



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' sixth set of notes.

One thing which seems to be universally taken for granted as an ingredient of urban "place" is what's been called "street life" – the everyday presence of lots of folks, on foot, mixing and interacting in the urban outdoors. What are these folks after?

We're after engagement. We want to engage with each other, and with our surroundings. This gets complicated* but for now it's enough to say that parts of Helena – by design, or luck, or both – still manage to sustain some semblance of this "street life." For the sake of "place," why not figure out how these parts are put together?

I start with walkable sightlines. These are passageways of any sort, clearly free for walking, with stuff showing at the far end and/or along the way telling me that the walk will be rewarding – the reward being an opportunity for engagement. If the walk passes enough good stuff along the way, the sightline is itself a linear destination.

The Gulch, Main Street – between the Library and Placer Street – is a tightly-linked chain of linear destinations, renewed at each dogleg bend. Here two other "ingredients of place" – complexity and peculiarity – come into play.

Those peculiar doglegs are walkable complexity on a big scale. Glances down the street, instead of shooting off into the gray urban distance as they would on a straight street, are repeatedly interrupted by buildings, within quick walking distance and at various angles

suggesting where the walk will slip past – just enough directionality to demonstrate, beautifully, how walkable sightlines can pull urban "place" together.

Then the buildings themselves, especially the old ones, are walkable complexity on a smaller scale. As I walk the sidewalk past the Iron Front Building (400 Block), I enjoy that row of fancy cast-iron piers I meet – just the reaction they were designed to get. It's the sort of street-front known to engage passing pedestrians – quickly alternating play of solid and void, sunlight and shadow, in and out, mystery and reveal, those hefty piers inviting exploration of the building's structure as much as the destinations waiting between them.

It's a theme with all sorts of variations in the Gulch (Stranahan's Atlas and Diamond Blocks immediately come to mind) – architecture for street life. These buildings I've mentioned are old – they're "historic" – but desire for street life is still with us. Architecture and urban design are as capable of meeting that desire as they ever were. If they're seldom made to do so nowadays, it's due to the place-denying notion that the urban outdoors is better read from behind a windshield than afoot. Why not challenge that notion and make a serious study of urban walkability?

In the meantime, we can walk the Gulch, for the closest thing to "street life" we'll find here. What's working in the Gulch? How much do we owe to the older architecture and urban form we've inherited – and how much to newer stuff, such as those outdoor eating and drinking venues on the Mall and 300 Block? (a particularly happy trend; maybe we're finally learning how to use the Mall.) Why do folks call the Gulch the "heart" of Helena?

Where else in Helena does something like "street life" show up? Certain parks and other public spaces? How about residential streets? (Here, I'm thinking especially of those old streets lined with closely-spaced houses with big friendly front porches...but can a row of driveways with basketball hoops work?).

Finally, how much does "street life" depend on clear and inviting pedestrian connectivity among different kinds of neighborhoods? I've made much of "walkable sightlines." Am I on the right track?

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**Here I'm inching slightly toward the fascinating field of environmental psychology – urban "place" thought of in terms of "affordances" and "action settings" – something handled well by architecture critic Sarah W. Goldhagen in her recent book *Welcome to Your World* – a good read.*