# 8 | COMMUNITY CHARACTER AND DESIGN

## Community Character and Design Policies

The Community Character and Design policies are intended to guide decisions made regarding the physical design of the built environment in Lancaster. These policies were developed from the Guiding Principles, and are intended to align future development with the goals of the community. Designed to enhance Lancaster's sense of place and make the city a more livable and inviting community, the Community Character and Design policies, as discussed and vetted with the citizen steering committee, are as follows:

**POLICY 1:**   Use Community Character to create a destination so people choose Lancaster as a place to live, work, play, and visit.

**POLICY 2:**   Insist on quality design in new development.

**POLICY 3:**   Use design themes to identify key areas and districts.

**POLICY 4:**   Community design should be part of Lancaster's marketing strategy.

## Introduction

Community character and urban design is essential to the creation of a visually appealing, desirable city. Good urban design takes advantage of community attributes such as topography, vegetation, land use, building forms, culture, and historic development to strengthen and enhance the community's identity to distinguish it from other communities around it. Successful urban design requires a firm dedication to placemaking. This means using distinctive character, good spatial organization, and high aesthetic standards to create memorable places that enhance social interaction and improve quality of life.

Good urban design also makes the city more successful by enhancing its imageability. The creation of a legible environment with a hierarchy of distinct places helps to form a city that is more easily navigable by residents and visitors alike, and strengthens the identity of both individual neighborhoods and the city as a whole. This sense of identity bolsters civic pride, can lead to increased investment in the community, and improves the resident's sense of well-being. Sense of place and imageability shape the experiences and perceptions of the city, which is an essential part of building and enhancing the community's image. Urban design can be implemented through a variety of tools including streetscape plans, urban design codes, zoning codes, and other policy and regulatory driven documents which outline strategy for what Lancaster should look like.

The Community Character and Urban Design component of the comprehensive plan is a guideline for the application of Lancaster's Guiding Principles in order to mold the look and feel of the community. Many of the recommendations from Lancaster's 2002 Comprehensive Plan have been adopted, including the 2006 Streetscape Master Plan and the Lancaster Development Code of 2006. The Streetscape Plan of 2006, summarized in this section but also available in its entirety as a separate document, coupled with the place types outlined in Chapter

3 – Land Use, and additional recommendations in this section, are the foundation for the implementation of the Guiding Principles and Policies. The deliberate application of these Community Character and Urban Design principles and practices will guide Lancaster in the creation of places that are more functional and attractive, and the integration of good design into the physical growth and development of the city will strengthen Lancaster's sense of community and guide the city towards a happier, healthier, and more livable future.

# Community Character and Design Opportunities

The previous Lancaster comprehensive plan identified several strategies for improvements to the built environment, many of which have since been implemented. Using the Community Character and Design policies that have been developed from the Guiding Principles, this comprehensive plan seeks to build upon those policies and guidelines that were previously outlined in order to further improve upon the physical quality of Lancaster's built environment. This section includes a summary of the city's Streetscape Master Plan prepared in 2006 by Halff Associates and Caye Cook & Associates, together with the Lancaster City Council, Lancaster Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, Lancaster Planning and Zoning Commission, and various Lancaster city staff. That document, available in its entirety as a separate document, addresses many of the aims of the Guiding Principles and Community Character and Design Policies. The findings in the document, together with other recommendations made here, should serve as a framework for improving Lancaster's imagability and enhancing the community's unique sense of place.

# 2006 Streetscape Masterplan Summary

## Overview

The 2006 streetscape plan was developed in order to present an image of what the city of Lancaster wants to be, and with an understanding that it should preserve and enhance the character and history of Lancaster while providing a safe environment for both pedestrian and vehicular traffic. It was intended to balance all modes of transportation, such as pedestrian, bicycle, and automobile, while enhancing the economic value of adjoining properties and neighborhoods. The Streetscape plan was developed in accordance with several core principles:

- Streetscapes are the most identifiable elements of any city.
- Streetscape planning and design is about place making.
- The aesthetic appeal of streets and their surrounding environments are what make people feel welcome in a city.
- Gateways create a sense of arrival.
- Recurring elements create a sense of connection and continuity.
- If well designed, city streets can give order and structure to a city, district, or neighborhood.
- Good streets make the journey safe, comfortable, pleasing and even enlightening in terms of the experience they offer within a city.
- The best streets have definition.
- The best streets also have identity and interest.

## Existing Conditions

The Streetscape Plan conducted an assessment of existing conditions within Lancaster that uncovered both positive and negative aspects of the current streetscapes in the city.

Positive aspects of Lancaster's existing streetscape include:

- Tree-lined streets and "Tree Tunnels" in south Lancaster.
- Various creeks and waterways.
- Abundant Agricultural land.

Deficiencies in the streetscape included:

- No sense of entry to Lancaster or sense of city identity.
- Poorly defined edges between residential neighborhoods and streets.
- Inconsistent sidewalk size and the lack of sidewalks.
- Visual clutter of overhead power lines, utility poles, signs.
- Minimal trees in parkways and medians.
- Lack of adequate wayfinding signage.

### Figure 8.01 - Lancaster Tree Tunnels



Source: Lancaster 2006 Streetscape Master Plan

## Goals and Objectives

The goals of the 2006 Streetscape Master Plan describe the city's vision for its preferred aesthetic and physical street environment. These include a unifying streetscape theme to establish a distinctive city identity that promotes a sense of community, as well as celebrating the community's history and preserving its small town atmosphere. The objectives governing the Streetscape master plan include:

- Create and reinforce a unified image of Lancaster.
- Design for vehicular and pedestrian safety.
- Create a pedestrian friendly environment.
- Provide wayfinding devices.
- Provide street trees and other vegetation.
- Preserve existing trees and vegetation.
- Provide consistent standards.
- Provide art and interest.

## Design Recommendations

This section of the masterplan generates recommendations that would resolve the deficiencies between the desired streetscape and the existing streetscape in Lancaster. The plan that was developed recommends a series of upgrades to the Lancaster streetscape that will reflect the character and identity of the community, establish continuity of information, promote the city to visitors, and improve the overall street aesthetic. In order to achieve this, the plan outlines a "zoned approach" that consisted of concentric rings radiating outward from downtown. Each zone will establish a character and identity governing the sidewalks, lighting, signage, plantings, and architectural elements around the city. Additionally, the plan discusses existing landmarks and new landmark opportunities, gateways to the city, major intersections and nodes, and improvements to major thoroughfares. Some of the improvements to these elements include:

- Revise Lancaster ordinances to reflect this report.
- Establish a hierarchy of streetscape solutions to include planting materials, landmarks, gateway enhancement, and major nodes in the street system.
- Place overhead utility lines underground.
- Apply consistent use of the city logo on all signage.
- Provide vegetative screening of neighborhood alleys.
- Provide identification of neighborhoods with entryways and signage.
- Screen parking lots with vegetation and establish shade trees along parking lot perimeters.
- Provide consistent plantings of native plant materials in the gateway entrances, parkways, and medians.
- Preserve existing landmarks and existing trees along rural and established thoroughfares.
- Provide pedestrian upgrades in downtown Lancaster and throughout the city.
- Revitalize and redevelop Historic Downtown Lancaster.
- Encourage Lancaster residents to take part in the streetscape improvements.
- Develop a theme to blend architectural styles from downtown to IH 35 and IH 20 through the use of monuments or markers.

## Prioritization of Improvement Items

The recommended improvements to Lancaster's streetscape were divided into short term (next 5 years), medium term (5-10 years,) long term (10 or more years), and ongoing (initiated as development occurs and needs arise) categories. These distinctions were made in order to prioritize projects that would provide the most immediate impact with consideration to cost, or "bang for the buck." They were also categorized by project type, with the 4 distinctions being; 1) City Wide Thoroughfares, 2) Landmarks, Gateways, and Nodes, 3) Streetscape Elements, and 4) Roads and Thoroughfares. It must be noted, however, that the Streetscape Plan was developed in 2006. Since that time, all suggested short term and midterm improvements should have been programmed. It is suggested that the City revisit the Improvement Items of the short and midterm recommendations and validate what has been completed and what has not.

**City Wide Thoroughfares**

- Short Term
  - Revise Lancaster Thoroughfare Plan ( January 2003) and related illustrations to reflect parkways and sidewalks on both sides of roads and thoroughfares.
  - Protect existing stands of trees during design of thoroughfares. Route roadways to avoid existing trees as depicted in Streetscape Master Plan, Chapter 4.
  - Revise codes and ordinances to reflect the need for parkways and sidewalks on both sides of roads and thoroughfares to be provided by developers.
  - Require developers to place utilities underground on all future thoroughfares and roads. Place utilities underground in areas as they are developed.
- Medium Term
  - Place utilities underground in areas that have already been developed.
- Ongoing
  - All public construction projects should be planned to minimize the loss of vegetation and soils through extensive grading.

**Landmarks**

- Short Term
  - Acquire land for the establishment of a landmark at the high point in the southeast corner of IH 35 and Belt Line Road.
- Ongoing
  - Preserve existing windmills, water towers, grain elevator, Tigers Stadium and relocate as needed.
- Medium or Long term
  - Commission artist, architect, or landscape architect to design a landmark to be installed at the southeast corner of IH 35 and Belt Line Road.

**Figure 8.02 - Proposed Landmark at IH-35**



Source: Lancaster 2006 Streetscape Master Plan

**Gateways**

- Short term
  - Major Gateways- IH 35 and pleasant run road - Mark this highly traveled road with a gateway consisting of a 25' tall marker and plantings to indicate that a motorist has arrived in Lancaster.
  - Downtown Gateways - Main Street and Dallas Avenue.
- Medium Term
  - Major Gateway - IH 35 and Beltline Rd.
  - Major Gateway - IH 20 and Houston School Rd.
  - Major Gateway - Cedardale and Dallas Ave.
  - Major Gateway - Future Loop 9 and Lancaster Hutchins Rd.

- Medium Term (Continued)
    - Intermediate Gateway - Dallas Avenue and Wintergreen.
    - Intermediate Gateway - IH 35 and Wintergreen.
    - Intermediate Gateway - IH 35 and Main.
    - Intermediate Gateway - IH 35 and Bear Creek.
    - Intermediate Gateway - Future Loop 9 and Houston School Rd.
    - Minor Gateway - IH 35 and Danieldale.
    - Minor Gateway - Lancaster-Hutchins Road at City Limits.
    - Downtown Gateway - Lancaster-Hutchins Road and Pleasant Run Rd.
    - Downtown Gateway - Dallas Avenue and Pleasant Run Rd.
    - Downtown Gateway - Main Street and Beltline (East Intersection).
    - Downtown Gateway - Main Street and Lancaster-Hutchins Rd.
    - Downtown Gateway - Dallas Avenue and Belt Line Rd.
    - Downtown Gateway - State Street and Belt Line Rd.

## Nodes

- Short Term
    - Main Street and Beltline (West Intersection).
    - Belt Line and Houston School Rd.
    - Pleasant Run Rd and Houston School Rd.
    - Telephone Road and Dallas Avenue.
- Medium Term
    - Main Street and Houston School Rd.
    - Main Street and Bluegrove.
    - Belt Line and Bluegrove.
    - Pleasant Run Road and Bluegrove.
    - Wintergreen and Houston School Rd.
    - Dallas Avenue and Lancaster-Hutchins Rd.

**Figure 8.03 - Proposed Gateway at IH-35 & Pleasant Run Rd**



Source: Lancaster 2006 Streetscape Master Plan

**Figure 8.04 - Typical Node for New Development**
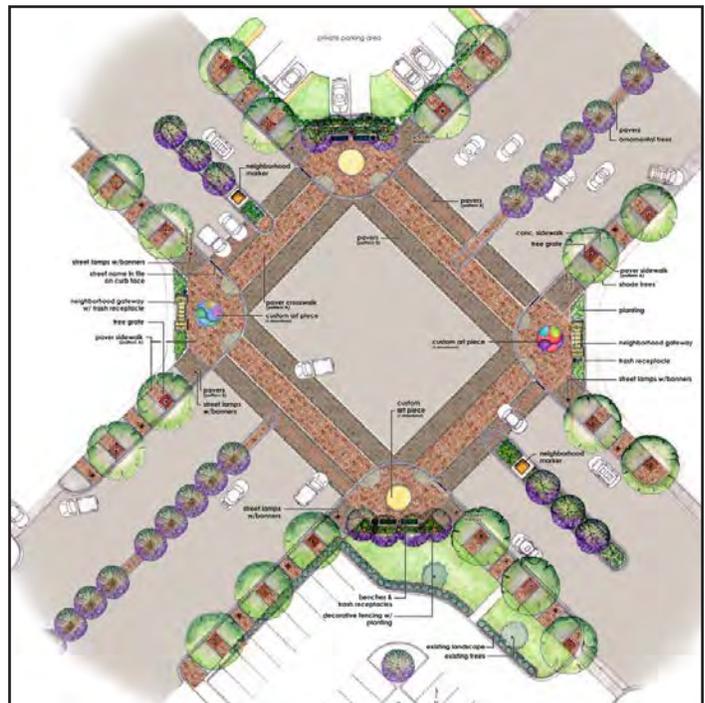


Source: Lancaster 2006 Streetscape Master Plan

- **Streetscape Elements**
- Short Term
    – Develop a program to protect mature trees in areas subject to high use and sheet erosion.
    – Revise Ordinances to require preservation of existing trees along all thoroughfares and to require planting of trees in parkways and medians.
    – Develop and implement a focused tree planting program of parkways and medians as recommended.
    – Use volunteer groups to plant saplings along thoroughfares and in medians.
    – Explore and develop a street tree organic maintenance program as an alternative and/or supplement to conventional chemical applications.
    – Enforce ordinances which require screening of all parking and the planting of trees in parking lots.
    – Revise existing ordinances to encourage fewer curb cuts into parking lots and shared entryways.
    – Older neighborhoods are encouraged to form associations for upkeep of common areas, entrances, plantings and fencing.
- Ongoing
    – Incorporate lighting, signage, and street furnishings at the time of development or improvement of the thoroughfares, gateways, and nodes.
    – As new neighborhoods are developed, entry signage, plantings, and fencing are required by developers.

**Roads and Thoroughfares**

- Short term
    – Rewrite ordinances to put stricter guidelines on the signs used along IH 20 and IH 35 and to provide sidewalks.
    – Roads Type A, B, and C – Major Thoroughfares - Plant street trees in the parkways and medians.
    – Roads Type A, B, and C – Major Thoroughfares - Provide sidewalks, lighting and other furnishings where needed.
    – Neighborhood Streets – Developers required and residents encouraged to plant trees in parkways and within 30' of curb.
    – Downtown Lancaster Town Square – Pedestrian improvements – sidewalks, street trees, crosswalks, site furnishings such as benches, lighting, trash receptacles.
    – Downtown Lancaster Town Square – Explore and develop a policy to include art in public places.
- Ongoing
    – Coordinate improvements on IH 20 and IH 35 with TxDot improvements.
    – Rural thoroughfares and Main Street – Protect all trees and vegetation in ROW, especially along Main Street and Blue Grove.
    – Mills Branch Overlay District – Follow all requirements set forth by the ordinances for this Smart Growth community.
- Medium Term
    – Roads Type D – Collectors – Plant street trees in parkways with sidewalks and lighting.

# Community Identity and Branding Challenges

Urban sprawl and rapid development have led to a high degree of similarity in towns and cities across the United States. This is especially true in smaller suburbs in large urban areas, which are often the focus of intense growth and are built up by outside developers, who use the same forms and development patterns over and over. This trend frequently leads to development that can render a town nearly indistinguishable from other towns halfway across the country, let alone unique from other towns within the same metro.

In order to differentiate themselves, smaller cities must work to develop identities that set them apart from their neighbors to establish themselves as unique places. Lancaster, experiencing high growth rates as a result of its location in the Metroplex, is no exception to this rule. In order to set itself apart, Lancaster must capitalize on its unique assets, including the downtown historic district, various other districts identified within the comprehensive plan (see Appendix 2), and other elements such as topography, architecture, and vegetation to create a unique place that is legible, and recognizable as a place that is separate from other cities in the region. One way to accomplish this would be through a branding study to help identify how Lancaster is perceived in the region, as well as to use good urban design elements to create a theme and image that aligns more closely with the image Lancaster wishes to project. The city should use the results of the branding study to educate realtors, lenders, residents, and business owners about Lancaster's character, strengths, and amenities. Additionally, the city could adopt a symbol or slogan that could become an identifying feature, which could be used both to enhance the both the physical image of the city, and to strengthen the city's brand

# Image and Placemaking

One of the ways in which a community differentiates itself is through placemaking, which is about creating memorable places that engage people. These places often use aspects of the surrounding environment to create unique places that focus on people, using human-scaled architecture, various amenities, high quality aesthetics, and a mix of uses to create an active pedestrian environment that encourages social interaction. Placemaking techniques can lead to higher property values and encourage reinvestment. Some of best ways to enhance the property values through placemaking involve planning for the provision and integration of open space, expressing natural features such as topography and vegetation, and planting trees to soften the built environment.

Placemaking requires a commitment to the creation of great streets. Great streets are designed to accommodate multiple users, such as pedestrians, cyclists, and automobiles, and are defined by buildings and streetscaping.

- Design streets to move local traffic at speeds of 25 mph, which allows multiple users to share the street. Drivers are able to watch for pedestrians and see signs and signals, cyclists can blend with vehicular traffic, and pedestrians feel safe on sidewalks and crossing roads
- Prevent streets from being dominated by parking lots. Maximize parking on adjacent non-arterial streets to provide visitor, resident, and customers access
- Locate additional parking and loading bays to secondary streets, alleyways, and the center of large blocks that are lined with buildings or landscaping

Another important component of placemaking is the development of places that people are attracted to; places that encourage pedestrian activity and encourage social interaction. Some of the features that great places often contain include:

- Buildings that are well sited, built for pedestrian access, and provide a feeling of enclosure for adjoining public spaces.
- A combination of building types and flexible site layouts, with retail and mixed use focused into compact, pedestrian oriented centers, helping to encourage the re-use, reinvestment, and re-purposing of buildings.
- A broad range of neighborhood and housing choices to satisfy a range of needs and markets, including lofts with retail/flex space, urban living units, live/work units, townhomes, single-family detached residences, and estate homes.
- Integration of a variety of uses within a development to create engaging places; a mix of retail, personal service, residential, and office uses helps to activate a place by generating activity during various times of day and weekend.
- Links between mixed-use / retail centers and their surroundings and other district. These places should have human scaled architecture, walkable streets, public gathering spaces and amenities, and clear edges.
- Flex spaces that can accommodate either retail or restaurant uses constructed at ground level along pedestrian corridors. These spaces must incorporate windows and entrances that open directly to the sidewalk and create an engaging walkable environment, allowing people to meet, visit, and exchange ideas.
  - Flex Space at grade can be defined as: Building space with a minimum 14' clear ceiling height and a façade with the structural capability to accommodate changes to window glazing and the number of entries.
- Compact centers, which should include pockets of green space to provide a focus for the center and surrounding neighborhood, ADA-complaint trails and links to the surrounding neighborhoods, and various cultural and recreational activities

It is also important for the city to be committed to creating a positive community image. Some of the essential factors that define a community's image include:

- The design and framing of streets (including streetscaping)
- The location and design of public and private open space
- The design of civic buildings
- The interaction of buildings with the street and their surroundings
- The ability to regulate building form in key situations

## Placemaking Examples

The following images provide examples of potential development in the community. These images were selected by the consulting team as examples of what may be preferred and not preferred in the city. While both the preferred examples on the right and not-preferred examples on the left might meet the city's minimum zoning and engineering standards, the preferred examples show desirable places that project a positive image to the community. Meanwhile, the non-preferred examples illustrate streets and places that have not implemented place-making principles, and thus fall short, either functionally or aesthetically, of creating the kinds of places Lancaster desires.

# Commercial Streets

Site layout and design can have a large impact on the creation of long-term value and is important in supporting community design

## Preferred



- Wide sidewalk allows for various users
- Windows and doors provide detail and interest and help encourage active ground floor uses
- Shading for pedestrians provided by tighter spacing of trees

## Not Preferred



- Few windows and entrances interacting with the street reduces pedestrian activity and safety
- A lack of shade, due to inappropriate tree spacing and selection, also deters pedestrians



- Outdoor dining creates an active and inviting public realm
- Street trees provide shaded sidewalks
- Sufficient sidewalk width for pedestrians to navigate



- Narrow sidewalks make walking difficult for pedestrians, especially movement-impaired individuals, and discourages socialization
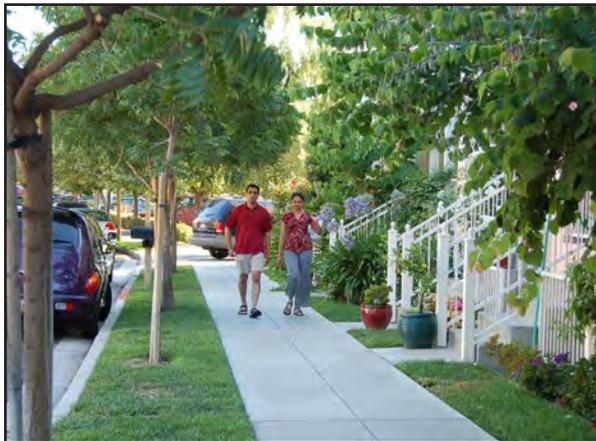
# Residential Streets

Site layout and design can have a large impact on the creation of long-term value and is important in supporting community design

## Preferred



- Street trees and on-street parking tend to slow traffic naturally, providing shade for pedestrians and a physical barrier to active traffic.



- Clear demarcation of the building entrance to landscaped street encourage pedestrian and social interaction

## Not Preferred



- Barren, treeless streets discourage pedestrians and social interaction
- Large amounts of street and driveway paving absorb and radiate heat during the summer months when there are no trees to provide shade
- Front-loaded garages on narrow lots present an unattractive face and severely restrict visitor parking.



- Fencing homes and neighborhoods from local streets reduces pedestrian safety, encourages speeding traffic and is not pedestrian-friendly.

# Building Form

Building form determines how the structure will interact with the environment. This form also dictates the potential uses and reuses that are possible on the site

## Preferred



- These buildings can be easily repurposed rather than replaced, reducing the length of time a building is likely to remain vacant before being and replaced with something new
- A mixture of scales and uses are more visually stimulating and have greater appeal to attract pedestrians



- Buildings scaled to the pedestrian interact more with the environment and allow for a greater variety of uses and activities

## Not Preferred



- Lost opportunity for a landmark building
- Buildings with large expanses of blank wall do not interact with the surrounding environment, are devoid of activity, and inappropriate in a pedestrian oriented district



- Large blank buildings are less flexible for redevelopment and adaptive reuse

# Site layout

Site layout and design is critical in shaping community image and plays a large role in the creation of long term value

## Preferred



- Buildings that are pulled up to the street front create a continuous urban fabric that encourages pedestrian activity



- Retail that includes shaded walkways and places to sit and socialize tends to be more successful at attracting shoppers and reinvestment over time.

## Not Preferred



- Large building setbacks and parking in front of the buildings reduce the vibrancy of both the corridor and the city as a whole
- Large open parking areas act as barriers to pedestrian activity



- Huge parking lots located in front of the building detract from the image of the properties and break up the continuity of the urban fabric

# Townhomes

Building form determines how the structure will interact with the environment. This form also dictates the potential uses and reuses that are possible on the site

## Preferred



- Town homes with trees, front doors, and windows relate to the sidewalk, enhance safety with "eyes on the street," and encourage social interaction
- Shaded sidewalks, uninterrupted by front entry vehicle access, creates a pleasant and inviting pedestrian environment



- Townhomes should have architecturally appealing end-caps that create an interesting façade to the street and an inviting presence to the sidewalk

## Not Preferred



- Visitor parking is almost nonexistent in town-house neighborhoods with front-entry garages because of numerous driveway openings.



- The Townhomes above present an uninviting public face that is dominated by garage doors.
- The excessive paving for driveways and a significant heat sink during the summer months, artificially increasing the temperature of the surrounding property.
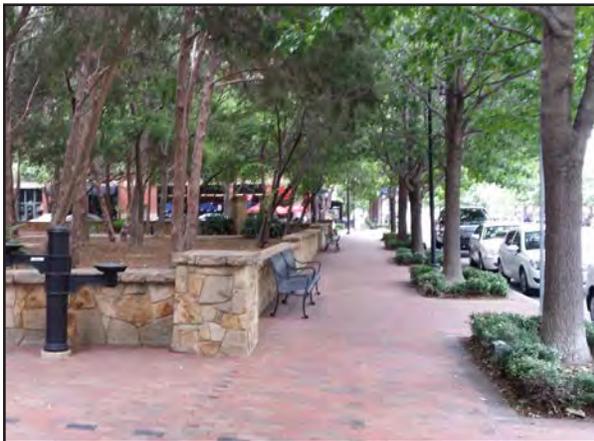
# Public/Private Open Space

Site layout and design is critical in shaping community image and plays a large role in the creation of long term value

### Preferred



- Homes that face quality open space with a premium of up to 23% in value.
- The integration of open space into both residential and commercial development provides focus and helps create a sense of community and a place where people can meet and engage with other users

### Not Preferred



- This open space is aesthetically unappealing and greatly under utilized, resulting in little premium value for adjacent homes.



- Shade and visibility are important components of successful open space.
- Interjecting open space into an urban neighborhood creates a sense of identity and address.



- Urban open space is often left over rather than planned and is not located to provide benefit to the ground floor businesses that surround it, like restaurants, bakeries and coffee shops

# Community Character & Design Implementation Strategy

The implementation strategies below are an important complement to the streetscape study and design guidelines the city has already enacted, and are a critical component of the city's approach to achieving its goals of improved placemaking, imageability, and quality of life. Greater details on strategies, priorities, and strategies are available in the complete 2006 Streetscape Study, while place type information can be found in Chapter 3 – Land Use.

- Conduct a branding study for Lancaster and implement its results using PR and Marketing.
- Create notable gateways into Lancaster at I-35 and at Pleasant Run.
- Establish design guidelines or regulations for development of adaptive reuse along I-35.
- Consider a design competition to design public art for gateways and landmarks.
- Establish design guidelines or regulations for development in Community Research Center, Logistics/Distribution, and Aviation place types.
- Develop distinctive landmark(s) to showcase UNT-D and CVC along I-20.
- Use public investments to strengthen the image and appeal of the town center.
- Provide information and education that makes realtors and lenders aware of Lancaster's character, strengths, and amenities.
- Adopt design incentives for key districts identified in the Comprehensive Plan.
- Establish design standards or guidelines for public infrastructure and private development so development is consistent within areas planned for rural living
- Update the Streetscape Master Plan of 2006.