that natural areas be carefully planned for, in order to protect and complement them throughout and around the City.

3. Revitalized streetscape standards should include inviting sidewalks, pedestrian-scaled street lights, street trees and defined pedestrian crossings at all major intersections.

4. Continual emphasis on property maintenance, i.e. targeting absentee landlords of student housing, is crucial to the city's overall appearance and character.

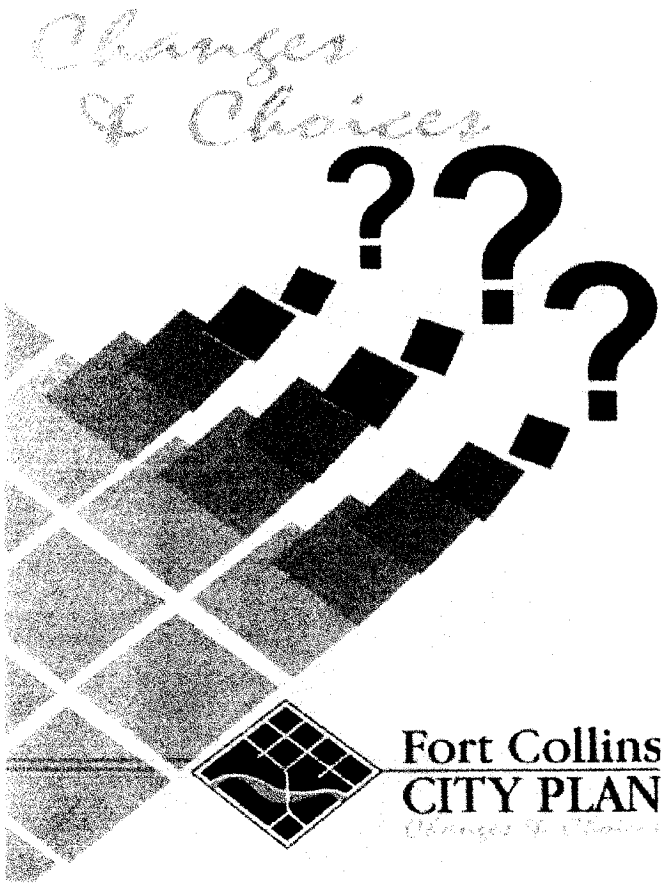
The VPS™ photographic images and simulations are illustrated throughout this report. They offer every reader the ability to immediately interpret the written conclusions. These illustrations provide equal access to the text's intended direction. It is often said that "one picture portrays a thousand words," and that is the spirit of this document.

The images can be examined for features and functions that should be emphasized or avoided in the future planning of new places. The implications inherent in each photograph (the trade-offs of cost, traffic flow, density, etc.) will be discussed throughout City Plan's tenure so that the community may decide how the positively-rated images will be implemented. Everything that gets built meets codes and standards; who sets these standards? The premise of the VPS™ lies in the belief that residents have the right to set the standards. Without citizen guidance, the standards will not engender the livable, enjoyable community that they prefer.

*The Visual Preference Survey (VPS) is a trademark process of A. Nelessen Associates, Princeton, New Jersey.

INTRODUCTION

The City of Fort Collins is currently setting a community vision and updating its Comprehensive Plan. This process is designed to facilitate the examination of choices regarding the future evolution and growth of the city.



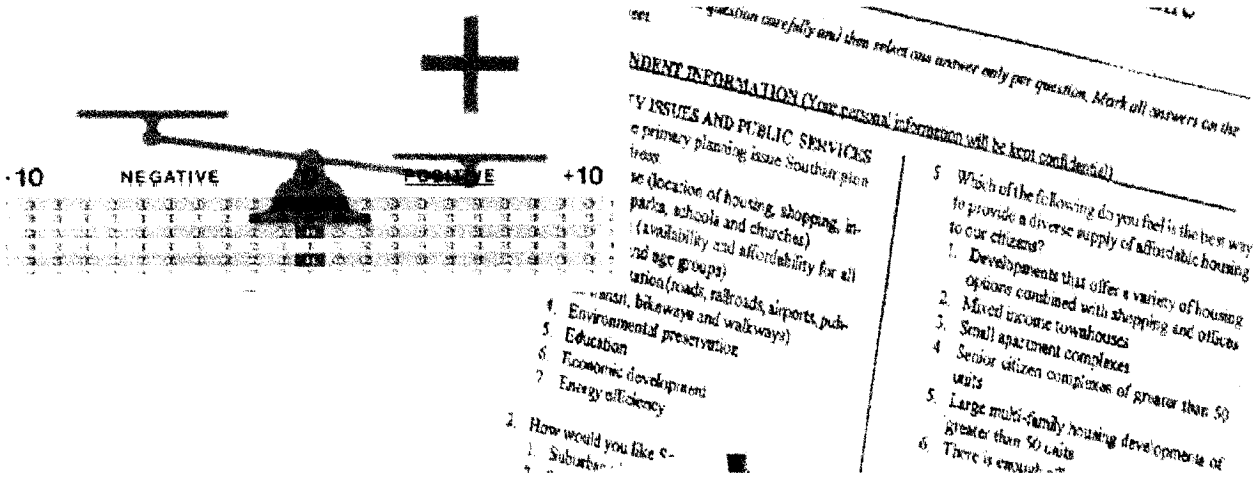
In the years before 1940, the emphasis for most of the city was focused around downtown shops and services which met the daily needs of the residents, with other services a trolley ride away. The 1950's brought the rise of the automobile, the suburbs, arterials and highway. The shopping mall met residents' changing needs and was only a quick car trip away.

In the 1990's, separated land uses and inadequate transportation alternatives foster a reliance upon the private automobile. Consequently, auto trips are increasing at a rate greatly in excess of that for population growth. As with most cities like Fort Collins, mobility has a major impact on how the city grows; people equate ease of mobility with quality of life. The choices for growth are density or sprawl. As abstract concepts, neither sounds attractive to the majority. Because Fort Collins has a reputation as a desirable place to live, work and raise a family, most people live here by choice. Therefore, the ability to choose between good alternative patterns of development is critical to the long term success of the city. One method of asking these necessary, though often trying, questions, in order to properly provide mechanisms for future regional growth, is through the Visual Preference Survey™.

The Visual Preference Survey™ is a technique, developed by A. Nelessen Associates, Inc., that allows participants to rate slide images, thereby determining the relative acceptability of various development forms. While the VPS™ is considered an effective planning tool for soliciting attitudes on a number of issues, it is not intended to address all of the growth management, urban design and transportation issues facing the city, nor all of the potential possibilities for the city's image. The VPS™ is an effective tool for getting people initially involved in the community planning process on a general and interesting level.

The use of visual images to solicit input allows people to respond to two questions: "Do you like this image?," and "Do you think it is appropriate for Fort Collins?" These questions put the issues in terms that can be readily understood, thereby making it easier than asking the public to spontaneously suggest an acceptable development pattern or density.

In the past, similar surveys have shown that subsequent planning efforts are greatly facilitated by the use of the VPS™ images to help explain concepts and choices relating to density, design or other land use and transportation is-



sues. An advantage the VPS™ offers to the planning process lies in the future use of the concepts and choices deemed to be acceptable by the participants. This information permits future land use proposals to focus on the refinement of acceptable concepts, rather than attempting to acquire public acceptability all over again.

The results and recommendations contained in this document are general in nature, and recognize that the city contains areas that are in different stages within the cycle of growth, development and redevelopment. One of the advantages derived from this type of survey is the opportunity that it provides to determine the various cyclical stages and their trends, thus educating City officials and residents alike.

Discussion of these results is the first step in the implementation process. The citizens of the community readily understand the concept of an attractive tree-lined street. However, an image usually has other implications that may be positive and negative concerning density, cost, traffic impacts, etc. The VPS™ facilitates the discussion of available choices. It provides citizens the opportunity for input in determining how a concept presented in a positively-rated image may be successfully implemented in Fort Collins.

The goal of the Visual Preference Survey™ is to begin to answer questions that are of crucial interest to the city. It is hoped that this VPS™ Results document fosters understanding while encouraging continued public participation in the planning process.

METHODOLOGY

The Visual Preference Survey™ and Community Questionnaire

240 images and 43 written questions were presented in the Fort Collins Visual Preference Survey™.

Selecting Images

The survey was assembled using images primarily photographed within the city and region. The local images were supplemented with images from other places that present alternatives which do not currently exist within the region.

The images were reviewed by ANA and analyzed for any potential bias that may affect their rating. Certain criteria have to be satisfied before an image is used in a VPS™. For instance, all of the images are photographed with a standard 35mm camera, using a 50mm lens, eliminating any potential perceptual differences. The images are photographed from the public realm, meaning that the view shown is that which the average person passing a place, either by car or on foot, would experience. The images are also reviewed to eliminate potential bias relating to the time, or season of the year that an image is photographed, amount of foliage on trees and shrubs, the weather and/or light conditions on any given day.

Previous surveys have shown that an image taken on a bright sunny day under blue skies will rate higher than the same scene on a cloudy day. An image depicting lush green foliage will rate higher than leafless trees. Recognizing the time of year that the survey was conducted and the issues that needed to be addressed, images were used that contained some, but limited, differences.

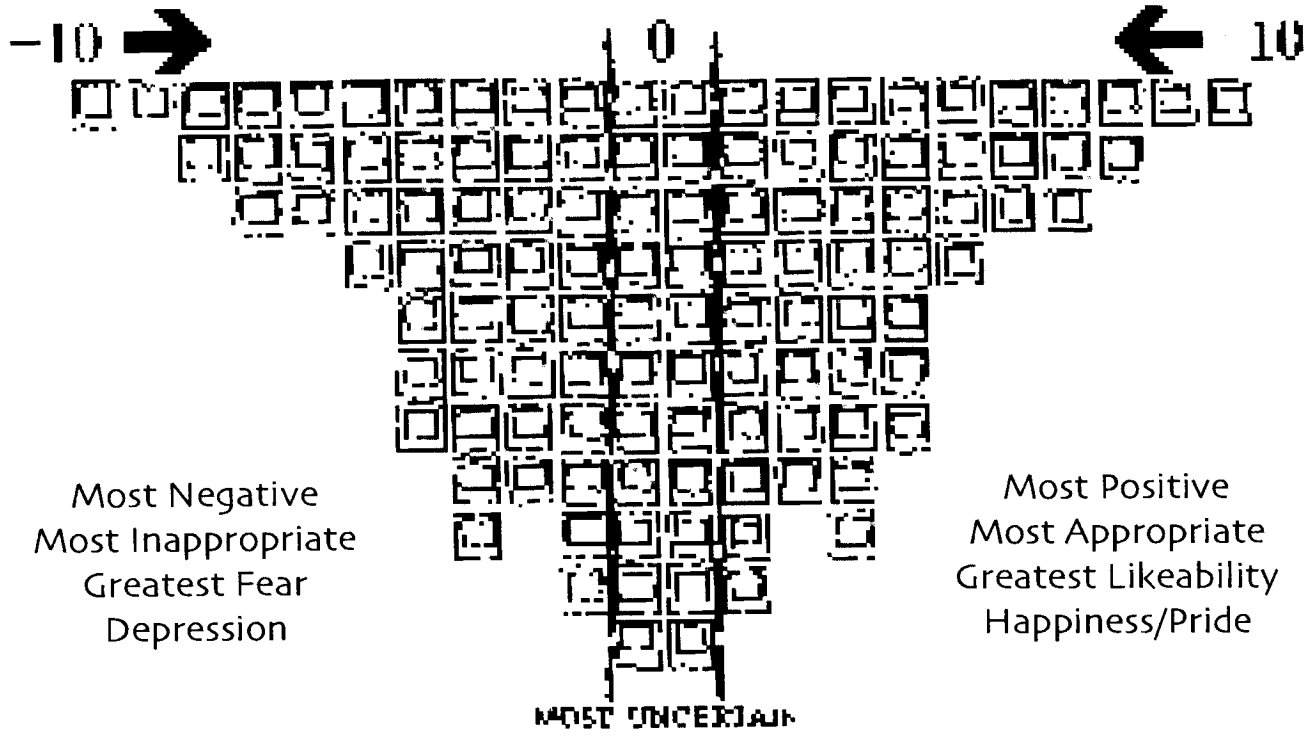
Participants were asked to rate these images on a +10 to a -10 scale. The score indicates a reaction to two questions: Do you like it? Is it appropriate for Fort Collins? For each image the mean, standard error, median, mode and standard deviation were determined. Images—planning concepts—with a high mean rating and a low standard deviation were considered to be the most appropriate for incorporation into future Plans. Negative images were equally important. Negative ratings are always cause for concern; steps must be taken to eliminate local conditions perceived as negative.

The ratings and results do not necessarily project a pure statistical representation of a random sampling of the public. The process, which in this instance does represent a very broad sampling of the public, is not a random sample, because participants chose to attend and participate. They were not solicited in a statistically random manner. The results are merely an approximation of the relative opinion and preferences of those who chose to participate. With that in mind the VPS™ results will be used by the City as a supporting piece of information obtained from public input.

Reactions are derived through each individual's lifelong range of experiences. There are several ingredients that combine to arrive at these decisions. The first is normative behavior, that which is considered normal within a particular community. Next is the individual attitude with respect to those community issues. The final component is an individual's basic beliefs, or their motivation to adhere to the community's values. These components combine to form the collective community attitude towards an image.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

The VPS™ ratings from all participants were used in evaluating the images. The images were first arranged by category from the highest-rated image to the lowest-rated image to determine the elements which were present in those images. Patterns which began to emerge were noted regarding the design features present or absent in the images. A triangular



pattern emerges with either end of the triangle representing the most appropriate and inappropriate situations, as viewed by the participants.

Refining the Analysis

The specific characteristics of these images must be analyzed. Many, or most, of the positive and negative features will be seen in the adjacent images. These images must be reviewed for general and specific planning and design content. It is also critical to understand if the characteristics contained in the negative images are generated by the existing zoning and development regulations. By analyzing each image in this form, the appropriate design and planning response to the negative images can be found in the positively rated images.

The categories were then further broken down by land use, street-type, etc., in order to compare similar sub-categories, again looking for emerging patterns in the positively- and negatively-rated images. The positively- and negatively-rated images depicting similar places or development forms were also compared to see why the images would rate differently. The differences between the images provide the design and functional elements that may be incorporated into planning principles.

Analysis Parameters

There are several design elements (trees, brick paving, etc.,) that tend to automatically improve the rating of an image, and the bias check usually addresses most of the differences not attributable to the quality of the place. The analysis of the images then looks beyond the mere presence of an element to how it is used in the design of a place. Tree location and spacing, for example, are examined and compared between images to determine how and why the presence of trees affected the overall rating of set of images. It is through the analysis of all similar images that conclusions may be drawn.

Images for the VPS ™Results

The images which best represent the concepts and patterns that emerge as desirable and undesirable for the categories are finally selected for the presentation of the results. The selected images are typically used in the document to make a single, specific point regarding a design

feature or concept. However, particularly with the more positively-rated images, several design elements are usually present that are also found in other positively-rated images. The incremental differences between the positive and negative images also provide clues and solutions for retrofitting the negatively-rated images to become places that are more acceptable for the City of Fort Collins.

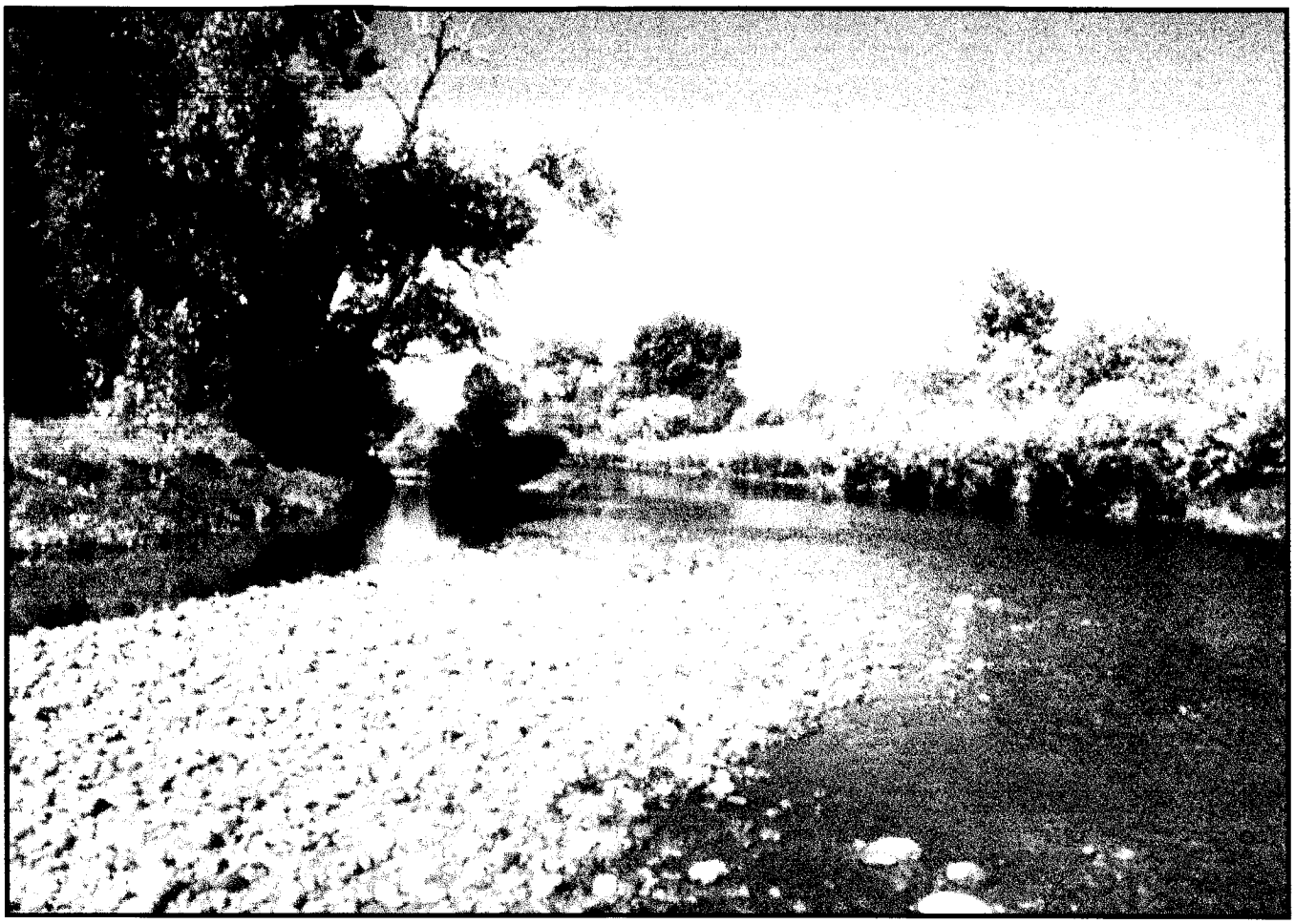
Questionnaire Synopsis

The City Plan Visual Preference Survey™ Questionnaire contained forty-three questions. The responses indicate that most participants live between Mulberry and Horsetooth Roads; and are between the ages of 25 - 64. Most of the participants live in and/or own detached single-family housing located on a loop road or cul-de-sac. While half of the participants have lived in the city for over ten years, only one-quarter expect to live there for more than ten more years. The average income ranged from $40,000 to $79,000. Half are employed full-time, living and working within the city.

Most expect that the population will increase by 100,000 over the next twenty years. The number of people who actually live in the city is as important to the highest percentage of the VPS™ participants as the way in which the city develops. Participants insist that development patterns be redesigned so as to minimize dominance by the automobile. To this end development within neighborhoods should permit, and encourage, a range of mixed- and multiple-use buildings in order to reduce auto dependency, traffic congestion and air pollution. Participants agree that the city should control the location and design character of all new and rehabilitated buildings, in addition to reinforcing and protecting the historic character of their downtown.

The questionnaire with the results in percentages for each response is reproduced in the appendix, while individual questions are incorporated into the text.

The Highest Rated Image and Desired Community Character



Image#:1.4 Score:+7.8

The highest rated image is that of an idyllic, undisturbed view of the Poudre River. This thematic emphasis upon environmental integrity and accessibility of the outdoors is underscored by several images. Participants clearly favor a coherent open space system—beginning with sidewalks, paths and parks—that connects all parts of the community. Everything that relates to a body of water or edges along waterways rates highly. The most important basic goal should be a lace of Greenways that link the community. Supporting this, 80% of the participants voiced support of the current program of spending tax dollars to purchase and preserve open space edges. This concern for the environment extends to the demand that development be restricted in environmentally sensitive lands.The unique character of the city is in no small part related to its particular landscape and topographical condition. Participants revere the environment; it must be celebrated throughout the city in redevelopment and new construction projects.

Image#: 3.34 Score:+5.3

Image#: 1.56 Score: +7.1

Image#:1.68 Score: +6.2

Fort Collins VPS Results

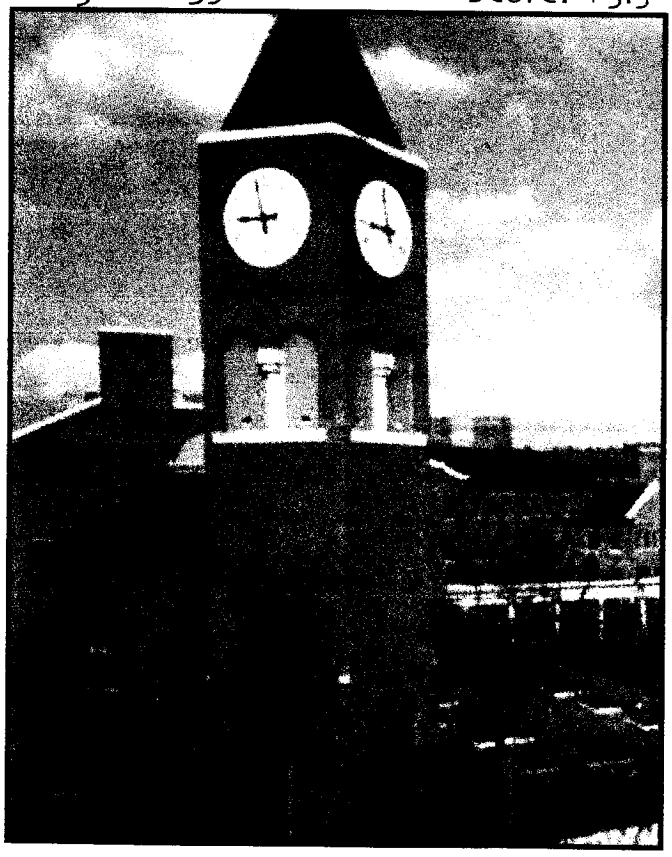
Image#: 3.31 Score: +5.3

Participants prefer visual character and quality for the city's future that derive from not only the natural environment, but also the built environment. The historic buildings of downtown provide future models and guides. Participants admire the texture and salmon color of the native sandstone; the stone should provide color guidance for brick and other masonry. Other design lessons that should be learned from downtown include buildings set directly at the edge of a sidewalk, containing a mix of uses—commercial on the ground floor and professional or residential space above. The survey indicates that it is possible for commercial uses to spill out onto the sidewalk in order to engage pedestrians. Businesses depend upon people walking by. If there is nothing to entertain people—shop windows, cafes—they will not walk, but rather get into their car and drive elsewhere. In order to make the pedestrian experience pleasurable, and therefore repeatable, they must be buffered from automobile traffic. The image of downtown prescribes diagonal head-in parking, street trees, and street furniture. Commercial streetscapes must be designed not only for the pedestrian, but also for alternative forms of transportation—bicycles and buses. Thus, special lanes should be designated for their use.

Image#1.80 Score: +6.7

Image#: 2.11 Score: +5.2

Image#: 2.35 Score: +5.5



Image#: 3.47 Score: +5.6

Image#: 3.49 Score: +5.4

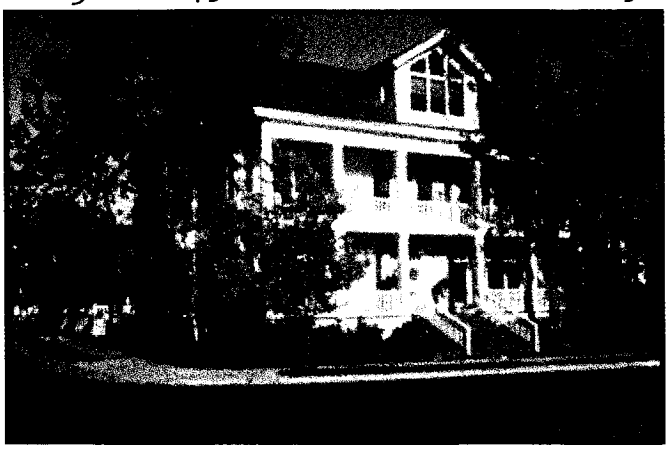
The Visual Preference Survey™ clearly indicated the type of residential streetscape that should support the commercial core. The preferred residential streetscape shares many design components with the commercial streetscape. Streets should be narrow with on-street parking to slow traffic speeds. Connector residential streets must be created as planted boulevards in order to visually minimize their width and to facilitate pedestrian crossing. As in the commercial areas, street trees—elements of the open space system—are required to separate pedestrians from moving traffic. The green parkway must be a minimum of five feet, though more would ease watering and mowing activities.

Participants want a completely connecting network of sidewalks in the residential neighborhoods. They want to be able to walk from home to school, neighborhood stores, and civic facilities. Participants do not want to be dependent upon cars for all facets of activity.

Within neighborhoods, residences should be set close to the sidewalk. The transitional area between the facade and the sidewalk must be clearly defined. Picket fences define the transition between the public realm of the sidewalk and the semi-public realm of the front yard. Front porches or articulated stoops further characterize the transition from semi-public to private. To provide a sense of security, houses should be elevated above grade at least 18 inches. This elevates the ground floor windows sufficiently that passers-by do not see directly into the house, while those inside may look out onto the street activity.

Image# 1.66 Score: +4.9

Image#: 2.45 Score: +5.1



Image#: 1.29 Scores: +5.3

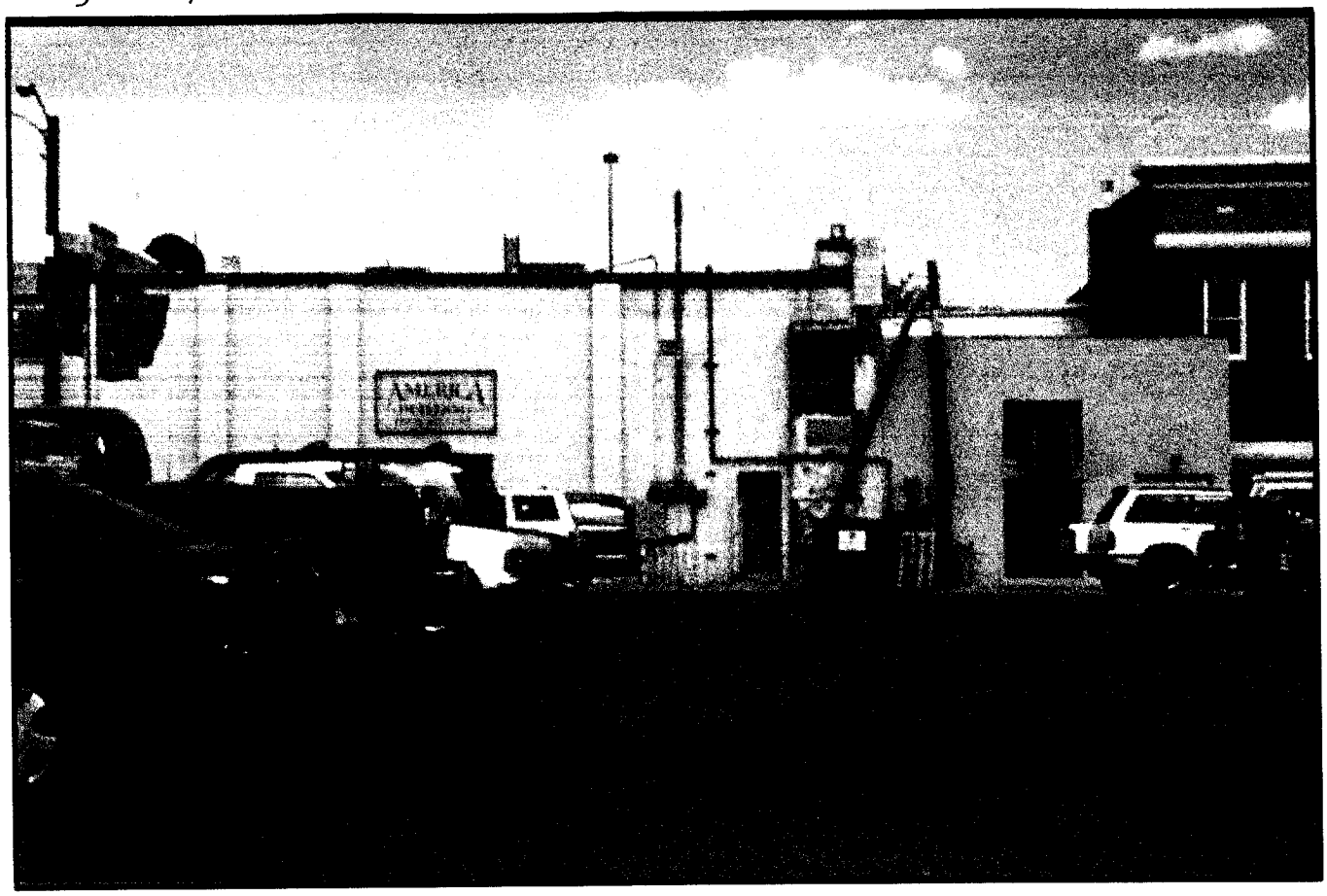
The final critical component of community design is the park system. We saw in the first set of images that participants consider the natural environment to be akin to a religious experience. Not surprisingly, a variety of parks must be designed into the community form. Residential neighborhoods and the downtown need small internal parks and open spaces to provide visual relief from the hard edge of the built environment. There must be places for small children to safely play, for weary shoppers to pause, and for casual, spontaneous meetings. The community must be surrounded by a larger open space system that clearly defines and distinguishes it from other surrounding communities. This larger system will provide space for organized activities and access to the foothills and the prairie.

Image#: 1.28 Score: +5

Image#: 1.16 Score: +5.3

Lowest Rated Image and Undesireable Community Character

Image#: 2.7 Score: -5.6



Image#: 3.30 Score: -3.8

These lowest rated images illustrate the participants greatest fears of what might happen within the city; the reactions may indicate that a change in codes may be necessary in order to limit these development forms. Automobile domination creates the intensive visual blight. It provides a constant reminder of our dependence on machines. Such negative reaction is not surprising given the desire to preserve and enhance the green intrusion of nature into the built environment. Streets, parking lots and shopping areas designed only for the convenience of the automobile receive poor ratings from a community that

Image#: 2.31 Score: -2

values the outdoors. Participants may fear that if such development is allowed, Fort Collins will lose it's individual character. This is a process and a fear that must be thwarted.

Nothing in any of these five images seem to attract pedestrian activity. Both the strip mall and America parking lots visually threaten a person's comfort and security. However, current development practices permit few alternatives. Blank road edges encourage traffic to move faster; however, one rarely moves at the appropriate design speed because the development pattern of cul-de-sacs and arterials precipitates congestion. As we learn from these negative images, no one wants to sit in a traffic jam and breathe exhaust fumes.

The lack of maintenance apparent in the student apartments also contributes to the debasement of the community character. Since the university for the most part provides less than adequate housing, it comes as no surprise that students move out of dormitories as soon as possible. Landlords, consequently, have a unrelenting supply of tenants with a high turnover rate. In order to ensure the character and quality of the community, the city may need to enforce more stringently the maintenance codes upon these absentee landlords.

Image#: 1.43 Score #: -4.7

Image#: 2.67 Score: -2.1

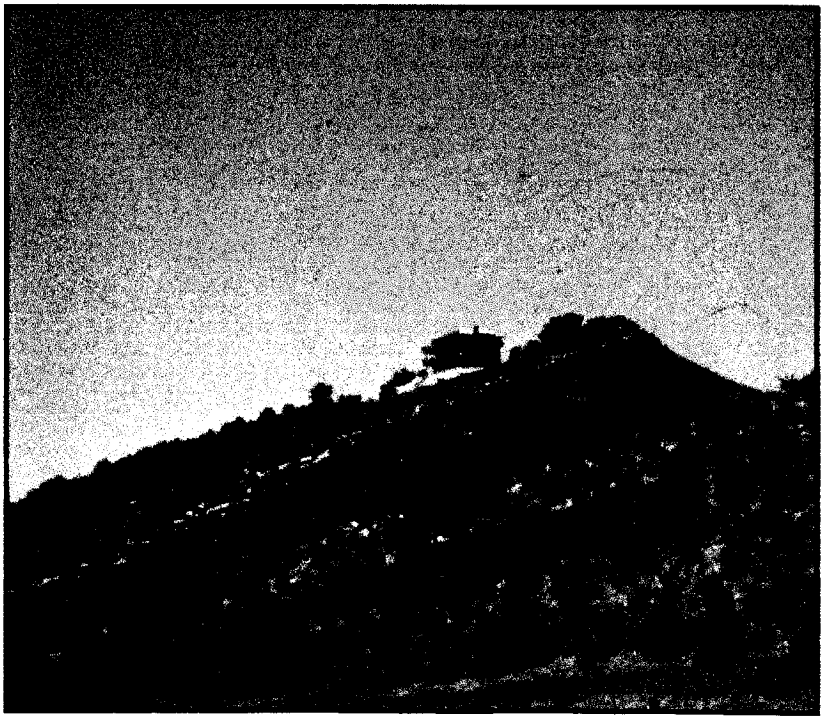
Visions For Open Space

Image#: 1.1

Score: +6.6

Image#: 3.5

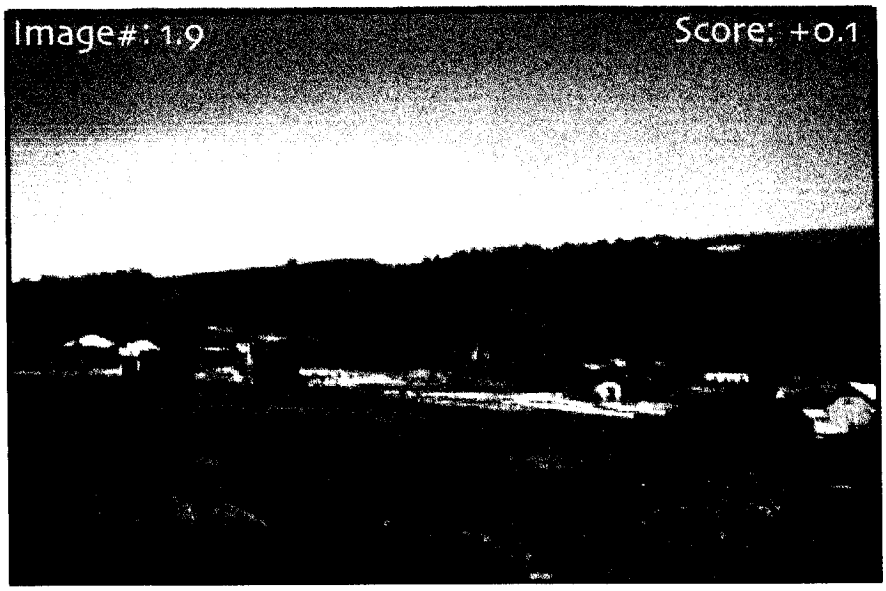
Score: -0.9

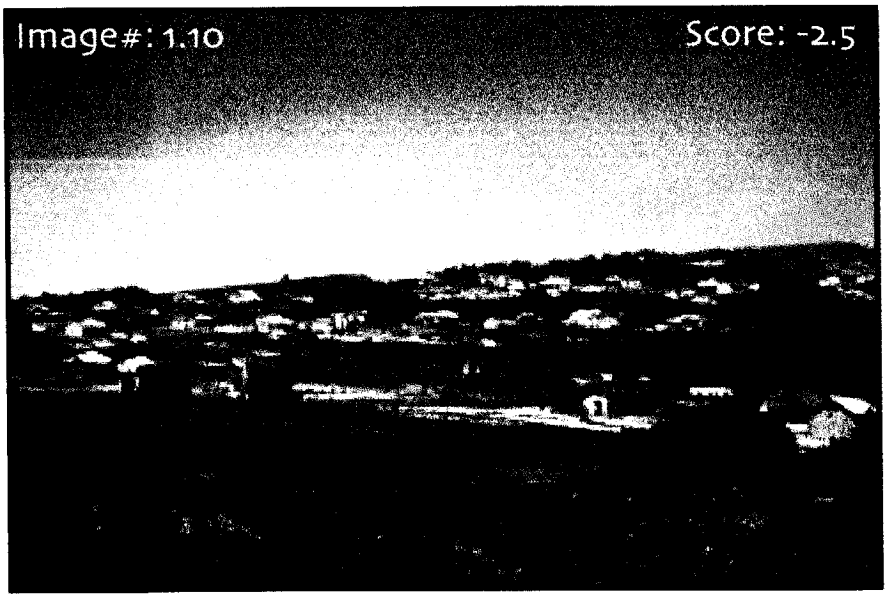


Throughout the VPS™ it was noted that the participants held the natural environment in the highest regard. 92% believe that natural areas along streams should be preserved in their natural state. As with most Front Range cities and farming communities, it seems that the residents of Fort Collins are becoming increasingly appreciative of the remaining natural environment within and surrounding their communities. The participants reactions throughout the VPS™ indicated that the reservoir and other existing open spaces should be preserved to the greatest extent possible and feasible. However, it was noted that even though preservation was stressed, accessibility to

them was also a desired factor. It is suggested that more paths be provided to invite and lead people to and through the natural areas. This interest in and concern for the environment is underscored by the questionnaire responses.

Participants are equally sure of what development forms were desirable and undesirable. The results indicate that the foothills should be preserved. This is apparent in the scores of a series of photo-simulations using our envisioneering computer techniques. The image of development that currently exists at the base of the foothills received a neutral reaction from most of the participants. When similar development extending up the foothills was simulated, the reaction dropped to a negative (-2.5). However, the other simulation that proposed a more intensive cluster of houses with the corresponding open space, received a positive (+1.6). The type of development shown in the negative image seems too intrusive and invasive; it privatizes a highly valued landscape, thereby detracting from the overall community value and spoiling the scenic backdrop. It is suggested that the foothills remain a community amenity.





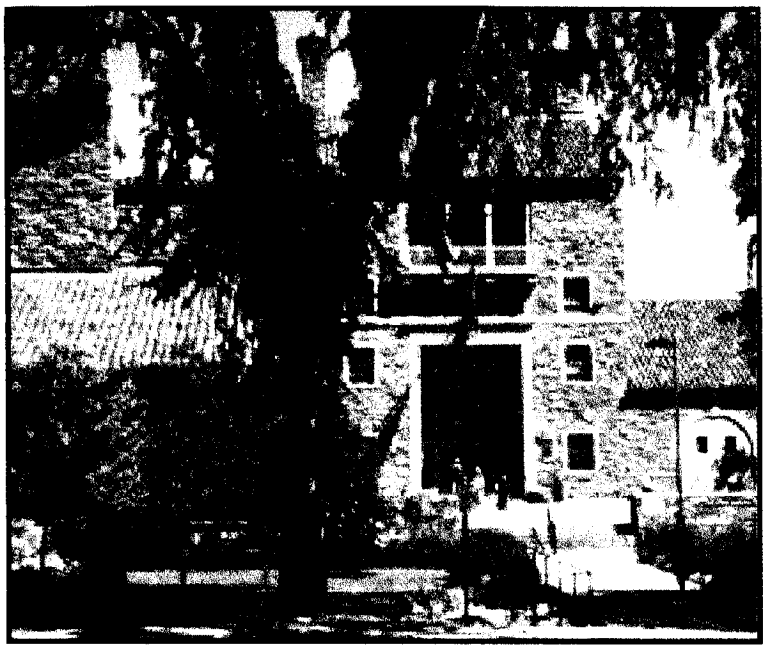
75% of the participants feel that Fort Collins should have edges which make it easy to distinguish the city from the adjacent communities. Furthermore, 90% insist that development must be restricted or closely monitored on environmentally sensitive lands. Large lots which stimulate land stewardship should be encouraged. It holds true that unrestrained development is detrimental to the natural environment.

Image#: 1.17 Score: +4.6

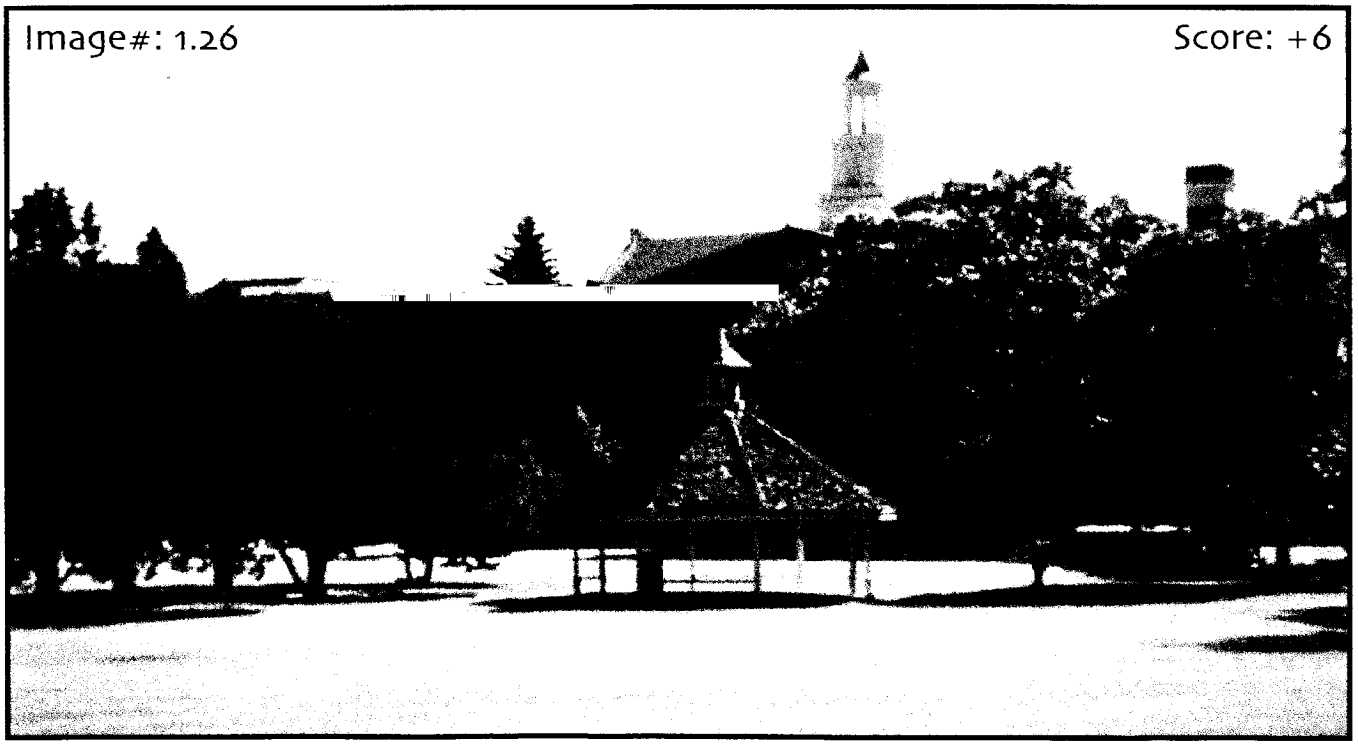
Image#: 3.3 Score: +4.5

Visions For Civic Uses

It is certain that the City of Fort Collins wants to retain and enhance the unique character and quality of the community. The greatest fear in historical communities, like Fort Collins, is that development will not promote the area's unique character, but rather a generic, repetitive image. It is recommended that major civic buildings—schools, libraries, city hall—which by virtue of their size and use, draw attention to themselves, retain architectural and historical worth. This should be accomplished through both architectural style--classical or the vernacular romanasque, employing either the local salmon sandstone or brick building materials--and siting contiguous to a significant civic park or open space. Civic buildings embody conspicuous evidence of the spirit and character unique to Fort Collins.



Image#: 1.40 Score: +4.3

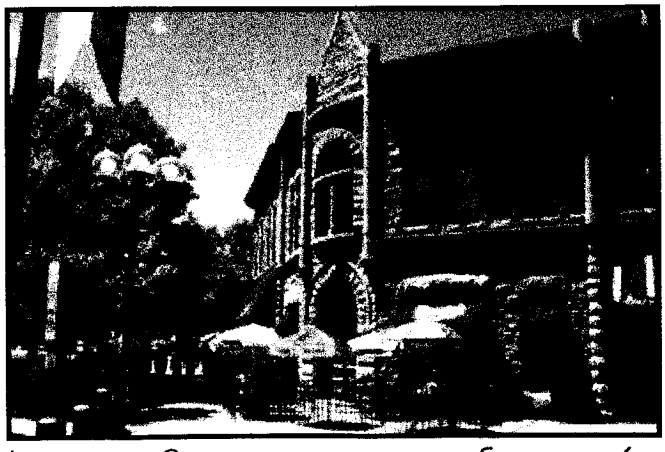


Image#: 1.26 Score: +6

Visions For Commercial Development

Image#: 1.79 Score: +5.9

Image#:3.31 Score:+5.3



Image#1.80 Score: +6.7

Participants in the Fort Collins VPS clearly encourage continued redevelopment of the downtown; its qualities were conclusively desirable and successful throughout the VPS ratings. The survey indicated that 55% of the participants think there should be one major center, downtown, where the taller buildings are concentrated. This center should be supplemented with other smaller centers providing civic and commercial services.

People are drawn to tightly designed spaces that offer discrete vantages for people watching. When such places, especially outdoor cafes, are imbued with vegetation, they generally are successful. Like the residential components of the community, commercial design needs more emphasis upon designing from a human scale. Unfortunately, in most communities current development practices are based on design standards whose general goal is to facilitate vehicular movement. The repercussions of such penchants can be witnessed in the ratings of these images. For example, recent construction on the city's edge—both commercial and professional—has neglected some of the downtown human-scale presence.

Image#: 1.77 Score: +3.6

Image#: 2.18 Score: -2.3

The common practice of widening of roads by removing on-street parking in order to enhance traffic flow has the negative effect of inhibiting pedestrians. Such activity suffers because of the proximity to high speed traffic. Mall designers will explain that consumers prefer to park in front of stores. Consequently, commercial areas require on-street parking or surface parking lots. However, people generally dislike parking lots because they are designed for cars, at the expense of people. People do not like their shopping experiences to include encounters with thousands of pounds of metal, situations in which they are clearly the underdog. Parking areas must provide safe, well landscaped walkways.

Discount commercial establishments are typically not found downtown. While it is necessary to be able to purchase goods for the most reasonable price possible, cities must be mindful that provision of such shopping alternatives does not occur at the degradation of the existing community character, the Downtown and the waste of infrastructure.

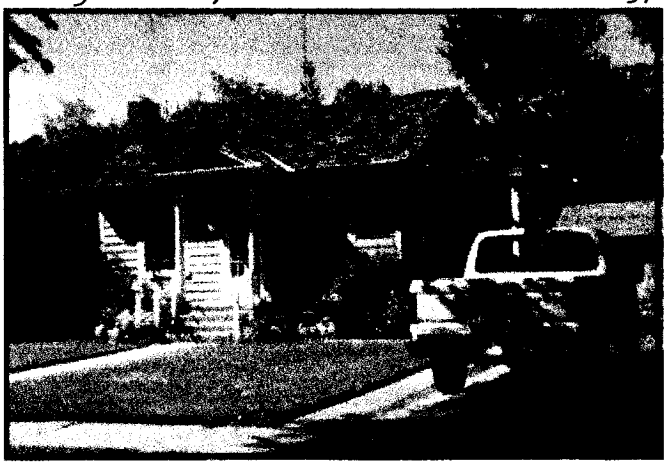
Image#: 1.50 Score : +5.3

Visions For Single-Family Residential Development

Image#: 2.77 Score: +4.9

This category, not surprisingly, continues to reinforce the importance of maintaining the historical and traditional design principles. The positive images present architecturally classical, moderate to large homes sited on narrow residential streets. They are placed relatively close to the sidewalk with garages in the side or rear yards. The garage then becomes a relatively inconspicuous component within the overall streetscape.

Image#: 2.69 Score: +1.37



Image#: 2.79 Score: +3.53

Image#: 2.73 Score: +0.3

A less desirable image emphasizes upon the garage by locating it directly in the forefront of the house; such treatment gives our homes and neighborhoods over to machines. If participants find the street view inappropriate, then what do they think of the backyards? The survey indicates that they are just as uninspiring as the fronts.

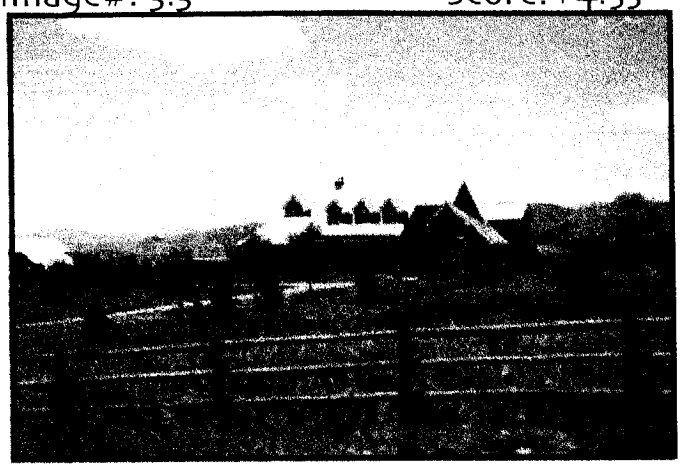
Image#: 1.21 Score: +0.4

The overall design program that respondents would find desirable is a combination of the interior amenities of new houses—large closets, modern kitchens and great rooms—with the streetscapes and site plans of traditional houses. Garages are tucked in the rear, preferably accessed from an alley. The transition between the public realm of the sidewalk and the semi-public front yard should be defined with a hedge or low fence. When a house is situated close to the sidewalk, design should consider privacy. In order to prevent passersby from peering directly into the front windows, the house must be elevated a minimum of 18 inches above ground level. A front porch provides a place for casual conversations among neighbors. Porches continue the transition from the semi-public realm of the front yard to the private realm of the interior. Finally, front doors should be clearly located, perhaps even architecturally emphasized, on the facade so as to underscore the human presence in the scale of the house.

Everyone deserves to live in a place designed according to the human scale. Not only do such places instill pride in individuals, but there is a ripple effect. When people live in well designed places that are properly maintained, everyone's property values rise. The place becomes known for its high design standards, and can potentially become a tourist destination. Non-residents are unlikely to visit a place with a negative appearance.

Image#: 1.66 Score +4.9

Image#: 3.3 Score: +4.55



Image#: 3.17 Score: +2.9

Image #:3.1 Score: +3.57

Visions For Multi-Family Residential Development

Image#: 2.45 Score: +5.7

Image#: 2.49 Score: +4.5

The most positively rated image of multi-family development (or any residential development) appears above. While it first appears to be a single family residence, in fact, it contains four units. This image demonstrates that multi-family housing can be successfully integrated into a neighborhood. The building contains most of the design program valued in the single family section, albeit on a larger scale, making it a seamless addition to the neighborhood.

The public usually resists multi-family developments near single family development because the design programs seem incompatible; these images clearly demonstrate that such a mixture can be compatible.