Understanding & Making Use of People’s Visual Preferences

Editor’s Note: The following articles, prepared by Anton Nelessen and James Constantine of the Princeton, New Jersey firm of Nelessen & Associates, explore one powerful way by which a community can seek to learn — and make use of — the “visual preferences” of its residents. Methods such as those pioneered by the Nelessen firm help answer the challenge that dealing with aesthetic or visual concerns is too subjective a matter for planners [for this point of view, see Frank Bryan’s “Insights” column in Issue 7 of the Journal].

Following this article is a brief account of how developers are making growing use of “focus groups” in planning their projects. Focus groups provide developers a mechanism for more closely examining the visual and aesthetic preferences of prospective homebuyers. Recall also our last issue and Clare Cooper Marcus’ article, “Considering Residents’ Needs” — as well as the article on Brunswick, Maine’s, charrette. These too explored ways of understanding and making use of what people want their surroundings to look like.

1. DEVELOPING THE VISUAL PREFERENCE SURVEY™

by Anton C. Nelessen

In 1979, Metuchen, New Jersey commissioned the Rutgers University urban design studio (of which I was director) to help them prepare a plan for the downtown. Metuchen is a small, older town in central New Jersey, with a population of about 13,000.

In thinking about the project, I began to ask myself how the people who lived in Metuchen thought about their downtown. What did they feel was positive? What didn’t they like? What type and density of new development would they find acceptable? We photographed the town and picked other scenes from our slide library. The slides were then shown to townspersons at a large public meeting. We asked them to give us a positive sign if they liked the picture, and a negative one if they didn’t. This was our first visual preference survey (“VPS”).

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After the meeting, the evaluations were added up. Interestingly enough, some scenes were rated positive by most of the participants, while others were overwhelmingly rated negative. We interpreted this to mean that there were building and landscape designs, land uses, and even densities, that almost everyone found acceptable. If the acceptable images were incorporated into the downtown plan, we reasoned, then the plan should be well-received by the town. Conversely, the plan should contain recommendations on how to deal with (either through prohibition or upgrading) the negatively rated images.

The results of the VPS were used to guide the character of downtown streetscape improvement, facade renovations, and infill multi-family housing. Metuchen went on to adopt design codes based on the community’s articulated preferences. Subsequent development received very favorable “reviews” from the town. In effect, the town’s visual preferences were becoming reality.

In the years since the Metuchen project, working with many different communities, we have found that the VPS enables citizens, government officials and developers to participate in creating a common vision — for either a large development project, a part of the community or, even, the entire community. The survey allows a community to evaluate its existing physical environment in order to learn if the current types of development meet with public approval. The survey can determine preferences for things ranging from types and densities of land use, to the style of downtown streetscape improvements.

2. WORKING WITH THE CITIZENS OF NORTH BEND, WASHINGTON

by James Constantine

North Bend, Washington is in the process of updating its comprehensive plan. Located in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains about thirty miles east of Seattle, North Bend is a community of 2,700 people that is facing intense suburban growth pressure. Historically a small town on a two-lane highway to the mountains, North Bend found itself situated at three interchanges when Interstate 90 was completed. During the past decade, new commercial and residential development pressures have been pushing down the I-90 corridor toward North Bend. The development climate has already brought the community a new shopping mall, a huge warehouse facility, large residential annexation proposals, and a burgeoning “anti-
growth” movement.

With these dynamics at work, it seemed sensible that a new comprehensive plan needed to involve and balance all factions of the community. The first step was to bring together citizens, elected officials, planning commissioners, property owners, developers, and anti-growth groups to work cooperatively in defining a “common vision” for the future.

To this end, our firm, this past summer and fall, prepared a Visual Preference Survey for North Bend. It consisted of 220 slide images, about two-thirds of which were of various scenes in North Bend itself: the downtown, the new mall, residential neighborhoods, multi-family projects, streets, parks, open space, and historic sites. Views included sidewalks, close-up details of landscaping and signs, and even some aerial shots. The remainder of the images were from other communities in the region, and from similar communities elsewhere in the nation.

We showed the images to over 100 people at several public input sessions. Images were displayed one at a time, for about five seconds each. We asked the participants to rate each image — on a scale ranging from +10 to -10 — based on their view of its appropriateness to North Bend. Ratings were tallied on personal computer score sheets. Individuals who moderately liked an image might rate it +4 or +5; individuals who slightly disliked the same image might assess it -1 or -2, and so forth. Zero was reserved for neutral responses.

After the survey sessions were complete, we entered the score sheets of all the participants into a computer program that calculated an average (mean) rating for each image. The average score for the entire group determined the final rating of each image.

In analyzing the survey results, we compared the ratings of various images — for example, how the community evaluated the downtown compared to the new mall. We also looked at things like the relative ratings of different types of sidewalks. We asked ourselves why the community rated images in particular ways, and whether there were patterns to the way the images were rated.

The survey results provided direct public feedback on the community’s recent course of development. The community gave low grades to scenes of deterioration in the old downtown, as well as to new strip commercial development at the highway interchange. Highly positive ratings were given to several scenic open space areas and historic buildings, but surprisingly, also to scenes of a new downtown-style shopping mall in Massachusetts. In residential development, large-scale multi-family projects were viewed negatively by the community. However, scenes of smaller multi-family infill projects received positive scores. In general, the community showed a preference for traditional, pedestrian-oriented development over automobile-oriented suburban forms. The survey results were analyzed and reduced to a set of the most representative images, then translated into a community “vision plan,” which will help form the basis for the comprehensive plan.

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Using Models

Following up on the visual preference survey, our firm conducted several workshops in North Bend in which citizens, elected officials, planning commissioners, property owners and developers “translated” the community’s visions into three-dimensional scale models. The models simulated downtown infill development, highway interchange commercial areas, the expansion of older residential neighborhoods, rural clusters, and new planned residential developments. The models have been incorporated as development prototypes in the community’s draft comprehensive plan.

We have found that the use of architectural models — consisting of everything from single-family homes and apartments to strip malls and drive-in banks, along with roads, sidewalks, and trees — brings site plans to life. Simulating a site plan in three dimensions is critical since it can be extremely difficult for most people to visualize what a development will look and feel like just by analyzing the number of units per acre, lot widths and setbacks, or even by looking at blueprints.

Editor’s Note: The Nelessen firm calls its models, “Hands-On Models.” There are similar approaches, with varying levels of sophistication, being used by other organizations. The University of Vermont’s Historic Preservation Department, for example, has developed what it calls a “Visual Laboratory” which uses realistic scale models to help planning boards and others “see” what different development scenarios might look like. Those of you who as a child (or still today!) enjoyed building or manipulating models or dollhouses will readily understand the logic that moveable models can make reality more imaginable — or even provide insights into a better reality.

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One of the greatest strengths of the North Bend planning process has been its ability to develop consensus among diverse groups that sometimes represent competing interests in development issues. Since the community at large has now clearly identified a common vision of the type of development that it favors, the planning commission has less guesswork to perform in preparing the comprehensive plan.

Since the plan will reflect a common vision, local officials and citizens can assist rather than hinder development. All concerned parties want to see development that they can point to with pride.

Anton C. Nelessen is the Principal of A. Nelessen Associates, based in Princeton, New Jersey, with regional offices in Seattle, Washington; St. Charles, Illinois; Natchez, Mississippi; and Ottawa, Ontario. James Constantine is a Senior Associate and founding member of the firm. The firm has used its visual preference survey method in numerous communities across the country. Please note that the terms “Visual Preference Survey,” and “Hands-On Models” are trademarks of A. Nelessen Associates.

Resources

James Constantine, author of this article, would be pleased to provide you with additional information on the visual preference survey (or the “hands-on models”). You can reach him at: A. Nelessen Associates, 909 State St., Princeton, NJ 08540; (609) 497-0104.

The University of Vermont’s “Visual Laboratory” is described in detail in The Hidden Design in Land Use Ordinances — an informative publication on how to understand the visual impact of dimensions used in land use ordinances. For ordering information, contact the University of Southern Maine at: (207) 780-4920.