

How To Conduct a Visual Analysis in Your Community



Trying to help your town revitalize itself? Interested in a serious neighborhood spruce-up? This manual can show you how to plan for the future of your community with a focus on its visual character.

**How to Conduct a
Visual Analysis
in Your Community**

Phase II of the Barton Visual Analysis

produced by: Jane Petrillo and
Diane Gayer

written by: Diane Gayer and
Katya Podsiadlo

graphics by: Hannah Morris

funded by: McConnell Foundation

April 1997

For more information regarding this project
contact: the Center for Rural Studies, 207
Morrill Hall, University of Vermont
Burlington, VT 05405.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Step One	1
Resources	2
Funding Sources	3
Step Two	4
Step Three	4
Step Four	5
Flow Chart	6
Step Five	8
Step Six	9
Presentation Boards	10
Conclusion	13

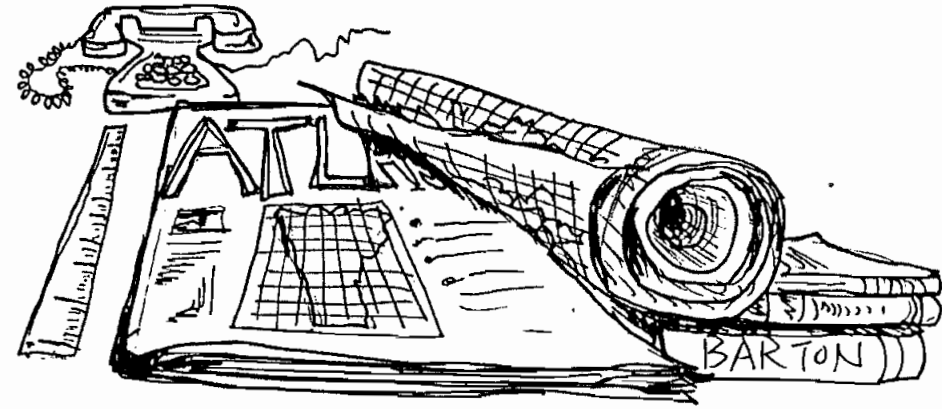
INTRODUCTION

A Visual Analysis is a tool for improving the visual character of a community. It includes a study of the physical and cultural assets of a community through a photographic survey, an analysis of the natural resources, and research of its history, in order to develop an overall plan for physical improvements. This analysis should address the community's stated goals. The main tools for performing this analysis are photographs and maps. The process of a Visual Analysis can be broken down into several parts. The first part involves identification of the physical, demographic, and historic characteristics of the community. This includes information on the location, climate, topography, bodies of water, soil type, socio-economics, and patterns of development. Next, issues or problems are defined through community input and analysis of the photographic survey. Finally, solutions or recommendations are expressed in visual form for presentations to the community.

STEP ONE

The first step in analyzing a place in terms of its visual quality requires gathering background information. Research in the following areas provides a good basis for a visual analysis: the natural resources of the area, the built environment, demography, historical and present-day settlement patterns, and planning, zoning, and sub-division bylaws.

An inventory of natural resources of the area can most likely be conducted using topographic and other maps. These are available through regional planning commissions or cartographic services. Town planning, historical, and current maps



with some detail of buildings will provide information about the built environment. Demography including socio-economic information can be gathered from the U.S. Census (<http://census.gov>). Demographic indicators such as population growth and decline patterns, economic levels, and housing characteristics can reveal important details about a community. Historical settlement patterns may be found in gazetteers, books on the place's history, and from the local historical society. Present-day planning tools, zoning maps, and sub-division bylaws can be obtained at the town clerk's office.

Important but less formal information to gather is the types and levels of community activism present in the community. These can be identified through networking with the town, school, municipal officials, and/or neighborhood and town leaders. These resources will be the means of understanding the critical issues the town is struggling with and can be used to identify appropriate solutions.

(See p.8-9, Flow Chart)

RESOURCES:

Various resources have enabled us to gather information for visual analysis projects in Vermont. The following list contains the names and addresses of organizations which have been useful in developing background materials for Visual Analyses.

Agency of Natural Resources
103 South Main Street
Waterbury, VT
(802) 241-3636

Agency of Transportation, Planning Division
133 State Street
Montpelier, VT
(802) 828-2667

Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation
103 South Main Street
Waterbury, VT
(802) 241-3650

Division for Historic Preservation
109 State Street
Montpelier, VT
(802) 828-2291
contact: Jane Lendway

National Main Street Center
National Trust for Historic Preservation
1785 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
contact: Cuffy Sullivan

Northern Vermont Development Association (NVDA)
Regional Planning Commission
St. Johnsbury, VT
(802) 748-5181
contact: Joel Schwartz

Vermont Design Institute
Norwich University
Northfield, VT
(802) 485-2620

Scenery Preservation Council
Agency of Transportation
Montpelier, VT
(802) 828-2600
contact: Rick Carbin

Vermont Downtown Program,
Preservation Trust of Vermont
Church Street
Burlington, VT
contact: Paul Bruhn

Map Sources: Microdata, St. Johnsbury (GIS Maps)
EMS (Eastern Mountain Sports)
South Burlington, VT
Northern Cartographic (Contour Maps)
Burlington, VT
NVDA (Northern VT Development Association)
St. Johnsbury, VT

FUNDING SOURCES:

The following is a list of potential funding sources for community development projects in Vermont, several of which were used for the Barton Visual Analysis (1996).

Agency of Natural Resources
Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)
Waterbury, VT 05676

Agency of Transportation
Enhancement Grants (ISTEA)
(Cultural, historic, and multi-modal improvements)
Montpelier, VT 05602

Bristol-Myers Squibb
contact: UVM Extension System
(802) 525-4340

Economic Development, Public Works and Dev.
Public Works Division, Economic Dev. Admin.
Dept. Of Commerce, Herbert C. Hoover Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20230
(202) 482-5265

McConnell Grant
Sustainable Rural Development Project
UVM Extension
601 Main Street, UVM
Burlington, VT 05405
(802) 656-2980

Turner Foundation
contact: UVM Extension System

Twenty-First Century Foundation Grants
100 East 85th Street
NY, NY 10028
(212) 249-3612

Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP)
Agency of Development and Community Affairs
Montpelier, VT 05602
contact: Joss Besse

Vermont Community Foundation
PO Box 30
Middlebury, VT 05753
(802) 462-3355



STEP TWO

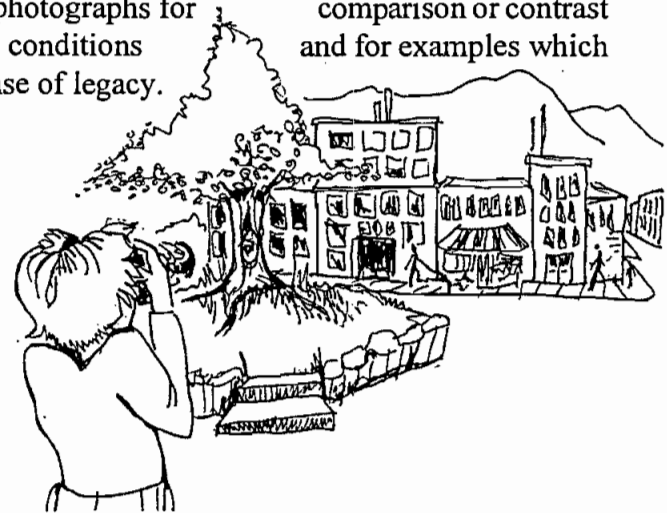
Public meetings should be held with the purpose of generating ideas and identifying goals for the future of the community. These meetings can be neighborhood planning association meetings, specially set up focus groups, the nominal group process, or initiatives such as the Take Charge program. Take Charge, for example, was a UVM Extension System project recently funded through the McConnell Foundation that helped communities to identify problems, organize committees and work schedules, and obtain the various resources for achieving their goals. The nominal group process is a series of steps that takes a group's brainstorming ideas through a "filter" process to reach consensus.

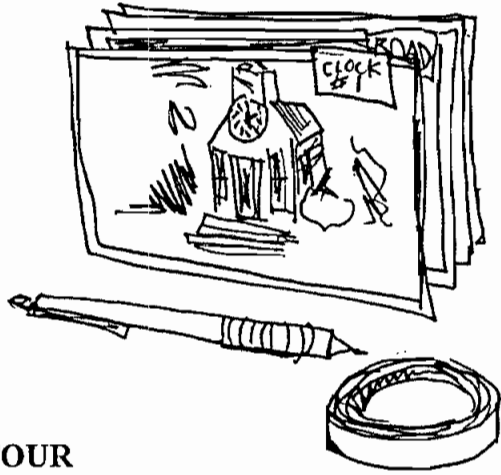
The intent of the public forums is to brainstorm a wide variety of goals and aspirations in order to increase the ideas and possibilities for positive and creative change. Other means of facilitating these community brainstorming processes are through what are referred to as "design charrettes" sponsored by organizations such as the Vermont Chapter of the American Institute of Architects or the Vermont Design Institute. If available, a Town Plan can be used to add another dimension of understanding to the community goals. Note that it is more efficient to utilize existing resources for multiple projects than to start from square one for every project. On the other

hand, be wary of aspiring to too many or unrealistic goals.

STEP THREE

The next step is to conduct a photographic survey of the village or place. If there is not enough funding or time for completing the survey on your own, you may want to explore employing help from high school or other photography students as well as from community members. Focus on taking pictures of areas identified by the community as problem areas, as well as those of particular interest such as a favorite tree, building, or shortcut. Be attentive to relevant details that may not have been pointed out by the community during the brainstorming process in addition to the overall feel of the place. The photographic survey should speak to both the specific details which may need improvement and to those details which may be used as examples to follow. It should also include larger scale, overall pictures such as streetscapes, buildings, views, and panoramas. For example, the photographic survey could include primary roads as well as typical side streets, entryways to the place, key project areas, notable natural features, and vistas. It is also useful to gather any historic photographs for comparison or contrast with existing conditions and for examples which suggest a sense of legacy.





STEP FOUR

Presentation boards which show the background materials and explain any improvements resulting from the visual analysis are the best and most visual way to present the information. Typically, presentation materials include an history board, a land use/natural area/geographic board, a demographic board, an infrastructure/road map board, a photographic survey board, and a solutions board. Proposed solutions can be shown as overlay drawings over the existing maps and photographs, or as a separate solutions board.

To make the background boards, organize the visual materials according to the type of boards you will want to develop. For example use demographic graphs, tables and charts that have been collected to make an attractive demographic board. Be sure to enlarge graphs and charts so that viewers can read them from a distance. An history board would be comprised of historic maps, post cards, pictures, and perhaps a short text. Topographic and land use maps can be overlaid on each other to display the physical characteristics of the area.

Foam core, available at most art and craft stores, is a useful material to use as a base for these boards, as it is stiff, easily cut, and one can use push pins to mark certain locations. The original maps or photocopies of the maps can be glued onto the foam core for the history board, and other background boards. (See page 11 and 12 for examples of presentation boards.)

One solutions board can be made using as a base, a road map or other present-day map of the area, and overlaying it with a transparent paper which will illustrate proposed changes. Tracing paper or acetate works for making these overlays on the board. In this way, a present-day infrastructure map can be shown and then a corresponding map marked with the recommendations on acetate can be flipped over the map (See page 13).

Finally, arrange the photographic survey by laying the pictures out on a board, i.e. foam core, in relation to a map of the area or village in question. This step will help identify the photographs and their relevance to the area of study.

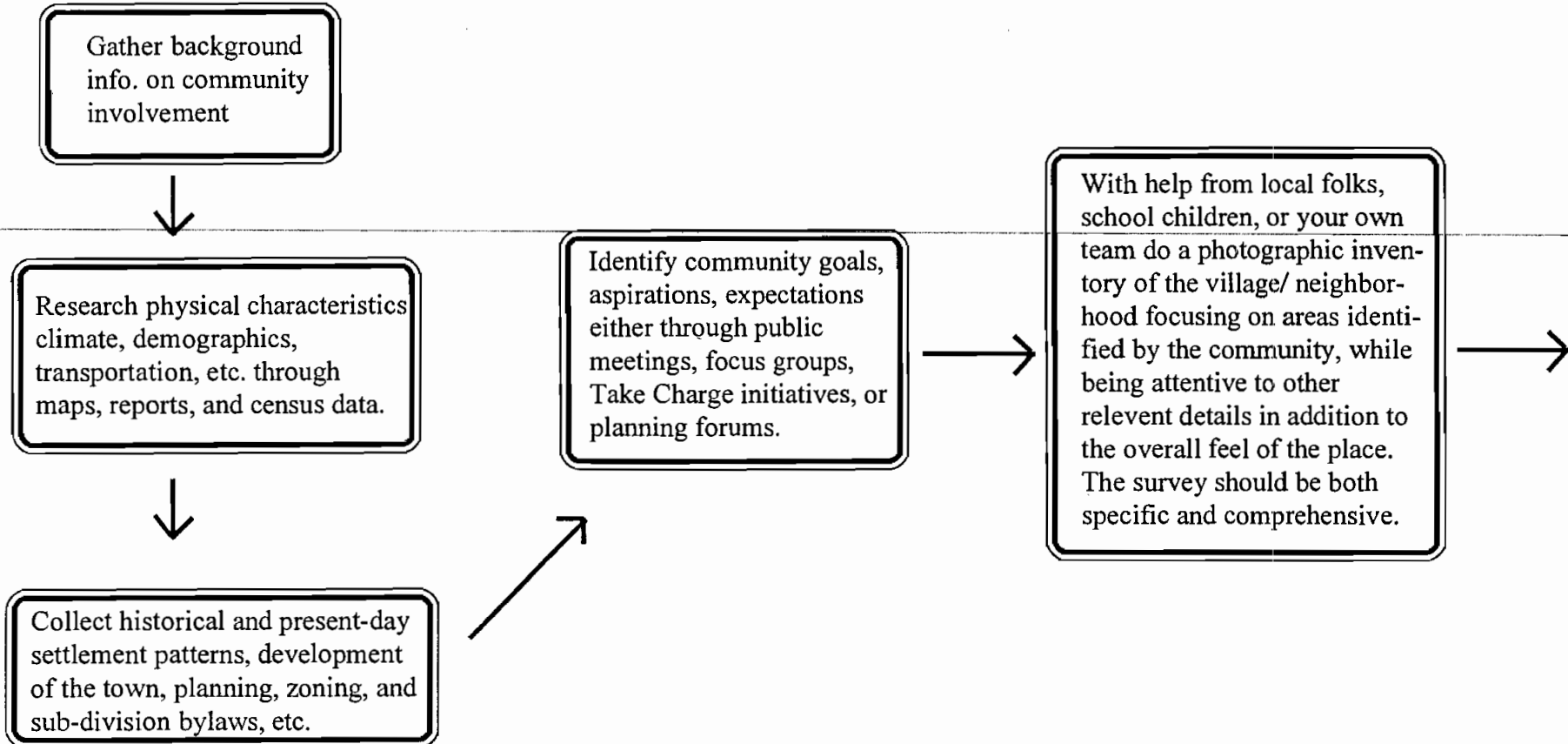
At this point, the main problem areas have probably identified themselves. If not, you should compare the community's goals to the photographic survey and other information which have been gathered to identify the problem areas. It is important to organize them as to whether they are perceived or real problems, and then to clarify your handling of them. Additional data gathering may be necessary to assess the actual needs, and potential conflicts, etc. A survey asking residents or interested parties about a specific issue may help identify all of its aspects, existing conflicts of interests, and potential or actual needs.

How to Conduct a Visual Analysis: Flow Chart

STEP ONE. Create a comprehensive portrait of the town.
(Concurrent research)

STEP TWO. Assess community needs/aspirations.

STEP THREE. Conduct a photographic survey.



STEP FOUR. Problem identification and analysis.

STEP FIVE. Develop solutions/ recommendations.

STEP SIX. Presentation to the community.

Prioritize town issues (both perceived and real)



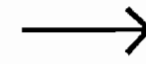
Organize all existing info. and maps on boards; include topo., climate, demog., transp., roads, etc.



Organize the photographic survey material and identify key target areas; include any historic and contemporary photos; pinpoint gateways, historic areas, key focal, economic factors, etc.



Use the existing maps and photo survey to create presentation boards which illustrate solutions and changes to the visual character of the community. (Boards may be maps with overlays, models, drawings, etc.)



Hold preliminary presentation of solutions with displays to gather feedback; revise as appropriate and submit final boards to community for their use.



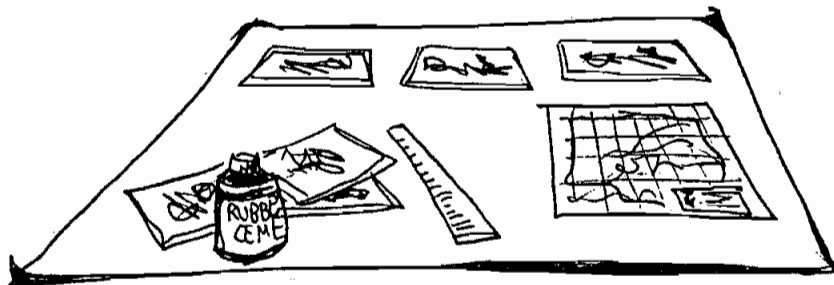
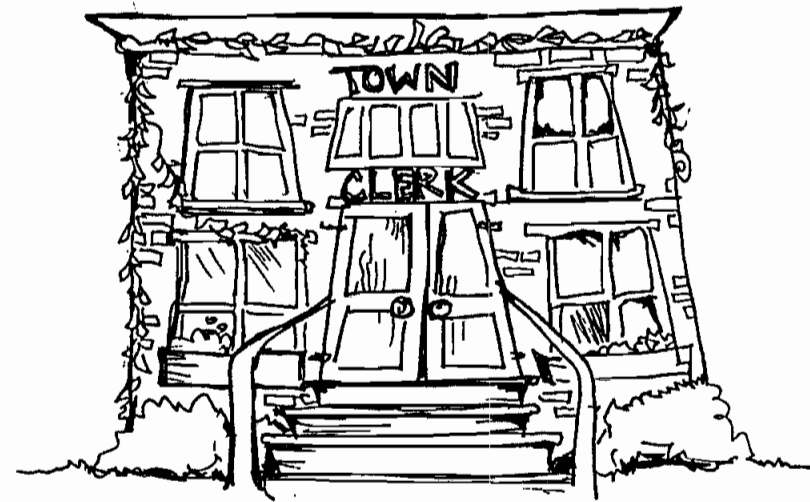
STEP FIVE

Using knowledge from the background presentation boards, research and the photos from the survey, outline suggestions for the community that can be implemented with physical changes. Using the boards that are prepared for overlays, (i.e., the road/infrastructure map and the photographic arrangement) create, through drawings or models on the overlays, a visual presentation which illustrates solutions. The presentation may include maps which show existing situations with overlays illustrating the proposed changes, drawings of solutions, or models of a recommended plan. By identifying and vocalizing the problems and recommendations through written and pictorial materials, a plan is more apt to be understood and therefore accepted.

It is crucial to keep in mind the larger community when making recommendations. Developing aesthetically-pleasing, socially and economically-acceptable, and environmentally-sound solutions is not easy. If these various positions are not covered by your participating community members, they can be gained through guest speakers, reading material, and by visiting other towns. Don't forget that your town officers can provide background information for your project. Town plans, maps, by-laws, and more can usually be obtained at

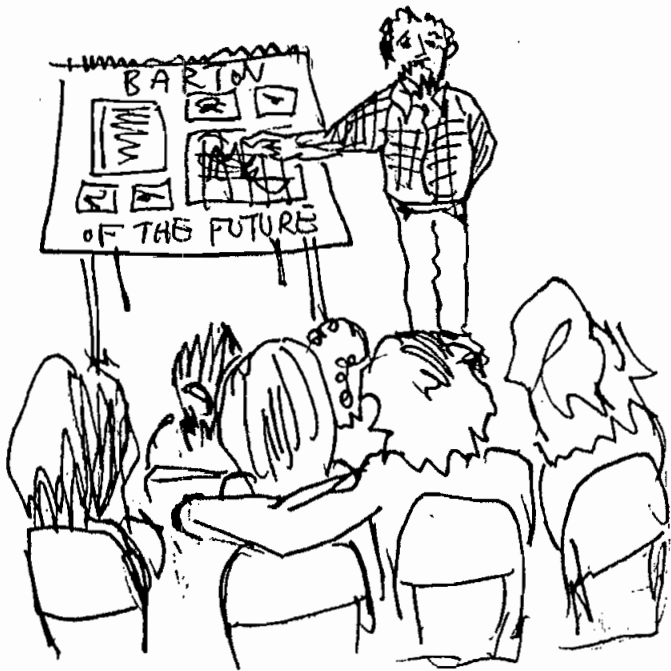
the town offices. Often local community members can provide missing links to the various issues you are trying to cover so be sure to include them in a discussion.

It is the role of the Visual Analysis committee to determine the most aesthetic and physically sound solution that meets the goals of the community. This is the creative thinking part. You are developing a new pattern of solutions that will guide your community in its future investment, both private and public.



STEP SIX

The final step in the process of a Visual Analysis is the public presentation of the work. Hold a preliminary presentation of the solutions using the display boards to gather feedback from the public. Be sure that the discussion is open for comments. People should have the opportunity to sketch and write out their own ideas. By using tracing paper, people can work over the presentation boards with the control of the maps underneath without fear of hurting the presentation boards themselves. Be sure not to miss any suggestions by taking notes yourself....some people vocalize their ideas rather than draw them. Revise the presentation materials according to the public's input and submit the final recommendations and boards to the community for their use.



Geographic and Land Use Boards: to use for presenting research. These boards are meant to guide, not dictate, a possible scheme for creating presentation boards for a Visual Analysis; not all details need be included.

Geographic Presentation Board,
may include the following:

topographic maps

slopes: gradual, steep

vistas

natural resources

bodies of water

waterways

wetlands

soils

climate

prevailing wind patterns

solar orientation

vegetation

cultivated fields

soft/hardwoods

open



Land Use Presentation Board, may include the following:

infrastructure

transportation

roads, logging trails,

recreation paths,

bus/subway system

buildings, historic districts

sewer/water/powerlines

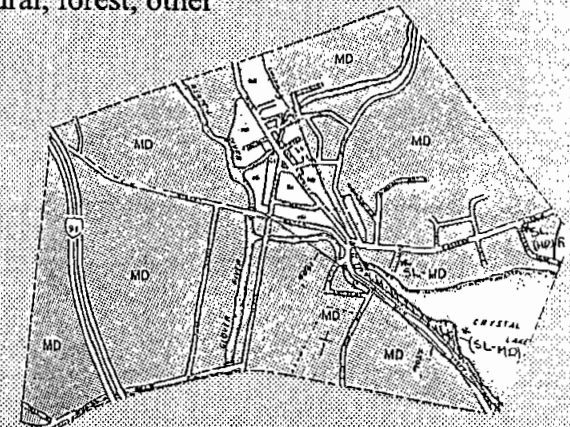
zoning regulations

density of buildings

private, public,

municipal

agricultural, forest, other



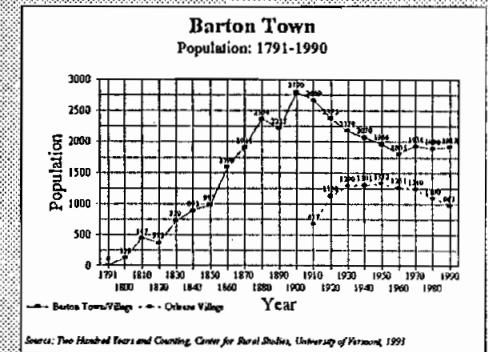
History and Demographic Boards: to use for presenting research. The example boards below are simply samples of items that you may include on a similar board of your own.

History Presentation Board,
may include the following:

- historic photographs
- old maps of the town
- key articles about the area's history
- historic districts
- notable vistas and/or other special features
- historic development trends
- prominent structures or monuments

Demographic Presentation Board, may include the following:

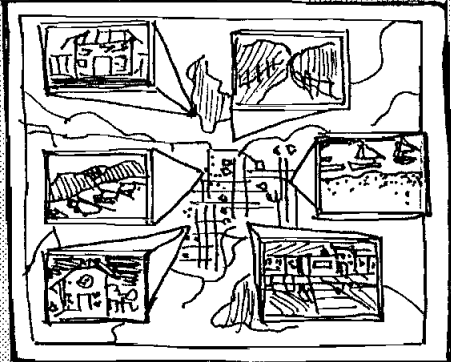
- age/sex population pyramids/graphs
- ethnicity
- occupation
- population density and location
- migration trends
- income/education levels
- rate of growth



Solutions Boards: to use for presenting recommendations. The following boards list possibilities and ideas that can be included in boards used for illustrating recommendations.

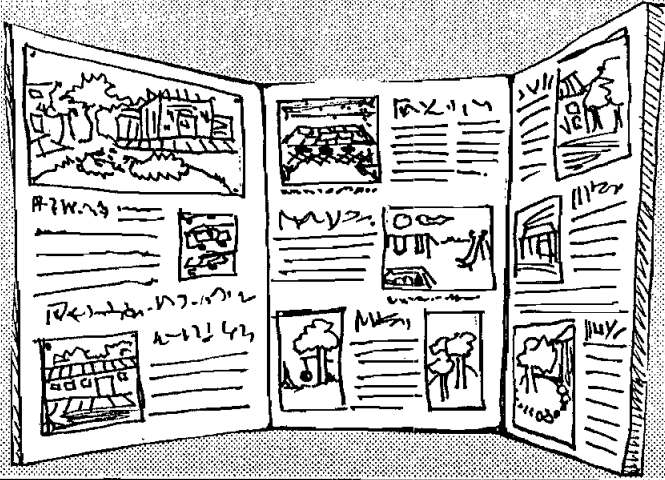
Photographic Solutions Board,
may include the following:

- historic photographs
- present-day photographs
- acetate or tracing paper overlays with sketches showing recommended changes to the places in the photographs
- small infrastructure map of the neighborhood with target areas of change identified



Solutions Board #2,
may include the following:

- present-day road map of village with existing infrastructure included
- colorful illustrations of the recommendations on the same map....or....
- acetate or tracing paper overlays with sketches showing recommended changes to the places on the map
- a short explanation for each target area as to what the illustrations/ recommendations mean



Conclusion

The Visual Analysis process is about redefining livability. It is about unearthing local community needs and desires, and developing aesthetically pleasing, long-term solutions to these issues. It is an opportunity to think about the natural, built, and human history of the area, then to recognize the highlights of social and economic development and to identify future goals for the community, and finally to propose long-term physical solutions that will improve the health and livability of the area in question. The complex issues of transportation, affordable housing, economic development, and environmental impact are addressed in a Visual Analysis. These issues should become an inherent aspect of the background research (i.e. in the physical geography, demography, maps, photographic survey, etc.). The strengths of the Visual Analysis are its roots in the physical and cultural assets of the community and that it builds from a community's vision.