



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

Looking up at the Bluestone House gets me thinking about how buildings can be "place-specific". Reeder's Alley does it by happily going along with the form and scale of pre-existing terrain (rare good sense on Reeder's part), so I enjoy buildings and terrain acting together. The same, up to a point, can be said of the Bluestone House – I enjoy it making the most of its steep site – but there's something more going on up there. It's an oddball.

I think of the guy who designed the House, James Stranahan. This and his other surviving buildings (the Atlas and Diamond Blocks) show a free sense of design, a love of stone as a building material, and a playful imagination – a mix well suited to his brief, heady, moment of Helena history. He caught the best of it for us.

It's fun to guess what he was thinking. The Bluestone house plays up its site to the extent that it reminds some of a castle, but unlike our other 1890-era "castles" (the Myrna Loy building and a certain west-side house come to mind), it's not another riff on the Victorian "Scottish Baronial" style – no battlements or other decorative hints of a defensive attitude. The fancy stuff, the cupola and that beautiful oriel, common flourishes of the day and not particularly castle-like, are stuck like afterthoughts onto a plain stone box. That plainness, on that highly visible site, suggests (to me, anyway) that Stranahan was celebrating two things he found here – the beauty of the plain work then being done in this stony town by practical builders (such as Reeder), and the natural beauty of the stone itself.

So, the Bluestone house is a very Helena-specific oddball – not just for its story, but for the fun it has with our local stone, both as landform and building material. Three kinds of stone take part:

- 1) Stranahan's dramatic site, Firetower Hill, is Flathead Quartzite, the tough bedrock edge which, to the west, makes the north bank of Reeder's Alley, Daisy Hill, and a varied row of convexities and rocky spots known to hikers on Mount Helena and beyond -- and, to the east, Sugarloaf and "Meatloaf" Hills. It's a familiar companion.
- 2) That blue stone is (mostly) Meagher Limestone, in one of its very few appearances as a building stone. We know it mostly as bold topography. It's Acropolis Hill, then Quarry Hill to the east and,

to the west and at its boldest, it's the big cliff and north peak on Mount Helena. It's the narrow north end of the Last Chance Gulch canyon, where it was quarried (Emil Kluge's quarry) for Stranahan's building material.

- 3) Then there's Wolsey Siltstone, in that tall retaining wall below the Bluestone House -- warm-colored stuff that complements the frosty blue of the Meagher Limestone (I can't help but think that Stranahan enjoyed the pairing). In Helena's terrain, Wolsey rock is the relatively erodible edge between the tough Flathead and Meagher edges, so it tends more toward concavity than convexity, showing itself best in the geomorphically-young south bank of Reeder's gully. It makes up in man-made exposures, though, for what it lacks in natural ones. It's the old town's common workaday building stone, used for hundreds of retaining walls, foundations, and the side walls of downtown buildings (the Iron Front, for one) whose fronts are made of fancier stuff.

So, how important are architectural oddballs for evoking sense-of-place? What's the difference in importance between an oddball structure that could have been built anywhere, and one that could only have been built in Helena? Where are some of Helena's other architectural oddities? How authentically place-specific are they? What about environmental oddities other than buildings? (Remember that big old cottonwood that stood, until last October, in the middle of the Park Avenue Building's parking lot, and the difference its presence made?)

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