



Participants in the THINKING ABOUT PLACE program are invited to walk around in Helena and its surroundings, taking notes about "place" as experienced, so we can share our observations, questions and ideas -- by email for now, and later at a group workshop. Here's Dennis' third set of notes.

In my second set of notes, I explored Reeder's Alley. Now I walk out the east end of Reeder's Alley (continuing my journey), between the cabins...and the space I'm in suddenly expands. In the Alley I'd been in a crooked little space defined, within touching distance, by landform and architecture. Both now recede, and the space I'm in is now shared with cars. Thinking about cars challenges my thinking about place.

Can "place" be a drive-through experience? I think of the kid in the back seat asking, over and over, "are we there yet?" We seem to know, somehow, that we're not really "there" until we're there on foot -- but how often are we on foot? We're in cars going from one "there" to another. Cars demand an enormous amount of space, so we disperse our urban "there's" to make space, and we empty that space and pave it and make it uniform. It's now an old story. I needn't go into it, beyond saying that it often goes by the awkward term "placelessness".

I guess I'm still the kid in the back seat. I associate "place" with walkability, and I want to be "there" all the time -- but how realistic is that? Is "place" now to be thought of as one or another discrete drive-up destination with, it is hoped, convenient parking out front -- or as something more expansive and connective? When I enjoy thinking that the "humane scale" of Reeder's Alley might be extended beyond the Alley, or when I enjoy that "abrupt, walkable edge-of-town" in the South Hills, am I being more nostalgic than practical, hankering after urban patterns that just won't happen any more in our car-centered world? That seems awfully pessimistic.

I prefer optimism. Given our growing list of reasons for driving less and walking more, I think that enjoying place is better thought of as a practical down-to-earth learning experience than as a nostalgic one. So, what might I learn here at the east end of Reeder's Alley, where landform and architecture suddenly recede off beyond the asphalt, taking "place" with them? It's time for walkable sightlines.

Walkable sightlines, generally speaking, are passageways of any sort, clearly available for walking, with stuff showing at the far end and/or along the way to tell me that the walk will be rewarding. They're connectors. They can pull a scattered array of hints and glimpses into a cohesive "place". (They're an old urban-design trick but, more often than not, they're lucky accidents -- as in the case of those open

dead-ends where the orthogonal grid meets the South Hills – and the trick is to keep them when we find them.)

A good one would be handy here at the east end of Reeder's Alley. I try to imagine I haven't been here before, hoping the Alley hasn't been just an isolated roadside attraction, and catching hints of more good stuff seemingly within walking distance beyond the asphalt. I look for a walkable sightline. Just ahead, across the street, a wide important-looking walkway runs downhill – but straight toward a storage shed and a high fill-bank under a parking lot. There's a disconnect between where I'm expected to walk and what I'm glimpsing toward the left – and a resultant disconnect between Reeder's Alley and the walking mall. Would some well-placed public art, down at the elbow perhaps, help pull them together?

The strongest walkable sightline here actually runs south, along the west side of South Park Avenue to the Last Chance Gulch "canyon". It's a minimal sidewalk, but the view ahead draws me on. As the street suddenly pinches down at the canyon, the sidewalk keeps going and I meet a very encouraging bit of recent urban design. The "West Main" street-improvement project not only rebuilt the century-old sidewalk along the west edge, but matched it along the east edge -- all the way to the Grizzly-Orofino fork – while not unduly widening the driving lanes between. That rocky little canyon with its quirky architecture is actually more walkable now than it was before -- and thereby more appreciable as "place".

Where else in town is there a place-sustaining balance between car traffic and pedestrian traffic? (Among busy commercial districts, the 400 Block comes to mind.) What do you think?

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