



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' fifth set of notes.

An objective of this project is to figure out how to approach "sense of place" in terms realistic enough to enter into consideration of Helena's future growth. So, realistically speaking, are there any generally identifiable urban qualities which, when present, are conducive to a sense of place?

For one, there's walkability -- a quality present in such places as Reeder's Alley and that pedestrian-permeable edge-of-town where the orthogonal grid laps up into the South Hills. For another, how about complexity? -- thought of as the quality which, by way of sightline, engages our curiosity and imagination -- adding interest to the walk.

For a third, how about "peculiarity"? -- the quality which, for whatever reason, evokes a sense that what we're looking at or walking through exists in this particular place and nowhere else. This "peculiarity of place" happens in all sorts of ways. It's often a lucky accident. At the Bluestone House it's a matter of imaginative design.

When I consider these three qualities as players in Helena's growth, I'm reminded of a line from the early days of modern environmentalism: "The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to save all the pieces". There's a useful analogy here. Those qualities are pieces of "place", to be saved, interpreted and enlarged upon as we tinker with the town.

To test them, walk the Gulch -- Main Street -- from the Library (currently a bit of place-making in process) to Placer Street. It invites walking all the way, primarily because so much of it retains a pattern of the long axes of destinations set at a right angle to the street. All sorts of destinations pack like books on a shelf, skinny side forward. The next front door is seldom more than a few paces ahead -- concentrated foot traffic -- complexity.

Complexity is enriched by the architectural show put on by those facades (especially ones dating to the same period as the Bluestone House). It's a show of materials, structural logic, workmanship and designers' imagination – all built to be seen at a walking pace from the distance of the street. The mix often results in peculiarity – such Helena-specific stuff as Stranahan's Atlas Block, the Sands Bros. Building, Boston Block, Iron Front, etc. – as well as individualistic takes on popular styles -- Richardsonianism, Art Deco, etc.

Complexity is further enriched by another dose of peculiarity. Main street is crooked and narrow -- a gift of our assertive topography (as at Reeder's Alley) -- resulting in two advantages: The architecture enjoys a visual advantage it wouldn't enjoy on a generically straight, wide, Main Street (a topic that's fun to explore), and car traffic, try as it might, can't dominate the space. This is obvious at the Walking Mall, but it's true also on the 300 and 400 Blocks, where there's a healthy balance between car traffic and foot traffic. Cars are slowed down, confined to two lanes and one direction, sidewalks are busy, and jaywalking abides. It works!

Toss in the fact that building facades front directly on the sidewalk, with no intervening asphalt, and subtract a couple of unfortunately-sited parking structures, and it all adds up to an object lesson in place-sustaining urban form. It's largely luck, a product of history and terrain like that other object lesson where the grid meets the South Hills, but nowadays it's got to be a matter of deliberate design -- intelligent (imaginative) tinkering.

So, what do you think? Am I too hard on cars? What are some other general urban qualities, besides the three I've mentioned here, that are conducive to a sense of place?

ps. I find it interesting that, for sense of place (in Helena) it's as good to have crooked streets downtown as it is to have straight streets dead-ending at the edge of town. It's about sightlines, walkable and otherwise.

Reach me, Dennis, at galumphant22@gmail.com or contact Marisa at marisa@merlinccc.org. For more information visit <https://merlinccc.org/conferences-and-events/helena-community-endeavors/>