



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 a summary of Dennis' first seven set of notes.

There are lots of ways to think about "place", but I had to start somehow – so I picked a few parts of the Helena outdoors where (for me anyway) "sense-of-place" kicks in particularly cheerfully, and tried to figure out what was going on out there. It seems that sense-of-place is really a sense of various more specific things, playing together. I thought I'd start by identifying a few of these players – and their interactions. Here I'll list some I think I've found – and I'll refer to previous sets of notes (sets 1 through 7) where I've tried to treat them in a bit more detail.

***SENSE OF TOPOGRAPHY*** – Topography is strong here. We're always aware of it. It gives us an evocative distant horizon (notes 7) and a walkably-inviting near horizon (notes 1, 4, 7). In town, it's assertive enough to shape urban form in a number of agreeable ways. It jostles with our architecture (notes 2, 4); it's given us a narrow, crooked, pedestrian-friendly Main Street (notes 5, 6); and, by challenging the street-grid, it's given us a classic pedestrian-permeable edge-of-town (notes 1, 7).

***SENSE OF TIME*** – It's clear that much has happened here. It reads at several levels; from Geologic "deep time" as read in raw, in-town, bedrock exposures and in the lay of the land (notes 1, 2, 3, 4); to human "historic" time as read in our well-preserved 19th and early 20th-Century architecture and infrastructure (notes 2, 4, 5, 6).

***SENSE OF SCALE*** – Thanks to a fine-grained pattern of proximities and a closely-woven network of walkable sightlines, much of older Helena reads at a congenial pedestrian scale.

This is true downtown (notes 2, 3, 5, 6), and along the old town's south fringe (notes 1, 3, 7). A special case is our entertaining South Hills terrain (notes 1).

***SENSE OF COMPLEXITY*** – The assertions of topography plus 150-odd years of human expression, as pulled together by walkable sightlines, concentrate unusual spatial and visual complexity in the few square miles of older Helena. The mix is such that each of the approaches to town-making tried here over that period has left its mark, until, today, none dominates – (for example: Main Street's 19th-Century narrowness prevents the would-be dominance of 21st-Century car traffic; notes 5, 6).

***SENSE OF PECULIARITY*** – Complexity engages our curiosity and imagination (notes 5), which in turn can bring on an enjoyable impression that what we're looking at or walking through exists here and nowhere else. The "peculiarity" might be individualistic architecture (notes 4, 5, 6), or some site-specific give-and-take between architecture and topography (notes 1, 2, 4, 5), or a quirky landform (notes 3, 4, 7), or an oddball juxtaposition or unexpected case of historic survival (such as a certain late-lamented cottonwood tree; notes 4).

A PERSONAL NOTE: At this point I thought I'd better say a few words about why I've taken on this project. As an old urban planner, I've grown to believe that thinking about "place" is now more important than ever as the starting point for humane and environmentally sound urban design – and I also believe, from experience, that such thinking is best (most realistically) done afoot, at the mercy of the urban outdoors, "sense of place" is grounded in that uniquely-pedestrian mix of exposure, limitation and freedom.

If asked to suggest some bedrock urban-design idea I've found in this exercise, I'd say it's the importance of walkable sightlines.

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