



Trees in Small City Business Districts: Comparing Resident and Visitor Response

Do people prefer to shop in places having tree-lined streets? Scientific studies about trees and business districts answer this question with a resounding “yes!” One study focused on smaller cities (10-20,000 population). Fourteen cities with downtown business districts were selected throughout the United States. Surveys were sent to residents, the most likely shoppers in the districts. Surveys were also sent to potential visitors in nearby larger cities (100,000 population or more). Both groups favored trees in retail streetscapes. The urban forest is an important amenity that provides curb appeal, and attracts visitors and shoppers to downtown business districts.

Public Preferences

Preference surveys are used to assess public values for various landscapes. In this study people rated 30 scenes using the scale of 1=not at all to 5=like very much. Ratings are not just aesthetic reactions; they reflect a person’s complex understandings and assumptions about a place. Judgments of high visual quality are often linked to behavior. Preference ratings provide information for planning and managing more shopper-friendly places.



Highest Rated Street Scene
3.85



Overall Highest Rated Scene
4.23



Lowest Rated Scene
1.51

LOW AND HIGH RATINGS – Image ratings were averaged. Scenes with the lowest and highest mean ratings differ quite a bit. Pedestrian-oriented pocket parks are most highly rated. These small landscaped spaces provide a quiet moment while in the city.

When comparing street scenes, higher preference is expressed for trees that are large and enclose the street. There is a full two point difference between streets with and without trees. Archi-

ture and parking are similar for all images, so probably have little effect on the ratings.

Consistent with other landscape research, the presence of trees enhances public preferences. In this study people enjoy having trees in small parks within business districts, and in the overall street environment.



**Category 1:
Pocket Parks**
overall mean: 3.72
resident: 3.76
visitor: 3.69



**Category 2:
Full Street Canopy**
overall mean: 3.63
resident: 3.58
visitor: 3.66



**Category 3:
Enclosed Sidewalk**
overall mean: 3.32
resident: 3.28
visitor: 3.33



**Category 4:
Intermittent Trees**
overall mean: 2.78
resident: 2.96
visitor: 2.61
(significantly different)



**Category 5:
No Trees**
overall mean: 1.65
resident: 1.69
visitor: 1.60

Public preferences for business districts increase with the presence of more and larger trees!

The same results are found in studies of both small and big city business districts.

Visual Categories

Statistics can be used to extract image categories based on ratings patterns. Five visual categories were identified. Mean (or average) ratings and standard deviations were calculated for each, and t-Tests were used for comparisons ($p < .01$). Here are the results.

CATEGORY PREFERENCES – The most highly preferred category was *Pocket Parks*. A person has views of surrounding buildings and streets while in these tiny parks, but is removed from the busyness of the street and sidewalk. Small green spaces provide moments of rest that allow the district user to regroup and then continue with his or her visit in the district.

Looking across the categories of street scenes, ratings increase steadily with the presence of trees. Category 5, *No Trees*, is rated distinctly lower than all other categories and contains no sign of vegetation within a block of well-maintained buildings. Category 4, *Intermittent Trees*, has a higher rating though the trees are a minor visual element. Vegetation is visible, but is less prominent when compared to paving and buildings. Categories 2 and 3 are streetscapes where trees are larger and define the space at the street level. Trees provide a physical and visual separation from the street for a pedestrian.

RESIDENT AND VISITOR DIFFERENCES – Business districts that have large trees are most preferred by both small and large city residents. Differences in response for the two groups were found only on *Intermittent Trees*. Potential visitors and tourists from large cities rated these street scenes lower.

Retail & Tree Management

Consumers enjoy having trees in shopping districts, and are willing to spend more where trees are present! Small trees provide some amenities, but are less preferred. Small street trees are being selected for planting in many cities, due to sign visibility and maintenance issues. But the mature canopy of small trees directly screens shop windows and signs. Larger trees can be pruned to enhance visibility, and are more preferred by the people whose purchases support merchants.



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