

DESIGN CONCEPTS

The significance of the Zion Hill Historic District requires the formulation of a culturally-sensitive design strategy for the preservation and revitalization of the district as a whole. Cultural or *ethno*-sensitive design is based upon the recognition that communities like Zion Hill present special design opportunities that are linked directly to the common cultural identity of its residents. A design strategy which is based upon this important aspect, proposes design solutions to existing conditions which are based upon historical and cultural associations, and when applied, dramatically influence seemingly unrelated design issues ranging from the location of view corridors or the use of water as a tangible link between design elements to the specific color palette for buildings within ethnic neighborhoods. This application of the design process to culturally-related concerns serves as a basis for enhancing the built environment while concomitantly, reinforcing fundamental cultural concepts and belief systems associated with ethnic communities.

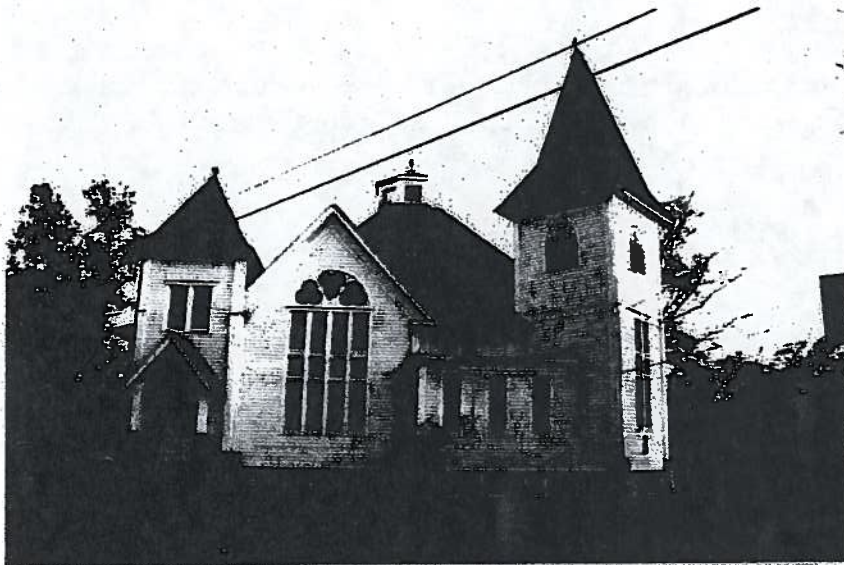
Three strong physical elements which are present in Zion Hill as well as other African-American communities and which are implicitly laden with cultural associations that may serve as a thematic basis for initiating a design strategy are the creek, the church and the cemetery.



View of Creek Area Looking East from Mast Alley

The Creek:

The settlement patterns of small nineteenth century African-American urban enclaves were often historically located in terrain which was undesirable for Anglo-American development, such as the flood plains of creeks and rivers, and were often summarily identified as *the bottoms* by the residents. Whether a result of this physiognomic relationship of site to creek or river, there is an undeniable connection, both physically and conceptually, between water and the community. This is initially present in the African-American belief system and its associations with life or more specifically, *christian rebirth* in the religious ritual of baptism. Water is also identified with life through time, as a source of sustenance, whether for the cultivation of crops or from the gathering of fish. The activity of fishing in particular serves as both recreation and public ritual during the spring and summer, and is utilized as a means to reinforce the social institutions of family and community.



Zion Hill Baptist Church

The Church:

The central and most powerful social institution for the African-American community has always been historically the local church, and the concept of community is synonymous with family and church. The church is the literal extension of the house and as the *house of the Lord* is, by extension, the house of the community. It is also rooted in the concept of sanctuary, with its implications of protection, freedom of expression, and hope. The church has and continues to nurture the common goals of the community. It allows for the expression and acknowledgement of each other's suffering and aspirations. The two themes present in the African-American spiritual, joy and sorrow, relate to the history of a people's experience with the institution of slavery as well as the common ideal and desire for

freedom. The spirituals, during the period of slavery were a means for communication in the absence of a written language. Since that time, they have remained encoded with elements of hope amid community suffering. The common refrains of *a better day is going to come*, or *let my people go*, has allowed the song or chant to serve as the connecting thread uniting the members of a specific community with other African-American communities. The church as a social as well as religious institution, served as the primary means for community organization during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and is the source for neighborhood activism to this day.



Grave Stone in Park Street Cemetery

The Cemetery:

The relationship between the living and the dead, between the descendent and ancestor is a persistent theme in West African culture. The physical relationship of the community of the living and the community of the dead, is inherent in the concept of place, of homestead and *roots*. The African-American concept of the family and death is based upon the extended family and kinship, in contrast with the nuclear family of the late twentieth century. It stresses the importance of the community over the importance of the individual. In death, the community as well as the family has lost a member. The concept of freedom from this

life, *of going home*, of the passing from one life to another provides a means for celebrating the community aspiration of achieving a better life than that provided by the world that one has left. When a African-American dies, that person is never described as being dead, but as having *passed* or *gone on*. The location of the remains of family members in proximity to one's community is necessary and a function of cultural and social importance.

The three elements which have been discussed provide the necessary background for making the following recommendations regarding the overall design strategy and approach to the revitalization of the Zion Hill Historic District. The cultural relationship between the creek, the church and the cemetery provides the means for linking these important physical landmarks and thematically uniting the district.

Although Zion Hill Baptist Church has been moved three times, its present location at the intersection of North Lanana and Bois D'Arc Streets serves as the visual anchor for the district. It should be restored and used to establish a visual axis, oriented east-west which runs the length of Bois D'Arc Street and proceeds toward Lanana Creek. This becomes a view corridor which is framed on either side by houses which front Gene and Ernest Alleys on the north and south, and intersects the creek. Vegetation along the Creek which currently obstructs the view of the creek's edge should be cleared to define the view corridor and direct the site line to water. The terminus of the end of this newly-defined axis may be provided by the construction of a community pavilion or an appropriate afrocentric element which also serves as a community center, overlooking an improved creekside park.

The relationship of Park Street Cemetery and Zion Hill needs to be strongly reinforced. This is possible given the proximate location of Zion Hill to Lanana Creek, which serves as the north-south edge of both the community and the cemetery. The existing trail system should be enhanced to preserve the relationship between these two elements and the cemetery needs to be heavily screened on the east and south sides.

**Infrastructure Conditions
and
Improvements**



View of Ola Alley Looking West

INFRASTRUCTURE CONDITIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

Currently, the district infrastructure conditions are by today's standards, substandard. The only paved streets are N. Lanana, Bois D'Arc and Richardson; there is very little public street lighting, landscaping, or parks and only the minimum required street signage. Historically, there has never been much attention paid to these features. Overall, the neighborhood is in an extreme state of neglect.

In order to preserve the historic and ethnic character of the area and yet upgrade the infrastructure to meet contemporary standards, a fairly unique approach to neighborhood redevelopment design must be undertaken. The guiding principle should be to introduce into the common spaces streetscape elements that are appropriate to the scale and integrity of the neighborhood and reinforce their relationship to both land and institutions. Providing for growth by the infilling of vacant lots with relocated historic or appropriate new houses, will be necessary to revitalize and stabilize the community. This should be done by carefully grafting new street patterns onto the existing ones that are in character with the existing alleys and infilling new houses to solidify the edges and the district's interior.

The paved streets, N. Lanana, Bois D'Arc and Richardson are recommended to receive standard street repairs as required, but also be lighted with cast-iron "acorn" pedestrian street lights of the W.P.A. period. The unpaved streets or "alleys" are recommended to be paved, but with a decomposed granite material over a gravel bed with concrete edging, to act as a curb. This technique is not normally used for residential streets, but is most appropriate historically to replace an original residential dirt road. Pedestrian lights along the alleys should be simple and "in character" with the street or alley enhancements in order to distinguish them from the W.P.A. - era paved streets. Perhaps a 6" square wood post with a goose-necked "industrial" head can best serve this purpose.