

THE STATE
OF THE

CITY

EXPERIENCE

WHAT MAKES A CITY GREAT?

Urbanites across the country agree on a few things: they want great food, they love waterfronts, and they value historical architecture. As planners and designers, our job is to understand what people want and balance these desires with the big picture—economic realities, cultural needs, environmental concerns, and design opportunities—ultimately helping to shape a more satisfying and sustainable urban experience.

In this report, Sasaki outlines the results of a survey of 1,000 people who both live and work in one of six dynamic US cities—Boston, Chicago, New York, Austin, San Francisco, and Washington DC. We asked what they like and what they don't like about their built environment in four key areas: architecture, activities, parks and open space, and transportation, and what their personal outlook is for staying in a city long-term. Our participants' answers show that while we may be in the "century of the city" there is still much work to be done to improve urban life through thoughtful planning and innovation.

If You Build It...

While many people say they are drawn to historic buildings, we believe there's more going on here than meets the eye. Digging a little deeper unearths ways in which cities can design and build better.

In our experience, two primary characteristics attract people to historic buildings:

1. When people identify a building as historic, it is well-made and full of interesting details.
2. It often has a story behind it. Who wouldn't be captivated by the building—however humble—in which Thoreau wrote Walden?

Contemporary buildings that people identify as such are often uninteresting not because they are new, but because they are market-driven products that prioritize quantity and speed over quality and mission. They're visually uninteresting, and there's definitely no story behind them.

Plenty of counter examples exist—especially in cities with a recent culture of great contemporary architecture. Residents of San Francisco notably prize buildings that feature public art or unique design elements rather than those that are historic.

We think it's entirely possible to elevate today's architecture and people's impression of it—creating buildings with character, detail, and human scale, that can also be iconic. New buildings that relate to the public realm (an aspect in which many historical buildings fall short) will also be more successful. Millennials and Gen Xers are more likely to want buildings with flexible uses for pop-ups and community events. Interesting landscape design, activated first floors (that go beyond that standard retail awning), and even green roofs are all ways to create engagement.

These approaches don't necessarily have to cost more, but do require a more thoughtful design process up front. And buildings with unique identities can yield higher returns in the long run. People are attracted to buildings with character, a story, and an identity—and tenants are often willing to pay a bit more to get that.

MANY PEOPLE FEEL THE HISTORY OF A BUILDING IS THE PRIMARY FACTOR THAT MAKES IT ICONIC

36

PERCENT believe a building's history makes it iconic

30% think it's great architecture

24% look to its unique design

6% believe the uses inside the building make it iconic

5% think it's a well-known name or logo on top

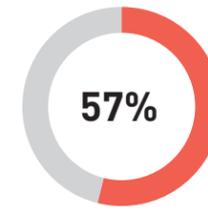
REGIONALLY

Residents of Austin are even more likely to appreciate history, but are less likely to say great architecture makes a building iconic.

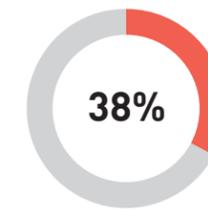
GENERATIONALLY

How you feel about architecture depends on your age. Baby Boomers are more likely than Millennials to say great architecture makes a building iconic. Conversely, Millennials are more likely than any other age group to say a unique design and well-known name or logo on top make a building iconic.

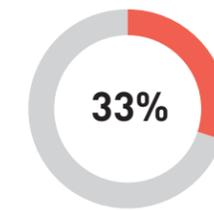
WHEN WALKING ALONG A DOWNTOWN STREET, MOST PEOPLE WILL STOP TO ADMIRE BUILDINGS THAT ARE HISTORIC



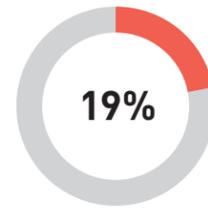
stop to admire buildings that are historic



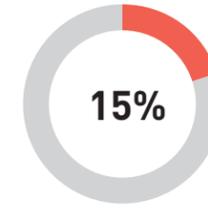
admire buildings that prominently feature public art or very unique design elements



like buildings with great public spaces that invite you inside



admire buildings that are modern



admire the tallest buildings

TO IMPROVE THEIR CITY'S ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER, MOST PEOPLE WOULD LIKE TO SEE THEIR CITY INVEST IN RENOVATING EXISTING HISTORICAL BUILDINGS TO RETAIN CHARACTER WHILE MAKING THEM MORE USEABLE

54% AGREE WITH THIS

33% love their city's architecture and think the city should keep doing what it's doing

30% would like their city to invest in more flexible uses that support pop-ups and community events

22% would like more unusual architecture (get Frank Gehry on the phone!)

20% think their city feels imposing and impersonal and would like smaller-scale buildings

17% felt their city was too quaint and would like to see more skyscrapers and iconic buildings

REGIONALLY

Residents seem to appreciate the local vernacular. Bostonians are the biggest admirers of historic buildings. Residents of San Francisco are more likely to be attracted to buildings that prominently feature public art or very unique design elements and are unimpressed by the tallest buildings. In contrast, with the tallest (on average) skyline in the US, it should be no surprise that Chicagoans are more likely to admire tall buildings.

GENERATIONALLY

Baby Boomers are more likely to stop and admire historic buildings, whereas Millennials and Gen Xers are more likely to admire modern buildings.

REGIONALLY

San Franciscans are more likely to want smaller-scale buildings. Residents of Boston and Chicago are torn—they want both smaller buildings and more skyscrapers, creating a conundrum for developers and urban planners.

GENERATIONALLY

Millennials and Gen Xers are more likely to want flexible uses that support pop-ups and community events, and unusual architecture.

ACTIVITIES

Out and About

Since the dawn of time, we've come together for meals—so it's no surprise that food continues to be a major social, cultural, and economic driver. When we asked city residents what aspects of urban life enchanted them, food kept popping up in their responses. Eighty-two percent of urbanites appreciate their city's culinary offerings!

There are myriad ways in which we can incorporate food into our cities, from traditional restaurants and waterfront patios to, more recently, food trucks and carts. We can activate streets by accommodating the mobile food scene. This usually requires making room for trucks and, ideally, providing seating options. At the district scale, we can plan for and incentivize food and beverage ventures in new or revitalized neighborhoods. Recognizing the powerful draw of food, cities should plan and design accordingly.

CONSUMERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY LOVE TO SHOP AND EAT—MORE THAN ANY OTHER OUTDOOR ACTIVITY

REGIONALLY

People from Chicago like consumer activities the most, while San Franciscans like them the least. Austinites tend to prefer programmed events (like farmer's markets, outdoor concerts, and food trucks) more than residents of other cities.



56%
enjoy consumer activities



45%
like programmed events



33%
prefer passive activities

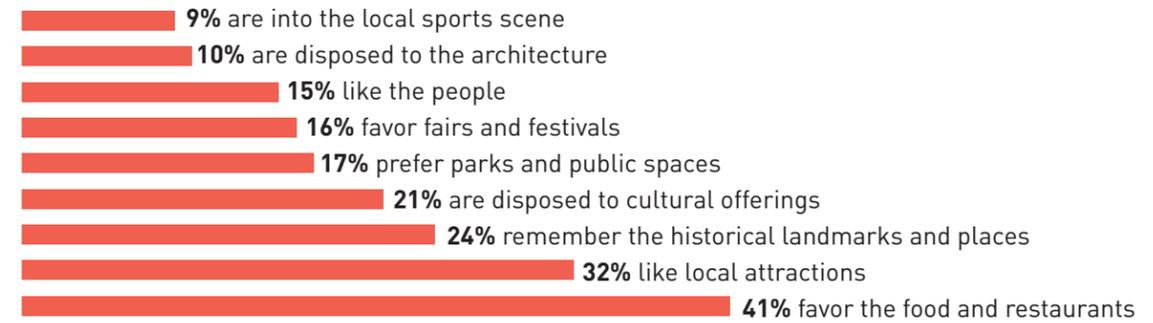


19%
are into adventurous activities



18%
favor team sports

FOOD AND RESTAURANTS ARE THE MOST OUTSTANDING ASPECT OF THE CITIES PEOPLE LOVE TO VISIT



REGIONALLY

New Yorkers like their parks and public spaces. Austinites love their fairs and festivals.

WHEN ASKED WHAT WOULD MAKE THEM WANT TO VISIT A NEW PART OF THEIR CITY, PARTICIPANTS OVERWHELMINGLY SAID "A NEW RESTAURANT"

46%
of respondents would venture out of their neighborhood to try a new restaurant

25%
would be incentivized to go to a new area of the city for a retail area or store

24%
would go for arts or a cultural event

18%
would check out a new park or green space

16%
would go for a sporting event

15%
would venture out to visit a nightlife venue

11%
would go for business networking purposes

REGIONALLY

Bostonians are the most likely to be enticed by a new restaurant. New Yorkers are the least likely; they are more likely to venture out for an arts or cultural event.

GENERATIONALLY

Baby Boomers venture out for arts and cultural events, Gen Xers check out retail stores, and Millennials, not surprisingly, are drawn to the nightlife.

PARKS + OPEN SPACE

The Great (Urban) Outdoors

While it's true that a city's skyline defines its character in the postcard sense, at the human scale, we identify with the spaces between buildings.

Recent research also suggests that open spaces and a high quality public realm add significant value (think real estate along Central Park in New York).

But making room for open space can be a significant challenge—especially for major, dense metropolises. Not everyone can recreate New York's Central Park.

Clearly, there are huge opportunities in existing underutilized spaces to transform them into parks. Often, these spaces are linear, like New York's High Line and Chicago's Riverwalk. These projects require design innovation and engineering ingenuity, but ultimately provide unique outdoor experiences and connective tissue between different parts of the city.

Coastal and riverfront cities are examining their waterfronts, which are a major draw when it comes to types of outdoor space. Transforming these often industrial and/or underutilized spaces can elevate the reputation of a city, enhance the well-being of its residents, and create major revenue drivers through a variety of programming options.

MOST PEOPLE REMEMBER THEIR FAVORITE CITY EXPERIENCE TAKING PLACE OUTDOORS—EITHER IN A PARK OR ON A STREET

1

PARK/ STREET

65% remember their favorite experience being in a park or on a street

2

PRIVATE BUILDING

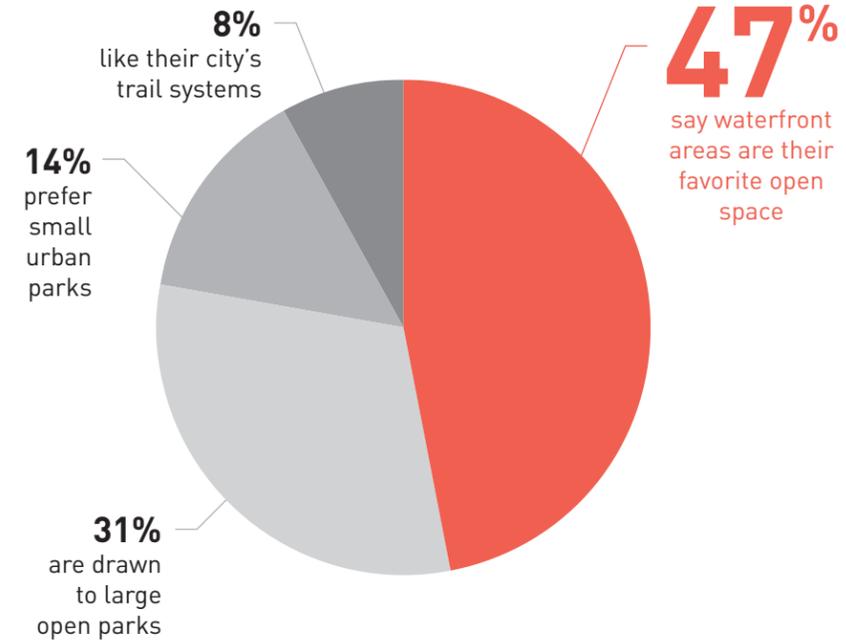
22% remember their favorite experience taking place in a private building

3

GOVT/ CIVIC BUILDING

6% remember their favorite experience occurring in a government/civic building

WATERFRONT AREAS ARE THE MOST POPULAR OPEN SPACE ACROSS THE COUNTRY



ACROSS THE COUNTRY, PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR THEIR CITIES TO INVEST IN MORE COMMUNITY-FOCUSED EVENTS AND ATTRACTIONS (LIKE FARMER'S MARKETS, SWAP MEETS, AND FOOD TRUCKS) FOR THEIR OPEN SPACES

FORTY SIX PERCENT

encourage community-focused events and attractions

41% support investment in making the waterfront more accessible and appealing

40% would like to see more large parks that support both passive and adventurous activities

37% wish their cities would make streets more pedestrian/bike friendly

36% support adding outdoor music and entertainment venues

31% desire more small urban parks (such as for visiting on lunch breaks)

REGIONALLY

Austinites are more likely to love their trail systems. New Yorkers are the only ones who prefer large open parks to waterfront areas.

Bostonians are least satisfied with their parks and public spaces. Even more surprising, Bostonians are very unsatisfied by their local sports scene, despite the strong loyalty and affinity for sports teams in the city. Chicago, on the other hand, is very satisfied with its sports scene, as is New York.

GENERATIONALLY

Age is a factor in preference for open space. Baby Boomers prefer waterfront areas, while Millennials and Gen Xers are more likely to hang out in a large open park.

REGIONALLY

Boston has the biggest demand for an investment in attractions like farmer's markets, swap meets, and food trucks. Bostonians would also like to see the city invest in making the waterfront more accessible and appealing, despite Boston's recent investment in the waterfront. Austinites seem fairly happy with their area events and attractions, but would like to build up their waterfront. Chicagoans are most happy with their small urban parks.

TRANSPORTATION

Information Superhighway

When we asked urban residents what they liked least about living and working in a city, traffic was the unsurprising winner.

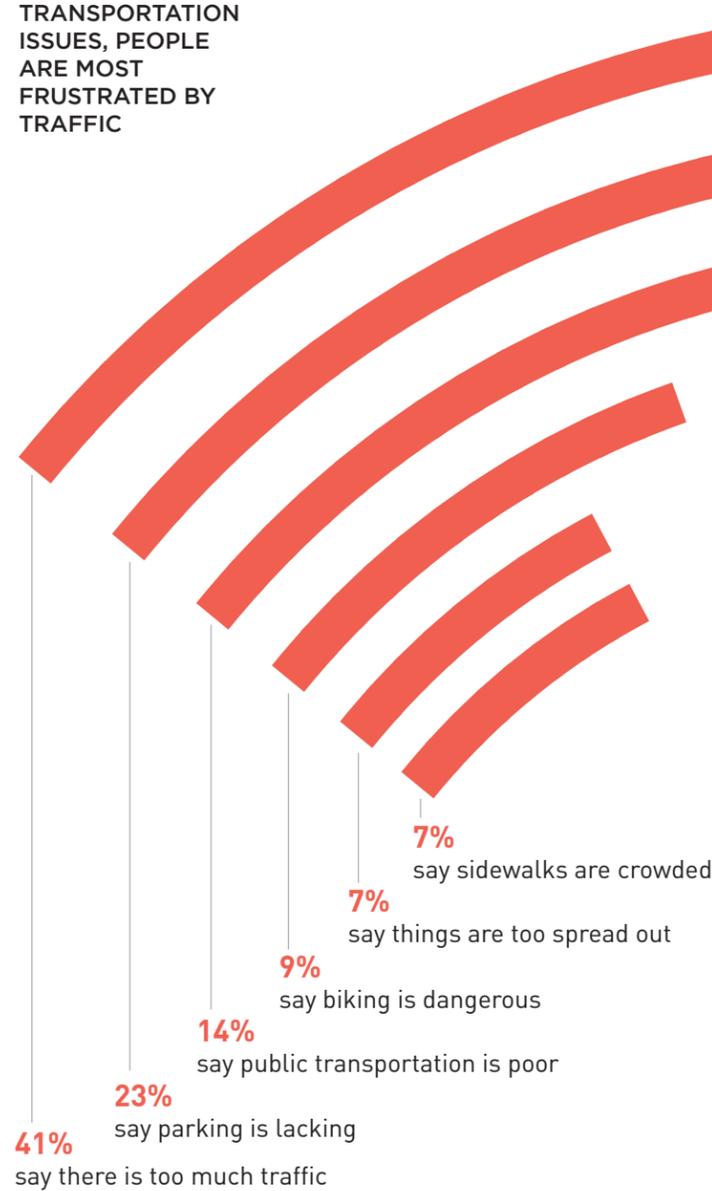
Breaking Americans of their car habit has been an ongoing battle. Transit-oriented development is the most-cited solution to encourage a less auto-centric society. (An anomaly, New York has the city-wide density to support a robust transit network.)

However, the numbers (here and elsewhere) speak loud and clear: we are still auto-dependent. We need to plan and design differently—in a way that will enhance mobility options while still acknowledging our love for the automobile.

We think new technologies offer a huge opportunity to rethink how cars can be more efficient and effective, both in terms of commuting and sustainability. Driverless cars, for example, promise safer and faster trips—and could be hitting the market in only 5 to 10 years. Driverless cars also address the issue of parking. Whereas traditional cars need multiple spaces throughout the day (home, work, gym, grocery store, home), driverless cars can park in a mega garage or further away while not in use—or even serve someone else during what would otherwise be parked time.

Ultimately, integrating mobility in the ever-expanding Internet of Things will help improve the city experience—and reduce our carbon emissions.

WHEN IT COMES TO TRANSPORTATION ISSUES, PEOPLE ARE MOST FRUSTRATED BY TRAFFIC



REGIONALLY

In San Francisco, locals are most frustrated by the lack of parking.

CARS REMAIN THE PRIMARY MODE OF TRANSPORTATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY



URBAN PLANNING

Back to the Future

The planet is becoming increasingly urban. And of those we surveyed, most urbanites see themselves staying in a city: a total of 60% said they plan on either living where they do now or in a different part of the city.

From an urban planning perspective, this is a great thing. In regions in which we've done the analysis, density and transit-oriented development have the best outcomes economically, environmentally, and socially.

However, some places in the US are struggling with shrinking cities. This phenomenon finds its roots in the 1956 Interstate Highway Act, which has proved to be the single largest force in shaping the development of urban centers across America. The highway program, which was intended to improve access to our great cities, also made it easier to sprawl outside of our urban confines. Once-thriving industrial cities like Detroit and St. Louis have seen more than 60% of their populations leave since 1950. The list of 36 US cities that have seen a population decrease of 20% or more over that same time period also includes places like Boston and Washington DC, though that trend is now reversing.

IN FIVE
YEARS, MOST
AMERICAN CITY
DWELLERS SEE
THEMSELVES
LIVING EXACTLY
WHERE THEY
DO NOW



16%
see themselves
still living in
the city, but are
saving to buy a
house outside
the city further
than 5 years
down the road

11%
see themselves
moving to the
suburbs

7%
see themselves
moving to a
rural area

This report helps us understand what will keep cities liveable now, and for future generations:

- Well-crafted architecture
- Engaging activities and parks
- Memorable open spaces
- Forward-looking transportation

**GINA FORD,
ASLA**

*Sasaki Principal,
Landscape Architect*

Gina is a landscape architect, principal, and chair of Sasaki's Urban Studio. The Urban Studio is an energized and interdisciplinary group of practitioners solely dedicated to the improvement of quality of life in cities through rigorous planning, exceptional design, and strong community partnerships.

Gina's work encompasses a wide range of scales and project types, from public parks and plazas to large-scale landscape planning and waterfront projects. She brings to each project a passion for the process of making vibrant landscape spaces—from the conceptual design to the details of implementation—with a particular focus on the life and use of urban, public environments.

Gina's experience is additionally informed by extensive research, writing, travel, teaching, and competitions. Her teaching includes guest critic and studio instructor roles at the Harvard Design School, MIT, and RISD. She holds degrees in Architecture from Wellesley College and Landscape Architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and was the recipient of Wellesley's Shaw Fellowship, the Janet Darling Webel Prize, the Hyde Chair at the University of Nebraska, and the Charles Eliot Travelling Fellowship.

**JAMES N. MINER,
AICP**

*Sasaki Managing Principal,
Planner*

James is head of Sasaki's planning and urban design practice and chair of the Executive Committee. His portfolio of work spans across all scales and includes urban infill projects, new communities, strategic land development, and regional planning. James also has significant experience planning for colleges and universities.

James enjoys complex, challenging projects in which the process of reaching consensus or seeking public approval is intricate and demanding. His collaborative spirit provides his teams and clients with broader ownership of key issues and of the ideas that will ensure the success of each project. James also has a passion for innovation and is always looking for new ways to use technology to improve the planning process. He is currently using several new technologies in his work including interactive online community engagement tools and modeling software that ties metrics to urban design decisions in real time.

James holds a Master of Urban Planning from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, and a Bachelor of Science in Art and Design from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is an active member of ULI and the APA.

**VICTOR W. VIZGAITIS,
AIA, LEED® AP**

*Sasaki Principal,
Architect*

Victor's work encompasses a range of project types and markets. He has rich experience with corporate campuses, interiors, and architecture, as well as with student life, student housing, and research facilities for higher education.

His practice derives valuable insights from his experience in both commercial and institutional sectors. Victor considers what the commercial world can learn from how new generations of students learn, work, and collaborate at school and, conversely, how colleges and universities can improve efficiencies, flexibility, and communication through contemporary workplace strategies. In all settings, Victor is passionate about creating spaces that foster interaction, collaboration, and community. He develops innovative solutions that are shaped by and reinforce the client's mission.

Practicing since 1994, Victor holds a Bachelor of Architecture from Cornell University. He is a member of the Boston Society of Architects and the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, and has taught design at the Boston Architectural College.

METHODOLOGY

Sasaki partnered with Equation Research to conduct this study. One thousand people who both live and work in one of six cities (Austin, Boston, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Washington DC) were polled. Online research was conducted in May 2014. The margin of error on this sample is +/- 3.1 percent.

ABOUT SASAKI

Collaboration is one of today's biggest buzzwords—but at Sasaki, it's at the core of what we do. We see it not just as a working style, but as one of the fundamentals of innovation. Our practice comprises architecture, interior design, planning, urban design, landscape architecture, graphic design, and civil engineering, as well as financial planning and software development. From our headquarters in Watertown, Massachusetts, we work in a variety of settings—locally, nationally, and globally. Learn more at www.sasaki.com.