

Chapter 8 ***Residents' Perception of Riverside*** _____

Surveying Riverside Residents: Purpose and Strategy

The Riverside landscape is recognized at the national, state and local levels for its historical significance. However, residents have never been asked how they *feel* about living in Riverside or how this feeling relates to their surrounding environment. Therefore, as part of our master's project, we created a survey in order to learn more about how residents of Riverside perceive their historic landscape. A copy of the survey is included in Appendix 3. The following questions were asked:

1. What is your favorite public outdoor space in the Riverside landscape? Explain some feature of this space.
2. What is your least favorite public outdoor space in the Riverside landscape? Explain some feature of this space.
3. What is your favorite view in the Riverside landscape? Explain some feature of this view.
4. What is your least favorite view in the Riverside landscape? Explain some feature of this view.
5. How long have you lived in Riverside?
6. How long has your family lived in Riverside?

By posing questions that specifically address resident's preferences for landscape features, it was possible to begin to understand what areas or views of the landscape residents perceived as their favorite or least favorite. In addition, a correlation could be made between these favorite and least favorite areas and the features or attributes associated with them that caused the residents to like or dislike the space or view. From these responses, it was possible to see if the spaces and views mentioned by the respondents related to Olmsted's design principles as discussed in Chapter 5, *Design Principles at Riverside*. A relation between responses and design principles, can give an indication of the residents' support of or opposition to these historic design principles in their landscape.

The respondents were also asked to mark the locations of their responses to questions one through four on a map that was included in the survey. This spatial information creates a visual

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representation of the location and frequency of responses for favorite and least favorite spaces or views in the Riverside landscape.

The information provided by the residents reflects their perception of, and preferences for the Riverside landscape. This information can assist residents, planners, and village leaders to more clearly understand which spaces and views within their landscape are highly valued by the residents and which ones the residents consider out of place. This understanding can help decision-makers to designate areas in the Riverside landscape that, according to residents' preferences, should be preserved or maintained and areas that should be changed or enhanced.

Procedure for Randomly Selecting 300 Riverside Addresses

Three hundred Riverside households were selected to receive the survey. The addresses of these households were chosen through a random selection process. This process utilized two, comma-delimited files of addresses provided by the Village of Riverside. These files included the addresses for residences, businesses, village buildings, etc.

The comma-delimited files were consolidated into one Excel file that had a total of 3,068 rows. From this Excel file, the following addresses were removed: multiple entries for the same address, mailing addresses that were not from Riverside (addresses of landlords, management companies, or family members who pay bills for Riverside residents), addresses for Village buildings (including the library, train station, public works, swim club, and schools), and any rows that contained errors as a result of the data transfer process.

The remaining 2,884 addresses were assigned a random number. This process was completed with the random number generator in Excel by using the following parameters:

- Distribution = uniform (variables are drawn with equal probability from all values in the range)
- Parameters = between 0 and 1 (the random numbers generated are within the range of 0 and 1)
- Output range = \$A\$1: \$A\$2884

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The randomly assigned numbers were then sorted in ascending order. From this list, the first 300 addresses (rows 1-300) were selected to receive the survey.

Discussion of Sample Size and Return Rate

As mentioned above, a sample size of 300 households was chosen for this survey. This sample size was selected based on the understanding that there was a relatively high return rate from previous surveys sent to Riverside residents by the village government. However, of the 300 surveys that were sent out, only 33 were returned. Thirty-two of these surveys were used for the analysis since one contained invalid data. This gave a 10.66 percent useable return rate for the surveys. The low return rate may be attributed to a variety of factors. First, the surveys were sent out only one week prior to the winter holidays. Given the delay in time from when the surveys were sent to the time they were potentially received, many Riverside residents may have been out of town for the holidays during the time the surveys were delivered to their households. Second, there was an increase in postage rate during this time, which may have deterred residents from responding; the surveys were pre-posted with \$0.33 stamps, but the rate was raised to \$.34 after they were mailed. However, any completed surveys that were mailed without the additional postage *were* received by our master's project group with postage due. Finally, it is possible that Riverside residents were not as familiar, and therefore not as comfortable, with this type of survey because it was composed of open-ended questions that queried their preference and perception of the Riverside landscape.

A 10.66 percent return rate cannot be considered a representative sample of the population of Riverside. However, the information that the residents provided in their responses can give an indication of how they perceive the landscape in which they live and provide information about what attributes make certain spaces and views more or less preferable.

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Analysis Process

The process of content analysis was used to analyze the open-ended, qualitative responses to this survey. Content analysis identifies, codes, and categorizes the primary patterns in the raw case data (Patton 381). Content analysis is a three-step process that can be employed to analyze qualitative data. Content analysis includes assembling the raw case data, constructing a case study record, and writing case study narrative (Patton 381).

The first step of content analysis is to assemble the raw case data. This step records, in this case word for word, the responses to the questions asked in the survey.

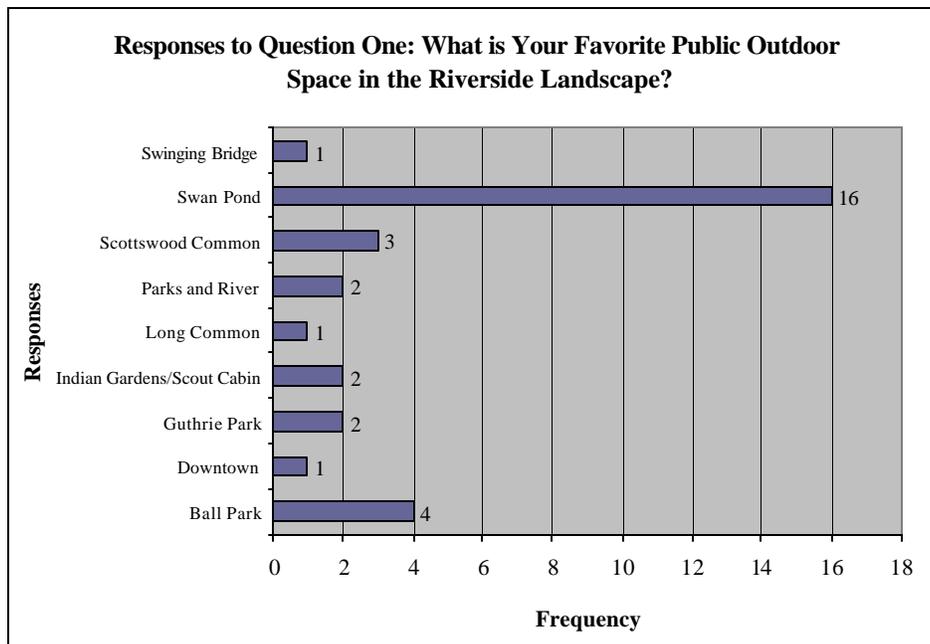
The second step of content analysis is to construct a case record. During this step, the raw case data is condensed into a manageable and accessible size through organization, classification, and editing. For this survey, the case record step was used to group location attributes (descriptors that respondents attributed to a particular space or view) into distinct, meaningful categories for future analysis. A member of our master's project team coded the data into categories based on observed similarities in the location attributes. After the initial categories were developed, additional people were asked to evaluate the categories and provide feedback; this check was intended to eliminate any personal biases that the original evaluator may have displayed when grouping the location attributes into categories. The evaluators included other members of our master's project group who were knowledgeable of the survey, as well as people who had knowledge of the subject, but were not directly involved with the project. Based on the comments of the evaluators, changes were made to the categories to produce the most logical and accurate organization of the location attributes. A complete listing of the raw data and the final attribute groups can be found in Appendix 4.

The third step of content analysis is to write a case study narrative. The narrative is a readable, descriptive picture of the case data that makes all the information accessible to the reader. This makes it possible for the reader to understand the data contained in the survey responses (Patton 388).

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Responses to Question One: What is your favorite public outdoor space in the Riverside landscape?

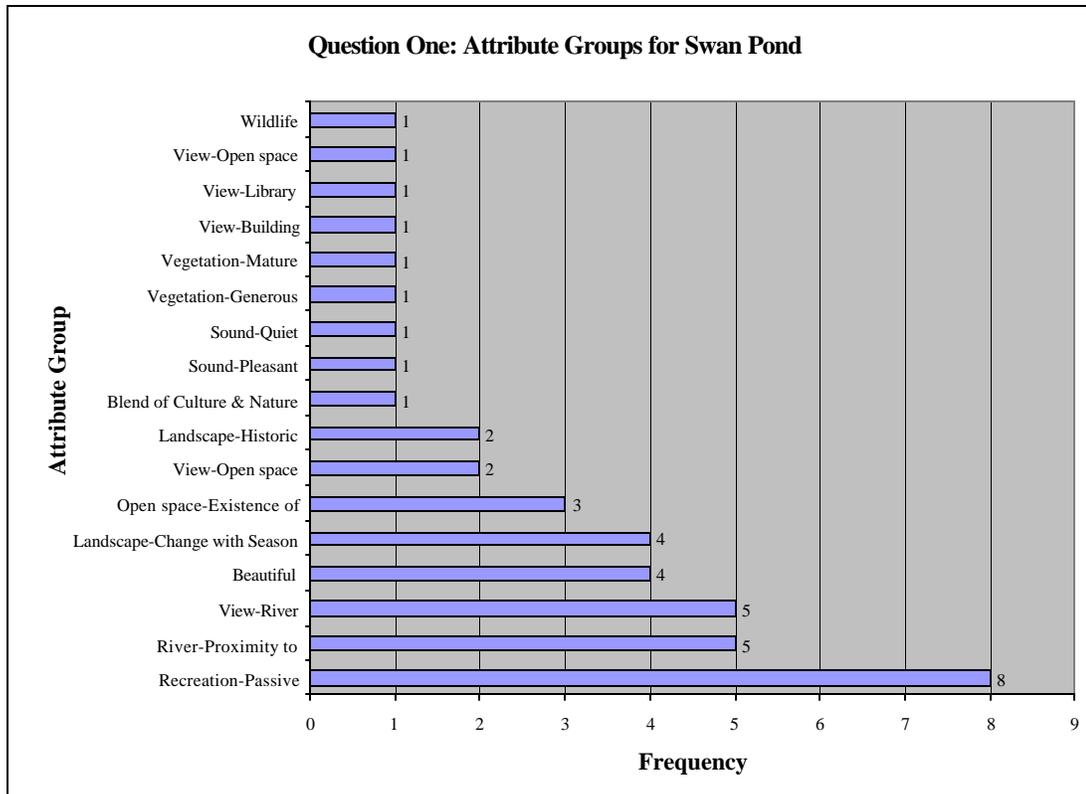
The first question in the survey asked residents to identify their favorite public outdoor space in the Riverside landscape. From the responses received, a clear preference for Swan Pond was shown; 16 of the 32 responses indicated this area as their favorite public outdoor space in the Riverside landscape. Following that, four people identified the ballpark; three people identified Scottswood Common; two people each identified Riversides parks and river, Indian Gardens & the Scout Cabin, and Guthrie Park; and one person each identified the Swinging Bridge, Long Common, and the Downtown area. The top three responses, Swan Pond, the ballpark, and Scottswood Common, will be discussed in greater detail.



As previously mentioned, Swan Pond is recognized by 50 percent of the survey respondents as their favorite public outdoor space in the Riverside landscape. The residents mentioned numerous and varied reasons for choosing this area, which were categorized into 17 different attribute groups. The aspect most frequently mentioned by the residents for liking the Swan Pond area was that they could participate in passive recreation (which includes running,

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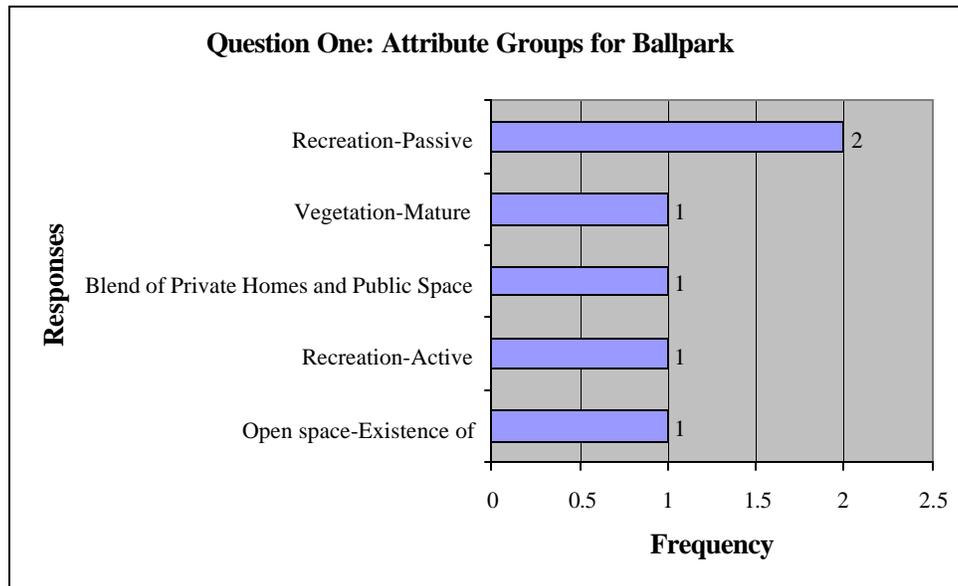
walking, reading, sledding, etc.). This area was also highly valued because of its proximity to, and views of, the Des Plaines River. In addition, seasonal changes of the landscape and the area's overall beauty were mentioned in a high percentage of responses as favorable qualities of Swan Pond. The remaining attribute groups and the frequency that they were mentioned are shown on the chart entitled, "Question One: Attribute Groups for Swan Pond."



The residents who responded to the survey have a strong appreciation for the Swan Pond area. The favorable qualities of this area reflect Olmsted's design principles for Riverside. Riverside's original design preserved the river corridor from development, leaving Swan Pond and the area surrounding the river as open space, available for passive recreation and the enjoyment of nature and the river. Although this area has gone through many changes since Riverside's original development, Swan Pond remains a favorable public outdoor space in the eyes of its residents. This is due, in part, to Olmsted's forward thinking about provisions for open space and preservation and enhancement of natural features.

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The ballpark was also identified in four of the 16 responses as a favorite public outdoor space. Respondents gave varying reasons for mentioning this area. However, passive recreation (reading, relaxation, and watching ball games) was the attribute cited with the most frequency. The presence of mature vegetation, a blend of private homes and public space, the ability to participate in active recreation, and the existence of open space (as shown in the chart entitled, “Question One: Attribute Groups for Ballpark”) were also mentioned as favorable attributes.

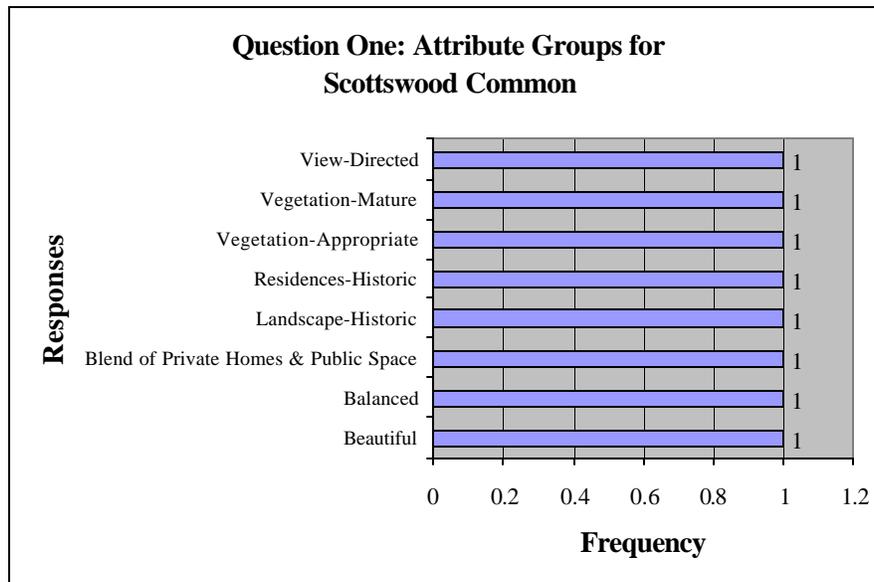


Although the newly constructed ball field does not directly reflect any of Olmsted’s design principles, the park that it is within does reflect the role that open space plays in the rejuvenation of the mind and the body. Recreation preferences have changed since Riverside was first constructed, but even during the time when Olmsted was developing the design for Riverside active recreation was considered a part of daily life. He even commented on the accommodations for playing cricket in England’s Birkenhead Park (Olmsted, Walks 53).

Scottswood Common was also mentioned by the residents as one of their favorite outdoor spaces in the Riverside landscape. The three people who mentioned this area sited mature vegetation appropriate to the area, historic landscape and residences, directed views, and the blend of private homes and public space as favorable attributes. The area’s balance and beauty

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were also mentioned (as shown in the chart entitled, “Question One: Attribute Groups for Scottswood Common”).



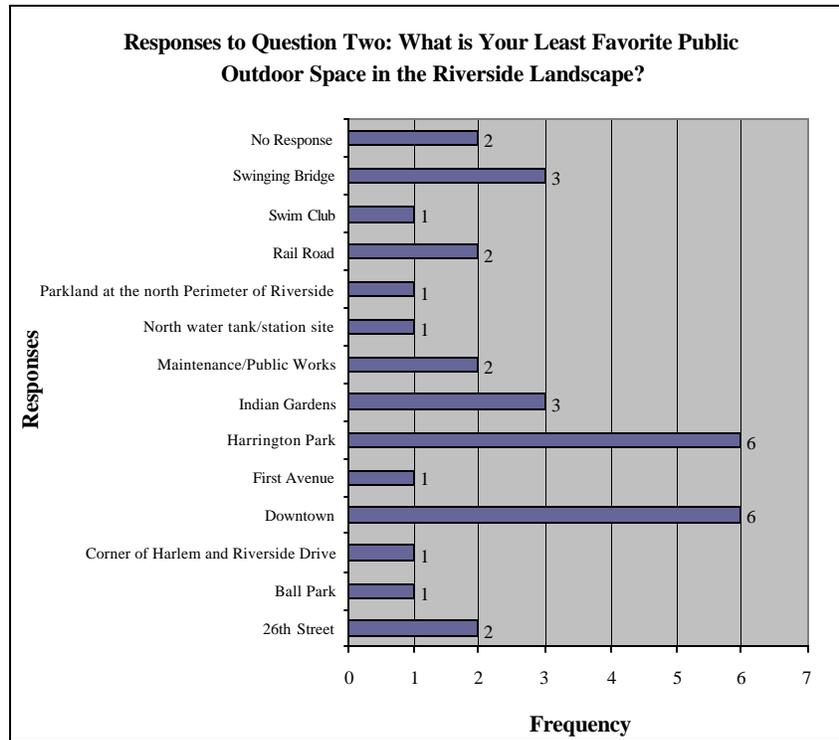
Scottswood Common, unlike Swan Pond and the ballpark, is enjoyed more for its scenic and historic qualities than its incorporation of passive recreation. One responded that the area was “the last remaining space remotely resembling Olmsted’s Riverside”. This statement shows that residents recognize the area as having historic qualities that date back to the original Riverside design. As highlighted in Chapter 5, Scottswood common does indeed reflect Olmsted’s design principles related to choreography of views, fostering improved health and convenience, provisions for open space, and preservation and enhancement of natural features.

Responses to Question Two: What is your least favorite public outdoor space in the Riverside landscape?

As shown in the chart entitled, “Responses to Question Two: What is Your Least Favorite Public Outdoor Space in the Riverside Landscape”, the downtown central business district and Harrington Park

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were cited with the greatest frequency, being mentioned by six people each. Indian Gardens and the swinging bridge were also mentioned by three people each. The remaining least favorite public outdoor spaces can be seen in the chart below.

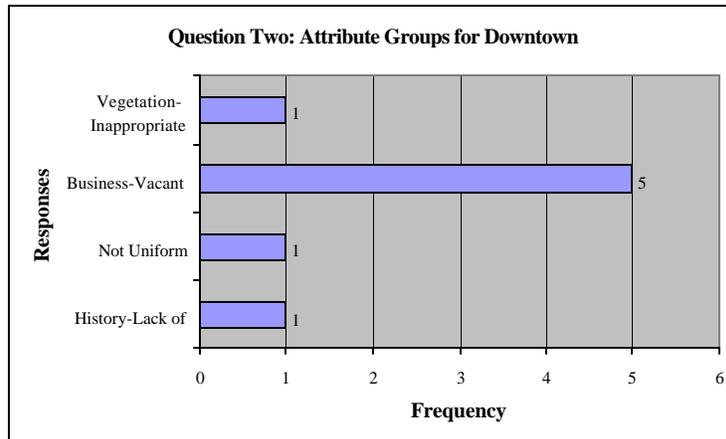


The downtown central business district of Riverside is thought of as an area that needs attention. There are a variety of reasons for this, but based on the responses to the survey, residents feel the strongest about the presence of vacant businesses. Residents stated that the lack of vibrant businesses makes the downtown “look like a street in a depressed town.”

When developing the design for Riverside, Olmsted wanted to create a “Suburban Village” by blending the countryside with urban environments. In doing so he offered residents the conveniences associated with cities. In the responses to the survey, residents have also expressed that “efforts should be made to attract successful businesses.” Based on the attributes mentioned by the residents, the use of

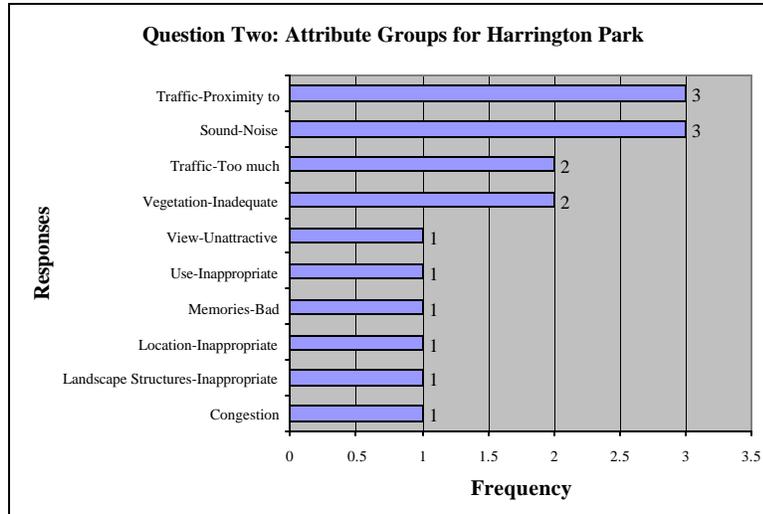
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appropriate vegetation, a sense of coherence, and a reflection of the Village’s history would be characteristics that should be incorporated into the downtown central business district (as shown in the chart entitled, “Question Two: Attribute Groups for Downtown”).



Harrington Park was another public outdoor space that was disliked by 6 of the 32 responses for question two. The major reason the respondents disliked this space was its proximity to traffic, and the noise associated with that proximity. Also mentioned was the high volume of traffic and congestion, inadequate vegetation, inappropriate landscape structures (eg. play equipment), inappropriate use, and inappropriate location. Bad memories are also associated with this park, (as shown in the chart entitled, “Question Two: Attribute Groups for Harrington Park”).

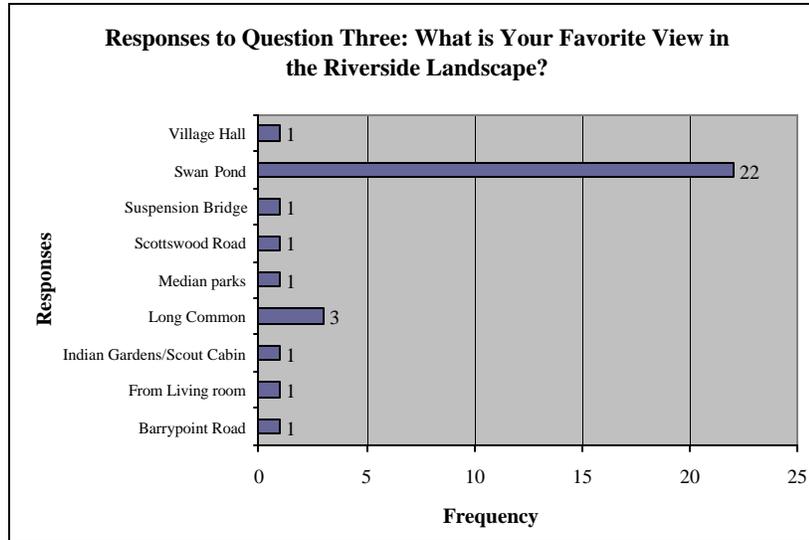
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Responses to Question Three: What is your favorite view in the Riverside landscape?

Twenty-two of the 32 respondents mentioned Swan Pond as their favorite view in the Riverside landscape, which again reflects the resident's strong preference for this area. Swan Pond was followed with the view of Long Common, which was mentioned by three of the 32 respondents. Views of the Village Hall, suspension bridge, Scottswood Road, median parks, Indian Garden, Barrypoint Road, and the view from a residential living room were also mentioned in the responses to this question (as shown in the chart entitled, "Responses to Question Three: What is Your Favorite View in the Riverside Landscape.")

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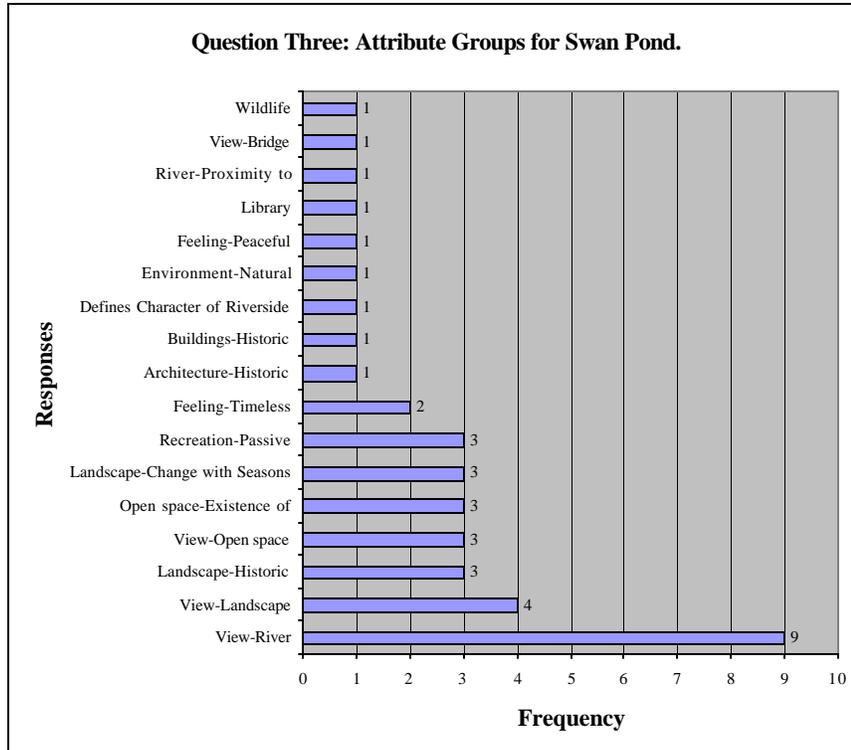


As shown in the chart entitled, “Question Three: Attribute groups for Swan Pond”, the residents who selected Swan Pond as their favorite view showed a strong preference for being able to see the Des Plaines River. The fact that this view remains undeveloped can also be attributed to Olmsted’s design principles. Olmsted had the foresight to maintain the “best” of Riverside for public use, which included preserving the Des Plaines River corridor. By doing this, the view of the Swan Pond remains unmarred by the typical development patterns associated with bodies of water.

Water is not just an attractive element in pictures. People are willing to pay higher rents for a water view. In fact, along many bodies of water the density of residential development provides an all too vivid indication to be near the water even if they must share the view, the facilities, the roads, the traffic and everything else (Kaplan & Kaplan 9).

Despite the fact that development along the river corridor would bring in economic gain to Riverside through residential development, Swan Pond still exhibits Olmsted’s vision for open space and the preservation and enhancement of natural features.

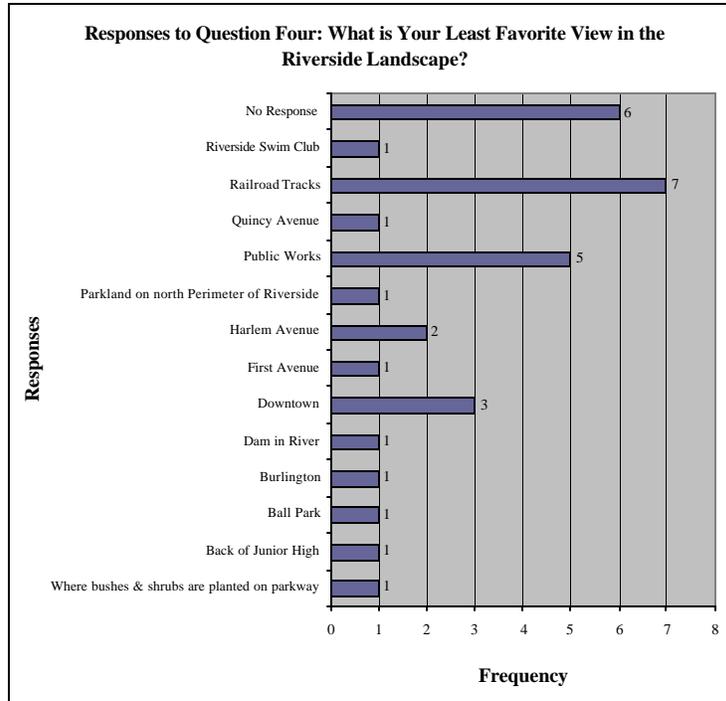
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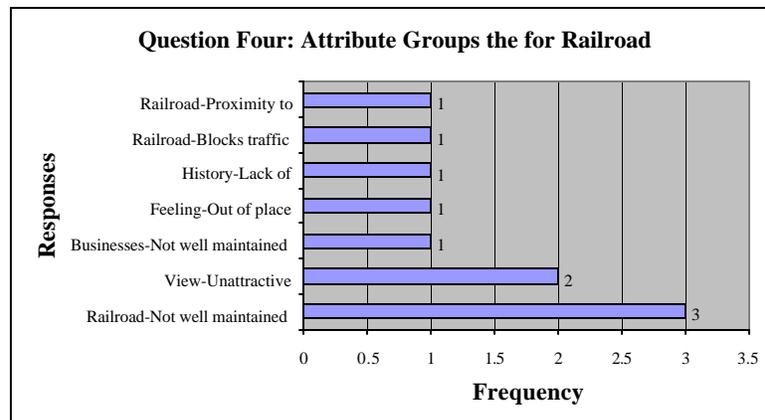
Responses to Question Four: What is Your Least Favorite View in the Riverside Landscape?

Seven out of the 32 respondents mentioned the railroad tracks and corridor as their least favorite view, which was followed by 6 people that stated that there were no unpleasant views in Riverside and five people who mentioned the view of the Public Works building. Other responses and the frequency with which they were mentioned are shown on the chart entitled, “Responses to Question Four: What is Your Least Favorite View in the Riverside Landscape”.

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The fact that the Railroad corridor is poorly maintained was the attribute most frequently mentioned by the respondents who selected this area as their least favorite view. Other attributes that are associated with this area are shown in the chart entitled, “Question Four: Attribute Groups for the Railroad”.

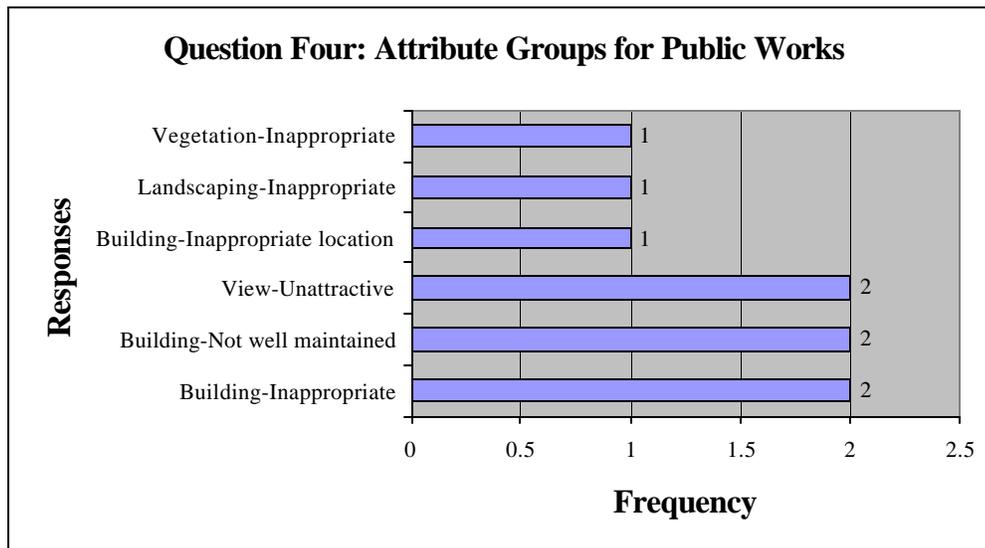


The railroad corridor, part of Riverside’s original design, was intended to foster improved health and convenience by providing alternate transportation to Chicago. The railroad remains a

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viable mode of transportation for the residents of Riverside to commute to the city. However, it is the appearance of the railroad corridor that residents feel is incongruous with its surroundings. The qualities of the railroad corridor mentioned by the respondents are related to the absence of many of the design principles used by Olmsted in other parts of Riverside. The railroad's linear design seems to be in conflict with the curvilinear roads of Riverside. This visual contrast is immediately apparent when passing through this area. It must be noted, however, that Olmsted and Vaux's original plan for Riverside included linear streets and higher development densities along the railroad corridor. Today, the inadequate maintenance of both the railroad corridor, and the backs of the businesses that are located adjacent to it, add to the visual contrast, making the view of this area unattractive to many respondents.

The Public Works building was also one of the most frequently mentioned least favorite views in the Riverside landscape. Respondents attributed this to inappropriate buildings that are poorly maintained and which display inappropriate landscaping and vegetation (as shown in the chart entitled, "Question Four: Attribute Groups for Public Works").



Because of these attributes, the Public Works building is considered one of the respondents' least favorite views in the Riverside landscape. It is interesting to note that this building is in close proximity to Swan Pond, which was strongly favored by the respondents as

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their favorite view. From the attributes provided by survey respondents, it seems that the Public Works building, which in close proximity to one of the most highly favored views in Riverside, is incongruous with its surroundings.

Again, the fact that the survey respondents do not favor the view of the Public Works building can be attributed to the conflict of its design and siting with Olmsted's design principles. Because it is built along the river corridor, which generally remains undeveloped within Riverside, and because of its inappropriate appearance and landscaping, the opinion has developed that the view of this building is undesirable.

Survey Results, A Discussion

The findings of this survey can be used to generate further discussion among residents, planners, and government leaders in Riverside regarding future planning of public outdoor spaces and views. The 32 survey responses, representative of a fraction of Riverside's population, begin to show trends in the data regarding favorite and least favorite outdoor spaces and views. Further studies of resident's preference and perception of the Riverside landscape can be used to reinforce and validate these trends. The data from this survey, although not statistically significant, does show preferences for areas that exhibit Olmsted's design principles, such as Swan Pond, and lack of preferences for areas like the railroad corridor. An understanding of the residents' rational for preferring, or not preferring, specific outdoor spaces and views can be used to make appropriate planning and design decisions. These decisions, because they reflect the preferences of the residents, should ultimately be more acceptable to the residents and more representative of the community. In both this survey and past surveys, many respondents expressed thanks for being asked questions regarding preference and perception of areas they are familiar with. This gratitude reflects respondents' appreciation for acknowledging their opinions. Knowing this, surveys similar to this one can be used successfully with support from the community to gain feedback for design and planning decisions.