Historic Preservation Study Synopsis

Buda has experienced tremendous growth in the last several years as people move into the Austin area and look for affordable suburban housing. This new growth has led to increased tax revenues for the city, but the impact on downtown businesses has not been as evident. While the long time residents frequent the downtown historic business district, it is unclear whether the residents of new neighborhood developments have the same connection. Historic preservation has been touted numerous times as a potential draw for tourism, but the effect it has on local residents has been less understood. This study attempts to reveal the current historical knowledge of residents by employing mental mapping methods. It is assumed that residents from more central neighborhoods will be more accurate and detailed than those from newer neighborhoods to the east and west. The mapping exercises will also help to shed light on the role that historic preservation plays in drawing residents to the downtown area.

The study will consist of a series of mental mapping exercises performed by focus groups from geographically distinct sections of the city. As mental mapping necessitates a longer time commitment than a standard questionnaire, and requires hands-on interaction, a number of focus groups will be selected representing each area of study. Focus groups will be composed of individuals selected randomly to the extent that such random selection is feasible.

Focus groups should consist of approximately ten people chosen from a list of people willing to participate. While those chosen for the study will not constitute a random sample, the study method does not allow for a true random sample of the population. The original list of people from which focus groups will be selected will be confined largely to those capable of receiving email, with the exception of the Onion Creek Senior Citizens Center and Old Town Buda residents that have volunteered to provide their contact information. The remaining electronically notified focus groups will consist of one group each from the Whispering Hollow and Garlic Creek subdivisions, one group chosen from the downtown business owners, and at least one group from a yet to be determined subdivision east of Buda.

The focus groups will set a mutually beneficial date on which to meet and participate in the exercise. All attempts will be made to restrict mixing of the focus groups, however if time constraints necessitate, mixing of groups will be restricted to those from similar geographical areas of the city. It is believed that groups from the same geographical area of Buda will have little indirect effect on each other, while a mixing of groups from different areas may lead to unexpected changes in the outcome. All exercises will take place at a mutually agreed upon location by the group, and the location will be noted for potential explanation of group tendencies. If necessary focus group members will be met with individually as it is assumed any outcomes will be relatively unchanged from a group session. In order to accommodate those seniors with mobility limitations one meeting will be held at the Onion Creek Senior Citizens Center.

Each focus group will be provided with the same selection of paper and writing utensils to minimize potential incorrect assumptions. Focus group members will be able to choose from 11” x 17”, large format drafting paper, and butcher paper. Various paper sizes will be available in order to accommodate differences in writing style and size, as well as potential sight limitations. Writing utensils will consist of pencils, black and blue pens, and assorted markers. Any instances of color-blindness will be noted and an alternative method of color identification will be chosen if necessary.

Members will be asked to draw maps according to their knowledge and understanding of the city of Buda in order to ascertain those areas they frequent most. As Lydon (2000) points out, this type of mapping project allows residents to come together to express various aspects of local knowledge or experiences. Each participant will be instructed to follow the color scheme outlined at the beginning of each session, but any symbols or legends produced will be unique to the participant. The exercises will follow the general principles outlined in recent research using hand-drawn maps, (Vajjhala, Fischbeck et al., 2005a; Vajjhala, Fischbeck et al., 2005b; Weinberg, 1999), but participants will be allowed to use text and draw with minimal prompting. While mapping exercises involving youth have shown that creative freedom produces more accurate results (see Amsden and VanWynsberghe, 2005), it is believed that the age of the focus groups in this study will require more structure in the mapping phase.

During the first round of the exercise each participant will be asked to draw the roadways in and around Buda in as much detail as possible, complete with road names to the degree capable. Streets will be drawn in black marker or pen depending on paper size or user preference. The next phase will require participants to locate landmarks they deem important or beneficial to them during their daily routine. Landmarks will be drawn in a predetermined color, or set of colors depending on type. Participants will then be asked to draw in the boundaries of any historic districts or structures that have received national or state level designation. The final phase will ask participants to highlight any structures not currently designated that they feel deserve designation.

Evaluation criteria will be formulated once all maps have been completed with sufficient explanation from focus group members. Geographical extent of the map, number of streets present, location of landmarks, and accuracy of historic district and designated structure locations will be evaluated using a combination of GIS and database manipulation techniques. As mental maps cannot be accurately scaled as a result of differences in resident distance perception, an analysis of street length and route accuracy will be avoided. The particular techniques involved in the analysis will become more clear after the maps of been sufficiently evaluated for understanding.