



Participants in the THINKING ABOUT PLACE project are invited to walk around in Helena and its surroundings, taking notes about "place", as experienced, so we can share our observations, questions, and ideas -- by email for now, and later at a group workshop. Here's Dennis' second set of notes. In the meantime...enjoy thinking about Reeder's Alley in particular.

In my first set of notes, I was at the south end of the Benton walkway, where it starts curving down to Reeder's Alley. This time I'll walk the Alley itself, a richly thought-provoking place (first, around the curve, a bit more geomorph.)

On my way down I pass, on my right, that south-tilting quartzite (Flathead Quartzite) that I first met at the top of the curve. At the bottom though, the rock suddenly looks different -- same tilt, but it looks a bit like dried mud. It's the moment in mid-Cambrian time when the sand that became quartzite was first overlain by the silt that became the next layer in Helena's sedimentary stack -- Wolsey Siltstone. It's fun to think of this as the very moment, but a road-cut just above the Alley, where Howie Street dives to the bridge, shows the transition to have been an off-and-on affair -- quick and sharp alternation for a while. It's all siltstone by the time I reach the Alley's south bank.

I enjoy meeting this reminder of what little I know about geologic "deep time", alongside the Alley's story of a century and a half of "historic" time. It gets me thinking about the extent to which sense-of-place is sense-of-time. Change over time, at multiple scales, is plainly legible in Reeder's Alley. "Place", here, has real temporal depth.

The Alley is in the mouth of a narrow gully eroded along the zone of contact between those two layers of mid-Cambrian bedrock. It's a young landform in very old rock, young enough to have fresh and ragged edges. It's a steep-sided and crooked little space. It looks like it would be fun to scramble through it if nothing were built there.

What's built there, though, doesn't spoil the fun. Almost everything about those buildings -- their sizes and shapes, the varying widths of the passageways between them and the way the whole bunch follows the pitch and swerve of the terrain -- fits the natural scale of the place. Though now urban, it's still a rocky gully, still steep-sided and crooked, its spatial appeal intact -- if not actually enhanced. I try to figure out how those two ingredients of "place"—natural and man-made -- seem to get along so enjoyably here.

It's not the same as in that old South Hills neighborhood mentioned in my first set of notes, where I enjoy the standoff between the single-mindedness of the orthogonal grid and the stubbornness of topography. Here I enjoy the result of Louis Reeder's outright rejection of the grid, and his easy rapport with topography. He took a little on-site building stone but otherwise let terrain have its way. He could do so because he was building with pedestrian circulation in mind. It doesn't take much cut-and-fill to accommodate natural human agility.

This gets me thinking about a connection between sense-of-place and an apparent need to be there on foot. Experience of the sort of "place" exemplified by Reeder's Alley – where the parts are small, the juxtapositions are immediate, and the story is in the details -- requires a pedestrian's freedom to be "present". I wonder if the very real appeal of Reeder's Alley is simply in the extent to which it entertains this freedom to be present. That's what I think of as human – “humane” – scale, something hard to find in so much urban design nowadays.

So, what's the validity of Reeder's Alley in 2020 Helena? Is it valid primarily as an antique – good for its charm and historic interest, despite what might be seen as all sorts of practical obsolescence? Or is it valid primarily for what it might yet teach us about humane urban scale? I approach that question with a thought-exercise. Suppose we were asked to extend the place (let's say up into that parking lot to the west) with present-day practicality in mind, but with all its authentic, quirky “place-ness” intact? How would we answer? It's fun to think about – a really interesting urban-design problem. So, what do y'all think?

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