



We're asking folks to get out and walk around in Helena, thinking about "place" and taking notes. Here are some of my notes. I'll share them with you periodically, here on the Merlin website and by e-mail, and I invite you to do the same. We want to get the conversation going -- so please let us know what you're finding out there, and what you think about it.

I've got a few ideas about how "place" works, and I'll test those ideas in a few locations where I get that "sense of place", and see how they hold up. One seemingly-obvious idea is simply that sense-of-place has to do with the experience of my man-made surroundings in their natural context -- a matter of sightlines and juxtapositions.

I walk south on the far end of Benton Avenue, where it narrows to a walkway atop a retaining wall, to the point where it curves down toward Reeder's Alley. To my right, within touching distance, is a raw exposure of quartzite -- warm-colored blocky layers dipping steeply south. To my left, within walking distance across the Gulch, an old closely-built residential district laps up into the foothills of Mount Ascension and the Rodney Ridge.

Both sets of ingredients -- natural and man-made -- seem to jostle agreeably here; so I try to understand how. For one thing, transitions between the two are clean. There's integrity on both sides. That quartzite to my right, once cut for building stone and to make a minimal ledge for Benton, is left rough. Its natural texture and structure, telling me where I am geologically and showing evidence of its half-billion year history, is left plainly legible.

Also plainly legible, on a bigger scale, is the natural structure of those foothills off to my left. Whether I'm walking those foothills or, as now, just looking at them from a good vantage point, I find I'm entertained by the lay of the land. I enjoy the terrain. This is sense-of-place -- so I try to understand what I'm enjoying (a bit of geomorph).

Generally speaking, those hills are made of layers of ancient sedimentary rock stacked like cards in a deck. The stack breaks off on the north and tilts south (that tilting quartzite on my right is one of the layers), so the edges of the layers are exposed to erosion. Edges which resist erosion most stubbornly stand out as rows of convex landforms -- hills, spurs, bluffs (Acropolis Hill is part of a particularly stubborn edge), bumps of every sort. Less stubborn edges yield to make the gentler, often concave, places between rows. Those east-west edges, in turn, are cut by north-south gulches, the terrain of the cut reflecting the stubbornness of the edge -- a sharp notch or a

gentle scoop. The gulches aren't very far apart and the edges aren't very wide, so the play of convexity and concavity comes fast enough to keep things entertaining at a walking pace, whether I'm actually there walking or just seeing it all from a walking distance, my memory and imagination engaged. So, to what extent, here, is sense-of-place a sense of proximity and accessibility? The question gets me thinking about walkable sightlines.

Walkable sightlines are connectors. They can tie diverse sorts of "place" together. So, how do we have them in that old district lapping into the foothills? Here, I think, we owe them to what can best be called a lucky accident. The district is built on an orthogonal street grid, a 19th-Century standard often criticized for stubborn indifference to terrain. Here though, terrain is just as stubborn, and I enjoy the standoff. The overall tilt of that geomorphic stack tends to steepen the north-facing (townward) slopes, and the alternation of stubborn (therefore steep) and not-so-stubborn edges and gulches lets those straight streets climb for awhile before dead-ending abruptly, straight as ever, at one or another stubborn edge (Sugarloaf, Meatloaf, Quarry Hill, Acropolis, etc.). Cars have to stop, but the sightline (and often a foot-trail) keeps going. Happily, those grid-stopping bumps are low enough to invite walking -- hill-top horizons invitingly close. Here, the orthogonal grid, having met its match, has left us a classic "edge-of-town" -- abrupt, pedestrian-permeable, visually open -- integrity of "place" on both sides, strongly distinct but sensed together.

Here I'll stop. There's much more I want to say as I continue this walk down through Reeder's Alley and Last Chance Gulch all the way to the Lyndale underpass -- but I want to hear from others.

So, where does "sense of place" kick in for you? What do you see happening there? How would you define "integrity of place"? What's relevant out there? I'll send out more of my notes next week, but I hope to hear from you. I want to learn.

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