



## Visitor Preferences for Trees in Streetscapes: Nature and Commerce in Athens, Georgia

Many downtown central business districts (CBD) experience intense retail competition from discount retailers, regional malls, and online shopping. Merchants will often organize and plan physical improvements to create a more appealing consumer environment. Such planning is important, as recent retail marketing studies indicate that shoppers are becoming more interested in having quality experiences while spending time in shopping places.

How does the urban forest contribute to the experience of a shopping district.? This question was explored in case study research in Athens, Georgia (USA). Using an on-site survey, Athens CBD visitors were asked about their streetscape preferences. The results confirm that trees are an important element in creating an attractive retail setting. Green shopping settings welcome visitors and shoppers! Athens, GA is a National Main Street program participant; these research results are relevant to other mid-size American cities.

### Shoppers and Visual Quality

Preference surveys have been used by city planners and social scientists to measure public values for urban environments. Municipal staff, agency professionals, students and scientists worked together to better understand how trees affect Athens, GA visitors.

**LOW AND HIGH RATINGS** - 365 people were approached on the streets of Athens and asked to rate 20 color scenes for how much they liked the pictures (scale of 1=not at all to 5=very much). Respondents included students, residents and visitors. Ratings were averaged. High and low scoring scenes are quite different.



**Lowest rating**  
Mean 1.34, sd 0.73

**PREFERENCE AND BEHAVIOR** - The ratings express visitors' aesthetic judgment. And research has shown that visual impressions, or image, of a place are related to higher judgments of the quality and character of the shopping environment.



**Highest rating**  
Mean 4.67, sd 0.66

Trees create positive images of shopping districts! As one visitor noted, *"the green makes everything so much more pleasant, relaxed, and beautiful."*

## Perceptions Categories

Using statistics, the image ratings were analyzed for categories of scenes, based on similar patterns of response. Three visual categories were identified in this study. It is worth noting that both the content of the categories, and their mean scores, are consistent with other research on trees and commerce in U.S. cities.

**CATEGORY RATINGS** – Preference ratings increase with the presence of trees. Athens, GA is a long term participant in the National Main Street program, and has an active agenda of building improvements and preservation. A high quality built environment has been created, yet visual response is positively influenced by trees.

Category 1 was rated lower, by far, than the other categories even though the historic buildings are evident. Meanwhile, Category 2 images have street trees and are rated higher even though buildings are not as architecturally interesting, nor scaled to pedestrians. Larger trees are associated with highest preference of Category 3. The trees create a distinct mood and street character.

**ALL VISITORS VALUE TREES** –When testing for differences in response it was found that few personal characteristics of the respondents, their shopping attitudes or familiarity with the district, had any affect on ratings. One person's comments captures the values of many, "*Trees and plants are VITAL for enhancing my shopping, dining, and entertainment experience. The trees in downtown Athens are what make Athens the wonderful place that it is.*"

## Design, Planning and Management for Trees

Nature needs care! Private and public partners have invested in creating a distinctive and pleasant consumer environment in Athens, GA. Planning and investment is needed to sustain a quality urban forest. Both scientific data and personal comments from CBD visitors in this study testify to the value of trees as a retail amenity. Results show that consumers enjoy having trees in retail shopping districts! Investing in trees is good business!



**Category 1:**  
**Dominant Buildings**  
**Visitor Mean: 1.98, SD 0.71**



**Category 2**  
**Buffered Buildings**  
**Visitor Mean: 3.13, SD 1.00**



**Category 3**  
**Green Streets**  
**Visitor Mean: 4.00, SD 0.60**

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