

November 19, 2009

13. Façade Materials - Wood



Alternate Example 1



Alternate Example 2



Scale of Preference:

-4 -3 -2 -1 +1 +2 +3 +4

If preferred, the design feature should be:

Encouraged Required

“13. Façade Materials – Wood” is a selected example from the Downtown Visual Preference Survey recently executed by the Planning Department of the City of Fort Wayne. It perfectly represents improper generalization, vague and meaningless questions, and limited examples common in the survey, any of which constitute a flawed methodology that would suffice to invalidate the survey and any data generated by it.

Improper Generalization

First, this is the *only* example relating to wood in the entire survey. But including only one example improperly leaves me with only one opportunity to vote and comment on the use of wood as a façade material. What if I generally like wood, but think this example is bad? What if I vote negatively because the wood is painted rather than stained? Might an example showing stained wood have resulted in an opposite opinion of wood as a façade material? For instance, I voted [-3] on the original example #13, but would have voted [+2] and [+4] on Alternate Examples 1 and 2 respectively had they been included under the category, “Façade Materials – Wood”. Do I, then, like or dislike wood as a façade material? Do I like wood, but just not that example? It is impossible to discern from my vote on example #13. Indeed, it is impossible for this type of generalization to yield any meaningful data.

Vague and Meaningless Questions

Second, though the category asks me to vote and comment on wood as a façade material, this example raises many more questions than it could possibly answer. For instance, if I object, am I objecting to the amount of wood used, or that it looks a little like residential siding? That it's poorly maintained, or that it looks outdated? Maybe I'm objecting because the paint is bland and uninteresting, or that there is no intermittent glass? Or because it looks insignificant compared to the adjacent brick? Or maybe just because it has paint swatches on it? On what specific question am I voting? Do I like it or dislike it? But like *what* or dislike *what*? If I don't leave any comments, which, of course, were optional, what will be assumed? What *can* be assumed? It is impossible for this type of vague and meaningless question to yield any meaningful data.

Limited Examples

Third, the survey was so limited in examples as to include only five possible façade materials (wood, metal, brick, stone, and vinyl). What about our opinions of concrete, glass, steel (different than metal), stucco, ceramic(s), plastic, or even virtual materials? If data obtained through this survey is intended to influence design standards, how will those standards deal with materials for which no data was obtained from the community?

Potentially Inappropriate Intent

Lastly, though an inappropriate intent would not necessarily invalidate the survey on methodological grounds, it nevertheless should be addressed. Even if it is possible to accurately ascertain which materials or window patterns I or anybody else visually prefers, what's the point of the City's interest? Do they intend to continue *encouraging* the use of only certain materials, as is the case in the current [Downtown Design Guidelines](#) ("*Desirable façade materials for new or renovated facades include red brick and dressed limestone, granite, and marble.*")? Do they intend to go further and *require* such use? Or worse, do they intend to dictate only approved architectural styles, typically of the historical persuasion (or more likely ersatz imitations thereof)? Any of these intents and approaches are inappropriate and incompatible with a city interested in and dedicated to embracing the future with boldness, confidence, and creativity.