RESEARCH DESIGN CONNECTIONS

Studies examine the retail value of trees, psychological effects of roadside plantings, and not driving in national parks.

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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, in partnership with the web-based newsletter and daily blog *Research Design Connections,* uses this column to report current research of interest to landscape architects from a wide array of disciplines. We welcome your comments, suggestions about future topics, and studies you have encountered in your own practice.

Trees Earn Their Keep

RECENT RESEARCH by Kathleen Wolf builds on previous studies that show the positive effects of trees on judgments of visual quality and, in particular, on consumer behavior. Two studies by Wolf, reported together, indicate that trees increase people's positive perceptions of central business districts in cities and towns of various sizes, generate shopping activity, and enhance perceptions of product pricing. Wolf says she was motivated to conduct her survey-based research because few marketing studies "have looked beyond the door of the store to assess the consequences of streetscape character and shopping response."

Wolf presented study participants with images of business districts with varying numbers of trees. The responses revealed that:

- Participants consistently valued the presence of trees in images presented to them. "Image categories depicting business district settings having tidy sidewalks and quality buildings but no trees were at the low end of the preference ratings. Images having well-tended large trees received the highest preference ratings, even though plants obscured other elements (such as historic buildings) that often are the targets of business-improvement programs."
- Participants valued both openly pruned and densely canopied trees, which indicates that trimming trees for better visibility of buildings or storefronts doesn't diminish shoppers' positive responses to the trees.

From these responses, Wolf concludes that "limbing up" and thinning the canopies of large trees "is a better management strategy for visual quality enhancements than topping [trees] at sign levels or planting smaller trees [whose] mature canopy height is the same as business windows and signage." The study also linked the presence of trees to more positive conjectures about in-store experiences. "Judgments of products and merchants were more positive in forested places as were inferences about product value, product quality, and merchant responsiveness," Wolf notes. "Respondents infer that the green streetscape has more positive atmosphere, image, and comfort level and would be a more favorable place to visit and dine out."

Participants reported that once drawn to sylvan streetscapes, they would be willing to pay more for parking, goods, and services in areas with trees. These increased parking fees, along with the increased store revenue that can reasonably be associated with the longer time periods that people indicated they would spend in areas with trees, may provide the needed financial support for tree planting in shopping districts.

Source

- "Business District Streetscapes, Trees, and Consumer Response," by Kathleen Wolf; *Journal of Forestry,* vol. 103, no. 8, 2005.
- "Trees in the Small City Retail Business District: Comparing Resident and Visitor Perceptions," by Kathleen Wolf, *Journal of Forestry,* vol. 103, no. 8, 2005.

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