

Southern California

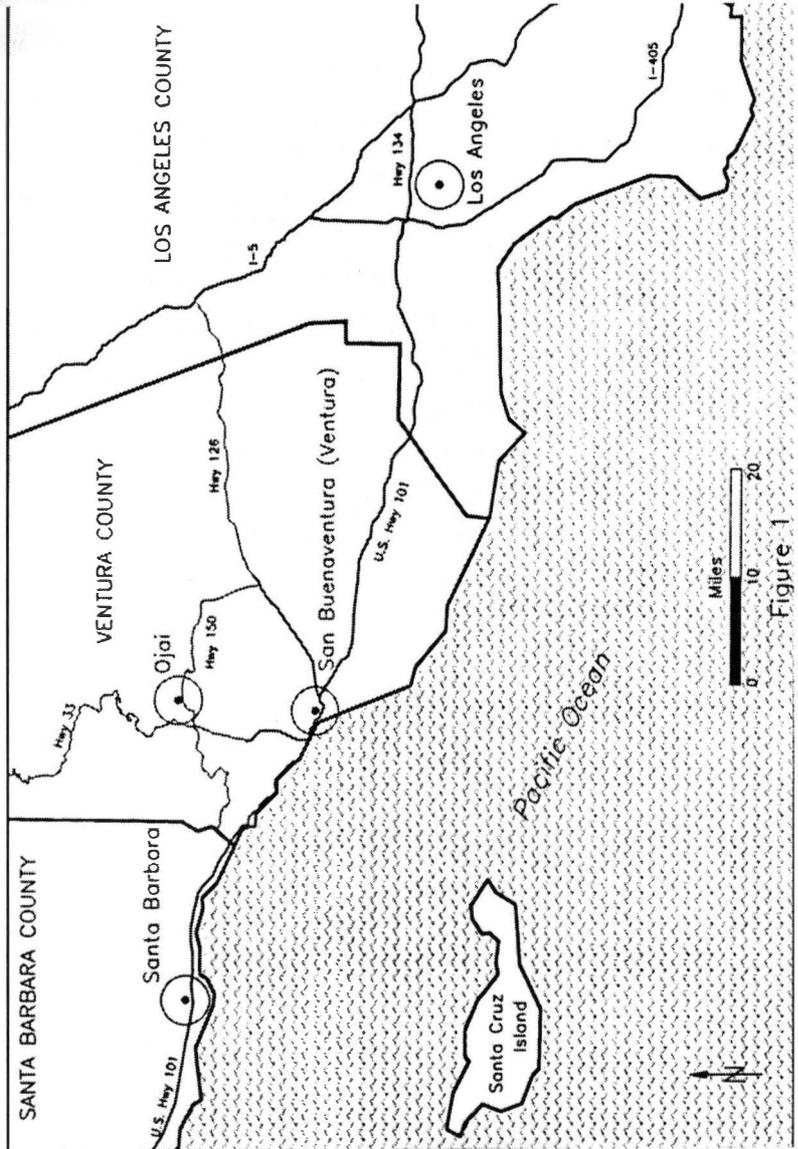


FIGURE 1. Map of Southern California

Sense of Place for Ojai California

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Abstract

This paper is based on a master's thesis presented to California State University, Fullerton in 1994. A questionnaire was used to elicit responses people and place, critical Ojai issues, and concerns for the future. Findings are examined in the context of the concepts of topophilia, topophobia, and *genius loci* and compared to current census data. Survey findings demonstrate that Ojai residents generally have a strong, positive, and distinct sense of place and are anxious about its preservation in the future. Respondents agree that Ojai is a place with striking physical features and residents unusually diverse for a small town. Threats to Ojai's lifestyle are perceived to derive from external forces of urbanization and economic development. Cohesive views regarding sense of place and common perceptions of imposing threats translate into community strength and a strong local identity or *genius loci*.

Introduction

This study investigated the sense of place held by the residents of Ojai, California. One of the few distinctive places remaining in southern California, Ojai is under pressure to develop in ways that may threaten its individuality.

As such distinctive places disappear under the spreading standardization of modern development and mobility people are losing their sense of place feeling a diminished sense of rootedness and personal attachment. The alienation resulting from the increasing urbanization of humanity is contrary to historical boundedness of humans to their physical and cultural place. Humans need attachments to significant places. Without these attachments people may feel estrangement or alienation from their environment (Bunkse 1990).

It would seem imperative for communities and their leaders to acquire a clear awareness of what it is they value so that they might make sensitive development decisions that preserve the spirit of a place or create meaningful new places (Lynch 1976). To help prepare for such decision-making, a sense of place study provides an invaluable tool. Sense of place studies have been used increasingly in the past 20 years by sociologists and geographers to increase our understanding of humans in their environments. This study is an attempt to provide such a tool for Ojai California.

Sense of Place

Humans thus shape and are shaped by the landscape in which they live.

A location has little meaning for a person just arrived. That person gradually develops a sense of place while carrying out everyday activities and acquiring memories in that location over time. Cultural values affect the ways in which humans view and use the environment. A person's relationship with places over time contributes to the creation of an experiential perspective. Locations then become behavioral settings, and places with human meaning are thereby created. This common human shared identity or spirit of place is also called *genius loci* which also can be thought of as a place's character, or atmosphere, as determined by the everyday life experiences of its inhabitants over time. A sense of place study must focus on the spirit of place concept by asking diverse members of the community about particular elements of their lives to find commonalities of perception.

As places developed independently through history they each acquired local characteristics and an identity derived from their physical and cultural geography. However, such regional differentiation of places is disappearing with the advent of a high level of developmental homogenization in the modern world. This extinction of uniquely identifiable places has two main. First, the move toward a global economy is standardizing diverse commercial, economic and cultural landscapes through universal building codes and materials. Secondly, our contemporary society, bombarded by media images and information, is far less tied to particular places than any society that has preceded it. Increasing mobility and tourism are also creating inauthentic landscapes that provide entertainment for visitors but may have little lived-in meaning for local residents.

Humanity has been tied to locality throughout history. Are we ready to lose these attachments? If we must progress beyond locality, should we not try to understand the dynamics of these historic attachments?

This study explores the distinct landscape of Ojai, California through field observation, interviews with citizens and public officials, and a questionnaire/survey delivered to a cross-section of residents. The survey elicits residents' experiential perceptions, and degree of commonality among a diverse population concerning such issues as traffic congestion, impact of tourism, directions for development, natural and the built environment, social landscape and concerns for the future.

Rationale for Using Ojai as a Study Site

The city of Ojai is located 80 miles northwest of Los Angeles, 14 miles directly north of the coastal city of Ventura and 30 miles east of Santa Barbara (Figure 1).

In the southern California context, Ojai's landscape is both physically and culturally distinctive. Ojai is in a valley in the Transverse Range Province, one of only two east-west running mountain ranges in the United States. The physical setting of the valley and mountains, with a historic legacy of limited access by two small roads, sets the community apart from the surrounding region. This relative spatial isolation may have contributed to Ojai's cultural identity which makes it appropriate for this study.

The eclectic mix of people who inhabit or visit the Valley give Ojai its cultural distinctiveness. With a population of 10,000, Ojai is noted for its large concentration of private schools and diverse social groups. In addition, the community's extant cultural values of small town preservation are evidenced by some of the strictest slow growth policies in southern California. Such policies have helped Ojai remain essentially rural (Figure 2), with the lowest population growth in Ventura County, while most of the surrounding region endures rapid development.

Ojai has a strong local identity (*genius loci*) manifested in its many diverse social groups united against growth. Ojai residents are known for their activism and have been successful in preventing a freeway from being built into their community (Figure 3). Ojai's strong local identity and spatial isolation from the surrounding region make it a microcosm of community place-making dynamics in the face of change.

There is a pressing need to document the general sense of place of Ojai because the Valley is under increasing pressure to urbanize in the context of the overall development of southern California. Regional growth has caused Ojai, in its rural setting, to become an increasingly popular tourist destination and desirable place to live.

Historical Development of Ojai

The Chumash Period

About 500 Chumash occupied the Ojai Valley when the Spanish arrived in 1779. There were four main villages one of which was called *A'hwai*, pronounced a-ha-hee, a Chumash word meaning moon (Fry 1983). The word "Ojai" is possibly the Spanish pronunciation and spelling for *A'hwai*. Although the non-literate Chumash sense of place will probably never be known, the idea that they might have considered the place spiritual is a part of Ojai's mystique and contemporary culture.

The American Period

Oranges were grown successfully in the 1880's and the citrus industry gradually expanded to the present 1500 acres thanks to the "agricul-

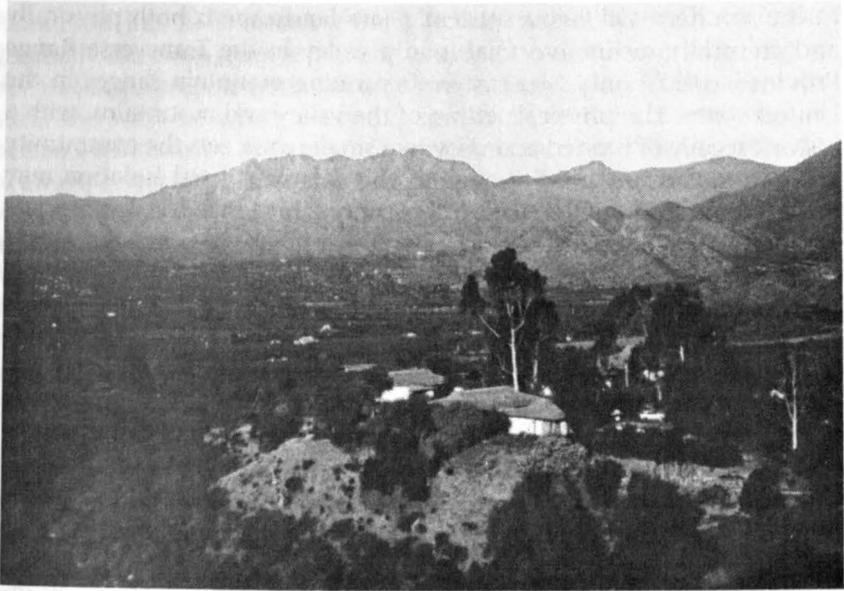


FIGURE 2. The Ojai Valley features many large mountains and is still an essentially rural place.

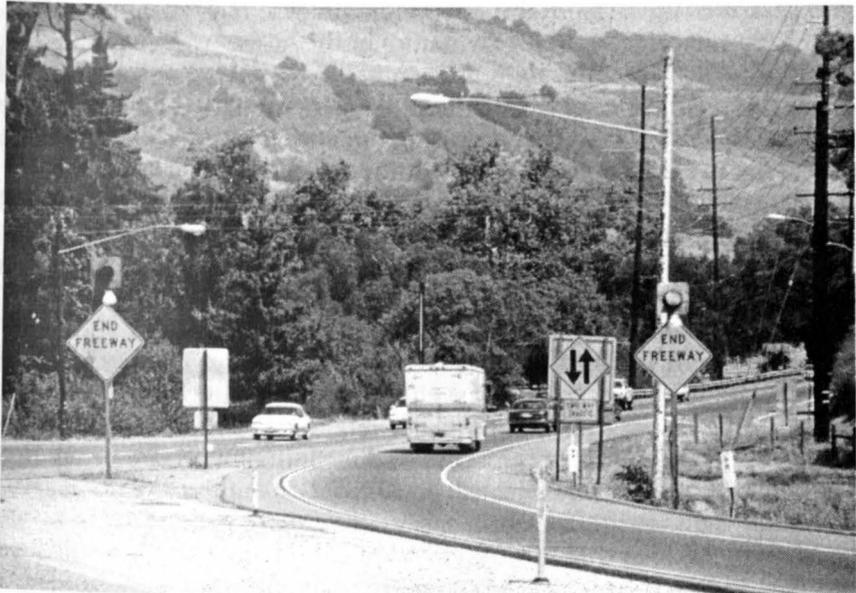


FIGURE 3. The freeway from Ventura ends 10 miles before reaching Ojai.

tural preserve" which lowers taxes on land kept under cultivation. Ojai's orange groves are one of its distinctive landscape features.

Tourism in Ojai commenced with the publication of Charles Nordhoff's (1872) *California for Health, Pleasure and Residence: A Book for Travellers and Settlers*. Nordhoff gave high praise to the mild winter climate, lacking the wintertime extremes which eastern Americans endured. Nordhoff's descriptions of the advantages of California's climate and lifestyle attracted hordes of easterners to the West Coast. His book and the successful treatment of respiratory victims in the area's dry climate led to the development of Ojai as a health resort. Sherman Thacher came to Ojai for the health of a younger brother in 1887 and stayed to start a private high school in 1890 which still draws wealthy students from throughout the United States. Other private schools were started in the area and attracted an educated population mostly from New England (Fry 1983).

The downtown shopping area and post office, with their distinct California mission style architecture (Figure 4), were constructed in 1917 by Edmond Libby to unify the appearance of the buildings along the main street. This architecture has endured, becoming an integral part of Ojai's distinct ambience.

Ojai's spiritual history began in 1922 when the Theosophical Society came to the Valley. The philosopher Krishnamurti arrived in 1922 and stayed as a winter resident in Ojai, writing, teaching and giving annual public lectures until his death in 1986. Many other spiritual and *new age* groups have been attracted to Ojai which has been characterized as one of the first *new age* centers in California.

By the mid 20th century, the special ambience that attracted so many types of people became threatened by growth. In response, the city strengthened development laws, created moratoriums on tree cutting and building, and implemented signage limitations (Figures 5 & 6).

The historic legacy of Ojai's type of development has created a community which is relatively enclosed and culturally different from surrounding areas. Its population of 10,000 includes artists, actors, spiritually minded people, business persons, environmentalists, educators, developers, ranchers, and commuters attracted by historic circumstance and the valley's special qualities. This diversity of people living in Ojai is one of its recognized features. However, this unusual community is facing external pressures to conform to a dominant southern California culture evident in a wide array of issues.

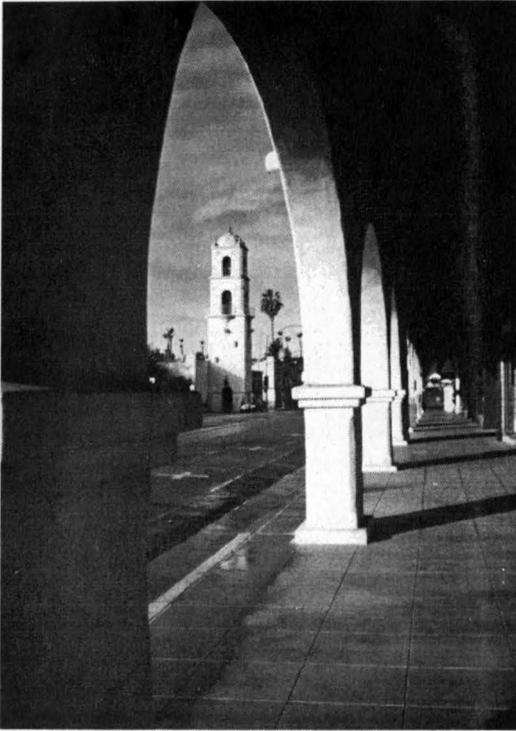


FIGURE 4. Ojai's main shopping arcade with post office tower across the street.

Current Issues for Ojai

Careful control of development has preserved Ojai's rural charm and fostered a strong tourist industry during the last 20 years.

Although tourism as a clean industry bringing income to the area has been a positive force, it has its negative side. Traffic has become heavy in town and property values have risen to levels which may force out many of Ojai's lower-income residents. A serious question is whether the established population and culture can survive the increasing impacts of tourism and immigration from the surrounding urban region. Ojai has so far remained distinctive in the face of change.

In this study I try to discover the current sense of place of Ojai residents through a survey regarding attitudes to life in the Valley and opinions about tourism, traffic, growth, and both hopes and fears for the future. The survey is designed to discover the sense of place qualities felt by Ojai's inhabitants while also attempting to uncover Ojai's *genius loci* from a commonality of responses among a diverse sample population.

The Ojai Survey

I have included a phenomenological element in this survey which allows the respondents to describe their community in their own terms. The phenomenological-humanistic approach in geography focuses on the elements of landscapes as perceived by the inhabitants, with the aim of understanding without pre-conceived theories. However, in order to provide a broader context in which to interpret residents' perceptions I will compare these perceptions with government statistical data.



FIGURE 5. Restrictions on tree cutting has fostered a landscape of trees growing in the street in Ojai.

The survey includes both closed and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions are used to elicit demographic data. Open-ended questions are used to determine respondents' perceptions of Ojai. These open-ended questions were intended both to encourage and enable respondents to contemplate and provide individual answers in their own words without the influence of pre-set closed-ended options.

The survey comprises 36 questions divided into the following categories: background of the respondent; Ojai and local issues; community identity within Ojai; Ojai descriptions and perceptions; Ojai's future; demographic data; and, open-ended, opinion questions to allow for factors missed in other parts of the survey.

I chose a sample of 100, approximately one percent of the population of the Ojai Valley. The sample population included individuals representing seven groups: general population; members of spiritual organizations; business owners; government workers; artists; educators; and youth under 18. The purpose of including the categories was to diversify the sample.

I have presented the results of the survey in the context of *topophilia* (love of place), *topophobia* (scorn of place), and *genius loci* (Spirit of place).

Topophilia

Ojai provides the ideal home for most of the respondents. Although a large majority (88%) describe a small community as the ideal place to live, they generally desire to be near a sizable city for cultural and retail amenities. Most (88%) identify Ojai as being home for a variety of reasons including: length of residence, family, friends, climate, lifestyle, and love of the place. Most responses in the youth sample group provide exceptions to the general trend because they grew up in Ojai, feel it is confining and dull, and want to move once they graduate from high school. Nevertheless, some say they might return to raise children because it is quiet and safe.

The respondents have most of their friends and social contacts in Ojai by a factor of four to one which is important as an indicator of place attachment.

A sizable majority (83%) of the respondents feel that Ojai is a spiritual place. However, they have differing interpretations as to the meaning of spiritual. These include: the power of Ojai as a New Age energy center; spirituality of nature and wilderness; the sunset; and the presence of Jesus and God everywhere. This overwhelmingly affirmative response to a question on spirituality marks its importance as a factor in the respondent's topophilia and Ojai's *genius loci*.

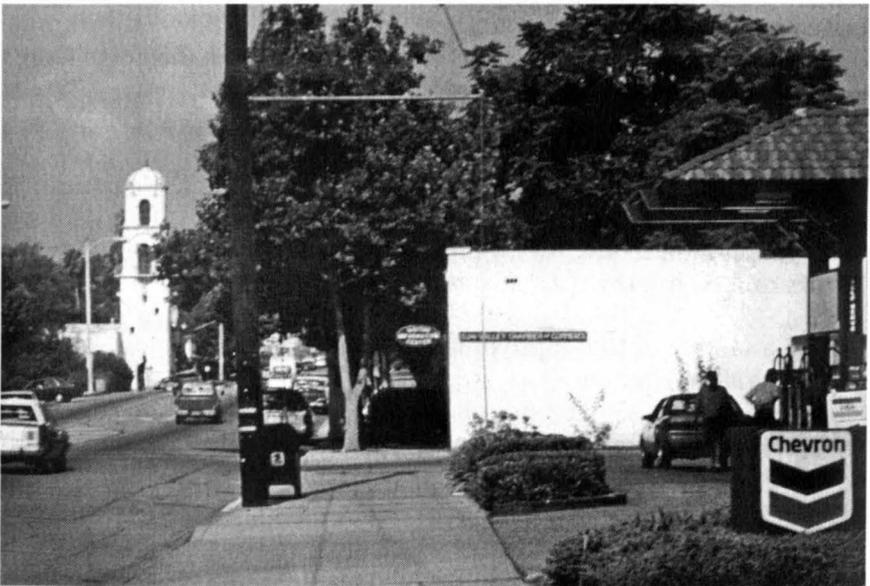


FIGURE 6. Notice the low-rise stature and wood frame of this Chevron sign.

Ojai's spiritual essence and the presence of many religious and spiritual groups, contribute to a cultural attitude that views nature, spirituality, and preservation as being more important than development and materialism. This has shaped the cultural landscape of the valley because the values of slow growth and natural preservation have prevented numerous development projects.

Physical setting and scenic resources of the Ojai valley are strong elements of the sense of place for residents. Ninety-three percent state that physical setting is important. The Ojai Valley contains large dominant and permanent natural features, such as imposing and steep mountains, which influence the residents' sense of the community's physical boundaries and identity. In a related question (What does Ojai look like?), the descriptions of Ojai's visual appearance follow clear physical and cultural themes. The main features include: mountains; valley; sunsets; citrus and oak trees; Spanish architecture; small town nestled in a valley surrounded by arid chaparral mountains; a town from the past; an agricultural place and an oasis or a Shangri-la. Ojai as a Shangri-la is based on an event that remains a part of Ojai's current mystique. In 1933 James Hilton wrote about a hidden paradise called Shangri-la in his novel *Lost Horizon*. In 1937 Ronald Coleman made the movie *Lost Horizon* and used Ojai as the setting for Shangri-la. The view of Ojai featured in the movie is virtually unchanged by developments in 60 years. The perception of Ojai as a beautiful and tranquil valley beyond the grasp of an outside world has endured and is a part of residents' current sense of place.

I asked the respondents to list their likes about Ojai as a place. The top five features which inspire satisfaction for Ojai residents, in descending order, are: people, community, nature, beauty, and the mountains. Their list of physical attributes includes: the climate; beauty; open space; bowl-like geography; mountains; quiet; peace; agriculture; proximity to other good places; and, clean air. Comments regarding social characteristics include: people are tolerant; caring; friendly; artistic; diverse; open-minded; environmental-minded; traditional; and, offbeat. The community invokes feelings of safety, belonging, community pride, relaxation, smallness, and good will.

I included a question "Is there anything about Ojai which makes a special (unique) place to live?" to discover if there was anything distinctive about Ojai. The responses to this question were almost unanimously positive (only one negative statement out of 47 responses). Ojai's uniqueness is derived from its physical geography, its available social contacts and ambience, and sense of history - which are evident in the seal for the city of Ojai (Figure 7). Common answers include: descriptions of the

mountains, valley, and community; isolation from, yet proximity to, a city; mix of people; variety of activities; rough terrain which inhibits future development; social tolerance; and, Ojai's artistic and spiritual atmosphere. Ojai's uniqueness is the essence of its distinct identity as a place.

Topophobia

Topophobia is the scorn of place. Human-environment interactions invoke both good and bad emotions and to understand sense of place accurately, both the positive and negative aspects of this relationship must be explored.

Growth and development are generally viewed as negative by Ojai residents whose wish for Ojai to remain small is evidenced by the City's slow growth policies. The survey focused on the growth issues of tourism, building, traffic, and the perceived amount of change taking place.

I asked residents about growth and development because these are important issues in southern California and could change the ambience of Ojai if not controlled. An example of the effects of population growth can be seen in the Ventura County community of Thousand Oaks which grew at an average annual rate of 16% from 1970 to 1993. Its ambience has changed from a small community to a large commuter suburb of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. By comparison the ambience of Ojai has changed little, growing at an annual rate of only 3.1% which was the lowest of any Ventura County incorporated area. Ventura County grew at a rate of 6.7% for this period (Table 1).

**TABLE 1
1970-1993 POPULATION GROWTH**

Place	1970 Total	1993 Total	Average Annual Change
Ojai	5,591	7,850	3.1%
Thousand Oaks	35,873	109,200	16.0%
Ventura County	378,497	700,100	6.7%

(Source: Population of California Cities, 93 E-1 and 84 E-1)

Growth is felt to be economically positive by a minority (27%) of respondents but only if controlled and in the context of long-term development plans. As one respondent commented, "Growth and change can be positive if controlled, planned and creative."

The issue of traffic is perceived to be a problem by most of the respondents but others think it is negligible compared to other places. Traffic is seen as a problem by a sizable 82% of the respondents. However, even though they perceive traffic to be troublesome, Ojai respondents like Californians elsewhere, are not keen to change their modes of transportation, typically the automobile. The City of Ojai is aware of the traffic issue and the need for appropriate planning. The City continues to oppose any plans to build a freeway into the valley which would alleviate the traffic along the main road into Ojai but make the town more accessible, thereby increasing local traffic in town.

The survey featured a question about two aspects of change: absolute change (Is Ojai changing rapidly?) and relative change (Is Ojai changing rapidly compared to the rest of southern California?). The responses to these two questions were radically different. Almost two to one said Ojai was changing rapidly but over ten to one said Ojai was not changing rapidly as compared to the rest of southern California.

The City of Ojai, with an average annual increase of 3.1%, ranks last in Ventura County for population growth for the 1970–1993 time period (Table 1). In addition, growth forecasts show that Ojai will continue to grow at a slower pace than the surrounding region.

Census data validate the perceptions of those respondents who say that Ojai is not changing rapidly compared to surrounding areas. The perceptions that Ojai is changing rapidly are not validated by census data so may be considered subjective as a 3.1% average annual population increase cannot be considered rapid growth by any criteria. Ojai residents may be sensitive to local change because they have a highly evolved and intimate sense of place.

These views about growth, regardless of their accuracy, are important to the researcher of a phenomenological study and to the city government because they represent an intimate view of Ojai and are expressed by a two to one majority of local opinion as measured by this study. In the context of regional growth, their anxiety could appear to be understandable as nearby cities have changed greatly.

Since tourism is viewed positively by 82% of the respondents, it would seem a topic appropriate for topophilia. However, after a more careful



FIGURE 7. Seal of the City of Ojai showing the mountains, citrus, oak trees, architecture and Libby Bowl concert facility – all part of Ojai’s genius loci.

evaluation of comments about tourism, it becomes clear that it is perceived as a mixed blessing. Tourism generally is viewed as a necessary and relatively clean source of income for the city government and local merchants. Tourist dollars are seen as contributing to the extensive social calendar of sports tournaments and cultural festivals. Ojai as a tourist product is relatively successful with the majority of visitors coming from Los Angeles County, followed by visitors from Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties. However, tourism is also seen by residents to be the cause of: traffic on weekends; boutique shops along the main street that are overpriced for residents; and, the feeling of an artificiality in the community.

There is a local verb in Ojai, “to Carmelize”. “Carmelization” is the process of becoming like Carmel, California. Carmel is an exclusive community, also with strong growth control policies, where most of the downtown consists of expensive boutiques catering to tourists. In reality, Ojai is not as expensive or economically active as Carmel, which has twice the average housing value, twice the number of service industries, with four times the value of receipts in a community with half the population. The per capita receipts for service industries for Ojai (\$4,749) is an eighth of that for Carmel (\$37,270). In fact, Ojai has a very long way to go before it becomes another Carmel.

Ojai is not yet Carmel but some Ojai residents perceive that their city is on the way to becoming "Carmelized." Ojai's median age is higher than the rest of Ventura County but is 15 years lower than Carmel. Ojai is an expensive community with a median gross housing cost as a percentage of household income of 29.6% for renters and 26.4% for mortgage holders, normally 30% is considered high. However, Carmel is more expensive with a median gross housing cost as a percentage of household income for renters of 35.0% and for mortgage holders 33.0%. Carmel is a more crowded community with over double the population density. Although the majority of respondents in this survey believe that tourism is positive for Ojai's economy, many also feel that "Carmelizing" development should be avoided.

Ojai residents recognize the economic value of tourism but feel strongly about the preservation of their cultural and scenic resources. Ojai residents' conflicting feelings about tourism are common in areas which are experiencing pressures from outside visitors. The Ojai Chamber of Commerce and the City government are developing and promoting tourism only if there is little or no negative impact on Ojai's scenic resources. Tourism is critical to the Ojai tax base: over \$800,000 is collected yearly from the hotel bed tax while only \$700,000 comes from all property taxes. In effect, tourists as a group pay more tax than residents. These figures do not count the benefits of tourist based sales, payroll, and business taxes. The tourist contribution to the local tax base helps pay for such benefits as the higher than average proportion of Ojai land devoted to parks and open space. The Ojai Chamber of Commerce promotes the well-being of existing tourism-related businesses but avoids expanding the number of tourist facilities.

I asked residents to list at least three things they do not like about living in Ojai. The most frequently mentioned negative aspects of life in Ojai broadly fit into five categories, in descending order of frequency: types of people; boredom; high prices; and climate. The types of people are criticized as being racially homogeneous. Residents who experience a feeling of boredom describe Ojai as being too small, confined, boring for teens who want to leave: lacking activities, employment, and shops. Complaints about traffic indicated perceptions that the valley is crowded now and will get worse with future development and tourism. Complaints about high prices indicated a perceived lack of affordable housing and expensive boutiques. Complaints about the climate referred to suffering from summer heat and polluted air.

Controversial issues reflect a diversity of perceptions, perspectives and opinions among the Ojai residents surveyed for this study. It is interesting to note the disagreement among residents' complaints about life in

Ojai: 28 complained about the types of people in Ojai but this is also its most mentioned positive attribute.

Genius Loci of Ojai

Perceptions about a place that garner a high level of agreement among a diverse sample group are a good indication of that location's *genius loci*. Clearly an important aspect of sense of place is the spirit of a place, or *genius loci*, which contextualizes people's lives.

To discuss Ojai's *genius loci* I have included those responses discussed in the analysis of topophilia and topophobia with the highest incidence of agreement. This perceptual consensus indicates that the power of the character of a place has the force to overshadow a possible diversity of individual points of view.

The responses with the highest level of agreement are: Ojai is a spiritual place (83%); the physical setting of Ojai is important (93%); Ojai is undergoing many changes (65%); and Ojai is not changing rapidly compared to the rest of southern California (91%). The survey questions on Ojai as a symbol and on hopes and fears for the future are included in this analysis as indicators of *genius loci*.

The question "What first comes to your mind, what best symbolizes the word Ojai?" garnered many responses. The most common image was of a beautiful, peaceful, agricultural valley surrounded by mountains and containing a dynamic community. As Ojai residents view the reality of rapid growth beyond the boundaries of their valley, responses indicate that there is a marked difference between what people expect and what they hope the future will hold for Ojai. Residents generally expect that there will be continued growth in the next 20 years but hope that Ojai will remain the same. Many residents (64%) are fearful of continued change; development; environmental degradation; increase in trinket tourism; and being overrun by problems from the outside.

The Housing Element of the Ojai City General Plan reports that growth of population, housing units and jobs will remain slow, well below Ventura County, for the next 20 years. This would indicate that the apprehensions of an overcrowded, heavily polluted future may be unfounded. When asked about their hopes for Ojai in the future, a large majority (80%) express a desire for things to remain the same. Some (13%) hope for a return to the past when there were fewer of the negative things that currently affect life in Ojai (traffic, development etc). Some of the hopes include: increase in activities for teens; more walkers and bikers with fewer cars; and less elitism.

The responses to these questions show that a sizable majority of Ojai residents are generally satisfied with the way things are and view change negatively. Change, as has happened in some surrounding communities, is also perceived to be the major threat to Ojai's future.

Summary of Survey Findings

This study has given the people of Ojai an opportunity to describe community perceptions and opinions, and express their sense of place. They have given their impressions of Ojai in the context of positive perceptions (topophilia), negative perceptions (topophobia), and overall perceptions (*genius loci*).

In the context of topophilia, residents concur that most of their friends are from Ojai; they are satisfied with available social activities; and they view Ojai's physical setting as being important. The people and community are the two most mentioned positive attributes of living in Ojai followed by nature, beauty, and mountains.

In the realm of topophobia, residents agree that traffic, urban development, lack of employment and entertainment opportunities, and the high cost of living are negative aspects of Ojai life. It is paradoxical that residents express discontent with the signs of development and change and yet are displeased with the lack of economic opportunities. While development usually brings economic opportunity, Ojai residents reject the negative aspects of economic growth.

The strong agreement among respondents in both the contexts of topophilia and topophobia, shown by the overall findings of the survey, may be due to the power of Ojai as a place with a strong *genius loci*. Those aspects of Ojai life which garner strong agreement among respondents include: importance of physical setting (93%); spirituality of Ojai (87%); and, importance of tourism (82%). Respondents also profess a strong sense of place for Ojai as a distinctive place and a clear anxiety about its preservation in the future. They agree that Ojai is a place with striking physical features and residents who are unusually diverse, culturally if not racially, yet tolerant for such a small community.

Most respondents are satisfied with life in Ojai and perceive problems being due to regional developments in southern California. This perception would contribute to a strong sense of place and unity against a common problem. Most respondents like being different in a distinctive place and fear change toward a conformity with the rest of the world. This is evident in their topophilic feelings of contentment about Ojai as has been in the past or currently is, and topophobic fears of

change and future population growth. These problems are perceived to have ruined outside communities and to be a possible eventual danger to Ojai. Indeed, some of the respondents conclude Ojai to have been ruined already.

The respondents to this study have reflected on their everyday world, how they interact with it, and how they want it to be. Their participation will have increased their understanding and appreciation of Ojai as a place and may enable them to guide Ojai toward a meaningful future for the majority of its residents and visitors.

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