NOTES FROM OUR WORKSHOP LEADER
~ Thinking About Place in Helena ~
(Dennis McCahon)

These notes follow from the October 13th workshop. Like any good discussion, the workshop stirred up some promising ideas, and left us with lots of promising questions. Here are a few of each.

We can think of "sense of place" as communication -- as a sort of conversation we have with a locality. It's a cherished old idea that we "commune with nature" in wild places -- but what do we commune (converse) with in an urban place? -- in this particular urban place? What's the ongoing conversation about here? What's "authentic" here?

The natural setting? Certainly. Natural topography gives us a rich and quirky distant horizon, but it's especially assertive within walking distance and underfoot, where it's shaped our town-making in all sorts of site-specific, often enjoyable, ways; and where it challenges us to find a collective term for our perception of that role, (sense of .... what?). We were heading in that direction when talking about "a kind of proportionality," "symmetry of buildings to terrain,"built stuff that "follows the line of natural stuff," "sits in its place," "inhabits its habitat," "sense of duality," etc.

What do we call the easy rapport between buildings and terrain in Reeder's Alley, or the standoff between stubborn old street grid and stubborn topography that gives us our abrupt and walkable south-side "edge of town", or the way gulch-bottom topography has given us a narrow and crooked and thereby pedestrian-friendly Main Street? We need a collective term. Earth-moving technology and the demands of car traffic have now made us more boorish in our discourse with topography –at the expense of place. So if, for the good of place, we want to save, or revive, or simply study the flow of that older discourse, would it help to have a name for it?

Is architecture in the conversation? Again, certainly -- but which architecture? Can we learn, by the design, the designer's attitude to place? Not only Reeder in his Alley but designers on Main Street clearly enjoyed playing with the odd-shaped sites and quirky sightlines dealt them by gulch-bottom topography (Montana Club, Power Block, FirstBank etc.)

Some delighted in making a show of locally-quarried stone (Stranahan's Atlas and Diamond Blocks and Bluestone House, etc.). Here we have a considered aesthetic response, beyond mere adaptation, to terrain and bedrock as found. (Again, we need that collective term).

How else does architecture affirm place? The obvious way is in how it directly treats the third, most essential, participant in the conversation -- us -- out there on foot, at the mercy of the urban outdoors. When we call an urban space "inviting," "welcoming," "legible," "practically

accessible," "comfortable for lingering," etc., what's the role of the architecture defining that space? The gulch-bottom facades mentioned above were made to be enjoyed, up close, at a walking pace – whether we're talking about lucid Richardsonian stonemasonry or expressive "Arts & Crafts" ornament. ("You see the building & the building sees you").

Such facades define urban spaces best en masse. To pack destinations close together, lining the sidewalk like books on a shelf, skinny side forward, was neccessary back when everything had to be kept within walking distance -- but why value such spacing now? Is it because we still want "street life," people mixing and gathering in the urban outdoors? Street life is universally regarded as a key ingredient of urban "place", but it doesn't survive the "all cars, all the time" mindset that now drives so much commercial development and public planning. What keeps it alive on the Gulch?

Is it walkable communication? So much is legible there -- in place -- the evidence (historic and artisanal) of a century and a half of urban life pushed together by topography and pulled together by walkable sightlines. Is a similar push and pull at play in other parts of town? Along the interface between old south Helena and open-land, for example? To what extent does sense of place, as communication, depend on walkable sightlines? Can urban "place" be a drive-through experience?