Dennis McCahon's

Walking Notes #7

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' seventh set of notes.

Thinking about place in Helena very often means thinking about topography. Sense-of-place here is largely a sense of topography – as seen in the distance or felt up-close and underfoot. Thinking varies with proximity.

Helena's distant horizon is a rim of strongly place-defining landforms. Think of the Sleeping Giant and all those other familiar mountains and drainages, each with its associations, historic and/or personal. A glance to this rim of the "bowl" gives us our bearings in more than the merely directional sense. It awakens memories and suggests possibilities. Ephemeral but recurrent weather-related sights along the rim place us in the bigger region and the cycle of the seasons. Think of the play of storm-cloud and sunlight along the rim – think of the "chinook arch" cloud formation to the NNW that tells of the unseen Rocky Mountain front – think of the brief Fall show of golden aspen on Skihi Peak to the south. Each of us has our favorites.

So, it's the view – visual access – which evokes sense-of-place in the case of distant topography. To think of the distant view as part of urban "place" is to think of sightlines – visual juxtaposition of the distant with the nearby. Ideally, our visual experience of each will gain from the presence of the other. This can (should) happen by urban design, but usually it's a lucky accident (think of that view of the north hills, on a sunny day, from the shadowy interior of the Lyndale underpass – a minor, but uncomplicated, example).

As topography gets closer to town, its role as "place" expands beyond the visual. Think of Mount Helena. From far to near, it's a strong view all the way. Its unique profile up ahead says "Helena" as you approach from anywhere else in the bowl, and, once you've arrived, it marks the very middle of town – a big friendly presence presiding over everything below. It's now in-town, but still acting like a distant view. Think of this view – the sightline – as you walk down Sixth Avenue from the area of the Old Governors' Mansion. Keep walking though, across the Gulch, up toward the mountain, and its place-making presence is due, more and more, to another sort of accessibility. The nearer the view, the better that the sightline also be walkable. In old Helena, many are.

A bunch of smaller hills in south Helena (Sugarloaf, "Meatloaf", Quarry Hill, Acropolis Hill, Daisy Hill, etc.) do for their adjacent neighborhoods what Mount Helena does for the town at large. (Some offer special seasonal appeal of their own; think of that often-spectacular bloom of Arrowleaf Balsamroot which gives Daisy Hill its name). Like Mount Helena, these smaller in-town hills are easily accessible, on foot and with a minimum of intervening asphalt, from their neighborhoods. Their trail network often reads as a natural extension of the old-town's walkway network – a case of historic luck (think of that standoff between the single-mindedness of orthogonal-grid streets and the stubborness of topography). Here we have an instructive – and fragile – example of walkable sightlines pulling contrasting sorts of "place" together, thereby enriching overall sense-of-place.

It's "fragile" because it's an accidental bi-product of urban-development practices that are no longer practiced. As we dismiss the rigid old street grid – with all its open dead-ends – in favor of a system of closed loops and cul-de-sacs, we lose many of those walkable sightlines. It's ironic; as we design streets to (ostensibly) better fit topography – to go with the lay of the land – we end up reducing the immediacy of that topography as an ingredient of "place." This suggests that, to keep our sense-of-place on the hilly edge of town, we deliberately introduce walkable sightlines, in some well-considered form, into urban planning and design.

That's arguable, of course, and argument can be. So what do you all think?

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