

SR 520 CORRIDOR AESTHETICS HANDBOOK

Ideas for Urban Corridor Design

**Citizens' Design Advisory Group
and
Washington State Department of Transportation**

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Project Background

State Route 520 links some of Puget Sound's most densely populated cities - Seattle, Bellevue, Kirkland, and Redmond - and some of the largest employers in the state. The key segment in SR 520 is the Evergreen Point Floating Bridge, a 42 year-old structure that is nearing the end of its life. The floating bridge carried 115,000 vehicles a day between these cities in 2005. As these cities continue to grow, the number of citizens that depend on SR 520 to cross Lake Washington will also increase. Congestion is typical in both directions during the morning and evening rush hours.

Public comment and input on the project has been and will continue to be an essential element of the project. The Design Advisory Group's work on envisioning corridor aesthetics is the first step in establishing aesthetic guidelines that will be used by the Design Team as the project moves forward through design and eventual construction.

Please refer to Appendix A for more project background.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Corridor Aesthetics Handbook presents the results of the Design Advisory Group (DAG) workshops held between January and June 2006. The DAG was a committee of volunteers from communities along the SR 520 highway that have an interest in the character of the new highway facilities. The purpose of the workshops was to develop a statement of the communities' preferences for the aesthetic character of SR 520. This statement will be used in later design phases to develop aesthetic guidelines for the facility and its corridor. Community preferences are expressed in this Handbook as thematic visions and aesthetic goals and principles, which led to the beginnings of design palettes of color, line, form, and texture.

The DAG's aesthetic preferences are applicable to any of the alternatives and options because the environmental studies for all alternatives and options were just being finalized as the workshops were in progress.

Corridor aesthetics and the DAG workshops are included in the SR 520 project because of the Washington State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT) commitment

to the Context Sensitive Solutions approach to the facility design process and community input. The DAG's vision and goals laid the foundation for planning that will follow selection of the Preferred Alternative and designing the new SR 520 facilities and corridor.

WSDOT's philosophical foundation for the SR 520 Corridor Aesthetics process and this Handbook is that:

- Aesthetics and engineering are good partners. They challenge each other to be better.
- Aesthetics will be an integral part of good engineering design.
- Aesthetic treatments do not have to be expensive or a maintenance burden to be successful.
- The SR 520 communities will be an integral part of the interdisciplinary team that helps formulate the aesthetic criteria for the corridor and its presence in those communities.



WHAT IS THE HANDBOOK?

The Handbook is a statement of the vision and expectations that the communities along SR 520 have for the aesthetic character of the new facility. The Handbook will also be the primary reference regarding community aesthetic preferences for the WSDOT Design Team as they first develop a design for the Preferred Alternative and then begin to refine the highway design.

These aesthetic themes and principles were developed by the DAG during a five-month interactive, iterative process. The DAG was a selected group of community members who volunteered to represent their communities throughout the workshop process. Their shared vision for the aesthetic character of the facility and corridor is expressed here as illustrated sets of aesthetic themes with their respective goals, principles, and preliminary design palettes. The theme sets were developed with all of the alternatives and options in mind so that they can be applied and made specific to the Preferred Alternative once it is chosen.

The DAG explored corridor aesthetics from two perspectives: that of the highway user and that of someone who is outside the highway, such as a resident or a visitor to an activity center, such as a park or business, along the highway. This two-layered approach allowed us to consider the corridor/regional scale and the local/neighborhood scale as independent realms. These two scales are presented as “Corridor Unity” and “Thematic Zones”.

The “Corridor Unity” chapter presents an aesthetic vision for a distinctive, recognizable overall corridor character. The “Thematic Zones” chapter presents a vision for smaller scaled and more detailed community places. The Thematic Zones chapter recognizes that there are different landscape characters within the Seattle area (the “Westside”) and within the Medina, Hunts and Yarrow Points, Clyde Hill, Kirkland, and Bellevue area (the “Eastside”). The result of the differences in scale and experience is that there are three aesthetic themes presented here: one for the entire corridor, one for the Westside Thematic Zones and one for the Eastside Thematic Zones.

Design strategy: corridor and local scales

“Corridor Unity” is a strategy that acknowledges that SR 520 is an important regional connector and carries high volumes of traffic between Seattle and communities east of Lake Washington. Corridor-wide design principles are therefore concerned with the visual unity and aesthetic integrity of the corridor right-of-way between Interstates 5 and 405, and reflect the fact that most observers will be traveling at highway speeds. High speeds mean that aesthetic treatments should be large, simple, and not distracting to drivers.

“Thematic Zones” is a strategy that focuses on places or features in the communities that are outside of the highway, such as trails, furnishings, or the outward surfaces of walls. Thematic zone-scale aesthetic design is therefore concerned with the expression of community character and reflects the fact that most observers are moving slowly or are stationary. This means that aesthetic treatments can be smaller or contain greater detail than those for corridor scale treatments.

PURPOSE OF THIS HANDBOOK



The purposes served by the Handbook are:

Support public involvement during the environmental studies phase of the project.

The workshops were held at the same time the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was being finalized in order to lay the ground work for design of the Preferred Alternative facility once the Preferred Alternative is chosen. The aesthetic vision and ideas presented in this Handbook are applicable to any of the options and alternatives considered in the DEIS.

Promote excellence in aesthetic design by articulating a vision and aesthetic principles for the SR 520 corridor.

The aesthetic vision, ideas, and principles presented in this Handbook are those of the Design Advisory Group and were reached through an interactive, consensus-building process.

Help the future interdisciplinary design team create a distinctive, attractive corridor that respects the communities through which it passes.

The Handbook provides an understanding of the aesthetic vision and concerns of the SR 520 corridor communities. A vision and its supporting principles were established for both the quality of the highway user's experience and the interface between the highway corridor and the communities next to the highway.

Meet stakeholder expectations for WSDOT commitment.

The Handbook will be used by the project design team as the key reference concerning aesthetic quality in developing visual and aesthetic guidelines and standards for the new facility.

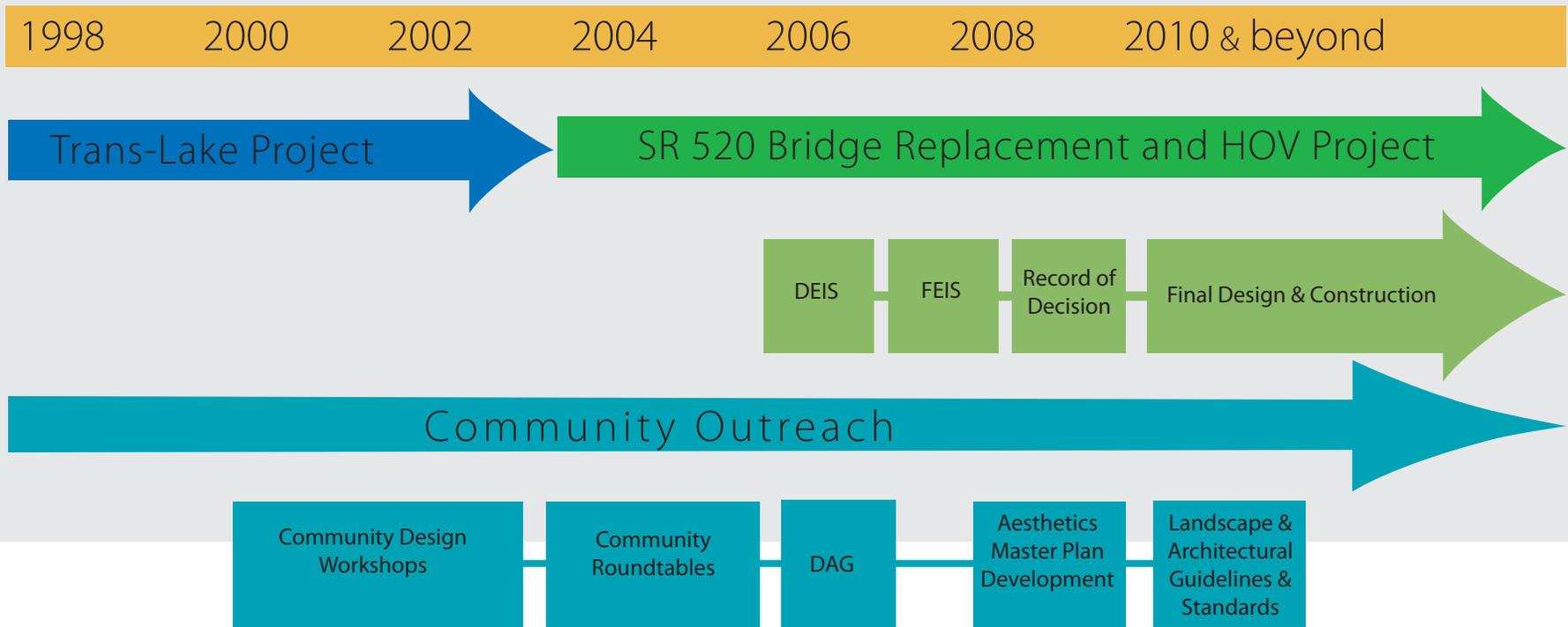


HANDBOOK PROCESS

WSDOT has a strong commitment to developing projects in accordance with the Context Sensitive Design/Solutions (CSD/CSS) philosophy. In order to design roadway facilities that fit within their unique contexts and meet the needs of the local communities, WSDOT developed a community involvement program to focus on SR 520 aesthetics.

The first step in this program was the formation of the Design Advisory Group whose purpose was to explore and articulate an aesthetic vision for the new SR 520 facilities. The DAG is an important step in the on-going community information and outreach process that began with the Trans-Lake Washington Study and will continue through design and construction. This Handbook is the record of the ideas developed during the DAG workshops.

Community Design Timeline



Design Advisory Group



The DAG was formed in the winter of 2005 through a community nomination process that sought volunteer representatives with backgrounds or interest in planning, design, and the arts. The group that assembled included representatives from:

Westside communities:

North Capitol Hill
Portage Bay/Roanoke Park
Montlake
University of Washington
Laurelhurst
Madison Park

Eastside communities:

Medina
Hunts Point
Clyde Hill
Yarrow Point
Wetherill Nature Preserve
Kirkland
Bellevue



Six DAG workshops were held during winter and spring of 2006 and focused on corridor aesthetics as a general set of goals that would be applicable to any of the alternatives evaluated in the environmental studies process. Appendix B provides a summary of each workshop illustrated with examples of workshop graphics and photographs.

The inspiration for creating the DAG aesthetics process arose from a series of internal roundtable discussions held by WSDOT in February and March 2005. During these roundtables the SR 520 project team discussed the value of integrating corridor aesthetics with the engineering design process. A consensus developed around these points:

- WSDOT is committed to the aesthetic needs of the SR 520 project.
- It is possible and desirable to develop a new highway corridor and facility with a distinctive, unified aesthetic character that is also compatible with its neighboring landscapes and communities.
- The aesthetic design vision and concepts for the new highway should reflect a variety of scales.
- The aesthetic design vision and concepts for the new highway should be refined into guidelines that will reflect the preferences of the communities and will help the interdisciplinary design team make decisions in the future.



HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This Handbook outlines the DAG's consensus on visual and aesthetic ideals for SR 520. These ideals are expressed as a set of statements that progress from vision level to material and color palettes:

- **Theme** expresses an overall aesthetic character.
- **Goals** establish the visual and aesthetic qualities of the new facilities and corridor.
- **Opportunities Maps** show where there are places or objects that are significant to the community and that should be given aesthetic treatment.
- **Principles** describe how the places near or components of the facility should interrelate in order to meet the aesthetic goals.
- **Palette** defines preferred materials, colors, form, and line for the elements of the facility.

The corridor scale and Eastside and Westside Thematic Zones each have a set of visual and aesthetic ideals statements that establish their respective aesthetic design strategies. Designers will use the strategies as they design the details of the facilities and corridor.

The physical components or places that can receive aesthetic treatments or be designed as an aesthetic element are collectively referred to as 'design elements' in this Handbook. Design elements are the objects or places in or along the highway that serve a function, such as lighting or stormwater collection, but that also contribute to the overall aesthetic character. For information on design elements, Appendix C provides the **Glossary of Elements** in which each element is briefly described and its aesthetic potential is considered. The Glossary also includes "Questions to Ask" and other ideas for how elements could be coordinated in order to create an integrated design.

Landscapes



Design Elements

A highway is a surprisingly complex combination of these design elements and coordinating how these elements are combined is what manifests an aesthetic theme. Some design elements are more visible from and integral to the corridor and others are more visible from and integral to community or local places. For the purposes of the DAG workshops we distinguished between the corridor and local elements in this way:

Corridor Unity

Design elements seen from the highway that are repeated often, have a continuous presence, or are large scale.

- Bicycle-Pedestrian Path
- Bridges – mainline SR 520
- Gateway – regional
- Landscapes – interchanges, inside the roadway
- Railings and Screens – on overcrossings
- Retaining Walls
- Sound Walls – surfaces facing the highway
- Traffic Barriers

Thematic Zones

Design elements seen from an adjacent community or activity center that are singular, particular to a context, or small scale.

- Belvederes and Viewpoints
- Gateway – local
- Landscapes – local streets, off ramps
- Lids and Bridges – surfaces and crossings
- Lighting – local streets
- Railings, Screens, Fences, and Gates
- Sound Walls – surfaces facing the neighborhood
- Way-finding - signage



Lids



Lights



Screens



Railings



Walls



Paths

A Working Tool

One way to organize and think about how the different elements combine and work together emerged from the first DAG workshops. It became apparent that all of the elements fall into one or more of these three categories:

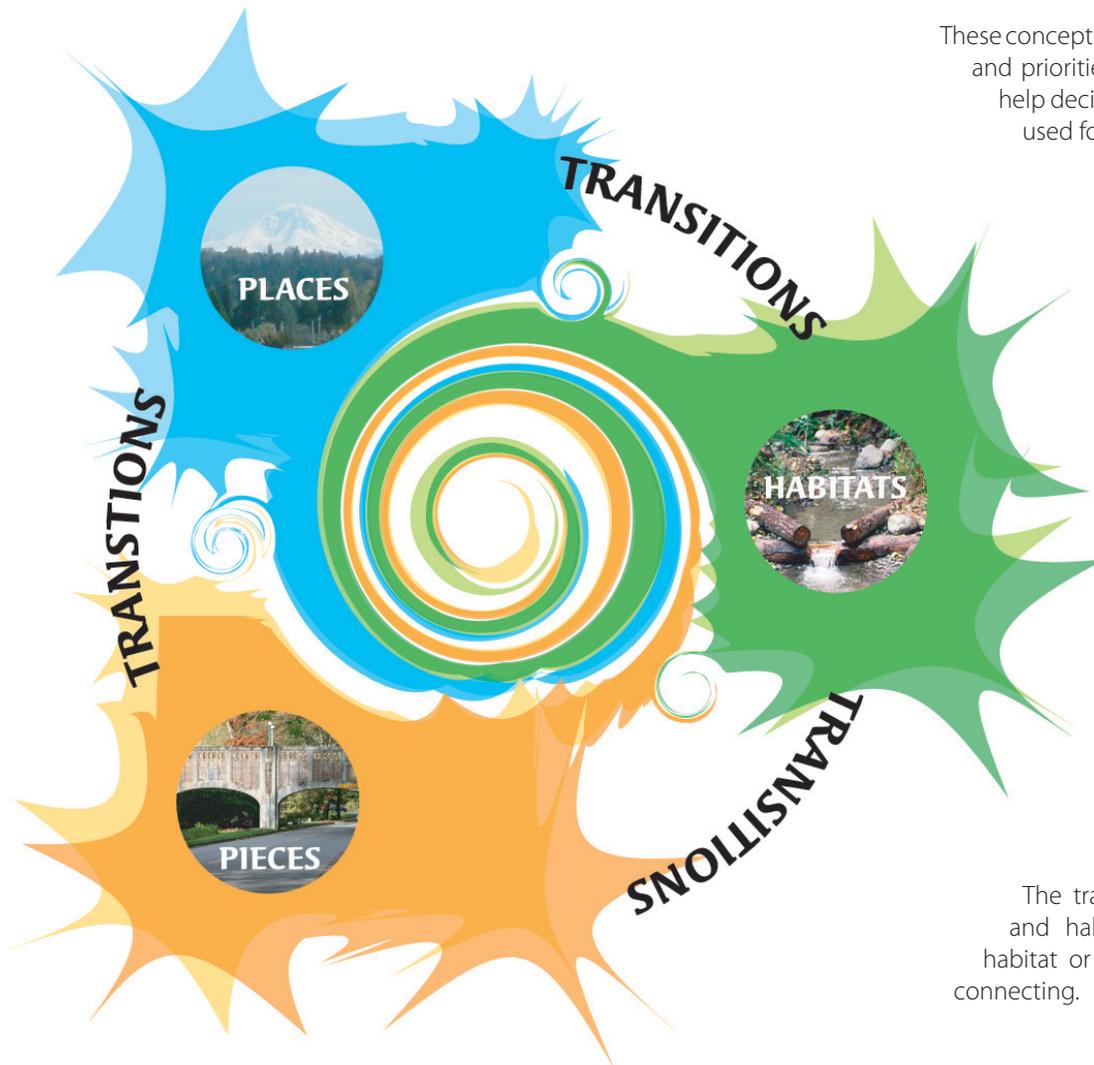
- **Places**- areas that are used by people and that are significant to the community (e.g., Points Loop Trail, the Arboretum)
- **Habitats**- environmentally sensitive areas that need to be sustained, protected, or enhanced (e.g., Foster Island, Wetherill Nature Preserve)
- **Pieces**- structures or objects that are part of a place that can be character-defining (e.g., walls and railings)

Even though all of the elements are present in the corridor, at any given location one or two elements will be the primary aesthetic feature and will be supported by other elements. Some combinations will be focused on “habitat”, which means that “pieces” combine to promote protection or enhancement of that place. Other combinations may focus on “place” and to that end “pieces” will be designed as part of a combination that creates a specific quality or character. Other instances may simply be a “piece” such as a sound wall, which will be designed to create a specific look.



Three aspects of the landscape to balance, connect, and weave together

These concepts are a tool for developing conceptual relationships and priorities between pieces, places, and habitat. This will help decide which category has highest priority and can be used for the corridor and both thematic zones.



The transitions between place, piece, and habitat are as important as the habitat or significant place that they are connecting.

