



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' ninth set of notes.

When talking about urban "sense of place", I've made much of "walkable sightlines"; and now I've been asked to explain, a bit more clearly, what I mean by that awkward term.

Well, suppose you're outdoors on foot, just moseying around, with no reason to head off in any particular direction – then two things catch your eye: (1) something interesting in the distance, and (2) a way to approach it on foot. This is a walkable sightline at its most basic, a simple two-part appeal to a pedestrian's curiosity and freedom to engage. The idea of walkable sightlines as elements of "place" – urban or otherwise – expands from here.

"Freedom to engage" comes naturally with the exposure and vulnerability of being afoot. Walking is our natural way of moving around, so nature equips us to engage with whatever we find within walking range. Free use of this nature-given equipment (the senses, physical agility, curiosity, imagination, etc.) in a place which invites their use is, in fact, "sense" of that place. Invitation comes by way of walkable sightlines.

So, place is held together – pulled together – by walkable sightlines. Sense of place expands as the sightlines extend and branch and intersect. For example: parts of older Helena, adjacent open-lands, and the interface between these two very different landscapes, are pulled together as a single richly-diverse entity – place – by a closely woven network of walkable sightlines. The weave is accidental, and it's fragile.

By "accidental" I mean that it's ours by luck – historic luck and topographic luck. The old town sits in a tight and hilly space because that's where the gold was. Everything then had to be kept within walking distance – which meant a tightly-woven street grid, kept open around the edges so it could grow. But, ours kept running into the hillsides, where it just stopped, still open, leaving lots of dead-ends. Some are still there – walkable sightlines.

Cross those dead-ends and you're immediately in open terrain – where hill-top horizons are seldom more than an easy hike away and where the play of convexity and concavity comes fast enough to keep things entertaining at a walking pace. Here the lay of the land, not the old grid, gives us walkable sightlines, but thanks to those dead-ends, the weave is continuous from one sort of landscape to the other – and with it, sense of place.

Now comes the "fragile" part. The example I've just described – that classic pedestrian-permeable edge-of-town – is an historic holdover. It's found in just a few parts of oldest Helena. The practices which gave it to us haven't been in play for quite a while. Current practice disregards it. If we value that sort of "place", then keeping it and interpreting it to revive under current practice will require study – the deliberate re-introduction of walkable sightlines as elements of urban planning and design. This suggests some good discussion topics:

- Suppose you're designing an edge-of-town land development. Would you include walkable sightlines? If so, how? How would you want them to work? What turns an ordinary walkway into a walkable sightline?
- Besides the example given above, where else in Helena are walkable sightlines elements of "place"? How do they work? Are they accidental, or there by design? What might we learn from them?
- How does current urban design and development practice treat walkable sightlines? Why?
- Since those old edge-of-town dead-ends are historic holdovers, should we regard them as features worthy of inventory and subject to historic preservation? Can "classic edge-of-town" constitute an historic district?
- Since it's a good idea, for lots of reasons, to encourage non-motorized transportation (especially walking), how might walkable sightlines be employed to that end? Is thinking about place "urban environmentalism"?
- More? What do you all think?

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