

# QUALITIES THAT YOUTH VALUE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CAMBRIA, PASO ROBLES, AND SAN LUIS OBISPO

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*Traditionally planning has concentrated on the adult population for decision-making processes, overlooking the needs and values of adolescents. To better understand how adolescents relate to their communities, to identify the qualities they value most, and to find ways to encourage their involvement in planning, in her MCRP thesis Camille Passon conducted a comparative study with high-school seniors in three communities. This article summarizes that study and highlights some of its important findings.*

The manner in which we plan and develop our communities exhibits our values as a culture and has a dramatic effect on how we relate to our environment. Planners have a responsibility to ensure that all residents within each community have an opportunity to provide input on matters which affect their quality of life. Unfortunately, there are barriers which preclude certain members of society from participating in the process of planning and designing their communities. This study focused on the barrier of age.

Children and adolescents are often excluded from planning activities simply because of their age. As a result, the places in which they live do not respond to their unique needs. Adults tend to believe that they know what is best for their children and that young people are not capable of providing valuable input. Generally, this means raising them in a quiet, suburban neighborhood and adopting policies and design practices that restrict the activities of minors and prohibit their occupation of public spaces. These actions are usually meant to either protect young children from harm, or the general public from rowdy teenagers; however, they can have a devastating effect on how these young people develop.

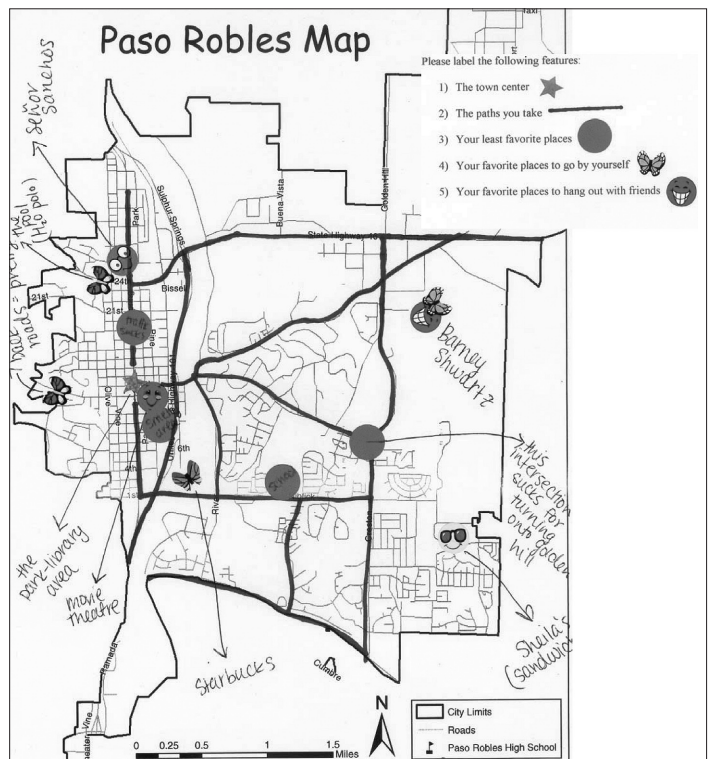
Being involved in the daily social life of cities and urban streets provides healthy stimulation for young minds and helps minors to become well-adjusted adults. Without this exposure to the public realm adolescents may not be able to complete certain developmental tasks such as establishing satisfying relationships, learning how to use free time wisely, and becoming comfortable being alone. In addition, the more children are disciplined, punished and controlled, the more they begin to see themselves as a group that is incapable of creating change and lacks valuable opinions. In order to ensure that they are capable of becoming active civic leaders in the future, we need to begin empowering them and involving them in important governmental activities that directly affect their daily lives, such as urban planning.

The first step to involve children more actively in planning is to gain an understanding of their perceptions of their environment and the qualities that they value within their communities. A limited amount of research has pursued this topic. Arguably, the most comprehensive study was conducted by UNESCO; however, it focused primarily on children under the age of 14 in countries other than the United States. Known as the *Growing Up in Cities*, that study identified certain qualities that indicate if a community is a good place to mature. These indicators include safety, freedom of movement, social integration, cohesive community identity, green areas, peer meeting places and a variety of interesting settings. The definitions of these indicators are summarized below:

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**Figure 2**  
One of the research instruments, where respondents indicated the places they liked and disliked, the town center, and the paths they more often used.

The results showed that all of the quality indicators are important to the students; however, the degree of importance that the students placed on the indicators varied and seemed to be attributed to the unique experiences that the students have had in each community. For example, students in Cambria, the smallest and most isolated of the three communities, rated freedom of movement significantly





**Figure 3**  
*In downtown San Luis Obispo, one of the preferred places was the open pedestrian-friendly mall that features movie theatres, eateries, and places to hang-out.*

more important than students in Paso Robles or San Luis Obispo. The students crave seeing new things and meeting new people. They have to leave their small town in order to obtain that kind of excitement and stimulation.

In each city, students indicated that they feel safe in their communities and that there are an abundance of green areas; however, they stated that their communities lack social integration, cohesive community identity, freedom of movement, peer meeting places and a variety of interesting settings. This perceived lack of quality indicators contributed to the low ratings of satisfaction with each community and its amenities.

Of the students who participated, only 11 percent in Cambria, 17 percent in Paso Robles, and 24 percent in San Luis Obispo indicated that they are satisfied.

An observation for why San Luis Obispo may have received a higher rating is that, out of the areas studied, it is the only community with a large, identifiable, pedestrian-friendly downtown area. Students in all three communities indicated that they enjoy visiting downtown San Luis Obispo. It provides them with an opportunity to meet their friends, interact with others, walk to several shops and eating places, go to a movie theater or hang out at a bookstore. This downtown area provides them with a significant amount of freedom and entertainment.

The students cited reasons for disliking their communities. The primary reasons are the difficulty they experience getting to their friends houses due to a sprawling development pattern, a lack of inexpensive places for young people to hang out with their friends, a lack of recreational opportunities, and being asked to leave certain places by adults for no apparent reason.

These results indicate that small, quiet suburban-type communities are not necessarily the best places for adolescents to grow up. If young people could choose where to live, they would likely choose compact, transit-oriented communities, which are more likely to obtain the quality indicators that they value. In addition, they would prefer residences that are designed to facilitate interaction with others, such as homes with front porches that abut the sidewalk. These happen to be principles of smart growth, a development pattern that promotes objectives such as a greater mix of commercial and residential uses, preservation of open space and other environmental amenities, and more vibrant town centers. This should be a call to parents who still believe that suburban neighborhoods are ideal places to raise their children, as well as to hesitant developers and investors who insist that traditional sprawl is the only adequate response to the housing market.

Many believe that communities which implement smart growth principles sustain a higher quality of life. Perhaps involving minors in planning can aid in implementing these concepts. One of the suggestions provided in the study includes establishing adolescent commissions, which could prepare Youth Elements for General Plans or other policy documents aimed at identifying and advancing the youth agenda. These efforts could give children a sense of pride in their communities, teach them about local government functions and encourage them to become more active citizens by showing them that they do have the power to make a difference.