

## “KNOW THY CITY”

(Notes from Dennis McCahon)

### What is urban environmentalism?

Can urban planning and design help solve our enormous environmental problems? Is urbanization an unavoidably destructive process, and is containing it (to what might be thought of as "sacrifice areas") the best we can hope to do with it? -- realistic pessimism -- Or, is there reason to believe that the nature of urbanization might be changed somehow to effectively diminish its negative environmental impact, from within? -- left-field optimism.

Consider a few plain observations: How we build a town depends on how we expect to move around outdoors there. The nature of urbanization – the amount of land it consumes, the amount of fossil fuel it burns, the whole look and feel and sound of it – depends on the dominant mode of transportation there. That mode is cars now. Driving, with all its environmental impact, seems too deeply ingrained to allow effective change.

Or is it? Consider (out in left field) the possibility of a cleaner, less consumptive, environmentally-friendly mode of urban transportation somehow earning enough popular appeal and influence to actually start changing the nature of urbanization. There are candidates (bikes etc., maybe some gee-whiz technology), and one candidate with particular intuitive, humanistic, appeal is our natural way of moving around – walking.

*(see note A)*

Walking, after all, is the cleanest, healthiest, least consumptive, most environmentally-friendly mode there is. Its merits can't be denied. The challenge is to take those merits seriously enough to plan and design accordingly, and thus build walking's popular appeal and influence. This would seem to be the stuff of urban environmentalism.

As luck would have it, there's something unique to walking, which sets it apart from other candidates and suggests a basis for planning and design. Call it "freedom to be present." Afoot, we have great freedom of movement in the short range, plus freedom from the speed, bulk, isolation, and other distracting complications of being tied to a vehicle, and there are few barriers between our senses and the setting. In short, we're present, free to engage with whoever and whatever we encounter out there.

To the extent that urban planning and design can be made to play to this uniquely pedestrian "freedom to be present," might it change the nature of urbanization? Why not find out? Why not test, outdoors, the observation that we'll walk as often and as far as our surroundings invite us to walk?

We should expect to enjoy walking in the urban outdoors. Where we do (or don't), we should ask why? Does the physical character of the place invite (or discourage) walking there? How? What might a perceived "invitation" to walk there have to do with our very notion of "place" itself?

To approach those questions of urban environmentalism, we'll get out into a piece of Helena's urban outdoors and see where folks walk (and where they don't) and consider what else is going on out there. What makes (or un-makes) "walkability"?

There's something we can consider right away. Freedom to be present can be thought of as freedom to exercise curiosity (I think exercise of curiosity is a basic human need – it's our nature, it's to be alive and awake, it's fun).

*(see note B)*

There's curiosity toward our fellow pedestrians, and curiosity toward the place itself. Of course there's a link between those two sorts of curiosity – the more interesting the place is, the more pedestrians it'll attract – but on this walk (since I'm an old urban planner) we'll emphasize the place itself.

*(see note C)*

Exactly what'll arouse our curiosity in the place itself is an individual matter, but experience suggests a few useful generalizations:

- There's the variety, temporal depth, complexity, etc. (the word that comes to mind is "richness") of human expression there – architectural style, art, craftsmanship and materials, evidence of history, etc.
- There's the "natural" context – topography, geology and sense of "deep time," vegetation, wildlife, etc.
- There's the interaction of all the above, the way it all plays in our perception – spatial complexity, spatial "texture," "grain" and density, sightlines, juxtapositions, seasonal and weather effect, etc.

The essential connective element – the thing that holds all this stuff together and facilitates our engagement – is the place's physical walkability. It's got to facilitate moving around on foot.

*(see notes D and E)*

All of this suggests a way of getting at the notion of urban "place". We'll look at standard urban development practice, of course, but curiosity assures that we'll emphasize the roles of two less predictable players: Accident and Contradiction.

---

## **AT THE CORNER OF SIXTH AND MAIN (Constitution Park)**

Main is an accident. It wasn't planned. It was the route of convenience along the right bank of a gulch-bottom placer field. So, instead of being straight and wide like a generic American Main Street, it's crooked and narrow.

What's good about Main's crookedness?

- It shows off the place. Instead of a single sightline that hurries the eye straight through the place and out the other side, we get a new sightline with every dogleg zig and zag. Buildings (for example) are seen, not at the edges of our vision field like sides of a hallway, but at various angles as sides of an irregular enclosure.
- It generates odd street intersections which, in turn, make odd visual exposures, used to great advantage by perceptive architects (Montana Club, 1931 bank building, Power Block) -- examples of designers treating the sites, as found, as so many lucky accidents.

*(see note F)*

- It brings the architecture up close. Those facades can be read clearly from both sides of the street.
- It lessens the usual spatial dominance of cars by slowing them down and confining them to two lanes, so pedestrians retain the ground (as shown, for example, by lots of jaywalking) – a contradiction in this heyday of car-centered urban development.

*(see note G)*

What's good about Main being at the bottom of a gulch?

- It further "brings in" the architecture. Quickly rising terrain on both sides of Main enhances the visibility, from Main, of whatever's on that rising terrain (Cathedral, City-County Building, Central School, Fire-Tower, etc.).
- It makes a compact core-of-town. Closely rising terrain on both sides has tended to channel and concentrate town-making along the gulch bottom. There's an agreeable "down" to downtown.

## **AT CRUSE AVENUE**

Cruse is a contradiction – a 1960s-style vehicular throughway run through an historically pedestrian context. It breaks the continuity of that context. Now though (if I can be optimistic) it might offer some lucky accidents.

How is Cruse a contradiction?

- It disrupts east-west pedestrian linkage (Grand Street, Breckenridge, Broadway) between two historic urban hubs – the Courthouse district and Main Street – in favor of north-south vehicular bypass of both.
- It's opened up a once closely-built and spatially-intricate district (those "side canyons" and the old "West Main" area) with a wide sweep of asphalt (Cruse itself plus its associated parking lots).
- Its cut-and-fill has altered the gulch-side lay of the land itself, especially south of Broadway.

*(see note H)*

How might Cruse offer a lucky accident?

- A single example (so far) is the pedestrian west entrance to the new Central School. Accidental survival of that old stone stairway and retaining wall plus that accidentally wide bit of sidewalk at its foot (left when Cruse rounded off a formerly sharp street bend) has suggested a visually and spatially interesting way to approach the school. New stuff, old stuff, and assertive topography have come together to give new Central a (potentially) pedestrian-friendly downtown presence.

### **AT THE CORNER OF SIXTH AND EWING**

Look west to see a sort of historic-architectural-pedestrian "center of gravity" at the bottom of the gulch. Look south -- along Helena's most successful attempt at axial urban design -- to a different urban hub, the product of another (1865) contradiction, as treated in turn as a lucky accident by later designers. Take a look at the "Old Governors' Mansion" and Chessman Flats to consider a few once-ubiquitous aspects of pedestrian-centered urban residential design.

### **AT COURTHOUSE SQUARE**

Helena's first try at formal urban design, the 1865 plan which introduces this "Public Square" also labels as "Main Street" the route we now call Broadway. It was an attempt to put the town center up and away from, but within walking distance of, the messy goings-on down in the gulch (including the accidental birth of de facto Main Street). The attempt can be called a partial success (eroded by events of the 1930s and 1960s).

How was the public square a partial success?

- Though the commercial hub stayed down in the gulch, the formal square quickly (1867) became our Courthouse site – the building was centered in the square to face west on the Breckenridge axis.

- The Courthouse became a secondary hub, surrounded by important stuff that didn't fit down on Main Street (Churches, Assay Office, lodge halls, "Catholic Hill", livery businesses, jail, classy residential).
- The slope between the square and Main became a high-density concentration of apartment and hotel buildings, plus up-hill expansion of Main's commerce (the dense mix largely displaced by Cruse).

How was the public square treated as a lucky accident and what resulted?

- The new (1885) Courthouse was turned 90 degrees to face north on the Ewing axis – a successful axial design – and the square was stretched north to meet Ewing as Helena's first landscaped public park.
- North Ewing, thus dignified, became a site for fine homes (Chessman, Sanders, Toole, etc.)
- The new Courthouse served also as the Territorial and State Capitol Building for a while – adding to the importance of the slope between the square and Main as the place for hotels.
- That slope, for five blocks north of the square, became a preferred area for all sorts of development, along Warren in particular (Churches, Public library, schools, hotels, residential).

---

#### NOTE A

Local history helps show how the amount of land a town consumes depends on how folks move around outdoors there. Helena's population in 1890 (U.S. Census) was just shy of 14,000. This was the peak of our boom, when a local banker had numbers to show that we had the "largest per capita wealth of any incorporated city in the world". The urbanized area in 1890 (based on old maps etc.) was about three-square miles. Urban destinations (housing, jobs, shopping, services, entertainment, etc.) were mostly within a 20-minute walk of the center of downtown. Out-of-town attractions (Fairgrounds, Broadwater resort, a few "streetcar suburbs" etc.) were linked to downtown by a trolley system and (surprisingly perhaps) a few bikeways. The dominant way of moving around within those central three-square miles and in vicinity of the trolley stops was walking. Density of development reflected that mode. Transportation infrastructure didn't take up much space, and stuff was distributed to keep it within walking distance.

Our population has about tripled since then, but the size of the area that can be called "urbanized" has grown at least 20-fold – to engulf much of the valley and reach East Helena. In the process, density of development has decreased to the point where we've largely lost the distinction between being in-town and out-of-town (much of the area is now a sort of flavorless dilution of both, heavy on the asphalt). Cars, and the enormously space-consuming infrastructure their use demands – have made the difference.

I recall my days working as an urban planner, in the 1970s, when containment of "urban sprawl" was a big issue (a lost cause) and when I wondered whether we really wanted to sprawl, and cars just made it possible, or if we had to sprawl to make room for all those cars. It's both, but I've become convinced that it's more of the latter than the former (especially in the case of commercial sprawl demand for parking space).

#### NOTE B

Thoughts on curiosity, mostly borrowed: Curiosity "evokes the care one takes in what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality; readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd." It's readiness to "throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at things in a different way." It's to question prevailing "hierarchies of what's important". Curiosity is piqued by surprise, accident and contradiction. It's the urge to explore. It's complete openness to others' artistic expression. It drives both art and science. It's the "sense of wonder."

#### NOTE C

Curiosity toward one's fellow pedestrians is the sharpened sense of possibility – readiness to socialize – felt when out among them. It's the possibility of "street life," etc. That this was once taken for granted as an urban-design factor is evident in the positive attention once given to street corners. Bring a lot of cars together on intersecting streets and you get some variation on the "malfunction junction" theme ("traffic flow" is compromised), but bring a lot of pedestrians together on intersecting streets and you get the sort of face-to-face mixing that was once the soul of urban life. Architects designed accordingly – important doorways on the corner bevel, street-corner towers etc. (Helena examples)

#### NOTE D

It makes sense to consider three levels of walkability in the urban outdoors:

- Level one – Is it SAFE to walk there? Can we be reasonably sure of not getting run over? (This is the level at which urban development usually stops nowadays, if walking is considered at all.)
- Level two – Is it USEFUL to walk there? Are there lots of potential destinations within a safe and reasonable walk of each other? (This is the level we inherited in much of old Helena.)
- Level three – Is it FUN to walk there? Given safety and utility, does the place also enliven the experience of walking by playing to those advantages peculiar to being afoot? (summarized as "freedom to be present"). Does the place invite curiosity? (To know walkability at this level, so to plan accordingly, is the objective.)

#### NOTE E

A positive juxtaposition is the abrupt transition from high-density residential neighborhoods to open land (much of it public) along much of the south edge of old Helena. A 19th-Century grid of narrow streets dead-ends unceremoniously at the open land, and those open dead-ends act as so many de-facto pedestrian trailheads (some official, some not). Such an abrupt and pedestrian-permeable "edge of town" is an urban amenity as fragile as it is rare nowadays, when the residential urban fringe is typically all closed-loop streets and cul-de-sacs lined

with uninterrupted rows of houses – pedestrian permeability, like visibility, is key to positive juxtaposition.

#### NOTE F

As a site is developed or re-developed, keeping and enhancing the surrounding area's existing pedestrian appeal is essential to walkability. Established pedestrian circulation patterns and sightlines should be treated as lucky accidents to be enlarged upon and worked into the design. Among the very first questions we should ask about any proposed development is "How'll it be to walk around outdoors there?"

#### NOTE G

I know it's considered heresy to speak up for jaywalkers, but I regard prevalence of jaywalking as a measure of pedestrians' sense of possession of the urban outdoors, therefore of urban health. Watching from my favorite eatery on the 400 Block I often see almost as many jaywalkers as folks on the sidewalk.

That word "jaywalker" has an interesting story. When cars were first getting popular early in the 20th Century, various motoring associations, lobbying for car-friendly traffic rules, wanted a pejorative term for the hordes of pedestrians who still used the streets as they always had -- more or less as elongated public squares – crossing and pausing wherever and whenever they pleased. They came up with "jaywalkers." It worked. The word retains that intentionally negative connotation (but I take it with a bit of pride, rather like when the Brits started calling their defiant colonists "Yankees").

#### NOTE H

The asphalt sweep was finally completed in October of 2018, with the loss of that huge old cottonwood tree that stood out in the parking lot south of the Park Avenue Building. It was the only thing there to survive Urban Renewal. It somehow escaped all the demolition, regrading and paving that otherwise obliterated its old "West Main" neighborhood – and then it thrived for decades more, a cheerfully eccentric presence out there among the cars. Its survival was both a lucky accident and a happy contradiction. It should have been celebrated.

#### A FEW MORE NOTES

Maybe the best reason to support "historic preservation" is for the elements of surprise, contradiction and accident (such as the accidental survival of that old cottonwood) that it sustains in the urban outdoors. All of these elements nourish curiosity. All of them offer refreshing departure from current standard urban development practice. They offer instructive alternatives. To preserve old or oddball architecture, urban patterns, landscape features, pedestrian infrastructure etc. is to affirm that we need stuff out there to be curious about.

It's (famously) been said that "architecture is frozen music". If, just for the fun of it, we stretch that metaphor we might say that urban design can defrost things a bit by introducing the notion of movement through time (rhythm, variation, virtuosic licks, etc.), architecture, and the

other components of the urban outdoors inter-playing in our perception as we walk through, curiosity engaged. There are certainly worse ways to think of urban design.